



Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – FRIDAY BEFORE SENIOR YEAR by K. Marvin Bruce. K. Marvin Bruce has published over twenty fiction stories among *Calliope*, *The Colored Lens*, *Corvus Review*, *Dali's LoveChild*, *Danse Macabre*, *Deep Water Literary Journal*, *Defenestration*, *Exterminating Angel Press: The Magazine*, *The Fable Online*, *Ghostlight*, *Jersey Devil Press*, and *The WiFiles*. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Write Well Award (Silver Pen Writers Association), and the Best of the Web Award.

Page 6 – NINE LONG NIGHTS by Ashley Kemker. Ms Kemker is a native Floridian and first year MFA student at the University of New Hampshire. She enjoys Norwegian black metal, obscure history, existentially terrifying her classmates, and eating midnight snacks with her cat. Her work has appeared in *TERSE Journal*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, and the audio chapbook series *EAT*.

Page 10 – SOURED LOVE by Luke Kiernan. He writes, “My name is Luke Kiernan. I live in Ireland and mainly write Fantasy and Sci-Fi material, as well as occasionally horror material. Previously, my short story “Daggers and Heroes” was published by *The Free Bundle Magazine*.”

Page 23 – CHARON by Pat O'Malley When he isn't writing about dragons, hell hounds or clown sex Pat O'Malley loves to write the kind of quirky and weird type of fiction that he and his friends would love to read. His work has been published on e-zines such as *The Weird and Whatnot*, *Teleport Magazine* and *Dark Face Fiction*. On the rare occasions where he has the extra time for it, Pat also likes to travel, attempt stand-up comedy and study for the Law School Application Test (LSAT.)

Page 31 – FREEDOM by Shainur Ullah. Mr. Ullah writes, “My name is Shainur Ullah and I am from England. I like writing short fictional horror stories on the creepypasta site (<http://www.creepypasta.org/user/ullahshy>). I also have a reddit account called Shortstory1 with more horror short stories. My most popular horror stories online have gone “viral” - “Crunched Up Paper House,” “The Camera Man,” and “The Guys Behind Hollywood.” They have also been narrated onto YouTube - check them out!”



“FRIDAY BEFORE SENIOR YEAR”

by K. MARVIN BRUCE

Her screams jolt me awake me like electroshock. Like she’s right in the room. Like she’s still alive. I kick off the saturated sheets. I escape the Institute. “Pathological liar,” says my permanent record. Believe me.

I steal a car and drive back to Montag Farm at midnight. I’ve got to find Lindsey. Why’d I ever read about Phalaris? Why’d I bring Lindsey here? The burning, the burning of that summer! I throw the Mazda into park and leap out onto that baked soil. I smell burnt flesh. I remember that day. The accusations. The verdict. The sentence.

We should never have gone to Montag Farm. Friday. Late summer. Before senior year. What’d we know? Everything that I’d known involved parental care. The ideas I have are untested in the real world. I’d never even balanced a checkbook before and there I was sitting in Valley Savings and Loan inquiring about money for college. Dad’s collar is so blue that it’s black. Mom’s depression prevents long-term employment. She sits in the car and sends me into the bank alone.

“You’re smart to start exploring lending options early,” the banker woman says with a wet-lipped smile. “Most kids just assume the money will come from somewhere.

Next summer, after you learn about scholarships, if any, you’ll need to decide how much money to borrow to cover your costs. Federally subsidized loans have a lower interest rate...” her words have begun to form a mental jungle gym I can’t climb. I know, roughly, what interest is. I watch her thick lips flap and her jowly, well-fed face jiggle. I glance down at her elegant, cherry desk. One of those giant green blotters with real leather corners covers most of the polished wood top, although it has a computer monitor and keyboard on it, with no danger of ink spills. It makes no sense. Her fingers, black nail polish emphasizing their speed, clack on the keys like stilettos. Her name-plate reads Roberta Montag.

School begins next week. Senior year. Another year editing the high school paper while all the other guys get the girls. Another dreary year wondering when it’s going to be my turn. That Friday afternoon Steed has Vicki in the crook of his arm as he drives. “I kind of envy pigs,” he muses. “They have thirty-minute orgasms, you know.” That’s a rare show of reading prowess for Steed. Vicki giggles. Lindsey frowns. Steed continues his lecture. “Their penises are corkscrew shaped—I wonder how that works.” Vicki rolls her eyes at Lindsey. He’s gone too far.

Changes the subject. "It's the Friday before senior year, let's do somethin' dangerous."

Everyone knows about Montag Farm. Everyone knows the police are afraid to go there. Everyone knows about the brazen boar. "Pathological liar," the doctor testified.

We drive out Dancing Ridge Road, out past Wooddale, on the lonely stretch leading to Montag Farm. Sere heat waves rise like we're driving into a mirage. Weeds wrestle their way from the pavement like they're suffocating, bursting into air at the last second. Rusted road signs assaulted with shotgun surgery. The fields have mostly gone back to nature, mostly. The Montags, they say, claim all this land. Great mud-wallows churn the sour soil. The clapboard farmhouse sags with a dismal desolation of human neglect and failure. Steed whispers that it's haunted, Vicki clenches him like a ghost-hunting date. I feel eyes on us. "Don't remember!" my therapist shouts. "You can't trust memory!" I remember.

The Montags, they say in town, never prospered as farmers. Along with the decrepit house numerous depressing out-buildings remain. The tar-papered roof on the barn has half-collapsed. Human hands no longer care for it. The chicken coop entrance stares out, resentfully naked with no door. An outhouse stands at a distance, a naughty child in the corner. Then there's the slaughterhouse. The bronze statue, they say, outside. The Montags were pig farmers. That's how the stories began.

Lindsey, Steed, Vicki, and me. We

have to see the brazen boar.

"Gabriel Deakle went missing out here last year." He was from our high school. Parents whispered feverishly. Montag Road is off limits. Nothing to see at the abandoned farm. There is no brazen boar. Rumors, they say. Lies. Why can't we hang out at the mall, like normal kids?

It's the Friday before senior year. Steed says "Let's get some girls and go. Gotta see the brazen boar." He winks. Lindsey's not a girlfriend. Just a best friend.

In the back of Steed's Frontier with a case of warm Miller stolen from his dad, we sit outside the melancholy house in the dissolving light. Not a sound from the wasted farm. Not even crickets. Cicadas avoid Montag Farm. Steed's large for high school. Football in the fall and lacrosse in the spring. Assertive and confident, others call him a bully. I'm the sidekick. How many girls has he bedded? I try to imagine what it must be like. He really seems to care about this month's selection. On an approval plan, a rent-to-own kind of deal. He's never showed any interest in Lindsey, my friend since freshman year, so I go along. Might get an idea for *The Knight's Roundtable*, September edition.

"D'ya think the stories might be true?" he drawls. Vicki, blonde, perky, takes the bait.

"What stories?"

"Bout the Montags. Pig farmers. They used the brazen boar to roast trespassers to death. It's a hollow statue with a trap door. Lock on the outside. Ate their victims." The four of us gaze toward the

splintering clapboards of the house where the graying paint is peeling off in large scabs, revealing tortured, even grayer wood beneath. Torn, moldy screens hang accusingly in the empty windows of the derelict farmstead. Crumbling bricks have tumbled from its chimney stack over the years. The colors of everything seem to blend together, fading from one joyless shade to another of deeper despair. Is that a glint of bronze in the setting sun? Out behind the silent house? A row of ancient, sickly, bleached sycamores stands leprously white before the dismal porch. No leaves although it's still summer. Angular branches furiously claw the sky. Wind carries the screams of the burning victims. "Why isn't the lawn overgrown?" Lindsey asks.

Steed doesn't answer questions. "The Montags, they were sick bastards. Shunned other people. They stayed out here and bred with their pigs. Burned all trespassers in that brass boar." Steed the historian.

"That's sick," Vicki interjects. "People don't pork pigs." She laughs at her own joke. A desultory breeze wafts by. "Why'd they wanna burn people anyway?"

Time for the editor of *The Knights' Roundtable* to contribute. "The story comes from Pindar," I say. Lindsey squeezes my arm.

"Who's Pinhead?" Steed asks. He likes the pieces I publish about his sporting feats. A regular Achilles.

"Pindar. Greek poet—lived in the fifth century BC. He wrote about Phalaris."

"Phallus? Never heard of 'im." Vicki's looking Steed up and down. The wind

stops. Twilight silently reaches its embrace around us.

"Phalaris was a king of Sicily who used to roast people alive in a brazen bull."

Lindsey shudders beside me.

"Brazen bull?" Vicki asks. "What's that?"

"Don't tell lies!" my therapist shouts, fingers on the dial.

"It was a hollow bull statue made of bronze. Big enough to hold a person. He'd lock an enemy inside and build a fire under it. Roast them alive. Slowly. Tatian says he used to eat his victims."

"You're shittin' us," Vicki scolds. "Steed put you up to this." She gives his arm a slap. He withdraws his hand.

"This Phallus guy ever come to Montag Farm?" he asks. "They had t' get the idea for the brazen boar from someplace."

"Phalaris died centuries ago. Montags must've known their classics."

"Did he really eat his victims?" Lindsey asks. She's never sat this close to me. Tonight could be the night.

"Cannibalism has a long history. In Polynesia they called humans 'long pig' up until last century. The ancients believed you took on the powers of those you ate."

"Who'd eat their friends?" Vicki wonders vapidly.

"You didn't eat your friends. Just enemies."

"Trespassers," Steed adds.

We gaze toward the decaying house just fifty yards away. Dereliction kisses darkness. The faint scent of charred wood woven into the night being born. Steed's

voice rises like smoke above us all.

“Anyway, that’s what they say. The Montags never left the farm. I hear the Montag kids had flat noses and black nails. They had to stop sending them to school.”

“I can’t imagine anyone slaughterin’ a pig,” Lindsey says, glancing over her shoulder toward the house. She pulls me to the opposite side of the four-by-four.

“They stopped slaughtering ‘em,” Steed says. “And started porkin’ ‘em, like I said. That’s where the mutant kids come from. The brazen boar was for trespassers, anyone who knew the truth.” Steed jokes about the pig people. In the bed of his Frontier he launches into his tale again, working his small crowd. Showboating before the touchdown. After the girls groan their protests, I speak up.

“Some scientists think it’s possible.”

Lindsey elbows me.

“No, really. I read this article by a scientist who thinks people evolved from apes mating with pigs.”

“Maybe you read too much,” Lindsey chides with a tremor in her voice. The empty fields swallow the sound. “Different species don’t mate with each other.”

“Or they’re sterile if they do,” Steed chimes in. His new girlfriend looks imaginatively impressed.

“I’m serious,” I say. “This guy says certain human features aren’t found in apes, but only in pigs. Maybe one chance in a million it could’ve happened here. But it’s still a chance.” Silence.

Growing uncomfortable Lindsey says, “I wonder if animals ever think of revenge.”

The last light lingers like her fingers in mine.

“Revenge for what?” Steed stands in the bed and looks toward the house. “Not bein’ evolved enough not to get eaten? Let’s find out.”

Lindsey shakes her head decisively. I can’t chicken out. “It’s been abandoned for years,” I reason. Vicki, it’s clear, will follow Steed.

Lindsey steadfastly refuses. You’ll be here by yourself,” Steed taunts. She won’t move. We leave her in the truck bed.

What remains of the driveway to the house is packed dirt that has long been penetrated with weeds and grass. The details look more sinister as we approach, Steed in front, Vicki fawning after. We’ve only ever seen Montag farm from the truck, fifty yards away. As we step between the rows of sickly sycamores, the abattoir begins to disappear behind the neglected dwelling. The roof’s missing shingles, panes glint with broken windows. Exposed cladding has rotted black beneath derailed gutters. Steed motions toward the rear of the house. “That’s where they slaughtered the pigs. Wanna see?”

Vicki doesn’t hesitate. “Hell, yeah!”

I want to run, but the truck is Steed’s. If nothing happens I’d never live it down. If something does, none of us will. The farm’s silent as we skirt the scorned house to the unseen rear. I glance back at Lindsey, alone in the truck bed, huddled down in fear. “Who cuts the grass?” I ask.

“Smatter? Chicken?” Steed scoffs. His voice doesn’t sound as assured as he

thinks it does. Was that someone moving behind the darkened windows? We clear the south corner of the house. The sight steals my breath. There, before the slaughterhouse, stands a brazen boar. Green with age, its belly blackened. The charred wood underneath looks too fresh. "Bitchin!" Steed whistles. "The stories are true."

Vicki laughs.

Lindsey screams.

I race around the house. A pink shape dashes from behind one of the ancient sycamores, cutting me off. A sow. She wears no clothing, but she runs unexpectedly fast on short hind legs. In terror my mind flashes to a gangsta with pants down around his thighs. Her bare chest sports twin rows of human-sized breasts, her hideous face that of an enraged warthog.

Steed's shouting behind me. I hear his fists slamming something like a heavy bag at the gym. Enraged squeals that sound almost like English. I glance back to see him falling between the weight of two of the creatures. Vicki's disappeared.

The smoke smell chokes the air. Lindsey! I've got to get to Lindsey. In the truck. We've got to bring back help. The sow charges. Reaches out for me with stubby fingers tipped by tiny, hardened black hooves.

Vicki backs into me, stepping on my foot. Her hand grabs my goose-pimpled arm.

"Help him!" she screams. I rip my arm free as my stomach drops in terror. The horrid blend of species misses me and snatches Vicki. They run on their hind

feet, have half-human hands. Their faces the worst of both species, human eyes with no feeling, up-turned shovel noses, bristly jowls with pointy, hairy ears right where a person's should be found. Blood smears their tusk-like teeth. Vicki screams. I'm running now.

I rip open the passenger-side door. "Step on it, Lindsey!" I scream. Lindsey's not there. "Oh God!" I cry as I scramble over the console to the driver's seat. I see a large boar lumbering back toward the house with Lindsey squeezed to his long trunk. The keys dangle. I'm shooting back in reverse. I skid a one-eighty, throwing up fountains of desiccated dirt, floor the sucker back down Dancing Ridge Road.

"Pathological liar," my chart says.

Tonight will reveal the truth. Lindsey's got to be here, just where I left her. The Montags never left the farm, and anything can happen the Friday before senior year.



“NINE LONG NIGHTS”

by ASHLEY KEMKER

If one who were a human hung here they might feel blood rushing away from their feet, past knees, and slender bones able to be snapped at a mend or a will; past a limp, sad groin; into bowels; into spleen and stomach; squelching kidney, hairy lungs, sluicing through a panicked heart into their head; the blood would blast through a hole where an eye should be. To be hauled away into the heaven bright Branches. Spinning in the bright nebula that billows outward, if a man were up here as I am. Dusted with the sand of the universe, cold and dry. No food, no water no mead no nothing or hope, no nothing. Just wound upon wound.

For nine long nights I hung wounded upside down in space, tied to the topmost Branches of a Tree by a rope around the ankles. I do not have blood, only thick night-black water streams out of me, nine days constant, the drop, drop in the Well far below me. Above, the wheeling black night of time pierced through with stars, and a sound of stretching colossal wings. And they are there below me. The shapes that I am not yet meant to see. Hauled terrifyingly to the great dome head night-thought of sky. Not even the tops of the great Tree, as tall as five million million aurochs standing on each other's shoulders,

brush the top of the head-dome. On either side, the wanderers, going through endless laps. The left scorches me, my skin burns off and grows again red and shiny as before. The water nearly boils as it leaves my side. And on the right, the cold is all hurt, licking at the head wound, halting my useless twitching fingers until they are blacked and still, they break off and are grown again. My sides burn and freeze, the left side's skin burns up, sloughs off, and is replaced, the right freezes, breaks loose from the rest of my suffering body, and it does this in circles and never stopping, for nine long nights.

A garden sits below my bleeding head, glassy towers and domes unconcealed from matter and sight; the others like me are there. My wife and sons have the same nightwater running through them, the same dark from corners of the universe I'd rather not know about or go to. I am hung out of time. The not-blood barely misses the dome of the garden sky as it races past. Below the garden are the lives of men. They go roving in their circles, and now I am shown the first few figures, the glittering sun moving light over their fateful edges. Cattle, aurochs. Drop drop into the water. Thorns. Your grandfather's thorns which they used to hurt your grandmoth-

ers. Or maybe a gentle husband thorn.
Wound upon wound. Given over to myself,
who is the one that walks beside you. In the
west under my right arm, the place of trees
and snarled roots thickly plunging into the
ground, where bees are fat and honey drips
down the bodies of the ones who look like
men and women. Wild things drink from
chilly creeks and sing into the trees forever.
Embrace each other in the wheat fields.
Forever. In that place, everywhere, one
hears the stag bellow for his doe-girl. In the
place of men they do this too, all men mad
for their girls in the rip of loneliness. Drip
drop. The dust wind sings where my eye
was, never to be put back, connected again
to its sinews. There are more. Wagons and
chariots. Through one eye burning in its
socket, I see all man's ancestors, carved into
the Tree of Trees.

Under my shaking left arm is the place
of light, the things that live there are made
of it, sometimes leaving to help men and
gods. No one can help me. Torches lit at
night, gifts from your wife. Or your concu-
bine girl. Joy at the fire with your people.
And there, right in the heart of every-
thing—is the place of men. What were they
doing? Plowing fields, kissing, milking their
goats, beating their servants, gutting their
enemies, burying their dead. Do they know
that I gave myself to myself? I am the one
thrown onto the rock face to tell about
their lives. I am there in their linens, on
their bread, in their hearth, wrapped
around their backbones. The water is grow-
ing clearer, through one eye, hung there
after nine nights, I see hail, yearning, ice. A

ruined harvest.

Under the place of trees and fragrant
mushrooms lies the underland. All the cold
rivers broke from here. Began flowing
when we woke the world. Men swam up
from the icy spring, pale fish flung out on
land and seeing that they had warm blood—
and not nightblack water—began to wound
each other. That spring, underneath the
ground where strange things drift through
the eons. Where, I suppose now they drink
the black water leaking from my head and
side which spills in drops into the Well. In
that place of dark water and mist there is a
cold thing snapping at my falling blood, its
eyes roll in misery, its body is freezing. My
sons and daughters, you could not imagine
the coldness of its scales or the eyes rolling
in an icehard skull, or its glacial breath.
Giant things move in that place; but they
find nothing, not even each other, except
when they touch hands through the mist.
My one eye sees the dome giant sky, pale
birch trees, running water life through their
woody cells.

Opposite the mist place, under the
place of light is a place of fire. If a man's
heart beats he cannot enter. Who could
suffer heat that sizzles tears on your face?
Who could run from the liquid fire thrown
from the mountain-burst places, I in my
weeping torment could not guess. I am
burned and frozen, and no one walks
beside you. Now my eye, which stings with
black water sees death, yew trees on a bur-
ial-mound. We do not know the ones who
come back and we do not remember the
faces we loved when we return. Only I will.

I will go back half-dead to walk beside you.
The cup of your wife's body. The body of a
great elk. The sun, the shield of the sun
which is the black sun that blasts its bore-
alis through the sky. Who is the one that
walks beside you. The place of spruce
forests and rocks where gnashes their teeth
or gets their teeth gnashed for them, is
under the place of fire. The body of a
horse, the body of all man, which is a
wound to a world who wounds it right
back.

Under the place of men is the Sea,
where the world-worm shifts in his sleep

and shakes men's lives. Being leaks out of
me, drop by black drop, wound upon
wound. And the ones who live in the city
below my head can offer me nothing. My
wife weeps to pass me bread but I cannot
take it. Men cannot see the things that hap-
pen so far above their heads. Drop drop-
ping into the dark Well, where my other
eye is. Things die, men die, cattle die, they
don't come back, and when they do, you
will not know them. Gone, never made
whole again, which is the way of wounds.
In the realm under the mist place, leering
dark creatures snap rocks together to snap a



flint spark, and there is no light beyond that. Men low like cattle. Upon the top-most place of the Tree, there are no hands to cup my freezing groin, no warm mouth to quiet my lowing. Beyond the river down at the very bottom of things, below even the Roots or the Well, are the weapons of men, clanging rushing river of mail and boiled leather, of helmets, axes, arrows, swords, hauberks and knives. Over this river, over the great wall, is the place of the dead, sleeping in each other's arms. And when they come out again—earth, water, and dawn.

Dawn below me. Wound upon wound. I hear one with a crazy, frenzied heartbeat coming from the top of the Tree. The scrabbling and ear-tufted approaches, passes in a furred wind, the sound fading bluey down the Trunk. Sacrificed myself to myself. The drops of black water from my side drop downwards, side of a man's torso, side of a torso nothing like a man's at all. Drop drop. Floating in the blackness until some infernal force pulls them down, dropping in the great Well below or steaming on cold rocks in the mist. Wound upon wound. Life is only ever a wound. The wheel of the year is a lamprey bite into the sides of men and women. I threw myself on to my own spear, to see the runes. I gave up my eye to drip into the Well. Death for life.

And life. What were the lives of men? The lives of men are a circle which is shaped like a wound. And the lives of men are a snarling at unbeing, a spear in the side of the universe that it can never shake out. And the shapes carved on the Roots

back in the great unbecoming of time are shown in the lives of women and men. Cattle, aurochs, thorns, ancestors, wagons, chariots, torches, gifts, joy, hail, yearning, ice, harvests, yew trees, cups, elks, the sun. The sky, birch trees, horses, man, water, earth, and endless dawns. And I disappearing into them. Drop by drop. All my sons and daughters with their upturned faces. If they will only have me with them, who is the one the that walks beside them. Still, I am not emptied out. The wound in my side is nothing compared to the shapes hidden in the water. And what I gave to my children, myself to myself. All the wives and husbands and slaves and soldiers and concubines and sons and daughters and uncles and grandmothers. The wound of the world carried in all their blood, through all the water, all the mare-roads and rivers going through dark undersecret places of the earth. And the Well where the runes are, where I became one-eyed and wounded, forever, where black godblood mixes with the water, where I can see them and tell them to my children so they can speak being into the world. Life is not only a wound. I am the one who walks beside you. The stars are singing. The rope is broken, and I hurtle my shrieking way down to walk beside the living, wound upon wound. Wound upon wound upon wound— ❖

“SOURD LOVE”

by LUKE KIERNAN

Silri was awake when the guards came to her cell, as she was most nights. She didn't question why they had come; she'd learned from experience that such questions would only earn her a bloody nose. She was dragged from her cramped cell to dimly lit corridors, to the grand hall. The hall was impressive if nothing else. It's elaborately decorated roof was held up five marble pillars, all of which were inscribed in runes the divine tongue, which none could read. A portrait of Emperor Ezuleus hung on the back wall. She had always despised the painting, as the Emperor's dark eyes always seemed to glare down at her. The only source of light came from the torches high above, which gave the hall a grim atmosphere. Sargo, Duke of Askela, rightful Duke of Grayhan, and her former husband sat at the head of the long table in his self-styled throne. Though it had only been three summers since they'd last seen each other, he looked as if he had aged ten. His hair was still neatly cropped raven black hair, but his once smooth face was now leathered and weary. He wore a loose, plain tunic, a far cry from the regal garments he had worn around her. To his right sat Jered, a monstrously large man, with a pudgy face that always looked sour. He wore rusted chainmail, looking more like a

common mercenary than the right-hand man to a Duke. On the surface, he appeared to be a simple brute, but she'd learnt firsthand just how cunning the man could be. To Sargo's left sat Malain, a withered old man with a wispy grey beard, and a shaved head. He scowled at her, his eyes brimming with haughty contempt. She was tempted to flash him a jeering grin.

“Silri,” Sargo said awkwardly.

“You're gracing,” Silri said, curtsying as low as she could while shackled. Sargo's eyes narrowed, and it seemed there was a ghost of a smile on his long face.

“There was a time when you bowed to no one.”

“My imprisonment has changed me, your grace,” she said. *I've gone from his wife to his beaten cur. Death would be a kinder fate than this, but of course, he'll never give me that.* It was hard for her to remember a time when she looked at Sargo with adoration rather than rage; a time when he looked at her with joy rather than cold contempt.

“Yes, you have,” he agreed. “Pity. I rather liked your feisty spirit.” *The dungeon stripped me of that.*

“And her pretty face, though it ain't so pretty anymore,” Jered sneered. She couldn't deny it. Imprisonment had trans-

formed her from a famed beauty into a ghastly creature. Dirt and grime had turned her ashen hair black, had made her cheeks sunken, more like a beggar than the wife to a Duchess. She had grown gaunt too; it was as if the flesh had been sapped from her body.

“Free her,” Sargo ordered. The guard behind her obeyed, unlocking her shackles, albeit with reluctance. “Come, sit,” Sargo said, his tone now warm. He gestured to the seat to the seat beside Jered. It was surreal, being free of her shackles, something that had only happened in her dreams. As soon as she sat down, a slave, who seemed nearly as miserable as she was, poured her a goblet of wine

“It would seem that the gods have granted you’re a miracle, Silri,” Malain said through gritted teeth.

“How so?” She asked. “My Lord,” she added hastily before Malain could object.

“Because my nephew has need of you.” She frowned. She had assumed that Sargo was in another one of his drunken stupors and had finally decided to execute her.

“Tell me, Silri; are you familiar with this local holy man who’s been causing peasants to revolt?” Sargo asked casually. *In my cell, I hardly knew whether it was day or night, let alone the name of some local soothsayer.* But of course, Sargo knew that. This was just another game he was playing, another way to remind her of the years he’d stolen from her. He was always one for petty games.

“I don’t believe so, your grace.” The Balhanan wine was foul, but then again, she never drank wine for its taste.

“He’s a fanatic, and not of the religious kind surprisingly enough,” Sargo said wearily. “He spends his days preaching endlessly of the woe I and my dear sister inflict on the smallfolk, urging them to revolt. No doubt he’s conjured up some scheme to have me overthrown, or worse as has happened to some other noblemen.” *Ah yes, of course, only a fanatic could see the woe you inflict.* “To make matters worse, he’s managed to sway some of my men to cause. Just last week, I caught three of them attending one of his sermons; I had them hanged of course, but Malian tells me this has done little to dissuade the others.” *And you can’t kill all your men, can you, my dear?* Silri stayed silent. Sargo, like most men, loved nothing more than the sound of his own voice.

“Usually,” he continued, “a little bit of coin is enough to make these men see the error in their ways, or perhaps a flash of steel. However, this one has proved especially stubborn; which is why I need you, to... deal with him.”

“You wish to send me?” She asked, barely able to mask her shock.

“Yes, Silri, *you.*” He sounded as if he could scarcely believe what he was saying either. “Normally I would hire a professional for this kind of work, but alas, war being war I find myself short on coin. And it seems my men’s loyalty is dubious at best.” *And mine isn’t?*

“Why send me? Why not send anyone else?” She asked, sure he was playing some game, though as to what end, she didn’t know.

“Because I am a man of mercy and have given you a chance for redemption.” Yes, *how merciful of you to leave me rotting in that cramped, stinking cell.* It was an obvious lie, but she doubted she’d find the true answer by questioning him further.

“It shall be an honour to prove myself to you, your grace” Silri said, trying her best to sound eager. Sargo, of course, saw through the charade, but she’d learnt it was better to amuse him than to anger him.

“Good. Do this for me, and I shall free you.” She frowned. It was an unusually blunt promise for a man who was usually so careful with his words. Malian opened his mouth to protest, but Sargo shot him an icy glare. Without warning, Jered leaned in, so close that she could feel his breath on her ear.

“If you try to run, then you’ll be begging to be put back in that cell,” He hissed, his voice low and gravelly, and full of glee.

“You’d better go now,” Sargo said, dismissing her.

#

The town, which was poor even by Askelan standards, was little more than a small cluster of wooden shacks covered with mouldering hides. Silri took in a deep breath, inhaling the sharp smells of sea salt, earth, and smoke; smells that were deliciously sweet compared with the rank of her cell; smells which brought memories of home. She embraced the gusts of wind, which was soothing after some many years of sweltering heat.

Despite Jered’s threats, Silri’s first thought upon leaving the Keep was of

escape. Then she remembered what had happened to the last prisoner who tried escaping. No one was quite sure what had happened to the man, but the rumour she’d heard most often was that he’d been flayed alive. She reckoned her punishment would be even harsher than that. Then she considered fleeing to Sargo’s estranged sister Shyla, but she quickly dismissed that idea. Shyla, Lady of Grayhan, was said to be even worse than her brother. Given their similarities, it always puzzled Silri why the two siblings despised one another. The war between them started when their father, in a vain attempt to reconcile the siblings, gave Sargo Askela and Shyla Grayhan. If only he knew his decision would cause a generation of bloodshed, perhaps he would’ve thought better. *That’s where good intentions get you, I suppose.*

Most of the townsfolk had gathered outside the holy man’s shack, eagerly awaiting his morning sermon. She recognised a handful of Sargo’s men hidden amongst the crowd; trying their best to stay unnoticed. Thankfully they hadn’t spied her yet. When the Holy man finally emerged from his humble home, the crowd greeted him with a warm cheer. He was a middle-aged man, of average height and build, with a scraggly, unkempt beard, and shaggy brown hair. He wore a simple rotted grey robe that was stained with birdshit and dotted with small tears. *He looks more a beggar than any of these lot do. Is this really what Sargo has to fret over?* He began the sermon by discussing the usual topics that holy men seemed so fond of: the glory the gods, the

importance of piety during harsh times, the days of judgment. His voice, though booming, was monotonous, and almost sounded bored. His words rang hollow to Silri and seemed just as empty to the townsfolk judging by their slack faces. *Is this what Sargo regards as a fanatic?* Then the priest changed topics.

“For some of you, all you’ve ever known is this war. Every year since you were born either Shyla’s or Sargo’s troops would march on your land; steal your crops, and sometimes your wives and daughters too. Then they demand that your fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands you fight in their endless squabbles.

“The women never return, and the few men who do come back haunted husks of their former selves. Some of my fellow holy men call this the will of the gods, the natural order of the world, or punishment for our sins. I’m here to tell you what these holy men fear to tell you: this is not the will of the gods it is *your* will. It is you who do nothing year after year, you who let them come and steal your crops and loved ones, and this disgusts the gods, which is why they will never heed your prayers for mercy!”

Around her people’s expressions turned from exhausted apathy to grim fury. Some of them even started roaring in agreement. *And killing him would only stoke that flame. Men like this Priest are weeds, rip one out, and another will take his place.* Despite being a man of impressive subtlety, Sargo was unusually blunt in how he dealt with dissent, much like all Dukes. But she sup-

posed that was the way of the world. Every few years a man like this priest would come and rile up the smallfolk, who would then revolt. Sometimes they were successful: Dukes was overthrown, keeps were burnt, and noblemen put to the sword. Then, inevitably, the Imperial legion would come and burn a few towns, which would terrify the smallfolk into submission. Years later, their children, who had no memory of the horrors, would revolt as their forefathers did. They were oblivious of the vicious cycle they were locked in. And no matter how many revolted, no matter how many Lords they overthrew, it was never enough when Dukes had the power of Sorcery.

She spent the day watching the priest from the shadows; mainly to drag out her last few hours of freedom. Despite her best efforts to blend in, she knew her status as an outsider was painfully obvious. But aside from an occasional stare or whisper, most of the townsfolk didn’t give her a second glance. The priest spent the day tending to the wounded and the elderly. He listened to their dying words and offered them water and empty comfort. Sargo had said her freedom depended on her haste, but she knew better than to be ensnared by his false promises. She had no delusions that killing the priest would set her free. *So why am I here? Why I’m here to kill some mad soothsayer?* Whenever she thought of killing the priest, a knot would grow in her stomach. She was no stranger to murder, but killing the innocent was taboo even amongst her kind. She imagined that the man would plead and beg; she’d seen it

often enough, brave men whimpering at the feet of death. Her sword would silence his cries, snuffing out everything he was or could've been. Most times she could get over it, tell herself she didn't have a choice in the matter, that she had to eat somehow.

Once evening fell, the priest, along with the townsfolk, returned to their homes. Silri hid behind the abandoned shack that lay beside his. The priest returned moments later with a long sword in hand. A sudden rush of fear gripped her, clogged her throat, and made her heart pound violently. Her sword suddenly grew heavier in her sweaty palm. He sat down on a dead tree stump and began to sharpening his blade with a whetstone.

"You can come out now," he called out not lifting his gaze from the sword. Silri froze in shock. "There isn't much point in hiding if I know where you are."

"Suppose not," Silri said. It was an effort just to keep her voice steady. "I didn't think priests were allowed to carry swords."

"We're not. But that's the times we live in," he said nonchalantly. "I saw you watching me today."

"Aren't you observant," she said, trying to sound as if she were mocking him.

"No. You just aren't as careful as you ought to be," he said, "I assume you're here to try and kill me."

"Aye, I'm afraid so." She saw no point in denying it. *Why couldn't the gods make this simple for me?*

"Which one sent you, Sargo or Shyla? Or are you here of your own accord?"

"Sargo," she answered.

"Ah." He seemed slightly disappointed. "Whatever he's paying you won't be worth it." She snorted.

"What would you have me do walk away? Defying a Duke generally doesn't end well." He was silent for a few moments.

"True enough," he conceded wearily. He stopped sharpening his blade. Before she could hesitate any longer, she charged at him. He sprang up, and nimbly dodged her first attack. He parried her first swing with ease. His sword whisked by, so close it nearly took her head off. She leapt around him, waiting for him to tire, but it was she who was beginning to be weighed down by exhaustion. He charged at her, the sheer force of his blow sent her toppling backwards. As he raised his blade to finish her, she lunged at him, her sword gashing his shoulder open. Dark blood came gushing out. He howled in pain; his sword slipped from his grasp. Just as she was back on feet, she was knocked back over by a sudden gust of wind. A wave of sharp pain struck her. She tried screaming, but sound refused to leave her lips. It was the type of pain that seeped into every inch of your body; the type of pain that eliminated all thought. With her body paralysed all she could do was thrash silently as tears and blood streamed down her face. Then the pain stopped. She dragged herself up, the world spinning about her. Vomit erupted out of her mouth. She stumbled, toppling back onto the ground. She looked up at him, and he looked back, his stern face twisted in horror.

#

She sat close to the fire, wrapped in a crusted blanket that stank of mould and sweat, the iron taste of blood still bright in her mouth. Each breath brought her a fresh wave of agony.

The priest sat beside her. Somehow his wound had already healed. They sat in awkward silence.

“What are you?” She asked.

“A sorcerer,” he replied, “well a former one anyways.”

“Former?” She asked. *Sorcerer? He’s even more powerful than Sargo, far more powerful!*

“Aye. But sometimes magic comes out instinctively. I did warn you.” Silri knew she’d given him little choice; knew she had no reason to be angry at him. And yet, it was hard to stave anger when she was in so much pain. “It would’ve been kinder to kill me,” she muttered.

“And why’s that?” He asked.

“Because when I come back empty-handed Sargo will throw me back in that cell or maybe he’ll show mercy and just take my head this time.”

“You’re his prisoner?” He asked. She nodded. “What did you do?” Silri hesitated. Memories of that time only ever brought her nostalgic agony, so she made an effort to avoid them.

“Because I tried to leave him” He frowned in confusion. “We were married,” she explained, “still are I suppose.”

“Married?” He asked chortling. “Forgive me, but you don’t seem like a Duchess to me.” She snorted.

“I did a few years ago.”

They sat in silence again. She pondered

what would happen now. Would she go back and be thrown in a cell? Flee, and have Jered hunting her? Which poison would she pick?

“What else can you do?” She asked, trying to distract herself from these lingering questions.

“Not much, in truth. There are others much more powerful than I am.”

“You’re much more powerful than my husband,” she said. “If you could do that to me, then I reckon you could take care of Sargo and Shyla yourself with no problem.” He shook his head.

“I wasn’t always a holy man,” he explained. “Before, years ago now, I was a Northern King. As far as I know, they still sing songs of my deeds to this day up. I spent most my life at war, trying to carve out my own empire.”

“And now you preach against war. How ironic”

“I changed once I started noticing what my men were doing. I saw how they would loot folk, butcher the men, and rape their daughters. I’d always known deep down, but folk have a way of ignoring unsavoury things. But at some point, I couldn’t deny it anymore. It’s a sickness, war, I mean. Men’s worst addiction.”

“So you came down South and became a priest.”

“Which is why I can’t kill Sargo or Shyla if I do, and then all of this would be for nought. There are enough men in the grave because of me as it is.”

“So instead you try to persuade others to do it for you.” He snorted

“They won’t do anything,” he said. “I mainly do this so I can sleep at night, and who knows? Maybe when I face the gods, it’ll count for something.”

“If you have the power to kill them and you don’t use it, then how are you helping these people?” She asked. He scoffed.

“As if you give a rat’s arse what happens to them. You just want me to kill your husband, so he doesn’t throw you back in a cell or have you hanged.”

“True enough,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t make me wrong.”

“So what would have me do, kill Sargo? Then Shyla will come and take his place, and if I kill her, another one will come to replace her. There’s no shortage of power-hungry cunts in the world.”

“You could make an example of Sargo, show whoever comes after him what will happen if they don’t treat the smallfolk right.” The thought of sending the wild sorcerer to murder Sargo unsettled her, but what other choice did she have? “Better than doing nothing, I reckon.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he conceded, letting out a heavy sigh.

“If you’re gonna kill him I should come with you.”

“Why?” He asked, “You’d only be endangering yourself.” She didn’t know the answer, other than some vague need for closure. Terrified as she was of her capricious husband, something far stronger dwelled within her; anger that had grown within her over the years, anger which was now much more potent than her fear. She needed to see him dead, to know she would be safe.

“I just...need to see this through,” she said. The priest nodded, seemingly understanding her.

#

Silri and the Priest waited outside the Keep’s outer walls, far enough so that they were safe from the guards prying eyes. Makeshift Palisades filled the gaps in the outer walls. Silri had spent nearly a decade living in the Keep, so she knew it nearly as intimately as Sargo himself. There were the Keep’s dark towers, which resembled plumes of smoke, were choked with ivy, blackened by mould, and crumbling under the forces of time and neglect. In the unruly gardens, weeds plagued the stone terraces, and overgrown grass buried the ancient statues of Sargo’s more impressive ancestors. Aside from the main hall, all of them keep stained glass windows were long shattered. However, despite the decay, she could see traces of the mighty fortress the Keep had been times of far antiquity. The priest glared through the thick mists, at the two men standing guard by the Keep’s main gate. Then, simultaneously, both men vanished from sight.

“Where the hell did they go?” She asked, staring at the mists, expecting them to re-emerge.

“Nowhere,” he said. Before she could probe him any further, he started walking towards the drawbridge. She limped after him, still wounded from their recent skirmish—two piles of ash lay by the main gate.

“Is that them?” She asked. It was a stupid question with an obvious answer, and yet she asked anyway, hoping the obvi-

ous answer was the wrong one.

“What’s left of them anyway,” he grunted. Looking at the ash made her nauseous; it wasn’t the sight of it that sickened her so much as the priest’s power to turn men from flesh to ash with such absurd ease. She turned to say something to him but found another one of Sargo’s guards standing where he’d stood a moment earlier.

“It’s an illusion,” The priest explained hastily. Though his appearance had changed, his voice remained the same. He snapped his fingers, removing the piles of ash, and barged through the double doors. Reluctantly, she followed him. *What the hell have I unleashed here?* She led him up to Sargo’s study, the chamber in which he spent most of his time. The study was a cramped chamber, with walls that were mostly bare from a handful of paintings of former Duke’s and Generals. Empty wine goblets littered the fine copper carpet. Sargo was nowhere to be seen; instead, Jered sat at study’s cramped desk, sharpening his rusted blade. The chambers only source of illumination came from a dying candle by Sargo’s desk, shrouding Jered in a cloak of ominous darkness.

She said nothing, waiting for the priest to unleash his magic, but instead, he stood motionless. He was staring at Jered pensively, and Jered was glaring back at him, a ghost of a smile on his thin lips. Jered suddenly started mumbling in a strange, incomprehensible tongue, and the priest’s illusion shattered. Silri stood, too shocked to move. *He’s a sorcerer.* The revelation was at once unbelievable and obvious. It

explained many of the mysteries that surrounded him. It explained how Jered managed to expose her plans to Sargo, and it explained why Sargo tolerated his constant mockery and occasional petty treachery. A surge of panic jolted through her; she scanned the room, scouring for any means of escape. There was none. The priest was motionless, seemingly as astonished as she was.

Jered sprang up from his chair right as the priest unsheathed his blade from his scabbard. Jered’s first swing was so fast it nearly decapitated the priest. The priest leapt around him, barely able to parry Jered’s relentless blows. The priest’s face was flushed, and beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. Possessed by a sudden, mad instinct, Silri lunged at Jered, but just before her blade pierced through his chest, he turned, and his meaty hands caught her by the throat. His grip Her sword slipped from her grasp. Deciding it wasn’t worth effort to kill her, he tossed her across the chamber. She sailed into the back wall of the study: the impact reopened old wounds and made new ones. Her head felt light, and her surroundings spun around her. She watched as Jered’s long blade slashed the priest’s sword in half, and then struck him in the knees. Blood and bone splattered across the copper carpet. The priest clutched his shattered knee, howling in torment. She tried to force herself up, but it felt as if she was locked in a drunken stupor.

Jered picked the priest up by his head and slammed it against the wall over and

over. Blood matted the priest's hair, and his face was swollen and purple. *Get up!* Something within her roared, but her body refused to move, frozen by exhaustion and terror. The priest lay in a pool of blood, either dead or unconscious. Not that it mattered anymore. She tried standing up one more time, before collapsing. She groaned as the darkness engulfed her.

#

The guards had bound Silri's wrists, and ankles were to a chair and gagged her. She didn't know why they bothered considering there was no one to talk to save for the pile's bones of that lay in the corner. They had stuffed her in one of the cells beneath the dungeon, located deep in the bowels of the Keep; the cell that held those sentenced to death. She had no hope of rescue. If the priest didn't die in Sargo's study, then he was surely killed afterwards. The priest had turned men to ash with ease and yet had been nothing but a rag doll to Jered.

The hours trickled excruciating slowly. During her imprisonment, she had learned that boredom was its own kind of torture. *At last, he hasn't put me on the rack or had my nails pulled out.* Finally, the silence was broken by heavy footsteps. The footsteps stopped by the iron door. The door creaked open, and a figure stepped inside. She could tell by the smell of perfume that it was Malain. He pulled the gag from her mouth.

"Comfortable?" He asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Not especially," she said hoarsely, her lips cracked and bleeding.

"I ought to thank you, you know," he said. "You've taught my dear nephew a harsh lesson, one I hope he'll never forget. I feared he'd change his mind on your execution, let mercy get the better of him and let you live."

"How long have I been down here?" She asked. She didn't dare ask the guard who fed her, fearing a bloody nose, but Malian was much too frail for that.

"Two days."

"Only two days? It's hard to track time in here," she said. "So how will it be done? Will I be impaled on a spike, burned at the stake? Or will he stab me in the heart? I suppose that would be painfully poetic, and Sargo always did fancy himself a poet." She pretended to be casual, tried to hide the creeping fear that threatened to seize her throat and made him beg for mercy.

"His grace has yet to decide on the manner of your execution."

"I see. I suppose there's no greater torture than letting me languish here and ponder these questions, eh?"

Malain reached into a pouch and took out a small vial filled with a foul-smelling glowing green liquid. The implication was clear to her.

"Ah, so it'll be poison. How disappointing."

"It will kill you within the hour. Painlessly, I might add."

"Did Sargo order you to do this?" He hesitated before responding.

"No," he admitted, "consider it an old man's mercy."

"Mercy?" She snarled. "Do you take me

for a fool? This isn't mercy. You think he'll change his mind." Malian shrugged.

"I honestly don't know what he'll do. He's always been a mercurial man. The way I see it, you can either take the poison or risk a much worse fate. The choice is yours." He held the vial up to her mouth. She mustered up what little salvia she had left in her dry mouth and spat at his face.

"There's your answer." She expected him to curse, or strike her; instead, he calmly wiped the spit from his face.

"Have it your way then," he said mildly, storming out.

She drifted in and out of sleep. The pain of her wounds waxed and waned as the hours dripped by. She spent most of her time lost in the depths of her mind, replaying past events, imagining what her life would've been had she only chosen another path. She thought back to the day she met Sargo. She and the other bandits had finally been caught and brought before Duke for sentencing. Back then, Sargo had been much more handsome. His face was smooth instead of wrinkled; he wore elaborate garments instead of a basic waistcoat. Not only did he let her live, but he let her stay with him. It took years for her to love, and years for that love to fade. She hadn't noticed it at first. It was the accumulation of many small changes; as the war with his sister dragged on the bitterer, he became. Then one day, he sent his men to burn a village down for harbouring Shyla's men, presumably to stop other villages from allying with his sister. After that, whatever love she had was gone, and so planned on

leaving, gathering enough coin to live. However, on the eve of her departure, her plans were exposed and once again, she was brought before him. Only this time, he decided to let her languish in a dungeon; condemned never to see daylight again, condemned to die with the worst men of Askela.

Days would pass before she would receive another visitor. This time she never heard their footsteps. She watched the silhouette of a tall figure approach her. Though his worn cloak and the cell's darkness shrouded his features, she still recognised him. He pulled the gag from her mouth.

"You're alive," she said, spitting out the vile taste from her mouth.

"Barely," the priest croaked, his once thunderous voice now scarcely a whisper.

"How did you escape?" She asked as untied her hopes, which still freshly burnt.

"I opened a portal when Jered tried to put a knife through my heart." He grimaced as he spoke, as though each word pained him.

"Why didn't you do that as soon as things fell apart?" She asked, harsher than she had intended. She tried standing up, but most of her limbs were numb. He helped her up and handed her a wineskin and a slice of bread.

"I was only able to do it when I was unconscious. Sorcery used out of instinct is the most potent kind as you saw firsthand." He explained as she devoured her measly scraps of bread. "Besides, sorcery of that nature can take a heavy toll." He

showed her left hand, a shrivelled limb, little more than bone wrapped in scorched skin. “Jered should be asleep at his hour; that’ll be our best chance to deal with him.”

“Deal with him? Are you fucking mad?” She asked, “are you fucking mad?”

“Would you rather take your chances and ride north?”

“Yes actually, I would rather that!” He laughed humorlessly.

“You think you can hide from him? No. You might elude him for a few months, maybe even a few years. But in the end, he’ll find you. And what do you think he’ll do when he does?” She could imagine. Death would be the least of her fears.

“Why didn’t you turn him to ash like you did with those guards? Why did you just bloody stand there?” She snapped.

“You think I didn’t try? I told you I was a weak Sorcerer, too weak to fight someone like him.”

“Then how do you plan on killing him, might I ask?”

“Simple,” he said, taking out a rusted dagger with a crudely made hilt. “I’ll slit his throat while he sleeps.”

“Is that a jest?”

“Slit throats kill Sorcerer’s just as easily as they do men.” She wanted to flee away from the Keep, away from Askela, away from Sargo and his hounds. And yet the priest did have a point; no matter how far she ran, Sargo would spend the rest his days hunting her. *One day I’ll have to confront him, why not today?*

“Let’s go then.”

The hallways were lit only by a handful of smouldering torches placed high above them; it was narrower than any of the other hallways in the Keep and was built from the same oily black stone that formed the most ancient parts of the Keep. They climbed up a winding stairway, arriving on the Keeps second highest floor. The priest stopped by a plain wooden door, which was identical to the ones beside it.

“You’re sure this is the one?” She whispered skeptically.

“Of course it bloody is. What do you think I was doing for the past week?” He whispered back. “I disguised myself as one of the guards and learned his routine as best I could.” He slowly opened the door and slid inside. The chamber’s only furniture was a bed in the corner of the room, and even that was just a plain mattress—the chamber stank of sour sweat and blood. The priest crept up to the bed; his footsteps were near inaudible. Silri waited close to the door. He stood over Jered; his dagger rose just above his exposed throat. The priest suddenly cried out, Jered’s meaty hands wrapped around his throat.

“You should’ve gotten as far from here as you could, you stupid cunt,” Jered roared, shoving the priest to the ground. Silri didn’t dare move. She glanced at the door, wondering if she would be able to sneak out while Jered was distracted; he hadn’t noticed her hiding in the shadows. That’s when she noticed a familiar sword lying at the foot of Jered’s bed. Quietly, she picked up the sword. She was able to hold it despite its immense weight; fear had grant-

ed her a preternatural strength. She dove at Jered; slashing the blade across the back of his neck. Jered froze, staring at the blood that rolled down his neck. Silri swung again, this time with much more force. Jered fell onto the floor, gurgling on the blood that gushed from his lips. She struck again, and again, each time the blade became lighter. She stopped when she felt a firm hand grip her shoulder.

"I'd say he's dead," the priest said. She looked down to see Jered's severed head rolled a few paces away from the rest of his body. Blood was still flooding from his neck. Her hands, bare feet and ragged tunic were all bathed in his blood.

The sight of his grisly corpse and the reek of blood sickened her, but she couldn't avert her eyes from the scene.

"Come on," the priest said, dragging her from the bedchamber.

#

Once the priest had set two of the guards aflame, the rest dropped their swords and bolted. That didn't stop the priest from hunting them down. Some were lucky and died quickly. Most died slowly, burn to death or were torn apart. All the while, all Silri could do was gape at the absurd brutality of it all. And what could she do to stop him? She didn't dare intervene, not wanting to be caught in the crossfire. They found Malain in his bed-chamber with a dagger jutting through his head. A guard had killed him in what she supposed was some mad attempt to appease the priest. Not that it worked. When all the guards were either dead or had fled, they

headed for the throne room where Sargo was already awaiting them.

"I take it from the sounds of slaughter outside that Jered is dead?" He asked his eyes fixed on Silri's blade, which was coated in Jered's blood.

"Aye," the priest said coldly.

"And what of my beloved uncle?"

"Dead as well."

"I thought as much," He said sourly.

"He was right the end; my cock will be the death of me." He smiled sadly, turning his attention to Silri. "Oh Silri, sweet wife. How many lives could I have saved had I killed you years ago?"

"You would've saved them had you not left me to rot in that cell."

"You say that as if you didn't deserve it."

"You think I deserved to rot for leaving? It was clear that you didn't care about the stolen gold."

"True," he admitted. "I didn't care that you robbed me. However, my men certainly cared. Despite your best efforts, they always still saw you as the Bandit Queen, and your theft only confirmed their suspicions," He explained. "Had I not done something, my men surely would've revolted and had me beheaded. Putting you in that cell was the only way of saving both our lives."

She snorted. "I'm sure that's what you told yourself."

"Tell me, Silri, why do you think I sent you to kill him?" He asked, gesturing towards the priest.

"To toy with me. How should I know what goes in your head?"

"I sent you as an excuse to release you,

you fucking halfwit,” he roared.

“Of course everything you did to me was for my own good,” she said, trying to fill her voice with as much scorn as possible, but already her rage was starting to wane. His words made sense, almost enough for her to believe him.

“Not everything, but a lot. I had to pretend to hate you to save my men’s respect, but I still loved you. Even now after you’ve sent this mad dog to slaughter my men, even now right as you’re about to butcher me, I still love you!” He chortled. “But why am I wasting my breath? Nothing will change. Just be quick about it.” He slumped back in his throne. Her rage had vanished now, replaced by horror and guilt. She wanted to say something, something that would mend the countless wounds between them, something to make him understand why she did this, something that could end all the bloodshed and hatred between them. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, he exploded into a thousand pieces.

She stared at his vacant throne, too shocked to scream. Flesh and bone spewed all across the back walls; some had splattered all across her ragged dress. The priest stormed out of the hall, without saying another word.

#

Even from a distance, the smoke of the smouldering Keep stung her eyes. The newly freed prisoners were like newborn children, looking at everything around them in awe, most unable to handle the intense summer light. Most hadn’t seen

daylight since the reign of Sargo’s father, perhaps even before that. The priest was mounted on a black mare and was staring at the burning ruins of the Keep. She stood beside him, and though her body stood outside the burning Keep, her mind was still frozen in the hall gaping at the gore of what remained of her husband.

She hated him, though she knew she had no right to. *How many nights did I pray for Sargo’s death? The priest did exactly what I asked him too. What did I think would happen?*

“You didn’t have to kill them all,” she said abruptly. “You should’ve just killed Sargo and Jered.”

“You told me to make an example. I did. Death is what comes with war; you knew that.”

“I suppose so,” she said, too tired to argue, too tired to do anything other than stare at the smouldering ruins. He made an example all right, an example none would forget for years to come. Eventually, she mounted her own horse, and rode north, away from the burning Keep and the mad priest, away from the memory of Sargo. ❖

“CHARON”

by PAT O’MALLEY

The Councilman walked towards the light and saw the figure waiting for him at the shore.

To the best of his knowledge, he had been walking for God knows how long in some sort of vast, underground river. He couldn’t remember how he had gotten here, all he could do was stare in bewilderment at the ink colored waves that crashed into the obsidian stones in front of him. A shrill breeze sent goosebumps up his arms as he walked forward to the coast.

Standing in a boat, rocking steadily with the waves was a tall hooded figure in a filthy, reddish-brown robe. Two muscular arms gripped a long wooden pole dripping with seawater. The boat, a ferry it looked like, was a long, upturned crescent decorated with what appeared to be human skulls all along the edges and front. At the tip of the boat’s mast, above a pile of skulls, was a large lantern glowing a pale white light. It had been the light that the Councilman had followed.

As he walked towards the ferry, the Councilman struggled in vain to comprehend the ghastly, nightmarish sight before him. Instead, the best that the ether of his reptile brain could do was rationalize the terrifying visage by reminding himself of the romantic gondola ride he and his sec-

ond wife had taken on their honeymoon in Florence.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Hop in,” a gruff male voice came from under the hood.

“I-uh, hey wait, now hold on a second—what’s going on here? Where the hell am I?”

He was a fifty-eighty-year-old City Councilman from Long Island. The edges of his navy-blue blazer flapped with the powerful cold gust of wind that filled this subterranean shore. He was gray-haired with a solid layer of fat around his midsection that had once been muscle. He was a man who liked to be in control of the situation around him so naturally, he was visibly uncomfortable. Even his usual confident posturing that made him so endearing to his voters was failing him.

The hooded man sighed irritably.

“No, I’m not doing this. Either hop in the damned boat and ask all your stupid bloody questions or you can fuck off.”

“I-“

“Goodbye,” the ferryman started to push the boat off the coast.

“All right! All right!” The Councilman climbed aboard.

Before he knew it, the two of them were off, sailing through the dark rapids in

the skull-covered boat. Waves thumped up against the boat, rocking it side-to-side but the boat held fast and sailed on. When he wasn't shielding his eyes from the splashing spray of salty dark water, the Councilman tried to make out a better view of the face beneath the ferryman.

From what he could see, the ferryman had a very old, rugged face with a long white beard. What stood out the most though were his eyes. At first, the Councilman thought that the hooded man was blind but that didn't explain why the eyes were glowing. True enough, glowing with white fire, the ferryman's eyes were two bright, fiery orbs like shining stars that gazed upon the edge of infinity.

As they sailed into the unknown, the air was filled with an undeniable awkward silence.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you back there. I'm just tired is all," the hooded man sighed without turning his gaze to the Councilman.

"Forget about it, happens to the best of us," the Councilman said. "You know, as long as we're talking; by any chance could you tell me just what the flying fuck is going on here?!"

When the ferryman finished explaining, the politician was hyperventilating.

"No, that can't be right! Who the hell dies from getting hit by a bicycle?! There's been some kind of horrible mistake! I just won the re-election dammit! Let me off this fucking thing!" The middle-aged man wailed.

"Get it out of your system. Nothing's

going to change," the hooded man's glowing white eyes held no sympathy.

The Councilman continued to rage and protest but soon enough those ravings turned to sobs. The ferryman steered the oar as the boat bobbed and weaved through the choppy water of what the ferryman had called the River Styx.

"My name's Charon by the way," The hooded one said.

"Go to hell," the miserable politician sobbed.

"Right then," Charon gritted his teeth, stifling a cough.

"What a fucking joke," grumbled the Councilman. "I mean I thought I lived a good life. Sure, I may have indulged in one or two white lies here and there, but I loved my family and I never did anything that I thought would land me in hell!"

"Don't flatter yourself, you're not going to hell. Nay, you're going to the same black void everyone goes to. I'm just the sorry bastard whose job it is to drag every dead soul to the Ether otherwise they'd never get there. You're one of the lucky ones too. Used to be everyone had to pay me a shilling to get their soul over to the other side, but they did away with that. Dead souls rarely carried coins on them. Purgatory was getting too crowded."

"You do this for everyone?" The Councilman asked.

"Every. Last. One," Charon grumbled.

"Oh uh, well what's the Ether like? Is it nice?"

Charon pondered this. "Eh, I suppose it's sort of like the void you were in before

you were born, only a bit more... seasoned?"

"Seasoned?"

Just then, the Councilman realized that the sound of the waves against the boat began to sound less like water and more like a chorus of agonized moaning. The sound grew louder, the man covered in the boat as his ears were filled with the piercing, unholy sound of the damned.

"What's that sound? Where is it coming from!?"

His answer came from a pair of rotten, translucent hands shooting out from the water. They clutched the edge of the boat directly next to the screaming Councilman. Terrified, he watched as the hands tightened their grip and pulled up the howling, transparent torso of an androgynous humanoid.

"Help me! For the love of God help me!"
The phantasm screamed.

The Councilman covered his eyes as the glowing pleading body pulled itself closer to him. As the screaming soul reached for his face, a loud "thwack!" of the ferryman's oar swatted the howling ghost back into the black water.

It didn't even splash, just dissipated once it hit the darkness.

"Sorry, best to ignore that," Charon smiled apologetically.

"What the hell was that!?" The Councilman roared.

"Nothing for you to worry about that's for true."

The skull-ferry lurched forward, knocking the two of them about as more glowing

transparent bodies began pulling themselves on to the boat. They were all naked and confused, decaying and healing, stuck between who they were and what they've become. All the worse were the confused screams and pleads each one elicited.

"Where am I?"

"It's so cold! Get me out of here!"

"The horror! The unspeakable, endless horror!"

In a series of rapid swats, each dead soul was smacked back into the dark ocean by the powerful whacks delivered by the wooden oar.

"Go on, get! Shoo! Shoo! Get out of here! Damned things making me work extra hard," Charon's frustrated grumbles were in stark contrast to the horrified, trembling Councilman.

"Oh God, oh Jesus. I-is that where I'm going?" The Councilman asked.

"Ah, don't be such a Mary. It's not so



bad.”

“Not so bad!?” The Councilman cried.

The boat sailed onwards as the moaning pleads from the dead souls gradually died down. Before they knew it, the choppy, narrow River Styx had stretched into a wide ocean. Above them, the cavernous ceiling grew higher and higher until a thousand shining stars appeared where the cavern’s ceiling had been. Wherever they were now, there was no land anywhere to be seen, just the two of them in the ferry, sailing in obsidian while millions of alien stars and planets shined above.

Beneath the heavenly cosmos, Charon hummed to himself as he steered the pole left to right. The awkward silence between the two resumed, only broken by the hooded man breaking out into periodic coughing fits before hastily regaining his composure. There was no possible way of determining how much time had passed. Even so, after what felt like several hours had passed with no destination in sight.

The Councilman was growing restless. “Are we any closer to where we’re going? It feels like we’ve been sailing forever.”

“Pipe down, don’t talk to me about ‘forever.’” Charon sneered.

“Look I’m sorry guy, but is it too much to ask how far away we are?”

The hooded man whipped his head back. The glow of the lantern illuminated his old face, but the fiery glow of his agitated eyes burned brighter. Charon’s wrinkled, bearded face was gone, in its place was some kind of fanged ghoulish nightmare that looked like it belonged to a

demon from deepest depths of hell.

“Forgive me,” this new Charon snarled. “Perhaps I am mistaken, but are YOU the immortal ferryman whose sole purpose for all eternity is to sail billions of souls to the afterlife? Hmmm?”

“Uh, n-no?”

“I see, well then if it’s not too much trouble, would your grace allow it if the ACTUAL immortal ferryman did his job and we get there when we damned well get there???”

“I-uh, yeah, s-sure,” The middle-aged man couldn’t look at the angry demonic face.

“I JUST want to make sure it’s okay with you,” Charon growled.

“Fine! Yes! I swear it’s fine!”

“Hrmph,” Charon’s old face returned but was immediately overcome with another hacking cough. His body violently heaved as he coughed and leaned on the pole to steady himself.

“Are you all right?” The Councilman asked. “That sounds like a bad cough and you’ve been doing it for a while.”

“Fear not, it’s only allergies.”

“How can you have allergies down here?” The Councilman asked.

“You are truly a test of my patience. I do free labor for millennia and you’re telling me I’m not allowed to have allergies every now and then?” Frustration drooled from the ferryman’s mouth.

“Fair enough,” The Councilman conceded.

The choppy water splashed against the boat, rocking it back and forth. The

Councilman was at least thankful that he didn't bring his habitual sea-sickness into the afterlife with him. What a nightmare that would have been.

Eager to prolong the inevitable return to awkward silence, the Councilman feigned interest in the ferryman.

"You really have been doing this forever haven't you?" He asked.

"It certainly feels that way," Charon sighed. "Feels almost longer than that if I'm being honest. I've been ushering souls since the Gods figured out what to do with you. I've long since gotten used to the freshly dead souls of men and women. It's the newly deceased children that will always haunt me. They cry and don't understand what's happening. It breaks my heart but there's nothing to be done. All I can do is tell them stories and try to make them laugh until we get to the end of the line," he sighed.

"I'm sorry, that sounds awful."

Charon shrugged. "Yes, well its all the same. The forces of life and death need undertaking. Since my brothers are too busy taking up space someone has to do the heavy lifting in the family."

Since the conversation began, the thrashing river they had been sailing on had steadily faded. Now, the River Styx has become eerily calm.

Even the terrible sound of the moaning dead souls had vanished. From what the Councilman could see, the boat was gliding silently across a silent, boat of water that seemed to stretch on into infinity. The boat looked as though it was sliding on a sheet

of glass that reflected the trillions of shining stars above.

Abruptly, the boat stalled, bobbing gently in the dark water. The Councilman craned his head back, he thought he heard the Charon mumble something to himself. If he didn't know any better he'd swear that the ferryman was looking at their surroundings with a look of confusion burning in the twin sun orbs he called eyes.

"That's-hmmm," Charon mumbled.

"Everything all right?" The Councilman asked.

"Fine, just fine," Charon picked up the oar and paddled on.

For a plane of existence where time no longer existed, it still damn well felt like hours had passed for the Councilman. Even though he wasn't in a rush to reach their destination, he was growing increasingly anxious sitting in this boat with no land in sight. The anticipation of the unknown was driving him mad. Just how long was this ferry ride supposed to take?

It wasn't long before the milky way above them disappeared and their surroundings changed. Blood-colored shores began creeping in the distance almost as if the horizon was closing in on them. The icy black water had turned to a scorching shade of amber that bubbled. He rubbed his hands together and patted his thighs, unable to sit still.

What fresh hell was this?

"Quit your fidgeting, you're rocking the boat," Charon grumbled.

"Do you know where we're going?"

"I already told you, we're sailing on the

River Styx to the land of the dead.”

“Has the River Styx always been made of lava?” The Councilman asked incredulously.

Indeed, an ungodly amount of heat had filled the air. Looking down outside the ferry, the Councilman and Charon watched as the boat sailed undamaged through what appeared to be molten lava. The Councilman ducked as a bubble of magma burst near his side of the boat.

The worst came when the Councilman spied land. On the red, brimstone shoreline, to the Councilman’s horror, were what looked like strange humanoid reptilian creatures covered in green scales standing on their forelegs. A cluster of them stood on land staring at the boat with black, oval eyes. The Councilman tried to avoid their uncanny, human-like gaze and cowered in the boat. The distinct sound of hissing made his skin crawl.

Charon scratched his beard and coughed.

“I suppose it’s a bit peculiar,” he steered the oar, twisting the ferry into a sharp left turn.

It wasn’t long before they had left the brimstone and reptilian creatures behind. The boat found itself back in the chill black ocean underneath the galaxy of alien stars and planets. The moaning howls of the dead in the water had returned too. The ferry was back in the cold sea of dead souls from which they had come.

All that insanity and they had only made it right back to where they started?

The longer they sailed uncertainly, the

worse the Councilman’s anxiety grew. He found himself longing for an actual Hell to reach at least that way the journey would be over. This had to stop. He had to take action. It didn’t matter that he had zero clues where to go, he just had to get off this God-forsaken boat.

The icing on the cake came when the boat abruptly stalled again in the river. With wild eyes, the Councilman stared daggers as Charon once again turned his gaze around with an alarmingly panicked look on his face. It was the same expression the Councilman had on his own face whenever reporters asked him where the money for the community’s budget came from.

“Something the matter?” The Councilman asked, gritting teeth.

“Fine, I’m-er fine,” Charon’s face betrayed his words.

“Really?” The Councilman’s voice was rising. “Because it looks like we just went in one big circle!”

“What? How *dare you!*” Charon’s demonic face was back and furious.

“You know something, Mr. ‘Immortal Ferryman’ I’m starting to get the feeling that you don’t know what the hell you’re doing!” The Councilman was livid.

“No! I am the shepherd of dead souls! I,” Charon’s nightmare face shrank back down to normal. He looked like a confused old man as he frantically looked around them.

“I am older than time I-uh-I....,”

Those burning white eyes of his filled with horror. Charon gripped the oar with both hands as if for security. The

Councilman had had enough. He got up from his seat on the rocking boat and slowly approached the hooded man, careful as the boat lurched in the waves.

“You son of a-we’re LOST, aren’t we?!”

“Stay back!” Charon cried.

“Give me that damn oar!” The Councilman lunged at the ferryman.

Charon thrust the oar trying to stop him, but the Councilman was fast enough to duck. The Councilman made a grab for the oar’s hilt, gripped by two old white knuckled hands. Both of them shouted incoherently at each other as the two fought and tugged over the wooden paddle. The sea of moaning dead souls raged around them, sending the boat spiraling unbound in the water.

Thousands of white arms shot out from the ocean desperate to grab on to the boat but the violent waves pushed and pulled the boat just out of their reach.

“Let go damn you! Where are you gonna go?” Charon yelled.

“I don’t care anymore! I just need to get out of here!”

“I said-let go!” With a powerful shove, Charon pushed the Councilman to the floor of the boat.

The Councilman was struggling to pick himself up when he heard the ferrymen spasm into another throaty coughing fit. Charon tried steadying himself with the oar as he hacked and wheezed. It wasn’t doing him any good and he was rapidly losing control of the boat.

“Hey, are you all right?” The Councilman asked squeamishly.

Charon tried to say something but the coughing wouldn’t let him speak. After another coarse, raspy cough, Charon’s confused burning eyes met the Councilman’s before keeling over, falling flat on his face with a loud THUMP. The un-manned oar wobbled back and forth uncontrollably as the current of the waves sent the boat hurtling.

Panicking, the Councilman ran to ferryman’s body. He turned Charon over, trying to shake him awake but his only answer was silence. The white-hot fire in his eyes that had fascinated the Councilman had been extinguished. Instead, it seemed as though the white cataracts of an elderly man were gazing up at the Councilman.

“Charon! Charon! Hey, come on, wake up!” The Councilman yelled shaking his lifeless body.

The boat veered sharply sideways knocking the Councilman back. Now what? He looked up to see where they were heading.

Directly ahead of them, was a black swirling, whirlpool that was drawing the current in. The lantern at the front of the boat flickered as the skull-ferry drew closer to certain doom. In the spiraling current of the whirlpool were uncountable waves of mortal souls helplessly flailing in terror as they were sucked in.

“Oh, fuck *me!*” The Councilman screamed and held on to whatever he could grip in the boat.

The Councilman shouldn’t have been scared seeing as he was already dead but getting sucked into a whirlpool would be

frightening for anyone. The boat was caught up in the pool's unrelenting current now, spinning uncontrollably down and down until it disappeared into the center of the ungodly drain.

The Councilman's screams were interrupted as the boat was pulled underwater. A muffled cry of bubbles shot from his mouth in pitch-black water. Everything was happening so fast, the Councilman couldn't tell which way was up anymore but just as suddenly as the boat was sucked downwards, it was then violently propelled straight up. In a huge splash, the boat shot out from the depths and emerged in an unfamiliar river.

Still holding Charon's body, the soaking wet Councilman timidly raised his head to see where fate had brought them now. He found himself missing the whirlpool when he saw his surroundings.

This was the land of nightmares and dying thoughts. The boat seemed to be on course for what looked like the entrance to some kind of dark cyclopean necropolis illuminated by a sinister emerald glow.

Large, green flames flickered all around inside the underground lair. The echoing moans of tortured souls accompanied the flames as the boat slowly sailed onwards. In the center of the cavern stood a colossal throne the size of a skyscraper. Beneath the throne, was a seemingly infinite pile of human skulls. Reclined on the mountainous throne, was an enormous, bearded man.

Jesus wept, the first thought to occur in the Councilman's feeble human mind was

that the figure on the throne was a nightmarish, twisted version of the Abe Lincoln Memorial. Before he could get a better look at the giant, several loud, angry barks thundered through the underground lair. Instinctively, the Councilman screamed, covering his ears.

After willing the courage to look up, he felt his jaw drop. Leering and barking maliciously before him was the legendary three-headed hell hound Cerberus. The ferocious guardian of the underworld leered just outside of the shadows beside the giant's throne. Two of the legendary canine's heads continued to bark snapping their fangs while a third snarled at the intruders in a boat. In the center of it all was the giant with one gargantuan hand holding a long trident and the other scratching behind the ears of one of Cerberus' hungry heads.

Curious at this intrusion, the giant leaned forward. A terrible, booming voice drowned out the sounds of moaning souls and the mythical beast.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, CHARON? WHY ISN'T THIS SOUL BEING DISPOSED OF? CHARON? ANSWER ME!"

The Councilman stared, speechless and trembling. This had been quite the day. There he was, petrified and dripping wet like a drowned rat in some fucked up Greek version of hell, holding on to the filthy soaked corpse of his old' buddy Charon. The dead ferryman's eyes, extinguished of their fire stared up at the looming giant with a dead gaze. Charon's stone-

dead eyes might as well have been two white X's.

"...C-CHARON?" The giant asked uneasily.

"I-uh-well, he-," The Councilman babbled.

"OH MY-IS HE DEAD? HOW?! HOW DOES THAT EVEN HAPPEN?"

"I don't know!" The Councilman whimpered. "I swear, I don't know what happened! One second he was fine, the next he just keeled over!"

"JUST WHAT MANNER OF DEMON ARE YOU?"

"I'm not a demon! I'm from Long Island! I was killed by a bicycle! It's not my fault!" The Councilman cried.

"**EXPLAIN YOURSELF,**" the astonished giant thundered.

After the Councilman recapped his long, horrifying boat ride, the giant did not look very happy. By his side, the three heads of Cerberus arched upwards, producing a somber howl. Perhaps they were in mourning of the filth covered ferryman who always remembered to bring them biscuits when he visited. Gigantic shoulders sank from the mother of all frustrated sighs as the giant's large forefinger and thumb rubbed his glowing yellow eyes as if trying to make sense of this mess.

"ALL RIGHT, THIS IS WHAT WE'LL DO. FIRST, DUMP THE BODY."

Not in a position to ask questions, the Councilman hefted up Charon's corpse and pushed it into the water. It fell into the black water with a powerful splash, floating there for a moment before finally sinking

into the infinite underwater darkness below. Small bubbles trailed off from the body as the Councilman watched it fade to black.

"NOW, SAIL BACK TO THE BEGINNING. RETRIEVE CHARON. RETURN HERE AND WE SHALL PLAN FROM THERE."

"Wait...what?"

"I AM HADES, GOD OF THE UNDERWORLD. WHAT I AM NOT, IS THE GOD OF REPEATING MYSELF."

"But that's impossible! Just how in the hell am I supposed to know where to go? Also, Charon's dead!"

"SAIL IN THE DIRECTION BEHIND YOU. THE CURRENT WILL BRING YOU TO THE HEAD OF THE RIVER STYX. THERE, CHARON WILL BE WAITING. WHERE ELSE WOULD HE BE? SEEK HIM AND RETURN HERE."

"Wait, so can I-?"

"AWAY WITH YOU, DEMON SPAWN!" Hades pointed his giant staff into the air.

The river was overcome with the thrashing of a violent current. The Councilman scrambled and grabbed the oar. He had no idea what he was doing. Story of his life. All he could think of was to steer the oar left to right all while trying to keep the boat steady. The dark waves carried the skull-covered ferry away from the green fire, away from the angry Lord of the Underworld and away from the fading sounds of Cerberus' mournful howls.

Alone and adrift, the Councilman sailed. He clumsily steered the oar to keep

the boat straight but fortunately, it was just as Hades said, the current seemed to be pulling him in a specific direction. He had some trouble ignoring the moaning dead souls caught in the black ocean but after some time he surprised himself at how easy he was able to tune them out.

It was impossible to say for how long he sailed. Years? Minutes? It didn't matter, the Councilman was already dead, so he never felt hunger or exhaustion. His willpower was recharged thanks to having a clear objective of sailing back to the shore. It made a world of difference. Now with a task in hand, the Councilman was able to preserve the remaining shreds of his sanity. Or at the very least, for now. Regardless, there were more important matters to attend to.

Meanwhile, Charon walked towards the light and saw the Councilman waiting for him.

Just as Hades predicted, the River Styx's current had brought the skull-boat back to the obsidian shore where the madness began. The shrill cry of the ocean breeze blew sharply as the Councilman looked down at Charon, standing there awkwardly, with his filthy reddish-brown cloak flapping in the wind. The old bearded man tried to mask the confusion on his face, but even without looking into his worried glowing eyes it wasn't difficult to see that he hadn't seen any of this coming.

"Ahoy there," the Councilman shouted.

"Hello," Charon muttered uncomfortably, averting his gaze.

"Fancy meeting you here," the Councilman smiled.

"Yes, this is hard for me to ask but-did I-erm-," Charon struggled to find the words.

"You croaked, old man. Now hop in the boat. Don't worry I'll drive."

"Ah, so that did happen. Damnedest thing. Well don't just stand there, help me up."

Charon took the frowning Councilman's hand and climbed aboard the glowing skeleton ferry. The long oar pushed the boat off the shoreline and the two of them sailed the River Styx back towards the Underworld. Charon sat in the front, not quite sure what to say as the Councilman tried to look busy by pretending to steer the boat.

"Hey, I'm sorry about that whole "tying to take the paddle" business before. I was under a lot of stress," the Councilman apologized sheepishly.

"Don't feel bad," Charon smiled sadly. "You were right, we were lost. I hadn't the foggiest idea where we were. For the first time in my long life, the waters were a stranger to me. Still, actually dying? It's almost refreshing to feel surprised."

"Yeah, it's been a very strange day for all of us," the Councilman murmured.

Charon turned to the water. There a look of sadness beneath his hood.

"I know that I took this job for granted, even became grumpy with it and my passengers. Now, just like that, it's all over. What happens to people like me after we die? Who will take care of guiding newly

dead souls to the Underworld? Maybe souls don't need that anymore, maybe that's why I died," Charon said.

The Councilman considered this for a moment.

"I wish I knew what to say that would make things all right for the both of us. All that's left now is seeing what will happen when we get there. God knows I'm scared but I feel a little better knowing that I'm not in this alone."

"Perhaps you have a point," Charon smiled sadly. "That reminds me, you still haven't told me your name yet."

"Wow, ain't that just the way? We go through all this insanity and I don't even tell you my name. It's Alexander; Alexander Stavros."

"Ah, a fine Greek name and a politician too. Your ancestors would be proud."

"Guess I'll see for myself if I meet them. I bet my obituary must have been something else. 'Councilman celebrates reelection by getting killed by speeding bicycle'," The Councilman laughed. "Oh well, I like to think that I did the best I could while I was alive. At this point, that's all anyone can do."

Charon didn't say anything, instead he patted the side of the boat before trying unsuccessfully to stretch his legs.

"It certainly feels different riding the ferry as a passenger," Charon said.

"Do you think you'll miss it?" The Councilman asked.

"Eh, you know it's funny. Sitting here I'm beginning to realize how grueling the responsibility of this duty was. The more I

re-evaluate it, I the more I think I fucking hate boats."

They burst out laughing. What else could they do in universe where demigods were just as vulnerable to fate as humans? No one, man or God could say. The skull-boat's lantern shined brightly as they sailed on the River Styx closer to Hades. Closer to an uncertain eternity for both of them. Strangely, the current carrying the boat didn't seem to be in any rush. Who could say exactly just how long it would take them to reach the Underworld?

However long it took, they laughed the entire way.



“FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode four of our serialized short novel *Freedom*. In this story, alien beings feed and survive off the freedoms of humans, who can only combat them by restricting their own rights, even to the point of slavery. See episodes one through three in our 2020 issues to catch up and...enjoy....

Episode 4

We were almost asleep on the sofa, when a voice was heard, "wake up, my love, wake up, I need you, I will take away all the sadness and suffering", I woke up with a heart accelerated, and I saw her fixedly, was the creature, had The shape of his wife, but I rarely seemed much younger, I guess he did recognize her correctly, he stood up and told her it was not real, that he walked away, she made a face, but decided that perhaps the Affection would make him fulfill his task in that house, he stood up and told him to leave, as he threatened the creature made me think it was clear that this man would win the battle, however, minutes later, this would be under a trance, in which he thought it was much easier to leave, with his wife and his children, he was stunned by the words of the child, he approached her, who promised him the

most beautiful things with his family, then the creature looked at me again, told me not to I would tire until I was completely free; At that moment I realized that not only had to deal with a couple of problems, but that I must add an alien who has always wanted my soul, who wants to take me as it may.

Mr. Wilson never left the trance, he was lost in the words of the beings that had used him to increase the number of his victims I was holding him to take him from this creature, it was very difficult to separate him completely from the creature, but I made use of all my strength. A second creature came in, but this time he wanted to take me, I refused many times and he said "sooner or later we will set you free, my master wants to meet you". What a horrible feeling to think that they still wanted to take me with them. I thought that during my childhood I was an easy target and that I would never again be tempted by these beings.

We were cornered, then Mr. Wilson said he would go with them, I tried to stop them, but this person had more security in what he was doing, and every minute that passed, the influence was getting stronger, Mr. Wilson gave me a look and thank you, invited the child to take his hand, that's

how Mr. Wilson's life became extinct, the creatures have taken him horrible, I have to admit that they also love me and that I knew, this brave Mr. endured until the end, but I could not resign myself to want to take me with me, once the body of Mr. Wilson touched the floor, I ran out to announce to the authorities what had happened in the house of Mr. Wilson, once taken my statement, I indicated that I was going to my hometown and that of course I needed to get all the new information that the spokesperson had provided.

I took my things and went to my town, to tell my parents everything, so that they could live without having to suffer much more for my cause. When I arrived I wanted to make a meeting inside the house, the space of the room is huge and nobody uses it, I even thought of inviting more neighbors, but my priority was my parents, I had to tell them everything that happened. The time had come to converse with them, they had become quite nervous, surely they thought that there was no way to avoid the fate that this aliens offered us, however the forecast was much more encouraging, fortunately.

"There are indications that these creatures seek to feed on our freedom, that is, these aliens seek to take the lives of those more complete and free people who exist in society, for this reason slaves have been looking for ways to return all changes that were made since they were called workers, they do not currently want freedom. All the changes that arose lately attracted these creatures, for this reason the cases increased

alarmingly," I said. My mother's face was soaked in tears, I had understood perfectly what all this implied, she knew all the sacrifices we would have to do to protect ourselves, my father was quite calm, as resigned, or perhaps very sad, in any way this It would be a challenge for all of us, for all the people and all the peoples who would have to submit to certain situations in order to be able to keep these creatures away from all the people who were in danger of losing their freedom and their lives.

We needed to draw up a plan to be able to live a little more calmly, but we knew in reality that we would never have a normal life again, life as we knew it would never be the same again.

My parents wanted to become slaves, they wanted me to do the same, but I always felt that I was born in the right place and social position, submitting to the whims and mistreatments of others was not an option for me, however I was considering all the matter, something we should do for our sake and that of others. We did not stop looking for options, we decided that that night we would not take any of these, we would consult with the pillow, we would sleep that night in peace, we would try to enjoy these hours of normality.

The days that passed were quite confusing, there were many people who gave themselves to what they called "inevitable," others decided to end their lives through different means; This was going to be a horrible crisis for many families, since most of them were accustomed to living in a very ostentatious way, and like many, they had

full freedom to carry out any activity that was needed at the moment they wanted.

All the people of the town decided that it was important to meet to find a solution that would be "beneficial" for everyone, not to say that we needed an effective solution, regardless of the consequences, as long as we could all be kept safe. Many thought to go voluntarily to the neighboring towns, to give themselves like slaves, to move away of the evil that the creatures could cause to them; particularly this seemed very risky to me, especially because everyone was going to give their lives to unknown people, who would probably take advantage of them, who would not respect ages or conditions, they would simply force them to take the jobs they needed at that moment, no matter nothing else.

I felt the need to help everyone, the town was not very big, and there were mostly many adults, people who did not have the need or the strength to work forcefully, maybe my destiny was to help them all, I quickly thought of a solution, as long as they agreed.

I took the floor, in the middle of the square, I told everyone that if slavery was the solution, obviously there would have to be a figure of a boss, immediately everyone started volunteering, because they did not understand what my proposal was about; It was obvious that something like this would happen, everyone would want to govern others, it was the dream of many, but this situation was much more complicated than previously thought, I said a few words again, in order to make myself understood

better.

"The person who assumes this position, should be able to give a treatment not excessive but quite strict for those under his orders, that is, should not be a loving pattern, but a little understanding, this figure will also need a great mental strength, not to let the aliens be able to end their lives." I think that all this was very exciting to many of the people who were there, a part of me knew that this scene would happen just like this, and that they would not be ready for what would come next, so I decided to continue with the idea, "and most importantly, this person will be the one with the greatest risk of contact with the aliens, because theory would be the only one with the freedom to do what he wanted, he would be the most vulnerable person before any attack, for this reason make sure you have incredible will power, because you will have the full weight of taking care of others and also of making the right decisions that can limit enough to everyone, so they are not attacked."

A very big silence took over the whole town, nobody wanted to be easy target of these aliens, it was to be expected that being the only person with liberties in the town, you would automatically become the easiest target, the most vulnerable person, and who of course would have more chance of dying, and by that time there were no volunteers, nobody wanted to take that role, people began to propose to certain people, claiming any crazy reason that these had occurred to them. They began to say that certain people had lived longer

than others, began to exclude themselves, one of my father's friends said that he had witnessed the visits of the creatures many times, and that he was still alive, they were very much in agreement, they had found their guinea pig, and I was not willing for this to happen, my father had suffered too much and I could not carry a responsibility like this on his shoulders, at that moment I raised my voice, I volunteered, I would be the I would carry that burden, it was my responsibility, and above all, I could never sacrifice my father in that way, I could not allow him to suffer more.

The people agreed that I was the boss of everyone, and since I already had enough experience in handling slaves, I decided that I would begin that same afternoon to do everything necessary to take them all as slaves, and as I said before, It would not be loving, but not ruthless, as long as this level kept us away from all of them.

First of all, I decided that all the villagers would have to hand over a large part of their fortunes, that is, almost completely, this money would go to some charitable organizations, worse far from that place, money was never a problem for me, so I did not need it, I preferred to keep it away, I would take some part of it to do the shopping for the food and other things the slaves needed to exist.

All the inhabitants had to submit to work without receiving any payment, that is, they would have other "benefits", the normal way to survive. I could not forget that this deal would also include my par-

ents, in one way or another, I knew that this would hurt them. And that was my biggest test, to turn my parents into my slaves, of course I would, only then could I defend them.

The following days were full of silence and uncertainty, nobody had any experience with the aliens, nobody had seen them, and they had not come to the town, for those days we believed that everything that we had planned would work, and until then it seemed to work in the best way, the people were happy but very exhausted, changing their rhythm of life had caused a deep emotional wound and terrible physical exhaustion, from children to adults had to meet a very strict day. Many did not resist these types of work, and decided that suicide was the most reasonable way to be free without surrendering to these beings, many others were very unhappy, and I came to hear from another group of people who wanted the aliens to reappear so that end the misery they felt they were living right now; this last thought seemed absurd to me, they all formed a contract where they were given as slaves to my orders in order to protect themselves from that external threat, I could not understand why these people wanted to be carried by the same creatures from which they sought to get away It was a very stupid idea for me, however I came to think that maybe not everyone was born to do a job, of any kind, and they preferred the easiest way out.

The aliens visited my house more than once, as I predicted, they sought to disturb my peace, they sought me to give myself to

them, each day their visits were more frequent, more dangerous more insistent, they had come to me in the most varied ways, as priests, beggars, and other people who were known but did not see it long ago, and had no idea that they had already died.

Although their attempts increased in frequency, I felt quite prepared to face them, I was growing stronger, in mind and body, I thought maybe one day I could face them, but I did not know how, if I touched them, I ran the risk of taking my life, or at least I thought so, I had become obsessed with knowing more about these disgusting and soulless beings, I did not know what else to do for everyone, just bear the burden we were carrying.

One morning my father woke up very sick, he was very tired, and I was very worried, I was being much less condescending with my parents, since these were the closest to me (my mind convinced me that every night), but the physical exhaustion It was becoming more and more evident, so I decided to take a little work from both of them, in a certain way looking to free them of some burden, however small, I needed to see a little relief in their eyes. I won the contempt of many who did not want to fulfill their part of the deal, also of others who considered an atrocity that kept my family members much more busy, many called me a monster, because, after a few years, the attacks they began to increase, so I had to become a stricter master, but always maintaining a bit of respect for the rights that we all should have, after all we were not prehistoric beings that knew no

norm in society, we were still a community, forced to behave like slaves, thanks to the presence of beings from other worlds that decided to feed on all the good that existed inside us, forcing us to become oppressed, but above all, forcing me to become an oppressor, a title I never wanted, but I was pretty good at it, I had control of the whole town, I made sure that my orders were always fulfilled, that everyone would appreciate that I am a person with scruples, I do not know what other beings with a darker soul would be capable of.

The next steps I had to take included a feeding schedule, they could only eat at the time I had proposed for them, and not when they were hungry, at least not immediately, for this reason I began to emphasize that, the slaves and the new slaves fed equally well, so there was no problem with that. This measure led to the aliens approaching few of the inhabitants, the number of attacks decreased. I felt exhausted, I did not want to continue playing this role, but it was necessary, somehow I had done this job quite well.

But one night they came to my house, they sat in my chair next to my parents, and they began to offer them the freedom of all the punishment and all the years that they spent protecting me, that they would not have to do it anymore if they surrendered or handed me. Of course, my parents were not going to give me up, but they wanted me to. I was at the top of the house when I heard voices, I felt a great fear running through my body, because a visit to my parents was what I least wanted to hap-

pen, I stayed there, standing, thinking of a quick solution, terror I did not leave, I remembered the medallion that my mother gave me when I was little, the one who had accompanied me for a long time, I put it on my neck, in full view, this time I needed all the courage that this had for me, I needed fill me with immense courage to face these beings face to face again. I went down the stairs slowly, taking the medallion pendant tightly, I needed to hold on to something that would allow me to feel that I was in control of this situation. I stared at my parents, who seemed quite confused, as in a trance, I had seen that look, I knew they were convinced to go with them, I had to avoid it. I put myself in the middle of the creatures, and my parents, who were already standing, they told me that someone had to leave of their own volition that day, the cause for which they had worked so much was practically lost, that is, they could no longer much more, my parents were in the middle and I was willing to sacrifice myself for them.

I had not realized that I still had the medallion in my hands, I pressed it even more, and while saying the words they wanted to hear, I let go, and had not yet finished accessing their requests when they launched a scream, the most creepy that I heard in my life, and disappeared in the blink of an eye, silence took over the room, my parents did not understand what was happening, that is, these creatures were going to achieve their goal, and could not even let me complete my sentence, on the other hand I understood what had made

them run.

Immediately I turned to see my mother, I knelt in front of her, with her hands she took my face, and I said, "Mother, tell me what material this medallion has been made of, it is a very important piece to achieve to remove these beings definitively." She could not articulate, was in shock, could not believe what happened, I needed her to return to herself, I needed to know what they had made that medallion, since these beings could not resist the presence of it, retiring in a way Immediately, they practically vanished before our eyes. I do not know how long I stayed with her, and all she could say was "I do not know", that night I took the medallion to detail it, the pendant was very small, and it was aquamarine green, a kind of metal and also of glass, it did not look like any stone known to me, so I decided that I should travel to a place where they had more information about precious stones, I should go to the capitol, although I did not know how risky the trip could be, It was crucial to discover this. My mother had told me that the penis was always in her family and that her father decided to give it to her on her deathbed, so that she would be brave now that she faced the world without him, she was the only daughter, just like me, for which She was always surrounded by people who loved her and protected her.

His father never told him about the origin of it, only that it was always believed that he had great strength within it, and that it gave value to those who carried it, so he decided to give it to me that day when I

felt powerless to continue fleeing from these evil creatures. I decided to make this trip as soon as possible, but when I left I left the medallion with my parents, I did not want to feel that they were unprotected, I would not be a good son if I wanted to leave knowing that they could die during my absence. I asked him not to mention anything about this matter, because there was a lot of pressure on this issue, that is, people would be able to commit any act in order to protect themselves from these creatures that had completely ruined their lives, therefore, it was better that nobody knew the scene that occurred in the living room of our house, I made them swear that they would not tell anyone anything until I managed to find out what material the pendant was made of, and until then we would have to think how we would approach that issue

with the rest of the inhabitants of the town.

So I undertook my trip, to various places, looking for an answer, and inventing stories about family relics of great sentimental value, describing the material so that they showed me different stones, none coincided physically with the medallion, I even arrived in the capitol, and nobody knew about the incident or the material, so I returned home, this time with a new mission for all, the search for this material. I decided to put this task to my most reliable men, who would be in charge of searching this material in every corner of the earth. But I really did not know how long this could take.



END TRANSMISSION