



# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 6 Number 2

Page 1 – DALLAS: A CLOSE ENCOUNTER by EXTRATERRESTRIALLY PHILLY.

T Philly Loyd loves fat chicks and cheap beer, though not necessarily in that order. Loyd has worked for Forbes and McGraw Hill, each time running for his life as if waking up from a nightmare. His dream is to one day move to Hollywood and win a Razzie. Loyd lives in Dumbass, Texas. [ployd77082@gmail.com](mailto:ployd77082@gmail.com).

Page 5 – MAKEUNDER MAVEN by Douglas J. Ogurek. Publications have rejected Mr. Ogurek's work more than 1,500 times. However, The Paris Review, considered one of the world's leading literary journals, thanked him for submitting a manuscript in one (form) letter. Another highly respected journal, The Yale Review, stated, "We want to thank you for your kindness in letting us see your work." More at [www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com](http://www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com). Twitter: @unsplatter

Page 17 – NIGHT CREATURE by K. A. Williams. K. A. Williams has been published in many various magazines including Corner Bar, Calliope, Ariel Chart, The Creativity Webzine, Bewildering Stories, Nuthouse, Altered Reality, and Transfigured Lit, with upcoming fiction scheduled for Yellow Mama.

Page 25 – 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>). 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!"



# “DALLAS: A CLOSE ENCOUNTER”

by EXTRATERRESTRIALLY PHILLY

On June 4, 2020, NASA received a signal from outer space like no other before. After careful deliberation, it was agreed that the signal was indeed from intelligent life not of this world. What did it say? Just one word: Dallas.

But first, a little history.

Travel back in time sixty years. 1977, and NASA launches the Voyager spacecraft. Anyone who ever saw the first *Star Trek* movie knows this. What most people don't know is that in the summer of 1980, a similar probe, Explorer, was sent into space as well: in the opposite direction.

On board was a document of life on Earth called the Golden Record, a sort of time capsule shot into outer space. The Golden Record was a gold-plated, audiovisual disc chock-full of all kinds of goodies, like the sound of a baby crying, whale song, even music by Blind Willie Johnson—all just in case the probe was ever discovered by extraterrestrials.

On it were classic movies, popular TV shows of the day, as well as documentaries and historical writings of the history of mankind, good and bad.

There were also much more technical documents, like Einstein's Theory of Relativity, Carl Sagan's *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, and George Lemaître's Hypothesis

of the Primeval Atom (also known as the Big Bang Theory). There was even a Bible, just in case.

There were questions from mankind itself, like: How was the Earth really created; what was the Universe like in the very beginning; and, what actually happened to the dinosaurs? When mankind received the message from outer space on June 4, 2020, it could mean just one thing: there was, after all, intelligent life out there.

On June 21, the same radio communication was received again: Dallas.

NASA jumped into high gear. Satellites quickly detected a large alien spacecraft in orbit around the Earth, and there was no doubt where it was headed. The only signal received from the extraterrestrials remained, over and over again: Dallas.

On June 25, everyone who was anyone converged on Dallas, Texas, to meet and greet our little green friends from outer space. All the important people were there, just like in the movie *Mars Attacks*. All the smartest people were there, as well.

There were historians, mathematicians, theologians, and scientists of all kinds. Especially, the outer space kind. The guy with the funny hair was there. The guy in the wheelchair, too. They even brought Einstein's brain out of cold storage. And

yes, there were politicians. The politicians, of course, had the best seats in the house.

Computers and loudspeakers were set up all around a makeshift runway, a la *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Whatever language the aliens may speak, the smartest people in America were ready and waiting to translate it.

The first thing that came to scientists' minds was: What would we ask the aliens? Of course, the first question would have to be: Where do you come from? But there were even more pressing inquiries, like: What's on the other side of a black hole? Is time travel really possible? And, is the Universe expanding, or contracting? Are we all going to die in another thirteen billion years, or will life go on?

People more down to Earth, academics mostly, were more interested in what the aliens themselves might have to teach humankind, like: Where humans really come from. Because of the great divide among mankind itself, the answer could be God, and it could be monkeys. Or even something else.

To the clergy, there was no doubt. The aliens wanted to know more about God Himself. They may have traveled halfway across the galaxy and have superior intelligence, but humans were God's favorite, and the aliens wanted to know why.

What the aliens indeed would ask, no one could have guessed. And that a mild-mannered ranch hand from Emporia, Kansas, by the name of Raymond R. Krebbs had the answer, would surprise the whole world.

The alien spacecraft landed to the musical stylings of the Marine Corps Marching Band's *From the Halls of Montezuma*. From the drawbridge of the spacecraft itself came walking down, you guessed it, a big-headed, little green alien man. Just like in the movies.

He was accompanied by a small ensemble of fellow green men. The good people at NASA had already provided a big microphone and the little green alien man walked right up to it. It was then that he said: □Ψ//□○∏∏∏∏∏∏.

What could it mean, everyone began speculating? What did they want to know? Were they curious as to whether America had completed its top-secret doomsday device in outer space? Had humans actually discovered a way to warp time and space and deliver the deadly payload across the galaxy? Not hardly.

The President of the United States gave the order, and in just a few moments the massive computer with all kinds of bells and whistles spat out the translation. It read: *Two Shot ER*.

Two Shot ER? WTF did that mean? Were the aliens not really friendlies at all? Had they come to Earth with hostile intentions?

Before anyone could get carried away though, before all the torches and pitchforks started coming out, a doctor in the crowd quickly deduced that the aliens may have been involved some kind of interstellar mugging. Two had been shot. Killed, maybe. Perhaps more were injured and now in need of an Earthling Emergency Room.

The big-brained humans at work on the massive computer quickly formulated such a question in alien speak, then blasted it out like Francois Truffaut in a Steven Spielberg movie. Mankind waited with bated breath. The alien at the microphone shook his head No, and said once again: □◻◻◻◻○ ∏ ∏∏∏∏∏∏.

Again, the gigantic computer lit up like so many traffic lights. This time, the translation it spat out sounded more like: *Who Shot ER?*

Who shot ER? Who was ER? Someone well-known throughout the galaxy? A friend of theirs perhaps, hit by a stray bullet? Theories began flying all around over what exactly the aliens meant by ER.

Could it be Endoplasmic Reticulum? How about Estrogen Receptor? Extended Release? External Rotation? No one could agree on any one answer. Apparently, however, this time the alien at the microphone did not need to wait for the translation via the candlelit megaphone. He shook his head No, and said once again: □◻◻◻◻○ ∏ ∏∏∏∏∏∏.

Again, the over-wrought, over-priced human computer began deciphering the message and this time it came up with: *Who Shot JR?*

Who shot JR? What on Earth did that mean? Perhaps it was code for some sort of impending intragalactic catastrophe.

All the smartest people in America put all their big fat brains together, and still they had no idea what the aliens were talking about. It was then that Raymond R. Krebbs, retired ranch hand from Emporia,

Kansas, and son of Amos Krebbs, stepped forward with the answer that took everyone by surprise.

“He’s asking,” said Krebbs, “Who Shot JR?”

“Who Shot JR?” said the President.

“Who the hell is JR?”

“JR Ewing,” said Krebbs. “From the TV show, Dallas?”

Could it be? Could highly intelligent life from halfway across the galaxy really have traveled thousands of light years just to find out who shot JR Ewing, from the popular 70’s and 80’s TV show Dallas?

Just then, a NASA technician approached the President of the United States and whispered in his ear, “Sir, *Dallas* was one the TV shows included on the Golden Record aboard the Explorer probe.”

“Yes,” said the President, “go on.”

“Well, sir; Explorer was launched in July of 1980, when the whole world was wondering: Who Shot JR? It was all everyone talked about that summer. It was the big finale to season three.”

“By God, you’re right,” said the President. “And it turned out to be his mother, right?”

“No sir,” said the technician. “It was his brother, Bobby.”

Just then, Harold P. Dunleavy, Attorney General of the United States, joined the conversation. “Mr. President,” he said, “it was clearly Cliff Barnes who shot JR Ewing. He had motive, and opportunity.”

“No,” chimed in General John J. Masteson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, “it was Clayton Farlow.”

“Clayton Farlow?” said the AG, “But he didn’t even show up until season four. JR was shot in the last episode of season three.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said the General. “Farlow was retired Delta. He shot JR Ewing off camera. Black ops, style.”

“Oh, come on,” interjected the First Lady. “Everyone knows it was Sue Ellen. Could it have been more obvious?”

It was at that moment, amid high-level discussions by the most important people in America, that Raymond R. Krebbs, retired ranch hand from Emporia, Kansas, and son of Amos Krebbs, interjected again.

“It was Kristin,” said

Krebbs. “It was Kristin who shot JR.” “Who?” said the President.

“Kristin,” said Krebbs.

“Kristin Shepard. JR’s secretary.” Everyone drew a blank.

“His mistress,” said Krebbs. “Sue Ellen’s sister? You know, Mary Crosby?” “Are you sure?” said the President.

“Absolutely,” said Krebbs.

“Okay,” said the President. “Run it through the computer.”

In just a few moments, the computer blared out the answer, and it was at that moment that all the aliens looked at each other in bewilderment. The head alien returned to the microphone, saying:

ⒹⒻⒿⒺⒾⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿ

The computer quickly translated it. It

said: *Are you sure?*

The computer answered: **ⒹⒻⒿ**. Or, Yes.

The aliens all looked at one other in disgust. Had they traveled halfway across the galaxy just to find out it was Kristin Shepard? JR’s secretary? Sadly, it appeared so.

The last alien communication needed no translation:



Dejected and deflated, the aliens turned back around, boarded their ship, and blasted off into the sky. Kristin Shepard? Are you fucking kidding me? They’d traveled a thousand light years just to find out it was Kristin Shepard? Lucky Earthlings. At least they’d only had to wait one Earth summer to get the answer to the disappointing, season-four episode and cliffhanger revelation: Who Done It?

Over was one of the weirdest close encounters in human history. Little did mankind know, however, that in just a few short years, long, slimy, serpent-like creatures from the planet Dynasty, who had come across the American space probe Frontier (launched in the summer of 1984) would be landing in Denver, Colorado—home of the Carringtons—to ask the question everyone in the Sombrero Galaxy was wondering these days:

**ⒹⒻⒿⒺⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿⒿ?** Or: Who set fire to the cabin? And, did Crystal and Alexis survive? ❖

# “MAKEUNDER MAVEN”

by DOUGLAS J. OGUREK

The book’s spread says “Wiggy.” The illustration shows a woman laughing and holding over her head intestines connected to a man’s corpse.

A cube-shaped chair holds the woman with the book. She wears a fluorescent green watch.

The man beside her talks on the phone and studies a tablet computer. “Where’d you hear that? Hello?” The sound of a jet engine fills the lounge, which smells of leather and wood. “I need you to move me a little up, okay? Just above Belstone and Fistel and voila. All right? Bye.”

“MentPath Airlines,” in curveless letters, glows from a stainless steel rectangle on the wall.

The woman closes her book, then removes a tablet computer from a purse decorated with a vice-like symbol. “I have my sketches.”

The man watches a TV mounted on the wall. It shows a woman and a toddler holding opposite ends of a multicolored plastic chain.

“For the Mavens addition? I’m a little stuck. Greg?”

Greg straightens her in the chair, then extends his tablet toward the room. “Look at this Tame. Thin lines. Muted colors. Look at the fonts. Well done.”

“Lilith Dewfetter...there’s a bit of an issue.”

“Who did this? I think Lordi and Maltop did this. It’s potent . . .”

“Most Lilith Dewfetter products . . .”

“I know a couple guys from Lordi and Maltop.”

Tame frowns at her tablet. “My background image.”

“I changed it. It was too...” He flaps his hand and his cuff links, silver, square, gleam. He straightens a stray cluster of her hair. “Lordi and Maltop. Those guys know me.”

Shrieks of laughter come from across the space. A woman, the lounge’s only other occupant, pushes blades of her short blond hair behind her ear and talks on a phone. “Well I asked him—he’s in the committee that I’m co-chair of—and he said, ‘Lila, that’s something I could do.’ He said, ‘Lila, I’m open to it.’” Lila squints at the upper corner of a glass wall that displays a runway.

Lilith Dewfetter, Inc. had invited Tame to join a design competition for expanding its headquarters for a “Mavens of Transformation” exhibit.

Tame’s watch marks the hour with the Dapple Cap theme song. She’s always liked the Green Meeplebuddle, the cartoon’s



only female villain. Tame extends her hand over the rendering on the tablet. “I’m thinking of a curtain wall that sweeps out.”

Greg says, “That watch is really distracting.”

“The wall...it’s kind of a feminine gesture. I don’t know. Can you kind of unstick...I’m stuck.”

The watch stops. Greg winces. “Isn’t there a setting to turn that off?”

“The sweeping wall here? I wanted to pick up on the transformation.”

Greg grabs her wrist, then brings the watch to his mouth. “Hello? Hello? Hello? I’m trying to help Tame break free of the third grade. Can you help me break Tame out of the third grade?”

Across the lounge, Lila shrieks again.

Tame cups her hand. “Like ‘Mavens of Transformation?’ The façade transforms. So I was thinking of this little...”

Greg releases a wind-like noise and flattens her hand. He pulls out Tame’s book. “What the hell?”

“It’s scratch ‘n’ sniff. I got it from this woman.” She opens it to the “Wiggy” spread.

“What’s it supposed to smell like? Intestines? Come on, Tame.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried. It’s got a smell. There’s this woman—”

Greg gets a call. “Hold on Bob. Let me get to a more secure space.” He walks away, leaving Tame and Lila, fifty feet away, as the lounge’s sole occupants.

Lila looks at the window. “Dave Dave Dave listen. I know what’s going on. I’m chair of the committee.”

The lounge’s scent seems familiar to Tame.

Lila, still looking out the window, starts to rise, but the chain on her purse—it has the same symbol as that on Tame’s purse—catches on the cube chair. She sits back down, then sweeps her hair over her ear.

Lilith Dewfetter, a cosmetics company, tests most of its products on animals. Tame sniffs the wig of intestines.

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Tammy’s only experience with the Makeunder Maven was at Flora’s baby shower. It took a while before Tammy’s future sister-in-law wasn’t surrounded by guests.

“Is Tip going to be around today?” said Tammy. “I took a client to that restaurant he recommended. It was called Catch...something. Plus I have this book he recommended.”

The guest of honor—her eyelashes extended pleadingly—pointed out the window. “Jesus-ah. What’s she doing now?”

A green jacket beamed at the center of the snowy courtyard. The woman wearing it stood next to a blow-up doll tied to a pole. One of its arms extended, and a rope ran from its wrist to another woman, who was covered in baby dolls.

“She’s so disgusting. All sloppy greeny.” This guest wore a blouse, probably a Moonfurl, decorated with rows of shapes. The phone she scanned, an Enchant Catena 4, was much larger than Tammy’s Bleme 2.

Velvet strolled, half imperially, half drunkenly, among the pumps and wedges



that put Tammy's flats to shame.

Flora's light blue fingernails glistened as she slid her phone (also a C4) across her bump. "She's crazy. I've seen her do crazy things."

"The one with the dolls?" A woman dug in her purse. A Shackelford.

"No. Her. The one in the stupid green jacket."

What a contrast Makeunder Maven was to the guests. She had that thick jacket, hood up. They wore sexy tops and their hair curved and shone majestically. What did they think of Tammy's taupe sweater and ponytail?

The tallest guest, keeping her legs straight, bent toward Flora. "She pretended to graduate with a degree in wife or something? Right?"

"Wifery. Jesus-ah. One time she painted herself silver and posed on a car. Like a hood ornament?"

"...toilet bowl seat around her neck..." someone else was saying.

Flora held up her C4. "Hey I just got my twenty-first Like. For my nail polish shade. It's His Dream. That's what they call it."

*Tammy wore a skirt that same baby blue when she met Greg her third day at Goy and Holderness.*

Flora displayed the nails on her abdomen. "You like this Tammy? His Dream? Tammy's an interior designer."

Twelve gleaming faces turned to Tammy. Some of the eyes locked on her Green Meeplebuddle watch. "Well, architect, actually, but I do like it. Sure." Then

she launched one of Greg's gems. "It's potent, but not pretentious."

The tall woman pivoted, as if an invisible hand shifted her. "I think my daughter—she's eight—could be an interior designer, yeah? She's really good at Legos. And she's into sorting colors." Then conspiratorially, "Steve and I think she's a lot better than her friends, right?"

Tip's BMW gleamed in the driveway. Where was the father-to-be?

The woman with the shapes on her blouse—it resembled a remote control—raised her C4. "I just got fifty-four Likes for this pic of Anna." There was a collective, though dispassionate, sigh. How many of these women, probably college educated like Flora, would drop out of the workforce to raise children?

Velvet plopped down beneath a glass coffee table. Mentally Ill used to do that. Stay close, but not too close.

The Shifter leaned toward Tammy. "Cute watch. Is that your daughter's?"

Someone snorted. "This is ridiculous." In the courtyard, a mannequin of a suited man stood on the shoulders of another woman. Her chest—she'd stuffed something in there—protruded from a tight shirt that said, "#1 WIFE." She fished from the snow a rope attached to the blow-up doll's other wrist. Makeunder Maven, her green jacket nearly glowing, stood next to the blow-up doll, both of its arms now outstretched.

Tammy received a text from Greg. "How's Flor look?"

She responded, "Big."

"Look at her outfit." Flora's eyes

widened. With the lashes, they looked like mariners' wheels. "Are those jogging pants?" Yes, Makeunder Maven was wearing jogging pants.

"Sixty-three. Sixty-three." Another woman shook a C4 over her Shackleford—was Tammy the only guest without a C4 and a Shackleford?—then showed a photo of a girl and a boy standing on a porch. "I just took this yesterday morning."

Another text from Greg. "Maybe you're next."

Flora exhaled. Her blue-capped fingers zipped across her phone.

*Greg, slightly older and clearly a power player, used a flashlight to look under employees' desks for any evidence of disarray. When he came to Tammy's, his light stayed on her legs for a moment.*

Tammy approached Flora. "Hey, I wanted to ask Tip about that car wax he uses. I was just admiring his car."

Velvet bounded by them, then shot up the stairs. A burst of cold air invaded the room. Remote Control stood at the open door. "You know, we're trying to have a baby shower in here and you're all showy showy. You're disrupting us so why don't you stop?"

Makeunder Maven looked at the woman with the dolls, then at #1 WIFE. Then she started trudging toward the window.

Flora tsked and batted those lashes.

*Tammy noticed Greg's less dramatic version of those lashes when he trained the flashlight on a set of plans on her desk. "Are you using these?" "They're for the Lockly addition."*

*"But if you're not using them now, then let's get them off your desk, okay?"*

Makeunder Maven arrived at the window. Despite the absence of makeup and the chapped lips, she was not unattractive. She unzipped her jacket, revealing what appeared to be a swollen abdomen. Then she stuck a knife beneath her sweatshirt.

The shower guests gasped. One screamed. Red liquid poured on the ground while Makeunder Maven reached beneath her sweater, then pulled out a glop-covered trophy. She raised it triumphantly and then, with red dripping onto her clothes and the snow, she screamed.

"No. This is my party. This is my party." Flora extended a hand toward the window. The delicateness of His Dream contrasted with the talon-like fingers. "She's...I'm calling the cops."

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From one of the ceiling's black squares descends a male voice offering details regarding Flight 125 to JFK.

Greg swipes Tame's tablet. "I want you to look at those toilet rooms, okay?"

Tame tucks a leg under her and twists. "That's the east façade."

"They have steel doors and fixtures in there. Black terrazzo. Absolutely spotless. Come on. We have twenty-five minutes till boarding."

Lila's laugh reaches from across the lounge. "Well Frank, if you're as curious as I am about a leading anesthesiologist at Rise doing improv..." Again she fixes on the window wall.

The Lilith Dewfetter competition pits Tame against three of the biggest female names in architecture.

“I’m a little stuck here.” Tame places her hand over her watch. “I’m thinking about extending the roof here. It’ll help shade the glass.”

“Everything’s pristine in there. Lordi and Maltop. And they have that aluminum. Dimpled. You go look, okay? And I’ll look at this.”

“In a little bit. I’m a little sticky with this. I have to make any tweaks on the flight.”

Lila shrieks and rotates her purse so its symbol faces outward. “He’s a top anesthesiologist, Frank, and he’s doing improv. You should come, and bring your lovely wife, Frank. The four of us could have a drink after.”

Greg makes a wind noise and tilts the tablet toward Tame. “Where’s our logo?”

“Owk, I’ll put it on the finals. Of course. I’m trying to show the transformation.”

“Mavens of...” Greg watches the TV. It shows a woman whose arm is stuck in a dollhouse. He grabs Tame’s ankle, then pulls her leg off the chair and sets her foot on the floor. “Make sure you use the logo with the box around the y in Goy.”

Tame starts to explain Lilith Dewfetter’s animal testing practices. Greg puts a hand over her mouth and answers a call. “Tim. They need to see the team organization, okay? They need to see a VP who’s going to orchestrate everything.”

Tame opens her book. The next spread

says “Cheergut.” It shows a cheerleader shaking not pom-poms, but rather the intestines of a rotting male corpse.

“I never said that.” Greg comments on the organization chart and watches Lila’s legs as she passes. “Is Karen a VP? She’s not a VP. I’m a VP. Look, I want Karen out of my box—it doesn’t matter—and I want her moved down to the design team box. They need a single point of contact, Tim. Someone at the helm, okay?”

Tame uses her heel to outline a gray carpet square. The lounge’s scent reminds her of the glitter makeup she had as a child.

Lila alters from her course toward the window wall. “Brian, Brian I don’t want Aiden pitching against that team, Brian. This is Little League. Those kids, they look like they’re in college. And Aiden’s so small.”

The upper corner of the glass wall reveals an overcast sky and the adjacent façade’s metal panels.

*That Halloween, her mother applied the glitter makeup. “See? You’re a princess.”*

“I know he’s good, Brian, but he can’t win against them. I mean, they’re giants. You need to step up as coach.”

Greg ends his conversation with Tim, then takes a bright green phone from Tame’s purse. “I don’t know why he just can’t...it’s really bad.”

“Can we look at these sketches now?”

Greg, affectless, looks at her.

“I want to make it potent.” *Tame wanted to dress as a cross between a jester, a scholar, and a monster, but her mother insisted on a*

princess. "What are you doing?"

He taps the phone's screen. "I think you could tone it down a bit, Tame. I mean, check out the toilet room."

"It's a toilet room, Greg. I'm talking about a façade."

"Tame. Listen. We don't need all these flourishes for Lilith Dewfetter. Your design? It's a little clunky. That's what George Goy would say. Think about your Mercedes. It's elegant. Everything there has a reason." He hands her the phone. "Voila. I changed your ringtone."

Tame traces the logo on her purse. "I have a reason."

He touches her lips. "Am I going to have to take your keys away?"

The TV shows a woman behind a banister. She polishes its wood columns.

"What's wrong with my ringtone?"

"It was a bit overzealous. I changed it to this. 'Precision.' I like 'Precision.' And what's with this green cover?" Greg fields another call from Tim. "Goddammit. Who told you that?"

Tame's watch alarm sounds.

"No. Fuck him. Hold on." Greg holds the phone to his chest. "Tame, turn off the goddam alarm."

"Owk." Tame presses buttons on her watch. The Green Meeplebupples: she wanted treasure, but, as with all Dapple Cap villains, the story never got into why.

"Tim, that's a different animal. Is Karen a principal of this firm? Right. And I am. So I want her out of that box."

Tame wraps the purse strap around her wrist. She often tells herself the Green

Meeplebupples wanted that money to do something good.

Greg watches the posterior of a passing flight attendant. "They need an orchestrator. One person, okay? Not two. That will be me only."

The girl cheering with intestines looks determined.

Lila approaches the window again, but then answers a call and changes course. "Hi honey. I thought you had a surgery now."

Every female to be featured in the Mavens of Transformation exhibit used her sexuality to advance. Why?

Lila leans against the MentPath sign. "Of course, honey. What do you need?"

Tame smells the "Cheergut" spread.  
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Tip had yet to show. At every shower Tammy had attended, the father had at least made an appearance.

Velvet, completely uninterested in the activity, sat next to Tammy and struggled to keep his eyes open. Tammy took a sculpture off the end table. It was a thin metal rod.

"The cops will be here in five." Flora wiggled her foam-separated toes before the visiting pedicurist.

Outside, the pseudo blood from Makeunder Maven's self-aborted trophy marked the path she'd taken back to the blow-up doll. Its arms and one of its legs were stretched by the doll-covered woman, #1 WIFE with her shoulder-mounted mannequin, and now another woman dressed as a giant bottle of glass cleaner.

"Behold." Flora, her lashes summoning, stretched her fingers for the pedicurist.

“I want the closest thing you can get to this. It’s called His Dream.”

*Behold. Greg said that at an in-house critique of Tammy’s first concepts for the Lilith Dewfetter expansion.*

The sculpture rod, Tammy discovered, was flexible. Like an old-fashioned hanger.

“It’s your turn.” Remote Control looked at Tammy, then at Tammy’s watch. “What did Brent and Amelia...”

Someone said, “Brenmelia!”

“...recently—hey, I’m almost at sixty Likes—recently name their second daughter?”

Comments from around the room. “I know this one.” “...easy, yeah?” “...can’t believe they named her that.”

After an hour of celebrity trivia, Tammy had flubbed every question. She was about to say His Dream when Flora said, “Tame, can you not bend that? Tip likes that straight.”

“Sorry.” Tammy returned the sculpture to its original position. Velvet pushed his head against Tammy’s *Bleme 2* as if the phone could pet him. Mentally Ill would do that.

A woman stood and displayed a tablet. “You guys, you have to see this.”

As Tammy joined the circle, the Dapple Cap theme song rang out from her watch. She quickly silenced it. Still no Tip. She had to talk to him about *Boom Troop*.

“It’s Premiera. Premiera.” Flora, with one foot on the pedicurist’s shoulder, raised her voice. “Brenmelia’s daughter? Premiera.”

*At the critique, Greg displayed his phone*

*and his lashes prevailed upon his fellow critics. “Behold. A Catena 4. No extraneous elements. This is clean. This is precise. It’s a representation of what’s going on today. What you have here, Tame, is a representation of what’s going on in some alternate universe.” Chuckles around the table.*

The tablet video showed the woman forking cake into a toddler’s mouth. “Say ‘Yum yum,’ Aaron.” said the woman. “Aaron. Aaron. Say ‘Yum yum.’”

Greg continued his reproach. “You have to step it up, Tame. This is Lilith Dewfetter. Okay? There will probably be reporters, industry insiders. Hello? Right now, this is just clunky at best.”

“...come on Aaron. Yum yum...”

The Shifter bent toward Tammy. Her perfume smelled complacent. “That Aaron’s a little slow on the uptake. I mean, my Emily’s in his class and she’s like in a different league.”

Tammy tried to point out the contemporary elements of her design. Then George Goy reached toward the screen and flashed his false teeth. “You think this is contemporary? This has nothing to do with contemporary. It’s a jumble.”

“You can do it, Aaron. Say ‘Yum yum.’” Finally, Aaron released a quiet “Num num.” The women around Tammy, including the Shifter, melted.

God.

Flora put her foot on the pedicurist’s head, held up her C4, and then sang, “I have a video too. It’s the ultrasound.”

The group started toward Flora. Then someone said, “Oh my god. What’s she

doing now?”

Makeunder Maven, a toilet bowl seat around her neck, stood next to the blow-up doll. All its limbs were stretched.

The talk on Flora’s cell phone video rose above the chatter.

A gigantic pair of plush breasts covered the head and torso of the newest rope holder. She wore a skirt and heels and toted a briefcase that said, “Provider Wanted.”

Flora slapped the sofa. “Jesus-ah. Ignore her. She’s just trying to get your attention. She thinks she’s...the cops will be here in a minute.”

The guests cooed over Flora’s video, then returned to the trivia. They all feigned disinterest in Makeunder Maven’s exploits. Tammy noted that her watch was the same color of Makeunder Maven’s jacket.

“What the hell’s going on out there?” Tip had arrived. Finally. He knelt beside Flora and tapped something metal against her baby bump.

Tammy covered her purse’s non-Shackleford logo as she approached the couple. Flora looked vacuously at Tammy’s watch. “Tammy’s in a big interior design competition . . . for a Lilith Dewfetter building.”

“Well,” said Tammy. “We’ll see.”

Tip used the instrument—it was a level—to cover his yawn and looked behind Tammy. “Oh yeah?”

“It’s a competition for an expansion. Architecture. Tip...” Tammy retrieved *Boom Troop* from her purse. “I’m about halfway done with this. Excellent.” Then to Flora, “He let me borrow this. It’s about the

Marauders. Their defense?”

Flora flourished her nails. “This is Lilith Dewfetter.”

“I’m a little sticky. With this competition? Lilith Dewfetter tests on animals.”

“It’s called ‘His Dream.’” Flora, her lashes stretching beggingly, looked up at Tip.

Outside, one police officer tramped toward Makeunder Maven, while the other kicked snow over the fake blood.

Tip placed the level on Tammy’s watch. “Don’t bend that.”

“Oh...sorry.” She was bending Tip’s Marauders bookmark. “I just finished the chapter on intimidation. Intimidating the opponent?”

“Hm.” Tip continued to focus on something behind Tammy.

“How do you think they’ll do this season?”

He held up the level. “Excuse me for just a minute.” Tip sidestepped Tammy, then approached two women, both beautiful, radiating on the couch.

Velvet reached up and pawed at Tammy’s purse strap. It was as if he sensed she was a cat lover. Too bad she gave Mentally Ill to her sister after Greg complained of the litter and the smell.

Now that she was alone, Tammy checked her phone. Bleme 2. Greg had sent her a string of texts, the last of which said, “Am I going to have to take that phone away from you?” Yeah, and replace it with a C4.

Tip held up the level and the women watched the bubble. One of them had a

Shackleford, and the other wore a thin silver watch and a top emblazoned with a Moonfurl logo.

Tammy joined a cluster of guests by the window. Now the officers, hands on hips, stood beside Makeunder Maven, who looked through the toilet seat toward the shower guests. The pedicurist came up next to Tammy. "I like her."

Flora yelled "Nadia. Natasha? Whatever your name is. Get back over here. You're not done."

Tammy's phone buzzed. Probably another text from Greg. She was about to look, when Makeunder Maven's four strange companions yanked their ropes. The blow-up doll tore apart. Green glop splashed out of it. The cops jumped back. The shower guests erupted with gasps and squeals.

After the cops issued their tickets and forced Makeunder Maven and her group to clean the mess, Tammy snuck out and caught up with Makeunder Maven. "I saw your performance. What's that about?"

Makeunder Maven rubbed her hands on her jogging pants.

Tammy's watch alarm sounded. "Owk...I'm a little..." She went to turn it off, but Makeunder Maven grabbed her wrist. They listened.

Then Makeunder Maven handed Tammy the scratch 'n' sniff book and said, "Maybe you need a makeunder."

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Tame presses a button on her watch. "There. Alarm's off." She slants her tablet toward Greg. "So right here, at the entry?

I'm thinking of this bright green wall, curving toward the Mavens exhibit?"

Greg traces the rectilinear chain pattern that weaves through the black panels next to him. "These are...zinc, I believe. You could use zinc. Straighten it out, use dark zinc like this, and voila."

"But this is more like a feature wall or...like a portal."

"...slight variation of these in the toilet room."

"A portal wall? Curving and bright green like this?"

"Who told you they wanted something like that?"

"It's in the brief."

"Green." Greg looks at the TV. "What's your rationale?"

"Get people's attention..." Tame watches Lila adjust her purse—its logo shimmers—as she passes. "...excitement."

Greg glances at Lila's legs, then returns to the TV, which shows a girl dressed like a princess and battling static cling. He moves Tame's hand onto the chair's arm. "I think you're a bit overzealous with all this green. Kind of a clunky element."

Lila approaches the left side of the glass wall. The runway and the sky echo the gray that dominates the lounge.

Tame touches the smaller version of the vice-like logo on her own purse. "Something to draw them in?"

Greg answers his phone. "No. Tim. Listen. Okay? I want you to—I don't give a shit—I want you to fix it and resend it. Hello?" A pause. "Where did you hear that?"

Tame studies her tablet and pulls both her legs up in the cube chair.

Lila answers her phone and turns away from the window. "Hi Slugger. I just talked to Coach Brian. He's going to save you for the next game. You're the team's star, so you need the rest."

In the upper left corner of the window wall, a shadow flits.

The one time Tame stopped in a Lilith Dewfetter store, she asked to sample any perfumes not tested on animals. The young employee, adorned with a Moonfurl logo and glistening eye shadow, shrugged and shook her head.

"No. Fuck him, okay Tim? Look. Just send over the revised version, okay?" Greg ends the call. "God bless it. They're not using that org chart, but I want to see it anyway."

Tame twists toward him and presents the tablet. "Can you just let me know if this—"

Greg grabs her ankle, then pulls her foot down to the carpet. "I shouldn't be in the same box as Karen. I'm the orchestrator. Karen's not a principal." He takes the tablet, then starts flipping through images. "You said you'd put the logo on here?"

"Box around the 'y' in Goy." Tame takes from her purse the phone with the bright green case. "I was looking at these photos. I took some photos of birds? Here."

"That's unprofessional."

"Owk...just to kind of inspire—"

"No. I'm talking about your phone cover."

"I'm thinking this curving wall

would..."

"Tame. Give me the goddam phone."

Tame rubs her purse's logo and stares at the phone. Then she hands the phone to Greg.

He pretends to talk on it. "Yes. Design Police? I've got a problem here: my fiancé's mind's stuck in elementary school. Can you, Design Police, help me get my fiancé's head out of elementary school?"

Tame wraps the purse strap around her wrist.

Greg takes off the phone cover. "This green...it creates the wrong impression, okay? We gave you a C4 to inspire more austere design."

"What about potent?"

"Hey, maybe they'll put us on a green plane?"

"You said the design should be potent."

"Give us some clunky green toys to play with on the green plane? Yee."

"Potent but not pretentious."

"I never said that." He keeps the cover and holds out the phone.

Tame reaches for it, but Greg pulls it back. "Tame. Are we gonna have to take this away from you?"

She tightens the strap around her wrist. "Austere."

Greg answers his phone. "George! How did the Banbend meeting go?" He cracks Tame's green phone case in half, then chortles. "Yeah, just let me get a little privacy here. Hey, you remember Lordi and Maltop?"

On his way out, Greg drops the phone case halves in the garbage. Again, Tame is



alone with Lila.

“I’ll be home for dinner.” Lila has returned to the MentPath sign. “Daisy’s going to make a nice fresh shrimp salad.”

Tame looks at the scratch ‘n’ sniff book’s next spread. It says “Brope” and shows a woman with brain-like buttocks. The intestines still attached to a prostrate man serve as her thong.

“Okay, okay Slugger.” Lila bends before the sign. She adjusts her heel and her hair falls before her eyes. “No shrimp salad. I just wanted to try...no. Yes. Spaghetti and . . . mac and cheese. You got it. Tell Daisy I said.”

Tame starts toward the window. A jet takes off, then vanishes in the clouds. Something clicks at the upper left corner of the glass wall.

Lilith Dewfetter’s lab technicians spray perfume in rabbits’ eyes, then monitor how long it takes to burn away the cornea. And Tame is supposed to design this expansion to “capture the essence of the Lilith Dewfetter brand?”

The clicking grows louder, and there is a shadow up there. Sometimes, the techs force the rabbits to swallow the perfume, then time how long it takes them to die.

Just outside the glass, a cardinal perches on a mullion. The red that fringes her wings strains to break through the gray. She hops toward the glass, pecks the window, and then circles back to where she started. Repeatedly she performs the action.

Tame looks at her watch. Surely the Green Meeplebuddle will not be among Lilith Dewfetter’s Mavens of

Transformation.

She turns on the alarm.

Tammy smells the “Brope” spread, then pulls out a sketchbook. Decisively she sketches, and from the slashes and arcs and loops emerge the shape of a building, but also of a rabbit, prone and with suffering eyes. This will be the Lilith Dewfetter expansion concept that the reporters and industry insiders will see. ❖

# “NIGHT CREATURE”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

With my rite of passage nearing the end, I had but one more cycle before I could return to my tribe. Kendal had spoken of a village at the edge of the forest and I dared to go there. The night was changing to day as the orb of light rose from the water beyond the village. I had not believed the tale Kendal told of the sun leaping from the water into the sky, chasing away our beloved moon but now I saw the truth with my own eyes.

I stared in disbelief as the sun colored the sky. As it climbed higher, I would need shelter from the light. When I finally shifted my gaze from the colorful sky, I beheld the animal swimming on the water which stretched to the horizon. The strange creature glided along its surface, pale wings fluttering in the breeze. I nearly lost my grip on the tree branch when I noticed the day creatures that stood upon its back. Why did it allow them to ride upon it when it could easily shake off the villagers, drown and eat them? How were they able to tame such a large creature?

I began to wish I had not sought out the village, it was not a required part of the rite of passage, only a few ventured here. I came because Kendal had brought back a strange object from the village and I wanted to bring one back too. Look for the hut of

smoke, Kendal had said, there you will find it.

I climbed down the tree and moved toward the edge of the village where most of the day creatures were still in their huts. I cautiously made my way to the hut of smoke. Through the entrance of the hut I could see a day creature pulling a long, thin object from the fire. It was a silver color and the worker admired it. So did I, but it was not the object I had come to get. Near the entrance were small objects of the same color, and I grabbed one of these as the day creature turned.

The startled expression convinced me that this day creature had never before seen one of my kind. “Help!” the villager shouted in alarm. “Some strange creature has stolen a knife!”

I tucked the object referred to as a knife into the belt of my tunic as I ran from the hut, stumbled over stacked wood in my way, and fell. Before I could escape, I was surrounded by day creatures with hair and eyes of various colors. I pulled the knife from my belt and they backed up slowly, fear and uncertainty in their eyes.

“What is that?” one of them asked another.

“A night creature.”

“In the daylight?” cried the first villager,

shocked.

“I have heard that the fangs of one have deadly venom.”

This last information was a lie. Night creatures did not have fangs filled with poison, only very sharp teeth. I opened my mouth and lunged for the villagers in front of me. They backed off and when I waved the knife, the circle surrounding me collapsed. I ran for the forest with all my speed. Some of the faster day creatures pursued for a time but when I entered the forest, they stopped.

Further I fled into the forest where none of the day creatures had been brave enough to follow. Rays from the sun filtered through the leaves and shone on swirls of hanging moss. After a while I walked into something solid that I could not see. It was hard and cold, like stone, and seemed to cover a large area. I found a tree closest to it and climbed up, feeling the surface as I moved along until I found an opening and went inside.

There were lots of unusual objects within this invisible building. I picked up a few of them to take back with me, Kendal would be jealous, but I could not find the opening again when I wanted to leave.

Suddenly I heard footsteps even though I saw no one. “Show yourself!” I commanded dropping the objects and withdrawing the new knife from my belt.

A strong wind whirled me around and pulled the knife from my fingers. I searched the room for another weapon, and when I touched some intertwined vines they wound around my wrists, binding me.

“Release me!” I yelled. My demand was met by silence. As I tugged at the vines, they grew tighter, so I chewed through them. Suddenly a brilliant light filled the room blinding me and I shielded my eyes with my freed hands.

“The bright light is gone now,” said a voice. I moved my hands from my eyes. In front of me stood a being with hair as white as snow. “Why has a night creature come to my castle?”

“Castle?” I repeated. It was said that a powerful sorcerer could conjure up a castle amid the trees in a forest; now I believed it. “Are you a sorcerer?” I asked, suddenly frightened.

“Yes, but do not fear me, I wish you no harm. However, I must warn you that my former evil apprentice stole some scrolls from me including one that told how to change a night creature into a day creature. I would never have used it, I just collect ancient scrolls, but I could teach you magic so you would be able to defend yourself if you ever meet any evil sorcerers. Would you like to be my new apprentice and be taught magic?”

That was a tempting offer. I thought about being able to perform magic like what I had just witnessed. “Yes,” I decided.

The sorcerer smiled. “I am Tarkan. What is your name?”

“Kanal.”

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Over time, my master Tarkan taught me reading and writing, and also magic from ancient scrolls. One morning I realized that magic had become more important to me

than my tribe. Sometimes before my lessons, I would see the sorcerer gazing into the crystal ball as if searching for something. "I search for my former apprentice. Some day I will find the evil one and reclaim my stolen scrolls."

Tarkan understood my need to rest in the daytime and taught me late at night and early in the morning. One early morning we left the castle soon after dawn; my master had woven a protection spell into a black cloak that allowed me to venture out in even the brightest daylight.

Trees had filled with leaves and spring flowers covered the ground. Tarkan led the way through the green underbrush to a stream which had cut a ravine with its flow of water. I may have been able to leap across but as I gazed down at the sharp gray rocks amid the frothing water, I decided not to even try.

When I looked around for Tarkan I discovered the sorcerer on the bank of the other side of the stream. "Show me what you have learned Kanal, make me proud."

I said a few magical words and tentatively placed my right foot on the open air above the ravine. It had become solid like the ground and I walked fearlessly across and joined Tarkan, who smiled.

The ground itself was softer on this side where moss hung thick from low gnarled tree branches. Trees eventually thinned out to reveal a large lake. "This looks like a good place to rest," Tarkan said, sitting on the ground at the edge of the water.

The ground was too soft for me and I preferred to lean against the great tree that

sunk half its exposed roots into the lake. When a small sharp stone grazed my foot, I picked it up and carved my name into the handle of my knife.

Ripples appeared suddenly in the murky brown water as a monstrous scaly long neck rose from the lake. In its head were two red eyes and jaws filled with pointed teeth. It lunged at me, caught my left arm in its mouth and pulled me toward the lake. As I struck it repeatedly with my knife, another long scaly neck ascended from the lake and attacked Tarkan. I could hear the sorcerer muttering incantations until they both disappeared under the water. My one-handed knife jabs finally discouraged the lake monster enough to let me go just as my feet entered the cold liquid.

"Tarkan!" I cried but there was no sign of the sorcerer. I frantically searched the lake area, seeing neither Tarkan nor the lake monster.

Despair overwhelmed me and I wept as I stumbled blindly through the underbrush. The forest eventually gave way to a meadow and beyond it I saw a castle on a hill. My master lived and had moved the castle to a new location for some reason. I crossed the meadow, my cloak protecting me from the sunlight.

I arrived at the castle and placed my palm on the stone but since I had forgotten the phrase that Tarkan had taught me to make an opening in the lower wall, I climbed the closest tree to gain entrance in one of the high windows. My left arm ached from the wounds inflicted by the monster and blood covered the black sleeve

of my tunic. When I reached for a high branch with my left hand, my fingers missed and I lost my balance. As I fell, the wind whipped my cloak in my face and blocked my view of the ground. I tried to conjure a spell to soften my landing but I was not fast enough. Sudden pain subsided into oblivion . . .

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Distant voices murmured in the darkness of my dreams. I opened my eyes. A tall figure with hair the color of fire and eyes as green as grass stood before me. "I am Tasilla and this is Talone." I looked at the other one who had yellow hair and sky blue eyes. "Who are you?"

I could not remember my name. "I do not know," I said.

"How did you hurt yourself?" Tasilla asked.

Was I hurt? I must be for I felt pain in my head and my arm which had a strip of cloth wrapped around it. I touched my head and felt a strip of cloth wrapped around it as well. "I do not know that either," I admitted.

I was on a bed, covered with a blanket, in a small room lit with one candle. Tasilla whispered something to Talone who left, then came back quickly with a cup.

"Drink this. It will help the pain," Tasilla said.

I drank the liquid; it was thick and sweet. Almost immediately, my head felt better. "Thank you," I said.

Tasilla held up a knife and began to question me while Talone remained silent. "Recognize this?"

I stared at it. "No."

"You had this weapon on your belt when we found you unconscious under the tree outside my castle. The knife has a name carved on it. Kanal. That must be your name."

"Kanal?" I repeated.

"Yes, and you are a night creature."

"Am I?" I asked.

"You have black hair and luminous black eyes like a night creature and Kanal is not a day creature name. What I want to know is why did you try to get into the castle with a weapon? Were you going to kill us?"

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

"Because I am a sorcerer and Talone is my apprentice."

"Are all sorcerers evil?" I asked, as a memory tried to come back but I lost it.

Tasilla smiled. "Of course not. We are not evil are we, Talone?"

"No," said Talone but I noticed that the apprentice would not meet my gaze.

I began to feel sleepy. "You should rest and heal," Talone said.

I slept until Talone changed the bandages on my head and arm after gently washing the wounds. Talone's fingers lingered on my hair afterwards but I did not mind.

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Over the next several cycles I explored the corridors of the castle, for some reason never feeling the desire to leave. Talone replaced my bandages often and gave me medicine for the pain.

I began to wonder if I was truly a night

creature because I seemed to be spending more and more time awake in the daytime. When I did sleep I dreamed of a lake monster, a white-haired sorcerer, and a castle deep in the forest.

I was upstairs in a darkened area of the castle hunting for a room I had seen earlier that contained magic books when I saw Talone and Tasilla at the end of the corridor. They did not see me and I overheard their conversation.

Talone said, "I do not think Kanal should be so swiftly changed into a day creature. Does the potion need to be this strong?"

"Do not worry, it is done. The night creature is now a day creature."

Then the two of them went into a room

without seeing me.

No wonder I now spent more time awake in the daytime; they had changed me into a day creature. Talone must have mixed the awful potion with my pain medicine.

It was as if a fog lifted from my mind and I could finally think clearly. I had been bewitched by these sorcerers into remaining in this castle so they could experiment on me; I needed to escape but all I saw were solid walls. How could I get out?

A phrase entered my mind and I said it as I placed my palm upon the wall. An opening appeared and there was a tree near it. I jumped out of the opening, caught a branch, climbed down swiftly, and ran away from the castle.



It seemed as if I had been in this meadow before. The tall grass rustled as I rushed through it and on into the forest. I had no idea where I was headed. I just wanted to get as far away from those two sorcerers as quickly as I could; I knew I would be pursued. The underbrush became thicker as I forced my way through it to where the trees were laden with moss and the ground softer. A lake appeared before me and there seemed to be something familiar about it. I became uneasy as I looked at it.

A twig snapped in the distance; someone was coming. I didn't have time to circle the lake and somehow I knew I couldn't swim. Maybe I could make my pursuer think I drowned. I entered the water, then backed up, careful to place my feet exactly in the tracks I had made leading up to the edge of the lake. Then I quickly climbed the closest tree and hid among the branches where the leaves were thickest. I believed I was well hidden.

My pursuer came in sight, it was Talone, studied the tracks I had made, then stood beneath the tree I was in. "I know you are up there, Kanal. We thought you were happy at the castle. Why did you run away?"

I could tell that Talone was an excellent tracker and there was no use pretending I was not up in this tree, so I yelled down my answer. "I overheard you talking with Tasilla about having changed me into a day creature."

The apprentice remained silent for a time before speaking. "I am sorry that I

gave you the potion. It was not my idea. Tasilla obtained the scroll from a former master and sought a night creature to work the magic potion on. You were unfortunate enough to be found by us."

"Then go back and tell Tasilla that you could not find me, or tell the evil sorcerer that my tracks entered the water but did not come out, and you believe that I have drowned."

"Tasilla would know that I lied. If you will return with me to the castle, we will make my master change you back into a night creature."

"Why should I trust you?" I asked.

"I am your only hope now."

That was true and I knew it. Talone waited patiently while I climbed back down the tree, taking my hand when I had fully descended. "Come, it will soon be dark."

The sun had started its descent by the time we neared the castle. It was surrounded by flashes of lightning, but there was no thunder or rain like in a normal storm. The wind howled as we moved closer, the lightning intensified and the wind harshly whipped the long meadow grass before the eerie storm ceased and the castle vanished.

"Tasilla must have been attacked by a more powerful sorcerer," Talone said, "and is most surely dead."

There was no hint of sorrow in the apprentice's voice.

"Do you not mourn for your dead master?" I asked.

"Tasilla was evil. I did not realize this until you came and my master turned you

into a day creature. Can you forgive me for giving you the potion?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "But now we must be quiet, a light comes this way."

We crouched low in the meadow grass as the light came toward us from the direction of the vanished castle. When it and the sorcerer, who we could not clearly see, passed us I said softly to Talone, "Come, we should follow."

We stood up together as the light advanced toward the forest. "No," Talone argued. "Why should we become involved with another sorcerer? We are finally free of the evil one."

"Because this one might be able to change me back into a night creature," I said.

"I doubt that, but we will follow if you wish," Talone said, and cast a weak light spell. "I am afraid to cast a stronger light for it may be seen."

I began to question the wisdom of following this new sorcerer as we stumbled through the forest barely able to see with the dim light cast by Talone. What if seeking the help of a more powerful sorcerer was indeed a mistake?

We kept the light in sight until it suddenly disappeared. "Where did it go?" asked Talone.

We advanced slowly. "Maybe into the sorcerer's castle," I guessed, reaching out with my fingertips until I touched something cold and hard like a stone wall. "Here it is."

I placed my palm on the stone and

muttered a phrase that popped into my head, like I had done at Tasilla's castle. My hand passed through the solid wall and I followed, pulling Talone in after me.

"How did you know how to do that?" Talone asked. "You must have done that before at Tasilla's castle, I wondered how you got out."

I shrugged, uncertain. It was dark inside and while we stood there, footsteps echoed in front of us, moving closer as torches on wall holders suddenly flared.

The white-haired sorcerer from my dreams appeared before us. "Kanal? Is that you? I thought you were dead."

"Yes," I said. "My name is Kanal, but I have lost my memory. Why did you think I was dead?"

"You were my apprentice and I made you a protective cloak so you could go out into the sunlight. One day we went to a lake and were attacked by monsters. One dragged me under the water, but I overpowered it with magic. When I resurfaced, you were gone and I believed that you had been eaten. You look like a day creature now. The luminescence is gone from your eyes which are now brown like your hair. Did my evil apprentice Tasilla do this to you with my stolen scroll?"

"Yes," I said. "But I do not fully remember you. I lost my memory in a fall. Can you change me back into a night creature?"

"Unfortunately, the scrolls that I would need to do this with are gone. I only



wanted to reclaim my stolen scrolls but Tasilla found me searching for them and attacked me. I had to defend myself, and the castle was destroyed as the result of our dueling magic spells. Thankfully I won and Tasilla lost. I can, however, easily restore your memory with a potion.”

Then Tarkan noticed Talone for the first time. “Who is this?”

“My name is Talone. I was the apprentice of Tasilla who ordered me to give Kanal the potion to change a night creature into a day creature. I never saw the scrolls nor did I see the ingredients. Tasilla always gave it to me already prepared. I know I should not have done it but I was afraid to go against my master’s wishes. I did not realize before how evil Tasilla was.”

Tarkan regarded Talone for a while, perhaps trying to decide if the apprentice was telling the truth or lying.

“If Kanal can forgive you then so can I. Come with me.”

We followed Tarkan to a room that had shelves full of books and scrolls. A wooden bench sat in front of a wooden table. Upon the table was a small bowl of nuts, a large bowl of fruit, and a pitcher of water with cups beside it. The room seemed vaguely familiar, but my memories were still shrouded.

“Please sit and eat,” Tarkan said, “while I mix the potion.”

We sat together on the bench. It seemed to me that I had once been able to crack nuts with my teeth; now I discovered that my teeth were no longer sharp enough to do that.

I ate the fruit along with Talone and watched as Tarkan hunted through a wooden cabinet for the ingredients needed before combining them into a bowl for me to drink. I had no fear of Tarkan and readily drank the potion.

They both watched me anxiously. Suddenly all my memories flooded back. I remembered my tribe, my rite of passage, and my decision to become Tarkan’s apprentice. I also clearly recalled that fateful day at the lake when we both were attacked by the monsters.

“I remember everything,” I said. “Thank you. I wish you could have changed me back into a night creature as easily.”

“As do I, but you had already given up your tribe to become my apprentice, and you know they would not take you back now. This castle has been your home and I have many more things to teach you. Both of you if Talone will consent to be my apprentice as well.”

“Yes,” Talone readily agreed.

“Perhaps being a day creature will not be as bad as you think,” Tarkan said, looking at Talone who was holding my hand. ❖

# “FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

**Ed. Note: Welcome to the final episode 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 seven in our 2020 issues to catch up and...enjoy....**

## Episode Eight

It was the first time I saw the planet earth, well, the first time I stepped on it, even so it was terribly familiar, it was a nice place to see, I landed the ship in a kind of jungle, and could see how around the landscapes mixed with each other, until completing the beauty of the place. The wise men gave me a strict route to follow, and they told me that on one occasion, they built a bridge over the river to cross, because they feared that I would drown in that place again, that thought made my heart feel sorry, yet there he was again, the place where he had initiated hope for all. With my skills it did not cost me to reach the temple, which stood among so much vegetation, I went ahead, and I thought I was alone, however a horrible Sokorian was next to the structure, it looked like some kind of guardian or something, I ignored it

and I continued my way.

This one looked quite weak, and I was very curious to approach him, it was likely that he did not feed long ago, I doubt very much that many people came to that place, or even that they lived in areas near it, it was evident that hunger was going to kill him soon, or maybe I would, after finding the material I came for. I was curious about the simplicity of the distribution of the rocks, as well as the information contained in these, I did not understand why before I needed some extra elements to achieve what was evident.

The inscription indicated that many more people had to accompany me, but I was not an ordinary human, I had skills, in an instant I could very quickly touch all the rocks so that they would open some kind of portal, just as I expected, the floor opened and I showed a path, when I reached the end I opened the door and found absolutely nothing, perhaps the wise men had lied to me, but I decided to return to the surface and think with better clarity. As I climbed I could see the earth fixedly, and I realized that it had an irregularity in its relief, I immediately knew that the rock I was looking for was buried there, I took out the necessary implements for the excavation and I started the search.

I dug for a few minutes and found the material, I took it out with care, it was a rock of about 10 kilos of weight, this meant that the piece would be quite easy to move; I stopped to take a look once more around me, I looked at the stone and it was exactly the color of my eyes, sure there would be an explanation for that, or maybe it was a coincidence, whatever it was, the goal was fulfilled, and I understood that not for the first time, I prepared to continue with my work, and take that stone to my ship, but not before passing by the guardian, what was left of this. I walked through the center of the monument, and the earth began to move, and a rumble was heard repeatedly, and looking around I could realize that before me appeared 8 human figures, who wore costumes similar to the earthly costumes, I remembered All that was said to me in the temple of the wise, these were my warriors.

Apparently the stone had summoned them in this moment of need, perhaps this time the hope was absolutely right, and this had to reach all corners of the universe. It was so important to stay alive, I held my stone and continued with firm step to my ship, the boys understood that they would have to accompany me, but before leaving, I had to visit the creature that had surely finished with my life or with the life of my children companions in the past. When I approached the rock, this creature let out a frightful scream, then at a firm step I went straight to that being, with the stone opening, then he looked at me, and his face made signs of having recognized me, I

brought the stone so close to the creature that it was she was forced to touch it and with a small explosion, her existence would turn to ashes, she wanted to know from experience what happened to these beings at the minimum contact with this material, and at that moment, more than ever, she was really sure that with some weapons we would have a great opportunity.

I felt like my memory came back to me suddenly, I could remember all these guys, but they did not recognize me, although I could read from the younger's lips saying "it's him, just look at his eyes". Everyone seemed to know the story quite well, and I think that for the first time in a long time, the expedition would go home completely.

We mounted our ship, which fortunately was quite large, this group of warriors would not have seen each other anymore, from the time they opened the secret passage in the earth to remove the stone, but had been on different planets ridding some battles, dying again and again, apparently were not the only ones with that condition, always reincarnated in a warrior, and always with the purpose of ending the Librianus and the Sokorians.

We arrived quickly with the wise men, who were already ready to make material weapons capable of fighting these creatures, who were even more despicable than others. They also warned us that warriors were very skilled with weapons, and different from those creatures that we had faced on earth, apparently these were only travelers, and did not use their strength to feed, not against a people that I could not hurt

them, humans were food and nothing else, they believed that they did not have the strength or tools necessary to be at the height of combat, in any of the times when they had visited them.

The weapons were forged, it is incredible to think that almost a thousand could be manufactured, the wise decided that only the edges of the weapon were covered by the material, thus ensuring that these penetrated the disgusting bodies that we were about to fight, and in this way we could also take advantage of efficiently the little material that we had.

We already had the weapons, now we only had to find the fighters that were going to brandish them, we also needed to resort to a strategy, since apparently we had a main objective, the Sokovianos and Librianus leaders, and apparently these were always in the same place : in the warrior factory, although this one had not been used for a long time, apparently with the amount they had now was more than enough to realize that they could dominate an entire galaxy, or a universe, if they wanted.

We did not rush, we were quite cautious, and for months, we took care of visiting planets and collecting warriors to fight for our cause, warriors with special abilities, who were skilled in the art of combat. Those who had been in some life my companions of expedition, would now be my most faithful generals, the warriors that had been announced long ago.

During the period they were away, they developed a number of incredible and

unimaginable skills for humans, they found themselves in the pursuit of the development and learning of different combat techniques, for years and years they were trained as warriors, and unlike me, each Once they returned to life, their memories were intact, from their birth they knew their purpose, their mission and their destiny.

When we had already formed a fairly solid army, we decided that we would start combat on some planet that these beings have planned their extinction, which they recently wanted to visit, we would have to fight them separately, we did not have too many weapons, we should be cautious and intelligent with this operation, we were going to disintegrate them until at some point the leaders were vulnerable and that would be the ideal moment to end them. According to what the elders told us, these beings had an unbreakable connection between them, it was important to kill their leaders, thus we would end up with the desire of all to consume the vital energy of all the unfortunate beings who came across them.

We decided to go to earth, I had heard that humans could not limit themselves even more in freedom, that they were always from the freest people in spirit and that they had high hopes even if they had all the conditions to be unhappy and want to finish themselves with their lives.

We found a large group of creatures, they were gathered in a big city, we moved cautiously, there were only a few thousand inhabitants alive on the planet, and the

creatures were talking about surrender or extinction, these were the two options they proposed for what was left of humanity.

I was surprised that none of these were under any trance, and I could conclude that those who survived, were those with a strong mental power and a will of steel, I have seen so many races give their lives so easily, however these they were not willing to be the food of the creatures, they could feel the contempt, the hatred and the desire to be free that emanated from these masses.

We decided that we would surround the creatures, since we surpassed them in number, and surrounding them would make them even consider surrendering, however we would not accept such thing, these beings could not survive, or at least that was my wish, the wise ones of course intended Take prisoners, worse I did not agree with this, so we continue with the plan. We landed the remaining ships a few streets away from where both groups were, who wanted to live and be free and the hungry creatures. The thirst that they had to end the lives of all was palpable, however, could not do much if they did not surrender of their own will, and if they threatened to kill them, they would stop being food immediately and would only become a means of transport to reach others and try to convince them, but that was what they were doing at that moment, and it was not giving them the expected result.

I am happy that we chose the land as our first ally, that is, my generals came from there, and also me, from the only people

capable of reincarnation in the whole galaxy, and it is curious that they did not have other abilities, but I think that with this era more than enough to achieve a goal, with a promise, and we were again there, in our old home, fighting for the freedom of what were once our companions.

I was very concerned about the fact that when we fought the battle and were victorious, humans would be the freest people in the galaxy at that time, and more and more soldiers would come to feed themselves, and if they would confront us, then In that life we had not been born as humans, we were born in distant lands and our army was composed of thousands of races of so many planets, we could not save ourselves if all the warriors arrived at the same time. We would have to devise other plans later, but first we had to put an end to the warriors that we already had almost in front, these were our priority.

We started to approach, right behind them, who were corralling the crowd of humans, then we took a surprise attack, every time our weapons touched the bodies of these creatures, they emitted a frightful scream, and then, simply turned to ashes, These were turning dust one after another, realizing that they were being attacked, they attacked us in a frontal combat. I do not know how long we fought, worse each time we got closer and closer to victory. When I was about to reach the ship in which they had been transported (I would need it later), I could see that the spokesman, who offered the surrender of the humans, was

trying to flee, so I made the decision to catch him, I ran In a fast way, I could not allow them to warn others of what was happening, the surprise factor should remain as our ally, so it would prevent them from maintaining communications with the rest of their planets.

Thanks to my speed I came to stand right in front of the disgusting being, who in a desperate attempt to survive, tried to offer me a full life in exchange for surrender, this seemed like a child's game to me, was in vain everything he said I could talk as much as I wanted, but in previous lives they could never convince me, much less now. There were some parts that did interest me in the conversation, this creature told me to let him get home, that it would not be long, his leaders always received them after a fight and that he would tell them that they cannot get closer to the land, than it did not belong to them (this interested me a lot), already in my mind I was devising a plan. I thought about leaving this being alive, maybe it could be useful for a while, but, while we had the conversation, he tried to touch a button to warn the rest that they were in danger, then I had to cut his tentacles and immediately became Ashes, the scream that he released made all the ears of the planet listen to him, I wonder if on his planet he would hear himself.

One of my warriors ended the last Sokorian life on planet earth, and with a shout of celebration they put an end to this age of anguish, slavery and death that humans had lived for millennia, that afternoon we dedicated ourselves to celebrate

victory, or at least the warriors and humans, on the other hand, I was meeting with my generals to launch the next plan to achieve defeat in a final way is these creatures who wished to dominate existence completely.

We all discussed the plan and agreed that the leaders would never see the surprise attack coming, however we needed more information about where the leaders would wait for us and what was the meeting place on the planet Sokoriano, where both races had placed their main barracks, the site of operations and training for all warriors of both species.

We decided to go for one of the wise men, if one of his own species was in front of the command of the ship, they would not be able to detect any anomaly, only when it was too late. Then one of my generals traveled to bring one of the wise men with him. It took just a few minutes to return, we decided that we would rest a little and then we would take up arms to defeat these races that had ended the lives of millions and millions of creatures across the length and breadth of space, without mercy they had seized their bodies and their energy of life had forced them to enslave themselves and live in really precarious conditions.

But on that day no human showed a different emotion that was not full happiness, and even if they knew that these creatures would be able to return, they would do the same thing over and over again, resist, never give their lives to such disgusting and horrendous beings. They felt freer

than ever and would not allow anyone to take away that feeling.

The wise man who had been brought to earth explained to us that for warriors to feel more motivated to enslave and terrorize beings from other planets, both leaders, without fail, made the reception of their heroes in a personal way, then it was more that we would surely find both of them there, and this was our best chance, we would try everything.

Upon leaving our meeting, some humans talked with us, appearing to join our ranks, one of them showed me an object that was strangely known to me, had a cross, the same material that had made the weapons we use in battle, memory came to my mind, but they were not memory of me making use of the cross-shaped amulet, they were the memories of one of my generals with the object in question.

"Noah, come here to see this," I said addressing the group of generals who were talking very happy, he just stood in front of this human, and stared at the cross, had an expression of longing, as a kind of sadness that does not it completely reflected,} "it was from my parents" was the only thing he said while stroking it for a few minutes, and then he added "and now it's yours" and with this he closed the hand of the human, who was trying to offer it back, and so Without saying more, my general left the place where we were.

I had not detailed this man well, and when I stared at him I realized he was very old, accompanying us to the battle would be a death sentence for him. "Here, you

need it now more than me," said the old man, who had read my thoughts. I took the cross, placed it on a chain and hung it around my neck, under my clothes so as not to alert the creatures we would visit on the presence of this material. It was time to leave.

We got on the ship, leaving again the planet that saw us grow and fight a lot of times, but that now would see us fight as completely free beings, humans now had a lot of work, they had to raise the foundations of the new society that they had to build from this moment, I wondered with a bit of nostalgia if I would see this planet again, or grow in it, if I came back, I would like to have the memory of my past lives to know that we fight and never give up before nobody, and to be aware that I managed to help free my planet from the claws or rather, the tentacles of the Sokorian creatures.

We left for Sokoria along with our army, once we entered the atmosphere of this planet the surprise factor took us and not them, apparently the chaos had already broken out, and we had not even set foot on the planet. The Sokorians asked for reinforcements to our ship, so we asked permission to land very close to the battle, worse before opening the ship, the sage who accompanied us told us which were the leaders of both groups, and after a very brief explanation we He said that at that moment, it was the Sokorians who were controlling everything, they surpassed their teachers, therefore we had to overcome the leader of the Sokorians, who was fighting

with a kind of staff in his hand.

When we opened the door, many of these Sokorians were surprised to see that we were not what they expected, we immediately ran into battle, but we realized that it would be more difficult on their planet, because here the guns were converted into lizards. I mortally wounded them and then I knew we were fighting as equals.

We ran and started to fight, we noticed that there were the same number of fallen from both sides, and that only the one who persisted was going to win in this important battle, I fought with all my strength, with the aim of getting to where the leader was, but there were many creatures willing to not let me pass, yet I kept trying, again and again. The leader looked imper- turbable, and I was still focused on the bat- tle. A huge creature appeared in front of me, ready to face me, I would keep busy for a long time, and it was really big, my gener- als seeing this, they decided to accompany me and fight by my side, the creature gave us a big blow and we started to fight In a tough way, there was no tomorrow, we had to win and try to reach the leader. We tried to remove the horrible creature of the step but we paid a very expensive price, this ended the lives of three of my generals, and I, full of rage climbed up to his head and stuck the gun in it, the creature fell in a resounding way.

I fell as well, and as soon as I recovered I went to a very wounded Noah, I took his

hand and I promised him we would be free, and he joked and said "the promises are very good", he smiled and his life went off, I was really affected, but I had to keep fighting, one by one I saw my army fall, the wise man was right, these creatures were much more powerful and intelligent than anyone could expect, so I tried to end life The largest number of these, and little by little I was approaching the leader, but we were losing, that was for sure, the only chance to win was reaching him.

Apparently, the leader of this move- ment that we had found in Sokoria felt the same as me, because when I looked up, there he was, ready to face this supreme creature, from one moment to the next, they were fighting, but the leader of the movement fell on his knees in front of the creature, who offered him freedom and he seemed to accept it, I do not know what came next, I just remember that the staff of the Sokoria leader changed color, and this as it weakened or something similar , because at any moment the scene had changed, the Sokorians were surprised, scared, then this guy had a weapon, and I thought that it would end the life of the creature, or that it would lock him up, as the wise ones wanted, nevertheless The same creature suggested that they kill him, and so it happened, they took out a laser weapon and aimed at his head.

Everything was over, or at least we thought so. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**