

The Forbidden

It wasn't much of a noise, but it startled her just the same. Moving slowly into the living room, Meagan looked carefully around, but found nothing. Just as she started to relax, a short figure appeared at the left edge of her vision, walking toward her.

"What?" she cried, spinning to face the intruder, but finding only a blank wall.

She stared at the spot in disbelief, but a moment later the figure appeared across the room to her extreme right. Turning quickly, she again found nothing there.

"God," she cried while pressing a hand to her mouth. "I'm going nuts."

"Megan?" a familiar voice called from behind her.

She did a quick turn to find her husband looking concerned.

"Oh, it's nothing," she lied as the shadow appeared on her right again. "I've just got so much to do. I can't decide where to start."

To her dismay, the figure was only a few feet away, its left hand reaching toward her face. Despite her determination not to move -- to let its touch be proof of her sanity -- self-preservation forced a quick step away.

"Is there something I can do to help?" her husband asked.

When her head shook, the shadow person vanished, but her husband didn't move.

"You know," she finally said with what she hoped was a cheerful tone. "You could run a vacuum through this living room."

His smile was unconvincing. "Glad to."

As he left, she jerked around and scanned the room again.

"I don't know why I let it bother me," she muttered while heading for the hallway. "It's just my eyes playing tricks on me."

After she was gone, a lone figure, dressed from head to toe in dark gray, lifted his arm and pressed a button on the sleeve.

"Need adjustment to subject's optical implant. Observation screen block is not covering peripheral vision."

With that, the figure vanished through a door that wasn't part of the room.

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For Megan Simplott, the crisp, clear morning was a thing to behold.

"God, I love this time of day," she exclaimed as her breath formed a mini-cloud in the frozen air.

"You're nuts," Wyatt Simmons declared as he moved up beside her on the porch, and waved a hand at her front yard. "There's frost everywhere. You should be hibernating." He snorted loudly while pulling his jacket tighter. "Hell, I should be hibernating!"

She laughed and playfully slapped his arm, feeling a closeness to this man she didn't feel with anyone else, not even her husband. She had been surprised at how utterly open she had been with him when they first met. They talked about anything and everything as though they'd been best friends forever.

What struck her as extremely odd, was that their relationship had never been sexual. Oh, she was attracted to him, and knew he felt the same, but something she couldn't explain kept that one aspect of their relationship blocked. She enjoyed his company, missed him when he wasn't there, and felt completely at peace when he was. What more could you ask of a friendship?

"Where are your big wrenches?" Wyatt asked as he stepped off the porch and walked toward the side door of her barn.

She shrugged. "I think they're in the calving shed."

Without comment, he disappeared into the barn.

She suddenly felt the need to ask him why they weren't lovers. But the answer was obvious: they were both married to other people.

She followed, feeling puzzled at how honestly unobvious it felt. After all, movie stars, politicians, even common ordinary people cheat on their spouses all the time. What was it about her relationship with Wyatt that made it a non-issue?

When she entered the large space that doubled as both a repair shop and calving shed, Wyatt was rummaging through her beat-up metal toolbox.

"Just take the whole thing," she laughed. "You know you'll just be back for something else if you don't."

Tugging at the handle of the unmoving box, he grunted.

"Trying to lift this old thing would pull every muscle in my back."

Shaking her head, she grabbed a hand truck lying behind a hay bale.

Rolling it to the toolbox, she chided, "How would you ever survive in this world without me?"

He smiled up at her. "It would be a dark and dreary prison."

She barked a laugh while sliding the lip of the hand truck in as he tilted the box back, but couldn't help feeling he was exactly right.

After the toolbox was loaded and Wyatt's truck rattled away down her driveway, she watched it go through the gate before taking the hand truck back to the calving shed.

The first thing she noticed upon entering was the open barn doors on the opposite side.

"Who opened those?" she muttered while continuing into the room.

A movement to her right stopped her. She initially thought an animal of some kind was sitting on a hay bale, but quickly realized its legs hung down to the floor. Looking directly at it, she guessed it to be a child dressed from head to toe in charcoal gray.

Her first shock came when it spoke.

"Greetings," it said in a flat, mechanical voice.

The second shock came when its huge, almond-shaped eyes blinked.

"Oh Lord," she gasped upon realizing its face was definitely not human.

She struggled to focus on the being, but in the diffused light of the room, the dark clothing reflected little detail. As it sat, staring blankly at her, she realized the skin on its broad face was dark greenish-gray. However, it wasn't until it reached up and attempted to scratch its cheek that she saw its fingernails tap against some kind of clear dome covering its head.

"Do you know who I am?" it droned.

She blinked rapidly and the room started to spin. It took a moment before she recovered her wits enough to realize it was waiting for her response.

"No," she answered bluntly.

"Surely, you've seen me. We have detected a problem in your..."

"What?" she barked. "You...that's you?"

Blinking its large eyes again, the creature nodded. "I am one of the observers."

She paused while the statement sunk in.

"Observers? You've been watching me?"

It nodded again. "We are required to."

"Required? By whom?"

The head shook as the creature waved a hand. "I can't discuss that right now. What is important is that you..."

“No!” she cried, trying to step back, but finding her muscles stiff and unresponsive.

When the hand truck clanged onto the concrete floor, she jerked in surprise, but could not otherwise move.

“We are not here to hurt you,” it stated. “Your visual controls are malfunctioning and we just...”

Her scream stopped it, but with another wave of its hand, her vocal cords froze.

“No one will come until I am finished,” it said while rising from the bale.

She tried to shout, to run, to escape, but only managed an exhaled ghostly, “No.”

The creature pulled something from a pouch on its waist, and moved behind her. Moments later, she felt a pressure on her spine, followed by several taps. Her body lurched forward, walking stiffly to the bale, where she felt another tap and stopped.

Unable to move her head, she was shocked to hear the crunching of the being’s feet on the hay bale just before it appeared at the right edge of her vision.

“This will not hurt,” it stated mechanically.

She tried to move her head away as it lifted something toward her face. Her muscles not responding, she watched in terror as it rested the small disk on her temple, and instantly felt a tingling sensation at the point of contact.

The room was suddenly flooded with colors and patterns. Strange characters raced across her vision, sometimes running from left to right and then reversing.

After a moment, unintelligible, but surprisingly familiar sounds blurred from the device.

“It is reporting that the diagnostic is complete,” the creature stated flatly. “The next phase might feel strange.”

She could not respond as the light intensity increased to a glaring brightness before fading to black. When normal vision returned, straight lines began to bend up, then down. The scene compressed and expanded several times until she was sure she was going to throw up.

Suddenly, the pressure on her temple vanished.

“It is complete,” the creature announced as it rose and moved behind her.

Without her willing, or even wanting to do so, her body suddenly twisted ninety degrees and sat. Soon after, the pressure on her spine also went away.

Abruptly released from its paralysis, her whole body slumped forward, but she caught herself and quickly straightened.

“Don’t stand just yet,” the creature ordered. “It will take your brain a moment to adjust to the changes in your vision.”

“Wha...” she tried to ask, but a sudden bout of nausea stopped her.

“What happened?” the creature asked flatly as it moved in front of her. “Your visual cortex subroutines were failing to control your peripheral...”

It stopped and she thought the corners of its thin, lipless mouth curved up.

“Basically, your eyes were malfunctioning, and I fixed them.”

Unable to speak, she stared blankly at the incomprehensible creature.

“Who are you?” she asked when her vocal cords started working again.

Its eyes lost focus and the creature remained silent for a moment before nodding.

“Saki N-Tschester,” it finally answered.

A laugh erupted from her, coming as more a surprise to her than it appeared to be for the creature.

“No chance,” she stated flatly, with a certainty she didn’t understand. She sat even straighter as confusing thoughts swirled in her head. “How did I know that?”

The creature nodded curtly as its dark-chocolate eyes lost focus again.

“I told you fifty was the maximum number of lives for internees,” it said, though certainly not to her. “She’s had fifty-six and I don’t think... Yes, I know what the court’s ruling is, but her control is now set at maximum and we can’t...” Its eyes focused on her again. “Yes, I think that would be prudent.”

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

Shaking its head, the creature sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it.

“We are going to have to work some things out,” it finally answered.

Despite the strange, terrifying situation, she felt angry. “Work what things out?”

The creature sighed. “We’ve never held internees this long. We’re experiencing problems with...”

“Internees?” she gasped. “I’m a prisoner?”

It nodded. “You and your mate have been here longer than anyone. This is creating complications, and we’re not sure what to do about it.”

She felt her breath catch. “My husband?”

The creature waved a hand toward her house. “Not the Human. Your real mate.”

It paused, staring at her inquisitively as a sickening feeling grabbed her stomach.

“Human? What? You’re saying I’m not...?”

Her thoughts froze as the creature seemed to shrug. “Human? Oh Lord no. We have very little control over them.”

“Are you talking about Wyatt? He’s my mate?”

Frowning as he again waved a hand, the creature nodded slowly. Megan started to speak, but her muscles froze once again.

“Not everyone agrees with your sentence,” it said. “But the law is the law and we have to...” It paused as its eyes again lost focus. “Yes, I know, but she won’t remember any of this anyway.” The creature sighed and shook its head. “Yes. Yes. I’m done here.”

Unable to move, Megan watched as it pressed a circular disk to her temple.

“I am sorry,” the creature said before tapping the disk once and vanishing.

The next instant, her husband was at the door, panting.

“Are you all right?” he gasped.

Still sitting on the hay bale, she looked up at him. “What?”

“You screamed.”

Feeling as though something was missing, she scanned the room, but found nothing out of order. Shaking her head, she started to rise, but a sharp pain in her left foot forced her back down. She let out a high-pitched yip as her eyes fell on the hand truck.

“I dropped the hand truck on my foot,” she said distractedly. “I think it’s broken.”

Her husband’s anxious response sounded distant and abstract, because a stronger voice in her head overpowered it.

“If you remember any of this, you can’t tell anyone,” the voice warned. “If you do, we’ll have to permanently separate you and your mate.”

She could feel the laces of her boot being undone, but the pain was dulled as her mind filled with a single anguished thought.

Not that, she repeated over and over. *Lord in Heaven, not that!*

Want to know where this is headed?

Pick up a copy of *Prison Earth – Not Guilty as Charged*.