



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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SUN, STONE, SPEAR

by Carrie Vaughn

Elu and I travel up the coast, keeping to the hills so we won't stumble on some unfriendly settlement. It's hard going, slow. We will wear out the leather on our slippers—the laces are already splitting. We journey toward the great tomb at Behru. The astronomers there will take us in, I hope. Anyplace between here and there will capture us for slaves, if not kill us outright and throw us in a bog. Until we get there, we are without a home to guard us.

Wind drives a misting rain, and we hold our hoods tight under our chins and bend our shoulders against the cold. Our leathers cling wetly to our backs and legs. This weather isn't dangerous, but it's annoying. We hatched this plan under sunshine, two silly girls spinning tales before they've happened.

“Are we doing the right thing?” Elu asks. The sky has lightened—the sun is overhead, but rain still falls. We've traveled most of this first day in silence—has it taken her so long to question herself?

“Funny to be asking that now,” I mutter.

“Yes, it really is.” She manages to sound bright, as if she is thinking out loud. “So, are we, Mahra?”

“I don’t believe we are doing the *wrong* thing.”

We walk another dozen steps. I lead; she is a pace or two behind and to my left, out of the way of my spear, which I carry parallel to the ground. She has a staff she uses as a walking stick; it has no spearhead, no sharpened point.

“We could go back, I suppose,” she says.

“No, we couldn’t.”

We left Inscroe for flimsy, selfish reasons. Elu wants more than anything to be a chief astronomer someday. She’ll do it, too. She knows enough already to mark the seasons, predict storms, and read the stories in the patterns of stars. But she won’t ever be chief in Inscroe, with four apprentice astronomers ahead of her. Ours had become a crowded village.

I could argue that my ambition is worse: I want an adventure. The kind that folk tell tales about and write in patterns in the stars. And that isn’t going to happen in a village with four apprentice astronomers and boundaries marked out by strips of planted barley.

I don’t remember whose idea this was, mine or Elu’s. We talked about leaving for years, so much that we had to either do it or stop talking about it at all. Then Elu’s mother died. We saw her burned, her ashes put in the tomb with our ancestors, a

spiral carved in the rock to mark her passage from this world, and found that nothing else was holding us there. So here we are.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” she asks a little while later.

I say without hesitation, “Bandits will capture us, rob us, kill us, and throw us in a bog.”

She rolls her eyes at me, rain streaming from the edge of her hood, and we crest a hill, descending to a slope strewn with jagged, storm-gray boulders. The last of the heather is blooming, a ruddy fuzz on the landscape.

“Or the gods will turn their backs on us,” she says.

The words fall like stones. We walk on, our steps shushing through heather.

* * *

Late the next day we hear distant voices, male. A call, an answering bark of laughter rising up from the valley below. I make Elu get down; we lie in a cleft between hillocks, my spear flat beside me. Hardly breathing, we wait. Soon their footsteps brush through grass, coming closer. Elu and I are too well hidden to see what is happening; instead, we stare at the earth that shelters us, eyes wide.

There are three of them, speaking of rabbits and how well their snares worked. I imagine them carrying a dozen of the

beasts, tied on rope and slung over their shoulders. My stomach rumbles, thinking of cooked meat. Maybe I should try for a rabbit tonight. That would warm us.

The footsteps move away, the voices fade. The hunters come within the distance of a thrown stone and don't see us.

We wait until there is only the sound of blowing wind and the cry of a jackdaw. I nod, Elu nods back. We unkink our muscles and move on, across the hill, away from the path of the hunters.

That night a storm comes in. The wind howls, rain drives, making yesterday's weather seem pleasant. We're sheltered under a thicket of hawthorn. I've used some of the precious dried turf I've brought along to give us heat. In this autumn season everything is damp—hard to start fires, but we manage a little sputtering thing, small so as to keep the smoke from giving us away.

I hear voices on the wind, more laughter like that of the hunters. My own fears reflected, or maybe something riding the storm. I make silent prayers, stroke the stone of my spear head, the sinews binding it, and check its edge. Sharp enough to slice skin. We are invisible to the world above and below; we will stay safe.

The wild is filled with every kind of demon and spirit. Elu is right, the bog may not be the worst that can happen to us. I

am wearing every talisman I own, every one I learned to make, from the satchel of heather around my neck to the spiral painted in the juice of ground-up oak gall around my bicep. We are beset on all sides, both human and spirit. I watch the hillside for glowing eyes, in pairs—or worse, a single glowing orb. A carved stone clasped between her hands, Elu crouches with her head bent and her eyes closed. Her lips move silently.

We have days of this ahead of us.

* * *

The next day we enter a forest of oak along a dull gray lake. Across the water are more towering mountains. We won't have to cross these. They lie to the west, and we go north. I decide we will stay here an afternoon to rest. Elu has learned to be watchful, looking outward constantly, every moment expecting figures to appear. She hasn't asked again if we're doing the right thing, but I have been thinking it.

I find a likely place, wait patiently, and spear that rabbit I dreamed about last night. I butcher and spit the thing over our fire while Elu lays out items from her pouch. Organizing, taking a survey, enacting some ritual, I can't say which. There are stones etched with spirals and shaded squares, twisted lengths of leather, and a precious clay spindle whorl. They all have meaning, but she puts them in a certain order and regards them with a focus that eludes me.

She holds her staff to the night sky, sighting along the carved notch at its head. Holds out her arm—measuring a set of stars against the risen moon not quite full. This tells her something about the turning of the year, and the direction we travel. I rely on stories and the pictures in my mind.

I call her over to eat when the meat is ready. She's collected some berries and wild onions on the trek. It's not a bad meal, and for a moment I think we could live like this forever, rootless.

"Mahra. Do you know where we are?"

"Yes. We are north."

"And where is Behru from here?"

"North," I say. "If we reach the river Buss we've gone too far. We'll turn inland, then south toward the tomb."

"I've spent so much time looking at the sky I can't find my way around a meadow," she says.

"That's why I'm here." I know the stories, the names of all the hills and rivers between every coast and great court at Tawra. This is why I am taking care of Elu. I am the hunter, earthbound. "Between the two of us we'll manage."

"I'm not worried. I know we'll reach Behru safely."

"You are too confident."

Elu wears a thin strip of beaten gold woven in her hair, a mark of status and of pride—her old place at Inscroe, as her

mother's daughter and a chieftain's granddaughter. I am just her friend. The ornament may save us if we are captured. We can demand ransom, buy our freedom. Or our would-be captors might simply cut it from her hair. Then kill us and throw us in a bog.

I am perhaps obsessed with that particular outcome of this journey. But until we reach our destination we are prey.

“You think we made a mistake.”

This is a difficult road. Staying behind would have been easier in some ways. But not in others. “We made a choice, that's all.”

“If you think we did wrong you can say it,” she says.

I glare. “If I thought we did wrong, I would.”

She pouts and turns away, drawing out her talismans again, lining them, shifting them. I wonder if she is cursing me.

Travel like this is usually done on well-known byways in sight of the ocean, in a trading party or war band with enough members to stand watch and to dissuade attacks from raiders and demons. We are far from the usual byways. The howling on the wind seems to grow louder. Or I am hearing it better the longer I spend in the wild.

I need sleep more than I need to stand watch. We both will rest lightly, and I have my spear. I know ways to keep out the night. Saying a prayer to the spirits of earth I cut sprigs of

hawthorn and twist them into spirals. At the four cardinal corners around our camp I bury them in the earth and hope it will be enough.

“Will that help?” Elu asks. Her prayers all go to the sky, but those gods aren’t the ones who will help us here.

“It won’t hurt.”

“True, I suppose. But the voices are still there.”

“You hear them too?”

She looks up, around, studying her stars, the patterns she sees there. “Yes.”

“Are they gods or demons?”

“Who can tell?”

You should, you’re the astronomer, I want to tell her. Why else study the stars and sun and moon unless you can tell how they move the spirits on earth?

“If I see them, I’ll ask them,” she finishes.

Well, that would certainly make for that adventure I want so badly.

* * *

A couple of days later Elu falls and twists her ankle. It isn’t bad, and though she tries to hide it I can tell walking on it hurts, so I find a place to camp. Kill another rabbit. We need to keep up our strength. I wrap her ankle with a strip of leather while she mutters about being clumsy and ruining our journey.

“You aren’t clumsy,” I say. “But you do watch the sky instead of the ground sometimes.” She huffs, and smiles, because this is not an insult to her. But I think: she hasn’t walked the miles I have, she hasn’t stalked deer or lived off the land. Maybe this was a mistake, but I don’t say it.

After dark I go to bury the rabbit’s offal, and on the far side of a cleft of stone I see those glowing eyes I’ve been keeping watch for. Deep amber with the light of coals and shaped like leaves of ash. The bulk of the rest of it moves; I can’t make it out against the shadow of stone and shrub.

I lower my spear and draw out a spiral-knotted piece of hawthorn from my belt pouch. The thing is watching me, I know it. If I take a step it will strike me. I think it might have wings, hawk feathers coming off its shoulders, and the mouth of a lizard.

The spear will do me no good here. I hope the hawthorn will. I hold it in front of me like a shield, though it’s no bigger than my palm. It wouldn’t shelter a fly. I back away, hoping this will interrupt the demon’s gaze, that it will be entranced by the spiral and not by me.

I don’t blink; I couldn’t have blinked, my eyes feel so wide and stiff. But when I have gone a dozen paces back from it, the eyes are gone, the light is out, and the world is only shadows again.

I return to camp, where Elu is using a chisel to carve something into a river stone cupped in her hand. She's humming, and in the orange glow of the fire she looks unreal. I don't tell her about the demon, and that I think we're being hunted.

The world is large, dark and crowded.

* * *

"What is *that*?" Elu stops and stares. We both do.

We have entered a broad valley, which we will try to cross quickly. Squinting, I see in the distance cleared spaces of woodland, cultivated fields, and smoke from a fire. Ragged dirty sheep cluster on the green plain. Far across the plain is a great sloping hill, like the belly of a fat giant lying prone. At the top is a black structure, flat and round, one of Elu's river rocks made large. A house made of stone. A monument that must have broken a thousand backs to erect. I have never seen it myself, but I know the stories. On the one hand, the sight of it tells me we are on the right path and have another week or so of travel left. On the other, it tells me we are in dangerous territory. Even more dangerous.

"It's Brean's fort," I say.

"Brean—the chieftain?"

"I think he calls himself high king."

“Every king thinks he’s high king,” she huffs. “What is he, really?”

“He’s gotten enough other people to call him high king to get them to build that fort for him.”

Inscroe has done much building in its time, over generations. There is the great tomb passage where the winter burials are made—my grandmother told stories of carrying stones from the river to build it. It’s never really finished—new standing stones are carved, more earth is packed onto the cairn, the hill grows as ashes of the dead crowd inside. A half dozen smaller cairns have been built, with standing stones to mark them. The folk of Inscroe, led by their chieftains and astronomers, build such things because they can, so that travelers will know that land is theirs, that their dead watch over them and are powerful.

A thing like this, so obviously built on top of the land and not a part of it, is entrancing. We stare at it for a long time, leaning on our staves, a nervous gnawing in our gut.

Elu says, “He picked the highest point and built it so all who see it will know whose eye watches them, and cannot travel without feeling his presence.”

“Everyone in this valley lives in his shadow,” I murmur. “Let’s move quickly, Elu.”

“Yes.”

* * *

We don't stop until we are out of sight of Brean's fort, which means we are traveling until dark. I pick a glade to make our camp, but then I find a set of spiral-woven hawthorn talismans on the ground, four of them laid out in a row. They've been dug up, still have grime stuck in the cracks and whorls. They are mine, from an earlier camp; I recognize the knots and coils.

"Pack up, we've moving on."

Elu looks up; she's taken off her hood and is digging in her pouch. I grab my spear, settling my own hood back on my head.

"What is it?"

I collect the talismans, shove them in my pouch even though they're demon tainted. I don't want them lying around where anything can get hold of them.

"We've got to keep going."

"Mahra, it's dark, we can't—"

I walk on, leaving it up to her to follow me.

* * *

It's started raining again.

"It's like the whole sky wants us to go back," Elu says. We're huddled together in a sheltered stand of rocks, under our

hoods, trying to keep warm. I couldn't get a fire lit. Me, the mighty hunter.

"No, the sky wants to make sure we really, really want to continue on," I answer.

"I haven't seen stars in days. If I can't see the sun, the moon, the stars, what am I then?"

"The skies will clear, they always do." When did I become the optimist between us?

"How many more days to Behru?"

I'm suddenly not sure if I'll know it when I see it. I know the stories, I know to look for standing stones on a hill, and a wall of white quartz gleaming in the sun. But what if I walk past it? "Four. I think."

She looks at me sidelong.

"We've made it this far, haven't we?"

"Maybe we should go back," she whispers.

"Elu!" I yell, and she cringes. I'm the one with the spear after all, and I wonder—does she think I'd use it, if I got angry enough? I wouldn't. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't.

A pause. The rain on stones sounds like a rushing stream. She says, "We're being watched."

"We're being followed," I answer. *Hunted*, I think.

"You can make more talismans, yes?"

"As long as you keep saying prayers."

I make the talismans. Elu traces spirals in the air, in the hopes that unseen spirits will turn away. I hear howling in the dark.

We can't see each other anymore, but she sings in a low droning voice, like distant thunder rolling in the night.

“Storms rise, night comes, the cold is falling. Where are my spears, where are the hunters to bring in food for the winter? Deer, eagle, barley, berry, the light will fade. The dead press close, to cry on the wind, to tell us where we are going.”

An autumn song, for dark nights and sputtering fires. If Behru does not take us in, we will not survive the winter.

* * *

We *are* being followed. Tracked.

Oddly, I smell them first: the ashen, sour smell of an old cooking fire long burned out, soot and grease smeared over the ground. Nothing wild has that smell. I sense a hint of it as I stop to crane my neck and look around, but there is no column of smoke in any direction. Something is there that should not be. My skin itches.

“Let's move this way,” I say, changing our track to head further into the rolling hills, where a forest provides many chances to hide. Many chances to be ambushed as well, but I don't like being on the plain by the river, where the whole sky can see us.

Elu follows. “Do you know where we’re going or not?”

She’ll only be upset if I tell her I think we’re being hunted. Either upset because we’re being hunted, or because she thinks I’m trying to scare her.

“Patience,” I mutter back. “Aren’t you astronomers supposed to be good at that?”

“We’re also good at being right. One misplaced marker and a whole cairn would have to be rebuilt.”

“I know where we’re going.”

The sour-ashy smell doesn’t go away. It gets thicker, as if the forest is burning up ahead. I look through the trees, study shadows to see what is there—a single hunter, a whole pack of men, or something else entirely? Among the shadows between the trees, a flash glints that might be light reflecting off a spear point, or might be the glee-filled eyes of some demon. I pull a stone from my pouch that I can throw.

“What are you looking for, Marha?” Elu’s voice has gone low; she already knows.

“Stick close,” I say. “Be ready to run.”

She grips her staff two-handed. It’s a tool with many uses.

Dusk has fallen, and that’s when I see the first one, a shadow breaking off from the trees, hooting a signal across the way to a figure up ahead. I veer; Elu is right with me, I don’t

have to worry. We move fast without running, because I expect at any moment I'll need to turn and fight.

I can't see how many there are. Dozens, I assume. They might be merely men—bad enough. But demons also have arms and legs, wear coats of fur and carry spears. Until I see their eyes I won't know for certain.

The light is failing, the world is gray. Up ahead the trees break, revealing a hill of rocks—a natural outcrop, not a cairn, though I'm not sure until we reach it and see the tumbled edges and cracked breaks between stones.

“Up!” I call to Elu, because the outcrop is defensible. With a running start, she scrambles up the side. I turn, spear out, to defend her.

I still don't know how many there are, but a javelin flies from the trees and strikes granite by my head.

“Mahra!” Elu calls, reaching for me. I retrieve the fallen javelin first and take Elu's hand.

We are on the rocks, and there are three of them, wild men in rough furs, taunting us—I don't understand their language, which means they must come from some far-off land even more wild than this. Another world, maybe. In the lowering dark, with their hulking furs, they stop being men and start being large stoats or small bears, or both together. Creatures of fur that speak words. I look for glints of red in their eyes.

They will be up the rocks in moments unless I stop them. But as Elu said, patience and accuracy will always win out, so I pause, take a deep breath, and throw the rock I've been holding.

My target howls and falls back. Next, I thrust my spear down at another one of them; the sharpened point catches fur, digs in. He grunts but doesn't fall. I pull back, slash forward—and throw the borrowed javelin in my other hand while he is distracted. It strikes him. He falls but isn't dead. What will it take to kill them? I have to kill them, if we're going to get off this rock and escape.

I turn to check on Elu—she's gasping for breath, but she is safe behind me on the pinnacle of the outcrop. She looks over my shoulder; the third has bided his time.

A hand grabs my ankle, another stabs at me—a stone sharpened to a blade. I can't yank away fast enough but manage to hold back a scream as the edge slices through my naked calf.

Elu skids along the rock beside me and jabs with her staff, cracking my attacker in the face with its oaken head. Bone crunches. I know that sound from killing rabbits.

The fallen figure is nothing more than a furry lump on the ground.

I set my jaw, resettle my spear in my hands. I am not angry, I am calm. I have my task: to stop them, so we can move on. The first two come again. Blood pouring from my leg has made the rock slippery so I have to brace carefully. I kick, stab, slash—they fall back again, and I scramble up the rock to a higher purchase. Elu hands me two good solid stones she has found, broken pieces from the cracks in the outcrop. I throw, throw again. I'm good with stones. Our attackers lie there, senseless.

My leg throbs. Nothing left of it but flowing red, it feels like.

“Oh Mahra, Mahra!” Elu cries. She's cut a strip of leather from one of her pouches and moves to bind the wound.

“We don't have time, we have to run before they come at us again.”

“You can't run!”

“I will, you'll help.” I let her wrap the strip of leather around my leg because that seems prudent. The pressure of the bandage at least cuts down the throbbing pain.

Gripping each other's arms for balance and reassurance we climb to the other side of the outcrop, slide down, and run. I stumble at first—the pain jabbing up my leg surprises me. But then I ignore it, and we run more sure. If I am confident, Elu won't stop.

Eventually, we leave that sour-ashen smell behind. I decide it wasn't the smell of old campfires at all but the smell of hungry demons.

* * *

We have to camp yet again. We will never reach Behru. Elu fusses over my wound. The skin hangs loose from the muscle. In the morning light we both look at it, ugly and scabbed over with clotted blood. Horrified, I might faint at its mangled shape, so I look at the trees in the glade we've sheltered in. I think Elu might scream, but she finds water, washes the wound, and then binds it all back together with strips of leather.

"We should move in case they come back," I say.

"I've put charms every half a foot around this place, they won't find us. Heal. I command it."

I start to say I don't trust our charms anymore. But my leg is on fire, and what else are we going to do? I trust Elu.

She chatters brightly to distract me. It's like the day we started out. "You were magnificent. I'll make a song of how you fought."

"If I'd been faster my leg wouldn't be hurt."

"You know what? We'll tell folk we fought off wolves. A pack of wolves, and you drove them all off with nothing but your spear and your battle cries."

I have to smile. She commands it. “Demons. They were terrible demons.”

“Demon wolves,” she adds. “Worst kind.”

They might as well have been. It makes a good story.

* * *

My leg hurts, but in two days we walk on. I’m too restless not to, but I have to limp along using my spear as a crutch.

The clouds break the next day, bringing sun. My skin stings with the heat, and it feels marvelous to push back my hood and rub the itch out of my hair. Elu smiles, squinting into the sky. It’s like she’s found the gods again.

Near dusk, we find stones. It isn’t Behru—Behru is a whole complex, tombs surrounded by rings of stones and altars, with a village nearby to oversee it. This is three simple stones in a clearing surrounded by oak groves. They are our height, small enough around to hug, in a straight line. Grass has grown up around their bases, but there are no lichens growing on them. They might have been here a decade, or a hundred years. Not longer than that.

“It’s a summer line,” Elu says, looking at the sky, sighting along her staff. “It aligns to the solstice.”

Even in autumn, when the sun has moved low, she can see this.

“Abandoned?” I ask.

“Nothing is ever really abandoned,” she says. “*Something* lives here, no doubt.” Her brow furrows; she presses her palm to the stone as if she feels a heartbeat. “They buried a bad harvest here, and plague. This is a tomb for ill fortune.”

I want to run, then. “We should go. We must be close to Behru.”

Turning to march away, I trip. My injured leg gives way, my foot catching on a tuft of clover, a dry stick, something, and I fall. I never fall. I’m not like Elu, looking up when I should be watching the earth. I know before I hit the ground that we are captured. My foot is stuck to the ground, my wound screams in pain, my hands are bound, I cannot see by what. My spear has fallen. It’s the bog for us, then.

Elu stands over me now, putting herself between me and... something. She is looking right at a thing that I cannot see and shouting curses, holding the stone she has been carving out straight-armed, like a shield, as if it will protect us.

A long moment passes, and I only hear her heavy breathing, and mine. Hand shaking, she reaches for me. I can raise my hand now, and I do so. When she grabs hold the weight comes off me, I can move again, though the throbbing pain keeps me on the ground. I retrieve my spear; even seated on the ground I hold it defensively. Elu stands over me with her staff, waiting.

A woman is sitting on the ground with her back against the center stone.

I know she is a goddess because she is too beautiful to look at. I turn away, my eyes watering, and sneak glances. She is a hunter, a shaggy gray hound at her side. Her spear tip gleams bronze—a rare and holy thing. She is like me but better. My better self, what I aspire to be but will never reach in all my striving, in all the silent vows I've made to bring Elu safe to Behru. She is Canna the Hunter.

“Oh my dears,” the goddess says. “I have been watching you.”

“You have been harrying us!” Elu says, much more sharply than she should. She bows her head in a late apology.

“Elu, no,” I murmur, putting a hand on her thigh, the only part of her I can reach. Canna is not her goddess, she wouldn't understand. Her gods live in the sky and the stones. Mine walk upon the earth, among living things. Elu can be angry, but I can only weep.

Canna looks at Elu, back at me. Her face is young; her eyes are like a grandmother's, full of scolding wisdom.

“Do you know it was me?” Canna says. “The world is full of gods and spirits.”

What can we say? The words of Elu's song pass through my mind.

“Command me,” I say, struggling to get on my knees. I cannot speak for Elu, who stands at my side as if she will protect me.

“Answer me a riddle,” the goddess says. “Are you running to, or away?”

That is not the real question: Are you brave, or are you a coward? Are you ambitious or merely discontent? I do not want to answer; I cannot trust my own honesty.

“We are not running at all,” Elu says. “We travel carefully.”

Canna laughs, and I don’t know if that’s good or bad. She looks at me. “And your answer?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “I think the answer is, yes.”

The goddess’s smile is kind.

“Do we pass your test?” Elu asks, because we both know that is what gods do, they test you and punish you. “Or is this some lesson of how we ought to be satisfied with our places and not go questing for better?”

“Oh, dear, no. I wouldn’t try to teach such a lesson. You simply crossed into my territory. I deserve to have a look at you.” She scratches the hound’s ears, and its tail thumps the ground. “You answered my question so nicely, though—do you have a question for me?”

This is an even worse test. Elu looks at me—Canna is my goddess, I should be the one to ask. But my mind is blank, and

I can't think of a question, only wishes and reassurances. I look back at Elu and nod.

She says, "Are we doing the right thing?"

"Well," Canna says. "We won't know that until it's all done, will we? Come, Di, let's be off. It's almost dark. You girls should find a camp somewhere. There are spirits about."

She stands—she is clothed in leather that blazes white, leggings and tunic and hood, all of it from the purest doe that ever lived. Her smile is brighter. The dog walks at her side, as tall as her hip. They move off, vanishing behind one of the standing stones.

The world is suddenly dark and silent.

"Mahra?" Elu asks finally. I can't answer because I'm weeping. She touches my shoulder with a fist—still holding her spiral-carved stone.

I get to my feet—easily, feeling no more pain. When I unpeel the bandages, there's a thick scar there, well healed.

We move off. A full moon lights our way, and we are able to travel far from the standing stones before we stop and put talismans around our camp.

* * *

We first see the tomb a half a day's walk away—gleaming, it rises from its hill like a full moon. The village at the base of the hill is large—smoke from dozens of fires visible, part of a

forest recently cleared, and all surrounded by the stubble of harvested fields. This time, we can't avoid the well-worn path that leads to the heart of the village. People watch us; I am careful to keep my spear lowered.

There isn't just the one tomb but a whole circle of altars, stone rings, barrows. The people here have started a new tomb. It's why we've come, Elu and I know the stories. The work is still for now—the autumn harvest has taken away most of the workers. But great stones lie on beds of logs and rope, ready to move, and a circling trench has been freshly dug.

All around the site, marker stakes made of stripped oak saplings stand driven into the ground around a new chamber of stone—the stakes, weathered and mossy, track the passage of the sun across their world. It takes years to get the map needed to build a tomb like this, aligned to the light of winter or summer. Elu studies the work, putting a light hand on each stake and sighting down its shadow to see what it marks. That brings the flustered gray-bearded chief astronomer rushing toward us, the woolen sleeves of his tunic flapping as he waves his arms.

We offer reassurances and are asked for our story. We tell them of days of travel, storms and cold, the forts and cairns we saw and the ghosts that haunted them. The bandits we avoided, the demons we didn't, and the otherworldly songs we'd heard

chanted in the night. Eyes in the dark, talismans left behind, our own strength of stubbornness, if not will. We met a goddess, we told them, and she did not smite us, though I couldn't say why.

All in all, it's a pretty good story.

"Mahra has the favor of Canna herself," Elu tells them, sounding outrageous, but I can't say she is lying. Because she says it and not me it's not bragging and people believe her. They ask to see the scar on my leg. They are impressed; we are admired.

But Behru does not need us. They won't take us in, and the refusal feels like punishment for being brave.

Then the flustered old astronomer says, "A tomb is being built at Nowa, only a few hours' walk away. The chief astronomer there needs a young apprentice to carry on the building after her death." He smiles.

The gold in Elu's hair does not glint as brightly as her smile at this news.

* * *

The solstice sun has illuminated the standing stones at Nowa many times since then.

Now Elu is old, with apprentices of her own, and she has used her life to build a circle of stones and a tomb that will not be finished when she dies. "The Earth was not built by one soul

in one life,” she says. “It takes a dozen gods and all their children too.”

I have children, and they have children, and Nowa has become ours. I still hunt, and my grandchildren tell the story of how I speared a charging boar and saved a chieftain. Sometimes in the evenings, after food and fire and song, Elu and I sit together over a smoldering piece of turf and tell a different set of stories, Remember whens? and Oh, we were so young. And yes, some cold dark nights when there is no moon and an interminable rain falls, we still ask, “Did we do the right thing?”

It should be a question with a firm answer, here at the end of our lives, but I think sometimes of all that could have happened, all that could have gone wrong, and I feel a terrible chill at all we would have lost. Not lost—all we never would have had. And I think the gods must have wanted us to be here.

Ambition drove us, but here at the end, when I know how it all turns out, I know our true purpose: to bury good fortune in our tombs, under our stones.

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THE SIXTH DAY

by Sylvia Anna Hiven

I'm the corn girl. That's because I make our corn field grow.

If I take my shoes off and curl my toes deep into the dirt when I walk around the field—although that tears up my feet something bad—I can raise the corn a quarter inch a day, so long as I make sure to touch all stalks I pass. You'd think that's an amazing talent, especially in a place where the other fields around our farm lie dead. But ain't nobody noticing a lick of what I do—not when my sister can travel into the ahead and tell us how to keep the stretch away.

Cassie. She ain't no corn girl. Pa, old Jeremiah, the Howell sisters across the corn field—they all just care about what Cassie has to say when she comes back from the ahead side. What will end up slipping away, what knickknacks will vanish: Pa's wagon wheels or Jeremiah's clod-hoppers or the wooden cross under the knotted oak where Ma's buried. Cassie used to be able to tell us what farms the stretch would take, too, but there are just the lot of us and our farm left now. So now all

that vanishes are things here and there: socks and the scythes in the barn and tiles off the Howells' roof.

Except one day, Cassie ain't telling me what will vanish. She tells me something's coming.

"A man and a boy," she says as she steps out of the mirror. "They got cows. Cows, Jo, can you believe that?"

The mirror shimmers behind her. I catch a glimpse of what all lies ahead of our farm six days from now. I hope to catch sight of cows down the dirt road but I ain't got Cassie's magic and all I see's the corn field and the outline of Jeremiah's little shack behind it. Then the mirror goes flat and there's just the reflection of me and Cassie: round and curly-haired and freckled Cassie because she gets away from the stretch sometimes, and tall and lanky with sore feet and hair straight as a horse's mane Jo, because I never go nowhere.

"How you know they're cows?" I ask. "You ain't never even seen one."

"They're cows. I just know. At least two dozen of them." Cassie puts the tattered sheet back over the mirror, making a looming ghost out of it in the corner of the room. "I seen it, Jo. Spent all day seeing it. You're gonna catch them down at the crossroads and bring them back here."

"At the crossroads?" I shudder. "Why'd I be down at the crossroads?"

The crossroads is where you notice the stretch the most. There ain't nothing out there but empty plains in all directions and black crows flapping in the wind like a bunch of screeching scabby marks in the sky. Ain't none of us been out by the crossroads since Pa and I went out to put up a sign. We did it in case anybody was still alive out there to need shelter, since we got corn to eat and crows to shoot with Pa's rifle—but that was before the stretch ate his last few bullets and left only me and my corn, so if someone came now we couldn't let them stay, nohow. We ain't been back to the crossroads since.

“You're gonna be down at the crossroads because I tell you to,” Cassie says. “You know how it works by now, Jo.”

This part is what never makes no sense: how Cassie can see something I ain't gone and done yet—or wouldn't even do to begin with unless she'd seen me do it in the ahead and told me to do it now. You can go crazy trying to figure it out. But then, the stretch's a strange thing—it groans everything thin until there's nothing left, and screaming at the stretch how it don't make no sense don't make it stretch things any less.

“Guess we'd better tell Pa, then, so he can fix the buggy,” I say. “Who knows how far away the crossroads have stretched by now. I sure ain't walking all the way there.”

We go outside. We can't see the sun no more: it's just a tired disc behind corpse-pale clouds too thick for anything to

shine through. Nothing casts shadows in the yard—not the sundial, not the fence with its peeling paint, not Cassie or me. It's as if the thin sunlight goes straight through us, like we're spirits that God forgot to claim.

We find Pa and Jeremiah in the field. They're stomping snake eggs to a slimy crunch beneath their boots. Makes no sense what the snakes are doing in that field, because we don't have no mice or critters in it, but there are always nests popping up all over the place. One time Cassie came back through the mirror, her face all scrunched up and crying because a snake bit me in the ahead, six days before it was gonna bite me here. Pa wouldn't let me go raising the corn for two weeks until he'd checked every corner of the field. He said if the stretch hadn't managed to get me in five years, he sure wasn't gonna give me up to no damn snake on something as common as a Wednesday afternoon.

Jeremiah shovels the snake mess over the fence while Cassie tells them about the man with the boy and cows. Sometimes Cassie's words have a way of making the wrinkles smooth out of Pa's face, but today she makes him lick his lips, too.

“Steak,” he says, ruffling Cassie's already unruly hair with thin fingers. “Aren't you the bearer of good news.”

“I sure didn’t think there was anyone else left out there,” Jeremiah mumbles, his gray eyes fixed on the horizon yawning wide beneath the twilight. “And with cattle, too.”

“You think maybe things are changing, Mister Jeremiah?” I ask. “Maybe the stretch is getting tired and things are pulling themselves together. Maybe the corn can grow on its own again.”

Jeremiah smiles, but it’s a rueful smile. “I think the world’s too stretched out to ever pull itself back again, Jo. I don’t think things are gonna change much, except we might get a few good meals and give you a bit of rest.”

“That’s change enough,” Pa replies. “I think we’re all tired of corn.”

Mister Jeremiah mumbles something else, about God having given up on us and for Pa to not give us girls false hope, but there’s a gleam in his eyes that ain’t been there before. He says goodbye and goes off to tell the Howell sisters about the visitors. Cassie and Pa head back home, the cornstalks swooshing around them like brittle ghosts in the evening breeze.

I raise those cornstalks half an inch before I go inside. And wouldn’t you know it, nobody notices a lick.

* * *

A few days later I ain't raised the corn for more than a few hours when Cassie rustles through the field. Her bonnet flops around her neck and blotches of red dance on her cheeks like someone smacked her around, but her bright eyes are wide in exhilaration.

"Linus *likes* you," she says.

I stop walking—which is nice, because my feet are already burning. "Who's Linus?"

"The boy with the cattle. He's our age. Maybe a year older. He *likes* you."

The last boy I remember was Jimmy Dixon, a little white stick of a boy with wheat-colored hair. We used to catch silver-bellied fish down in the creek behind the shed where Jeremiah lives now and he had a laughter you could hear for miles. Him and his family vanished with the stretch a few years ago, and I ain't really thought about boys at all since then. Boys, courting, getting married—all of that went away with the stretch. When I started to bleed and Cassie told me what it was all for, I cried. I'd be going through all that trouble for nothing because there's no boys to make babies with, not in the whole wide world.

But three days from now, there's gonna be a boy at the farm, and he's gonna like me. If Cassie says so, it's gonna happen, because Cassie's never wrong.

“What’s he like?” I continue to walk, trying to not sound too excited and trying to concentrate on the raising, but my mind’s already painting pictures in my head of this boy named Linus.

Cassie follows behind me as I walk. “Tall, like you. Kinda handsome, I guess. He has a rifle with him all the time. Says the crows out there in the stretch are mean and will peck at you in the night.”

“The stretch ain’t a nice place,” I say. “Jeremiah and the Howells always told us it’s bad. Much worse than here.”

Mister Jeremiah and the Howell sisters came the week Ma died from blood poisoning. By then that strange magic had been eating the plains for three years already, and the town we used to go to for supplies was gone along with all the people in it. Mister Jeremiah wandered off a cotton farm in the next county over, and he came across the Howell sisters who lost their village and took a wagon and a scrawny old horse and rode out with just the clothes on their back to not end up the same way.

Together the three of them came down our dirt road in their wagon, sunburned and bony and rickety as scarecrows, the same morning when we’d put up Ma’s cross. Jeremiah claimed he’d smelled the corn cooking from miles away and that’s how they’d found our farm.

The Howell sisters weren't really sisters at all but that's what Pa said, anyway. I reckon maybe he thought we'd be shocked at the idea of two old white ladies sleeping in the same bed and touching each other's hands when they thought nobody was looking, but we have weirder things happening around us and it don't bother me any.

So the sisters took the larger shack on the hill and Jeremiah stayed in one of the field sheds. And that's how there are six of us in one little spot, eating what corn I can raise up from the ground, and hardly anyone else in the rest of the world. But soon there's gonna be two more, and a whole bunch of cows.

Cassie tip-toes down the rows behind me, telling me how I'm gonna show Linus the creek and how Pa and Jeremiah will help slaughter a cow and how Cassie herself is gonna be watching it from the porch and gag at how red the blood will be against the bone-white ground. She spends almost all day on the other side, but when she gets back she remembers mostly glimpses like that. Makes me wonder what she remembers of this side when she crosses over to the future. Or maybe this is the past, and we're the ones six days behind. Shoot, I try to not think about it too much.

“They’re gonna cook the meat over the fire,” Cassie says. “Big slabs of it. I tried some, but I didn’t like it. Tastes burnt and wrong. Even worse than crow.”

“I won’t mind trying,” I say, still walking down the field, still brushing the plants with my fingers, teasing the dry stalks to cut me, feeling lightheaded and giddy.

“Jo, stop your damn raising for a second.”

Cassie’s cussing stops me in my tracks. When I turn around, all the seriousness I’m trying to keep out of my face is aching in Cassie’s. There’s no shadow cast from the cornstalks to hide the tears in her eyes, neither.

“They need a girl,” she says. “I think they’re gonna ask Pa to let you leave with them, Jo.”

“Leave? I gotta raise the corn. You know I can’t leave.”

“Well, you’re gonna want to go.”

Then my sister begins to sob, and I can’t tell her not to, because she’s always right.

* * *

There’s an old photo of Ma and Cassie and I on a wood shelf in the kitchen. It’s faded a bit round the edges and half of Cassie’s face is bleached out. I can see Ma’s face just fine, but as terrible as it sounds it’s not her face I look at. It the way she’s holding me—a tiny bundle with a head shock-full of hair, all snug in her arms like she’d rather die than put me down. I

wonder if that's how I'd feel too, if I ever had a baby of my own. Something alive and warm and soft to the touch I could raise, instead of a crackle-dry corn field. Something that would grow along with me.

Although when I start to think that way I feel my cheeks heat up with shame and I turn back to the stove and the corn stew I'm making.

"It hurts, you know," Cassie says, putting down our chipped blue-rosed china on the dining table behind me with angry, clacking noises.

"What hurts?" I ask, grateful that Pa's still outside because even though I ask, I kinda already know what she means.

"Having a baby. Even making them hurts. Much worse than your bleed."

I blush harder. "How do you know that?"

"The Howell sisters told me. They say men are nothing but trouble. They're probably right."

I turn to my sister, and she meets me with a defiant gaze, clutching the plates in her hand so hard her knuckles turn white. She looks a little scary, even—like she's facing some beast and ain't afraid to go at it, and that beast is me.

"Cassie, you gotta stop," I say. "We don't know what's gonna happen for sure when those folks get here. Maybe you

ain't seeing things right. Maybe it's all hat and no cattle. And if there's a boy, who says I'll even like him at all."

"I ain't never been wrong," Cassie says. "The only way I'm ever wrong is if we decide to change something before it happens, like when Pa went to kill the snake."

"Well, this ain't no snake," I say, feeling my cheeks burn hotter. "So nothing's gonna need changing, Cassie. We'll just have to see tomorrow, is all."

Pa comes in then, stomping dust off his boots and we don't talk of it no more. We just eat the corn stew, and drink water from greasy glass cups, and Pa tells me the buggy's oiled and ready for me to take it to the crossroads. He doesn't notice that Cassie's eyes are brimful of tears. But I notice.

So after I've washed up I find her out on the porch. It's chilly out there and it makes my arm prickle like the skin of a plucked chicken. Cassie has her bonnet off and twists its ribbons around her fingers, but she don't seem to notice the cold.

"He kissed you today," she says. "Behind the corner of the old chicken coop."

My heart beats once, hard.

"Maybe they'll stay," I whisper. "We'll have corn and cows."

"They ain't coming to stay, Jo."

I draw my shawl tighter around my shoulders. My first kiss, just six days away, and tomorrow I'll meet the boy who will give it to me. I want to smile about it, but it feels wrong to smile when my sister looks as though I have betrayed her. So I just stand there, watching the daylight drain out of the glum sky, until she's gone to bed, and Pa's gone to bed, and all's quiet.

* * *

For some reason I'd expected the sixth day to look different when I walked outside. Maybe I imagined that would be the day the sun would tear through the clouds, or there'd be no crows cawing at me from the barn roof, or there'd be a smell of something new in the air. But there isn't. And that's why I get this creeping feeling that something isn't quite right.

When I see the buggy gone from the barn, and Jeremiah's horse isn't in its paddock, and Pa and Cassie are nowhere to be found, that's when I *know* something isn't right. Not right at all.

My feet burn, as they usually do, but I take off barefoot down the dirt road toward the crossroads anyway.

I don't know how long I run. There's that saying how the road seems to stretch for miles, but in my case, it's actually happening—the road twists and turns across the gray-withered plain, but for each twist and turn there's another one up ahead.

I run past field after field of bristly, dead wheat and petrified cotton bushes and all the while my breath scorches my throat almost as much as the gritty road cuts into my feet. The stretch watches me as I go, I just know it. For each step I take I know, just know, *not right* is turning into *awful wrong*.

Pa's at the crossroads with the buggy. Jeremiah's horse is doing its best to browse on the dried grass on the side of the road, but there ain't much browsing to be had. Pa stares far away, his eyes fixed on some mark beyond the horizon I can't see.

"Pa?" I exhale, too out of breath to sound as angry as I wanna sound. "Why'd you leave without me? You knew I had to come along."

"I know, Jo."

He won't look at me. I follow his gaze. Far away, against the colorless sky, there's a wispy cloud of dust from a wagon.

A wagon that's come, and gone.

"We gotta eat, Jo," Pa says. "You do understand that, don't you?"

At first, I don't understand at all.

Then I see the bonnet in his hand, its ribbons fluttering goodbye in the wind, and my knees begin to quiver, and I understand everything.

* * *

All night I stare at the mirror, hoping to see something. A glimpse of my sister, maybe, of whatever's happening to her out there in the stretch, or what will come to happen to me. But I was never the one who traveled ahead and saw things, so no matter how hard I try, all I ever see is myself—that lanky girl with tired eyes and bleeding feet.

I wonder all the time if those tears Cassie shed was because she was jealous of the future I was about to have, or because she knew all along she had to rob me of it to save Pa, Jeremiah, and the Howell sisters. Sometimes, when my feet hurt more than usual, I'll just stop in the field and reach out for the cornstalks and listen, hoping they'll whisper the answer to me. But no answer comes.

And I'm the corn girl. So what can I do but keep raising.

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COVER ART

“Floating Town,” by Takeshi Oga



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