



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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LONGSLEEVES

by Mike Allen

Don't do this, she said.

There's nothing for it, lovely one. A shame you won't be so lovely once we're done.

* * *

Merav drifted between white hot pain and blissful shock until a voice lifted her to consciousness, its timbre akin to creek water rushing over rocks.

Her mouth burned as if she'd kissed a boiling kettle. The world smelled of blood and char. Branches partitioned the haze above her, dangling fruit with red, shivering skin.

"I can help you," the voice said.

A slender man leaned over her, his shoulders too broad and too knotted with muscle for his tall frame. As she stared, dazed, through the mask of agony fused to her face, she pieced together that she still lay in the ruins of the cabin where Uethorn's men had dragged her, deep in Dium Forest. Light shone through holes in the rotted ceiling.

The branches she perceived were in fact antlers, sprouting from the head of the man studying her. Four round, bloody objects hung in those antlers, spasms contorting their surfaces.

She remembered Uethorn's armers in their reeking leather. The blade heated by the torch. She touched fingers to her mouth, cried out at the pain that touch triggered, made a thousandfold worse when she flexed her jaw.

When her vision unblurred, the shapes on the straw beside her resolved into a gruesome stack: four leather-armored bodies, the stumps of their necks seeping.

"They pay still for their transgression in Olderra's wood," the antlered man said.

Even through the pain, she knew that name, whispered in Calcharra with the tones of awe reserved for floods and earth tremors. The stories: that Olderra's wrath once inflicted a year of saltwater rain on the ancient city. That she had rearranged stars to spell a message. That the last House to cross her, countless years ago, had been consumed in their manse by fire so hot it blinded all who witnessed it.

The man leaned close, and Merav discovered he had the face of a stag, long snout and tawny hide, though the dark beads of his eyes turned forward, human-like, beneath a blunt browridge. When he spoke he revealed incisors like ivory petals

and two long rows of molars in his lower jaw. “I’ll take you to Olderra now.”

She started to scramble away and fell back with a croak.

“I understand your fear,” the creature said. “You’re hers now. You were hers when your blood touched the soil. There’s nothing for it.” Hearing him repeat the words of Uethorn’s men as his strong arms gathered her for a cradle carry, she screamed, only to faint from the pain.

Her sight fluttered through the fugue that followed, witnessing high shrubs, mottled leaves, a wolf pack scattering into shadows.

Sometime later her bearer paused and shivered, the tremors in his oak-solid muscle stirring her awake. A pale serpent drifted across the trees ahead—a ghostly banner winding between the trunks. A second one soon joined it, weaving closer in the same sinuous way.

The antlered man shouted, though Merav didn’t understand his fear. Was this not the witch Olderra come to claim his burden?

The long white limbs whipped in a frenzy above as he ran. The sudden jostle opened wounds clotted shut, driving her back from consciousness.

* * *

When she regained her senses she lay on a table. A dry husk of a face floated above her, brown as a chestnut, shriveled as a dried apple. Lips pursed in a starburst of wrinkles. *You are almost mended.* The mouth didn't move to shape the words.

Ochre eyes flicked to one side. *Help her up.*

The antlered man leaned in, offered a thick-knuckled hand that Merav didn't want to take.

She lifted her head. The pain was gone. She touched her jaw, jerked her fingers away from coarse, misshapen flesh.

Above her a vertical tunnel spiraled into darkness, its walls like the underside of peeled bark.

A wooden platform drifted into view, hovering in mid-air, no means of support visible. Startled, Merav scanned the chamber, discovered more shelves and trays of various sizes suspended all around the table, stacked with vials, jars, bottles, books and other objects not immediately identifiable.

She turned to the wrinkled face, named its owner. "Olderra."

The witch's smile creased her cheeks. "That is a name I use, yes."

That this tiny woman stood at the heart of so many tales of woe and terror—Merav wanted to laugh, to wake safe in her bed and cackle at her own folly.

The deer-headed man's hand remained extended. Merav told the witch, "I don't want him touching me!"

His expression and posture didn't change.

The witch reached up as one of the shelves floated toward her fingers. She snatched a small pouch from the shelf without looking, shook it between forefinger and thumb, rattling its contents.

Merav sat up. "What is that?"

"I've not quite finished you yet," the witch said. She flicked the opened pouch at Merav's face. A puff of darkness billowed into wrestling foxes made of smoke. Merav recoiled—

And blinked, the apparition gone. Olderra curled the pouch into her palm, shook her hand as if as she'd gotten it wet. The shelves started to retreat.

Merav touched her jaw again, felt skin and bone and hair where none should have been. "What have you done?"

"What I could," Olderra said. "What had to be done." She inclined her leathery face toward the antlered man. "Show her."

The shelves were attaching themselves to the walls in a series of clicks and scrapes. "Show me what?" Merav demanded, but Olderra was gone.

The antlered man stood by an exit, a crude arch bitten out of the spongy bark walls. He bowed his head and stepped through. Merav looked for another way out of the roughly

cylindrical room; found none, other than a forbidding climb up the detachable shelves and into darkness.

Her bare feet touched warm earth. She no longer wore the skirt, corset, or undergarments she'd had on when Uethorn's men abducted her from Rosepike Market. Her clothes had been replaced with a tunic and breeches of identical brown. She shuddered as she stood, wondering who had done that.

Beyond the arch lay a chamber shaped exactly like the one she'd just left, with an identical bark-tunnel ceiling—except there were no shelves on the walls. The air changed from dry to dank. A pool in the center of the floor brushed the room in wavering light.

Across from her, the antlered man pointed at the water. “Best you look.”

The reflective surface permitted no glimpse of the pool's depths. The creature staring back at her possessed her eyes but wore the rust-pelt mask of a fox.

She opened her mouth, and the fox mirrored her, exposing a narrow tongue, incisors like curved needles. She curled her lip. The fox's muzzle wrinkled in a snarl.

“What...?” She couldn't finish the question. Her voice sounded no different.

The antlered man's mouth curled. “Milady healed you.”

“What have you done?” she shouted. The fox-woman in the pool flashed her fangs. “Change me back!”

Behind her, Olderra spoke. “You were already changed. This healing is the best I can offer.”

So often her father had shouted her down and worse, when anger moved her to speak. She had a swift, sharp tongue that resisted all containment and had learned to counter his physical savagery with verbal jabs that left scars of their own, she was certain. Yet at this moment, though the rage came, words did not. The brute snarl that issued from her throat shamed her.

The old woman peered up at her, impassive. “Hitch your cart to that anger, you’re about to have need of it. Hundeil?”

The antlered man sighed. “I feel them, milady.”

Behind Merav’s eyes a searing urge took hold, an itch deep in her skull that craved scratching. Though nothing about the chamber altered, she noticed shadows moving around her, noises seeping through the walls, harsh male voices and a girl weeping, a stench of heated copper.

“Again, our peace is broken,” Olderra growled.

Hundeil flared his nostrils, clenched and unclenched his fists. “Open the way.”

“You’ll have company this time,” she said, and laughed at his snort of protest. “You have no more choice than she does.”

Merav found that she lusted to open a belly with claws, to crush a throat between her teeth.

“So be it,” Hundeil said. “*The way.*”

The arch no longer led to the chamber of shelves but out into the night. Rain spattered at the threshold but didn’t cross.

As Hundeil’s form blocked the muted moonlight, panic rose in Merav. She could not have said why, but she craved first blood. She had to reach the prey before Hundeil.

She plunged into the drizzle after him.

They emerged by the ancient cottage where Uethorn’s thugs had marred her face. Even through the storm, rot fouled the air. She registered fleetingly that Olderra’s home was nowhere to be seen.

Three horses stood outside the cottage threshold, eyes flaring to expose the whites as they fixed on her and Hundeil. A lump of flesh lay crumpled by the front hooves of the closest horse. Blood drained into the soil from the fallen body. Through the soles of her feet Merav sensed how the earth thrummed with the transfer of precious energy.

Torchlight flickered inside the cottage. A man raised his voice in alarm—prey giving away its place.

Merav didn’t understand the covenants of Olderra’s forest, but she knew they had been broken, the offenders’ lives forfeit. Hundeil circled to a side window and reached through the way

a bear grabs fish from a river. A man screamed. The window was wide enough to pull the screeching prey's head through but not his shoulders. Hundeil gripped the man by the hair, bending his neck backward over the sill.

The horses bolted as Merav leapt over the bleeding body and through the front door. With a shout, a bull of a man charged toward her, swinging his torch like a club. Her response took no thought. She caught his wrist and dragged him off balance. He stumbled into the wall. The leather and chainmail he wore gave her easy purchase as she sprang onto his back and bit at the base of his neck. He howled as her teeth hooked his spine. She clamped and twisted, thrilled at the sensation of cartilage separating, bone breaking.

Iron seared her side.

She tore loose from her prey. Another armsman faced her, and though the torch had guttered out she could still perceive his scarred and bearded face. The knife he had stabbed her with glinted, no blood on its blade. The burning stripe across her flank faded. Behind the armsman lay the stack of headless bodies Hundeil had left when he had retrieved her for Olderra. Their soft parts teemed with insects.

Merav yearned to lunge, but the man kept the knife before him. That iron blade had burned where it touched her.

The man gagged. Merav shrank back, not comprehending—it looked as if a tree had reached through the cottage door and snagged him around the neck. Then Hundeil stepped fully inside and straightened. The armsman lifted from the floor, neck hooked in the upper reaches of Hundeil’s antlers.

Hundeil shook his head once. The armsman’s spine snapped. Though his body went limp, his mouth continued to move.

Merav’s attention whipped back to her own kill. She clawed at his head until she tore it from his shoulders. As he stared up at her, terrified, his mouth working silently, she recognized him. Jintien. A sergeant of House Lohmar, leader of her father’s personal guard. She had enjoyed Jintien’s company. He had a broad, kind face, stretched often by a gap-toothed grin.

Without understanding why, she hooked Jintien’s head to her belt. The head disappeared, but she still felt its weight against her hip. It felt right. It felt *just*.

“We tend to the wounded one now,” Hundeil rumbled. Two new heads had joined the ghastly fruit suspended in his antlers. “She still has blood left.”

“As I did,” Merav said. With this prey—the men, her father’s men—vanquished, her hunger for blood slid away.

“Yes,” said Hundeil. “This is the way of the forest. If it’s her fate to live, Olderra will heal her.”

“As she did for me,” Merav said. Then made a leap. “And for you.”

He left the cottage without acknowledging her words.

Outside, the rain had thinned to mist. Hundeil scooped the dying girl from the muck, and as her head lolled, Merav recognized her, too. Kaediya. Two years younger than Merav, one of Uethorn’s grandnieces. They had crossed paths at three of the four harvest banquets Merav’s father had made her attend the previous fall. Scions of rival houses, she and Kaediya had exchanged no more than diffident pleasantries at each occasion.

Mud plastered Kaediya’s raven-black hair across her long face. Her already pale skin had been bled to white. Her wide mouth hung open. Her wound wasn’t visible, but the flow of her life rolled out like a tide.

Questions swirled in Merav’s mind—why had she and Kaediya been brought to this place, marked for slow murder?

A moan rose over the patter of the storm and the rustling of the leaves. Hundeil’s scent soured with fear.

He ran, Kaediya clenched in his arms. Merav followed his lead without knowing why, but she soon enough spied the cause of his flight.

She remembered a serpentine length of white cloth, seen in delirium as Hundeil bore her to Olderra's lair. She now learned what the object was: a sleeve.

The hooded figure flowed toward them from the shadows, the white robe shrouding its emaciated form bright against the overcast night. It floated with arms outstretched, the sleeves of its raiment outstretched to either side, longer than human arms could possibly be.

When Merav was only five she had traveled with her mother and father and eldest sister to the keep of Dreygim, far to the south of Calcharra—one of the few memories Merav had of her full family, before they lost Mother and Sister both to the yellow pox. The prince of Dreygim kept reptiles in immense cages, their scaly visages a fixture in Merav's nightmares for months afterward, serpents who could swallow a man whole. These sleeves were longer than those serpents, waving slowly as if trailed through water.

The figure lifted its hood and moaned again, as a grave exhaling rage.

Hundeil quickened his sprint. Merav hesitated, and without appearing to gather speed, the figure halved the distance between them. The sleeves extended between the tree trunks like slow chameleon tongues, sinuous white arms curving together to embrace her.

Merav tore her gaze from the fluttering white and bolted.

Never before had she run with such speed or such fear, caroming off trees, tearing through brush, ripping loose the roots that hooked her feet, stumbling again and again until she caught up to Hundeil. Both were wheezing with exhaustion when they reached the gnarled behemoth of a tree that proved to be Olderra's dwelling. Its bark parted like curtains to admit them.

Merav doubled over, gasping, pulse pounding in her chest and sinuses. Inside the hollowed-out tree trunk, the interior had changed yet again, a hearth improbably embedded in the wood opposite the entrance. In the chamber's center stood a round table ringed by benches, set with three bowls.

Olderra pointed through the arch behind them, now opening into the room of floating shelves. Hundeil carried Kaediya there. "Put her on the table," Merav heard Olderra say from the other room, even though the witch was still hunched by the hearth fire, dipping a ladle into a kettle hung from a spit. Merav peered through to see a second Olderra at Hundeil's elbow as he placed the girl's body on the medicine table and shelves detached from the walls.

Hundeil returned to the dining hall and the arch behind him stretched shut. He sat as Olderra used the ladle to fill the

bowl before him. A smell of mutton and spicy roots overwhelmed Merav. Her stomach growled.

Hundeil took up a spoon and supped. “Wonderful, milady,” he said, as if he hadn’t just run miles carrying a body while a long-sleeved specter pursued.

The witch filled Merav’s bowl. Merav remained standing, despite her hunger. A slight frown made not-so-slight creases on Olderra’s brow. “Have some. You’ve earned it.”

The more Merav became aware of it, the more the invisible weight at her hip disturbed her. The weight of Jintien’s head. A new part of her, a piece of her psyche that hadn’t existed before she woke up on Olderra’s table, insisted that this new accessory provided comfort, that its presence was right and just, but that part did not rule her, no matter how persistently it snapped its jaws.

She was a beast now. A monster, like the thugs from Uethorn House who had mutilated her, like this murderous antlered man and the awful witch who was his master. And *her* master now. The death of gentle Jintien was on all of their hands.

Gentle Jintien, who had spilled a harmless girl’s blood. Merav couldn’t fathom why he would do that. Had her father ordered it?

The question gave strength to her repulsion. “Take it from me,” she said. “His head. Take it, I don’t want it.”

Olderra regarded her with bushy eyebrows raised. “The price is paid. The bounty rightfully belongs to you.”

“I don’t understand any of this and I refuse. Jintien was kind to me.”

“Not to the child on my table.”

“Then give what’s left of him to her, once she’s half-monster like me.”

Hundeil flinched. Olderra’s glower intensified. “You cannot make a gift of your trophy, especially not to her,” she said as the arch in the wall reopened. “But I will do as you wish. I will take it from you.”

Merav followed her into a chamber that shared the same tunnel-ceiling they all did, filled with rows of freestanding wooden racks not unlike the bookcases in the library at Garthand Palace. Tall glass jars crowded the racks.

The room was silent, yet full of subtle movement. Each time she blinked, the jars altered their configuration, as if the racks were switching places the instant her lids closed.

At last Olderra snatched a jar and opened it. The weight vanished from Merav’s belt. Something spun in the jar, a tiny man formed of pale smoke, the gray circles of his eyes huge with horror. Then Olderra closed the lid, and the effigy of

Jintien faded. She replaced the jar, immediately indistinguishable from its brethren as they shifted places. Merav could not have found it again on threat of death.

“Now will you eat?” Olderra asked.

Merav would never before have enjoyed such a gristly, fat-filled soup, but it proved ambrosia on her tongue. Her joints twinged, finally admitting aches from her exertions.

Olderra sent her to the moss-lined chamber that would be her new bedroom. It too had the same tunnel-ceiling. Contemplating its shadows, Merav drifted to sleep, and dreamed of bringing down a stag with her tiny teeth and dragging the corpse home to her kits.

* * *

Days and nights coursed past with little to distinguish them, their hours marked off by meals before the hearth, slumbering in soft moss, chores of cleaning or retrieval carried out through the dozens of rooms confined within the tree, most of which served no obvious purpose. In one, dried leaves spun forever in a slow cyclone. In another, glass windows honeycombed the walls, but Merav could make no sense of the roiling chaos of color outside the panes. In another, slabs of wood grew together into stairs that rose to the trunk's upper reaches, but a immovable trapdoor at their apex barred further exploration.

At first Merav and Hundeil spoke little at their shared suppers, but gradually he proffered carefully measured tidbits. “All milady’s chambers exist in one place,” he said. “Beneath this same roof. But they never merge. Only milady can move between them freely.”

Merav asked him to explain. He tried: he and Merav could go only where their host allowed, he said. Yet in his experience, once permitted access to a room, he needed only to think of it to summon an arch that led there, until Olderra chose to once more bar his access.

After learning this, Merav tried repeatedly, without luck, to summon the chamber of floating shelves. She wanted to know what had become of Kaediya, who had not reappeared. Olderra, too, eluded her.

Hundeil talked of the workings of their home but would not discuss its history. He did confirm with nods and strategic silences some of Merav’s suspicions: that Olderra never left the tree and yet could travel far beyond Dium Forest. That the tree held so many rooms within its unnatural dimensions that it was possible for many to live inside it and never cross paths.

He talked least about himself, until Merav finally asked him, “Who were you, before?”

In the middle of serving her soup, he dropped the ladle, slopping red sauce across the tabletop. As he cleaned with head

bowed he muttered, “Milady prefers we not speak of such things.”

Merav spread her hands. “I don’t see her.”

He snorted. “You believe she can’t hear us?”

“I’m sure she can, but does she always listen?”

“Not a gamble I will make.”

She couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “What could you possibly say that would worry her? We are both trapped. Helpless as kittens in a sack.”

His narrow jaw flexed, cords bulging in his neck. “We are not trapped. We are saved.”

The rage her father so often inspired, that spurred her to call him coward and monster, reared its head. In retaliation for that rage, her father had more than once pinned her down and beat her, careful not to leave visible bruises—but that never stopped her. Hundeil was a sheep by comparison.

“You?” she mocked. “Saved from what? The arrow of some hunter who spied your horns through the trees?”

“The first time, an assassin’s garrote, “ he said evenly, “when I commanded merchant ships for House Leursind.”

Merav stared. House Leursind was only a story, attached to a burnt-black ruin of a demesne in Steermast Quarter, uninhabited for centuries.

His deep voice quavered. “Longsleeves, the second time—” His eyes widened in surprise at his own indiscretion, and he turned from her, head tilted in shame.

He had to mean the entity in the woods, its sleeves ever seeking prey to strangle.

“Is it a ghost?” she asked. “Longsleeves?”

He summoned an arch and left before she finished the final syllable.

* * *

He successfully avoided her for several days, until Olderra called her into the apothecary chamber with its hovering shelves, to acquaint her with Kaediya.

“Your friend returns to us from a far distance,” the witch said. Behind her, Hundeil loomed, impassive.

A thorn-studded heap of vines sprawled atop the table, its foliage adorned with violet flowers. Their sickly-sweet scent flooded the room. Olderra opened her fingers, trickling powder into the heap.

The botanical mass coughed. Leaves and petals arranged themselves into a face. Kaediya’s gray eyes stared out from it.

Merav burned with questions: why had her father’s men brought Kaediya to the woods, why had Kaediya’s house abducted Merav, why were House Uethorn’s men ordered to mutilate her face? But Kaediya’s expression held no

recognition, no acknowledgment of her surroundings. Merav's hopes drained away.

Kaediya sat up, her form winding tighter into human shape. Olderra demanded, "Tell me your name."

Mute, the flower-woman regarded the witch.

Deprived of one set of answers, Merav aimed for another. "What is Longsleeves?"

Hundeil started.

Olderra seemed unsurprised. "Longsleeves is what it chose to be."

Some part of Merav, the same part that had enjoyed the weight of the ghost hanging from her belt, tried to keep her jaws closed, but it could no more stop her than her father could. "Milady, that's not an answer to my question. What is that creature?"

The floating shelves began returning to their places. "Your enemy," Olderra said.

"Why? Because it's *your* enemy?"

The witch addressed Kaediya. "You at least will be more docile. Can you use a broom? Did your family ever require you to wash your own things?"

Kaediya nodded.

"Good, then I don't have to teach you. Help her up." Hundeil extended a hand and Kaediya took it, her new flesh

rustling as she stood. Yet another door when none had been before opened into a room filled with huge, gnarled roots. A black substance crusted every visible surface. “Go in, listen for my instructions,” Olderra said.

Kaediya shuffled uncertainly toward the root-room. The arch folded closed behind her.

“Such a shame,” Olderra said. “One mercy, at least. She won’t understand she’s scouring her own blood from the heart of the forest.”

Merav and Kaediya had never been friends in Calcharra. Still, witnessing the girl’s existence as a listless automaton angered Merav more. “What have you preserved her for? She’d have been better off left for dead.”

“You say that because you despise Uethorn House.”

“Not true.” The vicious rivalry between the houses Uethorn and Lohmar had been a fact of her life from birth, but she had always assumed it resulted from their competing spice and fabric trades, and thus a war of markets, not weapons. Blood had been shed in centuries past, so she was told, because the Uethorns had resorted to murder to undermine Lohmar’s influence with Calcharra nobility.

As she had grown older, Merav came to loathe her quick-fisted father far more than any nebulous feud. She had

expected no danger whatsoever when Uethorn's men approached her outside Rosepike Market.

She pointed at the wall where Kaediya had departed. "I don't understand any part of what's happened to her, or to me, any more than I understand that creature in the forest that your strongman runs from. But I am certain you understand everything."

Hundeil and Olderra both eyed her. At last the antlered man grimaced at the witch. "It does no good to spurn the questions of the curious, milady."

"You would know that well, wouldn't you?" Olderra said.

The antlered man's face stayed inscrutable.

Olderra sighed. "We'll see where your curiosity leads me, then. The one called Longsleeves arrived as you did, a wounded bird brought to me when the covenant had been broken."

"Someone harmed her?"

"Yes." Olderra fell silent, her mouth working as if her next words resisted uttering. Her demeanor grew strange, lips peeling back, eyes squeezing tight, arms shaking as hands curled into fists.

At last she took a breath, then spoke rapidly, in pained syllables. "There are men of Calcharra who—who mistake their wealth for a... a license to defy the Ones I serve, the Ones Who Dwell Between, the masters of the forest. The brutes from

Calcharra seek—seek to curry favor from ancient things, forces... order sacrifices that—that the Ones cannot abide. I am charged with righting the wrong, as best I can.” She sighed as if she’d just set down a sack full of bricks, gasped for breath and resumed. “When those I save from death spill... spill blood unsanctioned, they... they reject the gift the Ones give them. They will never, never again be right with the forest.”

Merav twitched her ears. The talk of sacrifice and seeking favor from ancient things and defying Ones that rule the forest made little sense to her, but she believed she understood one implication. “Longsleeves lived here?”

Another deep breath. “Once. Now it has no home.”

This is not my home, Merav thought. She pointed a clawed finger at Hundeil. “What grudge does Longsleeves have with him?”

“Its grudge is with me,” the witch said. “For that, Hundeil suffered.”

“Twice milady has saved me from death,” the antlered man said. “I am grateful for it.”

“Grateful for what?” Merav’s hackles rose. “Are *you* grateful that the forest gifts you with slaves?”

The witch had recovered her composure. “The forest requires it.”

“What are you to the forest?”

Olderra scowled. “I should have left your mouth unmended.”

“If you don’t want these questions asked, surely you can stop me!”

“I understand why the Ones chose this shape for you, with its snapping jaws,” Olderra said. “Longsleeves resented the forest’s price as much as you do, broke the bargain, and incurred a debt that can never be paid.”

A new arch had appeared behind the witch, leading into a unfamiliar room where thick shoots grew from the floor to form pedestals supporting heavy books. “If you desire knowledge so strongly, seek it there.”

Merav peered into the odd library. The closest tome was illuminated in letters she didn’t recognize. When she turned, brimming with more questions, the witch had vanished.

“She’s indulging you,” Hundeil said. “She allows your insolence because she’s fond of you. Don’t squander that.”

“Fond of me!” Merav spat. “Then why did she refuse me answers? If she indulges me, it’s because I’m nothing but a child’s toy to her. One insignificant slave in a line of many. Just as you are.”

Hundeil went rigid. They stood in silence, eyes locked, for a long, tense time, before Hundeil summoned an exit.

“She’s a monster,” Merav said, watching him go.

* * *

The next day Kaediya joined them in the dining hall. Her leafy brow crinkled above a puzzled stare as Merav tried to remind her of the dinners and dances they'd attended in Calcharra. Hundeil glared over his shoulder as he stirred the soup, silently entreating Merav to stop.

Throughout the meal Kaediya shook her head in response to every question Merav asked. At last Merav accepted then that she had to find a different path for answers.

She regarded the heavy antlers branching from Hundeil's crown.

In tales, ghosts spoke. They warned the living. Exposed the wicked. Revealed things only the dead could know. "Your prisoners," she asked him. "Can you talk to them?"

"What?"

"The heads that hang in your antlers. Can you speak with them?"

His scent grew acrid with outrage. "Their voices do not deserve to be heard."

"Our voices do," she said.

He let his silence express his disagreement.

Merav again accepted a door forever closed. He would never be her ally.

* * *

Days passed without a glimpse of Olderra's cowl. Merav spent as much time as she could polishing jars in the room of shifting racks, which she privately named the Chamber of Spirits. She had discovered that sometimes, when she laid her palm on one of the jars, the ghost sealed inside would stir. Usually this produced a faint twist of smoke and little more, but sometimes she could make out a face.

Jintien could explain why her father had ordered Kaediya's killing. Perhaps he even knew why House Uethorn had targeted Merav. She spent days searching among the jars for his ghost, until the morning her frustration peaked. She started removing jars from the shelves two or three at a time and rubbing them with her paws. Perhaps in every dozenth jar a face congealed, but never Jintien's. She pulled a dozen more from the shelf, intent on testing them all.

Abruptly she awoke amidst her cushions of moss. From then on, whenever she focused her mind on the Chamber of Spirits, the arch she summoned always led somewhere else.

* * *

Merav crouched by the reflecting pool. Her vulpine features bared fangs in synchronicity with a soft, bitter laugh. Behind her Kaediya used a broom of thick straw to smooth the floor. At the noise she glanced Merav's way, face colorful, expression blank.

As Merav watched in the watery mirror, Kaediya finished her work and turned to leave. An arch opened before her—

Into the Chamber of Spirits.

Merav sprang, tackling the other woman and falling through with her as the entrance closed. Kaediya shrieked as they hit the floor. The sound wrenched at Merav, but she bounded upright and dashed between the racks, determined to resume her hunt. She might have only seconds before Olderra intervened.

She picked up a jar, clutched it between her palms, watched for smoke to stir. A face appeared, not the one she wanted. She slammed the jar back, grabbed another. Nothing. Next one, a face appeared—the same one as the first time. The racks had tricked her. It was her turn to shriek.

Kaediya shuffled close, leaning on her broom like a cane, her fright apparently forgotten. She watched Merav snatch and curse, the leaves of her brow crinkling. In a jar by her flowering shoulder a figure coalesced, its mouth and eyes stretching in fury, its fists flailing.

Merav swiped the jar holding Jintien's ghost before the racks could steal it away. Kaediya stumbled back, her body emitting a hiss of leaves disturbed.

Merav shook the jar. "Jintien! Hear me!"

Her old friend's face filled the vessel, his silent howl vibrating the glass. She tried to pry off the lid but it wouldn't budge. She applied her fox body's full strength to it. Muscles tore in her forearm, her shoulder. In her elbow, the sensation and sound of a cord snapping.

The lid broke free.

The ambient light dimmed. Jintien surged out, paying Merav no heed.

Kaediya screamed as smoke whipped around her. Vines tore loose from her body.

An itch to murder had possessed Merav when Kaediya's blood first had been spilled in the forest. As Jintien's ghost strove to complete his final mission, rend Kaediya leaf from limb, that itch returned a thousandfold. Taking life unsanctioned abused the goodwill of the Ones, defiled the forest.

The knowledge that a killer had broken the forest covenant consumed Merav. Bloodlust coursed through her limbs. Jintien's head was forfeit. But the ghost had no head to claim, no blood she could spill, no flesh she could rend. She staggered, her rage deprived of focus.

Leaves and petals burst from the smoke that twisted about Kaediya's body. Kaediya's screams stopped. Her gray eyes fluttered to the ground, petals plucked and discarded. A new

pair of eyes took their place, their familiar gaze dark and cruel in a manner that Merav had never before recognized.

As Jintien's spirit filled the emptied vessel of his victim, energies drew taut through Merav's flesh. The desire to kill poured a river through her, drowning out the voice within her that wept for Kaediya's murder. Before his new form could even draw breath she leapt, the wet roots and stems vile in her mouth as she tore head from shoulders.

The head unraveled, leaving her no trophy.

All about her an icy wind blew, and that wind carried Olderra's voice. "You impudent little fox, what have you done?"

Hundeil's forest of antlers charged into view. Merav, ruled by her thwarted craving, pounced on him without thinking, her tail sweeping dozens of jars to the floor as she attacked.

His blow knocked her aside as if the earth itself struck her, but her reflexes recovered faster. She grabbed his arm and vaulted forward to claw his face. A long strip of hide tore loose from his muzzle. He bellowed. The heads dangling in his antlers emitted ear-splitting wails.

"To spill blood unsanctioned is to reject the gift of Ones." Olderra's voice rose like a river cresting its banks. "You are expelled from this sacred place! Join our enemy in exile!"

The jars and walls vanished. Merav stood among withered trees in a part of Dium Forest she'd never seen. Light blared

through skeletal branches, the noonday sun a merciless witness. Three cart-lengths away, white fluttered. Longsleeves drifted toward her, uncoiling its tapering arms, face veiled under its long hood.

Merav's urge to attack warred with her fear, leaving her paralyzed as the long sleeves slithered either side of her.

She only found the will to move when the rough cloth brushed her skin. She clawed at the fabric, and it tangled her wrists. She savaged a sleeve with her teeth but it looped around her head. She thrashed and bit. The cloth stretched and ripped, but more replaced it. In moments she was completely cocooned.

She kept struggling as the wrappings tightened. Something forcibly caught her chin and lifted it, like her father whenever she had tried to avoid and ignore him. The fabric over her eyes parted to grant her a view of Longsleeves' cowl as it lifted, opening into raw, roiling hunger.

The folds of cloth hadn't covered her mouth. They were *avoiding* her mouth, the place where Uethorn's men had wounded her and Olderra had healed her.

She demanded, "Who are you?"

The wrappings tightened, as smothering serpents.

"Why are you doing this?" Merav gasped.

And the creature answered.

Tableaux came to life in Merav's mind, flat and faded like aged paintings, and yet they moved. The same nightmare that Merav had lived since Uethorn's men took her to the cottage played out again, with a different cast.

A girl bound and slung over the back of a horse, armsmen laughing as they bore her into the forest, to the same cottage. The merciless bite of an axe; her arms chopped away, leaving agony behind.

Heads dangling from antlers.

A ceiling like a tunnel. A second girl brought to the forest, the thrill of killing the killers, puncturing them with poisonous fangs and crushing them with the snake-like arms the forest gave her to replace the ones the armsmen had hewn off.

Those same arms, transformed to white sleeves, squeezed her now. Merav fought back not with claws and teeth but with will. "Tell me your name," she wheezed.

The creature stilled, as if startled. The tableau of violence subsided.

Merav heard a word. *Maelina*.

She knew that name. A great-great aunt, she would have been; vanished long ago. Merav's father had spoken of her murder as the worst of the long-simmering grievances with House Uethorn.

More memories poured from Longsleeves. The other girl enmeshed in the tragedy, the one Maelina had helped save, given fish scales for skin, a long mouth filled with needle teeth, water seeping from her hair. A Uethorn woman, dragged to the Dium Forest cottage to be slaughtered, flayed alive by men from Merav and Maelina's own house. She and Maelina had hated one another even before their reunion inside Olderra's tree. They did not recognize, as Merav did now, that they were the victims of a ritual.

They had fought. Hundeil had tried and failed to intervene. Maelina, victorious, was banished...

Maelina and her enemy, Merav and Kaediya; their misfortunes followed a baffling but undeniable pattern. Had it gone on even before them? How far into the past did these ritual murders go?

Longsleeves—Maelina—trembled even as she tightened her grip. Merav could no longer speak. She hoped her thoughts spoke for her, that her words could break through the monster's mindless bloodlust. *You and I are bound by family and bloodshed.* The pressure built in her lungs, her brain. She tried to share her own memories, scenes of Hundeil waking her in the cabin, of Kaediya bleeding into the mud. *Look what I'm showing you. Our fates are bound to this horror. To this*

atrocities inflicted on us by the men of our Houses! We must defy it!

Her head went light as the blood stopped flowing to her brain. Then she collapsed to the forest floor.

Longsleeves had released her.

Wind breathed against them as the entire forest seemed to sigh, in sadness, in relief.

“I am sorry,” Olderra said.

Merav craned her aching neck to stare at the witch, who stood among the withered trees. Longsleeves slumped to a kneeling position. Its shoulders hitched in silent sobs.

Eying Olderra warily, Merav croaked, “What curse will you bring on us now?”

“You are within your rights to despise me,” the witch said. “The rules of the Ones I serve are complex and exacting, inscrutable to mortals, and more than one has found them as intolerable as you do. But I am not responsible for the pact between your houses that has been a source of screams and spilled blood for four cold centuries.”

Merav’s voice, still little more than a whisper. “Pact?”

“The sacrifice of daughters, made to curry favor with things more ancient than this forest. Made inside that cabin, long ago. The greedy men who first swore themselves to this arrangement did not want the blood of their own daughters on

their hands. But to kill a daughter from the other house, that was acceptable, that absolved them of what little guilt they might have entertained. They tailor the manner of death to harm what each girl values most. In your case, your words.”

Merav found herself bereft of them.

“They might believe this approach carries more favor, but in truth it’s a sadistic flourish to no purpose. All that matters to the creatures they propitiate is the bloodletting. They care not how it happens, or who is killed. Those ancient things despise the Ones I serve and savor any act that defiles the forest.”

For all the hate Merav harbored for her father, its seething core still revolved around the notion that he had chosen to teach her, shelter her, prepare her for her life amid the merchants and nobles despite her defiant tantrums because he loved her, stupidly, imperfectly, brutally, but nonetheless as sincerely as his malformed soul could manage. As her grip on that notion loosened, that faith drained from her heart, her anger pouring in to fill the hollow that remained.

“Why,” Merav rasped, “didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I couldn’t. I tried,” the witch said, eyes lowered. “The pact made by your bloodlines in that cabin defies the forest law. It bound my tongue. Even the half-truth I managed to utter brought pain with each syllable.” She anticipated the question at the tip of Merav’s tongue. “When you spared each other, just

now—” she nodded at Longsleeves, who still trembled— “that freed me to speak.”

“How do I know you speak truth?” But even as Merav asked, she sensed the answer she had for so long sought: the filament of blood magic stitched through her, connected to the quivering figure beside her, to the scattered leaves of Kaediya’s corpse, to Maelina’s twice-dead rival, back into the darkness of memory and time; dead women hanging from its string like the ghostly heads that hung from Hundeil’s antlers.

Hundeil. He loomed at the edge of the copse, watching Longsleeves, his muzzle still bloody from Merav’s claws.

“This must end,” Merav said. “How do we stop it?”

Longsleeves raised her head.

“It can be done,” Olderra said. “But it cannot be done in Dium Forest. Once you leave, you cannot come back. And I will no longer know what can or will happen to you, or how long the body gifted to you by the forest will last.”

“I am willing to go beyond your knowledge, Olderra. Tell me what it will take to end this.”

Though at one time she could never have imagined it possible, when Olderra finished speaking, Merav offered the witch her thanks.

* * *

Don’t do this, he said.

There's nothing for it, honored one. A shame, father, that your honor was never real.

* * *

That night, in the great hall of Lohmar, two daughters thought lost by some, and disposed of for good by others, reappeared, one with sleeves as long as dragon's tails, one with claws and the visage of a fox. Lohmar was only the first manse they would visit that night, but it was fitting they called first at their birthhome.

The guards were unable to raise any alarms as white cloth tightened around their throats.

The sun would rise to find the Manse Lohmar and Manse Uethorn eerily silent. All the men of both houses, every husband, brother and son, beheaded in the night. Daughters, mothers and wives submerged in unnatural sleep would awaken to bewilderment and weeping, never to know why they'd been spared.

For a moment, once the most urgent deed of all was done, once her father's head hung from her belt, Merav's heart shrilled with grief. But given what he'd hidden from her all her life, the plans he'd made for her fate, her sorrow died just as fast, a candle flame snuffed out.

She and Longsleeves left Calcharra, moving south ahead of the dawn. Tales of their exploits would live on centuries hence, in nightmares, in fantasies of vengeance, in fever dreams.

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THE MAMA MMIRI

by Walter Dinjos

The mama mmiri is the mother of the Ofia River, and she loves her food in pairs. Every month the villagers toss goats and fowl into her water so that in return she will allow them to fish and row and wash in it. She swallows the twins among the sacrifices and spits the rest out on the bank as she did papa.

This was why the evening Baba Tunde lowered my twin brother, Ugo, into a caisson to fetch his fallen cap for him, I ran home with blobs of tears rolling down my cheeks and sweat soaking my dada. And as mama saw me, she abandoned the pounded yam in the mortar, tightened the knot of her wrapper around her chest, and we dashed back to the river with our feet naked.

We found Baba Tunde canoeing away from the uncompleted structures jutting out of the river and toward us with a plump body sprawling behind him in the boat. This made mama throw herself on the muddy ground and lift her face and hands skyward, screaming “why?” to the gods.

I, on the other hand, was too numb to cry anymore. But I felt a gloom building up inside me. If you have ever felt like

dropping from an iroko tree, a half of you hoping someone would catch you and assure you everything would be alright and the other half praying for a lethal landing, then you have a hint of my grief.

You see, Baba Tunde was a devious man, a predator always on the prowl, especially around the riverbank at night and, although he worked for the oyibo from England, he was lousy with English words. Often, when he wasn't spewing out what seemed like insults in Yoruba at one villager or another, he chewed pidgin English with a deep grimace, as though the words tasted like onugbu leaves in his mouth.

I suspected the deficiency in his vocabulary was a facade—a part of his deviousness—because on each of the few occasions he spoke English a corpse was always involved. Phrases like 'barotraumas of the ears' and 'lungs and dysbaric osteonecrosis' tumbled out of his mouth and he called them sicknesses and blamed them for the corpses.

This time, as he hauled Ugo to the clay bank, he said, "Sinus cavities."

Mama crawled to the corpse and fell on top of it, hugging it, shaking it, and wailing.

"You!" I jabbed a hesitant finger at him in most children's way of saying 'I realize mama said I ought to respect my elders, but I'm most certain you are that exception she failed to

mention.' I swear I could feel intense heat emanating from my rancorous gaze. "You think we don't know?"

Baba Tunde glared at me. Until that evening, nobody had ever challenged the truth in his strange words, although, with five sets of twins already dead, the villagers had begun conspiring.

"We know the truth," I yelled. The oyibo gun buckled to his waist and the brown beads around his wrist, which suggested he was into juju, were the only things holding me from crashing myself into him. I, however, doubted those weapons could frighten the aggrieved villagers away from their plots to drive him and the oyibo out. "You sacrificed him."

Baba Tunde didn't respond. He simply began to mutter in Yoruba and hurried back into his boat with his head down, as if to hide the three skin-deep tribal lines that marked each of his cheeks. I stood there, bleary-eyed, and, with bitterness, watched him paddle back toward the structures and caissons.

Everybody knew the truth, that the depths of the caissons were altars on which Baba Tunde and the oyibo appeased the mama mmiri with monthly sacrifices to ensure successful construction of their bridge. We knew this because, on his deathbed, papa mumbled that they trapped him in a caisson, and some glowing spirits tormented him with gushing water and visions of his death.

Papa didn't have a twin; one whose death would have made the sacrifice whole. That was why the river had spat him out.

Ugo, on the other hand, had me, and Baba Tunde knew that.

* * *

There is this saying about identical twins, that they are two bodies sharing a soul; one could hardly survive without the other. Appropriate to the saying was the vacuum I felt within me. It seemed that without being cut open I had been hollowed out, I had been drained of my very essence—like a grasscutter gutted alive, you know, or perhaps like an unripe coconut drained of its juice with a syringe.

It had been a fortnight since Ugo's burial, and the vacuum grew ever larger. I jumped out of bed most nights with screams that made mama down two cupfuls of Mazi Ike's supposedly heart-mellowing concoction every day, and I couldn't continue huddling under the avocado tree beside Ugo's grave every other night weeping. I longed for someone with whom I could engage in our papaya-pipe-gun battles in the surrounding forests.

I missed our pranks.

I remember the day mama had warned that plucking a mango from the tree in the backyard would incur twelve lashes. So Ugo and I decided to eat the fruits without detaching them

and leave the seeds dangling from their pedicels, just like bats do, except that, unlike bats, we did the eating all too neatly. And when mama returned from the market and questioned us, we simply explained that we hadn't actually done any plucking. It had been fun, but only because Ugo had shared in the experience.

The dirt road was moonlit and desolate, papers and dead leaves scampering here and there in the Harmattan wind as if to announce the impending appearance of a ghost. This reminded me of the whispered rumors that the spirits of those sacrificed to the mama mmiri roamed the river and its banks at night and that souls that ventured there during dark hours rarely returned.

But that was, of course, the reason I had stolen out of the secret meeting at the village hall and bounded downhill toward the river. Seeing as Ugo was taken by the water spirit, I couldn't help but entertain the prospect of seeing him again and fight the dread that his spirit might harm me.

Besides, if the dead had the heart to hurt the living, the ones rumored to have been glimpsed wandering the village especially at night would have killed those who had seen them, instead of vanishing on discovery. And Ngozi, our neighbors' daughter, who had unsuspectingly resided in the next village

with Mazi Okonkwo's dead son for a year, wouldn't have survived.

Still, as I fearfully ventured into the bamboo bush preceding the river, I focused my senses and readied my limbs for the improbable appearance of a ghost, or rather because something about bamboos made my skin flutter; that occasional rustle of dry leaves and the chill within the shadows—shadows where Baba Tunde or the oyibo could be lurking.

There was another saying, this time from the oyibo. 'Speak of the devil...' I had never really understood the need for the utterance of such a stunted phrase. Well, until, I sighted Baba Tunde strolling, not in the bamboos but between them and the bank, toward a path in the northern end of the bush.

My heart responded with a lurch that forced me down on my knees, and there I waited, until he disappeared into the path. All the while I tried to calm my nerves with mama's advice that if Baba Tunde or the oyibo ever tried to grab me I should kick them in the loins and run home with my slippers in my hands.

I scooted down the bank and buried myself neck-deep in the water and waited and prayed for a good hour that Ugo come and join me. My skin was already feeling like that of agege bread dipped in hot tea, yet no spirit appeared. It was all a rumor, I realized, although I did consider taking a boat past

the crab-like dredgers moored to the bank and to the pillars and from there pick my way scaffold by scaffold, over the protruding lacing of rods, to the caissons just to make sure.

I had barely dismissed the thought when the water lit up with a clean blue glow, as though its bed resided a million feet deep in the earth. I staggered back, the chill of the night and of the water making my skin and lips tremble. Deep inside, I felt my vacuum contract and expand as if deciding whether to let itself be filled by the glow or not.

Unfortunately, instead of my brother's spirit, or even a beautiful maiden with a fish tail in place of human legs as rumored across the village, a translucent woman sprang out of the river and hung in the air with agility that should have left her drooped shoulders falling apart and her wrinkled black skin sagging into the water. The now-billowing wind didn't shake her, and for someone who had risen from the river, she wasn't dripping. She was the ugliest creature I had ever set my eyes upon—yes, I doubted a fish tail or tentacles would have made her any uglier.

My bones were quaking even as I swam backward, slowly so I didn't alarm her, all the while gaping at her fallen rumped breasts.

“Let me spare you the trouble of asking, my dear.” Her voice was a high-pitched tone that suited neither her age nor

her fatness. “The stories are true, although somewhat embellished.”

“The stories?” I quit swimming, the muscles in my face twitching curiously.

“Yes. You are not going to escape the river tonight.” Her baggy lips spread in a smile that made the heavily crinkled skin around her mouth shift in a most perturbing way, much like the skin of a moving old snail. You could even have made a bag as big as a cement sack from the swinging meat around her stomach.

“Please,” I said. “I just want to see my brother. I need to know what really happened.” The words came out as tentative puffs of cold air.

“As if the oyibo’s saying, ‘curiosity killed the cat’, isn’t common enough. Now listen to me, my dear. We can stay here all night arguing it, but you are mine, and it will all be on you. I can see everything. Even the depth of your soul. And right now you are not saying what is really in your heart.”

Her words reinforced my anger and hatred toward Baba Tunde and assailed my mind with the sight of the man lowering Ugo into the caisson. “Okay,” I said, “I will get you a sacrifice and in return you give me back my brother.”

“Haven’t you been listening to anything I just said?”

“Please.”

“So you want me to let you run off on me, eh? As if anyone really could.”

I couldn't say I hadn't considered running, but the hideously disturbing smile on the woman's face suggested that running from her would be like running from death. It didn't matter that she looked like a grandmother whose only work was to eat akpu and snore and I was just plump and a little over fifteen. For Christ's sake, as the oyibo usually swore, she could fly. Hence, I resigned to saying please.

“If you can really see everything,” I continued, “then you would know I meant what I said. I will get you a sacrifice. Baba Tunde.”

“Oh, I see it. I see him. And I want him. The river swallows everyone eventually, I told him once. But can you manage that feat?”

“Please. I will return.” I found myself paddling as quickly as I could toward the bank (she didn't stop me) and running off into the bamboo bush along the path Baba Tunde had taken, my oversized singlet whose hue Ugo had once dubbed ‘it was white’ dripping so much that I left a trail of footprints fettered together with chain-like droplets.

Under the bush, the moon sketched shadows with ridged limbs and forked claws, shadows that threatened that if I so much as glanced up, giant ghostly birds would swoop on me. I

was about heaving a sigh, seeing as the margin of the bamboo bush was a few jumps away, when I discerned the lamplight ahead.

The discovery yanked at my heart, and the pain of it all brought me to a ducking position behind some inconvenient undergrowth—inconvenient because beside me hunched a lump of feces too massive to have been dumped by just one man. It appeared that a dozen little rascals had taken turns to unburden themselves on the spot, and the stench was so stomach-wrenching that I had to alternate between monitoring the lamplight and gagging at the feces; between putting a hand over my nose and watering the grasses around me with spittle; between wondering who bore the light and realizing what a foolhardy quest ‘sacrificing Baba Tunde’ was, then that the feces had started me on the thought.

I realized Baba Tunde had to be dealt with but, thinking about it at that moment, I reckoned I must have been so frightened for my life that I had had to make a false promise to the mama mmiri in order to get away. It didn’t matter that at the time the hunger to sacrifice him had been genuine.

Two other lamplights appeared in the distance. But then I noticed a rustle behind me. I understood that snakes cling to bamboos the way bamboos cling to riverbanks, but I was certain the rustle sounded too heavy to be just the slithering of

a snake. Even so, I felt my skin moving as if whatever it was had already crept between it and my wet clothes. Before I could scream or turn around, a sharp pain visited my nape and that was that.

* * *

My eyes were heavy, and that stomach-turning odor of decaying feces assaulted my nose without the slightest hint of restraint. So I reckoned, as I pushed my eyes open, that it was either I had been bitten by a snake and was dying beside the feces, or whatever had hit me had made sure I had fallen face down in the lump.

The latter, it turned out, was the case, as my mouth tasted like a pit full of carrion. I, however, was no longer within the bamboos but found myself surrounded by jutting rods and the heavy song of flowing water. My neck blazed with pain, and the two shadows cast on the concrete structure on which I sprawled showed that two manly figures stood behind me.

I rolled over and sat up, stopping short of spitting into the river, seeing as there was a third person, one that didn't have a shadow—the *mama mmiri*.

“Ha, boy, how very considerate of you to save us the trouble of visiting your *mama's* hut.” The *oyibo*, in his long-sleeved shirt tucked into hairy three-quarter-length trousers and with his pale-skinned face which the ruthless tropical sun

had turned into a big triangular ember, had his hands around his waist and stood tall and proud like one of those statues the white missionaries had erected at the church front.

“Mr. Edward, the villagers... Them they up to something,” Baba Tunde murmured in pidgin English. If he had that grimace on I couldn’t tell, as his face was silhouetted against the moon and my eyes were occupied with the mama mmiri, who was hovering over a caisson smiling her hideous smile.

“You see, my dear?” she said to me. “The river swallows everyone eventually.” Then to the oyibo she said, “A new month begins tomorrow. I am sure you won’t keep me waiting again.”

Mr. Edward shook that head of his that was so big I dreaded it would snap from his neck and bounce off the scaffolds and into the river. And that wavy hair that made every woman in the village fuss, that flute of a nose from where his melodious intonation seemed to emanate, and those eyes whose hue made the sky envious would all be wasted, carried downriver along with the head and buried in the place all waters go.

“The candidates have already been selected,” he said, and then turned to Baba Tunde, tipping his head toward a caisson. “Say the incantation and throw him in.”

“Them they plan something, I tell you.” Baba Tunde was shuddering like a boy about to wet his loincloth and wouldn’t stop glancing toward the bamboo bush. “I been see them gather for the village hall. Them they plan something, I tell you.”

The oyibo regarded the mama mmiri, who bounced jovially in the air as if the situation was a moonlight drama and she was merely a cast playing her own part. “Well...? Is that true? You see everything, don’t you?”

“That is not my problem, is it now, dear?” she said. “Oya, the sacrifice. Sharp, sharp!”

“Ha!” The oyibo smacked Baba Tunde on the shoulder. “You heard the miss. Chop, chop! Say the incantation, will you.”

“I tell you. Them they vex. Them go come.” Baba Tunde scratched the raffia cap on his head, his eyes still wandering to the bamboos and gleaming in the moon like those of a child about to receive some lashes for stealing bush meat from his mama’s pepper-soup pot. “We suppose wait make them finish mourning and forget.”

At least Baba Tunde had the common sense that those shotguns slung on his and the oyibo’s shoulders wouldn’t save them from the villagers’ wrath.

“Goddammit, Baba Tunde,” the oyibo barked, “will you quit complaining and say the incantation!”

Baba Tunde stepped toward me. I recoiled, but stopped on realizing I was sliding toward the mama mmiri and the caissons. The sudden squawking of birds in the far bamboo bush stopped him, and he spun around toward the sound, lifting his shotgun and moving his left hand back and forth on it. It clicked.

With my hand over my unsettled chest, I contemplated clambering forward to push him into the river, but that thought was cut short by the sprouting of many lamplights from the bamboos. And as the men muttered things like, “What the hell!” and, “I been tell you. Them done come,” I remembered that I had promised the mama mmiri Baba Tunde and that he was there with me. It didn’t matter who had brought whom.

Still sitting, I turned to her. “I promised you Baba Tunde, yes?”

“You did, dear.”

“Can I sacrifice the oyibo too?”

“It doesn’t work that way, my dear. I only accept twins.”

“Baba Tunde has a twin?” I regarded the two men who were scurrying back and forth on the concrete, inspecting the multiplying lights in the bush. If I was going to die before the

lamplights reached the river, it was only fair to take Ugo's killer with me. "Take him!" I told her. "Take Baba Tunde."

She shook her head, still smiling. "It doesn't work that way either. Sacrificing him means saying the right incantation and immersing him in the river so that, when he drowns, his spirit can become one with the water."

"No!" I whimpered, staring at the guns slung on the men's shoulders. Even if I could rip one away from them before they blew me into the river, shooting them with it wouldn't be as simple as pulling the pine stick trigger of a papaya pipe gun.

"This is your fate," she said, "and it is not such a bad thing." Her voice was reminiscent of mama telling me how going to the new Catholic Church would fill the hole my twin's death had dug in my soul. "You become immortal here with me. Everyone is still here with me. They work for me, protect the river, and sometimes even take physical forms again when on worldly errands for me."

I perked up. "My brother?"

"He is here."

The idea of playing with my twin again appealed to me more than anything, possibly even more than staying alive, at the moment. There was nothing left for me in our hut except a mother whose heart could fail anytime. And when that

happened, I would be alone, all alone. “Can we go see mama once in a while?”

The question must have jarred her, for she stopped smiling and bobbing in the air. I realized that with the moon’s help the night only managed to swathe itself in grey, but I swear her eyes, which were locked deep in the sockets of her skull, seemed to water.

“Oh.” Her gaze fell behind me. “Here they come.”

The words were followed by the oyibo saying, “Quickly. The incantation!” and Baba Tunde chanting in Yoruba and scrabbling toward me.

I tried to scream but couldn’t find my breath; my lungs were busy trying to calm my juddering heart so it didn’t burst and take them with it. This all left my eyes dripping like the eaves of our hut on a rainy night.

Baba Tunde completed the incantation and grabbed me by the arm. I cried as loud as the meager breath I could muster allowed me, pushing my right knee into his loins the way mama had advised. He groaned and, as he fell backward, I tore his gun off his shoulder and, with a little experience from my use of papaya guns, pointed it at him.

He scrambled to his feet, cowering toward the oyibo.

Mr. Edward smiled at my arms which flopped under the weight of the gun, his thick brows arcing up. “Do you even

know how to use that?” he said, his right hand casually falling on the gun dangling between his arm and his stomach. “Put it down, boy.”

I didn’t comply. I just shook my body and head.

“No?” He raised his gun at me. “Put it down, boy!”

The snap in his voice left my body shivering with fright and I gripped the trigger. A loud crack escaped my gun and sent Baba Tunde tumbling into the river with a scream and me reeling backward, and I too tumbled off the structure and down and down and down... until I felt thrusts of pain racking my whole body and saw the rods jutting out from my torso and water splashing up from the river and drenching my body.

For a moment, I heard the mama mmiri hooting, “The River swallows everyone eventually.” And before my sight failed, I saw him—Ugo—hovering over me with a smile that was both sad and reassuring.

My eyes shut.

* * *

When they opened again, I found myself rolling with the river, in the company of Ugo and dozens of other twins. Our minds mingled like waves from a hundred seas crashing into one another, but instead of chaos, we birthed oneness. We swayed around the mama mmiri, the aura emanating from our wavy forms making her glow. We chatted and laughed, our

voices heavy gurgles and a perpetual whirr. And through one eye, an expanse that reflected the moon, we watched the oyibo hurry off the concrete structure, down the scaffolds, and onto Baba Tunde's boat.

The villagers flowed toward him in their boats and soon surrounded him. They threw their lamps at him and he fired his gun at them. It wasn't long before his canoe went ablaze. Screaming, his body afire, he leapt into the river, and our fluid hands tugged at his feet and hair and clothes. We tugged and tugged until he yielded to our suffocating grip. Then we spat his ballooned corpse out—his and that of Baba Tunde, who had fallen without any incantation said.

The following month, we waited, merely as a rule, for the oyibo and Baba Tunde's next sacrifice, and when it didn't come, just as we had expected, we all sprang out of the river and dipped our hands in the water and made a wave that sent the pillars and scaffolds and caissons crashing, some to the riverbed and the others downriver to the place all waters go.

Then we turned to the mama mmiri and said, "Can we go and see our mama now?"

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Walter Dinjos is Nigerian, and he enjoys singing and songwriting as much as he does writing. In addition to Beneath Ceaseless Skies, his work has been accepted at Space & Time, Stupefying Stories, Literary Hatchet, and others. He is currently exploring means (both scientific and magical) of attaining immortality. You can find him online at www.walterdinjos.com.

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COVER ART

“Huashan Temple,” by Xiao Ran



Xiao Ran (a.k.a. Dawn Pu) is a concept artist from Shanghai, China. He received his art education at Shanghai University from 2004-2008, where he majored in oil painting. He is skilled at environment concept design and illustration and has worked as a Concept Designer for various game and movie companies, including Virtuos Game, Jiuyu Game Company, Tencent Company, and Talkweb Mobile Game Studio. To see more of his work, visit dawnpu.deviantart.com.

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