

# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy

Issue #196 • Mar. 31, 2016

[“Sea of Dreams,” by Alter S. Reiss](#)

[“The Stone Garden,” by Cae Hawksmoor](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit  
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## SEA OF DREAMS

by Alter S. Reiss

Three moons and six days, since the last ship had come. Ierois III Kaniour, who had worn the Imperial circlet for fifteen glorious days, went down to the shore of the Sea of Dreams, to await the food that his jailers were due to bring.

The island had no name. It had been named, once. There had been two villages, one by the shore, one up in the hills. Long before Ierois had been acclaimed by the Senate, before he had been deposed by his brother, that name had been erased, the villagers... well, the houses still stood, some of them.

Something, beneath his foot, as he walked out across the burning sands to meet the sailors, as they rowed the ship's boat out to his island. He picked it up, and it sparkled in the sunlight, a diamond the size of a pigeon's egg, clear and perfect.

At first, he had believed in such things. After he had stopped believing, he had hoped that the sailors would believe in them, and that he could buy his freedom with them. And then he let them go. The Sea of Dreams was wide, and nowhere else did it wash so pure. Ierois held the gem, forced the dream

away, forced the gem to revert into a lump of stone, nothing but stone, no shine, no sparkle, and let it drop back to the sand.

The Sea of Dreams washed pure, on the beaches of the nameless island, but it lied; it always lied.

The sailors rowing the boat were not alone. There was a boy standing in the boat with them. Everything about him—his halo of black curls, the richness of his mantle, and the purple of its border—marked him as being of the Imperial blood. And the fact that his nose was gone, leaving behind two gaping holes, like the nostrils on a pig's snout, showed that he had been the candidate of a weaker faction. If the boy had worn the diadem, he never would again.

As the sailors unloaded the ship's boat, Ierois III Kaniour waited nearby, not looking at them. He had no interest in seeing the contempt or pity on their faces. When he heard the oars once again splashing through the waves, he took up one of the amphora of oil that they had left on the beach, took up an inlaid chest, which would hold clothing perhaps, or other objects he might need.

The boy had been left as unceremoniously as the other things the sailors had brought. He stood watching the boat until it rejoined the ship, unmoving, back straight, head held high. Then he gave Ierois the same look he'd given the sailors—

the look of a prince, who expected deference from those beneath him.

Ierois turned and left the beach, not saying a word. There were two of them, and the island was not large; they could not avoid each other. But he was no nanny, no servant. He had been emperor, and he was the elder. In time, the child would learn his place.

Ierois knew both villages, knew every fallen stone and shattered beam in every house. Of the two, he preferred the inland village, where the sea was hidden behind forest and hill. The houses there were more orderly, not so large but better built; these had been people who did not seek out the lies of the Sea of Dreams.

One of those houses he had claimed as his own. He had repaired the roof, he had built up a door and set it on its hinges. He took his amphora there, his box which had a clean tunic in it, and sandals, and a book. Back to the beach for an amphora of flour, another of oil, one of strong wine. He took half of what the sailors had left; that was his usual portion, and ample to his needs. The child might have seen him, might not have, but that was no concern of his.

The oil and flour became a bread for his evening meal, and by the time it was ready, he had almost forgotten the unwelcome intruder that had come to his island. Fresh wheat

flour, with few maggots—it was a thing to look forward to, to savor, the way he intended to savor the book he had been given.

There was a rap on his door. Ierois opened it, and the child was there, head back, eyes sharp. “You shall tell me—”

Ierois shut the door. He had not thought to have a bar for it, so he moved his chair to block it and sat down in the chair. There was another rap, softer, but he ignored it. The first page of the book told him that it was of ancient speeches. Another world to live in, for a time. Again, an even softer tap. He ignored that one as well. It would be well for the child to spend a night in the darkness, alone.

Ierois expected that the next morning, he would find the child sleeping on his doorstep, or that the child would soon seek him out. But he did not. Nor the next morning, nor the morning after that. The child was not dead. The portion of supplies that he had not taken earlier now were gone, and there was a wisp of smoke rising from one of the buildings in the village by the coast.

It took until the next full moon before Ierois went down from his village in the hills, to seek out the child. It was not becoming to the dignity of a man who had worn the diadem, of course, and it was not right for the elder to seek out the younger. But it had been very long since he had spoken to

someone, and it would not do to lose a companion through stubbornness.

He found him at the shores of the Sea of Dreams, a little before midday. The child was walking along the sand, purposefully. Bending down to pick a thing up, discarding it, finding something else, keeping it.

It was a lure, it was a snare, it was lies. Ierois waited at the edge of the forest. The child looked up to see him, but he did not come forward to meet him, merely looked back down and continued what he was doing.

Very well; Ierois came forward, down to the beach.

“You are my great-uncle Ierois,” said the child. “The traitor.”

“And what do they name you now?” said Ierois. “Father of your people? Defender of God?”

The child flushed a deep crimson, more anger than shame. “They may fling what names they like,” he said. “They know that they have crowned an impostor. I am Artois VII Kaniour, anointed by God as emperor of all the world.”

Ierois shook his head. “You are a boy with no nose, on an island with no name. You will live here, you will die here, and you will be forgotten.”

“No,” said Artois, and he held up a piece of sea-green jade, as long and as wide as a finger-joint, pierced on either end.

“When the barbarian fleet closed in on Artois I Kaniour, he leapt from the ship, wearing the armor of Kaniour the Great, that it should not be defiled by their hands. No one knows where that ship was sunk, but it must have been near here. There—see? It is the seal of the rose and the thorn, carved into every link.”

“It is the Sea of Dreams,” said Ierois.

“It is the Armor of God!” said Artois. “I have found five pieces already. When they return, to bring us food, they will see to whom the armor has been returned, and they shall bring me back to my rightful place.”

“What do you see here?” asked Ierois, holding up his stick.

“A wooden stick,” said Artois.

“It was gold when I picked it up,” said Ierois. “And it was surmounted by diamonds and rubies.”

Artois turned away. “Nonsense,” he said.

Ierois looked across the beach. There; he walked over, pulled a helmet loose from the sand. It was in the antique mode, high cheeks, burnished bronze crest. “And this,” he said. “What is this, boy?”

“A helmet,” said Artois.

Ierois turned his will upon it. For a moment, the helmet remained, but then it was a crab’s carapace, brittle, cracked.

“There,” he said. “You see? Lies.”

Artois shook his head. “No,” he said. “That helmet might have been a lie. But this plaque of jade—it is real. The armor was lost somewhere, great-uncle; I have found it here.”

Ierois looked at the length of jade, and it remained jade. He shook his head. “So you choose to believe it more than I disbelieve. But that does not make it real. And when the sailors all turn their will upon your armor, it will become crab shells and driftwood and potsherds and seaweed. It lies; it is a lie, that you are believing.”

“No,” said Artois. “It is a dream.” He turned away from Ierois, back to the sand.

There was nothing Ierois could say; he made his way back to his house and took up the book he had been given. But there was something stale in the words. Over the years, he had been given nine other books, but they had become outworn, nothing in them to distract him. He busied himself with making a porridge for dinner, and eating it, but that was not enough. He left, prowled the hills as the day wore itself out.

He found himself down at the beach, after the sun had set and the stars had come out, in their glory. It had been so long since anyone had talked to him, even two words together, that disagreement troubled him so.

The Sea of Dreams was as placid as a pond that night. There was no ruffle of wave or wind; the sand was so clear he

could make out Artois' footprints by the light of the moon. His footprints, and here and there, spatters, as if of a light rainfall, or tears. And then, there was the prince of the line himself, curled up on the sand, still clutching two handfuls of jade scales. Ierois had spoken only truth, but the line of Kaniour did not give up easily; the child would have to learn from experience.

Ierois stood there for a time, silent, watching. Then he turned and headed back. By the side of a heavy, twisted piece of driftwood, there was something sticking out of the sand. Ierois picked it up. A polished bronze mirror. The Sea of Dreams was cruel, in its lies. Ierois had no interest in seeing the ruin they had made of his face; he forced the mirror to become a broad and decaying leaf, then tossed it to the side. It was a lie, all of it.

Only there—where Ierois had pulled out the mirror, there was a length of jade. He picked it up, held it in his hand, felt the cool weight of the stone, saw the rose and thorn hallmark carefully and perfectly cut.

It was another lie of the Sea of Dreams, crueler than the mirror. He could force it to tell the truth, that it was some splinter of pottery, some pebble that had washed up on the beach, that was pretending to be something that it was not.

But he did not. He walked back to where Artois lay and put the scale beside him. Then Ierois returned to his house up in the hills and slept, the matter resolved.

The next morning, there was a knock on the door.

For some moments, Ierois lay in bed. Had Artois knocked again, or even if that first knock had been a hair more imperious, he would not have answered it. But he didn't, and while it had been loud enough to wake him, it had not been overly loud or incessant.

Regretting what he had done, but not willing to stop doing it, Ierois rose from his bed, and opened the door. Artois was there, carrying a section of armor, the jade scales held in place with the purple threads of his cloak.

"Please," he said. "Will you help me?"

"It is," said Ierois, "a lie."

"It is a dream," said Artois. "And it is what I have. Will you help me to dream it?"

"What's the point?" asked Ierois. "We scrape and claw at the beaches, assemble a cloak of oyster shells and seaweed. Yes, perhaps we dream that it is jade and gold, but it remains garbage."

"When the sailors come, they will see—"

"No!" said Ierois. "How do you think that my scepter of office became a length of wood? No matter how beautiful the

dream, the sailors who bring us the supplies we need to live are not romantic men; they will see things as they are.”

“Then they will see the armor of God,” said Artois. “It is a dream, perhaps. But if it is a shared dream—with the sailors, I mean—they will see the dream for the truth that it is.”

Ierois shook his head. Artois did not mean ‘with the sailors’. He meant for Ierois to share his dream, but Ierois could not.

“I am past dreaming,” said Ierois. “There was a time I tried to call up everything I lost, and the Sea of Dreams gave it to me, piece by piece, and then took it all away again, when my concentration wavered.”

“My concentration will not waver,” said Artois. “Please, though—help me find the scales, help me weave them into a whole. I cannot do this alone.”

So Ierois III Kaniour left his house in the hills and went down to the shore of the Sea of Dreams, to seek jade scales and to bind them into a corslet.

The scales were not easy to find. Although it was easy enough to start a dream, the Sea of Dreams was not easily turned toward a sustained purpose. But Artois was relentless.

Ierois had lost the diadem because he was impetuous, because he did not accurately weigh the risks against the gains, because he allowed his passions to rule him at times when he

should have kept them in check. Artois... From what Ierois saw, from what he had told Ierois, from what he refrained from telling him, it seemed that the boy had lost his crown due to an accident of age; that he was removed because he would have become a formidable emperor, rather than for any fault in his nature.

Days and nights walking along the shore of the Sea of Dreams, seeking and finding, twisting threads of purple and gold. The moon waxed and waned, waxed and waned, until the time came when the boat returned to the island without a name and Artois waded out to meet it, the jade scales of his armor as green and white as the foam of the water.

Ierois watched him walk out, fought to keep seeing a child with the armor of Kaniour the Great hanging loosely from his shoulders, a face lit from within by a glorious sense of purpose. He fought to not see driftwood and sea-wrack and weeds, and failure and exile unending.

The sailors took Artois aboard their boat and rowed him back towards their ship. Ierois waded into the surf himself, gathered up the supplies which they had brought. He stood on the beach and watched the ship's boat return to the ship, and watched the ship sail off, until even the peak of its sail could not be seen.

The Sea of Dreams told great lies and small, beautiful and horrible. If he let himself believe, this could almost have been real. Perhaps it was—perhaps there had been a child, who had dreamed and forced the world to dream with him. Perhaps he would not have turned to sea-wrack and broken toys, had Ierois turned his will upon him.

It was a fine thing to believe, that the Empire was in the hands of a child who had been mutilated, who thought that dreams were different than lies. It was a fine hope, that when the crown was securely in that child's grasp, a ship would come to take Ierois back to the world of men, as a mentor, as a hero, as someone who had aided the emperor when all other hands were against him. It was a fine thing to believe, that not all diamonds were bits of rock and broken glass.

Ierois III Kaniour went up from the village by the shore to the village in the hills, and took with him the supplies that he needed in order to survive his exile.

Copyright © 2016 Alter S. Reiss

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the *BCS* Website

*Alter S. Reiss is a scientific editor and field archaeologist. He*

*lives in Jerusalem with his wife Naomi and their son Uriel, and enjoys good books, bad movies, and old time radio shows. Alter's work has appeared in Strange Horizons, F&SF, and elsewhere, and his first longer work, Sunset Mantle, has recently been published by the tor.com imprint.*

Support *BCS*

*BCS* on 

*BCS* on 

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

## THE STONE GARDEN

by Cae Hawksmoor

### *Stalwart*

*A common building material in the southern borderlands.*

The surface of it was mottled grey and white like breakers in high wind. It was rough against Gwyn's palms and heavier than expected when he hefted it into his hands. At some point in its life it had been consciously shaped—chipped out of the heart of the mountain that had grown it and worried at with tools until it fit a perfect space in the low wall around the garden.

Gwyn didn't know how long it had slumbered there until the wall fell into ruin, or whether his blistered hands were returning it to the same place it had been before. All he could do was let his instinct guide him and hope his ageing body could keep up.

He let the stone the rest of the way down into the wall and began to work it into place. Somewhere among a lifetime of memories that no longer served him, the stooped back of his uncle, as he strained the first lift of stones onto the footings. Aligning everything just so. Gwyn's own skinny arms working

the hearting stones between the facings. The memory was close enough that he could smell the syrupy freshness of the gorse flowers on the moor.

Gwyn was so lost in it that he hefted the next stone clumsily. Something in his shoulder gave way, the stone in his hands thumped back down into the ruin, and his short involuntary cry brought Mercher from the house. There was no sword in Mercher's hand, but his eyes had turned a hard and calculating grey that was as familiar now as it was in full armour. He was still young. And strong. An Exemplar. Perhaps he thought he always would be and could not imagine what life would be beyond it. Gwyn straightened up and brought a hand to the wrenching in his shoulder. He remembered how it had felt to live like that. As though the way things were would last forever.

The moment Mercher realised that there was no threat, all of the calculating violence went out of him.

"I am getting too old for this, love," Gwyn complained as Mercher sat him down on the half-built wall and worked his practised fingers into the snarl of over-tensioned muscle. "Too old."

Gwyn let his eyes wander to where shattered beams turned the sunset into long lances, piercing the carcass of the house. Impossible to tell exactly when the roof's back had been

broken. Long enough to let several seasons' rain into the mess of splinters and fallen shingles. Somehow, many of the slates had endured. Now Mercher was picking them out, one by one, and stacking them beside the yawning space where the door had been. Looking at it now, the idea that this could ever be his home, *their* home, felt like a fool's fancy. A breath short of utter madness.

Gwyn rubbed his blisters together and closed his eyes. Waited for the whipcord pain to ease.

"I found something," Mercher told him. "In the house. You should see it, Gwyn."

It was curiosity that finally brought him to his feet. He took Mercher's hand in his own and said: "Show me."

The belly of the cottage was worse than it looked from the outside, and Gwyn stumbled among broken stone and wood as Mercher led him under the leaning lintel of a cellar door. They scrambled through the space that was left, the smell of must and damp and rot turning into something richer. The stairs were chiselled down into living land itself, and the room at the bottom was softened by sunlight that sought its way inside with the water through a high gap in the wall.

Rising up out of the ankle-deep pool at the bottom were blossoms of dead stone. Grey and fragile, drained of all but the faintest echoes of their former colours like flowers pressed too

long in an old book. But their shapes endured still: tapering stalagmites as delicate as sapling trees, and globular nodes that looked as though they had bubbled up out of a wound.

The barest thread of a long-buried secret brushed against Gwyn's thoughts. "This is a stone garden," he said. "Nothing remembers for as long as stone. Or as deep. And when they are given proper care they can be coaxed to offer up just the thinnest sliver of what they've seen and heard. Or of what *we* have seen and heard. To remember the act of remembering."

Mercher inclined his head and rested his hand at his waist. Just above where the pommel of his sword should be. "What should we do with it?"

Gwyn crouched down and ran his fingers through the dozen bead-like pebbles that had clustered in a hollow where the stream pooled deep and brackish. The stones were cracked through, the colour and texture of water just begun to freeze. In the gloaming they almost glowed with their own light, colours shifting underneath the surface like ribbons in the winter sky.

*Stone seeds.*

He fumbled them into his palm, dropped them carefully into the pouch on his belt, and stood.

"Help me clear some of this mess out of the way," he said, a slow conviction settling into every part of his body. "We have some time before it's dark."

\* \* \*

*Wisp o' the Marsh*

*Other names: desire-destroys-me; the want unmet; wispstone.*

So many fragments. So deep that he can dive down into them and forget how to breathe the present.

That first fumble in the hay barn and the scent of ripened grass is thick enough to drown in—mixing into the peculiar excitement of adolescence that's almost an anxiety.

*Don't let me mess this up. Goddess, please, don't let him stop.*

The smoke and venom of his first love. The one that he does not choose himself. The one that chooses him, and that he cannot escape. The pain is like a borehole in raw flesh, threatening to pull him in.

*I would have shared every year and caught breath of my life with you. Now all of it is poison.*

Afterwards he thinks he cannot love anything again. That his world has wintered into longing, where the only beauty is in the austere slow death that lives ice and wasteland. Sitting in the darkness of his prison cell, the pain threatens to consume him from inside. Liquefy his whole being like a pupa trapped inside a chrysalis.

I will not let you die in here, Mercher tells him, one firm hand on his shoulder. Start walking.

The heat of Mercher's body wending tight into his own. Breathing the same air that he himself is breathing as they suffocate one another to stay warm. Their footsteps in the unbroken snow marking the path of their flight behind. The want does not come then. It does not come until much later.

And then? The hesitant tremor in Mercher's fingertips like an ice dam afraid that it might burst. And the snow-melt patience of waiting, watching him unwound. So many years when want was a clenched fist. Could that ever be undone?

Only in the deepest, silent moments. The tipping points that balance upon the apex of the heart.

*I'm tired now, and old. I have to leave. Come with me.*

\* \* \*

Better to sleep out under canvas than in the ruin of the house. The moon above the moor and the deep thrum of the owl that carried on forever in the hush.

They rose with the light and worked long into the sunrise clearing a space beneath the broken roof, like the hollow an animal makes in the bracken by circling itself to sleep. Unloading the wood-burner from the wagon and coaxing it into place against the chimney breast was harder, and the tear in Gwyn's shoulder tugged like wool caught in a wall.

Then shadows reached out for the evening, and Mercher's destrier pawed at the low-grazed grass, wounding the ground with its impatience. Mercher packed his things in silence. Still so much of life laid out ahead of him and so little left behind, until every decision must feel like the rending of the earth. Gwyn smiled to himself and laid the wood into the open stove.

"Are you going to be all right?" Mercher asked.

"I have lived through greater wars than rebuilding dry stone wall and slating roofs, love."

Mercher shook his head and knelt down on the bare stone next to him. "It is stupid of me to worry."

"No. But it doesn't help to think that something will come true just because you fear it will."

Gwyn twisted dry grass over between his hands and worked it into a space amongst the kindling. So long since he had even had to light fires for himself.

*How did I let it get this bad?*

"Ride," he told Mercher, picking through the rubble to the doorway so that he could watch him leave. "Our new queen will need your council, and your blade. I promise you, when you come back, it will not be to sleep on rubble."

"Yes, my lord."

*Once, that name, perhaps. Not any more. And not ever again.*

On the threshold, Mercher took his hand and dropped a single stone seed into his open palm. Blood red and laced with fire. “I found it when we were clearing the outlet for the stream,” he said. “Plant it for me.”

Gwyn did not have the heart to tell him what the seed was, or how much pain it contained. He just watched Mercher’s back, rod-straight in the saddle, and waited for the destrier to pick its way down the wending track into the village.

The wind poured down off of the moors behind them both, flowing downhill from where winter still clung to the earth. Gwyn thumbed the stone seed against his palm until it bit against the rawness of his blisters. Until he could imagine all of his old wounds opening to engulf it, and he would have no choice but to dig it out.

\* \* \*

### *Bloodglass*

*Other names: heartspear; cut-me-quick; the wound unhealed.*

An old pain. Or many, layered one on top of the other over all the long years of living. The sharp breathlessness of old muscle tearing, or the deep ache of young joints worked near to breaking. So many weeks, in the wet dark of the cell where his brother had left him to disappear. His first love’s blood still drying on his hands.

Pushing his meals away, and letting the dull certainty of death creep outwards from his empty stomach into every frostbitten toe and finger.

*It doesn't end. It never ends.*

*Goddess, let me sleep a while.*

And then the siege goes on and on beyond the wake carved out by that flight from Caer Isel. Grim lines on Mercher's brow as he sends the dead down onto the butcher's block. Choosing between that and losing everything they have fought for. The other things that matter less: dignity, humanity, pride. For six months it feels like the sun never rises. Just cold wet moonlight and the sound of swords beyond the walls.

*How long can we go on?*

No one knows the answer, and none of them are certain what they will be capable of before the end.

And when it comes? No ringing bells or flying flags. Just a wound that will not stop bleeding on his brother's thigh and a slow blight that seeps up from the southern lands that Gwyn can never capture. Crops that fail year upon miserable year, until all of it is ash.

Those same hunger pangs ache back into the five-month winter of his childhood, he and his brother wasting so many futile hours digging graves into the frozen earth. By the time his uncle stops breathing, they have given up on trying. Gwyn

lays his uncle's body on the hoarfrost and they cover it with the stones that have been set aside to finish up the wall. His hands and his brother's hands, hard and clumsy with the cold. When it is done, the cairn is ugly and imperfect. It seems a greater injury than death, to the man who taught them how to scoop the hearting stones into walls that will stand long after all of them are dead.

\* \* \*

Gwyn started from the memory with a jolt that tugged every tendon taut. The feeling of blood on his hands and his arms. It was a long time since he had woken alone, robbed of the luxury of Mercher's deep and steady breath to lull him back to sanity. The sky was still dark through the fractured beams. Stars sharp. The bloodstone bit into the blisters on his palm, tugging his thoughts back to memories of digging in the frost. Gwyn shivered and rose with the finches in the knot of hawthorn outside the empty door.

By the time the sun crested the lip of the horizon, a grey and lifeless rain was falling—patterning the dirty glass that still clung in the windows. A thousand silver threads, snaking to the sill. It was a day to take comfort in the smallness of life itself. When everything narrowed to the space that he was standing in.

Gwyn lit the wood in the stove and worked with what they had brought up from the village. Honey and milk, scalded over the fire. Baker's yeast, and a coarse flour ground on millstones to the north where wheat would still grow. It warmed his fingers as he brought the dough together and worked it to compliance. *The most fundamental stuff of life.*

But his eyes kept finding the fat drops of rain dripping off of the few tiles left on the ruined roof. The land outside was smothered in the kind of low cloud that felt like it could lift to reveal a world changed beyond all recognition. Or the kind that harboured things that were not human but sought to be.

And Mercher was out there somewhere. Riding north towards the capital in the fog and the rain. Had he lost his way out there? Fated to wander forever among the hollow hills?

*And all that I can do about it is bake bread.*

The powerlessness came breathless unexpected. He tried to focus on the softness of the dough, on the rhythm of it, but it was futile. As it rose on the shelf above the stove, Gwyn sat on the rotten sill of the window and simply watched the rain fall.

*If I let myself go on like this, I will lose my mind.*

He put the bread into the oven and picked his way down the slick stairs into the stone garden. The stream had gorged itself on rainwater and overflowed the narrow channel that they had cleared for it. Viscous silver water that almost reached

his ankles. He felt with blind fingers beneath the surface for the outlet and the debris stopping the stream from seeking down into the earth. Cleared away the grey and fragile shards of the things that had grown here before. He walked them up the stairs by the bucket-load. Took them out into the rain, and gave them to the moor. Inch by inch, he began to uncover the snaking cracks where he had dropped his seed stones into the desolation of the garden.

The smell of burning brought him back into himself and sent him stumbling for the oven. He burned his hands on the slab of black-hot bread and dropped it on the wet slate floor with frustration and disgust. He sank down to his haunches and pressed his burned hands onto the wet stone. Tomorrow, he would walk down into the village to get more flour, and he would try again.

\* \* \*

### *Cavespire*

*Other names: the tipping-point; chrysalis; gatekeeper; the fulcrum.*

That terrible feeling of waiting. Crouching in the gorse flower on the moor.

He is sixteen and hunched low with a dozen other men and women not much older. None of them know what they are doing. No one but his brother. And he is so strong. So certain.

Gwyn would follow him down into the mouth of the underworld if he asked. Next to that, finding a way to murder a king seems easy.

Something must be done, Gwyn.

His first love at his side for all those grey and desperate hours, shifting amongst the thorns and complaining. Trying to persuade him to leave, to be anywhere but here, while Gwyn watches his brother's silhouette against the low sky. Waiting for the signal. He does not know when he stopped listening to his lover, only that the resistance no longer means anything against the banked fires of his rage.

The worst comes when his brother waves from the hilltop with the yellow lining of his cloak, and Gwyn slides down on his heels to lie upon the road. His world narrows to the wet gravel underneath his cheek. The hooves and feet and wagons of the approaching guards. Praying under his breath that they don't notice the tremor in the standing water from the shaking in his hand, or put a crossbow bolt through him before creeping forwards to investigate the dead man wearing their king's colours.

The thought of his uncle is bound around that memory. Ghost whispering for vengeance, weighed down by a few hundred ugly and ill-fitting stones. And from there? One betrayal bleeds into another and he is fighting for his life

against a dozen knights like silver ghosts in alleys of blue morning. When it is done, the cobblestones are black with blood. Bodies laid out in the spaces where his friends had been. His brother holding out the crossbow, stock first, eyes as hard as polished stones.

His brother says: you know who told them where to find us, Gwyn. He's been trying to get you to leave us for years. You've never listened. Now half of our people are dead and it's on you to make it right.

His finger wavers on the trigger, staring into the face of a first love who he had worshipped with every thread and vein in his body.

You won't do it, Gwyn. I know you.

He closes his eyes. His heart. Closes his finger on the trigger.

*And now the world is hollowed out inside. It can never be made whole.*

He makes easy prey for the king's men after that, and Caer Isel seems fitting punishment. Grey and silent-empty with its garrison of crows. He barely even notices when one king falls and another takes his place. When the-king-his-brother leaves him in the dark. Waiting for the crows to pick his eyes out of his body and render him to nothing.

A hand grasps his and pulls him to his feet. Grey steel eyes, and a feeling like coming to the surface after so long drifting in water the same colour as a sword. Mercher as solid and as real as though he's shaped out of the stone. Everything resting on the answer to one last and desperate aching towards life.

*Will you help me get out of here?*

The battlements of Dinas Pair at the height of the siege, with the whole city gathered below him to hear. The rain glancing off of Mercher's pauldrons and his gauntlet on Gwyn's shoulder. Thousands of expectant eyes waiting for him to tell them that they aren't all going to die. To find some hope in all this hopelessness.

And, at last, he and his brother standing in the high hall. Albany between them with her red hair and her silver tongue. She reaches out with both her hands for them. Unsheathing her knife, to seal the only sort of peace they can have the only way that they can seal it: with their own hands, in their own blood.

\* \* \*

Gwyn had not expected the village to be easy. He had had no misconceptions about walking out of his castle and slotting neatly back into a life abandoned more than half his years ago.

He knew that everyone he met would be suspicious, and some to be angry, and they were, but worse than that were the ones that were afraid. The men and women who bowed their

heads and hurried their children away, the way done in stories, when the lands and their people were ruled by fickle monsters that sat on poison thrones. The way they had done in his youth, when King Estraven's justicars and magistrates passed through. He could not think of anything to say that did not make it worse. That did not push him further away from the lives that these people had gone on living while he planned ambushes, escapes, and speeches.

He paid for what he needed, with coin that wouldn't last as long as it needed to. Flour and honey. Seeds for muskmint and mint balm, knitbone and bear's foot. A dark mood blowing through him until he noticed the moss-green beads in a tiny glass vial amongst paper packets bearing the names of herbs and flowers.

She saw him looking. The woman on the stall, who was older than a mountain and as weathered as the moor. Something in the way he stared must have made her smile and talk, and when she did, the darkness in his blood began to thin and fray.

"You have taken Tabitha's old house up on the moor," she said, twisting the vial of green stone seeds between a knotted finger and a thumb. "Then take this. When the songsmith calls to you, it's wise to answer him."

She told him that she kept a stone garden of her own somewhere. And yes, with time, perhaps she'd show him. In return he promised her whatever seeds his would yield, if he could get it to bear fruit. Goddess bless her, but she did not tell him how hard that could be. He kept his pace steady as he walked back up the track towards the cottage.

That afternoon he knelt in the turned earth between the stacked-up slates and the crumbling wall and nurtured the tiny seeds, echoes of knitbone and muskmint, into wide rows cut in the soil. In the evening he took the songsmith from his vial and rolled the stone seeds over on themselves. The rich umber of the candlelight caught on the thinnest threads of gold spidering across its surface. Like looking down on the land from high above, seeing the places where all the living things had trodden.

\* \* \*

### *Mapstone*

*Other names: songsmith; the pathfinder; map-of-the-mountains.*

The snow unbroken north of *Caer Isel*, and *Gwyn* wades through it like deep water. The wound on *Mercher's* leg leaks red into the white, and the sound of hunting dogs catches in the wind blowing back towards the mountains. At any moment, red guards could come pouring into this hollow, and his

brother's men could drag him back to that grey tower. Gwyn's mind races but will not turn to worry. So long with nothing but the dripping damp for company. The singing of a hundred thousand crows. So long since he was free beneath the winter sky.

They cut through the snows towards the town where he was born. The one he hopes will give him sanctuary.

*If any of my people have survived this, they will be there.*

Mercher wavers that evening, standing exhausted in his armour and staring back towards everything he has betrayed. Gwyn can sense his hesitation—like the headache of frozen air that clings to water in the bottoms of the valleys—but it never reaches him.

*All we have to do is walk.*

The great walls of *Dinas Pair yr Arfaeth*, at the height of the siege. He walks the battlements for hours, putting one foot in front of the other to stop his mind from racing. Letting quiet certainty gather in the minutes and days before the cry goes out—carried like blackbird song in the silence of a sunset—and the red army floods out of the hills.

Guard up! *Mercher shouts*. Get your visors down! Archers, ready your bows.

The dawn that comes after the last battle of the siege is cleaner than any he can remember. A quiet peace settling over everything like winter.

*It didn't last, then or ever. But what does?*

Albany, flickering at the edges of the light like a tongue of flame. That anxiousness for what comes next working at the back of his brain. But the way back into the south, into the heartlands that had birthed him, has begun to sing him home again.

She asks, how am I going to do any of this without you?

And he embraces her the same way he would his own kin. As his daughter from a life other than this one.

*You will be fine, my queen. There is no one better for this than you.*

And, she says, how long will it take before you get sick of tending to your garden and decide to start another war?

*A long long time.* He hopes. The world needs more gardens. Fewer wars.

\* \* \*

He did not notice the days and the weeks passing by in the cottage as he once had. And with every tiny increment, the pressure eased a little more. His life slowed to the pace of his own hands and feet. The timbers of the roof. The grain of wood

against his skin. The tiny seeds of life and stone, inching their way into becoming.

Gwyn no longer burned bread in the oven. Instead, he learned to nurse enough heat out of the stove to sustain him through the shortening nights. Evenings stretching themselves out languorously in front of the approaching summer, turning everything to red and gold. The blue light of the distance that hung tremulous between the sunlight and the stars.

On one of those long evenings, Mercher guided his destrier onto the narrow path that led to where green fields met the open brown. The cottage shone white in the last light like it was shaped out of fresh metal. A skeleton of new-cut wood in its roof, with slates laid out almost half-way and much of the rest patched up with skins and hide. Hay and water all made ready in the stable, and seedlings pushing themselves up through the tilled earth. The arrogant green of early summer.

Gwyn met him on the threshold, brought him inside, and helped him with his armour. “There’s something that you have to see. Before we lose the light. I know you’re tired, love, but come.”

The stone garden was waiting for them both, and Gwyn’s heart rang whole.

Light and life and water spilled in over the rocks, through the high vent in the wall. Stalwart, carpeted with moss and tiny

alpine flowers. Jewel-coloured spiders spun their webs between the carved ivory of cavespire, and moths clustered about the shifting lights of the wisp o' the marsh. Bloodstone knapped to a sharp edge. Waves and waves of it, like the gills of a fish. Nightwatchmen painting the air with their little living embers.

Then Mercher's arms were tight around him. And the whole world tumbled down into a patient kind of bliss.

\* \* \*

### *Stalwart*

*A common building material in the southern borderlands.*

It had barely yet been spring when Gwyn came to this place. Standing upon the footings of the first hills. It was difficult to spot the ruin at first, nestled at the point where his world and the wilderness melted into one another.

A hundred years ago this house had been borrowed from the stalwart and slate, the sand and the clay of this land. Untended, it now ached back towards its birthright. A cottage in the process of remembering what it was like to be a mountain.

The wagon creaked as Mercher swung himself down to stand beside him, looking up the hill towards the broken walls. He looked back over his shoulder, the same way that he had

once lingered too long into the evening and stared back towards everything that he had already sacrificed.

*He did not leave then, and he will not leave now.*

Mercher put his hand onto Gwyn's shoulder, and the heat radiated down deep into old muscle.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Gwyn sat down on the edge of a waystone weathered away until it was almost featureless. His thumb stroked the deep grain of the stone. The whorls of moss and lichen that had grown there. Gold and green and grey. Something in it tugged at him. Some wordless threshold between the high walls of Dinas Pair yr Arfaeth behind him then and the broken ones above him now, crumbling on the brink of the moor.

He stood, and reached out for the horse's reins.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I am.”

Copyright © 2016 Cae. Hawksmoor

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the *BCS* Website

*Cae Hawksmoor lives between genders and between worlds but also in North Wales surrounded by the mountains. They are a graduate of the Clarion West class of 2016 and are busy*

*preparing for the collapse of industrial civilisation by wasting time on Facebook. You can find them there, as well through their website at [www.cahawksmoor.com](http://www.cahawksmoor.com).*

Support *BCS*

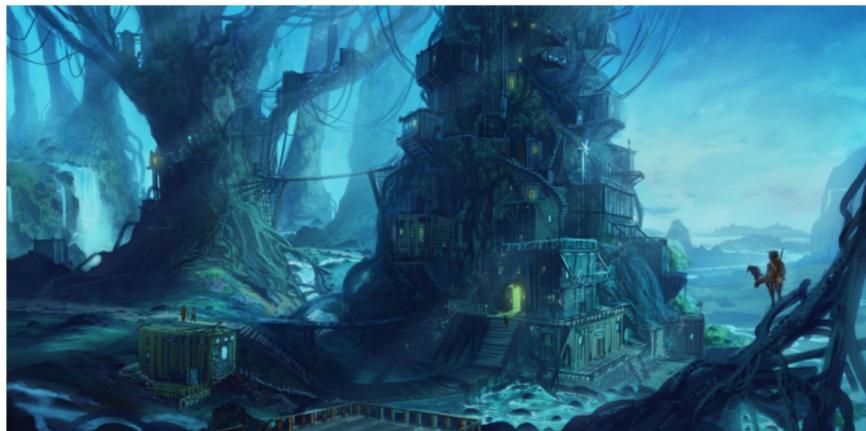
*BCS* on **facebook**

*BCS* on **twitter**

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

## COVER ART

“Forest,” by Geoffrey Icard



*Geoffrey Icard is a French graphic artist with expertise in traditional 2D design and game creation. He has worked as a 2D and 3D artist and concept artist on numerous game development projects and now works as a freelance artist. He prefers environments but always tries to learn and push his characters because he believes environment without life is boring. He is also a gamer and takes inspiration from video games. See more about him and his artwork at [geoffreyicard.blogspot.fr](http://geoffreyicard.blogspot.fr) and his gallery on [deviantArt.com](http://deviantArt.com).*

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

Compilation Copyright © 2016 Firkin Press



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.