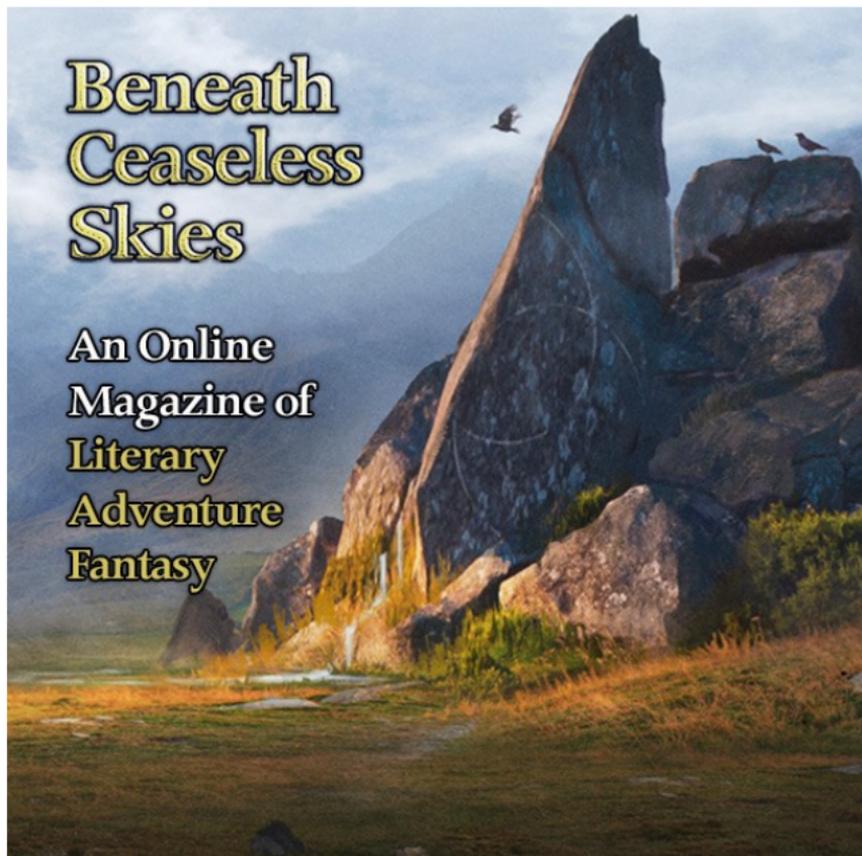


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[“Out of the Woods,” by Marissa Lingen](#)

[“Men of the Ashen Morrow,” by Margaret Killjoy](#)

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OUT OF THE WOODS

by Marissa Lingen

We had waited through five years of misery for Good King Harald to come back from the wars abroad and save us from the depredations of his brother Eirik. We had hidden in the forests and staged raids on the tax collectors. We had poached the harts and the coneys and traded volleys of arrows with Eirik's men for five years, knowing that the return of King Harald would set the land aright again. Some of us lived in the woods full-time. Others went back and forth to our families in the towns and on the manors in secret. We covered our tracks with spruce brushes and finger-snap spells, then the bigger spells that no one was supposed to know. We lived lean. So did the lawful, in those days.

In the long hot days that ended the sixth summer, our Good King Harald came back—on his pyre, his armsmen around him, their hair shorn close in grief.

In the woods, we too cut our hair. There now was no one left to come for us. No pardon would be forthcoming. We had broken the laws of the land, certain Good King Harald would see our reasons and pardon us when he returned; certain we

could hold out for our king before the laws would break us. And we had lost that great wager.

When our scout Vigdis returned from the coast with the news of the pyre's impending approach, six left our band that night, creeping back from the woods to their family's farms, or what was left of them. They hoped they would not be recognized as the arms of the forest.

Only two of them made it.

The other four were hanged on the beach as Eirik's men set King Harald's pyre ship alight.

I went to watch. Not because I wanted to. Because one of us had to see it happen. What they suffered. What the rest of us would suffer, if we tried to leave the forest.

I stood and watched until they stopped kicking, Lasse and Kalle, Undis and Mats, four of my comrades for years. I kept my hood close around my face, in case my tears should betray me, but the wind and smoke from the pyre stung everyone's eyes, and Eirik gave a speech about his brother's goodness and bravery that would have excused another tear or two.

Now that he ruled uncontested, Eirik could afford to be generous in his praise for the king; though not, I supposed, generous with us.

I had worn skirts, as I often did to go to town, to go unobserved, and those who knew me spoke my name in

greeting: “Sad day, Lovis,” they said, those two or three in the know and those who had no idea. I stood on the shore and watched the king’s pyre ship float out until the salt air drowned the smell of burning and I could pretend that the death in my nostrils was the ordinary life and death of the sea, the circle it held naturally, fish and sea birds and kraken and serpents eating each other and going on to be reborn.

I had brought no money to buy fish from the fishermen along the shore before I returned, to liven our forest diet—we had little to spare—and it was a long walk home. None who greeted me had any spare food to press into my hand either—they kept it close, at home. No funeral feast for the king except behind the tall walls, in Eirik’s keep.

The finger-snap spells I used to blur my way into the woods were second nature by now. The tiniest click. Five years ago, when I was the pampered daughter of a knacky noble, finding the way for the first time, it took a giant sweep of my arms and a great clap to accomplish such a magic. Now, though most of my comrades could perform no such feat, it was nothing to me, force of habit wearing away at the channels of magic until my passage was like slipping between the familiar branches. I had become the thing the laws warned against becoming: the habitual witch. Home in lawlessness, just as I was home in the trees.

When I got back to the cave in the woods, there was the homelike smell of roasted duck and wood fire, but my comrades were grimly silent. Vigdis and Ronia had tangled their limbs around each other for comfort, as they always did with each other, never with me. Per was scouring the pot. Borka held out a trencher of duck and smashed turnips that he had saved for me, without a word.

“All dead,” I said.

“As we thought,” said Vigdis. “Eirik’s men can’t let them go back when they could set an example.”

“*You* could go back,” said Ronia indistinctly from around a mouthful of Vigdis’s hair, its indistinct brown color turned to molten bronze by the firelight. “No one has seen you. You’ve never been caught among us.”

“Shut up,” said Vigdis, without any force to it.

“We could sail off to the south,” said Borka. “To the wars where King Harald died. We could fight in the wars.”

I shook my head. “Do you speak their languages, those southern languages?” I knew he didn’t. None of us did. “Who would take you, in the south? Or among the townfolk of the east? A foreigner with a strange tongue and a poacher’s skills? And that’s if we could get passage for all of us. We would need a full ship, to take all of us.”

“Go if you can find passage, Borka,” said Vigdis. “We’ll all wish you well. But it’s not our answer.”

“There is no answer,” Ronia muttered.

Per took the pot down to the stream to shake the sand out and rinse it, cutting off the despair in Ronia’s voice as sharply as if he had told her to shut her mouth. The crackling of the fire and the murmurs of the others, deeper in the cave, settling down to sleep, were our only noise until he returned.

“We’ll see how it looks in the morning,” he said.

It would look the same in the morning. Vigdis and I would still be the safe ones, the ones who were not known for outlaws, the ones from good families. The ones who could go back. The rest—they would still be cornered. But we murmured noises that could have been assent, and we banked the fire and settled into furs and cloaks and blankets.

We were used to the noises of the dark forest now, the small nocturnal animals foraging, the birds calling to each other or hunting in the night depending on their ways. We had our own night noises, our sentries on patrol to make sure Eirik’s men didn’t find our cave.

How it looked in the morning was how it always looked. We had a little leftover duck, some porridge from the barley Borka’s mother had left us. And then Turre, who was on scout, brought word of Eirik’s men entering the far west reaches of

the forest, and we all fell into our usual ways. We gathered our arrows and quickly worked out who would fall upon them from the north side of the path and who from the south. In name we took orders from Per, but we had grown so accustomed to each other that we scarcely needed a nod from him.

They shot at us. We shot at them. There was shouting from the trees, shouting from the path. There were arrows lodged in trees, arrows whistling through bushes.

None of us took a wound, none of them. We scared one into dropping a bag of oats from the tribute they were bringing back to Eirik's keep. It was a small bag, must have been from one of the small holdings, possibly even one of our relations—I mean, of course, the relation of someone poorer than I.

And Eirik's men made it out of the forest, and we made it back to our cave, and King Harald was still dead, still not coming back to save us. The nuthatch still trilled its descending wippling notes in the trees, unconcerned by the arrows.

Nothing changed.

"Lovis," Borka whispered to me as we drew water from the brook.

"I know."

"Something must be done."

"I *know*," I grated back at him. But I waited until one of the young ones who slept deeper in the cave, one of the skinny

spotty ones whose names I could never keep straight, had finished skinning the coneys, before I spoke out loud. “Per.” He did not raise his head. “*Per.*”

“I hear you, Lovis.”

“It won’t do, Per.”

Still, his shaggy head, more grey than blond now that I saw it in the sunlight filtered through the trees, did not lift up. He was scraping away at an arrow shaft, more slowly than he needed to given all the arrows we had made over the years. Scrtch. Scrtch.

“Per.”

“I said I hear you.”

“Well then.” I could feel my voice too loud in my skull, too loud echoing into the back of the cave, and everyone was looking at me. We always had two or three side conversations going, and a few more people off in their own thoughts. Not this time. “What are we holding out for? The king is not coming. He’s dead.”

“Go home, then, Lovis. You can. You and Vigdis, you can go. Maybe a few of the boys. The rest of us—you saw yourself what happened.”

I stepped enough closer to Per that he finally looked up from his arrow shaft. “Do you really think I would—”

“Lovis.” His voice softened. I could see what was coming, ahead of the rest of them, and I stumbled back against it. “You at least should go home safely. You could turn us in. Tell them where we are—where we were—not this place, of course. One of the smaller ones, one where they’ll see the signs we’ve been there. Our ashes, our coney bones, our—” He brandished the arrow shaft, the knife in his hand. “Our wood shavings.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because if you say you saw us, they’ll know you’re not one of us,” said Ronia, disentangling herself from Vigdis. “We will live as we can—try to survive—but you will have bought your safety.”

“Bought it with you!”

“Bought it with one of our outposts,” said Per.

I turned my head away.

Vigdis spoke, to my relief. “They won’t believe it. If there’s no one there, they’ll think we were conspiring with you. It’ll turn on you.”

She crept to me and took my hand. I clutched it gratefully, probably too hard.

“Give them me,” she went on. “They won’t hang me—”

“They might!” cried Ronia.

“They won’t. My mother won’t let them.”

“But they might torture you,” I said.

“They won’t.” She met my eyes with a steadfast look, a look I knew from being in the tops of the trees with Vigdis waiting on parties of Eirik’s men with supplies. From helping her divide too little food among too many, scrupulous and careful, always able to find something more to add to the pot. Vigdis was no more ready to listen to Per than I was. Vigdis and I, I knew from the set of her jaw, would make a plan together.

But for the moment, we had to feign agreement with his.

Ronia wanted to have their last night together. Ronia wanted it to be beautiful and tragic and perfect. Having Vigdis huddling off at the edge of the trees with me was no part of Ronia’s vision, and neither of us wanted to hurt her. We kept our voices low and swift.

“You know as well as I that Per’s plan has a slim chance if any, and even if it worked, it’s no way to end the life we’ve had,” I said.

“A bandit’s life,” she said, and for once her head was bent close to mine instead of to Ronia’s. I could hardly breathe for it. Her breath smelled of coriander and lemons, though we had neither of any such thing, hadn’t for years, not since the ships stopped coming four years ago.

“A bandit’s life won’t last,” I said. “But a rebel’s life...”

Vigdis drew back and looked at me, and I wanted to weep for losing her closeness. “A rebel’s life won’t last either.”

“Not unless that rebel wins.”

She relaxed back close to me. “Ah. Ah, Lovis, what are you doing?”

I told her, very close in her ear. How we could be a rallying cry. How the town supporters of the brave bandits might take heart and rise. She relaxed against me as I spoke, and then I let her go to Ronia, to that more boneless and thorough relaxation that was not mine. I could be generous with the night when I would have the day that followed.

The morning was shatteringly lovely, the sky such a clear blue that it hurt to look at it. We had nothing out of the ordinary to eat, no farewell feast. We would have had nothing to eat at all, but Borka’s mother had kept giving us barley in secret, so there was porridge, cooked in water, and a few of the tiny golden berries that grew in the bogs. Vigdis and I clasped hands with each of our comrades silently, except for Per, who gave each of us a hearty bear hug, and Ronia, who clung to Vigdis and wept.

We looked around us as though it would be the last time we would see our caves, our trees, our fireside. And then we walked out of the woods together, the two of us, and the nuthatch sang, and we said nothing.

When the trees began to thin and we found a path that the villagers might use, we stopped and made sure, by silent

assent, that we were in proper order. Each checked the other's hair for knots and twigs, to see that the braids were pulled smooth and tight. I wanted to say something to Vigdis. I wanted to say everything. But the way that we were not speaking was what we had.

Eirik's men let me into the keep with my prisoner immediately. I was a respectable young woman of a good family. I had made sure of it. But then, so was she. They checked us both for weapons. Vigdis had nothing they could find. I handed over a small knife with a nod, expecting this. It was an ordinary little knife.

Eirik was in the great hall, on the dais that belonged rightly to the king. I spoke in a low voice, as if shy: "I bring to you, my lord, this neighbor of mine, who goes at night to cavort with the rebels of the woods."

As I hoped, the usurper did not hear what I said, but his hangers-on passed the words forward to his ears. He motioned me up to the dais so that he could hear me better. "Lovis, is it? Come forward, Lovis, don't be afraid of your king."

I pushed Vidgis ahead of me, and we joined him on the dais. Close. So close.

So close that the finger-snap spells would do the work that would have taken so much more from someone with less practice. And I gutted him like a coney, with my outlaw spell.

Vigdis and I put the usurper's dying body to our backs and faced his court together, shoulder to shoulder.

"Take them down," cried the usurper's chancellor, "quickly, for who knows what else they might essay, if they will kill the king."

"Stop to consider," I called in my clearest voice. "Who among you trusted Eirik? Who trusts each other? Good King Harald is dead. We were kingless already. I but confirmed what nature had given us."

"We had a king, and now we have nothing," said one of Eirik's armstrongs, but he paused, he did not nock an arrow to shoot me.

"You had nothing," I said. "Now you know it. Give my friend and me safe passage out. We are of good families, you knew that already. If you slay us, certainly you may say it was because we slew Eirik, but I doubt our mothers and brothers will listen to that."

Vigdis tossed her head and waited, letting them consider the clan from which she had sprung—the clan whose protective influence she had convinced Per would shelter her from Eirik's wrath. The beating of my heart felt infinite, and I was half-sure that I would have to use my practiced spells to take as many of them down as I could before they killed us.

But after a moment one of them stopped looking at us and looked... across the room at his fellows instead. And then another, and another.

“It’s working,” Vigdis whispered.

“Shh,” I replied.

“The spell she used,” said one of Eirik’s men. “Spells are not used for—”

“Never mind that,” said another. “Lovis’s own clan can deal with her misuses of sorcery. It’s none of our affair. The question is who will rule in Eirik’s stead? He and Harald left no sons, nor brothers.”

“There is a cousin in the north,” said another voice at the back of the room.

“Slowly,” said Vigdis to me from the corner of her mouth. “Quietly.”

“Yes,” I breathed.

We did not make it out of the king’s hall unmolested. That was too much to ask. But the man who seized my shoulder recoiled at my suddenly bared teeth. “I will do you no harm, Lovis,” he gabbled hastily.

“And you will get me my knife back,” I said.

He did. “But I wanted to say. You—this thing you have done here. It won’t be forgotten, but—that’s not good or ill. It’s both, it’s neither.”

“Do you think we don’t know that?” said Vigdis. “We have not fought Eirik all these years to ignore how the people see us. We know that the good name of the folk of the woods rides up and down like the tide.”

His breath huffed out like a bellows. “Then you—you actually are the folk of the woods, it was not merely a ruse your clans cooked up to destroy Eirik?”

We looked at each other, Vigdis and I. That was one idea we had not considered, that we could pin this on our families and keep our friends safe. Our brothers would hate us for it. If they had meant to do anything but keep their heads down, they would have joined us in the woods. Neither of us had sisters.

But in that moment of unspoken understanding—so sweet, to have grown to the point with Vigdis where we could understand each other at a look—we had shown our true nature and thrown that all to the winds.

“You may decide what you like,” said Vigdis airily. “Are we of the folk of the woods? Was this a ruse of our clans? You don’t know. We could tell you something, and you still would not know. You will have to determine it for yourselves. You can send a runner to confer with our mothers and see what they say. I will be interested in the answer.”

“Will that runner find you there?” asked the man breathlessly, as if the one he had let out had been his last and he was only waiting to die.

I shrugged. “Who knows?”

And indeed I did not. For though the nuthatch sang in our ears, though we sang with it, and laughed, and chattered as though we were going to a festival, on our way back into the woods we had kept so long as our second home, I did not know in truth what the future would bring. I had not known we would survive that day, and anything further I could not plan for.

Per had sent one of the youngest lads as a spy to the court. That I had not planned for either—Snip, I think it was, some little name like that, barely a name at all. And he was breathless at Per’s feet when we arrived, and they all stared at us, but not with the joy I expected them to show at seeing Vigdis alive, no; not even Ronia.

“You fools,” spat Per. “You little fools.”

I met his gaze without flinching. “You were the fool, Per.”

“You think this wins our freedom? It will be nothing but strife and open warfare, and where will we be then?”

Vigdis was standing beside me, her hand on my shoulder. Where it had ever belonged. “Where we were before. Where we

have always been,” she said. “Standing against the tyrants wherever they are.”

“But where is that now?” asked Borka. “Which of the lords who will battle for the crown are worthy of our enmity? Which our loyalty?”

“Why can’t we say a pox on all of them and go our own way and let them go theirs?” I asked.

“You have created open war in our land!” Per shouted. “We will be torn apart by factions!”

“We can create a faction,” said Vigdis softly.

They all looked at her. I looked at her.

“You should have seen Lovis there. They never expected magic to be used that way.”

“No,” said Ronia coldly, “nor should they have.”

“To save my life? To save all of us? She looked strong. She was not hiding. Nor should any of us hide. I say, if there will be factions in the land, let us be one of them. We have known what was best for the people for years. And the people have supported us. I say, it is time to say what we do and do what we say. And Lovis has shown us how.”

I stared back at Vigdis, who was grinning in triumph. She slipped her hand into mine. I felt her wild grin spreading to my own face. I reached my hand out to the others, to all the others, any of them. To whoever would take it.

And Per, our leader, our friend, the one we had looked up to all these years, Per said, “No.”

I could feel my face fall slack.

“We waited for the return of the good king. And we lost. Now we must pay.”

It was Vigdis’s turn to say, “No,” and mine, and our words were a bare heartbeat apart.

No one slept in our cave that night. The camp was divided. Neither side wanted to be the true side. But as they claimed the land would be split, so were we too split. For Per and Ronia and some of the others were insistent: we had waited for the rightful king, and he had failed. And Vigdis had said what I felt secretly in my heart: we must make our own way. That we knew the way and must show it to the others. But the days of us being one band, one people in the woods, were over.

We slept among the trees, scattered but not lonely. For though we did not kiss, not yet, Vigdis curled around me this time. I was the one she warmed until morning.

This time I could ride out openly, under my own name.

I would hide in the trees and the caves, before it was all through. I would live on the flour the neighbors gave us, and coney we had caught for ourselves. But under my own name, and I would wait for no good king to return to save me. I would save myself, or perish.

So would we all.

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Marissa Lingen lives in the Minneapolis area with two large men and one small dog. Her work has appeared in [Tor.com](#), [Lightspeed](#), [Apex](#), and multiple times previously in [Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#), among others.

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MEN OF THE ASHEN MORROW

by Margaret Killjoy

The doe was near to dead before Sal got her knife up to its throat, but it still looked her in the eye as she drew the blade through its skin and severed its grasp on life. It took blood to call the end of summer; exactly how much blood was always the question. In her plain voice, in her human tongue, she sang:

A half a hundred legs has Hulokk

a half a thousand teeth has He.

A half a million men ate Hulokk

a half a billion moons is He.

The five hunters behind her breathed in deep, breathed in unison. They were close, their lips almost to her ears, and the wordless chant was heavy in the air. Four sets of lips belonged to men she cared not much for. The other belonged to Lelein, a woman who had breathed hard into her ear in other moments, passionate moments. The trees hung boughs high above the hunters, the moss of the ancient forest soft beneath their soft-heeled boots.

In and out, in and out, the six hunters took deep, violent gulps of air.

He would come. Not for the sacrifice—what's a deer to the god of all rivers and roots and everything on the ground and beneath it—but for the hunters. Hulokk would come when summoned by His people. As like as not, He'd take someone with Him.

Sal didn't want to die, and she assumed none of her companions did either. But Hulokk must freeze the earth to end the summer, and winter must come for the snows to settle onto the hills, and the snows must come to keep the creatures from the West at bay. Risk was necessary to life, always.

Deep breaths, violent breaths.

Ten summers prior, as a young woman, Sal had performed the ritual. Hulokk had come, she'd spoken with Him, and He'd departed with nothing more than the buck they'd slaughtered. It had been the first time in living memory that the summoners had convinced the god to spare them all. Sal was counting on that luck. She was counting on her own strength.

The doe's blood melted and burned the earth. The smell of old rot poured into the forest. The ground collapsed, pulling the saplings and ferns down into the underworld, and Sal and her company stepped back.

A single segmented leg, infinitely thin and long, crept out from the hole. First one, then another. Then another, another, another. Slower than the setting of the summer sun, His fat, round worm body of flesh and stone rose into the air. His belly was awash with eyes.

He looked at Sal, and Sal borrowed the breath of the other hunters. She spoke, in the tongue of the gods:

“I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will not.” Hulokk’s voice was a thousand voices, across and below the audible.

“I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will not.” Ancient trees trembled and fell, and Sal felt her heart quiver in her chest from the physical force of the voice.

“I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will.”

Four legs shot out and wrapped around Lelein, and she screamed, hoarse and angry.

“I ask you, Hulokk,” Sal started, but it took more magic than she could summon to keep her voice in the tongue of the gods. She finished her sentence meekly, in a human language. “To spare our lives.”

The god dragged Sal's lover into the depths of the earth. At the last moment, the eldest among the hunters put a quarrel through Lelein's throat, silencing her forever.

As the world grew silent, Sal collapsed at the edge of the of sinkhole and clawed at the dirt in lieu of weeping.

Hulokk froze the earth, and autumn came, then winter.

* * *

A lifetime later, Sal was gray-haired and tired, her skin aged by sun and time. No one had yet called for winter, and the summer had been five months too long already. Bright, monstrous creatures were stirring in the west, but Sal had done the work fifteen times herself; the burden of sacrifice should be shared by other collectives. She had other matters, simpler matters, to attend to.

The forest bison in front of her was near to dead, its breathing labored and slow, fluid likely having filled its lungs. It lay in a blade of sunlight that pierced the thick canopy above. Red and iron blood stained its gray and grizzled fur, and the cold steel of crossbow bolts stuck from its hide like thorns.

Sal approached.

"I can do this," Reka said. She was the youngest of the six, her face still unlined. Too young to be hunting at all.

“Too dangerous,” Sal said. One hand held the seax, the other held the rest of the collective at bay. She met the dying beast’s eyes.

“Live free, die free,” she whispered. “Life is struggle, death is not.” She put all the magic in her body behind the words.

The massive eyes closed, and Sal drew her blade across the bison’s throat.

Her hunting collective spent a long afternoon butchering and salting meat. They packed it into six barrels, each with the name of a town or city stenciled in black across its oaken staves. One each was addressed for the four towns of Laria, two for the city Laros itself.

She heard the hooves a few miles off, well before her younger and less-attuned companions. But the noise didn’t seem to signal danger, so she said nothing.

Closer, birdsong cast music down from the trees, and the thick carpet of wildflowers sent up perfume almost strong enough to mask the scents of blood and marrow.

Sal sat on the cart, watching her companions work and the team of mules pick at the grass and flowers. It wasn’t fair, of course, how often she took sentry. The hunters were a collective of equals, and by rights she should be doing the same hard labor. But she’d lived seventy-times-twelve moons, and she’d spent the whole of the day on the move, tracking their

prey. She deserved the rest. Her crossbow was loaded, its stock balanced on the rail of the cart as she kept watch. There was no rest except death.

The rider was almost upon them before her companions noticed, but neither humans nor horses had been much of a threat to anyone in the valley for an endless succession of moons.

“Sal Everett and company?” the rider asked, his face obscured under a thick black beard, the style in the city.

“We’re the Men of the Ashen Morrow, thank you,” Sal corrected.

Not one of the Men were men, but Sal preferred tradition to semantic accuracy and the collective’s name had gone unchanged for ninety times twelve moons.

“Sal Everett, I presume,” the rider continued, addressing Sal directly and ignoring the frown that grew on her face.

“I’m Sal,” she said.

“I’ve come directly from the great assembly,” he said. “The summer is in its fifth moon and no one has come forward to summon its end. I’ve been empowered to ask you, on behalf of the whole of Laria, to do this. Summon the god Hulokk.”

Sal spat, off to the side. “The reason’s no one’s come forward is because everyone’s hoping we’ll do it.”

“Will you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Someone else’s turn.”

The man considered her words for a moment while birdsong filled the silence.

“You know why people ask this of you,” he said at last. His eyes darted from her to her companions, all of whom we armed, all of whom he’d prefer not to anger. “There’s no one more capable.”

“Summer after summer, we’ve done it. Summer after summer I’ve lost friends and...” She let her anger keep tears at bay. “No one else will ever get better at speaking with gods if no one else will risk it.

“Go back your great assembly,” she said, “and tell them Sal Everett is an old woman who’s lost too much already. Tell them they can send me students, if they wish, but no commands.”

The man looked at her without sympathy. “All my life I’d heard stories of Sal Everett, and here you are a coward.”

“Fuck off,” Sal said. The rider didn’t take her meaning clearly enough, so she fired a bolt into the bough above his head. A branch broke, and it fell with a crack, startling the horse.

The rider spun around and took off at a canter.

The birds were silent; the hunters were silent. The mules went on grazing.

Sal climbed down off the cart, started rooting through the duff for her crossbow bolt. She found it, still intact, and for a moment she remembered the bolt that had pierced Lelein—a broadhead, for hunting. A mercy.

Sal's life had been too full of all the wrong sorts of mercy.

* * *

Their summer lodge was a sprawling stone house built in a liminal space between prairie and wood. The eaves hung low over the windows to fight off the summer sun, and the windows themselves were simple cloth screen. Nearby, Sal and the rest of the collective crouched in a circle under the shade of an ancient oak. By the looks on her companions' faces, no one was happy.

"You don't get to decide that," Hels said. She'd born two children; both were off with their father in the city. Silver and ash were creeping into her hair, and she was the next-oldest after Sal.

"We've done the work the last ten summers," Sal said. "It should rotate. The risk should be spread out across collectives."

"We've done the work because we're the best," Reka said. Her voice was low, her shoulders broad, and she was as proud of her power as she was of her youth—as though either were

things she'd chosen. Every time Sal looked at her, she saw Lelein. Reka could have have been Lelein's granddaughter, had Lelein lived to bear children.

"All the more reason we should leave it to someone else," Sal said. "The best should step aside, not end up indispensable. It's healthier for everybody."

More importantly, it was healthier for those five she saw as her children. She couldn't bear to lose another. Not to her own weakness.

"I'm not saying your decision is wrong," Hels said. "I'm saying it isn't your decision to make."

"*I'm* saying the decision is wrong," Reka said. Blood went to her cheeks and her fists clenched and released.

"Do you want to die?" Sal asked. "Do you? Because that's what happens when you summon a god and ask it a favor. Someone dies."

"Last summer—" Reka started.

"Last summer nothing," Sal interrupted. "Last summer we got lucky. The summer before that, we got lucky. Three summers ago? Five? Eight? Hunters died. I've summoned Hulokk fifteen times and I've lost nine friends to the effort." Eight friends and a lover.

The other collectives, she knew, had much worse tallies. For all their efforts, no other summoners had ever held

strength in their voices long enough to demand Hulokk spare their lives. Every time anyone but Sal called the god, He took one in the six down with Him. When Sal did it, sometimes she failed and sometimes she managed.

“I’m tired of this shit. I’m tired of watching you all die.”

I’m tired of surviving your deaths, she didn’t need to say.

“I’m sorry,” Sal said. “I shouldn’t have spoken for us all so simply. I’m not in charge. But I refuse to participate, and we are six, and the ritual takes six. One ‘no’ is enough.”

* * *

The milky moon hung low over the western hills, lighting the last scraps of snow that capped them. The night air was sticky and thick, though the worst of the day’s heat was fading, and Sal walked alone in the prairie. Her knees hurt, like they’d hurt for hundreds of moons.

It was Lelein who had taught Sal to love the prairie, to love the bright wash of wildflowers and the tide-like brush of wind against the tips of the grass. So many moons had come and gone and so many memories had blossomed and faded. But Lelein remained. She who was not forgotten was not yet dead.

In the distance, a buck lifted his great crowned head, a silhouette against the sky. A breeze swept across the land, bringing the smell of dead grass—the world needed the rains of

autumn. What cruelty it was that only the magic and sacrifice of humans could cut the heat of the warming world.

In the distance, she heard the kitchen door shut and Hels making her way across the field. Sal knew her footsteps and soon smelled her heady scent. Most moonlit nights, she would have loved the younger woman's company for a walk across the land.

"You're not going to talk me into it," Sal said, quietly, while they were still far apart. Hels had enough magic of her own to make out the words at distance.

Hels came to her, took Sal by the arm. A few more deer walked out from the tree line and joined the buck in the field.

Hels pointed them out. "Why don't we keep animals for meat?" she asked.

"You're not going to convince me."

"We keep plants for grain and fruit, but we don't keep animals for meat. Two hundred summers ago, when the seasons were regular and the snow never melted in the hills, we kept animals. More than just horses and mules and dogs. We kept bison and deer, hogs and fowl. Why don't we keep them anymore?"

Sal ignored the question.

"Because the terror and hell—or the brute banality—of a life lived caged bleeds into the meat. We eat it, and it gets into

us; it ruins us. Drains our magic. Living free is important; dying free is important.”

“I don’t see what you’re getting at,” Sal said.

“Are you afraid of dying?”

“No.”

“Neither are we,” Hels said. “We live free. We’ll die free. You need to let us do that.”

“Someone else should do it.”

“Are you that stubborn?”

Clouds drifted in front of the moon, and much of the field turned to shadow. Only the lanterns by the lodge still cast light.

“Yes,” Sal said.

Hels dropped Sal’s arm. “You’re greedy,” she said, walking away. “We all lose people.”

Sal stood alone in the field, feeling the absence of her friend’s touch. Hels was right about one thing. Being open to death was the cost of living free.

The moon broke free of the clouds, and she saw the deer in the field. Traditionally, it took six casters to sacrifice an animal and call Hulokk. But Sal was the strongest magician in the valley. Maybe she could do it alone, even if just one final time.

* * *

The buck stared at her with angry eyes, but Sal’s words had crawled into its mind and stilled its dying body. Dragging

the beast from field to forest, she made slow progress. The bolt's fletching caught on the low branches of the edge forest, and the buck caterwauled into the night.

It was a perverse thing to do, to cause an animal to suffer like that.

It needed doing.

She'd been late to the life of a hunter. Struck by wanderlust at twenty times twelve moons, she'd left her work as a cobbler in the city and been accepted on probationary terms to the Men of the Ashen Morrow—one of the hundreds of hunter collectives. Most of her new fellows were the children of hunters and farmers. But she was alive with magic, and magic flows unevenly through space and time; its practitioners do well to wander. Despite her upbringing, she'd become a hunter.

She dragged the animal by horns for hours. Her muscles were in agony, but she dared not stop for rest. She pushed on—exhaustion was an old friend. The buck was screaming in pain, but she hadn't the strength to lift it across her back.

By the time she reached the heart of the forest, near enough Hulokk's domain, she heard the rest of her collective searching the woods. Their footsteps were too soft, too careful to be any but those of hunters. Sal had to hurry. She spied a tangled thicket and made her way for the refuge of its densest depths. Low pines burst forth from brambles, failing to reach

the sky. Ahead of the dawn, morning fog rose and lonely birds sang.

The buck had suffered, but it hadn't died. Sal laid it down heavily in the dirt, then paced around it, ducking under branches, pulling her wool trousers free from thorns. She circled it six times widdershins, then she stopped.

Her companions were closer. They'd found her trail. If they found her, they'd try to help her. If they found her, she'd lose another friend.

She got her knife up to the animal's throat, and it stared into the depths of her as she drew the blade through its skin. In her plain voice, ragged with exhaustion, she sang:

A half a hundred legs has Hulokk

a half a thousand teeth has He.

A half a million men ate Hulokk

a half a billion moons is He.

The song was older than the city, as old as the woods. She sang it in the language of the first of her people to settle the land.

The melody faded to nothing, and Sal breathed in quick, violent breaths. Staccato, ritual breathing.

The blood ran fast from the creature's neck; it ran hot into the earth, burning soil and stone as it mingled with the magic of Sal's breath.

The ground fell away, pulling the buck and the surrounding brambles down into the underworld. Sal shied back, still keeping complex rhythm with her lungs.

Hulokk arose, as he always had, tremendous and horrid and sheathed in dispassionate eyes.

Sal opened her mouth, and no voice came out. She couldn't find the power to speak. Always before, she'd had the breath of her fellows to draw upon.

She had the sky, though, and all the world's air. She focused her strength, in the core of her chest, and summoned the night's wind to fill her lungs.

"I ask you, Hulokk..." she began in the old tongue, but the air fled her chest faster than she could fill it. Her voice failed.

Hulokk stared at her, impassive.

Sal determined to take strength from the earth. The dirt beneath her feet hardened to stone and gave her a conduit to the core of the earth's magic.

"I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end..." She collapsed to her knees, unable to finish. No other magic in the world was as strong as that of collective spirit.

"I'm sorry," she said, in the common tongue.

Hulokk's gaze swept over her, each eye moving together with its neighbors like grass blown by a winter wind.

"I've killed us all, haven't I?"

He towered above her, impassive. He'd likely end her life, but without the ritual words he wouldn't freeze the earth and it would be six moons at least before he'd appear when summoned. The snows would melt; the bright monsters would flood into the valley and kill her children.

“Oh vanity, I've killed us all.”

One long leg crept toward her, stroked her cheek. The thought of death was no comfort, just then, unlike it so often had been. She would die a failure, lain low by pride. Worse, she would die having brought death to so many who'd relied upon her. She had to survive, at least long enough for the Men to find her. At least long enough to complete the casting and beseech Hulokk for winter.

She felt down into her gut, pulled forth what power she had, and shouted. Birds scattered from trees, and the Men heard her. They were running, now.

A second segmented leg wrapped around her waist, trying to pull her toward the pit and its master. She flung out her arms and called branches to her, lashing herself in place with magic.

She was off the ground, her body stretched between the trees and the god. Maybe her arms would rip free from her shoulders, maybe her torso from her legs.

More insectoid limbs lashed out, ripping at the foliage that held her, and Sal drained every bit of her strength to call the nearby brambles to dig their thorns into her body and hold her in place.

Through it all, Hulokk made no noise. Sal struggled, but Hulokk was no more angry at her resistance than Sal could be at the bowstring when she reloaded her crossbow.

Reka was the first to reach her, war axe held at her side but still in her nightclothes. Hels and the others were shortly behind. When they saw Hulokk, half of the hunters fell into breathing shallow and long, half of them fell into breathing fast and deep.

Young Reka spoke, in the tongue of the gods. “I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will not.” The thousand voices of god tore through the thicket.

“I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will not.”

“I ask you, Hulokk, to bring an end to summer.”

“I will.”

Sal released the vines and brambles that held her and dropped to the earth, near to unconsciousness, still cocooned in the long legs of the god. With the casting complete, the

thought of her coming oblivion was warmer than the summer air.

But Hulokk let her go. Sal lay empty and exhausted upon the bloody soil. Her vision blurry from pain, she saw the thin legs embrace Reka.

“Take me,” Sal whispered. But she spoke the common tongue.

Every eye on His belly focused on Reka, and Reka screamed wordless as Hulokk dragged her down, after the deer, into the underworld, severing her grasp on life.

* * *

“She who is not forgotten is not yet dead,” Hels said. The five Men held hands in a circle and wept for themselves, for their own loss, while the light of dawn cast soft shadows from the elder trees of the funeral grove.

Sal wept for Reka and she wept for Lelein, and she wept for her own bruised and torn old body and the wounds of loss that would never heal. She wept for all she’d sacrificed, and all the more she would in the future.

Because next year, she would volunteer. Every year until she was unable, by age or by death, she would call an end to the summer and spare others the torment of survival.

While the Men cried, the storm clouds of autumn gathered above them. Winter would come.

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Florent Llamas is a freelance artist based in France. He specializes in concept design and illustration, with over a hundred works to his credit. See more of his art online at [Tumblr](#), [ArtStation](#), and [DeviantArt](#).

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