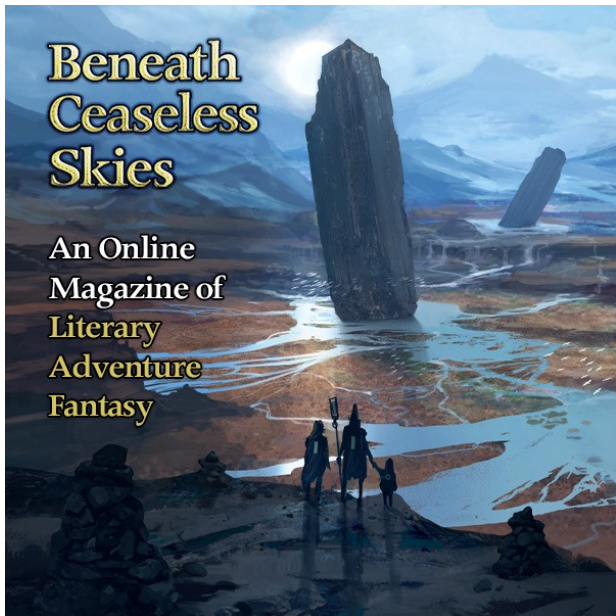


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



Issue #220 • Mar. 2, 2017

[“Suddenwall,” by Sara Saab](#)

[“Ghosts of Amarana,” by Kurt Hunt](#)

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

SUDDENWALL

by Sara Saab

In the amnesty-city of Vannat, Aln Panette has let guilt go.

The city of Vannat is a strict and inscrutable rulemaster, so Panette doesn't question the rules. She lives a plain, clean life. Keeps her recollections as free of the war as she can.

Panette figures she has earned an indulgence or two for her decade as a soldier. Memories of Odarr Harvei are one indulgence. Harvei's smile of fifteen years ago flashing in the light of the war caravan's lanterns, her easy company, their mild one-upmanship. The unbroken sky above them.

Other small indulgences Panette allows herself:

Leading the stallions at Vannat's racecourse stables through their daily exercises.

A now-and-then treat of salted fish in tart molasses that reminds her painfully of Camillon, her home.

And in this city of unremarkable languages passed naturally from parent to child, not a drop of magic in the syllables, not the barest trace of rebellion or fury, Panette indulges in the knowledge that—at least in Vannat—the killing has stopped.

* * *

Seven years after Panette's last encounter with Harvei, accidental, fraught, a neighbor appears at her door. He's here to tell her that a veteran from Panette's war caravan ("Harway? Halveigh? Not so easy to hear through stone—") has been trapped by a suddenwall. Panette jogs a long time down dusty side streets, her throat hot and tight and dry. The morning is dull as pewter. Commotion in the city's Southern Quarter winds her nerves tight.

The suddenwall's appeared inside a house that smells exactly like Harvei, bark and new-woven muslin. A crowd's concentrated at it: a seamless floor-to-ceiling curve of ochre stone that isolates a corner of the starkly furnished bedroom. There's a cocksure ruckus, as if every ex-tactician and ex-armoror in Vannat has gathered here. Fists against arcane masonry. Voices pitched to carry through stone. Battering poles hoisted, crowbars hefted.

"We'll get you out."

"How many behind there?"

Panette hears an answer hop from tongue to tongue: *three*. There are three of them walled off by the vigilante immune response of the city.

Three that Vannat has judged? Or two, or one, plus collateral? (Three people—in what must be Harvey's bedroom. That, Panette does not unpack.)

Panette pushes to the front, shouldering other veterans aside. Rests fingertips against the suddenwall.

“Harvei!” she shouts.

The rescue party is so loud. Panette hears nothing from the other side. Questions she would ask, given time and privacy: *What did you do, Harvey? How did you make Vannat so mad? Where have you been, these years?*

Question she does ask, again and again: “Harvei, it's Panette, can you hear me?”

And finally, from the other side, a voice she'd never forget in a thousand years: “Panette? I'm—”, and something obscured, and “Help.”

Panette would have helped her anyway. She can't turn away. But everyone gathered here knows that whomever Vannat meant to hold here, meant to *extrude*—there's no way to stand Vannat down. Not really.

Three the city has judged; or two, or one, and collateral.

* * *

A long time ago, Aln Panette is sixteen years old. She's still living in Camillon, still growing up. She's a devoted stablehand. In exchange for riding lessons, Panette tends the beautiful

purebred mares, would do it even if there were nothing offered in return. Now that she's finished with school, she'd like to spend the rest of her life in the service of horses.

She's never heard of the Ruumari, only vaguely knows what The Pockets are. (In that invincible, unthreatened way of the young.)

Then Camillon's godkeep comes down. The bomb's vibrations shake the whole city. Panette doesn't see it but is caught in the ensuing stampede of bloodied worshippers. Moments later she smells the destruction—sour, smoky, ancient. The greatest city in the world becomes a fragile thing.

Much later, during their years side by side in the war caravan, Panette asks Harvei about the day the Ruumari bomb went off.

“Were you close enough? To feel the blast?”

Harvei's brushing her horse's flank with an oiled comb. Next to her, Panette wraps preserved rations for the next campaign.

“A few streets away. Saw the dome shatter.” Harvei stares unfocused into the now-glossy chestnut coat. “Over the tops of the buildings. The shockwave rattled my jaw.”

“That was the day I enlisted,” Panette says. It's an oddly private secret, hard to share.

Harvei watches Panette in her unreadable way. “The same day?”

“Yes.” Panette laughs. “Hot blood.” She passes a handful of pitted dates up to Harvei. “When did *you* sign up?”

Harvei doesn’t laugh. “Camillon, those days? There was nothing else for someone like me to get good at. I was headed for this war before anyone had thought of it.”

Panette’s quiet. She wants to say it isn’t true. That this war is just a detour for them both. But the moment hangs silent, until Harvei stands, clucking, to lead her horse away.

* * *

During the Extinction, the Camillonese war machine is a hundred thousand strong, a sledgehammer bearing down on the brittle defenses of The Pockets and the Ruumari militias cowering inside. In the early days of the war, Panette’s survival and safety aren’t at stake. Even guilt is more a nuisance than a scourge.

Panette has imagined her earliest encounter with Harvei a hundred different ways. She is sure in hindsight that they’d been in the same war caravan from the start, but can’t decide on the first time she noticed her. Was it a glimpse here, a quick, terse instruction there? The slope of shoulders from behind, a hypnotic rhythm during a hypnotic march?

A fact she keeps snagging on: Harvei somehow avoids shaving her hair as a cadet, wears heavy black curls braided under a helmet until the day she gets a direct order to comply with regulations.

Panette would have given that order if she'd noticed. A privilege of rank. A smudge of guilt absorbed easily into the bigger body of what they'd been sent to do.

The first conversation between them that she distinctly remembers:

“He’s only ten years old, Captain.”

“Does he speak Ruumari?” Panette asks.

“He won’t speak at all.”

Panette begins to saddle her horse. Annoyance gives her clumsy fingers. “Make him speak and find out. Is this your first day in the caravan, Officer?”

“With respect, Captain. He’s ten,” says Odarr Harvei. Her buzzed black hair hasn’t settled on how it’s supposed to sit.

Panette rankles at the way this upstart’s insubordination courses through her chest. “That’s enough. Go do it. Go.”

She loathes it, but Panette notices Harvei after that, watches her out of the side of her eye. After a while, she still watches but no longer thinks of the Ruumari boy by association.

* * *

Much later, when she dares shoulder a fraction of the crippling guilt that Vannat's built to carry (brief, rare instants), Aln Panette sees the Extinction for what it is.

Ruumari is a lean language. In Camillon the prevailing anecdote is that Ruumari has a single noun for males, females, children, and no grammar to differentiate acting, possessing, or being moved.

The language is a miracle tongue: never taught, never written down. Spontaneously, children come to speak it. Youngsters too old to babble are caught mouthing gibberish into their palms. Words slip out in the solitary dark of sleep. Panette sees a boy separated from his family on the cobbled street leading to the horse market. He catches her eye, face wide and pleading, lips working in a way that pebbles her skin.

It's unsurprising that as adults these Ruumari speakers, mistrusted and persecuted from childhood, would seek out others like them. And in the lead-up to Camillon's godkeep coming down, they do. They organize; they pray in simple, overdetermined words for a homeland—for Ruumari to ring loud when they haggle over the price of flour, for its marching songs, unbearable noise cutting through Panette's home, to be their nightly entertainment.

The Ruumari annex fragmented lands on the frontiers beyond Camillon. They call these lands *Anachbatarr*—heart-homes. The Camillonese call them The Pockets.

Then the godkeep explodes. The Ruumari insurgency has struck too close to Camillon's core. Panette's not the only Camillonese with hot blood. In the logic of devastation, every Ruumari speaker is equally to blame.

The Extinction: genocide, for speaking a language.

That is why Panette's guilt is too big to bear.

* * *

It's fifteen years prior to the suddenwall in Harvei's bedroom. Panette and Harvei arrive in Vannat, part of two disbanded war caravans. The Extinction is over. The Pockets are a deadland. The war is won.

Camillon is safe, but its soldiers are unsalvageable.

Panette and Harvei whisper about Vannat throughout the final wet season of the war, an amnesty-city being constructed at tremendous expense, product of collective remorse. There are nearly a million Camillonese veterans after ten years of the Extinction. One day history begins to shift and the realization spreads—fast as the fires that razed The Pockets—that they have done something terribly wrong.

How could we?

Genocide, for speaking a language.

Guilt that could crush a heart, crush a people. Vannat is the best salve Camillon's alchemists can muster.

Panette, to her troop, in various debriefing tents on the journey from Camillon to Vannat:

"This has always been about duty. Camillon called, and we answered."

And: "You'll be able to rest your conscience. You'll be able to let the city decide what's moral, what's good. What justice is."

And, forcing herself not to look for Harvei in the humid tent as thumb-thick horseflies drone against canvas: "We've given a lot of ourselves for this war. Vannat will accept what we are."

Except for the trade-off that the alchemists of this miracle couldn't avoid. "As one of its inhabitants, you're within Vannat's purview. You live there, purified, but you live by new rules. If you act in a way the city deems immoral, *it'll* act. Protectively. It will eliminate you from itself."

Exile. Camillon too scarred to take them back. Vannat too righteous.

Maybe it's this threat that forces Panette and Harvei apart just inside the gates of the amnesty-city after their war is over. They study discharge orders to avoid looking at each other.

"Where are you staying?" asks Harvei.

“The Hall of Breath.”

“I’m in the Hall of Joy. I’ll find you after we’ve gotten settled,” says Harvei.

In Harvei’s eyes, Panette sees every order she’s given, the Ruumari lives she’s commanded to an end. Panette looks away first.

She doesn’t see Harvei again for three years.

* * *

It’s early in the war. Panette’s a junior officer. She’s only just qualified for her first warhorse, a grey gelding she’ll call Agha. A year later he’ll be put down after breaking a foreleg during a tricky river crossing just a morning’s journey from the northernmost of The Pockets.

A few days before she swaps the sluggish packhorse she’s ridden from Camillon for loyal, spirited Agha, Panette makes her first kill.

The Ruumari’s firing a repeating crossbow from a defensive outpost equidistant between two Pockets. The squat bolts ping into the winter-hard arid soil of this plain. Clods of soil flip into the air twenty breadths from Panette, then ten, then five. It’s madness: a single Ruumari fighter, the Camillonese force a thick glinting sea, pennants slack in the still morning. The war caravan extends indefinitely east from the hill Panette’s been caught on.

Panette's mounted; she grips her saddle painfully hard. It's the first time in the war that she fears for her life. The whiff of death is exciting and strangely illicit. (Later, she'll begin to suspect that the gravest risk to her safety is ambient—the accumulation of small, self-inflicted incisions to the heart.)

Two bolts ping. Then no more. The Ruumari topples from the rampart, downed by the arrows of at least two Camillonese archers. Panette is the first to ride over, shield braced above her head. He's still alive, legs at wrong angles, hands clawing at the wounds in his torso.

He shouts. He flaunts the language. Impossible syllables. Consonant-rich sounds that heat Panette's ears beneath her helmet.

She hitches her weight and stabs down one-handed through his leather mantle with her pike, through the ribs. Bone and flesh resist, but the shouting cuts short.

The risk to her safety is gone, replaced with an oilier deposit in the base of her stomach.

She flicks the reins and rejoins the caravan.

* * *

They pull Harvei and two others—a man and a woman—through the suddenwall after dark. They're shaken and thirsty, arms covered in pulverized stone to the elbows.

Panette hasn't had water or food either. She took a single break from the rescue effort to relieve herself hours ago and tried not to pore over every clue about Harvey's life on the table in the house's latrine.

The rescue party begins to disperse, but the mood is solemn. Any reprieve from Vannat's devices is temporary.

Harvei looks so deflated, nothing of the soldier in her. Her eyes are downcast. Then they're searching, dancing from face to face, and then they're downcast again. At Harvey's left, as yet unnoticed, Panette puts a hand out to touch Harvey's shoulder, remembering many a steadying hand as they rode in the war caravan. Back then, muscle beneath soft armor. Now, beneath fabric, mostly the sharpness of bone.

"Here."

Harvei turns. Sees her. A slight recoil beneath Panette's palm. "Captain Panette."

Panette flinches. "No titles here." A convention among veterans, not Vannat's own rule. It is still odd to hear it broken.

They drift towards the back of the crowd. "Where will you go tonight? Stay with me."

"I need to stay with Ammar and Lei," says Harvey. She finds the newly rescued pair in the crowd as she names them.

"You three can't be in the same place tonight, after what's happened." Unsaid: that by separating Harvey from the others,

they would soon divine which of them Vannat was targeting. Unasked: *who are they to you?*

Harvei lets Panette take her home. She feeds her, gives her anise spirits to calm her nerves. After dinner they walk to the racecourse and Panette takes her to see the stabled stallions.

Harvei is subdued. Every now and then, through the fog of what Vannat's decided, Panette catches something: the hunch of Harvei's shoulders when she wants to be alone, or how she still favors her left leg after that long-ago fall from horseback during an ambush. The old tilt of Harvei's chin when she's shaking off a thought.

Those old incisions to the heart. Panette discovers they never healed through.

* * *

When the war is over and Camillon is thrashing in its own guilt, there are no informant reports of Ruumari speakers for many months. This is when the war becomes known as the Extinction.

But the miracle tongue is a hardy thing, and after some years, there are rumors again. Then firsthand accounts. Of children afflicted with the language across the frontierlands, and eventually, within Camillon itself. The numbers are not large. It's as if the sturdy trunk is broken and now only yellow shoots push through.

Camillon begins work assimilating the few Ruumari who come to the city's attention. They're taught suppression techniques—counting, deep breathing—to still their tongues. They're partnered early in adolescence to Camillon's most loyal bloodlines.

In the shadow of the Extinction, some Ruumari are not so eager for assimilation.

Panette remembers this: it's soon after they've taken the northernmost of The Pockets, hard years after that first conversation with Harvei. Panette and Harvei have not spoken words beyond commands and acknowledgements in as long as Panette can remember.

At first, she thinks it's exhaustion. Morale is low. The horses are sickly and their riders too. Rasping coughs have punctuated the rattle-clomp of the war caravan's progress the last few nights. Panette cannot stomach elaborate conversation either. But after weeks of this, she wonders if Harvei's okay. She watches her twice as closely, hates herself for the accounting she does of Harvei's every action. She wants to ask outright what the matter is. Her pride won't let her.

Then they find a Ruumari child in an abandoned home, maybe five. She's underfed and alone, mumbling in the tongue, so scared that she's soiled herself. Panette is outraged that they cannot find the parents. The idea of executing the girl alone is

an inexplicable step further than doing by rote: mother, father, child.

So Panette takes the Ruumari by the hand, away from the troop. Harvei follows, her gaze locked on Panette in a way she's never experienced before. Panette is thrilled by the attention—and also ashamed. That oily feeling in her stomach again.

The child is in a housedress, shoeless. Flies hound her. Her wails stutter in a dried-out throat. Panette washes her from the pail in her own tent. When she is no longer repulsed by the stink of filth, Panette raises a finger to silence the unsettling cries and wraps a matted old fur around the child's thin neck.

She glances at Harvei. "Take her away. Far as you can get before the sun goes down." She pins the fur at either shoulder. "Find a village that'll take her. Tell them—" Panette straps the child's hair back. "Tell them orders of the Camillonese army. To keep the child safe."

"Yes, Captain." Harvei looks at her in a brand new way. This is Panette's reward. She soaks it in like sunlight.

Then she pushes the little Ruumari in Harvei's direction and goes back to the head of the troop.

* * *

Three years after they first arrive in Vannat, Panette encounters Harvei on the grand steps leading down to Corner Avenue. Panette's in a hurry, rushing to the track to watch Udu

race. The young bay stallion is her favorite. He's so responsive when she gallops him; stops as soon as he's sure of the tug on his reins.

She and Harvei almost collide. (Vannat? A taste for whimsy?) Harvei's arms are heaped with fabrics. Bolts go tumbling and unfurling down the steps: tangerine, white, olive. Panette scoops up three rolls of silk from the roadside before she sees who is carrying them.

Harvei's smiling, and then Panette's smiling too. She wants to orient this moment inside the years she's lived in Vannat, three years the whole time wondering, feelings a bit ripe, a bit bruised. But she can only think in the register of the jubilation that springs awake in her chest.

"Aln."

Panette has never heard her given name in Harvei's voice before.

"What—where are you going with all that?" Panette asks.

Harvei's smile widens. "The tailor."

"I'm going that way," Panette lies. "Shall I walk with you?"

Udu wins the race comfortably; Panette's on the other side of the city when he crosses the line. The tailor is across Vannat's huge central square. They walk in silence for a time, then it rekindles: the easy company, the mild one-upmanship.

“Surprised you thought you could carry all this alone,” Panette says as Harvei struggles.

“Strong shoulders from carrying your second quiver for a decade,” Harvei says. “And your shield. And your mud boots.”

“No, no. I travel light,” Panette counters, smirking at the clear sky. “*You* insisted on having a whole armory to hand.”

Panette stops with Harvei at the door to the tailor’s. She can’t bring herself to ask for more of Harvei’s time. Too proud. Too ashamed. So she doesn’t, and Harvei doesn’t volunteer it.

Panette strides across the road and raises an arm in goodbye. Cutting her eyes away is like smashing a latch.

The next time they see each other is the day the suddenwall appears.

* * *

Harvei spends the night after the rescue in Panette’s home. The hardness about her barely softens. The only familiar cues are the involuntary tells of her body.

They set a mat down in the spare room, and Panette gets a single impassioned reaction—when Harvei won’t let Panette make a bed for her.

“Everything I learned in the war caravan counts for nothing,” Harvei says, “unless you give those sheets to me. *Captain.*”

The next morning Panette heads down to the spare room with a glass of orange blossom. Waking up, she remembered the way Harvei would tease her about how she sat a horse. She'd exaggerate a lean to the left—*you sit off-balance, Captain*—until her horse whinnied nervously and other soldiers began to stare.

Panette has her line ready when she rounds the hall towards Harvei's room—*since you envied my horsemanship during the war, shall we ride today?* She stops short.

Even if she wanted to go further, she can't.

A suddenwall is in the way.

* * *

This time, there is no doubt. There are no associates of Harvei's to share the enclosure Vannat has built for her. The amnesty-city is pushing her out.

* * *

Given enough time and fodder, even yellow shoots grow into trees.

After a long lull, in the wake of the Extinction, rumors of Ruumari speakers turn into rumors of Ruumari agitators.

On the face of it, Camillon has been rehabilitated. Pacifist approaches prevail: a Minister for the Ruumari, ambassadors, receptions to celebrate cultural exchange. Theories appear about how the Ruumari language is acquired, rekindling

speculation about whether it's teachable. Scholars read treatises aloud to captive audiences gathered for horse races and concertos. There's such a glut of new studies that crowds learn to arrive later and later for public events.

The assimilation isn't enough. Attacks by Ruumari fighters are sporadic but on the increase. Nothing as dramatic as the day the godkeep came down—nothing will ever sear into Panette's memory that way—but there are Camillonese victims. A Ruumari swordsman breaks into the stalls at Panette's childhood stables, kills jockeys, kills horses.

Like all veterans of the Extinction, Panette pays attention to the disturbing news from Camillon and the frontiers. Although not too much attention. Vannat is always passing judgment, and all of them worry. No one is sure what raises the city's ire.

* * *

Aln Panette sounds the alarm throughout the neighborhood—a suddenwall, a suddenwall here. Her door stays open for a stream of volunteers.

The suddenwall in Panette's house is thicker than yesterday's. Vannat has redoubled efforts, as she knew it would.

They excavate until dark, until Panette is blinking ochre dust from her bloodshot eyes, and though she can hear Harvey's voice on the other side, they still do not break through.

Panette's hands don't falter, but she mouths *no no no no* without pause. A string of words like a defensive stream of arrows, because otherwise she will have to accept what this means.

If Harvey stays? If Harvey stays, a suddenwall will spring up too close and crush her, or entomb her in an unbreachable thickness of miracle stone. These deaths happen. They are not as rare as they should be. Camillon's veterans have become dependent on a city that lightens burdens, antidote city to every sediment that's ever settled inside a heart. To bear its rejection is almost inconceivable.

After midnight Harvey scrambles out from behind the suddenwall. She's ashen wherever she's not covered in dust. She's barely standing.

"I was asleep," she tells Panette. "The head of my mat began to lift. I rolled away. Woke. Saw this." Tips her face at the suddenwall.

"Why is this happening?" Panette whispers as she wipes Harvey's face with a cool cloth in the latrine. It reminds her of dressing injuries in the war caravan, even Harvey's own once or

twice. All of the rescuers have gone home to tell cautionary tales of the woman Vannat has condemned.

Harvei's face is set, chiseled. When Panette scoops dust from the corners of Harvei's eyes, from the hollows of her cheeks, there's not a hint of emotion, not even this close up. Panette half-imagines clay, not flesh, beneath the track of cloth. The only thing to indicate life is the wild black hair that's come free at Harvei's temples.

"I eliminate suspected Ruumari speakers," Harvei says. "For money. That's how I survive."

Panette stops, the cloth midway between them.

"Ammar and Lei are my clients," she adds. "They work for interested parties in Camillon."

Panette puts the cloth down.

"All ages," Harvei says finally. "Even children. A lot of children."

There's something terrible shackled behind the control of her features, the untouchable focus of her eyes. It never undams. There's only the cutting wound to Panette's heart, incision overlaid on old incisions.

* * *

Panette never moves away from Vannat. When on occasion she takes the stallions out beyond the city's walls, the sky's oppressive, the ground too red-rich with the minerals left

behind by the Extinction's shallow-buried dead. She forces herself to ride Vannat's circumference every so often. A reminder, she supposes, of how tattered her heart would be without the balm of the amnesty-city.

Harvei survives Vannat's extrusion, leaving on a packhorse not unlike Panette's first mount of the war effort. Panette sees her off.

Nights, Panette dreams of Harvei being crushed. The suddenwalls in these dreams are not stone but walls of sound, walls of syllables that scald Harvei's skin as they close in on her.

Waking up from these dreams, Panette recalls more and more from her years with Harvei. In the war caravan. During the Extinction. These memories she sifts, on her back with her eyes closed, fists knotted in her blanket. She's searching for the most untarnished of them to keep. Does Vannat know these too? Do the memories count in her favor or incriminate her?

Panette only wonders briefly, and only privately, by first light.

When she hears about a new suddenwall, she tilts her chin to shake the thought away.

for Jess

Copyright © 2017 Sara Saab

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

Sara Saab loves warm croissants, crowded cities, and the sound boxing pads make when you punch them dead-center. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon but now lives in North London. Sara's a 2015 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop at UC San Diego. You can find her on Twitter as @fortnightlysara and at fortnightlysara.com.

Support *BCS*

BCS on 

BCS on 

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

GHOSTS OF AMARANA

by Kurt Hunt

When the city of Amarana fell, broken from the cliffside like a docked tail, its cobbled streets fell first. For a heartbeat they retained their shapes, their curves, their intersections. I have memorized every single one—that ghost of the city, the amputated walkways and avenues backlit by the fading orange blooms of our bombs.

By my side, someone whose face I can no longer see whispered, “It’s beautiful.”

I tried to agree, but I couldn’t speak.

The ghost city tilted as it fell, barely enough to see through the black spots burned into my retinas, then the streets divorced and the illusion was broken. There was no ghost. There was no city. Only a storm of cobbles, and they landed like hailstones.

Buildings followed. Homes. Shops. The cluster of government offices that had inspired us to kill the city in the first place. All filled with screams—I still hear them, especially the children—as everything plunged to the valley floor and shattered. Only in the ensuing silence did the city’s outer wall—

stubbornly rooted into the rock face, protecting only smoke and emptiness—collapse.

* * *

Here, there are no walls. Time has dissolved. I simply persist, each day an echo, huddled with prisoners and grimmer things in this massive stone bowl beneath the Judicial Plaza. It is the most famous—and the cruelest—of the oubliettes of the Fifth Sovereign. A prison without walls; confinement without bounds.

Somewhere high—even higher than the spires of the plaza—comes the sounds of thunder, a great clearing of the throat. A whisper leaps up—a single ember, and everywhere it touches: conflagration. Prisoners scatter in orbit around me, hopelessly purposeful. Their instinct is to huddle, to hide, but where? Cruel, cornerless world. Some even cling to the bars above, faces turned up and gasping at the slash of rain like monstrous white koi biting at the surface for food. The rain falls, inevitable.

It speaks to me of cyclicities. At the grated bottom of the bowl, where corpses collect and melt to the river below in fat rotting chunks, I lie back and watch the other figures—the ones that are not prisoners here. The rain passes through them as if they were fog, and they sing a melancholy song about a

different rain, about pale dirt made black, about lying in the glurbling mud while drops fall into open mouths, open eyes.

I would sing, too, but I have no songs.

I watch the new prisoner too. The one that does not belong. Crawling, not like the others, but with purpose. Energetic. Inquisitive.

He has come for me. But I don't know who he is.

* * *

Amarana is a wreckage, but still its citizens press cold against me in the oubliette. Another darkness behind me. Like the mother who died birthing me—with each push I stole more of her breath, and still more until, crowning, I ended her and emerged, bloody fists held before my open eyes.

My world now is the imprisoned and the dead, but I can't tell the difference until they reach into me. Ghost fingers are needles—they dimple my flesh and then puncture, and once inside me they inject sensation and memory.

This was how I had learned first-hand the fear of the people of Amarana when the city fell. The weightlessness, the shock, the wretched impotence. This was how I had lost myself beneath the terrible weight of their accusation.

I cannot bear them, but I cannot flee.

This is why I scream when the mysterious man touches my face, and I thrash away until I realize his fingers are blunt and

rough like walnut shells, not needle-like at all. The fingers of a living man.

He squints in a familiar way and opens his mouth. But instead of words he emits only a buzzing shriek, ear-splitting, a hundred thousand hives rising up in frenzy.

I shrink down, hands protectively over my head, and the man touches my shaved scalp with a manner so gentle I finally recognize him. Kaeler. My brother, Kaeler.

“Bzzz bzz?” he asks.

Are these words?

“Bzz ZZZZZzzz.”

I cannot recall. I shake my head.

He looks from side to side and points down. Down to the grated barrier and the river below. “Bzz?”

While I am staring at the black rush of the river, filled with vertigo terror, the air shifts—becomes heavier—and needles hit me.

There is a ghost in me.

“Your brother will help you escape,” says the ghost.

I crouch and whimper.

“Listen to him,” the ghost says.

Kaeler opens his mouth to disturb the air, and those disturbances magically transform into words. “—can escape. Zin implanted—”

I lose his words in a panic, overwhelmed by the relentless sound of Amarana's detonation. It echoes still. More ghosts crawl into me—worms in an apple—and shush me and soothe me and instruct me.

“You must go with him,” they say.

I protest. I have carved a path through life like a reaper in the field.

“Yes,” they say.

There can be no resurrection. Nothing for the stalks beneath my feet but decay.

“Yes,” they say. “But you cannot allow it to happen again. For you: one more swing of the scythe.”

Redemption?

“Perhaps.”

One more swing of the scythe.

I take Kaeler's hand. We look at each other like wolves.

* * *

Too many voices in my head; too many visions. But I swear Kaeler opens a small hatch in his bottom jaw, and from it he withdraws a narrow jeweler's blade, and, with a quick glance up, cuts off the top of his left middle finger.

Blood is a friend of mine. It defined my old life—though I cannot remember exactly how—and my time in the oubliette.

But what comes from Kaeler's finger isn't blood. It is too thin, too black, and where it hits the grates the metal smokes and fizzes and finally cracks to pieces.

An implant. My old specialty.

"Do you remember," the ghosts inquire, "the men who bore the bombs like fetuses into Amarana?"

Four men, and a woman. A young woman. Each placed strategically. There had been months of research and—

"Quickly, now." Kaeler grabs me. A dribble of black from his finger burns into me. "Be present, Lash."

"Look at him," say the ghosts. "Look at him."

I look at the grate first. Kaeler had burned a hole almost two feet wide—more than enough for my starving body.

"Into the river," he says.

The river is black and angry. It is thirty feet below us, and just looking at it, past the ropes of prisoner-rot swaying from the bars, overwhelms me. I evacuate my bowels and shriek something in a language I don't know. Kaeler—it was Kaeler next to me when Amarana fell, Kaeler who saw the beauty, and

"I have come far, brother," says Kaeler. "We need you, and there is no time for hesitation."

"Jump," says a ghost.

"Fall."

"Jump!"

So many voices.

“Let the river take you.”

“We will fall together.”

“Into the river.”

“Into the air!”

—and one of them is Kaeler’s—

“Trust us.”

“NOW!”

—but I don’t know which.

“Jump!”

“Stay together!”

I close my eyes. Hands are on me, rough ones and needle ones.

“Don’t worry.”

“The fall will be over soon enough.”

Someone laughs.

“God be with us.”

I open my eyes. The oubliette is above me, above us, quickly receding. From here it looks like a fishing net—massive, the size of a small town—hauling in its grisly catch of murderers and dissidents. Tangled in it are people like me, staring, already too far away to tell if they are confused or scared or excited.

There is a brief sensation, like a shockwave, and I go black.

* * *

Water, people say, evokes a feeling of peace. Sunsets over lakes. Ocean waves talking their way up beaches.

But water is false. Like a man, it has two faces. Its surface—merely the reflection of the people and things around it—is a pleasant story, a harmonious extension of its surroundings. But within: it is unforgiving, violent, cutting, crushing, bottomless, blinding...

“Open your eyes,” says a voice.

I am floating.

“Surface,” says a voice.

I am submerged.

“Wake up!”

Maybe water has three faces. Calm surface; chaos in the transition; and beneath is oblivion. Serenity.

Escape.

The ghosts scream in my head. Bubbles erupt from my mouth.

“help”

Strong arms wrap around me, and pull me back to the air and to life. Kaeler’s face is huge and black and wet.

“Lash,” he whispers. “Lash, are you still here?”

“I’m...” I don’t know what to say. Days have passed without food, with only rain for water, and my body... “I’m here.”

“Good. Our ride is here.”

I become aware of a shape, low and dark as a log or a hunting crocodile. It’s a boat, silent, and filled with silent men who offer us hands. Once Kaeler and I are pulled aboard, the men rocket us between the banks using their hands as paddles. The oubliette is gone and the city bridges arc majestically over us. The movement, and the calming shushes of the ghosts, lull me to the edge of sleep just as the alarm is raised.

Bells ring out from the Judicial Plaza and voices call out from bridge to bridge above us.

“Gods,” mutters one of the boatmen. “I didn’t expect them to be so fast.”

“Hide,” whispers a ghost in my head.

“We need to get off the river,” says Kaeler. “If they know of the escape, they’ll have already dropped the gate. There’s no way out, this way.”

We continue for ten minutes—long enough for the silhouettes of pursuing boats to come into view behind us—before grounding suddenly and violently against an abandoned stone boat ramp. The four boatmen jump out and brandish

blades. I cannot see their faces, but I see no trace of fear or hesitation. One of them claps Kaeler on the shoulder.

“With me, Lash,” says Kaeler, leaping from the boat and offering his hand. His eyes flicker in the moonlight. “Our brothers will buy us a delay.”

* * *

I try to run, but my joints have suffered and I can't keep up. Before we even make it up the boat ramp, Kaeler makes an exasperated noise and crouches so I can climb onto his back.

He stands, holding my forearms together with a single hand. “You weigh nothing, brother.” He exhales, and jogs into the cluster of merchant buildings, all of which are dark and closed for the night. Just as we are concealed, we hear shouts and fighting. The guards have arrived at the boat ramp.

Kaeler must feel my tension because he pats my arm and says “We'll have time. The men I brought are demons in battle.”

As if on cue, the shouts from the ramp turn to shrieks and the sounds of armored bodies—the city guards, I realize—collapsing onto stone and splashing into the river. There is a hush, then, and I see all four of our companions trotting into view, crouched low and gleaming with sweat and blood.

The ghosts churn within me, but I can't tell if they are excited by the violence or disconcerted by it.

I drop from Kaeler's shoulders and we all confer in the shadowed entrance of a warehouse.

"There were two boats in pursuit," says the lead boatman. "Three men to a boat. Sentries, though, not soldiers." He grins. "They stood no chance."

"Thank you," I say.

The boatman looks at me for the first time, for a long time, then raises his sword hilt to the center of his chest and nods to me. "It is an honor."

I do not know why.

* * *

I am in a box. Hidden in a warehouse, in the dark, with Amarana and its ghosts. "Until the city lowers its guard," said Kaeler.

It is as timeless as the prison beneath the Judicial Plaza. But even in the timelessness and lonely darkness there is no peace. The ghosts of Amarana are awake, sharks at chum.

What do they want from me?

"Remember," one hisses.

I remember only pieces.

"What do you remember?"

I remember a man, younger than me, and a hollow in his abdomen where his organs had been.

I remember something in the hole—clockwork and wires—
and a voice, whispering as if to itself:

“silver to copper, then
silver to black;
silver to copper, then
silver to black”

and there was tension in the voice—concentration, and
perhaps fear of the terrible potential.

“What do you remember?”

Steady hands. A voice—Kaeler’s—saying “Amarana will
fall.”

“What do you remember?”

Five toned bodies scooped out like gourds. False brass
sides attached to them to conceal the bombs. Celebration.

“What do you remember?”

Fire and blooming death and falling.
Then darkness.

* * *

The box is moving.

* * *

The box is moving.

I am so thirsty.

* * *

The box is a coffin. I’m sure of it.

My lips crack and bleed. My body shakes uncontrollably.

Kaeler has forgotten me. He is dead; they are all dead; all life has been crushed beneath the heel of the world but me, gasping in the darkness like a fish on the shore. There are no brothers.

There are only ghosts.

* * *

A noise awakens me. I don't know where I am. The noises of the city have long stopped. I don't know when it is. I've slept more than once.

The ghosts have kept me company, reciting hour after hour of stories of Amaranan lives snuffed out, and they know my mind. "You are not dead," they whisper. "Not yet."

A sudden crack of light almost blinds me, and the nails of the box lid shriek as they are wrenched up.

I don't want this. I want the dead to whisper me into oblivion. I want to lose myself. To become clay, formless, like I was before the hands of the world first shaped me.

"This is your resurrection," says a ghost. "You are not done."

Reluctantly, I sit up and there is jubilation. Twenty faces, thirty, I cannot count the crowd, but their mouths are all open and shouting and their eyes are wild. From the blur, Kaeler steps forward and raises his hands.

“Welcome,” he shouts, toward me but in a manner meant for the audience, which cheers in response. “My brother: Lash the physician! Lash the bombmaker!”

Bombmaker.

That’s what I was.

That’s how I flooded my past self with blood and glory. The doctor who learned how to conceal bombs from even the most attentive guards, who learned the delicate wiring from a toothless clockmaker

silver to copper, then

silver to black,

always in that order, *never* permitting the copper and black wires to cross—who perfected the implantation procedure. Lash the bombmaker, who—

“—struck Amarana to the ground.” Kaeler was still shouting to the crowd. “The man who brought the spinning hub of our enemies to a grinding halt! Welcome home!”

Home. I am overwhelmed. Home!

“We will never have a homecoming,” says a ghost. An old man’s voice. “Our homes are spread to dust on the valley floor.”

The words pull me away from the fleeting sensations of the room and back into my mind.

This is not my home.

I want to protest. Home was a small two room shack, warm and pleasantly dim, filled with the smell of cinnamon and the voice of our mother singing and the sound of our father's hushed conversations with huge, faceless men. I played with toy soldiers and learned my letters there, under the tutelage of mother's mother. Home was where father was taken by Justice, months before Kaeler was even born.

"You *never* knew our home!"

Am I speaking out loud? No one seems to have noticed, except perhaps Kaeler who is very still and looking at me. The crowd is too excited to see me. Everyone is smiling with their teeth and every nerve is telling me to run.

I'm weak.

"We know," say the ghosts.

I can't do this.

"You must."

I'm— I haven't said the words, but I realize abruptly I mean them. "I'm sorry!"

"Apology," hisses a ghost, and I can feel her like a blade in me, "is insufficient."

* * *

Night comes fast in the valley. The sun lowers but does not dim until the edges of cliffs eclipse it. There is no twilight warning—the unsuspecting can be caught off-guard, lost in the

dark among the many false paths and treacherous falls that line the valley's walls and floor.

The sun is low, and I understand the dangers. But, fixed by Kaeler's eyes I still find myself wanting to flee, to deliver myself to the wilderness.

"We need you," Kaeler says.

I don't know if I can do this.

"Ask him what he needs," instruct the ghosts.

So I do.

"The loss of Amarana brought the junta to chaos, but they've mostly recovered. Administrative functions—even for the remote regions—have been moved to the capital."

"You need my bombs."

"More than ever. Amarana had a single failure point, which is why we hit it in the first place. But the capital is hardened, and the ideal targets are well-distributed."

"So you'll need to hit multiple locations. Depots and offices?"

Kaeler shakes his head. "They're too well-protected. They learned at least one lesson from Amarana." Then he laughs, and it is terrible. "But they didn't learn every lesson."

"Listen now," say the ghosts. "Listen closely. Listen and remember." They fill me again with their final sensations—

smoke burns in my lungs, and the ground slips away beneath my feet and I am falling, I am falling...

“We’ll hit their markets. We’ll hit their homes. Their hospitals. Their nurseries.” Kaeler’s face is fierce. His conviction is absolute. I remember a time when that conviction swayed me. “They are protecting their brain, so we will rip out their heart.”

* * *

They give me a medical student—a skinny, nervous young man called Heit—to train.

“We’ll need more bombs than you can provide, brother.” Kaeler claps me on the shoulder and pushes Heit into the room with his other hand. “Heit will be of great help to you,” he says, but he smiles as he says it. Kaeler never smiles.

“Be cautious,” say the ghosts.

“I am always cautious,” I say, then kick myself for speaking out loud again without meaning to.

Kaeler raises an eyebrow. “I understand. You have standards. But properly trained, Heit will be a second set of arms for you. Teach him everything.”

Kaeler walks out and I’m left alone with Heit.

Well... not entirely alone.

“Do not trust him,” says a ghost.

“He is one of them,” says another.

“He cannot be—”

“I know!” I shout, and Heit drops a scalpel he was examining and looks at me in alarm.

“It is an honor, bombmaker,” he says, mumbling, while stooping to pick up the scalpel.

I wince. “Call me Lash. Only Lash.”

His eyes grow huge, and I’m reminded of my welcome here. I am a hero.

I don’t need the ghosts’ jeering to feel sick at the thought.

“How old are you?” I say.

“Nineteen.”

Nineteen? So young; was I ever so young? I was only two years older when Kaeler...

“Surgical training?”

“Yes. Two years.” He looks me in the eyes for the first time. “My mother always said my hands were a gift.”

“And demolition work?”

Heit finds the scalpel and drops it trying to return it to a table. “None, bombmaker. Lash.”

The ghosts break in. “He is your tool. Use him.”

“Teach him.”

“Yes... teach him.”

I make a squeaking noise and smile, too large, and I can feel my left eyelid flutter. “Ah, so I will... teach you.”

* * *

Heit learns.

The ghosts riot.

And I... drift.

Heit and I, we carve bodies—I don't ask where Kaeler gets them—so he can learn where the incisions are made, where the explosives are packed, how everything is fused and resealed. Camouflaged.

But I spend as much time arguing with the ghosts as I spend teaching Heit.

He asks why we hide the bombs inside people—why not just packs that can be set down? The ghosts scoff and spit, and I explain about the search protocols, and how in areas of heightened security every cart and every bag is searched. A person with a bag filled with the expected travel necessities—and nothing else—can walk in with thirty pounds of explosives in their gut primed for detonation.

“Is that how you killed Amarana?”

The ghosts seethe. They tear at me.

I cannot remember the faces of the bombers I operated on before Amarana. But I remember they were young, and I remember their twitching excitement—the same excitement Heit demonstrates now. And again the ghosts remind me of my

purpose and assail me with a hurricane of their last moments, and by the time they stop I am curled on the floor, weeping.

I forget to answer Heit's question.

* * *

I try to focus.

I want so badly to think clearly again, but the ghosts won't leave me alone. "Do you know what the brothers say about you?"

I don't care about what they think.

"They say you're crazy," says a ghost.

They're right.

"They think you're dangerous."

I try to turn back to my lecturing, but they interrupt me again.

"They're plotting, right now, Kaeler and those closest to him." This voice is of an older woman, and it reminds me so much of mother's mother I cry just to hear its softness. Heit looks at me in alarm, but the ghost keeps talking. "They're going to ask you to sacrifice yourself. To be the next bomb."

I close my eyes, and all I see is surgical cuts and the removal of pulsing organs and explosives, then wires, always silver to copper, always silver to black, wires bristling from the empty cavity of our sacrificed brothers and sisters. My whole body shakes at the thought, and I whisper, "What should I do?"

Heit steps forward, hesitates before he touches me. “Sir?”

The ghost’s voice is understanding but firm. “You’re going to say yes.”

* * *

“Good,” I say, and it is. The brass is smooth on my sides—better than I could have crafted it myself. Heit has listened well.

Kaeler’s voice disrupts my thoughts. It is too muffled to understand his words, but I recognize the tone. He and the men he calls brothers—I spit at the thought—are in the next room, deep into yet another planning session, no doubt arguing about me, about where I will strike.

Of course, my brother didn’t trust me with the detonator. But he should understand better than anyone: a compliant man is as reliable as a button.

“Now the wires,” I say to Heit, Heit-my-scythe, and I smile at the weight of the explosives within me.

I am walking death; I need no button to push; Kaeler cannot—

“He cannot stop you,” say the ghosts.

He cannot.

Ghosts crowd against me. Their fingers brush my back, tracing the pattern of the streets as they fell, as they still fall, over and over, accompanied by our ragged cheers and the

screams of children. I sense their anticipation, but I don't feel it.

I feel only relief.

Heit licks his lips. He is so eager, but he doesn't understand. His young mind is filled with future, unaware we have already been cut down by the past.

All that remains is to fall.

I try to pity the boy, but the ghosts don't allow it, so I simply watch.

His nimble fingers pluck at cords within my abdomen to complete the wiring, just like I showed him:

Silver to silver;

copper to black.

A single spark leaps. Beneath me, the stones bloom.

Copyright © 2017 Kurt Hunt

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

Kurt Hunt is, in no particular order, a father, a lawyer, a husband, a human, and a daydreamer. Sometimes he writes things, but usually he doesn't. His fiction has been published at Strange Horizons and PodCastle, among others.

Support *BCS*

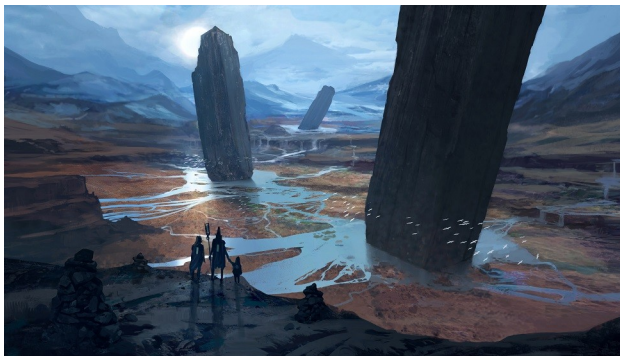
BCS on **facebook**

BCS on **twitter**

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

COVER ART

“Pillars of the Gods,” by Ward Lindhout



Ward Lindhout is a concept artist currently living and working in Japan. Having studied game design in his home country of Holland, his love for original videogame design drove him to the land of the rising sun. After having worked on titles like *The Evil Within* and *Metal Gear Rising* he is now working at Capcom. He is passionate about designing new worlds and their inhabitants, drawing inspiration from traveling to the many beautiful countries the world has to offer. View more of his work on his website at www.artbyward.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

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

Compilation Copyright © 2017 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.