

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy

Issue #223 • Apr. 13, 2017

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I HAVE BEEN DROWNED IN RAIN

by Carrie Vaughn

Aldis snapped his fingers, and grass kindling under scraps of wood sparked, lit, and caught fire. His companions drew near the heat, murmuring gratefully.

Jared let the others have the small space around the fire. He'd only reluctantly agreed to one in the first place. Here by the shore, many small encampments sat around sputtering fires—travelers waiting for the tide to change, for a hired boat to return, for a place on a crew sailing out. For the rain to stop. His party—the magician, the knight, the thief, and the princess—would not draw attention with its small camp. He hoped.

The fifth member of the group, the young woman Kat, stood by, clutching flint and steel, her hood thrown back such that her head was drenched, her brown hair dripping with rain. Aldis had stepped in with magic when her own efforts at starting the fire with wet wood proved futile.

She pouted and grumbled, “It’s all well until magic leaves the world. Then where’ll you be, hm?”

This was just the sort of thing she said often, declarative and nonsensical. She flopped to the ground and started cutting

turnips into her cooking pot, humming an unrecognizable tune punctuated with a few scattered words, also nonsensical.

Jared didn't know what Kat was: waif, vagrant, servant. Enigma. Mariana watched her with hawk-like focus. She had been hidden away as an acolyte in a distant temple, safe and anonymous. She'd been happy, before Jared arrived to call her to her destiny. Lines of worry were starting to crease her young face. They would only deepen when she became queen.

She thought Kat was some kind of medium, clairvoyant. Maybe a seeress. A prophet of the future, or past, if they could only understand her. It would explain why she was here, at least. Suggest that Kat had a purpose for joining them. That some kind of Fate was at work.

The rest of the party agreed that she was mad.

Whoever Kat was, they had eaten well since she joined them. Edging to the fire with her pot and turnips, she set up a little tripod to hang it from, added water and bit of ale, herbs from a pouch, dried meat from a rabbit she'd trapped a couple days before. The stew wouldn't be much, but it would be warm, and it wouldn't stick in the throat the way travel fare usually did at this stage of a journey, when home was just a short sail across a calm stretch of water.

After all that had come before, these last few days seemed a mockery. A simple journey by boat, and all would be well.

Jared hated waiting, stalled here, postponing his triumphant return for something as insignificant as the tide.

And yet, they could still be caught. Even now Wrath's hunters could find them, and their quest would fail. Jared stayed in shadow, where his vision was not so blinded by the firelight, and kept watch.

Kat spooned stew into shallow bowls. She came to give Jared his portion. He gripped the bowl with both hands to warm them and smiled up at her. "Thank you."

She looked bedraggled, some poor creature saved from drowning, a shawl pulled haphazardly over her shoulders. She shrugged. "It's all of a kind to me."

She had a country accent, with the rough brown features of the poor farmers of this land. Looking at her, he'd have guessed she'd lost her way at a village market.

Mariana graced him with a smile, her young face gilded by the firelight. "Jared, why are you brooding? We're almost home and yet you still look as if wolves are stalking us."

"Forgive me," he answered. "It's habit."

They dispensed with titles and honorifics to protect Mariana's identity, but once they returned home, he would call her "Highness." Another habit to relearn, after weeks on the road. Returning his country's rightful heir from exile, in anticipation of the usurper tyrant's defeat, would be his

greatest feat, the fulfillment of a hundred boyhood dreams of adventure and noble deeds.

The Gods only knew how he'd made it this far. Their party should have been killed a dozen times over, but luck and Fate had brought this group together, and they'd saved each other a dozen times. Still, he could not bring himself to rest.

"Sing us a song, Kat." Baerd the thief would tell a man jokes while he slit his throat, and his victim would laugh along as he died. Take all his knives and weapons off him, Baerd would always have a few more hidden away. But Jared trusted him, as unbelievable as that would have seemed a year ago.

"You'll laugh at me." Kat knelt to scrub out her pot with sand, working as she always did. She insisted on earning her keep.

"Only if it's funny."

She had an unmelodic, unadorned voice.

It's the color of a sea in an ice cold rain

It's a nightmare steed and her coal-dark mane

It's the sound of a babe crying out in pain

It's the shape of my heart which you broke in twain.

Her voice cracked. The silence after was heavy. Rain drizzled, pattering on the sand.

"I'd hoped for something cheerful," Baerd said.

She shook her head. "They're all gone."

Jared took the pot from her. Her hands were shaking. “Rest,” he said. “I’ll finish this.”

“Can’t. Must work, must keep moving, it’s the only way.” But she let him keep the pot and pulled a damp blanket over her shoulders.

“Kat?” Mariana said gently. “What does it mean? That song?”

Jared couldn’t say. The woman would tell them their futures, if they only understood her. Or it might mean nothing at all.

“It’s what my heart says. I don’t know anything else. Nothing at all.”

They’d found her being attacked in an alley behind a tavern, in a town they’d stayed in a month ago. Jared, Aldis, and Baerd had just joined Mariana, and the urgency of their escape was great. But they couldn’t turn away. Without speaking a word about what must be done, they acted.

Three men—bulky, strong-arm types, local laborers or such—had Kat against a wall, two pinning her arms, the third hitching up her skirt and laughing. She struggled fiercely, but she was small and no match for them. Head tipped back, she howled, a cry of defiance full of bared teeth and spit. This was the sort of town that did not notice the screams of women in alleys; men were allowed to take what they willed.

Aldis raised his hand and summoned light. A star burned white and hot above him, illuminating the alley. The three men cried out, shielding their eyes, leaving the girl a chance to twist out of their grasps. Jared and Baerd drew blades—the knight his sword, the thief a thin dagger. In short order they drove the three men off and sent them running. Baerd nearly put his knife through one of their throats; Jared had to hold him back, warning, “We don’t need bodies drawing attention to us.”

Mariana helped the girl up from where she huddled against a wall. She didn’t cry. In fact, when they gathered around her, she regarded them with a straightforward, calm expression, as if this sort of thing happened to her often.

“You needn’t have bothered,” she said softly. “I’m already dead. Been that way for weeks. Or months. I forget which.”

It was clear from the first she was mad. Mariana insisted on bringing her along. “Jared, we can’t leave her,” she’d said insistently. “She’ll surely die.”

“We don’t have time. We can leave her at the temple—”

The girl looked back and forth between them and said, “The lady needs a maid, yes? You’re too fine to be traveling without one, I can see that. I can cook, clean, mend shirts—I can earn my keep. The fine lady needs a maid.”

She saw right through Mariana’s disguise of peasant clothing. Jared reasoned, then, that they couldn’t very well

leave her behind to spread stories. Looking back on it, stewing here in the rain and his frustrations, he still didn't know what to think of Kat. She didn't make any sense. The whole episode could easily have been arranged to set the girl among them as a spy. If she were, what trap awaited them when they stepped off the boat at the end of the voyage?

Was she simply waiting for a chance to murder them all in their sleep?

The rain continued, interminable. Baerd hunched inside his cloak and scowled. "Aldis, can't you do something about this rain, if you're such a great mage?"

"It doesn't work that way," Aldis said. "I put up with a little rain so that I might light a fire in it. One or the other, not both. I won't waste the magic when we can all very well stand the rain."

"Every rule can be worked around," Baerd said, grinning.

"Rain is death," Kat said flatly.

Jared looked at her. "What?"

"She said, 'Rain is death,'" Baerd helpfully told him.

Mariana said, "Kat, why would you say such a thing? Rain brings life. It waters the crops."

"And floods and drownings."

"She has a point," Baerd said.

“Everything that brings life can also bring death,” Aldis said.

Jared frowned. “It’s an ill omen, to say such a thing.”

The rain was still falling when they settled in to sleep. Jared doubted he would sleep at all. To be so close to the goal and yet still have such a great hurdle to cross. Yet they must wait until morning, when the tide turned.

Aldis had the first watch. He drew his cloak around him and sat on a berm of stone a little ways off, where he could watch the camp and the space around it. Jared joined him after the others had stilled.

“Not tired, my friend?” Aldis said.

“I’m exhausted. But I can’t sleep.”

The two women slept close together, sharing a blanket, taking shelter in each other’s companionship. At times Jared was grateful Kat had joined them. She had made the journey easier for Mariana.

“You still don’t trust the girl,” Aldis said, watching Jared watch the sleeping women.

Jared stopped a sigh from hissing through his lips. “These last few days have been too easy, don’t you think? This shore should be covered with agents of the tyrant looking for us. I expected to have to fight our way onto a boat, to stow away like

rats in a hold, fending off death at every turn. Yet here we are, in a pleasant little camp, with food in our bellies, *sleeping*.”

Aldis turned his face into the rain. “I wouldn’t call this pleasant. You think we’re missing something?”

“A spy among us could send messages, telling our whereabouts, our progress. The tyrant would only have to bide his time. She is the unknown quantity.”

Where did Kat fit into the story of such a quest? The waif, the madwoman—such as she were *meant* to be left on the side of the road as omens to ponder. Not taken along to cook meals.

“Jared, this is why we’ve set a watch. I’ll watch her. Don’t worry.”

Jared needed sleep, whether he wanted it or not. He stretched out on his soggy bedroll, still some distance from the fire, from the others, as if he could not be a part of them. He could not—he was their protector.

“Jared,” Baerd spoke softly. The thief propped himself on his elbow. His eyes gleamed orange, looking out from the hood of his cloak. “The girl is no more than what she appears, I think. There’s a sadness about her that’s honest.”

“Then what is she doing here? What brought her to us?” Whenever Jared put the question to her, she answered with riddles, with nonsense.

Baerd said, “Not your question to answer, it seems.” He lay back on his bedroll, seemingly without a care.

If Jared kept up this thinking, by morning he’d trust no one.

* * *

Aldis was meant to wake him around midnight, to change the watch. Jared, used to long campaigning, to the habit of their watch, woke on his own, expecting Aldis’s voice, to find him waiting. He expected to be able to open his eyes. But he couldn’t.

He couldn’t move at all. His blanket pressed on him, his limbs felt pinned to the ground as if nailed there, his body frozen as if his blood had been replaced with iron and he had become a blacksmith’s scrap, tossed away. He could almost feel the dirt under him spreading out, making the outline of his shape in the ground. This was some dream, some night terror.

But he never remembered dreams. This was something else, and it stank of magic.

He grunted, that was all the sound he could make, a bit of air escaping his throat. He panicked, because he couldn’t move enough to draw more air in. If he opened his eyes, he knew he’d find a boulder pressing on his chest. If he could open his eyes.

A rustling sounded near his ear. Someone moving close, kneeling. Jared could feel a gaze on him, and again he tried to

lurch up, to fight—they'd been found, Wrath's wizards attacking with an onslaught of magic, there had to be a way to fight back—

“Can't move, can you?” a voice whispered to him. Jared couldn't even grunt in response. That voice, he knew that voice

—

“Good,” Aldis said, with satisfaction. “Though you shouldn't be awake at all. You're strong, aren't you? Hm.” He made a noise as if he was surprised. “I ought to kill you. But the bounty on you all is only good if you're alive. I can't imagine why. Wrath only needs the princess.”

Jared knew why. Capturing them all was a show of power. And the tyrant could use the rest of them to force compliance from Mariana.

How had the tyrant gotten his claws into Aldis? Or had the magician been a pawn all along? Jared would throttle him. If he could just break free of the spell, just open his eyes...

“My poor friend,” Aldis said, without an ounce of sympathy. “You know you've lost.”

A great crash and thud sounded, followed by the splash of a body falling in a puddle. And Jared could suddenly sit. His muscles clenched at once and he gasped sharply, trying to see through the mist, fists ready to punch.

Kat stood there, her cook pot clutched in both hands. Aldis sprawled on the ground at her feet, a stain of blood growing on the side of his head.

“The princess—” Jared hissed.

“She and Baerd are both fine. Trapped like you, but I expect the magic to fade with him down. That’s how it works, yeah?”

Jared was still trying to find himself, trying to work out what had happened. “How—how is it you’re standing?”

“I think... I suspect... that he felt he didn’t need to waste any magic on me.”

Jared let out a thready laugh, past the fear still lodged in his throat. “Thank you.”

Kat sat abruptly, her legs folding under her, and hugged the pot in her lap.

“I’m mad and harmless. So I watched him leave his signs and send his messages. Didn’t say a word, and he never suspected.”

“You are not mad,” he said.

The fire had died, her face was in shadow, and her gaze seemed unsteady. “But I am. A little. After Ben died, his brothers came to the farm. They didn’t believe me when I told them he’d fallen off the roof. He was mending the thatch, but it had rained, and he slipped and fell. The rain hasn’t stopped

since, feels like. They dug him up to see for themselves. I'd buried him myself, you see. They thought, after, that the farm was theirs, and I couldn't argue. I couldn't work the land alone. Then they thought that I was theirs, too.

"So I ran. They found me. I went mad because it kept them away. The wise woman said there was no cure for it because I needed a baby to calm me, that a widow without a child to calm her could only go mad. I left them all and they were not sorry to see me go. But she was right. I wanted a baby." Her shrug was expansive. "Then you lot came along, and I could see the lady needed a friend. I've seen such sights with you, felt such amazement! I'm so grateful to you all."

"You've earned your way. More than earned it."

"I didn't want charity." Loneliness and grief were a kind of madness. Her stare was distant.

Jared studied her, her sopping hair and gaunt face. She was nothing to him, or shouldn't have been. The story she told—he might have ridden past the field where she worked a hundred times and never noticed her, not even her face, because it was bent to the earth. But now, at this moment, the two of them sat outside the reach of the embers' faint light, shrouded in a silent world, and they might have been alone on an island at the end of time. All his titles and stories, his dreams of glory and heroism, meant nothing, because a

farmer's widow had saved his life. And she had not done it for glory, but for decency.

She said that all she wanted was a child, and to mourn her husband.

“Then you have my pity.”

“That’s even worse.” She sighed.

Jared considered what to do with the traitorous mage. He would love best to truss him up, sling him over his saddle like so much meat, and return with him to face justice. That was the noble knight’s wish, the hero of tales planning how best the tale should end.

Kat caught him staring at the prone figure. “You can’t leave him alive. He’s too strong.”

Jared stared bleakly at Aldis’s prone form. “I know. But... I thought... he was my friend.”

“If you like, I’ll do it.”

What strange Fate brought him to this, that without the madwoman, the farmer’s widow, his quest would have been doomed?

“No,” he said. “It’s my duty, not yours.”

She helped carry Aldis to the water, where Jared slit his throat. The mage never woke. Kat might have killed him already; he didn’t bother checking. They searched the body and found a packet of letters in coded runes. He took these. After,

they shoved him into the waves. He'd likely wash ashore again in a day or so, but Jared and his company would be far away by then.

Jared watched the pulsing water and felt furtive, demon-like. He was meant to ride into battle with the sun on his face. But the rain still fell.

Kat smiled at him, her face ghostly, her eyes bright. What had Baerd said, that she had an air of sadness to her? She was thin and drawn. But the smile was pleasant. Genuine.

"You're a good man, Jared," she said. "But my Ben, he was the best."

Jared didn't doubt it.

* * *

When they got back to camp, the others were waking.

Mariana sat up, rubbing her face. "I've had an awful dream."

"It's no dream, lady. We must leave." Jared shook Baerd's shoulder. "Get up. We've been betrayed."

"What? What's wrong?" Baerd reached for his dagger.

Jared gathered up his blanket. "We're leaving now."

"Where's Aldis?"

"I said we've been betrayed."

"By the Gods," Mariana said. "Not Aldis."

Kat had efficiently gathered the few of their supplies into a pack. She touched Mariana's arm, urging her to stand.

"Rain is death, my lady." Her gaze was fierce. Mad, even. The mask had returned.

"We'll go up the coast a mile," Baerd said. "The fisher folk will sell us passage before dawn."

Jared nodded. "Good. We should hurry."

Kat said, "I know a cheerful song about fisher folk. You still want to hear a cheerful song?"

Baerd said patiently, "Perhaps it's best if you stay quiet just now, Kat."

Jared caught her gaze then, or she caught his. Hers was bold, laughing.

A little mad, to survive in such a world.

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Carrie Vaughn is the bestselling author of the Kitty Norville series, the final installment of which is Kitty Saves the World. Her most recent novel is the YA-flavored space adventure

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WHEN WE GO

by Evan Dicken

The smile bled from Raven's lips as I drove the World Serpent's Fang into her side. Slate gray veins spread from the wound, creeping up her chest to flow like rainwater along creases in the cracked hardpan of her face. I could feel Raven's breath on my cheek, sharp as burning prairie sage. Wind from thousands of beating wings made a wild tangle of our hair, the spirits of the underworld enfolding us in a spinning cloud of night-dark feathers. I wondered dully if my children were among them; the lost and forsaken had always been Raven's domain.

I held her gaze. There might be closure amidst the swirling flint-eyed faces of the dead, but if I glanced away, even for a moment, she would be as wind in my hands. Dreamgrief, Bone Rattle, Mother of Sighs—Raven had always been the thinnest of gods, a thing of smoke and tears. Besides, it didn't matter if my children were dead or slaves to the Bronze Faces. I was no mother to them. I couldn't even remember their names.

Raven sagged in my grip and I snaked an arm behind her to hold her close, just as I had held Hashuf after the Bronze

Face priests cut his burned and broken body from the wheel. Strange, how I could remember that moment but not the feel of Hashuf's skin on mine, the curve of his jaw in my cupped hands, or if he ever smiled.

Clouds stole over Raven's glossy black eyes, but there was still time. The Fang killed slow, as patient as age.

"Why did you forsake us?" The question hissed like smoke through my gritted teeth. I had put it to all the gods before the end: Red Claw, Grandmother Turtle, even the Green Corn Woman, their answers hollow as their devotion.

"Why not?" Raven had no teeth, no lips, no tongue. Her mouth yawned deep as the night sky, empty as a chasm, ready to swallow me as she had the smoke from our last desperate offerings. I remembered the heat of the pyre, hot enough to snatch the tears from my eyes as I fed my grandmother's tortoiseshell comb to the roaring blaze. The gods had taken it and so much more, but the sky had not darkened with fury and no pestilence came to strike down the invaders.

"You were gods," I said, voice rising with the wind.

"Your name, not ours."

"You were *our* gods!"

"Your choice, not ours." She spoke as if from deep inside the earth, an echo with no maker.

"Where is Coyote?" I asked.

“At the end, where else?” Streamers of greasy black smoke leaked from her cloak to vanish in the wind, her body like dry grass in my arms. I shook her, but she, the god of the dead, was dead herself and my hands empty but for her cloak of feathers.

And then there was one.

Coyote had always been the closest to us, weakest of the gods or perhaps the strongest mortal. That old trickster, he carried no blade, had no home, with his arms forever open, a grin on his changing face and a secret in his eyes. It was said he dwelt among mortals because he loved us, or because he hated us—it depended on the tale, and there were many. His betrayal had cut the deepest. Not because he could’ve stopped the Bronze Faces, but because he was too much of a coward to even watch us go.

Distant sunlight threaded the gloom, boiling away the underworld like morning mist. Galleries of bone and whip-tight sinew fell away to reveal rough limestone, the polished obsidian floor tiles crumbling to fine black sand beneath my feet. In the time it took my heart to stop racing, the underworld had become little more than a large, unremarkable cavern.

I wrapped Raven’s cloak about my shoulders, the feathers cool against my skin in the warmth of the cave. It wasn’t that I needed or even wanted the thing, but it seemed a shame to leave it, and there was precedent, of a sort. It had felt only right

to take a comb from Grandmother Turtle to replace the one she'd stolen from me. I'd told myself I *had* to take the Green Corn Woman's satchel to keep it from the Bronze Faces. It was the same with Raven's cloak. The gods had done my people little good. I would see they did little harm.

The dead slipped away, taking the wind of their breath to wherever spirits go when nothing remains to watch over them. For a moment, I felt small hands in mine. When I looked down there was only the Fang—a gift from the Serpent, not enough to devour the world but perhaps enough to make it regret.

The dull thunder of hooves greeted me as I ducked from the cave. I blinked through the unaccustomed brightness to see a party of Bronze Face riders crest a nearby rise. They wore battle masks wrought to resemble lions, spiders, hawks, and all manner of fearsome animals. Light from the setting sun glinted from their helms and lacquered breastplates, reminding me of the water beetles my children used to catch in the shallows north of the longhouse. I remembered their cupped hands overflowing with tiny things; their laughter, quick and breathless from the sprint up from the pond; the smell of hot oil as Hashuf fried the beetles with black beans and gingerroot. The memory was old leather worn thin from long use. I held it tight, searching for names, smiles, anything, but the faces of my family were salt in the rain.

An arrow hissed past my cheek.

The riders bore down on me, circling with shouts and yips, more arrows leaping from their long, lopsided horse bows. Barbed shafts skittered between my ribs, flicked darkness across my eyes, slipped coolly into the hollow of my throat, but they might as well have been harsh words for all the mark they left upon my flesh. I wore Death's mantle—the only thing that could end me now was clutched in my sweaty palm.

They broke off, confusion evident in their bearing if not their masked faces. Three swapped their bows for spears and rode at me, dirt flying. Irritated, I killed them quickly, leaping up to draw the Fang across their throats as they galloped past. There was no anger in my heart, even after all the Bronze Faces had done. They'd made no promises, broken no oaths, never lied about what they were.

One of them rode forward, her weapons slung, one hand at her side, palm parallel to the ground. Her mask was featureless, but her breastplate bore the round spoked symbol of the Bronze Faces' god-who-was-not-a-god.

She said something in their halting, hard-edged tongue, then gestured at the cave.

I shook my head and thrust my chin back the way they had come.

She nodded and turned away.

I took one of the riderless horses' bridles and swung into the saddle. A few of the Bronze Faces shouted at this, but the priest woman cut them off with a flick of her fingers.

No arrows followed me into the sunset. When I reached the top of the hill, the riders were gone, a serpent of trampled grass coiling back upon itself.

"Thank you."

I hadn't heard the old man approach. He was short and crook-backed, his grey-black beard heavy with ancestor charms. He had the look of a hunter long past his prime, hands rough with old calluses, face screwed into a perpetual squint but his notched ears and arms crisscrossed with scars spoke of frequent bloodlettings.

"You drove off the Bronze Faces." When he smiled, I could see his teeth had been filed with speaking runes. A shaman, then.

"They'll be back."

"Another day is another day." He winked up at me. "Did Raven send you?"

"I came for Raven."

"Ah, I see." He glanced at the Fang. "You're her, aren't you?"

I nodded.

“I knew you’d come.” A smile ghosted across his cracked lips.

I nudged the horse forward, rising in the saddle as I prepared to ride him down. There were many among my people who still thought the gods would save them, even believed the Bronze Faces were punishment for our lack of faith. I had no time to waste on an old shaman’s tricks and wood lore, not when the end was so near. Coyote would not stalk me through the ancient coastal forests, snarling fiery mist into the sky; he would not seek to turn me aside with visions of departed loves or snare me with unsolvable riddles. No, ever the trickster, he would hide as he always did, hoping to lose himself among mortals and other little things.

“No need for that.” The old man made shields of his raised hands. “Won’t find any trouble here, not from me, not from any who saw the Scaffold fall. What manner of gods won’t even save their own temple?”

I couldn’t sheathe the Fang, so I let it drop to my side, low but threatening.

“My name is Ardrun,” he said. “Yours?”

I couldn’t remember. So I just looked away.

Ardrun watched me for a moment, then shrugged. “Fair enough.”

He nodded at thin coils of smoke rising from the valley beyond. “Come to camp. You’ve earned a rest and a meal, might as well collect before the Bronze Faces kill us all.”

His offer meant little. I’d felt neither hunger nor exhaustion since the Field of Husks, the emptiness inside me lost against the vast hollow expanse of a thousand worlds fallen to rot amid the roots of the World Tree. I’d left more than my blood upon that long crawl down to the Serpent’s lair, the jagged tangle of obsidian roots carving away whole parts of me. And yet, something tightened in my chest as I surveyed the valley. The smoke on the air, the faint calls of herders, the distant glimmer of fires—I needed no rest, I needn’t even stop, but it would be nice to ride toward the camp for a while, to pretend I was coming home.

It might be my last chance before the Bronze Faces killed us all.

* * *

There were thousands of refugees huddled in the shadow of a long barrow, one of the many overgrown heaps of stone and earth piled over the bones of those who had called the plains home before my people had come. Legends said the Mound Folk had been dead and gone long before we came, but I’d seen their shades while I hunted Raven through the underworld—tall, with the pale white eyes of corpses, their

wings not feathered but thin and dusty like moths'. They had not spoken, had not bade me carry messages to their kin; they had only stared, heads thrown back and lips pursed like they were throat singing. No sound had broken the breathless silence, but the Mound Folk's emptiness echoed within me. In that moment, I knew we had done to them what the Bronze Faces were doing to us. I wondered if the Mound Folk had prayed for deliverance when we swept across the plains.

I wondered if they'd deserved it.

Ardrun ran ahead, calling to the refugees while my horse took its time picking through the carpet of tangled snakebrush.

The people watched me come. I could feel the hollowness in their hearts, in their stomachs. What I'd mistaken for cook fires were actually the remains of pyres, burnt down to sullen ashes. A half-made kraal surrounded the camp, the fence of woven sticks rising to waist height before petering out as if the builders had simply lost interest. Those few goats that remained inside were tottering, raw-boned things, barely good for meat let alone milk.

A knot of warriors slouched out to meet me, pushing past Ardrun. Most were old, the ink of their tattoos as faded as their glories. They carried bows and long axes, but I could tell from the shuffle of their feet, the gentle rounding of their shoulders, that they weren't about to use them.

For the first time since I stepped from Raven's cave, I wondered how long I'd been down there. The underworld was slippery, days creeping by. I looked again at the older warriors and recognized some ancestor lines among the whorls and hachures on their faces, but most of their tattoos were foreign as Bronze Face sigils. Here and there, I saw fresh marks still glistening with blood. Those who wore them were little more than children, their faces smooth and unlined yet already steeped in bitterness.

It was one of these who stepped forward to glare up at me. She was tall and long-limbed, her hair woven with dark feathers and her hands blackened with soot. Although most warriors prayed to Red Claw, a few sacrificed to Raven.

"Who are you?" She held her axe tight, gaze flicking to the Bronze Face markings on my horse.

I couldn't remember, so I just stared back.

"It's *her*, Fehu." Ardrun tried to slip through the tightly packed group, then gave up and walked around them.

"Now, she returns." Fehu's lips made a tight line as she scowled at my satchel, my comb, my cloak. "Come to end us, too, murderer?"

That was new.

The older warriors edged back, which wasn't unexpected. They would've been children when I set out for the Tree, just

coming into their prime when my battle with Red Claw set the great pines aflame. I knew there were tales, had even heard a few as I crept up on a camp, listening from beyond the firelight, close enough to imagine I was one of them, tired and frightened rather than empty and sharp. People love to tell stories, to try and make sense of it all. The worse it got, the more they needed to believe.

“Why did you do it?” Fehu asked.

I looked at my hand, knuckles whitening on the Fang. I’d only meant to threaten Grandmother Turtle, to force her to honor her promises.

Why have you forsaken us?

Grandmother had just smiled that serene, self-righteous smile. “Can the sun forsake the sky? Seasons change, daughter. Do you blame the winter for being cold?”

We had spoken for days, perhaps longer, Grandmother Turtle twisting my questions back upon themselves until my thoughts were burr-tangled hair. It wasn’t until I saw the Scaffold burn that I’d finally grown tired of her riddles. I could still picture blood blossoming like red spider-lilies from the thin slash in her throat. It seemed such a tiny thing, too small to kill a god, but she had fallen, smiling even as the grayness crept over her. I hadn’t known what would happen, hadn’t trusted the World Serpent, hadn’t even believed I could do it.

“Answer me!” Fehu’s shout snapped my head up like a hurled stone.

“They abandoned us.”

“Why should the gods stay? You were *killing* them!”

I knew Fehu was going to charge before she knew it herself—the slight shift in her stance, the quick inhalation as the rage boiled up.

It was like looking into a mirror.

The hunt had made me fast as a spring flood. I could’ve slapped the axe from Fehu’s hands and set her on her back before she even took a step. There didn’t seem much of a point, though—I wasn’t after her. So I let her come, dark and fierce, howling as she brought her axe down in a tight arc. It slipped through the joint of my hip, flesh and bone parting like clouds around the blade. She couldn’t hurt me. Unfortunately, I hadn’t considered the horse.

It shuddered beneath me, the bright spray of blood from its nostrils speckling the faces of the front rank of warriors. Fehu reeled back, dripping axe held tight, her expression one of wide-eyed surprise.

The horse kicked out, then pitched to the side, its hooves churning the dry earth. One quick blink and I was kneeling beside it, not exactly sure how I’d dismounted. The wound was deep, deadly but slow. The Fang wouldn’t be any quicker, so I

stepped to Fehu with a speed that set her stumbling over her heels. I made sure to keep my knife hand behind, fist pressed tight into the small of my back. Fehu was a fool, but I didn't want to end her.

Even one-handed, taking her axe was easy as pulling grass. Two quick steps and I was looking down at the horse. I spared it a grateful nod before bringing the blade down—it hadn't carried me far, but it had carried me. Just one more regret in a long, shameful litany.

Fehu watched me for a moment, empty hands flexing as if to strangle the air. With a frustrated grunt she turned and pushed her way back through the crowd. A few of the younger warriors followed her; none of the old ones did.

I tossed her axe away then sat, free hand on the horse's cooling cheek. It was a while before anyone spoke.

"Should've warned you about her." Ardrun's craggy shadow fell over me. "Most people take silence for what it is; others, well, some think it means they need to shout all the louder."

I didn't reply.

"Do you mind if we...?" He winced, swallowed, then glanced at the horse. "Lot of hungry people, here."

I stepped away and he waved a dozen warriors forward. They dragged the beast away, watching me as if I were a coiled snake.

“*Lot of hungry people.*” Ardrun massaged the back of his neck with one knobby hand.

I frowned, not sure what he was getting at.

He nodded at the sack on my hip. “That the Green Corn Woman’s satchel?”

“Ah, yes.” Like the horse, I’d simply forgotten. Distance had crept between me and the world, filling the spaces between breaths until reality seemed little more than a smudge on the horizon.

Chagrined, I loosened the drawstring and upended the bag. From it fell ears of grilled corn, nuts, hard green apples and sour cherries, baked goat, roasted crickets, and more—not a torrent like in the legends, but a steady trickle.

“It won’t feed everyone.” I glanced around the camp then held the sack out. “Won’t even feed most of them.”

“Still, we’re grateful.” He took it in both hands, the runes on his yellowed teeth making a story of his smile.

“I should go.”

“Stay,” he said. “I may have embellished the meal but rest we have aplenty, at least until the Bronze Faces return. You must be tired. “

I wasn't, I would never be again. And yet, the thought of being part of a camp, even for a night, seemed to loosen something in my chest.

"I need to find Coyote."

"Coyote is of the people." Ardrun bent to pick a chestnut from the growing pile of food. "What better place to look than here?"

I couldn't argue with that, or maybe I just didn't care to try.

* * *

"I will howl like the North Wind when I go." Sweat sheened the young warrior's face as she strutted around the chanting circle, the low buzz of throat singing lending her words a weighty echo. "Tearing blades from hands and foes from mounts, I will scatter them like autumn leaves when I go."

Her proclamation was greeted with the approving slap of hands on thighs, and she hopped from the hot coals, her voice threading the chant.

Another warrior stepped onto the glowing embers, his arms spread as he thrust his chin at the Bronze Face war camp on the distant hills. "I will glitter like silver when I go, piling masks to the midnight sky; I shall join the stars in heaven when I go."

Fire singing was an old game, older than the world, perhaps, played by warriors on the night before a battle to lift spirits and provide distraction. Normally, there would be drinking as well, the boasts becoming even more outrageous as the night wore on. Tonight, they made do with nothing stronger than hot tea but seemed even more determined for the lack of spirits. If the boasters' voices occasionally cracked or if the chant had an almost manic intensity, no one remarked upon it. All seemed resolved to ignore the swarming firefly glow of Bronze Face campfires to the east and the glitter of whitecaps to the west. We'd been running for weeks, tired and heartsick, the Bronze Faces at our heels—so long that the impassible vastness of the great western sea seemed more a reprieve than a doom.

“You should join the circle.” Ardrun nudged me. “Show them some *real* bragging.”

I worked a toe into the beach, cold seawater shifting the sand underneath my feet. Coyote wasn't here, had never been here. He was probably curled in a warm burrow on the other side of the plains, laughing at me. I hadn't meant to stay, to stumble west with the ragged column, but every time I turned away, Fehu's words came slipping up through the cracks in my thoughts. What if this was my fault?

Why have you forsaken us?

Red Claw had blamed me, too, had burned white with the injustice of it. It did not fall to me to judge the gods and I was a traitor for even trying. He'd given me no choice, no time, only came on fast as a wildfire. We had run for a very long time, his breath bellows-hot at my back, the flames of our passing leaping from tree to tree until the whole forest burned bright as day. At last, Red Claw caught me, knocking me to the ground before pinning me with one great steaming paw. Both of us were too breathless to speak. His jaws opened wide, slaver popping like hot oil to spark bright flecks of pain on my face.

But Red Claw had not devoured me. I felt the heat and pressure recede as he rocked back on his haunches, eyes widening. The great pines were gone, reduced to little more than black-tarred stumps by the flames of our chase. He looked about to speak, then lowered his head.

I put my question to him then, but he only laid down and closed his eyes. So was war ever ignorant.

Ignorant, but not blameless.

"I will soar like a sparrow when I go," a warrior called. He stepped onto the coals, face tight with concentration. "My enemies but tiny specks, I shall rise until they are nothing when I go."

The younger warriors shouted their approval, calling to the veterans who sat back from the fire with eyes slit and canny as

they sized up their competition. I scanned the crowd but couldn't find Fehu among them. She and her followers had been as ghosts during the past few weeks, ranging far ahead or far behind. It was they who'd first brought word of the Bronze Face army. The rest of the camp had been almost pathetic in their gratitude for my food and presence but careful with their words, handling me as if I were knapped flint. They whispered when they thought I couldn't hear. Several times, I'd caught them burning personal effects to a small, rough-carved effigy of a woman with a bone dagger. I considered stamping out the fires and telling them what fools they were, but in the end I did nothing. Who was I to blame them for trying to make sense of it all?

"Go on." Ardrun nudged me again. "Even if you don't fight tomorrow, it won't hurt to give them hope."

I watched them, recalling the old, fearful joy that dwelt within the chanting circle. The lull in the song seemed to call to me.

Hope? No, I suppose it couldn't hurt.

I swept past a very young man steeling himself for a run across the coals. I felt heat but no pain as I stepped onto the banked embers, and I worked my feet into the ash, standing with my head thrown back and my lips pursed. The chant

faltered as the warriors noticed me, startled looks flitting across the fire.

I drew in a great breath. “I will—”

“—fall chanting your name when I go.” Fehu stood opposite me. I hadn’t heard her approach. “My body one of many, I will be swept along with you when I go.”

The raven feathers were gone from Fehu’s hair and her skin was rubbed with white ash. Lines of soot accentuated her cheeks and jawline, giving her face a lean, wolfish look. She was unarmed but for a long dagger of sharpened bone. There were a dozen warriors with her, ranged in a loose semicircle around the coals like pale, wingless ghosts. For a moment, I feared I had never left the Underworld, that Raven had ensnared me as had the Green Corn Woman. I glanced to the Fang, all but humming with the desire to take their lives, and was reassured. It cared nothing for ghosts.

As one, they knelt upon the coals, knives held out, looking to me for answers.

I didn’t know what to say, so I ran.

Ardrun caught my arm. “Please, don’t go. We need—”

I shrugged from his feeble grip. The warriors parted for me. Silently, they watched me go, faces grim and desperate. I fled the circle, the camp, kicking up sprays of sand, the sea tugging at my ankles.

I should never have returned. The Green Corn Woman had spoken true in that, at least. “Kinder to lie, to pretend there’s a reason,” she’d whispered. “It’s what they want, anyway.”

I could’ve stayed in the dream she’d woven for me, drunk sweet berry wine from cups of woven grass and grown old with scarecrows in the dappled light of a thousand, thousand summer afternoons. Finally, I remembered Hashuf’s smile—eyes of polished river rock, his lips drawn back from a double-row of fine white kernels. The Green Corn Woman had fashioned me a husband, children, a life woven of gossamer lies to drape across the hollow within me. Why look for answers when there were no questions? It had been all I’d always wanted. Never had I been so tempted to simply drop the Fang and let it worm its way through the rind of the world back to its master. It would’ve been so easy. Denial was but ignorance given breath.

The Green Corn Woman had died hardest of all, screaming and pleading as I cut away her illusions. She would’ve told me anything and believed it true with all her heart, but belief is not truth. And so I had killed her like the others.

All but one.

Pale daylight threaded the horizon, separating sky from sea. I could run forever, faster than the Bronze Faces, faster than my people. I could run until the sky cracked and the earth

crumbled, until the Serpent crawled forth to devour the world or slumbered on and left it to rot with the others. The future would hold nothing, simple and empty, when I went.

Shouts carried along the breeze. In the plain beyond the camp the Bronze Faces rode in wide, lazy loops like hawks drifting on thermals. I could be among them in a frenzy of dust and blood, the crack of bone and wet swish of parting flesh the only sound from men and women lacking time to even scream. Perhaps their great wheel would save them; perhaps there would be too many. It didn't matter. I couldn't take enough of them to make a difference when I went.

I looked back to the camp, which was little more than a bruised shadow on the beach. They would be preparing, making their peace with one another if not their gods. My children. Did they hate me for what I'd done? Had my vengeance given them peace of mind? Had it changed anything?

A stone skipped through the waves, catching the crest of one and rising up in a spray like broken crystal before disappearing back into the dark sea. I turned to see Ardrun a few paces up the beach. He smiled and threw another stone.

I watched him for a while, the sea breeze tickling a strand of hair across my forehead. Shapes emerged from the eddies of my memories, shadows in the deeps, still indistinct but solid

for the first time. The memories were slippery and sharp like jagged glass—not just what I had done, and why, but who I was. I blinked through stinging tears, throat thick with the heaviness of it all.

He nodded. “Coyote.”

I swallowed, knuckled an eye. “How did you find me?”

“I’ve heard all the stories,” he said. “Wasn’t hard to piece together.”

“What now?”

“I suppose that’s up to you.” He glanced to my side.

The Fang was a cold, dead weight in my hand, whispering of quiet conclusion. It would be slow but painless, grayness bleeding along the edges of my world. I’d done it so many times, a quick slash, barely an afterthought; far easier than going back to camp, than looking my people in the eye and knowing I had failed them.

I’d always been a coward, but I was so tired of endings.

I held the Fang out, grip loosening for the first time in decades. It dangled from my fingers, such a small thing. I let it fall to the sand, lips tight as I watched it burrow into the beach. A ragged breath, and it was gone.

“I knew you wouldn’t forsake us.” Ardrun grinned.

“I can’t save you.”

“I know. Just be with us when—” he blew out a long puff of air— “when we go.”

I took Ardrun’s hand, warm and dry despite the cold spray. He tensed, then relaxed as I squeezed his fingers and smiled. A warm wind plucked at the charms in his beard, but the clatter was lost amidst the hiss of beating wings.

As we walked back up the beach, I wondered what would happen if I prayed for deliverance.

I wondered if I deserved it.

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By day, Evan Dicken studies old Japanese maps and crunches data for all manner of fascinating medical experiments at the Ohio State University. By night, he does neither of these things. His fiction has most recently appeared in Unlikely Story, Starship Sofa, and Flash Fiction Online, and he has stories forthcoming from publishers such as Apex and Daily Science Fiction. Please feel free to visit him at evandicken.com.

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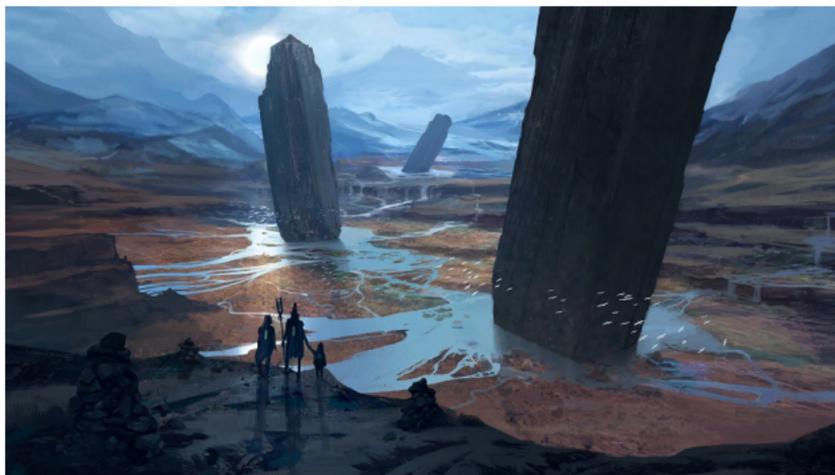
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COVER ART

“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

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