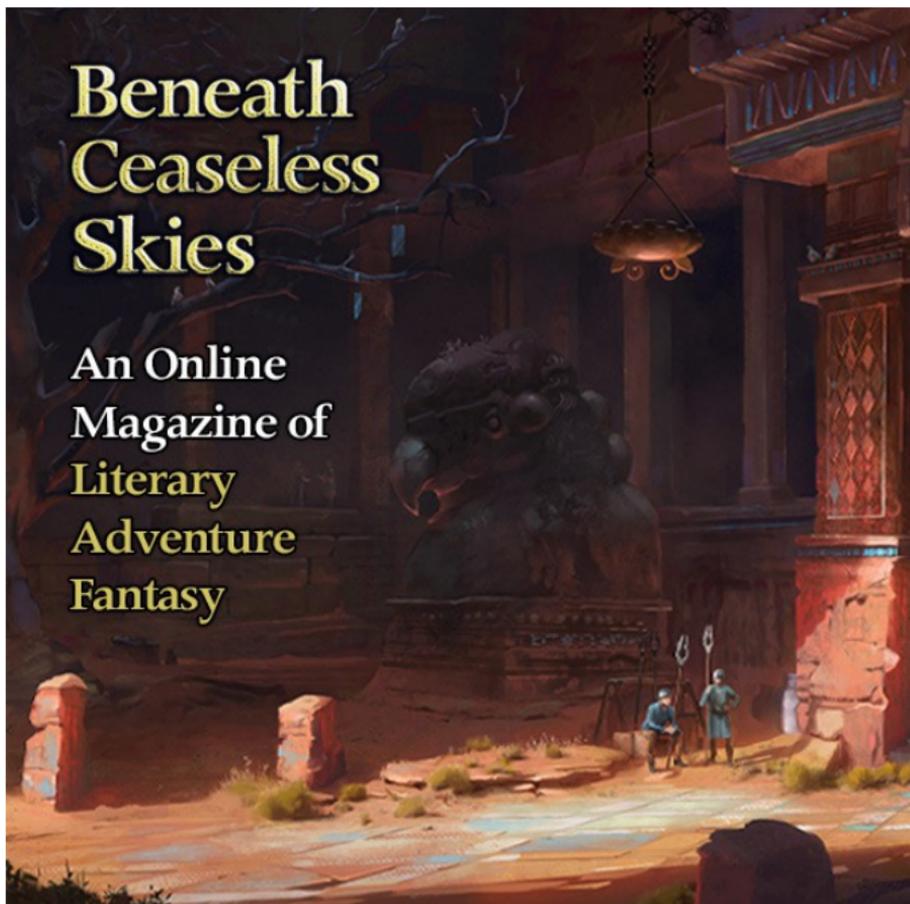


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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[“Dire Wolf,” by Michael J. DeLuca](#)

[“Corpus Grace,” by William Broom](#)

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## DIRE WOLF

by Michael J. DeLuca

Staggerlee came to Brother North Wind's for the blood. Cards he could play anywhere, but nobody for a hundred miles of ruts through frozen marsh could match the backcountry laments Old Tom coaxed from that pot of a banjo for putting a rounder in mind of his regrets. A cup of Evangeline's rotgut or three, and regret became rage. That was as far as Stag had figured he could hope, until the day Delia walked in with the Wolf.

His pile had grown enough to hide his grief when one of the lumbermen, the biggest—it was always the biggest—kicked away a stool. “You're a cheat,” he said, and spat on the floor.

Sometimes Stag cheated, to give them an excuse. No need that day.

“Nobody could've pulled that straight,” confirmed the chickenshit to Stag's left, a wagon-driver, a riverman—maybe a company man, though this indiscretion suggested otherwise. “Turn up his sleeves.”

Stag knocked down the last of the bottle. The .45 stayed in the back of his belt, fitted comfortable as skin. “You all don’t know me,” he said, out of something whimsical like pity.

Chairs flew, men crumpled. Evangeline shook once-blonde hair over her cold eyes and went on wiping cups, clinking them away, sipping delicately from her own. Tom Banjo slapped his boot heel hard against the hearth and plucked out “In the Pines”, investing those moans about cold winds and *What have I done?* with hurt enough that Stag wondered Tom’s heart didn’t fail from the strain. Finally, Stag got the big one by the belt and laid him out.

Catching a breath amid wreckage, Stag regretted. No—not what he’d done. That the fight was over, that the whole of Fennario could field no more dangerous men. But to regret, the way other men did? Delia had asked it of him once, not understanding it was asking he regret his nature. He had made sure she learned better.

Which was why, when Delia walked in, Stag came near failing to believe it. Delia, all the way from the city, not in slinky red but scarred boots, mittens, a wool coat high enough at the collar it hid every part of her fine flesh but her face, which stayed frozen even when her eyes met his. She disappeared outside quick as she’d come; but for the Wolf, he’d have written it off as a whiskey vision.

The Wolf swaggered up to the table and sat, though there wasn't a chair left standing. "You want to deal me in." Was she a thing to look at: six feet at the shoulder, fur like frosted iron, lips curling from canines big as railroad spikes. Stag thought about the .45. Close quarters, and no telling it would be enough. A bullet might as well be a bee sting to a bear; the Wolf was bigger. Those were the reasons he gave himself, at least, as he righted his stool and fronted the Wolf a silver dollar.

The rounders pulled themselves together, black eyes, bloody mouths and all, collecting scattered chairs and cards, leaving eyeteeth where they lay. Stag had to laugh.

Melt dripped from the Wolf's muzzle. Somebody dealt. Evangeline brought a bottle nobody touched. The Wolf won the first hand, king high.

The Wolf won every hand. Nobody could bluff her. She could have played open, it wouldn't have mattered. Stag let it happen. Even when the company man abandoned his cards and his money and fled, Stag couldn't bring himself to intervene.

The Wolf had all the money. The rounders, speechless, pushed back chairs, ready to follow the company man into the evening. The Wolf saved them the trouble. She left her winnings where they lay, licked her lips, and took their throats instead.

Tom Banjo played. The rounders screamed until they couldn't. Evangeline got out the mop.

"This makes us even," said the Wolf to Staggerlee, nodding to the bloody heap of coin and paper. And she sashayed out the door.

\* \* \*

On the porch, the rocker creaked. Delia shifted the scattergun from across her lap before Stag could take a step. "Don't you dare come near me, Staggerlee."

The surface of the millrace blurred, stilled. Jagged firs licked at the clouds like fire. Aspens bent then straightened, their outer leaves seared paper-gray, the inner leaves still bright with life. No sign of the Wolf.

"I brought her here for you. Stupid creature. I don't know what could be more obvious."

Stag nodded careful sympathy but matched her cold expression. "Who you going to put your trust in, can't trust a thing like that?"

Delia's presence, her voice, that ragged whisper, got to him deep, an itch in his blood. He wanted her or he wanted her gone, he couldn't sort which.

She wouldn't kill him. She'd have done it.

"West," she said, pointing with the muzzle, answering the other question in his heart.

He went back for rations, stepping light over the dead. A bottle of redeye in his bag, a twanged note from Tom, a last cold look from Delia, another from Evangeline. He lit out.

\* \* \*

The Wolf left hot, bloody tracks in the sharp-bladed frost, until the blood faded. In an hour, Stag found the company man, and the tracks were bloody again.

Through dusk he walked, and past it. The trees turned to stumps, then to trees, then stumps again, rising and receding the way he'd heard tides did, though he'd never seen ocean, just the lake, vast, jagged, liquid or frozen depending on season but subject to no tide. The Wolf followed no trail, and the boughs slapped and scratched at Stag's face and tried to steal his bag. In his head, old Tom picked at that banjo and city lights flickered in freezing lake wind, trying to tell him something.

This place was Stag's penance, with its rounders, its timber, its swamps and interminable darknesses. Easy money, went the promises. Hard money. Frostbite. Redeye over flapjacks. Legends, if you lasted. No one did. Match flares in wind, they burned out on the work, drowned drunk in the river, fell dead from exertion while the great tree they toiled at still stood. They disappeared without warning, forever, into the timber. There would always be more timber, no matter how long and ruthlessly they cut.

He missed the city. He wanted the city's hard edges, its long lines, its lights to swallow the crystals of his breath, its stone to echo his loping step, its smoky dens, its torches and rusted guitars. The city had turned against him for nothing he'd done; rather, for what he was. Staggerlee was the baddest mother around. Fennario was what was left to him.

At dusk, the Wolf's track joined a logging road, deep-rutted, running with mud, a man on it in furs and skins. He carried a pack, a skinning knife, a bow unstrung, a carbine and a string of traps. He pointed the carbine at a pawprint, huge. "You after her too?"

"Seen her?" Stag said.

"Just the track," said the hunter. "Nothing moves like that. With a purpose, like. Nothing."

You haven't seen everything, Stag didn't say. "Six feet at the shoulder," he said. "Teeth like railroad spikes."

Stag wanted the Wolf for his own but allowed he could stand a tracker's help. Anyway, it was too dark to follow the trail. They made camp, or something like it. Fire. The cold was the kind that began seeping in as soon as you stopped and reached bone when you tried to sleep. The wind was the wind of change, wet then frigid, curving west to south and back, loud enough that when the howls came distant, Stag waited,

counting until he heard them again, then once more before he was sure.

The hunter shook his head. “Packs of them around, wondering where their timber went. When you hear her, reckon you’ll know.”

Flurries fell slant, deep blue and tiny. Stag went for another downed branch from the lumbermen’s leavings; it dragged at the earth with tips of twigs like fingernails, like it knew it was going to die. Green wood flared, crackling.

Delia regarded him from the edge of the firelight, tight black curls whipping around the coat’s hood, mittened hands wrapped around that scattergun tight like she would plunge from a trestle into an icy river before she let go. “Cold,” she said.

“Join us,” said the hunter, like he headed a table in some old-world keep, haunches of mutton steaming on trenchers and servants in wired-on antlers pouring.

Stag got another branch, broke it up and fed the fire to blazing. They sat a triangle, all three of them armed, all three shivering. Stag opened the bottle. Neither of the others wanted to share, so he didn’t.

“You even seen the thing you’re tracking?” Delia said to the hunter.

Stag tried to picture Delia and the Wolf, together on all those timber miles between here and the city. His whiskey-breath clouded.

“Just spoor.” The hunter stirred the fire, unnecessarily. “But I know how to be patient.”

Delia studied the hunter, so Stag did. For all his traps, his furs, he was just another rounder. “There a bounty?”

“Five dollars a pelt. But that’s for the regular kind.”

Stag understood. Wolves in Fennario could not be countenanced, just as that timber had to fall. What the wolves were to this forest, Stag had been to the city. What he was to this forest he didn’t know. Delia might be here to show him.

*Other men regret*, some newspaper man had said of Staggerlee—in print, but first outside the burning speakeasy where Delia used to sing, before Staggerlee fed him his teeth.

Songs had been written about what he was. Given the chance, he might have shot every singer down, burned every stage. Not that he disagreed; he just resented the presumption.

Delia’s eyes drooped, snapped open. Her mittened hands kept the gun trained at his feet. Fire noisily devoured green wood. Finally, her eyes closed and stayed that way.

“You knew she was behind us?” Stag said.

“Knew somebody was,” said the hunter, looking into the crackling dark, a hand to shield him from the glare. “Knew you

was coming, too. What you doing here? Either of you. You're not from here. You're not after any bounty."

"Nobody's from here," said Stag. Of course, it wasn't strictly true. There was the Wolf.

The clouds parted, the clouds returned. The hunter too slept where he sat. As even Staggerlee began to drift, he was thinking that if he wanted he could have them both. Wasn't sure why he didn't. Tired, cold. Delia, the Wolf: something there he didn't understand. He meant to. The hunter was a convenience: necessary skills, and a warm body to interpose between Delia and the Wolf—or even Delia and Stag, if it came to that, to keep them from each other's throats. He'd wait and see. Stag could be patient too.

\* \* \*

They woke coated in frost that split and sloughed away when they moved as if they were old giants waking to find the world changed. There was no breakfast but rotgut.

"What you got in that pack?" said Stag.

"Get up moving," said the hunter. "Best to hunt hungry. You'll forget about food soon enough. Catch her when we reach the lake—no place to run then. Maybe want to talk about that bounty. Monster like that, who knows what they'll pay."

The hunter went first with the carbine, then Stag and the .45, then Delia and the scattergun. White sun and gray shadows

painted jailbird stripes between dead pines. Moss grew between the ruts. Their boots raised mud that reeked of rust.

Stag allowed that no part of the Wolf would be traded for dry goods or drink or a bad hand of cards or for flesh or a train ticket out of this wasteland. He remained uncertain the Wolf could be possessed. Nevertheless he was resolved to try—with bare hands, he thought, imagining his fingers closing below those magnificent jaws. Anyhow, a ticket out would be no use. All places were either the city or not. All places that were not the city might as well be Fennario.

The lake drew near, the air dropped cold.

“She froze to death,” said Delia in a voice so faint Stag might have thought he’d dreamed it. “I left her on the tracks, forty miles outside Kalamazoo. Thought maybe the ice of her blood would slick the rails and send your train into the river. But I’m glad it didn’t happen. Wouldn’t have been fair. There were other people on that train.”

“I never meant you any harm,” Stag said. “Either of you.”

She snorted, but it was true. For all he loved her, she had never understood him.

The hunter raised a warning hand.

When they stopped, they could hear the lake, the waves crashing: a roar like one of old Tom’s songs, the one where the

little girl drowns her sister over a man and the fiddle they make from her bones sings the tale at the wedding.

A gory wolf stool lay in the rut, steaming fresh in the cold. Off to leeward, out of nowhere, out of rutted track and severed stumps and wind-nodding aspen and dead pine and dirty wash sky, rose an ancient dune. The Wolf's track turned up it. The hunter let his pack to the ground, the traps clattering.

"Traps won't hold her," Stag said.

"No." The hunter freed one anyway, the biggest, then unslung the bow and its quiver. "But bait might draw her. Anyway, I don't want the weight."

Stag stepped past him, bent and pulled open the pack. He reeled back. It stank. It was stuffed full of wolves' heads.

"How many?"

The hunter grunted as he strung the bow. "Almost enough. Few more, maybe, I'll retire."

"How many more?" insisted Stag.

When the howl came, it was almost like speech, like a torch song gone wrong. Like a torch song she'd been murdered in the middle of. Delia's pretty face took on hard lines under her sheepskin hood. Stag's heart constricted.

"She knows we're here," the hunter said.

"You never killed a wolf like this one."

The hunter pried open the trap and laid it out next to the pack. “We split up,” he said. “I go crosswind, you go up. Scent will draw her. You,” he told Delia, “keep back.”

She snorted. The mitten twitched around her trigger finger.

The hunter moved away uphill, zigzagging, almost silent, not quite.

“Relax,” Stag told her.

The scattergun’s muzzle shivered as she aimed it at his chest. “Don’t you tell me to relax, Staggerlee. I came all the way out here so bastards like that one—” she spat “—like you, couldn’t hurt me anymore. But it’s all bastards. Monsters everywhere you run. Thought I’d get one of my own, even that wasn’t enough. You did this to me. You burned my life to the ground, you gave me a child, then stole her away. You don’t get to tell me nothing.”

She was beautiful like this, like she’d been that night. He wanted her. He couldn’t fear her. It wasn’t his nature. She couldn’t kill him. She would have done it.

He wanted the Wolf more.

Stag kicked over the hunter’s pack. The trap sprang closed with a ravenous snap. Delia spooked, and the scattergun went off, boom. It didn’t hit him. She didn’t seem surprised.

Now the Wolf knew they were coming.

He drew the .45 and left Delia reloading, trembling, in the lake wind. He went left like he'd been told, but only barely, steeper than the hunter, slower, letting him get ahead. The wind froze half his face as he climbed.

From the hilltop, the lake came in sight, a filleting blade beyond the trees, the blue of spirit fire.

The Wolf met him, grease-mouthed and smiling, just past the dune's crown. Between them lay an elk, an old kill half-devoured—maybe the last elk, like the Wolf was the last Wolf, the only Wolf, like Stag was the one and only Staggerlee, and everyone else, everyone and everything, even Delia, came a dime a dozen.

The Wolf was hulking, all shoulders and neck like a brawler. How could she still be hungry after eating all those men? What a thing to behold. What a fight it could be. Stag tested a fist, open, closed; it had killed men. A woman once, though not on purpose. A child, if Delia was to be believed. It had never killed a bear. Not even a dog.

The hunter crouched behind a downed trunk ahead. The carbine lay in the mud; he knew as well as Stag a puny pistol bullet wouldn't do the job. He nocked a long arrow and drew.

Stag respected that bow; it was ancient and decorous; it made him respect the man who carried it.

Not enough. Not nearly. He shot the hunter in the back. The .45 roared loud, the way he liked it, so when you'd done it you were deaf a minute. The arrow fishtailed away over the dune.

When the lake wind came back, Stag realized the Wolf was laughing. "Told you we were even," she said.

They were even. They were the same, in no way Staggerlee and anyone he'd ever known had been the same.

He rolled the hunter over with a kick, exposing wax eyes to wind-bent treetops. Too easy. He shoved the .45 in the back of his belt and got the bottle from his bag. He dropped the cork. He spilled some liquor on the corpse. It smoked.

He toasted the sea of swamp and timber that was Fennario. He toasted the rounders, the lumbermen, the little packs of wolves who would drag them off forever into the timber until there were no more of either. He toasted the lake, its ocean vastness, the city far beyond it drinking the lake, drinking the blood of wolves, devouring the timber, driving away what loved it, what it couldn't countenance or bear to destroy. He toasted the Wolf.

When at length Stag looked up from what he'd have sworn was no kind of prayer, Delia was stepping past him.

She paused to spit, at the dead hunter or at him, then not again until her boots shared the old red mud with the Wolf's

red paws. She placed a mittened hand in the Wolf's dried-bloody fur and clenched tight.

Stag toasted Delia for good measure, then threw away the bottle.

“Don't you dare come any closer, Staggerlee,” Delia said, “you fucking monster.”

The Wolf grinned, inscrutable, unfathomable.

Stag wondered how her jaws would feel around his throat, her body with its coarse fur a furnace against his. God, he wanted her. Back at Brother North Wind's, Old Tom would write songs about this fight, after none of them was left alive to hear—not Delia, not the Wolf, not Staggerlee. Maybe Evangeline would sing, in a voice terrible as her whiskey.

Somewhere among the drink and wind and distance and prayer, Stag found it had all come clear. It wasn't death he wanted, though death would have been no easy thing to come by. No rounder could have done it, no hunter, no big city sheriff. The Wolf could give him death; and death, better even than whiskey or a cold lament or pain, was the ultimate forgetting. But Stag wanted more. What he wanted from the Wolf was love.

Delia pushed back the hood of her coat, looking from the Wolf to Staggerlee. Then she pulled off her mittens one after the other and dropped them in the bloody mud.

Her face was still frozen, so he couldn't read what was there, but then she'd never had much trouble reading his. He'd never before been bothered to care. Now, he regretted.

Delia raised the scattergun wobbling to the base of the Wolf's jaw and pulled the trigger.

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## CORPUS GRACE

by William Broom

### **1. The Priest**

The priest slept in the saddle, passing in and out of half-remembered dreams. The one-eyed girl sat in front of him, driving the horse on across the steppe. They passed through tiny villages and nomad camps, where the people welcomed them and warned of where soldiers had last been seen. "It is too dangerous for you," they said to the priest. "Move slowly, and only at night, or you will be caught." But all the years of hiding were behind him now. It was a long way to the tomb of the saint, and they did not have much time.

He had lived in secrecy for so long that he had forgotten what it was like to see the open plain in the daylight. When the one-eyed girl had found him, he had been hiding in a ger, squeezed into a stifling gap between the inner and outer walls. The herdsman who he was visiting had put him there because they thought the approaching rider was an Imperial spy. They shouted at her, "Go away, mountain girl, go! There are no priests here." But when he heard her say: "I have come from Kou," he had wriggled out of the secret space and showed

himself. Only something very dire could have brought her here to find him, a hundred miles away from the mountains of her home. And because she came from Kou, he had known at once that the saint must be in danger.

As they traveled, the one-eyed girl said little. When they stopped to rest, she would build the fire, heat the pot, and boil the meat that the herders had given them. She never let the priest do any of the work. The first night, after they had eaten, she took off his boots and washed his feet. He didn't let her do that again.

He remembered her from his previous visits to Kou. She was young enough that he had probably blessed her when she was born. But he could not remember how she had gotten the scar. It made a ragged canyon down her face, from her right eye socket to her jaw. By the way she wore it, he guessed she had had it a long time.

On the third day they passed another herders' camp: a half-dozen tents clustered around a thin stream that wound across the plain. From this central point, the herds were spread out from horizon to horizon, like the wings of a great bird. Their food and water was not close to running out, so the one-eyed girl rode on without stopping. But before they were out of sight, one of the herds crossed their path, putting an impassable river of sheep and goats in front of them. As soon

as the herdsmen recognized the priest, they were eager to speak with him.

“Please let us welcome you at our camp,” they said. “It has been a long time since we were visited by a priest.”

The one-eyed girl watched them warily, but the priest was not suspicious. Long ago he had made a choice to trust all the people of the steppe with his life, just as they trusted him with their souls. Still, he did not want to stop.

“We are in a hurry,” he said, “and there is still far for us to go.”

The herdsmen did not ask where he was going. Silence ran deep among the steppe tribes, and they trusted that whatever mission he was on was a sacred one. But he could hear the soft plea in their voices.

“My sister—she had a child only a week ago,” one of them said. “Will the saint give her a blessing?”

It would be better for the child if he said no. Only a week old and already she was bound for all of this: a life of covert spirituality, of grace bartered in dark corners and scraped together from doctrines written by dead men. Let her be raised in the imperial faith, he thought. Let her forget the doomed religion of her grandmothers. Yet he knew this could not be, for his was the only faith that the steppe-people knew. If they did not have this, they would have nothing.

“There is no time,” the one-eyed girl murmured to him.

The winters were harsh on the steppe. Many infants did not live through their first. He might be the only priest the baby ever saw.

He nodded to the herdsmen. “I will call the saint.”

As they rode toward the camp, the herdsmen blew on their ram’s-horns and others echoed them across the plain: *the saint is coming!* The elders of the tribe came out to greet him in their yellow robes and foxskin hats. Bells were rung and sandalwood burned in an iron bowl.

These were not his rituals but theirs. Before the saints had come to the steppe, these people had worshipped spirits. Saint Theodore—heaven send that he find peace—had counseled his missionaries to leave those old ways intact wherever they were compatible with the scripture. The false idols had been destroyed, but other things remained: the burning of sandalwood, the chants of the storytellers, the cups of mares’ blood and milk. Such things were immaterial to the Divine Mission. *The instruments of grace are ten thousand in number*, the priest had learned in the seminary—the number ten thousand having stood for the infinite in the ancient texts.

That was the bargain Saint Theodore had made for the people’s souls. It had made him a schismatic in the eyes of the

Canon Church, but it had cemented the faith of the steppe peoples forever. In spite of everything, they remained strong.

By the time the last shepherd had come in from the plain, the sun had already set. It was time for the calling to begin. One of the elders began to beat a drum. The others sang from their throats, filling the air with deep harmonic tones. The people crowded around in a half-circle, clasping offerings for the saint. The one-eyed girl stood off to the side but watched intently.

Orienting himself by the stars, the priest knelt down and used two fingers to draw a circle around himself in the dirt. The people pressed forward to lay their gifts on the circle: fruit, vegetables, bonecrafts, and embroidered fabrics. In his youth he would never have allowed such offerings to be made. It far too much resembled the sacrifices they had made to spirits in the time before Saint Theodore came to them. He felt guilty about it, but he no longer had the strength to deny it to them. It gave them comfort; and what was one more heresy among so many others?

He dug into his pack and unbuttoned the secret pocket there. The hide scroll was slipped snugly into the lining of the bag, so that it might easily be overlooked. He drew it out and laid it in front of him.

Silence settled over the villagers when they saw the scroll. Even the youngest child knew they were looking upon a thing of power and danger. Only the newborn continued to cry from within the ger.

The code on the scroll, which had taken months for him to master in the seminary, was now like a mother tongue to him. The symbols on the hide aligned with the eternal landmarks in the sky above, showing him the way.

He adjusted his position several times, making notches in the circle to guide himself through the precise movements that were required. The night was cold and his hands shook, but eventually he was finished. He was now facing, to within one-hundredth of a degree, toward Saint Mirabina's barrow.

He stood, arms outstretched like a scarecrow, leaning into the wind. He mouthed the words: *O holy Saint Mirabina, patron of the forlorn, grant that your grace may enter into me!*

And the plain lurched away beneath him.

As always, there was a moment when their minds formed a bridge and he found himself inside her body. He looked through her eyes into the blackness of the tomb; he smelled the musk of old stone and moisture; he felt the cloth bindings biting into her skin. He felt her pain.

Two nails through her hands, one through her feet; and on her chest the weight of centuries.

Then the vision was gone, and instead *she* was moving into *him*. He stepped back from the window of his mind and saw things only from afar. His body was a distant object, moving with a volition that was not his own. Saint Mirabina had taken him over.

The same old feeling spilled through him, like the warmth of a fire, like sunlight pouring through a half-open door. He saw the world as she saw it: the marvelous symphony of the heavens, the divine mystery of the earth. Fear faded away. Death faded away. There was no past or future, only the eternal stillness that was God.

She smiled.

As soon as she lowered her arms, the people knew who she was. They could tell by the way she moved, by the softness in her eyes, by her smile; the man's body was just a shallow skin that she wore. No one could mistake her for anything other than a saint.

She moved among the tribespeople and spoke to them, each as individuals. The things she said were no grand statements of theology, only simple words, but they were just what each person needed to hear. She drew on the memories in the priest's mind, acting upon things that he had noticed or

suspected. To some she offered words of comfort, to others words of warning. For many, a firm squeeze of their hand was all that was needed.

Last of all she came to the one-eyed girl and embraced her.

“Do not be afraid,” she whispered. “The faith shall always endure.”

Then she left the crowd and went into the ger. The mother was curled up under dark furs with her new child at her breast. But it cried and would not suckle.

The saint came close to her. Calmly she laid a hand on the baby’s head.

“Let God smile upon this child,” she said.

The babe continued to cry. The mother’s face shifted between a hesitant smile and a frown.

“You thought she would be quiet when I gave her my blessing?” said the saint.

Bashfully, the young woman nodded.

“But that is her way. The rain falls, the grass grows, the wave breaks, the baby cries. You cannot tell any of them to be other than what they are.”

The mother nodded. Then Saint Mirabina rose and stepped out of the ger, leaving her grace behind her like a charm.

She looked toward the northwest. The moon was big and bright above the vacant steppe.

“I must go,” she said. “This body cannot take much more strain.”

The villagers pleaded with her but to no avail. She stepped out of the priest’s body and he became himself again, tired and worn as an old cloth.

“You must stay now until morning,” the elders told him.

He shook his head. He was deeply wearied by the ritual, but he knew he had to go on. He had feared for some time that the inquisitors had some way of tracking him whenever he called on Mirabina.

It was all he could manage to climb onto the horse behind the one-eyed girl and hold on tight. He faded in and out of awareness as they rode across the starlit steppe, sometimes almost dreaming of the saint.

Long ago he had been strong. He had been able to hold the saint’s essence for hours at a time. His faith had had other saints in those days: Theodore and Batuphon and Peter of Huxa. All gone now, all found and burned by the inquisitors.

In those days he had been one of dozens of priests and priestesses. They had shared the saints between them; the lower half of his scroll was a lunar calendar that dictated the days and times that he could summon a particular saint. He did

not heed it any more, but occasionally when he called Mirabina she would not answer. Each time it happened was like a silent signal: that someone else, somewhere out there, was calling on her as well.

\* \* \*

The next day, the mountains could be seen in the distance. By nightfall they filled half the sky. The plain gave way to hills with a light scattering of trees. The priest and the one-eyed girl slept a few hours and went on. At daybreak she raised her arm and pointed northwest, to a tangle of smoke trails rising from the hills.

“There is the road,” she said. “It is close now.”

An hour later they arrived at Kou. The village had grown since the last time he had come: a dozen new huts had sprung up on the ridges above the town center. Despite his warnings, there were always those who wanted to live closer to the saint and who saw the village itself as a sacred site. Yet most of the faces that greeted him were still familiar: women he had counseled on their marriages, men he had dissuaded from folk-magic, and many children whose births he had blessed. As he dismounted from his horse, the people reached out to touch his hands or the hem of his cloak. An old woman wept silently, the tears following deep furrows down her cheeks.

He was used to the love that they showed him here. He knew it was not truly him they loved but the saint; he could not be jealous, for he loved her also.

The one-eyed girl's family was waiting to welcome her home. She left him outside the headman's house, where he was given a bed in a quiet room at the back. He fell asleep at once, but the feeling of urgency stayed with him, and he woke again after only a few hours.

The headman and his family were waiting in the common room. They served him with anxious solicitousness, offering him the choicest cuts from a fresh-killed goat. They would not hurry him, no matter how much they wished to. Part of him wanted to sit and enjoy their hospitality as long as he could, but he knew that time was short, so he ate quickly and then said: "Take me to see the road."

If they had been allowed, the whole village would have gladly accompanied him. Instead the headman limited it to a select few whom he considered the 'most pious', the one-eyed girl among them.

The trail wound up through the stony foothills of Mount Damash. The country was wide and almost treeless, save for the narrow defiles where water ran down from the mountains. After an hour they came to the crest of a hill that was marked

with a cairn of stones. This was the threshold of the sacred; to go into the valley beyond was forbidden to all but the priests.

From the summit, they could see the unfinished road. It stretched back across the steppe all the way to the western horizon. Dozens of campfires burned at its head, and men and beasts moved back and forth in the haze. They were workers from the west, brought in at great expense to push the road forward. It would curve north from here, crossing over the mountains to connect the Eastern Capital to the Empire's most far-flung tributaries. It was the largest thing that had ever come to this part of the world.

“They bring the road here to destroy her,” said the one-eyed girl.

No, he thought—if they knew where Mirabina was they would already have burned her. But he did not correct the girl. Her people had a simpler way of looking at the world. They saw a purpose behind everything, whether for good or evil. To them the Empire was a vast demon crouched beyond the horizon, a singular entity of bottomless malice.

From here the saint's barrow was not quite visible, though the priest knew precisely where it was—down in the sacred valley, hidden behind a screen of birches and poplars. The curve of the road would lead inevitably through the valley on its way up to the pass. The workers would be collecting firewood,

hunting wild fowl, scouting the terrain for dangers. And if by God's grace they did not find it, then before long there would be many travelers on this road, merchants passing along the newest of the Empire's arteries. Sooner or later, someone would stumble upon the tomb.

He turned to look at the hill-folk assembled behind him. They were all watching him in expectation. Their faces were solemn but with joyous smiles lurking beneath the surface. He realized they were waiting for him to perform a miracle; to turn the road aside just like Saint Omon had turned aside the floodwaters. He had never shown them any such power before, but they believed wholeheartedly that he could do it, for the alternative was unthinkable. It would make sense, up here on this windswept hilltop, at the hour of most desperate need; the whole scene was like something out of one of the lives of the saints. But he was no saint, only an old man of corrupted faith. He had nothing for them.

At last he said: "I see." And then: "Let us return to the village. I must call on the saint."

The hill folk's rituals were different to those of the steppe herders yet fundamentally the same. Instead of purifying smoke they had a bowl of oil and balsam that the elders painted on each supplicant's forehead. There was no need for the star map this time. Here they had a line of sunken stones that

pointed the way precisely to the saint's barrow. All the priest had to do was kneel along that line and call her into him.

When she had come and gone, the villagers were left even more confident that danger would be averted, though she had said nothing to them other than a few vague words of comfort.

“Do not be afraid,” the priest told them. “The saint has revealed to me what must be done. Go to your rest now, for I must pray.” None of them questioned him.

He followed the stone line up to the ridge that overlooked the village. He knelt there for a long time as the sky turned from blue to black. At first he was only waiting for the villagers to go to sleep. Then, as the night grew quiet, he began to pray in earnest. It had been a long time, he realized, since he had prayed to her; not summoning her into his body but simply kneeling and asking her for help.

It had been three years since he had last received the same communion that he dispensed to others. He was an instrument of grace, but having it pass through him was not the same as receiving it himself. He felt sure that he would understand—that he would see once again the infinite intricacy of God's plan, the rightness of all things—if he could only see her smile again. But he had no-one. He could not feel God with him any longer. He was only an old man, pudgy and beaten, murmuring useless words to the wind.

“O holy Mirabina, mother of grace and stillness, forgive me for what I am about to do,” he said. Then he went back down into the village to find a mattock.

\* \* \*

## **2. The Inquisitor**

At first light they struck camp and saddled the horses. Before they left, the inquisitor knelt down in the grass to make her devotions. The earth seemed to curve in a bow shape around her: the featureless steppe receding behind, the hills and mountains rising up ahead. In such a vertiginous landscape God did not seem far away. But when she closed her eyes she could only see the face of the herdsman she had put to the question.

*O Lord, she thought, let all this be part of your plan. I could not bear it if it were not.*

When it became necessary to acquire information by force, she always chose the oldest and most intransigent subjects—those who were most deeply lost to heresy. For the young ones, she still held out hope that they could be made to see the light.

*We are at war, they had taught her in the missionary school, but the people are not the enemy. The people are the battleground.* Sometimes, some battlegrounds had to be given up so that the greater cause could flourish.

She opened her eyes and saw the young soldier, Darien, praying beside her. He had a tiny folding eikon of Saint Humbert in his pack, which he brought out every morning. The sight made her smile, and she wondered if this itself was God's answer to her prayer.

Ahri was already on his horse. Not a religious bone in his body, though she had known him long enough to say that he was a good man. He waited while the other two mounted, and they began the day's journey.

They rode north. North was all the herdsman had been able to tell her, no matter how she worked upon them. They had deliberately remained ignorant of the priest's movements; what they didn't know they couldn't tell. But they had said he went with a *muamin* girl—a house-dweller, not a nomad like them. That meant he was headed for the mountains.

She fingered the clasp of her scroll-case. She wished she could call upon Saint Eremas, the Huntsman. He would sniff out the apostate like a mongoose chasing a serpent from its burrow. But the new Imperial calendar did not give her Eremas again for another nine days.

As they moved up into the hills, they saw smoke rising in the distance.

“Soldier, what is that?” she asked Darien. “It looks like an army.”

“It is the new road, Inquisitor.”

Of course—the road through the Kharenian Pass had been all the people were talking about back in Hama. She studied the skyline: the wooded hills rising steeply to become the slopes of the mountains, whose granite faces passed in a seemingly endless procession from west to east. The *muamin* girl had come urgently, the herdsmen had said, and taken the priest away almost at once. Her heart began to beat faster.

Ahri rode up beside her. “Are you thinking the same thing as me?”

The inquisitor squinted into the glare. “A new road, passing through ancestral hill country. One of the old heartlands of the heresy. The priest, called back there in a hurry when the locals realize that the road is coming. I can’t help but wonder.”

“Now wouldn’t that be something? After all these years, to find that one of their own priests has led us to the last anti-saint of the Theodorian Heresy?”

“It shall be as God wills it,” the inquisitor replied; but as they rode on she could not keep from scanning the hills and ridges.

\* \* \*

The village was small and old: a cluster of squat wattle-and-daub houses surrounding a narrow stream that ran down

from the mountains. There was no one in sight. The doors of the cottages were closed and the windows shuttered as if against the rain.

A child peered out of a side door to stare at the soldiers and the woman in her strange red cloak. For a moment their eyes met, and the inquisitor's heart hurt. It was always the children that wounded her the most. Then the boy's mother pulled him back inside and shut the door.

The village had no church, only a little shrine in the town square with a collection of dusty eikones. There were fresh cherries and apricots laid at the saints' feet. Very fresh; the inquisitor guessed they had been put there when the villagers had seen her coming.

While they were looking at the shrine, a man came out from a large house on the other side of the square, wearing a heavy fur hat that marked him as the village's headman. He prostrated himself stiffly before them, his forehead nearly touching the ground. When he was finished, he shouted, and a trio of elders came out of the same house, bringing sacred salt to cast at the visitors' feet. Next there came seven girls, also bowing and scraping.

The inquisitor had seen these kinds of displays before. The people said all the right words and went through all the motions of piety, but their faces remained closed to her. There

was almost a sense of mockery in their exaggerated subservience, a bluster that precluded any chance of an honest connection. Part of her wanted to shout at them, to embrace them, to do anything that might break through that wall of denial. For how could the truth ever reach them if they would not even admit to their heresy?

She looked at the villagers' faces and saw cattle led blindly to the slaughter. They believed fervently that they had found their own path to salvation. They did not know that God had given mankind a single path only, and that was through the intercession of the true saints.

When the welcoming was done, the headman called for the visitors' horses to be cared for and begged them to eat dinner at his house. Weary from days of riding, the inquisitor accepted.

The inside of the headman's house was dark. The shutters were closed and the only light came from the fireplace, where an old woman stirred a pot of stew.

"Food will be ready for you soon," said the headman. "Please, sit."

Darien looked suspicious, but Ahri just shrugged, claimed a hide-covered divan in the corner of the room and began polishing his talwar.

"We are here pursuing a heretic priest," said the inquisitor. "Has anyone come here in the past two days?"

“Nobody has come. There are no heretics here. If there were we would not let them in, but drive them away. We are pious people.” The headman was sharp; he had not hesitated at all. But from the corner of her eye she had seen the old woman pause stirring the pot for just a moment.

“I will go to make sure that soft beds are prepared for you,” said the headman. He left.

“Do not believe anything these people tell you,” Darien murmured. “The suzerain has had much trouble with them. When missionaries come they pretend to be converted, but out of sight they are all still Theodorians. There have been purges in the hill country, many times, but they never learn.” His eyes flashed with righteous fervor. “In Hama we all hate these people, you can be sure. They are no better than devil worshippers.”

“Hate is not the way, soldier. *Hate not the darkness, but shine a light upon it.*”

He frowned. “What shall I do, then?”

“Pity them. They are outside God’s grace and they do not even know it. Most especially I pity the children. It is said the anti-saint is called to give her blessing to the babes as soon as they are born. Their lives have barely begun and already they are condemned.”

Darien nodded and fell silent. She could see he was considering her words seriously. After some time he took out his eikon and made his devotions. The old woman ladled out the stew and gave some to each of them. The headman did not return.

“I’ll go and check on the horses,” said Darien, obviously restless. “I doubt these people will have bothered to pick out the hooves.”

He went out.

Quietly, Ahri said: “What do you think are the chances, Inquisitor?”

“That she is buried here? I don’t know. There aren’t many places left that we haven’t already searched.”

“It would be the making of your career if you found her. You could return to the Capital.”

She shook her head. “I’ve been out here too long now, Ahri. The steppe is my home now. The people need me.”

“Even these people?”

“Especially these people.”

Ahri frowned, looking over her shoulder. She turned and saw that the old woman had gone. They were alone.

“Did she leave before or after you said—”

There was a hoarse shout from somewhere outside.

Ahri’s hand went to his sword. “Stay here.”

“No,” the inquisitor said. “Both of us will go.”

The night was dark and moonless. A cold wind crawled down from the mountains and black clouds hung heavy in the sky. There was no sign of anyone in the town square, but a light was shining from behind a wall some way down the street. As they crept closer they saw it: an oil lantern, hung halfway up a sloping alley of rough-cut steps. Ahri hissed when he spotted it, like a wildcat hissed when it scented a hunter waiting in ambush. But they went in all the same.

Darien was lying on the steps below the lantern. A pool of darkness spread underneath him and glimmered in the light. His throat was cut nearly all the way through, leaving his neck bent at an unnatural angle.

Somewhere in the dark, a drum began to beat.

The villagers closed in from both sides of the alley. They were carrying knives or spears, and wearing masks: images of grotesque devils with pointed tusks and bronze rings through their cheeks. Their garments were relics of a heathen past but blasphemously embellished with symbols of the true faith. One wore a robe embroidered with the Name of God, while another had a jangling necklace of six crucifixes.

Whatever sympathy the inquisitor had had for these people, it was gone. In its place was a cool, white fury that sat in her chest like a stone.

“We need a saint, right now,” said Ahri. “You start the ritual and I’ll try to hold them off.”

“The ritual won’t be necessary,” she said, taking a clay phial from a pocket in her sleeve. “Soldier, what you are about to see is an Imperial secret. You are not to reveal it to anyone, on pain of excommunication.”

She unstopped the phial and drank it down. She felt the jerk of her spirit leaving her body before the taste had left her lips.

With the fluid it was never an easy transition. It felt dirty, crude, like a spike thrust through her mind. She was in the saint’s body, in the sepulcher at Ramos a thousand miles away. She was trapped and panicking inside an embalmed corpse, staring out at the others hanging in row after row, crucifixion after crucifixion.

Then it was done. Saint Androminus shuddered as he took over her body and mind. The first thing he saw was a masked man lunging toward him with a curved knife. He took the man by the wrist and bent his arm back until it snapped at the elbow, then let him fall to the ground.

The other villagers stared at the saint, all rooted to the spot. His presence alone was enough to bring about the Holy Fear in them; their limbs trembled, and their hands struggled

to hold their spears. They already knew in their hearts that they could not stand against him.

“My God is a gentle God to his servants,” said the saint, “but to those who scorn him he is vengeful, and he will deliver swift and dreadful retribution upon them.”

He drew his sword, and a shudder ran through the crowd like the wind passing over a field of grain.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Ahri and the inquisitor took Darien’s body and buried him out of sight of the village. The bodies of the villagers they left where they had fallen. The hills were quiet; the inquisitor didn’t know where the children had run to, but there was no sign of them now.

After it was done, they returned to the outskirts of the village so they could find the stone line. The directions Androminus had extracted from the headman were simple and precise. They faced north along the line and began to walk. After an hour they came to the hilltop with the cairn, just as he had said. They went on down into the valley beyond and found the barrow.

The mound was large but unmarked. Covered as it was with a century’s worth of vegetation, it almost looked like a natural part of the landscape. The inquisitor might have walked right past it were it not for the fact that the tomb had been

opened. A ragged hole was torn in its side, with loose earth heaped up around the threshold. The darkness within was framed by dangling roots.

The inquisitor and Ahri looked at each other. They bent their heads and stepped inside. The chamber was small and rudimentary, with no adornment to show that it served a religious purpose. It might as easily have been a storehouse for food or grain. A little sunlight filtered in to touch the back wall.

Ahri folded his arms. “Those people were going to kill you—an imperial inquisitor. Even out here, that would mean death to them when they were caught. They wouldn’t have done that for an empty tomb.”

The inquisitor shook her head. “They did it for the one who emptied it.” She ran her hand along the broken seal. “This work is fresh. We could be less than a day behind him.”

The cold fury rose up in her again. Even yesterday, he had been here—the serpent she had been hunting for the past three months. He had been spreading his poison in the villages, in the ears of children. If she had been there a day faster, she would have caught him. If she had been faster, then the villagers—

She slipped her fingers around the phial in her sleeve.

“Go look for the trail,” she said. “It should be easy to find. He will be carrying something heavy.”

\* \* \*

They climbed through the hills all day and camped that night on the southern slope of Mount Damash. God willed that there would be neither rain nor snowfall, and the priest's trail was still visible the next day. Once they crossed the snowline it was even easier to track him. Frequently they saw depressions where he had stumbled, and sometimes there were angular shapes in the snow where he had set down the cross to rest.

"He can't be far ahead of us now," she said at midday.

Ahri nodded but glanced at the sky: clouds were coming in across the plain, promising snowfall. They went on.

Her world narrowed down to only three things: the glare of the snow, the blue shapes of the footprints, and the cold biting at her bones. Ahri lagged behind—she knew he would have liked to rest, but she would not stop. The fury of the Lord warmed her from within.

By the late afternoon they were drawing close to the peaks of Mount Damash and her sister, Mount Erub. The priest had taken a harsh route, far from any of the commonly used paths. As they came up to the grand saddle between the two peaks, the smoky clouds overhead finally began to let forth snow. The inquisitor marched on grimly, as though she could outpace even the processes of nature. But the trail began to fade. She stared hard into the gloom, trying to keep it in sight.

“I’ve lost it,” she said at last.

“We need to go back. This weather looks like it’s settling in for the night.”

“He can’t be far. We’ll spread out and keep looking. Shout if you see any sign of the trail.”

Ahri hesitated. But he was a soldier at heart, and she was his commanding officer. He did as he was ordered.

The wind blowing over the ridge made the inquisitor’s eyes stream with tears. She stared into the snow, willing it to give up its secrets. In the end it was Ahri who found it, though. When she heard his shout she hurried back towards him. He shouted again, but his voice was snatched by the wind. She looked where he was pointing. A hundred feet down the far side of the saddle, a still shape was silhouetted against the snow.

Without waiting for Ahri, the inquisitor started to make her way down the slope. From a long way off she could see that the priest was dead. From a little closer she could see that the anti-saint and the crucifix were nowhere in sight.

“No,” she said. “No!” She skidded through the snow toward the body. He looked small and sad, lying there with his thin woolen cloak wrapped around him. He was old and slightly overweight, and his chin was hairless from years of taking the spirit of a woman into himself.

The inquisitor could not remember hating anyone so much.

“You bastard,” she shouted. “Where is she?” She pulled out her sword and raised it over her head, but it wouldn’t come down—Ahri was there, grabbing her wrist.

“Enough, inquisitor. He’s gone.”

She shrugged him off. “We have to keep moving. We have to find the anti-saint.”

“No. We need to head back, now.”

She stared into the thickening air. Every indent in the snow might have been a footprint, rapidly filling in and about to vanish forever. She felt her anger guttering, and a dull emptiness rising to take its place.

“Wherever she is,” said Ahri, “she’s not in her tomb any more. The old maps won’t work. The others won’t be able to call on her.”

The inquisitor gave a hoarse bark. “There are no others,” she said. “He was the last.”

She let Ahri take her arm and help her back up the slope. When they reached the top of the saddle she looked back once. The body was already being covered by the snow.

\* \* \*

### **3. The Saint**

It was said that no one who became a saint had ever had the ambition to be one. So it was with her. She had never really wished to be anything other than what she was, which was not very much. But she was old, and she would be fading soon one way or another, so she had agreed to it.

Of course there was pain—not only when they set her on the cross, but also from the bandages they wrapped around her, dripping with embalming oil that burned her skin. But she had never expected that death would come without pain. She had been preparing for it for many years; indeed, perhaps her whole life's work was learning how to die.

Once she was in the tomb, it was not like living but more like dreaming—the kind of dreams that had no form but trembled on the edge of awareness. When she was called upon by the priests, she was awake, but then she was not really herself any more. She was more than she had been in life, and less. She was what they had made her.

The years and decades rolled by over her slumber. She did not count them, but she knew she was called on less and less, by fewer and fewer priests. She knew that her people suffered more. She knew the dwindling of the light.

Then there was the mattock, and the wall of the tomb breaking open. *Then* she was awake again.

She saw the man, whose body she had worn so many times, as he dragged her from the barrow and lifted her onto his back. She saw him struggling under her weight as he carried her up into the mountains, battered by the wind and frost. She was not afraid, but she pitied him, and it hurt her to see him hurt. She wished she could leave her body one last time and give him solace.

Then there was the cave. The man went away and did not return. She lay propped against a rock, looking outwards at the dim shaft of light from the entrance. The light waxed and waned many times, but whether that was the passing of days or seasons she could not tell.

Then the children came. They were gaunt and ill-clothed, their eyes like sunken hollows in their skulls. The oldest of them had a cruel scar running from her eye socket to her jaw.

With trembling hands, she unrolled a hide scroll and laid it on the ground before the saint. The other children knelt behind her and bent their heads in prayer.

Slowly, silently, she began to perform the ritual.

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## COVER ART

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