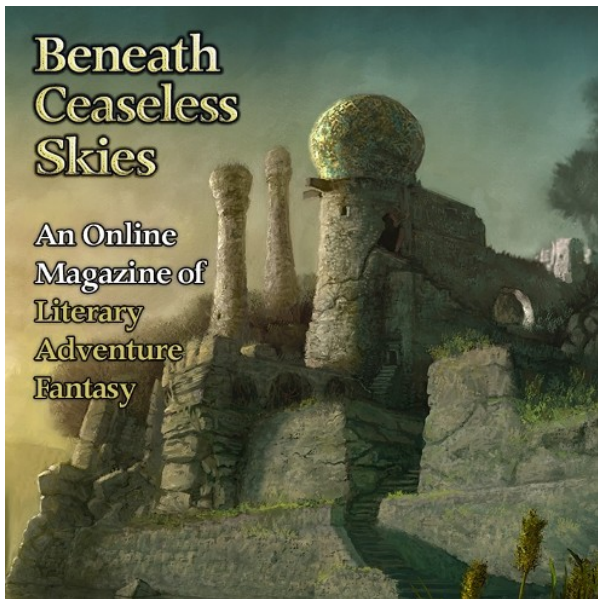


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy



Issue #24 - Aug. 27, 2009

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## SORROW'S BLADE

by Rita Oakes

1.

The winds buffeted Meurig, tore him away from his father's court, banished him to the realm of men. His bloodied hands would pass unnoticed there. *Here*. Sickly gray light oppressed his eyes. Heaviness dragged at his limbs. *Pain*. Pain to the very bone and teeth.

Was this what it was like to die? Had Selwyn, poor, murdered Selwyn, felt such agony as he crossed Beyond?

An unfamiliar reek crawled inside Meurig's nose, choked him.

**Stand up.** Rhiannon's voice in his head. She was lost to him forever now, even if she shared his banishment.

**Stand up. Draw your sword.**

*Sword. Rhiannon. Lost.*

**Draw me, Meurig. Now!**

Sunk upon his knees, Meurig drew Rhiannon, blocked a downward slice. Metal clanged, shattered. *Iron*. Small wonder he felt so sick.

A metal giant stood over him, gripping the pommel of a broken sword. "Sweet Jesu." The voice rumbled from within a black helm.

Not a giant. A man clad in iron.

**Get up.**

Meurig stumbled away, fighting nausea. A horse, heavy, metal-clad, slammed against him, sending him spinning. He stumbled over a corpse. Meurig's hand touched something wet, red.

To what nightmare realm had his father sent him?

**Get up. By the Great Oak, collect yourself.**

He pushed himself once again to his feet. A horse reared, flailed with iron-shod hooves. A blade whistled near his head. Meurig ran.

Ran until the grunts of men and the screams of horses faded. Something spewed from his mouth onto the grass, something vile and bitter-tasting. His flesh felt heavy, unfamiliar.

**We're not safe here. It's too open. Go to that grove of trees.**

*Trees.* At least the hateful realm of men possessed trees. He lurched toward the copse. *Blessed trees.* He clutched the trunk of a slender rowan with one hand, gripping Rhiannon in the other so hard his hand ached.

Slowly he regained his breath. Cool green soothed him a little, now that he had left battle behind.

“Was that by design or misadventure, do you think?”

She did not answer.

“Rhiannon?”

Her face on the pommel wore a hauteur she had never worn when flesh, but her delicate features were the same he had known all his life, in spite of the silver sheen.

She had spoken to him earlier, he was certain. Or had his wits betrayed him and she’d never spoken at all?

“I’m sorry,” he said. “By the Oak, you know I am.”

Carefully, he wiped the blade clean and sheathed her.

Again he put his hand to the rowan bark. He felt so lost and the tree was a solid, soothing presence. A shower of leaves fell upon him, brown and sere, where before they had shown a healthy green. Alarmed, he sprang back. This world was not the same as his, and now he had unwittingly harmed the tree.

“I am fit for nothing but destruction.” First he was Kinslayer, now Blight.

“Redeem yourself, if you can,” his father had said before calling the icy winds.

Huddled in misery, thirst finally prompted him to rise. A small brook bubbled a few paces away. He knelt, rinsed his mouth, and drank. Then he fingered his face in disbelief as he studied his reflection. The familiar ferryshen features had vanished, replaced by the blunt and unlovely contours of a human face. His ears were round and flat.

The water he had drunk threatened to come up again, but he managed to keep it down. The taste was nothing like the water of home. Nothing would be like home in this terrible place.

\* \* \*

A narrow track eventually widened to a rough, rock-strewn road. The day grew hot and dust settled over Meurig's cloak and skin. Overwhelmed by shock and an oppressive sense of loss, he ignored the heat, the dryness of his mouth.

Selwyn, dead at his hand. Rhiannon, childhood friend and potential lover, enchanted within a deadly weapon. Exiled into a world of iron, the bane of his kind. How was he to bear it? And how was he to redeem himself in such a perilous demesne?

From time to time he left the road to rest a few moments, but never for long, lest he repeat the incident with the rowan.

Late afternoon he came to a great wall. The gate stood open. Men passed through without challenge. Distant music drifted from within, very faint. Voices without instruments and words he could not understand, yet soothing.

His heart hammered as he approached the gate. He did not know how these folk might welcome strangers. The strains of music gave him courage. Surely a people who could produce such beauty would not be complete barbarians.

The buildings were plain, sturdy dwellings of gray rock. Their ugliness was relieved by a series of gardens and small, tidily pruned trees. Meurig smelled tilled earth, manure, roses and peonies. Further on, the scents of flowers changed to a less sweet but still pleasant tangle of rosemary, mullein, pennyroyal, rue, and others he could not identify.

The music lingered, and he followed it, until finally his steps took him to a large building of carven stone. Still expecting to be challenged at every turn, he entered through massive doors of wood and bronze.

He kept to the back in case he needed to flee. Voices filled the spacious hall. Colored panels of brilliant reds and blues took in the late afternoon sun and transmuted it to a light of liquid jewels. Hundreds of candles flickered, giving off a scent of beeswax. There was another scent, heavier but not unpleasant.

The singing continued.

Meurig watched men make orderly passage toward the source of the music. He had always believed men indifferent artisans, but no part of this building remained unadorned. Statues of marble and ivory and gold stood in niches. Traceries of wrought stone decorated galleries like a heavy lace. More crude than ferryshe work but undeniably beautiful.

Meurig closed his eyes.

*A gentle breeze tugged at his long hair. Sun sparkled upon grass. Gloom lifted as blood raced in his veins to the sweet music of feryshen blade to feryshen blade. A friendly bout with his brother for Rhiannon's amusement. Meurig's boot slipped in dew-dampened grass. Instinctively, he shifted his thrust to compensate. His blade slid past Selwyn's defense and met resistant flesh. Selwyn sank, pierced to the heart.*

“Sir?” A tentative touch upon his shoulder startled Meurig awake. He gasped.

“I am sorry, sir,” the man said.

At least, Meurig thought it was a man. The creature was so bent and misshapen he looked more like a turtle. Yet the face had the pure lines of one of the statues, somewhat round, but with a gentle gaze.

“I did not mean to startle you, sir. Did you wish to see Father Ambrose?”

“Father?”

“He has finished hearing confessions for the day, but if you are in need?”

“Need?” He knew he should stop repeating words like a fool, but the dream and exhaustion fogged his wits.

Meurig swayed and the twisted man put out a steadying hand. No taller than the middle of Meurig's chest, his head

swiveled in what must be a painful position. He gazed at Meurig with sympathetic eyes. “Are you unwell, sir?”

“I am a stranger here,” Meurig said. “The music drew me. Have I done wrong?”

“All are welcome in God’s House.”

“Which god?”

The man blinked. “There is only one. I see you are weary with travel. Come. Let me show you to a place where you may rest and refresh yourself. I am Brother Caedmon.”

“I am Meurig.”

“Come, Friend Meurig. I’ve found the world always makes more sense with a little bread and wine inside you.”

Caedmon led him outside and down a narrow path. “This is the guest house,” he said, pausing at a squat stone building. They passed inside.

Meurig followed Caedmon to a small room. A narrow window let in a meager spill of light. A cot hugged one wall, and a table and single stool stood in the corner. The only ornament in the whitewashed room was a wooden cross upon the wall.

Caedmon poured water into a bowl. “Wash the dust of travel from you. I will return with food and drink.”

“You are very kind,” Meurig said, ignoring the thud of his heart.



The water felt agreeably cool on his face and hands. Nor did he think he had anything to fear from the amiable hunchback. In spite of deep weariness, he paced the small room, wishing for even a sprig of green to relieve the weight of so much stone.

Caedmon returned with a basket containing bread, wine, cheese, a few small strawberries. “Our fare is plain here,” he said.

“To share it with strangers enriches it,” said Meurig.

Caedmon smiled, and said some words Meurig did not understand. Then he tore the brown bread in half and offered it to Meurig.

They ate in silence. Meurig had not realized how hungry he had become. The bread was heavier than he was accustomed to, but filling, and the soft cheese quite delicious.

They shared wine from a single wooden cup. Meurig preferred the sweet berries to the sour wine, but did not say so.

Meal done, Caedmon rose. “I will leave you to rest, for I feel certain you have traveled far. I will wake you for morning prayers.”

Meurig rose, bowed slightly. “I will not soon forget your kindness.”

“God give you good rest.”

Alone, Meurig unbuckled his sword belt. He lay Rhiannon upon the cot, close to the stone wall. He wrapped himself in his cloak and stretched out alongside her, one hand curled about the scabbard.

He wished she would speak again. "I do not blame you for being angry. You might have married Selwyn in the spring."

It had been an accident, truly. Or so he thought. Now he could no longer be certain if mischance or jealousy slipped blade into his brother's flesh.

"You saved my life today," he told her, "when I have given you only grief in return."

Silence. Perhaps she only had the power to speak when his life was in danger? Had the touch of cold iron hurt her? He fretted about that until exhaustion claimed him, loneliness as heavy as the tomblike stone about them.

Meurig dreamed again of Selwyn, his brother alive and laughing. Shifting sun-dapple spilled upon him between the leaves of trees. Meurig moved to embrace him, but at the moment of touch Selwyn blew apart like milkweed from a burst pod. Laughter lingered.

He rubbed his eyes, confused as Caedmon shook him. Meurig blinked at the flicker of greasy torchlight.

"What have you wrought?" Caedmon asked. His face looked pale even in the ruddy cast of light, and his eyes darted

about.

“What?” Meurig asked, still snagged in dream.

“The walls.”

Meurig sat up. The walls had been of rough-hewn stone, cool and unadorned. Now they echoed the landscape of his dream: a grove of trees sculpted with no trace of chisel or file. *Trees of stone.*

He touched the wall in wonder: bark, lichen, many-veined leaves. Overarching branches intertwined across the stretch of ceiling above. So natural-looking it seemed a breeze would set the leaves a-tremble. He could almost hear birdsong and the distant call of a hunting horn, feel the run of sap beneath his fingers.

“I dreamed of a wood,” he said. “I thought the realm of men devoid of magic.”

Caedmon’s eyes were very wide. “I must inform Father Ambrose. He will know if this be devil’s work or a miracle.”

When Caedmon had once again withdrawn, Meurig picked up Rhiannon. “Did you do this?” he whispered, but she did not reply.

\* \* \*

Father Ambrose was an ungainly stick of a man, with a dry cough and gnarled fingers. His hollow cheeks were pitted with pockmarks, his hair white and sparse. He pursed his lips in an

“O” of surprise when he saw the carven walls. He touched the stone gingerly. “You did this?”

Meurig shook his head. He was uncertain how to address the man Caedmon seemed to revere. “No, Father Ambrose. I was asleep.”

The old man traced a complicated gesture with his hands, a movement Meurig had seen Caedmon make several times. And there were more of those words in foreign tongue.

“Come,” Father Ambrose said. “We shall talk after prime.”

In the great hall Meurig remained standing quietly in the back while robed men knelt and rose, chanted, and sang.

The ritual mystified him, but the sounds echoed pleasantly in the hall. No one took note, so he spent some time examining the statues. There was one of a man bound and pierced with numerous arrows. Another portrayed a woman about to be beheaded. The faces showed a placid expression out of keeping with the suffering of their bodies.

He felt a little ill, was pleased when the ritual ended and Caedmon returned to take him to Father Ambrose.

The father’s room was as sparsely furnished as the guest house, except for a tapestry upon the wall that showed a nearly naked man bent under a great burden.

Father Ambrose smiled. “Now, Meurig. Caedmon tells me you are a traveler. Where are you bound?”

“I do not know.”

The smile faded, and though the tone remained gentle, there was an edge underneath. “You do not remember?”

“I am a stranger here.”

“You wear a sword. Have you been in battle? Have you suffered a blow to the head, perhaps? Such things may scramble one’s wits and even steal memory.”

“I was in a battle,” Meurig said, “but I took no harm.”

“Are you a Christian, Meurig? I could not help but notice you took no part in morning prayer.”

“I do not think so.”

Father Ambrose drew a sharp breath and some of the warmth left his eyes. “If you are a Jew or Mohammedan, you have trespassed the law by dressing as one of us.”

Meurig felt increasingly confused. “I do not know these words.”

Father Ambrose glanced at Caedmon. “Is the man mad, possessed, or a simpleton?”

“I do not believe he is any of those things,” Caedmon said. “He has behaved strangely, but with courtesy.”

“I am sorry about the room,” Meurig said, “though I confess I find it prettier now. I am grateful for the food and rest you have provided me. If you will present me to your Lord, I will thank him personally and take my leave.”

Father Ambrose gaped. “You wish me to present you to the Redeemer?”

“Redeemer?” Excitement stirred. Perhaps the fates had led him here and this Lord would tell him what he must do to win redemption. Then he and Rhiannon might return home. “Yes. I will wait, if he is busy.”

Father Ambrose rose. “Come.”

They returned to the great hall. At a large table Father Ambrose knelt and made that gesture again. “This is our Lord. Will you pretend never to have seen Him before?”

Meurig examined the table. It was covered in cloth of gold and held precious objects encrusted with jewels. The largest item was a great gold cross. Stretched upon it was a man in apparent agony. Spikes impaled him at hands and feet, and a cut to his side showed red. The face was a rictus of pain, eyes fixed skyward.

The nausea he had felt earlier returned in force. “Your Lord is a statue? I do not understand why you glorify pain.”

“This is our Saviour. He suffered on the Cross so we might know Heaven. Is your homeland so far from here that you have no knowledge of the Word of Christ?”

“It is far,” Meurig said, wishing he were home again.

Father Ambrose placed a hand upon Meurig’s shoulder. “You are lost, Meurig, are you not? And God has guided you to

us for a reason.”

“Lost. Yes.”

“You will stay with us. We will teach you and bring you out of error.”

“Redemption?”

“Yes. There is no man so lost he is beyond Salvation.”

2.

In the Abbey of Saint-Sever Meurig spent hours studying Latin, and he could at last understand the words of the prayers the monks chanted. Rapt, he listened as Caedmon explained stories from the thick book they called a Bible. Prayers day and night segmented time like bits of an orange.

Meurig chafed sometimes at so much time indoors but counseled himself to patience. If he could but redeem himself, perhaps he could send Rhiannon home, even if he could not return himself.

What he enjoyed most was time spent at Caedmon’s side, working in the gardens. He liked the smell of rich soil, the heat of sun through his clothes. Caedmon was more patient with him than any of the other monks—far more patient than Father Ambrose.

Today’s lesson had been the story of the first murder, the tale of two brothers, Cain and Abel.

I am Cain, he thought, as he pulled weeds. Except I bear no Mark.

“You are quiet today,” Caedmon said.

“Did Adam and Eve miss Cain, do you think?” Meurig asked. “Or did they mourn only Abel?”

“I don’t know. I imagine they mourned both their sons.”

“Why do you think God despised Cain’s offering? And what did the Mark look like? And—”

“Hold!” Caedmon said, chuckling. “I think I liked you better quiet. You must ask Father Ambrose those questions—they are beyond me.”

“Father Ambrose does not like me.”

“That is untrue. He is puzzled by you. And Father Ambrose becomes irritable with what he does not understand.”

“And you do not?”

“I find I understand little in this world, so puzzles trouble me less.”

“I think you are wiser than Father Ambrose.”

“Father Ambrose is a good man. He has been Abbot here for over twenty years. It was not so pleasant a place before.”

“You have been here so long?”

“Since boyhood.” Caedmon jabbed a trowel into dark earth, drew an unsteady breath. “My mother could not bear the sight of my twisted form.”



Meurig considered that. Was it worse, he wondered, to know a mother's love and lose it, or to never know such love in the first place? Perhaps that was a question he might ask Father Ambrose, for he did not want to cause Caedmon further pain.

\* \* \*

In front of the stable, Caedmon finished yoking an ox to a laden two-wheeled cart.

Meurig hastened to him, buckling on Rhiannon. "Father Ambrose said I might go with you to the mill."

"You won't need your sword," Caedmon said.

"I don't like to leave her behind." He rubbed the swirled hair on the forehead of the placid ox. "Besides, she finds so much time within doors dull."

"You talk about that sword as if it were a live thing." Caedmon paused as if expecting an explanation. When Meurig remained silent, he changed the subject. "How did you fare at lessons this morning?"

"I am confused by a great many things. I fear Father Ambrose wearies of my questions. I think that's why he wants me to go with you. His forehead is smooth when we begin, but by the end of the lesson it is creased and he rubs his temples. I do not mean to give him a headache. Yet how am I to learn if I do not ask questions?"

Caedmon smiled. “How are we to get to the mill if we do not begin the journey?” He seized the beast’s halter, clucked. The wooden wheels creaked as the ox moved obediently forward.

The morning was clear and fine, with a hint of cooler days to come. The ox pulled the cart without complaint. The bags of barley and wheat would be made into flour at the mill. There would be enough, Caedmon explained, to supply the monastery for the winter and to give to the poor if needed.

Meurig set his pace to match the plodding of the ox and Caedmon’s by now familiar if unlovely gait. The hunchback’s breath came soft and gasping, for his twisted frame made it difficult to draw a full lungful of air.

Meurig had asked Father Ambrose about Caedmon’s infirmity. Why would a merciful God permit one of his creatures to suffer in so painful and awkward a form, especially when it housed so kind and gentle a spirit?

Father Ambrose had rebuked him. It was not for Meurig to question God’s purpose. Which meant that Father Ambrose did not have the answer. Perhaps, Meurig thought, God meant Caedmon’s twisted back to make others grateful for their own straight ones. But he could not help but feel that manifestly unfair to Caedmon.

“You’re thinking again,” Caedmon said.

“Yes.” When they had gone a little farther, Meurig asked, “After Cain slew his brother, he went to dwell in the Land of Nod and he founded a city there, yes?”

“Yes.”

“If Adam and Eve were the only people, where did the people come from who dwelled in Cain’s city? Were there other Edens? And if so, might there be Edens where man did not disobey God and fall into sin?”

Caedmon shook his head. “I see how you gave Father Ambrose his headache. I cannot answer your question, Meurig, but beware of heresy. We are not made to understand the ways of God. That is why there is faith.”

Meurig sighed. “Very well, Brother Caedmon. I have no wish to give you a headache, too.”

Caedmon laughed and they walked on in agreeable silence.

An hour brought them to the neighboring village and the mill that stood at the southerly edge. When the miller’s sons had unloaded the cart, Caedmon suggested Meurig explore. “I will take the ox for water. There is a well at the center of the village. You can meet me there.”

The village was small, featuring some thirty or forty houses of timber, mud, and thatch. The streets were muddy tracks where swine rooted at will and chickens scratched. There

seemed neither plan nor ornament, and Meurig missed the well-ordered lanes in the monastery.

He gave the blacksmith a wide berth; the closeness of so much iron made him ill. The smell from the baker's outdoor oven was more inviting, and the work of cooper, joiner, and chandler more interesting.

The villagers, intent upon their work, ignored him, though one or two glanced at his sword worriedly. But he smiled to show he meant no harm and their expressions softened. He paused to watch a young girl herd a dozen squawking geese down a grassy hill toward a small pond. Another girl struggled with two full buckets of water from the communal well at the center of the village. Her face was pink and she blew a strand of loose hair out of her eyes. "You came with the hunchback?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Chevalier de Moissac's men are tormenting him at the well. I told them it would bring bad luck to harm a monk, but they only laughed. The Devil's in them. Or drink."

Meurig sprinted toward the well.

The ox, generally a meek creature, sidled away from the post where she was tethered. Her eyes showed white around the edges.

Three men, bearded and brutish, surrounded Caedmon, who lay huddled upon the ground. They kicked him and struck him with stout cudgels. They smelled of sweat and sour wine. One laughed and said something about “breaking the turtle.”

Caedmon wrapped his arms about his head. His breath came harsh and fast. One of the men put his foot in the center of Caedmon’s chest and pushed, forcing the monk onto his misshapen back.

“How long does it take a turtle to right itself when turned upon its shell?” The man chortled at his own wit and kept his foot in place, preventing Caedmon from moving.

White fury filled Meurig. He drew Rhiannon from her scabbard.

“Let him up,” Meurig said.

“What’s this? A stripling with a toothpick?” the man pinning Caedmon said. “Teach him some manners, Gilles.”

“Let him up, or die where you stand,” Meurig said. Wrath was a sin and the Commandment said “thou shalt not kill.” Yet he had killed already and for lesser cause. Caedmon had been kind to him and besides, it was an affront for the strong to bully the weak.

Caedmon’s breath came in a labored wheeze and his face had taken a blue cast that was not all bruises.

The one called Gilles swung at Meurig with a cudgel.

Rhiannon sheared through the stick. Gilles' eyes widened as he stepped back.

Meurig advanced. "You see how my blade cuts through wood. I think it will have less difficulty with flesh."

"Take no notice," another man said. "We are three and he is only one."

Meurig flashed his sword and nicked this man's wrist. Blood flowed and the man dropped his cudgel with a yelp. Meurig approached the third man, the one who still held Caedmon helpless.

"Shall I take no notice when you are coughing out your life's blood? Release him, I say!"

"Enough!" A fourth man approached.

Meurig felt a sickness rise. This man wore iron. He set his teeth against the nausea.

"Let the hunchback up, you imbecile," the armored man said. "He's gone purple."

"Just a bit of sport, my lord," the man said, but he released Caedmon, who rolled to his knees, whooping draughts of air into his lungs.

The other two men sidled away, but Meurig did not put up his blade. He knelt upon one knee and put his free hand to Caedmon's shoulder, though he did not take his eyes from the enemy. "Shall I kill them for you?" he asked softly.

Caedmon had not yet breath to speak, but shook his head.

Meurig rose. Rage almost made the bone-deep ache of the nearby iron bearable. “These are your men?” he demanded of the knight.

“They are. Forgive their high spirits. I will discipline them later. I am the Chevalier Guillaume de Moissac.” His eyes narrowed. “That is a fine sword. I remember crossing blades with it on the field of battle, when I drove the marauders from my lands. You showed more courage today.”

Meurig chose to ignore the insult. “I am called Meurig of —” he hesitated briefly— “of Saint-Sever. You would do well to school your men to better courtesy.”

“Go warily, Meurig of Saint-Sever. I may be moved to school you in courtesy, as well. But by the Rood, it is too fair a day for quarreling. Put up your fine blade. Take a cup of wine with me. And you, *Brother* Caedmon.”

Meurig did not like the covetous gleam in the chevalier’s eye as he glanced at the unsheathed sword, or the dripping sarcasm with which he had addressed Caedmon. Nor had he any desire to drink wine with a man clad in iron. “Thank you, no.”

“Then perhaps you will tell me what master craftsman made such a blade? I have never seen its like.”

**Tell him nothing.**

Meurig nearly dropped Rhiannon in startlement. She had not spoken to him since their first encounter with de Moissac. He drew a deep breath and slid the blade into the scabbard.

“A gift from my father,” he said, because he must say something and he would not lie. Let the chevalier make of that what he would. Meurig bent to help Caedmon rise.

\* \* \*

The miller fussed and clucked over Caedmon and pressed a cup of wine upon him, all the while muttering about “evil days when even a monk cannot walk in safety.” Caedmon protested that he was unhurt, though his dark habit was torn and muddied, his cheek bruised and scraped, and he pressed his elbow firmly against his ribs as if he had pain there.

The miller and his sons loaded the bags of flour onto the cart and Meurig yoked the ox into place.

The village disappeared after they crested a hill and began a gradual descent toward the abbey. Caedmon’s breath hitched and his fingers strayed to his rosary, but he did not pray.

“Are you angry with me, Brother Caedmon?”

Caedmon wiped his face with the sleeve of his habit. “No.”

“You are in pain. We can rest a bit.” Meurig pointed to the narrow stream that ran some few feet from the road.

At the stream, Caedmon knelt and washed his face. He lifted a cupped handful of water to his lips, then sat in silence



upon the grassy bank, arms wrapped about his ribs. He closed his eyes. Silent tears ran down his cheeks.

Meurig paced as outrage returned. "I would have killed them for you. I can go back and do it now, if you like."

Caedmon's eyes snapped open. "Killing is a sin, Meurig."

"Is cruelty not also a sin?"

"It is for God to judge them, not us." Again Caedmon wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "My bruises throb not so painfully as the hurt to my soul. For when you first offered to kill them, I was tempted. I wanted them dead. And I despaired. In my wickedness I have felt anger with God for giving me this twisted form. And even jealousy of you, my friend, for being straight and tall. That is why I weep, for I am full of sin. I have pretended virtue before now, and in that I fell into pride and grievous error. I fear I am lost, Meurig."

Meurig crouched upon the grass so that he might meet Caedmon's water-filled gaze. He did not know how he might hearten the monk. Caedmon had only ever shown cheerfulness and kindness before. If such a man were lost, what then was he? And how might he ever find redemption for his own sin?

"If you mistake your way upon the path," Meurig said, "you have but to retrace your steps and begin again."

Caedmon smiled through tears. "Perhaps you have been listening to Father Ambrose, after all. I have not thanked you

for coming to my aid, Meurig. God has surely sent you.”

Not God, Meurig thought. My father.

As children, he and Selwyn and Rhiannon would sit at his father's feet and listen, rapt, to the tales of the world's beginning, when the First Tree lifted the sky upon its branches and sprouted acorns that gave rise to all the birds and beasts and beings of the Wood.

Now Selwyn was dead, Rhiannon trapped inside a sword, his father implacable. His people had no concept of sin, and no understanding of forgiveness. Meurig might retrace his own path, but he could not undo what he had done.

### 3.

In summer the pestilence came to Saint-Sever. The monks kept vigil and fasted. For some, fear was greater than faith, and they fled.

Father Ambrose continued Meurig's lessons, but for shortened hours. In the scriptorium, the scratch-scratch of pen to vellum dwindled and fell silent. The refectory grew cheerless. Survivors dug graves and prayed.

Meurig toiled alongside Caedmon among the sick. They bathed fevered flesh, held cups of broth to unresponsive lips, carried away soiled linens. Caedmon murmured prayers for the

recovery of men he had known from childhood, and wept when prayers continued unanswered.

Once stricken, fewer than one in five recovered. When they started coughing blood, none lived more than a few hours.

Meurig despaired when Caedmon fell ill.

How could the monks' God permit such injustice?

In the pest-house, Caedmon lay on his side upon a cot. Fever sweat shone upon his face and Meurig was once again struck by the irony of so beautiful a countenance set upon so poorly made a frame. Perhaps God had been distracted at Caedmon's making. Perhaps He was distracted now.

Meurig touched Caedmon's hand briefly. The fever burned. Caedmon's lips moved in prayer, but his hands were too weak to do more than clutch his rosary.

The bell tolled for nones. Meurig sighed, touched Caedmon's hand once again, and then lifted a basket of soiled bedlinens. These he deposited at the laundry and turned his steps automatically toward the chapel.

The afternoon sun shone bright and hot. Meurig hesitated, turned and made his way toward the gardens and the orchard beyond, seeking a warmer chapel of earth and sky and cool green. Meurig settled upon the grass before an oak sapling, knees hugged to his chest.

Green life gave him more comfort than the image of a man nailed to a cross. He sighed, knowing that would displease Father Ambrose.

Sun and reverie made him drowsy. He passed from doze to dream.

*Rhiannon stood before him, her long hair the color of spiderwebs in moonlight. She studied him, eyes green and bright as a spring leaf.*

*“I shall lose Brother Caedmon, too,” he said to her. “If only I could pull out sickness the same way I pulled life from the tree when we first came to this realm.”*

*“Perhaps we can,” she said, bending to kiss him upon the forehead.*

“You missed prayers,” Father Ambrose said.

Meurig scrambled to his feet, confused. He had pierced the skin of worlds, however briefly. Now Rhiannon was a sword again, and Caedmon would die.

“Your pardon,” he said. “My heart is too heavy for my words to rise.”

The angular planes of the abbot’s face softened. He patted Meurig’s shoulder, the joints of his fingers swollen and red. “You must not despair, Meurig, but have faith in God’s mercy.”

“But how, Father? Why should God afflict his own servants so?”

The abbot's gaze grew sharp and he straightened as if to rebuke Meurig, but then he let out a dispirited sigh. "If I were a better priest, I would have an answer."

"You are weary, is all," Meurig said. "Let me take you to your room."

"Just walk with me to the chapel."

\* \* \*

Leaving Father Ambrose at prayer, Meurig returned to the pest-house. He found Caedmon unchanged, unless perhaps his breath was even more labored than before. Meurig seized Caedmon's wrist and knelt.

*Perhaps we can.*

With his left hand, he curled his fingers around Rhiannon's hilt. She had kissed him in the dream. Perhaps she was no longer angry.

"God of Caedmon and Father Ambrose," he said softly, "Lady of Light and Great Oak, Giver of Life, bestow your blessing to my untrained hands. Send health where there is sickness, and drive the pestilence back into darkness."

His hand clutching Caedmon's wrist ached and began to burn. Meurig's other hand tingled and grew warm. His head felt light and strange.

A sensation like a thousand spiders skittering over bare flesh progressed from hand to wrist, arm, neck, and spine.

Meurig suppressed a gasp of pain and surprise. When the crawling feeling ceased, he released Caedmon's hand, swayed unsteadily as he climbed to his feet. Color had returned to Caedmon's cheeks, and his breathing seemed easier.

Meurig moved on to the next cot.

Twenty beds with twenty brothers near death. Some of them had been vomiting blood, some had lips turned so blue they were nearly black, some had egg-sized swellings under their arms and in their groin. All suffered.

Meurig went to each in turn, felt again the prickle over his skin. Each healing—he hoped it was a healing—left him feeling faint and sick, as if he were surrounded by cold iron.

**Stop.**

Rhiannon's voice. He was only at the tenth bed and the weakness in his knees made him stumble.

**Meurig, stop. You are killing yourself.**

He shook his head. Rhiannon might protest, but this must be his purpose. He could not bring Selwyn back from the dead, but he could prevent others from too soon sharing his brother's fate.

At the last bed, he sank to his knees. White lights danced before his eyes. He summoned a final reserve of strength.

**Outside, Meurig. The trees. The trees will help you.**

He heard her, but he could not make himself move to obey. He closed his eyes and felt himself fall.

\* \* \*

Meurig woke, blinking in sunlight, found himself sprawled upon cool grass, one hand outstretched to a gnarled oak root. Someone nearby recited the *Pater Noster*. He thought perhaps it was Caedmon's voice.

A leaf detached from a branch above and fluttered down gently. He watched it, entranced. When it had settled upon the grass, he noticed its withered brown. He snatched his hand away from the tree. Dozens of other dead leaves lay scattered around him and upon his tunic.

Meurig tried to rise, but a face loomed over his, a hand pressed him gently back. "Be still." Father Ambrose held a cup of cool water to Meurig's lips. The water tasted finer than wine, finer even than the herb-laced mead of home. Father Ambrose eased him back.

"Thank you," Meurig said. His voice sounded strange in his ears. All the brothers in their black robes had gathered, even those who had lately lain near death in the infirmary.

"How came I here?"

Caedmon said, "The Voice of Our Lady bade us bring you. Surely She has touched you, for you have taken our sickness.

We have prayed most earnestly for your recovery and She has answered.”

*Rhiannon. Masquerading as the Voice of the Mother of God. How dare you?*

**I did not. You were dying. If their assumptions made them act the quicker, I saw no need to correct them.**

He struggled to rise. Father Ambrose gave him his arm to lean on. Violets grew in profusion where Meurig had lain. Noticing this for the first time, Father Ambrose crossed himself. “To witness one miracle in a lifetime can be accounted strange and wondrous,” he said, “but you, my son, I suspect are filled with unnumbered miracles.”

“No, Father Ambrose, I—”

“And see here. Our Lady’s flower. These were not here before.”

“Father, I—”

“Hush now. You are weary.”

They walked in slow procession back to the abbey. Meurig was glad of Father Ambrose’s wiry arm. He felt as if his bones had turned to jelly. And yet somewhere beyond his weakness, he felt something new and joyous, something he had not known, even in the days before Selwyn’s death when he had



supposed himself happy. He had purpose now. Redemption might elude him, but it was better to save life than to take it.

\* \* \*

Meurig's strength returned and tales of his gift spread from abbey, village, and town. Saint-Sever became an island of health in the middle of desolation. Travelers told of great cities virtually deserted, of fields untended, harvests left to rot, corpses unburied. The abbey turned no one away, and Meurig filled his days with healing.

One day as summer edged toward autumn, Chevalier de Moissac sent two armed men with a letter to the abbot. There was sickness in his household. Could Meurig come?

Meurig did not like the idea of journeying to de Moissac's stronghold. Yet perhaps the afflicted were too ill to journey to Saint-Sever. Should they die because he had a dread of iron?

Caedmon urged him to stay. "Guillaume de Moissac is a profane man," he said. "Let him humble himself by coming to Saint-Sever in person."

"Perhaps he is unable."

"The road is dangerous. De Moissac's men are dangerous."

"Where is your faith, Brother Caedmon?" Father Ambrose asked.

"Not with Guillaume de Moissac."

Father Ambrose glanced again at the letter. “It is Lady Alys who is ill. De Moissac’s mother has always been generous to the abbey.”

Caedmon’s face lost color. He bit his lip. “At least, do not send Meurig alone, Father.”

“I will not. You and I will also make the journey with him.”

“Father, well or ill, Lady Alys will not want to see me.”

“Nevertheless.”

4.

The chateau lay a half day’s ride northeast of Saint-Sever. Caedmon and Meurig rode on mules, Father Ambrose on an aged palfrey. Caedmon sat the mule as awkwardly as he walked, but kept his head bowed in thought. Meurig did not mind riding, but the nagging closeness of iron on the mule’s shod hooves and in the buckles and bits of harness set his teeth on edge. Father Ambrose, in spite of his age and arthritic hands, rode with grace and vigor. “I was not always an abbot,” he said, catching Meurig’s stare.

De Moissac’s men provided escort. Unshaven and unwashed, their dark eyes darted about restlessly. Searching for bandits on the road, Meurig guessed. So why did he feel like a prisoner?

The journey was a cheerless one. Fields of ripening wheat and rye waited for scythes that would not come. Crows gathered in great noisy flocks, their bellies so full Meurig wondered how they managed to fly. The stench of decay permeated the land.

Late afternoon they rode into the courtyard of the keep at Moissac. By the dying light Meurig could see grass growing between the cobblestones. There seemed very few people about for so large an estate.

They surrendered their mounts and a ruffianly old man led them inside the hall. “The Abbot of Saint-Sever, my lord,” he said.

The interior looked more ill-kept than the courtyard. The rushes upon the floor had mildewed. Dust coated the dark walnut furnishings and furred the tapestries upon the walls.

Guillaume de Moissac sat before the fire, a brace of wolfhounds sprawled at his feet. To Meurig’s relief, he was not wearing armor, but his tunic looked rumpled and sported more than a few stains. He held a cup of wine carelessly in one hand, scratched the ears of one of the hounds with the other. “I did not send for you, Father,” he said. “Nor for you, Brother Crookback.”

“Nevertheless, we are here,” Father Ambrose said with some asperity. “It is customary to offer some refreshment to

travelers who have journeyed to your aid.”

“I am short of servants at present,” Guillaume said. “But you may help yourselves to wine.”

“Never mind. Where will we find Lady Alys?”

“The sickroom is at the top of the west tower.”

“Are there others afflicted?”

“I cast all out who had signs of the pestilence. Yet even I balked at tossing my mother over the wall.”

“Your filial piety is exceeded only by your hospitality, it seems. Come, Meurig, Caedmon. I pray we are not too late.”

De Moissac gave them a torch, but would journey no more than halfway up the winding stone stair.

The sickroom itself was foul with dampness and decay. The bedding stank of urine and excrement. “They have simply abandoned their Lady to her fate,” Father Ambrose said, his voice shaking with anger.

“I will fetch water and clean linens,” Caedmon said.

Father Ambrose nodded, and placed the torch into its setting on the wall. He began to anoint the woman upon the bed.

Meurig drew closer. The woman’s skin was parchment yellow and loose over her bones. Her hair, white and brittle with age, lay snarled upon her pillow. She lay helpless in her

own filth. Shadows in the hollows of her eyes and cheeks gave her a skeletal appearance.

Her eyes opened to reveal a cold, pale blue. She studied Father Ambrose a moment only, then Meurig felt her gaze. “Have you come, Imp, to take my soul to Hell?”

Meurig felt a cold niggle of fear in his belly. Had her closeness to death allowed her to see past his borrowed human face and cropped ears?

“No, Lady. I’ve come to help you stay in this world a little longer, if I can.”

“Here’s water,” Caedmon said. He held a cup to the woman’s lips.

She drank thirstily. “Sweet Jesu,” she said. “My other son. Behold, Healer. The Crookback’s twisted form houses a gentle nature. My other son is well-made, but twisted in his soul. And so are my sins made flesh.”

“I am going to lift you from your bed, Lady,” Meurig said.

“My rottenness will run out of me.”

She weighed little more than a child. He gagged on the stench of sour flesh and foulness as he carried her to the narrow window. The press of bones moving beneath the sack of her skin felt strange against his palms.

He forced the stench from his mind as he gathered himself for the familiar effort of healing. Dimly he was aware of Father

Ambrose and Caedmon working quietly, removing the soiled mattress and bed linens, sweeping the floor, setting water to heat, lighting lamps. He could see an arrow-slit width of stars out the window.

The sickness began to crawl from her. He gasped. Though Lady Alys was not heavy, Meurig's knees began to tremble. His skin felt thick, as if he were being lowered into tar. He sank slowly to his knees, still clasping her close.

The other healings had not felt like this. It was too much. She was too ill, or this pestilence was different. Or he was losing the gift. Pain dissolved his flesh. Darkness pressed against his eyes. *Rhiannon. God of Caedmon. Root of the Great Tree. Selwyn, my brother. Help me.*

Light stabbed him, and heat, and cleansing white fire, burning away the ichor and despair of long sickness.

Someone lifted Lady Alys from him. Someone pressed a cup of wine to his lips. Someone prayed.

Meurig opened his eyes to find Father Ambrose close. "Meurig? I thought we had lost you. You were so cold."

"Lady Alys?"

"Caedmon is with her. She is asleep. Peaceably. And already much stronger."

Meurig struggled to his feet. Lady Alys' face had a flush of healthy pink. Caedmon was gently brushing out the snarls of

her hair. “She is truly his mother?” Meurig whispered.

“Yes.”

She had loathed her hunchback son from birth. And yet Caedmon’s touch upon her betrayed no resentment or bitterness. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.* If only he could understand forgiveness. If only he could earn it, or at least send Rhiannon home.

“Meurig?”

“I need air.”

“Take my arm.” Father Ambrose supported him on the long climb down the tower stairs. “There is an elm tree in the garden. Will that do?”

Meurig nodded.

Moonlight revealed a garden as neglected as the rest of the household, but the elm was old and strong. Meurig put out his hand to the bark. Strength returned to him almost at once. He drew his hand back before even a single leaf began to curl and darken. His control was getting better.

Father Ambrose rubbed a leaf with thumb and forefinger. “I do not understand this affinity you have with trees,” he said. “It troubles me.”

“How can it be wrong to heal? I do try not to harm the trees overmuch.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I have a question, Father.”

The Abbot sighed. “You usually have many questions, Meurig.”

“Will you explain forgiveness to me?”

Father Ambrose studied Meurig with the same intensity he generally reserved for his missal. “What is to explain?”

Meurig took a deep breath. “If a man does wrong, and the one he wrongs forgives him, it still does not undo the wrong. So why forgive?”

“To forgive shows a meek and charitable spirit. It lightens the heart of both the one who forgives and the one who needs forgiveness.” He clapped his hand on Meurig’s shoulder. “We are all sinners, yet with God’s grace we may all be forgiven. That is the way of Hope and Faith.”

“And if those we wrong will not forgive? Or do not know how? Or perhaps are dead and cannot?”

“Prayer and a contrite heart, my son.” Father Ambrose squeezed his shoulder gingerly. “What is it that weighs so upon you? I have sensed it from the first. You have not yet chosen Baptism and the True Faith, but perhaps you would like to confess yourself friend to friend, if not penitent to priest?”

“My brother—”

De Moissac’s wolfhounds bounded into the garden. The chevalier followed more leisurely. “Here you are,” he said,



thumping Meurig and Father Ambrose upon the back hard enough to make both stagger. “Brother Crookback says our mother will live.”

“Praise God in his mercy,” Father Ambrose said.

“There’s a cold supper within. We shall drink deep in celebration.”

“We are weary from our journey,” Father Ambrose said. “A room for the night is all we require.”

“No carousal for you, either, young Meurig? You are not a monk yet.”

Rhiannon’s voice in his head trembled with urgency.

**Refuse him.**

“Thank you, no,” Meurig said.

“As you wish,” de Moissac said, his jovial manner falling away.

Later, after nibbling on a bit of bread and cheese, and a judicious sip of wine, Meurig sought the bedchamber prepared for him.

**Let us be away from this place.**

“Tomorrow.”

**Tonight.**

“The beasts deserve rest. And what of Caedmon and Father Ambrose?”

**We can leave without them. And without the beasts.**

“Why?”

**I do not like the way de Moissac looks at me.**

“You fear him.”

Rhiannon fell silent. Whether she was sulking or simply resigned, Meurig couldn't tell.

5.

They took their farewells of Lady Alys in the morning.

She seized Caedmon's hand. “I was right to send you to the abbey,” she said, “though I sent you for the wrong reasons. Vanity was always my downfall. Pray for me, if you can find it in you.”

“I will,” he said.

“Father Ambrose. I will send a gift to the abbey before the first snow.”

“You have always been generous to us, my lady. I shall add my prayers to those of your son.”

She smiled and momentarily the years retreated. “Faith! I may reach Heaven after all.”

Her smile faded as she studied Meurig. “You are both more and less than you appear to be,” she said. “Have a care on

your journey. These are troubled times and saints have a tendency to die overyoung.”

“I will, my lady,” Meurig said, “but I am no saint.”

\* \* \*

“The chevalier went riding early,” the old manservant said as he led the saddled mules and palfrey from the stables. Meurig thought that just as well, though hospitality normally required a formal leavetaking of one’s host.

The day was crisp and fair. Their mounts tugged at the reins, at odds with the reflective silence of Rhiannon, Father Ambrose, and Caedmon. Were they as eager to quit the gloomy keep as he?

Meurig toyed with a bit of mane, frowned as he noted the browning of trees on either side of the road. Was this the normal turning of the season, or had the pull of life from so many healings spread farther than he’d ever intended? By the Great Oak, he hoped not.

They had not ridden more than half a league when a horseman emerged from the wood. Meurig tensed. De Moissac.

“Good morrow,” the chevalier said. “I did not realize you planned so early a departure. And without escort. You know the risks of brigands about.”

“Our duties at the abbey are pressing,” Father Ambrose said. “And we have nothing to tempt a brigand.”

“Not so,” de Moissac said. “There is your healer’s fine sword. What need has a healer for such a weapon?”

Rhiannon clamored inarticulate alarm. “To deal with brigands, as you say,” Meurig said, silently reassuring her.

“But are you strong enough to keep it?”

“Let be,” Caedmon said.

“Mind your own affairs, *brother*.”

Father Ambrose interposed his horse between de Moissac and Meurig. “Tread warily, Guillaume de Moissac. You risk your immortal soul.”

“Must you hide your cowardice behind a priest’s robes, boy?” de Moissac said.

Meurig felt his face grow warm. Pride was a sin. Also wrath. But so was covetousness, and de Moissac’s eyes hungered. “I am not hiding.”

De Moissac grinned. “Then dismount and battle with me. Let God favor whom He will.”

Leather creaked as the chevalier swung down from the saddle. Meurig leaped to the grass. Caedmon scrambled down awkwardly, touched Meurig’s arm. “You do not have to do this.”

“Brother Caedmon is right,” Father Ambrose said. “Remember the meekness of our Lord.”

Meurig slipped the mule's reins into Caedmon's hand. "I am sorry, Father." He drew Rhiannon, felt her metal warm and alive beneath his palm.

He and Selwyn had fought for Rhiannon, though in play. Meurig tasted bile in the back of his throat.

**De Moissac is not your brother. And he will fight in deadly earnest.**

Grass damp with dew slickened the ground. Leaves of ash and oak and yew rustled in a breeze while carrion crows watched with dark interest. Mail gleamed in sunlight beneath the hem of de Moissac's knee-length surcoat.

Meurig clenched his teeth against the nearness of iron. De Moissac drew his sword and their blades clanged together. The chevalier's sword snapped in midlength and Rhiannon screeched as she slid down to catch at his hilt.

De Moissac's eyes widened and he bared his teeth. "That's two swords you have cost me." With his left hand he drew a poniard and sliced down the length of Meurig's forearm, scraping bone.

Meurig dropped Rhiannon as the shock of cold iron took him. She bounced upon the grass, silverbright in the sun.

De Moissac shoved Meurig aside. He swept Rhiannon up. "With this blade I will drive my enemies into the sea."

Meurig half rose, clutching his wounded arm. Already he could feel the poison iron at work in him. "Release her."

"Spoils of war," de Moissac said. He thrust Rhiannon through Meurig's belly.

Rhiannon shrieked aloud. Caedmon and Father Ambrose clapped hands over their ears.

Meurig gave a soft groan and sank to his knees, curling the fingers of his unwounded hand around the naked blade. Hot blood welled between his fingers.

Caedmon caught Meurig before he toppled, eased him gently to the ground.

Father Ambrose knelt at his other side, praying. Meurig felt scalding tears drop upon his hands, heard Caedmon weeping. He welcomed the warmth. The cold bite of iron hurt more than Rhiannon in his vitals.

She still wailed. Not a human sound, nor a ferryshen one. Something of earth and metal, fire and rage. Possessed by a corrupt human hand. Trapped in sword form. Forever. Locked within her the memory of serving as the instrument of his death. As he had been Selwyn's. Was this ferryshen justice? *Father. Free her.*

De Moissac seized Rhiannon again, wrenched her free, scattering Meurig's blood upon the grass. Light danced up her

blade, flashed like strong sunlight over water. The keening stopped. She began to glow with white heat.

De Moissac dropped the blade with a yelp of pain. Rhiannon sent hot rage leaping from her pommel to the chevalier. White flame licked at his hair, ran down his shoulders, blackened the fabric of his surcoat.

De Moissac screamed. The air stank of roasting meat.

“Rhiannon, no,” Meurig gasped. “Let him be. Come back.”

The iron was poisoning him. His father remained silent, unyielding. *Father. Forgive.*

Cool water upon his head. And again. And a third time. Meurig shivered.

*Father. Bring us home.*

A light touch upon him, a tracing of a pattern upon his brow, a scent of fragrant oil. More prayers. He'd not been paying attention. Father Ambrose disliked it when his mind wandered at prayers.

*Rhiannon, help me.*

**Let me kill de Moissac.**

“No,” Meurig said.

The flames engulfing de Moissac flickered out. The chevalier slumped to the ground, moaning.

Darkness crowded him. Earth embraced him. Strength in soil. Soil that fed the roots of trees. He pulled life from the dirt.

New vigor flowed into him. And heat. A small heat, like a candle flame, but growing.

He grabbed Caedmon's hand suddenly, firmly. Caedmon gasped, and Father Ambrose, startled, paused a moment in his prayers.

Meurig twined Rhiannon's heat with that of his own. He sent it around and through Caedmon—light, reassuring, loving, melting and reshaping bone and flesh, straightening the twisted form.

Their united heat radiated through Father Ambrose, burned away the stiffness of arthritic joints, the persistent cough which had begun in the spring and never really went away.

Meurig tried to make the heat leap from the priest and coil about the chevalier.

**No.**

"Forgive," he whispered to her.

Rhiannon's heat flared as her anger threatened to consume de Moissac anew.

"Forgive," Meurig said again, struggling to curb her. Their heat enveloped de Moissac in a fire that no longer burned. It flickered between the links of mail, ran over limbs, seeped into his ears, mouth, danced into his hair.



De Moissac cried out, batted at the white flames on his head. His sickness was not of flesh. Meurig and Rhiannon seared away the chevalier's treachery, his cruelty, his brutishness, his covetousness.

*I forgive you, Guillaume de Moissac.*

**I do not.**

*You must.*

Meurig forgave his father and mother, who had never known they needed it; had never known how to bestow it upon others. He forgave them the small ways they had shown Selwyn greater love, forgave them their coldness and his banishment, forgave them their unyielding silence when he needed them most.

He forgave Rhiannon, for not making her choice clear. He even forgave himself, for old jealousies and resentments and the fatal misstep that cost him home and brother. In the realm of shades perhaps Selwyn would forgive him as well.

**Meurig?** Rhiannon's voice in his head held puzzlement and grief.

Light and happy, elated with a love for Rhiannon he had never been able to express, his flame brightened, flared, went out even as a sudden wind made the branches toss, swirled dry leaves into a vortex, startled crows into noisy flight. He tightened his hands on her as the winds took them.

\* \* \*

Meurig knew without opening his eyes that he had come home. The air tasted different, the warmth of sunlight more inviting, the scents of grass and flowers more intense. Someone cradled his head. Long hair brushed his face, and hot tears splashed on his cheek, rolled to the corner of his mouth.

His eyes felt weighted with iron, but he forced them open to see Rhiannon, sword no longer, leaning over him, silver hair stirring in a soft breeze.

“You are free,” he whispered.

She nodded. Her shoulders shook with weeping.

Meurig tried to move his right hand, but it was as dead as the cold iron that poisoned him. The icy touch had crept from forearm to shoulder and no magic could stop its progress. He brushed her face with the back of his left hand. “Don’t cry. We’re home.”

“I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t do anything when de Moissac made me stab you.”

“Shhhh. You did not stab me. He did.”

“Your mother and father are coming across the meadow.”

“Give them my love. I cannot wait.”

“You mustn’t leave me, Meurig. Not now. Not when we finally have a chance to be together—truly together.” She pressed his hand to her cheek.

“I cannot stay. Selwyn is waiting.”

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*Rita Oakes writes historical fiction, dark fantasy, and horror, sometimes at the same time. She enjoys curling up with a fine Belgian beer and the obligatory writer's cat at the end of the day. Her work has appeared in Tales of Moreauvia, Aeon Speculative Fiction, Paradox, and The Many Faces of Van Helsing anthology. Learn more at [www.ritaoakes.com](http://www.ritaoakes.com) and [www.facebook.com/rita.oakes](http://www.facebook.com/rita.oakes).*

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## FATHER'S KILL

by Christopher Green

The door has three locks, and I am their key.

I was nine before I could open all of them without help. Father's game of teaching me how the locks worked had become a desperate trial when Mother passed. When Father hunts, the door must be kept locked throughout night, until the morning drives the wolves away.

He cannot go into the night without having the door locked behind him.

The lowest lock is the first one I learned. Little Stefan can touch it if he stretches. I have only to press my index finger to the front piece, curl my thumb behind, and twist my wrist and the lock will spring open in my hand.

The second is a knot of metal and gears. This lock must be wound, or it will seize. Marta is old enough to be trusted and tall enough to reach it, and she is always helpful. Winding the lock is her job. One spins the toothed gear the same number of hours that the sun has been in the sky that day, and the lock will open. The lock will not work if the sun is not out.

The third lock shines regardless of how little light the room holds. I can reach it if I stand on my tiptoes. It is hollow and open at the bottom, wide and deep enough for my hand.

Bright silver teeth line the lock. It will not open unless the pressure plates within are pressed just so, and, if they are not, the lock will take my hand as payment.

\* \* \*

It is near to night, now, and Father pats Stefan on the head, then sweeps Marta up in his big arms. She giggles, and wraps her arms around his neck. While she hugs him, his blue gaze drifts from me, to the third lock, and back.

I move to the door and unlock the first lock.

Father sets Marta down and her smile unravels at the edges like a split seam. Stefan scampers behind the chair.

I unlock the second lock.

Father lifts the wolf skull from the mantel and places it over his face. His eyes go from blue to yellow.

He is broken and remade.

Marta takes a step backward, and Father pads forward and licks her face.

I stretch upwards, bite my lip, and carefully place my hand within the third lock. It responds, and I swing the door open.

The bite of winter spins in and Father whirls on all fours to face the doorway. Beyond, the night is almost here. He barks, then shakes his pelt into place and trots out into the darkness. His tracks stand stark in the snow and the moonlight.

I lock both him and the night away. Marta helps me pile

wood on the fire, then goes about the tasks Mother taught her. The heat grows and presses the cold flat against the walls.

All of us are hungry, but only Stefan opens the pantry to look. It is empty, but that doesn't stop him from going back again, and once more before coming to sit in my lap. The fire makes the wood pop, and soon Stefan begins to snore, his head against my chest, and Marta comes to sit beside me. I sleep.

The fire is only ash and ember when something awakens me. I roll Stefan's sleeping form off me and sit up. Marta is sleeping as well. She's used her doll as a pillow.

There is something at the door. A wide slice of moonlight stretches in from outside, broken only by the wolf's shadow. It smells us, snorts into the snow outside and whines, then throws itself at the door. Its howl stops short when more howls join it.

The pack outside grows louder. Their claws rake the wood, and yellow eyes glare at me from outside, wolves with their faces pressed to the snow, ears against the ground. I hear them snarl amongst themselves, fighting to be nearest the door. They growl and snarl and scratch at the walls.

Stefan, thankfully, snores through it, but Marta sobs and covers her face with her doll. I get up as quietly as I can and creep to the door. The second lock ticks quietly away, counting the hours to morning

The wolves hit the door so hard I feel it in my stomach. They smell my nearness. They snap their teeth at the space beneath the door, their jaws spasming shut over and over just like the lock does on my hand, in my dreams.

The locks hold strong.

I stop trying to be quiet and trust in the locks. I bring more wood for the fire and Marta helps me stack it high in the hearth.

The pitch of the wolves changes, outside. They are gone, as one, and their yips and barks move away from us, down the valley, and trail off into the night. They have tired of us, and are running something else to ground.

Marta pulls her knees to her chest and rests her chin on her doll's. "What do they want?"

"Us," I tell her, and lay my hand on Stefan's forehead. "That pack out there wants in here. This isn't anything more than a den, to them, and the way they deal with other packs is the same way they want to deal with us."

"Will they hurt Father?"

"They might try, but that's not what they want most of all. A wolf pack kills the rival's cubs, Marta. They want in here, to be at us."

"Cubs?"

I do not take my hand off Stefan, and Marta stops asking questions. I cannot sleep. Stefan doesn't wake up during the night, and Marta drifts off now and again but whimpers and cries in her sleep, like a dog. Like a wolf cub.

When the night fades and the light returns, Father does not come back to us. I wait, watching the second lock count the time away, and the light beneath the door grows stronger. Just inside the doorway there is a torn claw and curls of wood shavings amidst a spill of melting snow.

I wait.

When I can wait no longer I shake Marta awake. She looks at me with eyes dark with worry. I take her to the door, careful to let Stefan sleep, and show her how to open the lowest lock. I lock it, and she unlocks it for me. And again. Satisfied, I open the second, and stand on my toes and undo the third. Despite my worry, I cannot help but smile a little. For the first time, the third lock is as easy as the other two.

“Marta,” I say, “throw only the lowest lock.”

She nods.

Father is not far from home. I find him in the briar, naked, his eyes rolling in his head and drool freezing at his lips. He doesn't move as I push my way through the bramble to him. My clothes tear, here and there, making more work for poor Marta when I return.



His hands are empty, and I feel a coldness inside that matches the winter around me. He has lost the wolf skull, and I have to fight the urge to yell or cry or despair. We will starve if Father cannot hunt.

When I am near enough, Father grabs my wrist. His skin burns bright with fever. I lead him back to the door, and Marta quickly unlocks the door and pulls it open. I see in her face how Father and I must look, my face scratched and bleeding, clothes torn; Father naked and more bloody and not even shivering, despite the cold.

I take him to the chair in front of the fire, and Marta covers him in blankets. He watches us, and then his gaze goes to the door I'd forgotten to close. I rush over and throw all three locks like I've been doing it all my life. Father watches, eyes full of what I hope is pride.

"I hunger," says my Father, voice rough from the night.

Marta has been busy, and fetches a bowl of gruel, but Father throws the bowl across the room.

"Boy."

I stand, and Marta shrinks behind me.

"Boy, go to my kill and fetch me meat." His voice softens, becoming more like the Father we know. "The night was long and the hunt a hard one. The girl's meal is not enough. My strength is gone, and I need the kill."

I nod. "Where is it, Father?"

"Beyond the valley, in the stand of pines nearest the river. I was hard pressed, last night. I am sure the wolves have been at it. Bring me what they have left. It will have to be enough."

One, two, three, I unlock the door. Father's eyes gleam at me, watching as I work at the door. He nods to himself and smiles when I turn back to face him.

"I won't be long," I say, and wrap my cloak tight around me as I push out into the wind.

The valley is hardly worthy of the name. I have only my Father's wolf prints for company as I trudge through the snow. The wind picks up. It makes my cloak snap, and now and then the noise of it grows to a howl. I walk on and on, through the valley and to the pines. When I hear the rush of water muffled by ice, I know the river is nearby.

Father is right. The wolves have been at the kill. Their tracks are everywhere. Split bones and frozen blood have been scattered in a wide circle around the carcass. The wolves have done so much damage that the kill is nothing recognizable, now, just a lump of meat and muscle that is beginning to ice up.

I cut free what I can and wrap it in my cloak. The wind no longer sounds like wolves. I am warm, even without the cloak.

When I return, the door stands open. The winter and the wolves are everywhere, within. I cannot bring myself to enter.

A big gray wolf stands on the table, and it growls at me. The cloak and the kill fall from my hands, and I pull my knife from my belt. Yellow eyes glare at me from two different corners, and three of the wolves fight over what is left of Stefan. His blood is bright, as bright as Marta's. She lies, open and empty, beside my Father, who rises from the chair and turns to me. One of the wolves has her doll in its jaws.

The thing in Father smiles, wide, showing too many teeth. It howls, and the other wolves howl too. It reaches up with Father's hands, hands that will soon be paws, and takes my Father's skull away from its face.

And its eyes go from deepest blue to pale yellow.

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Ceaseless  
Skies**

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## COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardinha



Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.battleduck.com>.



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