

FICTION | ESSAYS | POETRY | INTERVIEWS | BOOK REVIEWS

The Book Smuggler's Den

Fantastic **Fantasy**

EXCLUSIVE

Interview with
published author,
Aaron Sommers

Mermaids,
pirates,
& gold...

A Tribute to Iris Murdoch

That is why we Iris Murdoch fans continue to read her novels: they refresh us anew even now, twenty years after her death and 100 years after her birth.

August 2019

Contents

August 2019

Letter from the Editor

Fiction

The Belief Ritual, Edward Ahern

Owain's Red Branch, Jennifer Arnold

Sutland, Daniel Deisinger

Yggdrasil, Glenn Dungan

The Isle of Restored Faith, Reed Martin Miller

Author Interview

Aaron Sommers

Book Review of the Month

Iris Murdoch, on the Anniversary of Her Birth and Death Reviewed by S.B. Julian

The Sad Girl's Declassified Heartbreak Survival Guide, Gigi Bella Reviewed by A. Lawler

Contributors

Letter From the Editor

We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.

- Iris Murdoch

Drifting away into another realm, and escaping reality for a while, is always a welcome feeling in my mind. Fantasy novels and short stories are some of the most creative works available on the market. Authors who dare to write such a tough genre have a lot of courage. There are so many working parts to fantasy. Creating creatures of a whole new breed, defining worlds with different rules, and the names of the characters are always my favorite part.

Fantasy gives you the opportunity to explore modern-day problems and take it to a whole new level. The emotions behind these issues disappear as the reader now has to choose a side unknown to them. There is a hint of psychology behind these types of stories. Good always triumphs over evil, even if that means committing murder.

Authors who write fantasy illuminate the inner workings and desires of the mind. There are so many different ways to take a story; like swords and shields versus guns, or castles and palaces versus mansions. Above all, fantasy stories offer hope. There is nothing better than seeing a dragon or centaur rescue the main character in what seems like it is the end of their existence.

The real world is boring! Let's dive into another world and read some of the best fantasy short stories from this month's Book Smuggler's Den contributors. Thanks again to all of you who submitted!

Dani Watkins

Dani Watkins

Editor-In-Chief, Book Smuggler's Den Literary Magazine

The Belief Ritual

By Edward Ahern

Those who dared to meet the Old One waited in a glade below his hut until I escorted them up the hill. On this summer morning there was only one person standing in the glade, a wizened, elderly woman. I recognized her as I approached, and fear flickered through me.

The woman discerned my worry. “Calm yourself, servant. I am come to parlay with the Old One.”

“It is a wonder to encounter you, venerable Horflog. Please, let me escort you to him.”

She nodded, saying nothing. She hobbled and used a staff, but set a hard pace, and I had to lengthen my stride to keep up. As we walked, I forced myself to ask, “Charlong and our daughter, they are alive?”

“They live unscarred. You and the slut bred well, Malame. Charlong has talent, and the child has more. Perhaps I should arrange another coupling.”

It was not a question. “May I ask the child’s name?”

“You may ask, I may not tell.”

The Old One had divined her approach and was waiting outside his hut. They bowed in silence to each other, ozone faintly crackling around them as their protective spells shifted. They conversed without speaking aloud for several hundred heartbeats, then both looked at me and began saying words I could hear.

“Listen closely, Malame. Horflog has told me of a visitor who will come to us in two or three days. She asks...”

The woman’s aura sputtered, casting blue light over the gullies of her wrinkled skin.

“That is, advises—that we must either decline the request or turn it to our advantage. She believes that honoring the request will jeopardize our existence.”

“What is to be done, venerable one?”

“A great deal, so try not to lose my words.”

The Old One described for me, in the time it takes to eat a meal, what I would do on their behalf. When he finished, Horflog and the Old One bowed to each other, the unseen waves of their spells pushing into each other and forming a dirty rainbow.

There were no audible goodbyes between the two adepts, and I escorted the old woman back down the hill. I stepped to one side in the clearing so she could continue. The look in my eyes betrayed me. She studied me briefly.

“Saccul. The whelp’s name is Saccul. If she does not die or disobey me she will attain great malevolence.”

When I returned to the Old One’s hut he was still standing outside it, his thoughts bending the air around him. I waited, saying nothing.

He roused after perhaps a hundred breaths and glanced at me. “She is a grasping hag, but not wrong. I have things she shall not know of for you to accomplish during your absence.”

“I assumed as much, Master. Will you not be leading me on this task?”

“No. You have sufficient goetic competence to be put to the test on your own. But sympathy and corporeal urges could still betray you. Come into the hut.”

Once inside we sat cross-legged on the dirt floor facing each other, our knees almost touching. The Old One grabbed a blanket of dragon scale from off of his cot and threw it over both our heads. Dragon skin is as useless as iron in holding in warmth, but shields words and thoughts from outer presences.

He spoke without preface—not the hidden language he had used with Horflog, but an almost extinct dialect we used between ourselves. His plan had mysteries within lies, making success more difficult. I listened some while without responding but at one point interjected. “We will kill him, Master?”

“Almost so. Do not fail. I am able to torment you beyond death.”

I resisted the urge to smile. As I had progressed the Old One used increasingly painful threats and punishments to hone my skills. He did not love anyone, including me, but he gave me what I craved more, grudging respect for my abilities. He was viewed by most as evil, but I knew him to be driven by unknowable, amoral purpose.

I nodded. “I shall make every effort to avoid an accursed afterlife.”

The Old One’s thoughts turned inward, where I could not follow. Then: “I send you to encounter a sorcerer stronger and perhaps craftier than you. It is probable you will be spiritually disemboweled. Prove this wrong.”

The emissary, a rotund courtier names Cortanus, arrived two days later and requested that the Old One visit his master, Aldrag the Benevolent, who a few months earlier had slaughtered

several hundred villagers suspected of underpaying their tithes. Aldrag, a man with considerable ambition, wished the Old One's assistance in becoming a god-king.

Once Cortanus had rambled to a close and the Old One had agreed to a visit, I escorted him off the hill and returned to the Old One.

"Listen carefully, Malame. Aldrag is protected by a necromancer, a skilled adept. You must survive on cunning rather than magic."

I paused a heartbeat. "And if I succeed we will extract rich marrow from the bones of Aldrag's hubris."

The Old One's snorted. "Just so. Prepare yourself. I must train you in a ritual and it would be annoying if you were to die while learning it."

Aldrag's capital was called Surpleice, and it required ten horse-abusing days for me to reach it. I anticipated that I'd arrived at least two days before Cortanus, who would have treated himself more gently. Once the horse was stabled I went to the central souk. While I was being offered food, wine and assorted vices I queried the merchants about their lord.

Aldrag's forced theocracy was not popular, nor was Aldrag himself, but the city was without war or pestilence, and the locals paid lip service and tithes to Aldrag in return for his keeping their lives somnolent.

The next morning I sponge bathed and put on a clean robe I had bought the day before. Then I walked to the palace and presented myself. Sentries, interior guards, and Aldrag's personal guard all inspected and groped me before passing me along for the audience.

Aldrag was in a side chamber of the reception hall, speaking with advisors when I arrived. After flowery introductions, Aldrag waved away all but a tall woman and four mute guards.

The woman was Synolcar, the necromancer. Her body swelled her robe in arching curves. Her alert expression overlay an air of assurance, and her stance hinted at physical agility. The market gossip was that she jilted lovers by killing them.

Aldrag began a blunt questioning. "You travel alone?"

"I have no need of guards."

"Where is Istfrig?"

"Most august Lord, he does not wish that name used. The Old One has made me plenipotentiary in this matter. Once you have described your wishes to me I anticipate fulfilling them without incident."

“And if you can’t, Malame?”

Synolcar interjected before I answered. Her ability to do so said much about her influence with Aldrag. “My Lord, despite his callow appearance, Malame is reportedly an accomplished adept. We should perhaps convey your desires to him. If his efforts are legless we could insist that Ist-ah, the Old One come.”

Aldrag remained irritated. I wondered at giving a petulant man control of uncountable minds and lives. Then I wondered at Synolcar’s support of me.

“We shall sit.”

Aldrag was a man of short and round proportion whose richly brocaded robe further swelled him. As did sitting.

He began without preface. I nodded slightly to Synolcar, aware of the spells against intrusion she had laid. She nodded back. Professional courtesy.

“We have learned that a generation before my birthing your master wrested the incantation for the creation of belief from a sorcerer he then killed. Dread and now dead.”

Aldrag smiled at his blotchy effort at witticism. “My wizardess can control the dead, but I wish to control the minds of the living. Many, many minds. Unless you are in command of this magic you are of no use to me. Less than no use, I might have to dispose of you to ensure your silence.”

I smiled to myself. Spoken threats are empty. Tacit threats give birth to the dread he mentioned. “I am trained in this arcana. What is it you offer?”

“Istfrig and you are presumably immune to this conjure and need not fear us. You will be given vassalage of your adjoining lands, bound to me by tithe and tax. I will graciously make an earnest promise of a horse weight of gold when you start, which shall commit your effort. The gold is forfeit on your failure.”

Synolcar made no motion or expression at this, but I sensed she was annoyed by the uncouth bullying of her owner. “A generous offer O mighty ruler.” I let my words and not my tone convey the sarcasm. “But the gift you ask for is an empire without boundary. Surely the reward for such a gift should be regal.”

Aldrag frowned. “What would you ask?”

“Two horse weights of gold shall be dispatched to my master as a nonreturnable token of your trust in our efforts. Once I receive confirmation that the gold has reached our crag my efforts shall commence.

“Something else?”

“Yes, but first you should know that this goetic of imposing faith is bound with my life. If I die so does your ability to convince your people.”

“Understood. But what other reward would you expect for success?”

“We already have villages full of peasants, we need no more subjects arguing about crop-eating goats. The Old One wishes knowledge, in this case of necromancy. The esteemed Synolcar holds this knowledge in secret. Once I have founded your godhood our reward will be her initiating me as a necromancer so I can better serve my master.”

Synolcar jumped up in protest and Aldrag stared at her. “Synolcar?”

“This power cannot be released to a backwater wizard. It is sacred to our order and forbidden to others.”

He stared back at me. “Ask for something else.”

“I cannot. If we are not in agreement I will take my leave and thank you for the audience. But is it not more than fair exchange? Your greater magic for her lesser one?”

Synolcar blurted out “Do not be fooled by sophistry...”

Aldrag had waved her silent. He sat in silence for several breaths, his face an angry pout.

“Synolcar, would providing these secrets harm you?”

“Only somewhat, but sharing such knowledge dilutes its power and...”

“Fine. Malame, I agree to your demand. If you are able to provide me with this power Synolcar will train you in her art...”

She gestured, but Aldrag again waved her into silence.

“I will dispatch the gold to your mountain tomorrow. My men will confirm its receipt on their return. Meanwhile, Synolcar will arrange for you to receive whatever potions and instruments are needed for the incantation.”

I smiled thinly. “No need for your confirmation. I commune with the Old One when the night is darkest. He will verify its arrival. We should be able to start after sixteen or seventeen more days.”

What I said was almost true. Words cannot traverse long distances between the Old One’s mind and mine, but images can. This night I would picture the departure of the gold and the Old One would eventually envision its receipt. Emotion too can bridge these distances, but I had never

known the Old One to display hate or joy, and I had been harshly trained to remove any passion from my goetic thoughts.

Aldrag's smile was strained. "Then we are agreed. Synolcar will provide accommodation in her apartments. Relay any requests through her."

I bowed, smiling. I was being put under house arrest, to be guarded more by Syolcar's spells than by the palace troops. As the Old One had predicted.

Synolcar and I walked from the side chamber to her suite of rooms, saying almost nothing. Once there she ordered food and water for me and watched while I ate.

Her smile was pro forma but attractive. "You are larger and burlier than the usual gaunt sorcerer. Are you sure you've taken up the right calling?"

"The Old One asks the same question."

"The dead tell me to fear the Old One, but that you can be manipulated. Are they right?"

"I suspect you'll find out."

Synolcar shifted her focus. "When shall we begin fasting, Malame?"

"Seven nights from this one. I will provide a scroll of needed items tomorrow. None of them are unusual- blood from you and Aldrag, a poultice of ground, engorged tick, that sort of thing."

"Easily done. Have you need of grimoires?"

My mouth curled. "No. I must travel light, so the shelves in my head hold my library. The ritual requires that we couple. Presumably this is not an issue?"

"Of course not. Just we two or a coven?"

"Under six eyes."

"How refreshingly intimate. Will you require aphrodesia?"

I glanced at her. "I think not."

I remembered the guarded exchange just days ago between Horflog and the Old One, and knew that I was in more danger than he had been. Synolcar could do Aldrag no harm and was bound to his bidding, which could well include my death.

"Tomorrow, Synolcar, we must perform a Magi's covenant forswearing harm to each other except as specified."

She leaned toward me. “Surely an accomplished sorcerer like you already has protections in place.”

“Not nearly enough for an accomplished sorcerer like you. I shall cut myself later and write a sanguine agreement for you to also sign in blood during the ritual. Otherwise we cannot proceed.”

She smiled again, not pleasantly. “You’re not quite as stupid as you appear, are you. Very well. I will show you your room.”

The next morning Synolcar grudgingly signed an oath agreeing to not destroy me except for failing to provide Aldrag his believers. We both knew that Aldrag could still have someone else try and kill me, but that was a reasonable risk.

I provided the list of needed items, surprisingly few and simple considering the power Aldrag would be granted. We spent several hours a day together for the next few days, taking meals together and talking on a superficial level about spells and other magicians. Synolcar had apparently ordered my food laced with a mild narcotic, which was anticipated. I had addicted myself before departing, and a dosage strong enough to affect my thinking would have rendered me unconscious before revealing anything. On my return to the Old One I would be vomitous and incontinent through the drug withdrawal, but of no matter.

There was a faintly corrupt sense about Synolcar that I realized was the corpse-like aspect of her that allowed for her necromancy. And I knew that for me to attain mastery a similar part of me had to become necrosial.

My room, where I spent most of my days and all of my nights, was a richly furnished cell. There were obvious peep holes on all walls where watchers monitored my actions. Intricate iron latticework covered the windows, so tightly interlaced that a hand could not pass through the openings.

After two days with the drug having no effect it was removed from my food. I awaited Synolcar’s next move. On the fourth evening she unlocked my bedroom door and entered without speaking. She was nude, so a late-night discussion was unlikely.

Synolcar sat on the edge of my bed, pulled down the sheet, and stroked the inside of my thigh with the backs of her fingernails. Her coarse brown hair hung loose, half concealing her breasts. “Do you need words?”

“No,” I replied. We began to touch each other, gently at first, using fingertips and mouths to awaken each other’s pleasure points. There are degrees of intimacy when adepts couple, escalating as the pair uncovers each layer of the persona. Pleasure and danger increase greatly but so too does understanding.

As we mated we explored each other's emotions; she felt my repressed need from long celibacy, then my wonderment at the black, dead part of her. I tasted the bitterness of her servitude and the harshness of her self-control. As we finished the intimate levels collapsed, and we were just two sweaty bodies lying next to each other.

Synolcar scratched her sharp nails across my belly in annoyance. "You're not talented enough to have kept so much hidden from me."

"Perhaps not. The Old One trains me like a dog, I respond only on command."

Anger swelled her face. "You're on a fool's errand, and will suffer a fool's fate."

"Perhaps. But I have a fool's chances."

She subsided, and we talked guardedly about our situations, and the outcomes of our efforts. Synolcar saw no result which did not leave her beholden to Aldrag, a man I now knew she despised.

The Old One's images four nights later were kaleidoscopic, the arrival of the gold, possible entrapments, necromantic ceremonies, and, at the end, a mandala which opened my mind to a secret he had not wanted me to reveal too soon. Synolcar could never know of our plans because the Old One kept them hidden within me until it was time to take the next step.

The following morning I announced to Aldrag and Synolcar that the gold had arrived and we could proceed.

Aldrag bounced with anticipation. "How soon can you execute the spell?"

"We require three days of fasting, so three nights from now during the darkest hour. The results will be discernable six days after that."

"Why so long?"

"Belief is not like the dropping of a sword but the rising of the tide, inexorable, but not noticed from moment to moment. I will need to instruct you in your talks with your people."

"When?"

"Once you have seen results."

Synolcar and I returned each evening to her quarters to rehearse the ritual, which included stylized coupling. We did this for three nights, and were a facile couple by the night of the ceremony. She continued to probe during the intercourse, and berated me each night for my ignorance of the next days events.

Aldrag was the third person at our ceremony, but being without goetic vision he saw only a stuffy temple observance. Except of course for the mating, which was vigorous. What Synolcar and I witnessed however, was a knotted swirl of phantasms jostling each other to participate in our spell, and the blackening fire of Aldrag's emergent godhood. There are no human words for this thing, only fearful elation at our success.

For the next two days I did not sleep or eat, for Aldrag, now a god, might attempt my murder. I set traps and curses and waited on the floor of my room each night, legs crossed, until dawn let shards of light through the latticework.

On the third day, I went to Aldrag and insisted that he needed to accompany me into the city. "A god must perform miracles to ignite belief, venerated Aldrag, and you are about to perform several of them over the next two weeks. You may bring guards of course, but not Synolcar, for your people will assume that it is she and not you who performs the miracles. I will be, in dress and behavior, merely a personal slave."

Synolcar bristled, but had to agree, she was much too feared and well known. That same afternoon Aldrag and I went into the produce market and found an appropriately hideous leper. I anointed Aldrag's hands with what I assured him was protective oil and insisted he lay hands on the kneeling leper's scabrous head. The leper jumped up yelling "I'm cleansed! I'm cleansed!"

And to the hundreds of people around us he did appear clear skinned and without lesions. The illusion I had created would wear off in a week or so, but the rumor of the miracle would have become widespread fact. We then walked on until we found a blind beggar.

"Spit on your fingertips," I whispered, "and rub the spit into his eyes."

Aldrag recoiled, but after some hissed warnings, did as I had asked. The beggar used fingers on both hands to pry open his crusted eyelids, then blinked and dropped to his knees. "Thank you, my king and my god. I can see you as I praise you!"

My skills took up the cry, and many in the crowd began moaning chants of adoration.

"That's enough for now, o noble king," I whispered, and we returned to the palace. We did this again for two more days, drawing ever larger crowds.

"It seems to be working, Malame, will this devotion increase?"

"Immensely. As Synolcar teaches me her rite, I must also teach you your governance of this power. It is something to be done only under four eyes."

Aldrag's eyes narrowed. "Why cannot Synolcar attend us?"

"I know you have complete faith in her, but you are on a path without time, and people do change over long years. This knowledge is best kept secret."

“Very well.”

On the third day after his divine anointment, members of several city guilds approached Aldrag suggesting that they begin to offer sacrifice to him as their godlike benefactor, and large crowds began prostrating themselves crying “Ave Aldrag” as he passed.

Synolcar’s preparations for my necromantic ascension began that same day. The Old One had carefully instructed me in necromantic principles and spells, so all that was lacking was the ceremony. In two days time she and I gathered under four living eyes and two dead.

Necromantic spells would be considered hideous to an outsider. No narcotic incense, no couplings, no gongs or bells. It begins by summoning a perpetually rotting corpse able to kill a portion of my spirit and in return give me access to the dead.

But Synolcar had other plans. She had spoken only a few phrases of the first step when I held up my hand and stopped her. “Please don’t continue with the wrong ritual. We bribed one of your fellows to tell us exactly the steps involved in installing a necromancer. I must ask you to make an oath to me to follow the correct ritual.”

She snarled, but made the oath, then removed the implements on the altar and replaced them with others.

Several minutes into the ritual the sweet-sour acrid stench of death filled the room. The necrotic presence was with us. I was then cut open in feet, hands and torso and the ever-rotting corpse inserted his finger into each wound while incanting. The wounds turned gangrenous and then scabbed over with dried pus. A part of my being I did not know I had was torn away and eaten.

And then, without words, the corpse departed and the ritual was over. Synolcar dropped to her knees, panting and ashen, and I knew that she too had paid a toll. “Sister?” I asked gently.

She keened, her tone ripping into my ears. “I have lost too much. Even the dead would not welcome me.”

“Then you must remain living. Your sacrifice will be rewarded.”

“Get out, you soul thief!”

I donned my robe and weaved my way back to my chamber. I could feel the knuckles of the dead softly knocking on the new gateway to my mind. But I had an urgent errand, and as soon as I had rested and eaten I sought audience with Aldrag.

Aldrag was reclining on a divan, listening to some embroidery of Cortanus. He looked at me, saw my expression, and nodded. “Leave us Cortanus.”

“But sire, I have not yet...”

Aldrag’s stare was enough to shoo Cortanus out the door. “So Synolcar has fulfilled her part. Odd that she is not here.”

“The ceremony was especially disagreeable for her and she is recovering. And now I must fulfill mine and instruct you. Please ask the guards to leave. One call from you and they can immediately return.”

He hesitated, narrowing his eyes, then nodded to the guardsmen. I stepped over and knelt next to him. “Please sire, place your left hand in mine and incline your ear so I may whisper.”

When he did so I began my own spell, in the hidden words the Old One had opened up for me the night before. Aldrag’s look was quizzical but he did not pull away. After fifty heartbeats the incantation was concluded. Three veins inside his skull shriveled and blackened, and Aldrag lost all contact with himself.

He sighed and dropped to the floor. I turned and waited, quite close to complete death. A few heartbeats later, Synolcar burst through the doorway, raising her hands for a curse.

“Stop! I have released you.”

She hurled liquid fire, which I dodged, singing my hands. “He is locked inside himself and is your vassal.”

She heard nothing in her anger and launched a spray of salt acid at me. I dropped behind Aldrag’s smoldering robe and yelled again. “You can control him!”

She paused, shuddering in wrath, “He is dead and you will scream for it.”

I took two steps toward Synolcar, my arms outstretched, palms facing her so she could see I was not concocting a spell. “You are free.”

Her muscles knotted and bunched as she gave herself demonic strength. She monkey jumped on top of me, her legs squeezing around my torso, her hands around my neck. I could not breathe, and I felt my neck bones knuckle together.

Synolcar lashed my body with a restraint spell and slightly loosened her hands. “Say something else clever before I consign you to anguish.”

“No, listen. He half-lives, but is trapped within his mind. You could not harm him, and I was sworn not to kill him. You, the necromancer, can animate him and rule through his pronouncements. With the spell of belief you have an empire beyond limits. Reach into him, see that what I say is true.”

Synolcar kept one eye on me while she knelt next to Aldrag, touching his head and murmuring a goetic. The Aldrag body sat up, eyes clouded. Aldrag and Sinolcar muttered in unison, "I am Synolcar and I have governance of this one. I will rule."

She turned her head to stare at me. "Why do this?"

"We would rather that one of us have control of this power, rather than a megalomaniac. I am not alone in this."

Synolcar rose, silently ordering Aldrag to rise with her.

"You did not try to curse me because of this faltering hope? Truly a fool's plan. Although you're not advanced enough to best me in combat."

"Probably true. Do you accept our gift?"

Her face, already red, darkened to purple. "Wizards do not give gifts. What is your demand for this not-dead present?"

I glanced at my body and Synolcar undid the restraint spell. "Well?" she asked.

"Only what you yourself have longed for. We ask that you keep Aldrag's body alive and in good health. Show restraint in expanding the belief to other kingdoms."

"There is a lie I cannot yet see in all this. But I will. You surely need more than a wizard's promise."

"We do. An oath on the bones of your oracle that you will do these two things. If you swear, you can unshackle yourself as sorcerer and woman."

I stood, and after several hundred more heartbeats of talk, I prepared the ceremony and Synolcar took her oath. We, who had been so often intertwined, did not touch again before my departure.

On my return I found the old one sipping from the blood of a sacrificed goat while reading its entrails. Lamb's blood tastes better, but the entrails do not give as prescient a forecast. I had imaged my results days before, so there was relatively little more to explain.

The Old One nodded to me, as much praise as he ever bestowed. "When will Synolcar become aware that the spell of belief will dissipate?"

"Probably already, for she will have thought through the covenants and realize that when a part of me died the spell was voided. But like the ebbing of the tide, the waning of belief will occur over the next month."

"Aldrag?"

“A fattening vegetable. He should live another twenty years before his body joins his mind.”

“And you believe she will not seek vengeance?”

“Only if an opportunity presents itself. Aldrag’s empire even without being a god is vast. She will enjoy the power. A question, Master. You are already a necromancer. Why did you wish that she initiate me?”

His lips curled upward without smiling. “We will have further use of Synolcar. What she gave of herself to install you is now yours to use against her.”

He waved a gaunt arm. “Your instructions were adequately followed. We have a local commission. Prepare a death potion of mandrake seasoned with anise. It will be administered in wine, so do not let it taste like vinegar.”

As I turned toward the herbal shed, the Old One waved me motionless. “Horflog commands your presence next week. Apparently, you are a better breeder than sorcerer. Do not let her twist your weak joints. You will not enjoy my remedy.”

I nodded, fear and elation competing within me, then I cast both aside. “Will Horflog kill me afterwards?”

“Perhaps not.”

Owain's Red Branch

By Jennifer Arnold

There was once a great king over the Tuatha De Danann. They named him Dagan after Ireland's strongest king because no other ruler came close to the power of Dagan's will. Dagan did not possess magic but the Tuatha De Danann had magic in abundance. Prowess in battle and cunning were Dagan's tools and no one could wield them as shrewdly as he. Dagan lamented his lack of magic so he searched high and low for other ways to prove his skill.

The Gailag still roamed the hills and luscious forest lands in the high country but Dagan had trained warriors to help drive the vandals out. The warriors came to accost the Gailag's settlers by destroying the farms and fields of any who were not Tuatha De Danann. Even the most innocent settler recognized Dagan's standard and knew where to place the blame.

Dagan sought to make peace with the settlers and to gain favor with the land by giving away the farms he and his men had earned. The taken land was given to grieving settlers like a gift. Three mighty rivers separated several plots of land. The river provided fresh water and the current brought in minerals to make the land good for farming. Many warriors asked the King Dagan for these plots of land but he denied them. None of the best lands were given until Mac Owain came asking a favor.

Mac Owain was the youngest son of Mirid, a wealthy Gailag farmer and Ninid, a seer of the Tuatha De Danann. The Gailag farmer could not interest Dagan no matter how wealthy he grew but Mac Owain's mother was another matter. Every ruler wanted the favor of a seer and helping the son seemed like a sure way to win over the mother. Ninid the Seer could tell Dagan the outcome of any battle before war was declared. He could know the mind of his enemies before actions were decided. A seer could be a powerful tool if it was placed in the right hand. Dagan could be that hand if Ninid would only share the things she knew.

So Mac Owain was granted land when he came to ask. Dagan gave Owain the best land the Tuatha De Danann had to offer and split up the plots that the mighty rivers separated.

Mac Owain was grateful for the land so he planted three fruit trees near the confluence of the rivers. The rivers gave those trees extra nourishment so their fruit was the juiciest and sweetest. They produced fruit year round. Owain was able to make a fortune on the sale of the fruit. The Tuatha De Danann warriors under Dagan mocked Dagan's decision to give away the land. Dagan got tired of the talk so he sent a swineherd to trample the trees and to eat the fruit before it could be harvested.

Ninid, Owain's mother, saw that this was to happen. She saw that Dagan meant to use her son for his own ends. So she went to her son and told him to place pikes with fruit on them along the river. The scent of the fruit drove the swine to the river where they drowned in the water.

Owain had a great feast of pork and roasted pig for three nights. Each night Owain and his neighbors ate well and drunk honeyed mead until they fell asleep at their places but on the third night Dagan came to Owain's feast.

“There is trouble being stirred up between you and me,” Dagan told Owain. “The warriors and settlers of this land believe that your skill and power are greater than mine.”

“No one with eyes to see would say such things! Only a fool would believe rumors like those.”

“I am glad to hear you say so. Put these rumors to rest by telling me three truths that your mother’s visions have shown her.”

Owain shrugged his shoulders. “My mother's secrets are not mine to tell. She only tells me of the hawks that fly over the north fields. They will keep vermin away so that the crops will prosper. She tells me that the pigs will grow fat if they are allowed to roam near the western forests where wild mushrooms grow. I know no secret that will make any army great.”

Ninid stood up from her son's table then. “I will give you this prophesy for free because of the kindness and generosity you have shown my son. You will see two hawks. One will fly over the fields at Dun Chruachan and the other will roost at the mouth of the river Sharron. These two hawks will fight for a rabbit above the tombs of Craig No Dunn. One hawk will die and fall from the sky. Walk into the tomb the dead hawk lands on and you will find a treasure. A weapon like no other. Use this weapon against the army of the Gailag and they will be no more. No warrior will be able to say that such a king is not the greatest in skill and power!”

Dagan was glad to hear this news, certain was he that Ninid could not have made up so many specific places and occurrences. He drank deeply of the honeyed mead and retired early. Owain and Ninid were alone when he turned to her and demanded, “Why have you turned on my father's people? Dagan has shown me favor but what is one life over thousands? Warrior like Dagan slaughtered farmers and children to get this land. None of them earned it and none of them deserve to have more!”

“Stop your complaining and listen! I told Dagan what he wanted to hear. Now it is up to you to keep something terrible from happening.”

“How can I stop it? I am only a farmer.”

“You are not only anything. You are the son of a magician and a seer and magic of two lands runs through your veins.”

“What must I do?”

“Look for a white ox with the mark of the cross on its head. Take the milk of this ox and bath in it until the milk becomes purple. Use the dye from this milk on the silken manes of three different war horses. Send these horses as a gift to Eochaid Feidlech of Tara.”

“My father's people have warred with Tara for many generations.”

“Then it is time to make Tara an ally. Eochaid lost Fathach to Dagan after the Battle of Corann.

Offer to fight Dagan with him and Eochaid will welcome you.”

Owain had given Dagan his oath of fealty when the land was given to him. His skin itched at the thought of abandoning his sacred oath but he could not sit by while innocents died either.

“You must make a decision, my love,” Ninid told her son, “but remember that no matter what decision you make the choice must be yours. You must stand by it!”

Owain planned to go to Tara and give Eochaid the horses. He hoped to build a bridge to peace so that the Gailags could have some kind of sanctuary when Dagan's men came. The first night Owain spent in Eochaid's hall made him reconsider his plan.

“Great welcome from me to you, Owain. You will be my guest at Tara and my daughter Clothra will be your wife.”

The beauty of Clothra was legendary even in the far kingdoms of the Tuatha De Danann. Her skin was the pale pink of peaches. Her hair was darker than any winter night. Owain longed to measure her curling eyelashes against his thumb but Eochaid moved to him before Owain could take two steps.

“My daughter will travel with you to Ros na Rig, your new manor where you will wed.”

“I never expected three horses to buy me a wife no matter how lovely the manes.” Owain knew that Eochaid would never give away a daughter without expecting something in return. The only obstacle to the path was in finding what payment Eochaid expected.

“My men tell me that you are a seer. I need magic to help me avenge the deaths that the Tuatha De Danann have brought.”

“I will be forsworn if I fight against Dagan and his Tuatha De Danann warriors.”

“A man should take his oaths seriously. Will you give an oath to me if I give you my daughter's hand?”

“What oath?”

“A small thing really. Agree to speak for me at the gathering of tribes. I have it on good authority that the three chiefs will call for a vote in naming a war general. Stand for me and call out my name and I will give you my daughter's hand in marriage.”

“Does it matter who I stand for? By yarrow and rue! Why would the three chieftains stand with me?”

“It is well-known that your mother is a gifted seer. Many in Gailag and Danann alike believe that you have inherited your mother's gifts.”

Breath caught in Owain's throat. The fight must be dire indeed if a fine chief like Eochaid need to rely on deception. “I do not have my mother's skills.”

“The truth is no matter. My chieftains will believe that you have the same gift. They will follow where you lead.”

“I cannot deceive men I will fight beside.”

“You will not need to say anything. Leave the words to me. I only need you to stand beside me.” Owain needed time. “I only came to give you three horses.”

“Take however much time you need. Stay in the manor with Clothra until you make your decision. My daughter and I both trust your word of honor.”

“A chaperone could be found from among your court,” Owain said, knowing that the response was expected and proper. “My mother told me tales of Loch, son of Eochaid Yellow-Heel. A man of his renown would make an appropriate guardian.”

Eochaid laughed. “I forgot what it was to be young, to have travel hunger gnawing at the belly and honor blinding one eye. You will learn to ignore both in time. I will have Loch come and meet with you in time but I'm afraid that he is away on an errand for me.”

Owain could only accept Eochaid's generosity. He traveled with Clothra to Ros na Rig and stayed there to think before giving an answer.

Owain did not know it but King Dagan of the Tuatha De Danann sent men to watch all that Mac Owain did. They were not always close enough to hear what Mac Owain and Eochaid were saying but the events that transpired before them were troubling enough. The three spies told Dagan all that they had seen and he came to the same conclusion that they had.

“Mac Owain has betrayed me! This is how he repays me after all that I have done for him!”

“You must show him that you have the power,” Briad, Dagan's Fae wife sang to him in Siren song.

These were the words that Dagan wanted to hear. “How? What can I do to bring him down?”

“I will help you, my love. I am not a seer but I have a drop or two of magic. Every drop belongs to you to use as you will. Owain mocked your swine and your occupation with his display. I will help you repay him for that.” Her voice was as sweet and thick as honey. Dagan could only drink

her in. He was a great king in need of a great queen. Briad had proven that she could be that queen. She was his equal in every way. What she lacked in battle prowess was made up for in magic.

“What can I do?”

“Bring me a boar. I will feed on its blood and ingest its power into myself. It will allow me to become something more... something that will bring Owain to his knees. The bards will come to us and give us any spell they want. My grandmother taught me that spell. She used it to force a man to her beck and call.”

“Bring me a bard who can tell the future. Bring me a seer who can see even more clearly than Owain or Ninid.”

“I can't always control what kind of bard the boar trance will bring but I'll call the strongest bard available,” Briad promised in her honeyed voice.

A night later, Dagan brought Briad her boar. A gleaming knife appeared in Briad's hand. The moonlight glinted off the sharp edge and made an arch as it sliced through the poor animal's throat. Blood fountained from its battered neck and into a dented cup. Dagan could not take his eyes off of the sparkling blood as Briad brought that cup to her lips. Briad closed her eyes as the blood made its way down her throat.

Gold flashed in her irises as they opened again.

Dagan felt the accompanying surge of power and let a smile come to his lips. His foe, Owain would taste defeat soon enough.

“My father will be calling for you soon,” Clothra warned Owain. “He will expect an answer this time.”

Owain could only agree. “Eochaid will not let me leave without an answer this time. By yarrow and Rue! ”

“My father is an honorable man. He would not hold you against your will. He would tell you if you were a prisoner. The chieftains will not follow just any one.”

“I doubt anyone will follow me. Your father only guesses at their loyalty to my heritage. I fear that he will be sorely surprised. He should send messengers to Ireland instead.”

“How would that help?”

“Your family has relatives in the court. Fergus of Cathbad was your mother's cousin and Ulsterman the Huntsman married your cousin's son. Eochaid does not need me.”

“You need my father if you plan on fighting King Dagan.”

“I never planned on making a war on Dagan or his Tuatha De Danann. Dagan is making war on my father's people and I cannot stand by silently.”

“Who are your father's people?”

“The Gailag. Dagan conquered the army by making war on farmers. No warrior with honor could watch the suffering of innocents. The Gailag gave the land to Dagan to stop the raids.”

“I can see how the hate would spread with the raids.”

“Raids became the least of the issues after Dagan's army pulled back. Gailag farmers began fighting on their own. By yarrow and Rue! They fought with desperation but years of training have the advantage. The Gailag were still losing but Dagan knew these skirmishes made his Tuatha De Danann look weak. Mere human Gailag had the gall to fight them! Giving away the land he had won helped bandage wounded pride.”

“It sounds like your people already defeated Dagan. You have your land. Tara means everything to us!”

“The Gailag did not feel that way. Dagan added insult to injury by giving them what was already theirs. The little battles did not stop. War has only been avoided through my mother's talent. She has been warning me that it won't last. Dagan came to me and asked me to help him rouse the Tuatha De Danann to battle. I cannot wait any longer... I do need your father but I do not know how far I can afford to offend Dagan. My people are still on his land.”

“The Gailag farmers have stood against the Tuatha De Danann's magic far longer than anyone else has been able to. My father's people have had to make peace with them in the past. Tributes have been payed to them. The Tuatha De Danann were bound by their word. They kept every promise they made but Dagan broke them all when he came to power. The tributes were taken but raids and wars did not stop. The Tuatha De Danann are less than they once were because of him. They could be reasoned with before Dagan came but now they say one thing and do another. They lie and deceive! There is only one thing we can do to keep peace: drive the Tuatha De Danann back to their island across the sea!”

Clothra shook with both anger and hope as she spoke and Owain wanted to join her but caution held him back. “They slew everyone in Tuired, even the women and children. The warriors fell in battle and that seemed right. Those warriors would have killed the Tuatha if they were not killed first. Dagan had slew the warriors and taken the head of the Meg and that should have been the finish but the war went on. Men with battle lust as strong as that don't just fall into the sea because people like you and me wish it.”

“My father is not relying on wishes to save us. The chieftains will send armies if they agree to his plan. They will send armies if they see you stand with Eochaid.”

“They will only stand to fight because they think that the victory has been seen. The truth is that no army can defeat the Tuatha De Danann!”

“The Aos Sidhe have a chance. The Hill country does not breed gentle folk. Only the strongest can survive such a place.”

Owain's eyes widened. “The Aos Sidhe are fierce but they never leave their Hills. How did Eochaid convince them to come to Gailag's aid at Tara?”

“The Aos Sidhe can recognize a common enemy. They know who the Tuatha De Danann will come after when the Gailag are defeated.”

“Is it true that the Tuatha De Danann and the Aos Sidhe were once one people? That they both came from across the sea to tame this wild land? Is it true that warrior's blood runs in their veins as thick as mettle runs through a forge?”

“All that is true,” Clothra confirmed. “The Tuatha De Danann and the Aos Sidhe both lived in a harsh land across the sea. Magic killed the land they called home so they left to find a new land. The tribes came to Ireland and made their home through war. Their blood puddled on the land and made a connection with the Earth and its magic. The Aos Sidhe wanted to stay in the Hills where their blood was spilt. The Aos Sidhe had lost many and wanted to make a home while there was still a home to be made. The Tuatha De Danann were strong in number and the call of battle sang to them. They did not want to settle. So the Tuatha De Danann and the Aos Sidhe separated and became two people. The Aos Sidhe made a home in the Hills and only fought when attacked. The Tuatha De Danann made war and are only now finding a home.”

“Why now?” Owain mused. “Why our home?”

“The Tuatha De Danann gave up their gods when they left their home. They would have lost their magic if they did not make a deal with the Crow. She is the goddess of war. She promised to give them magic if they would give her fresh blood.”

“The Crow will take away the Tuatha De Danann's magic if they stop giving her battle,” Owain realized. “How have the Aos Sidhe avoided this fate? They must have made the same deal when they left the old country.”

“The Aos Sidhe made a new deal with the soil of Ireland. The forests have power here. The trees and the Earth made a connection with the Aos Sidhe because they had lost so many. Their power comes from nature. Your mother's power comes from the same place.”

“My mother is Tuatha De Danann.”

“By birth, yes, but not in practice. She follows the path of the Aos Sidhe. My grandmother says that Ninid followed the Tuatha De Danann and lent them her strength in magic for many years. She left after seeing the carnage at the Battle of Itha.”

“That battle happened more than fifty years ago. Your grandmother must be thinking of someone else.”

“The Tuatha De Danann are long-lived and so are the Aos Sidhe. Ninid fled to the Hills when she left her people and the Aos Sidhe found her and taught her their ways.”

“Why doesn't your father pay a tribute to the Aos Sidhe to win their favor? They are great warriors and may be able to defeat the Tuatha De Danann. They have magic and skill.”

“The Aos Sidhe will not fight the Tuatha De Danann. They are family and family should never make war on family. Connachta and her tribes have promised to aid Tara if my father can get the chieftains behind him. The armies of the Clans, Tara, Gailag, and Connachta can come together and defeat Dagan.”

Owain had still more questions to ponder but Eochaid called on him then.

“The Sun smile on you, Mac Owain. Will you be my son-in-law and stand by me before the chieftains?”

“Is it true, Eochaid, that the Connachta will aid you if the chieftains stand with you?”

“I see that my daughter has told you much. It is true that Connachta's tribes will stand with me when the chieftains do.”

“Do you trust the Connachta's word on this?”

“Yes. She has long been a friend to my people and has proven worthy of trust on many occasions.”

“Then why do you need me? Tell your chieftains that Connachta and her tribes will fight with you.” Politics and feuds had never been Owain's stronger suite but he understood the basics. All this talking back and forth made him restless for the real fight.

“None of this was possible until you brought me those horses.”

“They are fine animals but I fail to see how they could change Connachta's mind. My mother bade me to wash them in milk. They are softer than the wings of the butterfly after such careful minding. They are not built for war.”

“Your steeds are the fastest in all six kingdoms. You washed them in ox milk while a seer sang longevity and speed over them. These horses are ready to travel. Such horses are the only option

for me. The meeting place is at Donn Cualinge and its three days from Tara on a strong horse. Your Fae horses will get us there in a single day.”

“My mother called them Kelpie. She said that they would be even faster near the water.”

“I only need the time it takes the sun to cross the sky. Your kelpie will serve me well but will you serve me as well? Will you marry my daughter and stand with me before the chieftains?”

“Aye, my Lord Eochaid. I will stand with you before the chieftains.” Owain declared, showing him proper respect.

“Formality like those titles has no place among family! Call me by my name. You are a son now and not merely a tenant.”

“Should the Lady not have a say in this? I would stand with you simply to stop Dagan and his Tuatha De Danann from harming my people. Your daughter is beautiful and kind so it would please me greatly to wed her but I would not use her so.”

“A good husband you will make! A good man must think of his wife first in all things. What say you, Clothra?”

“I am a dutiful daughter and I will marry any man my father chooses. I will find my own happiness if I cannot find it in my husband. This has been the way of wives and daughters for as long as time remembers. But I would not need to find happiness in a union with Owain because being with him makes me happy.”

Eochaid smiled down at his daughter. “I am glad of it and I bless any union that brings my daughter such happiness.”

The two were joined in marriage that very day and Owain brought her back to Ros na Rig, the manor that they were to share. Owain wanted nothing more than to hold her and feel her body against his but he could not stay. Time was short and the meeting with the chieftains could not wait.

“My father has always been a fine judge of horseflesh. May your horse be as swift as he says and bring you back to me all the more quickly?”

“I will ride as swiftly as I am able. By yarrow and Rue! Your father might have trouble keeping up!”

Owain turned to mount but Clothra gripped his arm to stop him. “My father is a good man but he is also bull-headed. Do not let him pressure you into anything. He likes getting his own way.”

“All men do.”

“He forgets to look for the forests because he is distracted by the trees. Do not let him lead you astray. Do what you can to lead him to the correct path on the horse and through the meeting with the chieftains.”

Owain bowed his head to kiss her cheek. “A good husband does all that his wife asks. I aim to be a good husband so I will do all that you say.”

Clothra kissed him in return and returned to Ros na Rig to watch him leave.

Sutland

By Daniel Deisinger

Darin stared south over the dunes, toward where Grandfather had told him Sutland once rose from the sand and spits of rock and scratched holes in the sky. Where it had conquered the desert.

He leaned against the fence around his village, scarf wrapped around his face to keep the sand out of his nose and mouth and eyes. Pain stabbed up through his chest and into his throat. The wind sliced across his hands, and played with his hair, and pulled his clothes away from his body. It lifted the grit under his feet and threw itself against the sides of the buildings behind him into red-brown devils, swirling and cutting into the ground. It flowed over the dunes around the village, building them into great mounds or reducing them to tiny lumps. The setting sun hid behind clouds, firing beams of gold through the sand when it could.

"Darin!"

His father, wrapped in long clothes and face hidden inside his own scarf, forged through the sand and grabbed his hand. "We must get inside! The winds are too strong now! I won't hear any arguing!" The wind chased them home; Darin's chest seized.

Once inside, the howling backed away, whispering into the cracks of the house and muttering across the windows. Steam from the stew rose into the chimney's vents and sand filters. Candles flickered in corners.

"Nothing will be gained from standing in the storms and looking," Darin's father said, removing his scarf. "Your condition will only worsen!"

Darin opened his mouth, but coughs shook him. After a few seconds, he took a deep, ragged breath.

"Here. Drink," his mother said, and the water soothed the sand in his throat. His father took the cup.

"You see? You can barely breathe inside. I don't want you going out anymore tonight. Especially now, in a storm. Darin, can you promise me?"

"Yes," Darin said, voice rasping. "I promise."

"Good," his mother said. She handed him a bowl of stew. "Now: to dinner."

#

The wind and sand buzzed outside the wall of Darin's bedroom, darting through the sandy alleys between houses, and rattling the cover of each room's filter in the ceiling. Darin lay on his bed, candle on the table still and small, and turned the pages of one of Grandfather's books. One of

the images showed Sutland's great sharp towers of red rock, filling the sky. Another had huge underground caverns, ten times as big as Darin's town, where people could hide from the storms. Yet another--Darin's favorite--showed the channels. Tunnels and man-made rivers of sand, funneling it out and away, somewhere else. It fell in frozen waves and ran like living dunes into unseen places.

Sutland had won. It had beaten the storms and the sand and the endless dunes. It had created a land free from choking gasps and paralyzing coughs. It had stopped the dunes from growing and burying their homes. It had freed the air and the sun, and the storms had bent to its will.

His chest hitched and he coughed as he collected the canteens of water he had hidden under his bed, wrapped an extra-long scarf around his face, and put on his pack. It contained food and clothes, medicine, candles, rope, tools, and Grandfather's books.

He quenched the candle, and passed through the curtain into the hall. He crept to his parent's room. They breathed in an easy rhythm.

Grandfather's staff, sturdy wood with a metal tip, leaned next to the front door. He took Grandfather's compass out of his pocket. He nodded to himself.

He opened the door a crack and slipped through. The storm had weakened, but sand still flew, stinging whatever revealed skin it could. He checked the compass and set south, toward Sutland, with his arm over his mouth. Grandfather's staff tore holes in the sand every time he placed it.

#

Past the village's fence, and over the ring of dunes, the storm buffeted him, and it sucked his breath away. His lungs groaned and scratched. He splashed water onto a piece of cloth and tucked it into his scarf. His breathing came easier, but he had to wait to get his breath back before checking his compass and continuing south.

The storm punished him, but its power fell more and more as the little hours of morning passed. Darin climbed dunes bigger than his house only to slide down the other side, sand rushing after him in little drifts. The sun cracked on his left, turning the sand orange.

Pressing his hand to the wet piece of cloth in front of his mouth, Darin coughed, scanning the horizon for towers. Instead, endless rolls of sand surrounded him. He checked his compass and continued south. Grandfather's staff pulled him ahead.

He drank and ate when the sun got high enough. Glancing north, the shimmer of heat and light revealed figures running toward him, shouting at him, berating him. After another moment they faded into wisps of vapor, and he stood up to continue.

He hunted around the dunes, looking for remnants of rock to guide him. As the sun fell toward his right he climbed down into a huge basin, ringed with stone, round like a bowl. The sand didn't fill it, and his eyes widened despite the wind gusting into the basin. The rim of the basin

took on a smooth, finished quality. Man-made, not natural. He went to one section of it and peered close, running his hand over it.

A loud noise came from his left, and sand sucked away, pulling him along with it before he could brace himself. He plummeted down a chute, tumbling with the sand into utter darkness. The chute rushed him into darkness, sand roaring with him until his hand caught on an opening. He howled with pain, and the howl turned into a coughing fit just as another wave of sand struck him. His mouth filled with sand. Grandfather's staff tore out of his grip and disappeared; he grabbed the edge with both hands to haul himself out.

Sand crunched between each finger and in each joint. He coughed on and on, until white spiderwebs filled his vision and his lungs tore in his chest.

Moments later he laid on cool stone, sucking down dry lungfuls of air, pressing his scarf close.

After a few minutes he stood, and sand poured out of every fold his clothes contained, some of it flowing back into the channel he had freed himself from. He peered down into the channel, but Grandfather's staff had disappeared. Coughing with his dusty sleeve pressed over his mouth, he glanced around. Light came from patches far above and around him, cold and sterile.

"Sutland," he said, but his voice scratched through his throat in a whisper. He coughed and tried to clear it.

His pack, and the canteens, had survived. He drank a little, sitting alongside the channel. Sand surged through it at irregular intervals, rushing from the surface to somewhere unknown.

After recovering his small breath, he shouldered his pack, right hand clamped around a missing staff. The path he rested on ran off into the darkness, out of sight, and ended at a wall. A narrow, gritty staircase ran down to the right. Pressed against the rough wall, he descended, placing each foot with care.

His eyes stung; he halted and blinked until the tears subsided. Storms of sand fell. Grandfather used to tell him about rain--water falling from the sky and dampening the earth, and spreading a wonderful smell, and birthing green things. Grandfather would make a rushing sound to approximate it, and now the sand mocked it.

Darin continued, down the steps, and reached a large landing, with edges falling away into emptiness. Grandfather's compass told him nothing useful. The bright panels above hid the sun. He coughed.

Another sound came to him. It hummed all around him, underneath the raining sand. Like Grandfather blowing air across the opening of a jug. It ran through the walls and floor and air around him.

Once, he peered over the edge of the walkway, staring down into darkness. After a few seconds, he leaned back, unsure. Far below, the darkness flowed.

He reached a landing with an alcove in the wall. It had a ladder cut into the stone, descending into utter darkness, and despite Darin's adjusting eyes nothing appeared as he climbed down.

By the time he reached the bottom his pack weighed on his back like a stone, and he shrugged it off, groaning. He exited the alcove, and a wave of sand enveloped him.

He gasped and turned away, pressing his arm over his mouth, but the cloud passed around him. Another came, and he pulled his scarf tighter, but his lungs caught and he coughed anyway. The rushing sound filled the air.

A foot under the platform he stood on, a huge sea of sand swirled and washed. Numerous channels spat endless gallons into the pit. Sandy clouds rose. But even as the sand filled the cistern, in several places it drained away.

Darin followed the platform to the left, pressing himself against the wall, keeping his eyes on the end of the platform and the roiling sand as he coughed.

Stabbing out of the sand, Grandfather's staff washed back and forth, toward one of the drains, and Darin stared in surprise, scarred lungs forgotten. He turned and looked over the wall behind him, feeling along it, and then inched closer to the edge of the platform.

The edge had worn gaps to pass his rope through. Darin secured one end to the platform and the other around his waist. He took a deep breath, fighting past the urge to cough. His eyes locked on where the sand disappeared to some even deeper place, one with even less light and even less air, as Grandfather's staff drifted closer to it.

One hand squeezed the rope around him. Darin stepped forward. The sand supported him; a moment later he sank, and it washed over him. He clambered forward, and each motion sucked him farther down. The sand climbed up to his waist; he kicked his feet behind him, trying to tunnel toward the staff. The sand rose to his armpits, and he tried to scoop it out of the way.

The rope pulled taut, and he strained forward, fingertips reaching for Grandfather's staff as it drifted past. The rope cut into his waist. Sand rolled over him, dragging him down, and the staff flowed half a foot past his fingers, sinking.

Sand swamped over him, and he choked. His hand clawed to his waist, and he pulled himself without sight or breath. The sand flowed around him, catching in his scarf and eyelids, stinging his palms.

He pulled hand over hand, and his lungs ached. His throat and chest burned. Sand struck him to the side and he lost his grip, flailing through the grit. His left hand brushed the rope and he grabbed it, pulling again.

A cough pushed itself out, and sand flowed into his mouth. It scoured his throat, and he gagged, spitting, but more forced in.

He stuck his hand straight up, into empty air. Emerging, he took a huge, frantic breath, coughing and gagging. He grabbed hold of the rope again and pulled, straining against the suction.

His weak arms cried for mercy by the time he reached the walkway. He hauled his top half out, and slumped against the rough stone under him, gasping for air and coughing out gobs of sand drowned in saliva. The sand pulled on his legs, threatening to cast him back down, and after a minute he freed himself.

Groaning, each breath scratching his lungs, he untied the rope and retrieved his pack, retreating to the ladder and climbing a short ways up, bracing himself in the small space, out of the clouds of sand. He shook everything he could out of his clothes and hair, and washed out his mouth with water. Sand ground under his eyelids with every blink. Marks covered his hands and fingers, which he wrapped with bandages.

After resting--shallow breaths and ragged coughs--he climbed back down. Grandfather's staff was gone.

His left hand brushed the stone wall next to him, and he walked around the perimeter of the huge sand cistern, eyes burning, chest filling with fire.

#

A few hours later he found an opening in the wall, less a hallway and more a tunnel, leading away from the swirling cistern behind him. He glanced at the sand a final time and entered.

More light than before led him forward, but large items cast lengthy shadows across his path. He looked up when the tunnel opened. Huge circles suspended above him. Teeth sprouted out from the circles, like immense jawbones. Darin spun in a circle. The teeth of each circle meshed with those around it, held in place by long rods, pillars, and jointed arms.

It all hung silent and still. Lit panels showed him the way through the dusty, man-made skeleton, and he picked each step with care, looking for holes or piles of sand. The staircase at the tall room's far end led up. The rushing sand from before ran elsewhere, but its sound filled the room.

As he rose the lit panels increased, and soon the darkness fled.

The ceiling of the room loomed closer. They entered a small room with lit panels in the ceiling, a few feet over his head.

Glyphs and writing covered the walls, and Darin pulled a book out of his pack, inspecting the pictures and text for the language of Sutland, but found nothing. He went to a wall and peered close.

He could turn some of them, and others sank into the wall when he applied pressure.

His heart jumped, and a smile grew on his face. He coughed a few times.

He went about twiddling everything on the walls, moving the movable pieces, but nothing changed. The sand roared around him in unseen channels as always. Another set of stairs continued up, and he climbed, new excitement coursing through him.

Instead of circular jawbones, the next area had quiet, dusty, tubes--more channels. Smooth, thin columns supported them, winding past the steps.

Farther up, past even more stairs, more panels of light glowed in the distant ceiling. But as Darin rose, the panels became a cleaner, softer light.

He rose past the channels. The light grew, turning from sour illumination to brilliant sun. He ran the final stairs, breaking into the sun, squinting. He stretched his arms up, taking a deep breath.

The hum of sand continued. His heart jumped. Wind blew, and clouds scudded across the sky. The sun hung over the horizon.

His platform stood several feet off the desert floor. Four dunes, at cardinal directions to the platform, belched funnels of sand into the sky, up from the bowels of Sutland. He took out Grandfather's compass.

The compass danced as he turned, and when he pointed north he looked up. He peered forward, clouds of sand firing past him.

He gasped, and sand sucked down his throat. He coughed it back out. Past countless dunes, the sand originating around him continued covering his village. He spun in a circle. The man-made dune behind him didn't spit anything, and he could look straight down the dark hole. On the platform, in a corner, a crank, just like the town's well, pointed straight up. He ran to it.

He grabbed it and twisted.

The platform spun a tiny bit under him, and he stumbled, falling to the sandy surface. The shifting stopped; he rose and continued twisting. The platform spun again and, around him, a harsh grinding came from the dunes. The holes, issuing sand in endless blasts, tore away from the dunes, freeing wide-mouthed channels, spinning away from the collected sand of hundreds of years.

Darin spun the crank with all of his might, and the sand redirected to the east, issuing from the channel to the south and cutting off from the channel to the east. He continued turning, but the crank caught on something.

He rushed down, stumbling on the narrow stairs until his eyes adjusted. The empty channels had moved, shifted to follow the channels on the surface, and now roared as unknown energies forced sand up through them. He ran to the room with the glyphs, and then into the long, tall area with the mechanisms.

They ground together, spinning each other in loops and arcs in all directions, but some locked together, shaking and jolting, fighting something. He ran down until he could inspect them.

His eyes followed the jammed mechanisms until they led into the ceiling, and he raced back up. He reached the room in the middle.

His lungs closed off. He gasped and fell to his knees, coughing until blood pounded in his ears and breath whistled down his throat. Fire, blades, white nails traced through the scars in his lungs. With a long groan he stood.

A little red dot winked on and off at him from the wall.

He stumbled to the wall and peered close. Next to the light a raised surface waited, and he pressed it.

A heavy clunk, loud enough to blot out the sound of the rushing sand, shook the room. It came from above, and Darin rushed to the stairs. An opening had appeared in one of the channels, and sand poured out, emptying past the stairs and toward the distant ground.

"Clameff vis loreia, pora tanagru," a loud voice said, all around Darin, and he lost his footing on the stairs, falling down a few and ending up on a painful landing. Above him, the channels moved, winding like snakes, and another opened, dumping sand past him and over him. He coughed.

The coughing continued. On and on. Blood flecked his lips. Tears dripped out onto the stairs under him. He tried to halt it, and take a deep breath, but the coughing pushed past his glottis, forcing its way into his mouth and out, and sparks and flashes exploded behind his eyelids, and his body curled up, clenching together.

A breathless eternity later, he sucked down hot air.

A loud clank opened his eyes. From the new opening in the channel, something emerged, spinning toward the stairs, and when it struck and bounced off, it became long and thin, with a metal tip.

Darin lunged for it, body sore and weak, and missed by inches, and Grandfather's staff fell with the freed sand. He pulled himself up and eased himself down the steps, through the glyph room to the mechanisms. They ran without stopping now, spinning and turning, grinding and groaning.

Sand flowed past him. He came closer to the bottom, darker and darker, harder and harder to breathe.

He pressed his arm over his mouth, blinking away the sand. Huge clouds rose and took away his sight; he ran his hand on the banister to steady himself, and the choking waves rose.

Tears slid down his cheeks, and his feet slid on growing piles of sand. The lit panels in the walls cast flowing shadows through the sandfalls. The sand came up toward him, and when he reached it, he peered into the growing pile. A momentary flash caught his attention.

He dove into the sand, hand reaching for Grandfather's staff. He closed his fist around it, and turned.

A wave of sand buried him. His mouth and eyes burned, and he tried to tunnel forward, searching for the stairs. He swept his free hand and the metal end of the staff around him, and the staff struck something hard. He pushed to it, lungs burning, sand rising, pain drilling his chest and head and legs.

His free hand found something, and he pulled himself up. A step. He climbed onto it, still under the surface of the sand, and stood.

His body pushed out of the sand, and he coughed, taking shaking steps up with Grandfather's staff. His coughing went on until he reached the center room again, where he slumped to the floor and sucked down hot, dry air.

The red light still flashed. He limped over to it, legs aching, air whistling down his throat. He pressed the light again, and another loud thunk startled him, and the voice spoke in more meaningless words.

And the falling sand stopped. He went down a few steps. The sand a hundred feet under him receded, flowing away somewhere, back into the cistern.

Breathing hard, resting every few flights, Darin returned to the sun. The channels blew east, and he returned to the crank, directing the sand south.

"We did it, Grandfather," he said, and coughed.

Grandfather's staff landed in a dune, sticking straight up, and then Darin's pack, and then Darin himself as he jumped from the platform, creating one last cloud of sand, which settled in a moment. He picked up his things, checked Grandfather's compass, and walked north. At the top of a dune his throat slammed shut and his knees buckled under him. He leaned on Grandfather's staff and pulled himself north.

Yggdrasil

By Glenn Dungan

Sigur called Jude his discovery when visiting a friend in Manhattan. Jude remembered his meal. The starter: Foie gras with apple glaze, topped with sunflower seeds, pistachio, and cracked black pepper. He finished with scallops seared with fennel and shiitake mushrooms, complimented with a sea urchin bisque. Jude did not know who the patron at the table was, but after the meal the owner of the restaurant called him over to meet Sigur, who complimented Jude on his skills.

Sigur told Jude that his skills could be better, and Jude agreed. He learned to be humble in the kitchen. Without even getting up from the table, Sigur offered a position at his restaurant Yggdrasil, located in Reykjavik, Iceland. When Jude expressed hesitance, Sigur simply told him that in Nordic cultures Yggdrasil translates to “Tree of Life”.

Sigur Edmunson did not wait for a response before leaving. He told Jude to be at his restaurant the following Monday. As Jude watched him leave, baffled by the logistics of Sigur’s offer, the owner of the restaurant said, “What are you waiting for? Go.”

“But I have a job here.”

“If I know anything about my friend Sigur, it’s that if he sees potential, he goes for it. He has the ambition of a hunter. His offer to you already signifies that you are too qualified for this restaurant. Get out of here.”

“But this is a Michelin star restaurant!”

“Exactly. Now go, because you’re fired.”

Jude bought a ticket to Reykjavik, along with a private room in a hostel, that night.

He did not sleep much the previous night before his first shift at Yggdrasil. Perhaps it was the six-hour jetlag that was still catching up to him, or the reality that he had abandoned his life as a promising chef in Michelin New York City restaurants to come to Reykjavik for reasons that his Queens born family never quite understood. Perhaps, Jude was simply nervous to train under the famous master chef, Sigur Edmunson. He realized, as he stepped onto the cobblestoned paths and smelled the rich history of the city, that this was probably the case.

Yggdrasil was more gorgeous than the open plains of the country in which it resides. Large, industrial windows skirted the front and separated the patio space from the interior. The door was made of Icelandic birch, which was impressive because according to a statistic Jude read on the plane, trees take up less than three percent of the entire country’s landmass. A hand carved tree painted in gold was emblazoned on the door, cut vertically so it split open upon entry.

Jude found Sigur in his chef's uniform, much different than the button up and tie that he had seen him wearing in Manhattan not one week prior. Sigur smiled and shook his hand. His skin was strong, and Jude could feel the scars of years of culinary arts etched like cartography on his palm and fingers. When not flushed with wine and a full stomach, Sigur looked hardened from stone and the frosted weather of Iceland. He looked like an old Viking, complete with wisping blond hair that was almost white.

Sigur reached into his pocket and pulled out one thousand krona. He handed it to Jude. He said, "I've got something to show you. If you want to work here and learn from me, you've got to understand that Yggdrasil does not use conventional ingredients. If it bothers you, or if I think it bothers you, then you take that Krona and leave tonight. I will call my friend Gunther for your job back."

Jude nodded and pocketed the krona. He followed Sigur through the maze of the open kitchen, into the prep kitchen, and pass the dish pit. They went into the basement, which was surprisingly just as immaculate, and passed the inventory of liquor, extra plates, and aprons. At the end was another door, where a heavy thumping that sounded of heart beats pounded almost rhythmically on the other side. It sounded as if someone was tendering a steak, or battering a fresh tuna, which was common in the culinary field. Sigur reminded Jude of the krona in his pocket and opened the door, releasing high pitch screams through the opening. The screams sounded of torture and made the back of Jude's hair stand upon his neck. The pounding vibrated his bones.

The room was of industrial tables, silver and shining underneath clinical looking bulbs which hung from the ceiling. Jude stepped into a thin layer of blood upon the tiled floor, which rain in little rivers to the drain in the middle of the room. Upon the table was the biggest fish he had seen, four feet in length, scaled in effervescent green and blue. A tenderizing mallet was being applied with a mason's precision on its flailing scales. It was then, as the screams continued, that Jude realized this was no fish that made these horrible sounds of torment; it was that of a woman, and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, her eyes as blue as the ocean now fading with pummeling, her soft skin now splotched with the color of undercooked steak, scarlet hair now in tatters on the floor, soft pink lips bloodied and twisted into anguish.

Before Jude was no fish, nor was it a woman. It was a mermaid.

Two prep chefs held the mermaid down as another wailed on its throat, neck, breasts, and ribs. The creature's eyes rattled in its sockets and in one final blow to its brow it submitted to death in sudden silence. Beyond them was typical prep kitchen activities; chefs cutting cabbage en masse, pasta boiling to be portioned out. The tails of several mermaids stacked on top of one another on a table across the room, where several chefs reorganized the stack to add the newly deceased mermaid to the bunch after separating its torso from its waist with a bone saw. They took the torso of the mermaid, its tongue lolling and eyes wide and blank, and tossed it into a large trash bin lined with black bags.

Sigur said, "What do you think, Jude?"

“I think that when they die, they look an awful lot like fish.”

“Exactly. Mermaid meat is a delicacy. It is very expensive. We usually sell mermaid meat for upwards of four thousand a dish, depending on the market.”

“I didn’t know mermaids were real.”

Sigur studied Jude’s face and Jude knew that this was a man who could see people for who they fundamentally are. Finally he said, “It’s all real.”

“How are we serving her?”

“It. We are serving it with a thyme and maple chardonnay reduction, a side of Brussel sprouts with capers and camembert shavings, and polenta with black garlic and white truffle.”

Jude smiled. He said, “Brilliant.”

“Alright then,” Sigur said. He asked for the krona back and returned to the kitchen.

Jude watched the door close behind him, and even though he had many questions, he knew that they could wait. He belonged in the Yggdrasil, and because Sigur believed this, he himself believed it.

After four weeks of intense training as apprentice to the famous Sigur Edmunson, Jude realized that with genius comes a certain level of insanity. He also knew that Sigur was as hardened as the chilled air flowing like streams in the Reykjavik streets and had seen his wrath in the kitchen during rushes. It was simple things, really, that awoke Sigur’s ire: too much vinegar in the dressing, not enough chives sprinkled atop the rose blossom shaped scrambled eggs to match his seemingly insatiable perfectionism. Jude was not intimidated by Sigur, he was enthralled. He could feel his brain working when his thick brows wiggle during the creation of a new dish, the subtle nods of appreciation when his dishes were plated with as much presentation to rival the Harpa opera house. This man lived for food, and Jude was very happy to be studying under a man as absorbed into the craft as he. Sigur Edmunson was the most prolific artist that Jude had ever, or would ever, meet.

After the initial shock value of the fact that mermaids were not only being harvested but used as effectively as they were, Jude found his temperament on the issue dissipate faster than he had anticipated. Having only gone in the butcher’s room a second time to confirm that his eyes were not deceiving him, Jude had become desensitized to their horrible screams rattling in the basement and their battered, fleshy torsos tossed unceremoniously into a waste bucket. They were no more than fresh caught fish, and on some weeks, mermaids were more plentiful. They were captured by Sigur’s every morning off the coast of the Blacksand Beach with methods unknown. Sigur let slip one evening after a long and successful Saturday night and a celebratory glass or two of wine that mermaids are attracted to a special scent. He would not reveal the scent, even after his cold exterior softened with the blush of drunkenness. He did, however, suggest that it was the same that attracted the sirens of old to ships of men miles across the ocean, like blood to a shark.

He also discovered that a lot of the butchers in the basement will often hum as they batter the mermaids, or whisper poetry to themselves. When he asked why, one of the prep chefs said that beautiful sounds and words muffle the constant snap of breaking joints and bones.

Jude wondered when Sigur's fascination of these mythical creatures mutated into serving them. He had never seen anyone stare and refer to creatures so elegant and magnificent with such detached pragmatism. Overtime, Jude learned that everyone at the restaurant was desensitized to the mythical nature of their ingredients, but he supposed that it was because the concept of magic was so interwoven in Icelandic history that they were easier to accept the existence of mermaids.

As the winter started to repress and give way to crisper, gentler air, the menu experienced that awkward transitional phase of trying to follow the seasons. Jude was now four months in and had rented a studio in downtown Reykjavik, Miðbær. He was starting to make good drinking buddies at the restaurant, who still poked fun at him for being a "burger eating American" but waned when Jude illuminated the Iclander's own love of beer and hotdogs. One day, Jude suggested a gumbo using the mermaid meat with a bone broth base, and Sigur thought this was such a clever idea that he gave Jude the rest of the day off to work on the recipe. This caused further butchering of the mermaids in the basement, and the tiles were bathed with such blood that it looked as if toddlers had tried to paint the walls by tossing buckets over their heads. The gumbo consisted of puffins (who were a culturally valued animal in Iceland, but the culinary practice in Yggdrasil has transcended norms in pursuit of art), whale meat, and mermaid. It turns out that mermaid bones make terrible broth, and the product was horrendous. Sigur understood the value of experimentation and instead used whale bones for the base and introduced a new ingredient that he received from a direct supplier in Cyprus, Greece and another somewhere in the forests of Scandinavia.

"Centaur," Sigur said, "slow cooked with pink peppercorns and mustard seed. I was saving it the fall menu, but you're welcome to use some for tonight's dish. Centaur meat is a bit gamey.

Consider your applications."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're doing terrific, Jude. The Yggdrasil is very fortunate to have you here. I am very fortunate to have you here."

As Jude stared over the front of the house, watching the pleased expression of the guests who tried his gumbo travel from curiosity to bliss, he thought that his move to Reykjavik was a good one. With Sigur as his mentor, he had no choice but to become the best.

Outside the window the Northern Lights wiggled their green and amorphous tendrils across the sky, casting wiggling lights onto the tables and well-dressed patrons. When he first moved to Iceland, Jude was disappointed that the Aurora Borealis was a shade of lime jello. He learned that humans do not have the eye capacity to view it with such gorgeous colors that he had seen

on television and in movies. He wondered if mermaids or centaurs possessed the eyes for magic and dismissed these thoughts as fast as they came. Some birds and insects see in ultraviolet. Dogs cannot comprehend color.

Summer came, and the ice in Iceland melted into crystalline rivers and revealed verdant, mossy moors and plateaus. The patio opened and Sigur hired additional staff to onset the influx of business that comes with the tourists every season. In recent decades, Iceland has become a popular destination for young travelers looking to find themselves, but Yggdrasil does not concern itself with the young, adventurous ilk. The quality of its culinary was too high, and instead the tourism that Yggdrasil capitalizes on during the summer is those of rich corporate executives on holiday, clientele rich enough to fly on a private jet across the world for an evening to spend over one hundred grand on a dinner and then fly back to work on Monday.

Sigur came in one evening holding a metal box. Bandages wrapped around his hands pressed against splotches of blood and pus. He was sweating from his brows, as if he had just spent the evening in the kitchen. He held the box gingerly and stepped into the prep kitchen. The pastry chef gave him a glass of water and rag to wipe his forehead. A crowd gathered around their master chef, curious more of Sigur's weakened expression than the contents of what he was holding. Jude had never seen Sigur so winded before.

He downed the water and massaged his temples. He said, "I've been waiting for this ingredient. Jude, will you get the fire extinguisher and keep it aimed at me?"

Jude retrieved the extinguisher. He stood by Sigur's side.

"Do you have matches?"

Jude handed him matches.

"Now stand back, all of you."

Sigur opened the box and all four sides dropped down, revealing the cube to be more of a trap like a carrot underneath a box to catch rabbits. The box was full of straw. The strands rustled and a sharp chirping noise emanated from the pile.

"A nest," someone said, "for a bird."

"Not just a bird," Sigur said, reclaiming his breath, "a phoenix."

The crowd leaned in just as its tiny, scarlet head peaked from the straw. Some of the servers gushed in its innocent cuteness and Sigur shot them a hardened look which straightened their backs to attention. The bird clicked its beak and rustled its feathers. It cocked its head and stared at Jude with dark, nebulous eyes. It was the most beautiful bird he had ever seen, and Jude knew that his training was effective because his first thought was *how can we incorporate this into a dish?*

Sigur struck a match and held it in front on his face, the flames threatening to incinerate his thick, blond-white brows. He said, "I've had phoenix once, when I was a child. It was not the meat that gave me pleasure—it tastes much like quail or puffin. No, it was the ashes."

He lowered the match onto the chick, where it raised its head and opened his beak in expectation of food. Sigur kissed the flame onto the bird's scarlet brow, where it became engulfed in an orb of fire that crackled its bones like popcorn and hissed as it burned the feathers. The chick pipped and squealed in horror as Jude and staff looked on, hardened by Sigur's own detachment. The bird flailed and flailed its head before crumbling like sand into the blackened mess that was once its nest. The flames died and left a silence in the kitchen.

Sigur took a pinch of the ashes and sprinkled some onto his tongue, where his eyes rolled back and his face relaxed. A bead of sweat fell down his cheek, but Jude was not sure if this was actually tears. It was the first time that Jude had seen Sigur genuinely enjoy the taste of something, which meant that it was nothing short of magical.

Sigur gestured to the pile of ashes and invited all to try a pinch. The ashes of the phoenix felt almost like soot. It was black and it left a residue on Jude's fingers. He placed it on his tongue and understood why Sigur had gone through so many ambiguous trials to obtain this cindered bird. The ash landed on Jude's taste buds with an explosion of spice; at first the taste was akin to a strange and unexpected union of paprika and vanilla, and then it followed to the sides of his mouth and increased in intensity until it burned with the aggression of a habanero. Once the spice regressed and traveled to the back of his throat, the taste lingered and turned into salt before returning to its original warming spice, full loop. Jude felt the ash travel down his longs and into his stomach with the smoky burn of a good whiskey, warming him body from the inside all the way to his fingertips. His eyes stung from the spice, and as Jude wiped away a tear, he found out that he was crying. The ashes of the phoenix was as much an intense orgy of flavors that it was almost like covering himself with the blanket; the taste profile was psychic and becoming and evoked memories of utter bliss that one would find only in the womb.

When Jude looked up, he saw the rest of the crew tearing in euphoria. No one was crying for the dead phoenix. One of the hosts reached into the pile for another taste and Sigur rapped on his knuckles with a spoon. He took half of the ashes and put them in mason jar.

"The ashes are a delicacy," Sigur explained, "they are very expensive."

Jude asked, "How many dishes can we serve with this amount? Forty, fifty people?"

Sigur shook his head. He put the remaining ashes back in the iron, padlocked cube. "Infinite.

There will be a phoenix back by the morning and we will collect another seven ounces."

Jude had forgotten the lore of the phoenix. Mythical fire birds that rise triumphantly from their ashes. Immortal. He nodded and said, "Something tells me you already have a dish that uses these ashes, sir."

Sigur locked the box. He said, “A ribeye with phoenix ash rub and mango chutney served with parmesan garlic fingerling potatoes and lemon broccoli rabe. For dessert, let’s see if we can incorporate the ash into a glaze and put it over our Tahitian vanilla ice cream. Sprinkle it with a touch of sea salt—a touch—and slivers of peaches. Maybe a bit of cayenne, but that might clash with the heat of the ashes. Let’s make a dish and see how one of the guests react. Do you all understand?”

The employees of the Yggdrasil bounced a collective nod. The chefs went to preparing the dishes and the front of the house went about setting up the tables.

Sigur personally oversaw the creation of each dish, impervious to any outside influence. He was entranced. Like most things, Sigur’s intuition proved correct and the phoenix themed dishes sold out faster than Sigur could register. Jude overheard the patrons describe the ribeye as *addicting*, *inspiring*, and *incomprehensible in its performance*. He thought it was strange words for people who spent over twelve hundred on a single meal. The entrée and dessert received such acclaim that its praise circulated around the restaurant with as much intensity as a forest fire, and before the night was even half over their supply of phoenix ash had been depleted. The disdain from the patrons unable to receive the dish was bittersweet; their disappointment was a good problem to have.

The following night Sigur gathered around the crew and repeated the show with the phoenix. He placed the box on the stainless-steel industrial tables and revealed a fresh bird, already chirping and blinking absently in the heavy light of the kitchen. It was almost surreal, like a magic trick. Jude knew the regenerative nature of the birds but seeing it in practice was an experience all on its own. Sigur palmed the ashes into a mason jar and repeated the practice; remaining ashes in the fireproof box, locked from above, and stored in the cupboard to give the bird time to revive. The rest of the kitchen did their best to prepare for the rush of their high-profile patrons and after the night was over, Jude was asked to open a bottle of whisky to celebrate the end of a long shift.

Jude enjoyed his apprenticeship underneath the famed Sigur Edmunson. Even after half a year, the chef showed no signs of waning genius and was unforgiving in his critique. He played no favorites and apologized to no one. Jude was learning so much more here at the Yggdrasil that he had almost forgot what it was like living in New York, working at places where he felt he had plateaued. The very existence of mythical creatures such as the mermaids, centaurs, and the ever-popular phoenix ash were secondary to him. He had never seen a giraffe before, but that does not mean they do not exist.

The phoenix ash was a hit throughout the summer, its only fault was that the phoenix could not regenerate fast enough to create an additional number of dishes. Anything incorporated with the ashes brought a certain euphoria for the taste buds, one that was not quite addictive but filled their soul with a longing that one never knew they had. The shifts at the Yggdrasil were like clockwork. The crew gets in, watches as Sigur grants the newly revived phoenix with the industrial lights, and sets it aflame, its shrieks of pain and horror no longer shocking for the crew. The sound of its torture was more akin to the dishwasher running, or the oven declaring it has

been preheated; sounds of a restaurant in full motion. Some of the servers would actually skip this ritual to get a head start on perfecting the look of their tables. Ashes collected, box closed, workers go home with thousands in their pockets on a Monday night. The mermaid and the centaur meat were still available but had adopted a perception of being the second option.

It was in Autumn when Jude came in early to do inventory. He found the words *MUD MEN BUTCHER* in scarlet ink written across the Yggdrasil's oaken doors. Trails of red dripped from its carved branches.

"Mud men," Sigur said, spooking Jude. He was sitting on a bench in the patio, hunched over, looking like a rock. He shook his head, stroked his beard. "We need to get this cleaned off. Wait here, Jude."

He went into the restaurant and came out with a bucket of water and two sponges. Jude went to the door and began scrubbing alongside him. The brisk Icelandic air bit his soap covered hand as he raised it above his head.

"Who could have done this?" Jude asked, "I didn't think we had any real competition."

"The mermaids," Sigur answered, "that's what they call our people."

Jude paused. It was the first time Sigur hinted to the ingredients as a "people". It held as much computation as referring to pigs living in a democracy. He had spent so much time with their prepped tails that he had forgotten the initial shock of seeing the mermaids battered to death and separated by their torso in the prep kitchen, sometimes not entirely dead. When dealing with their tuna-like meat it was almost impossible to picture a full breasted woman attached. Now knowing that Jude's species were callously referred to as "mud men" signified that mermaids not only have enough intelligence to communicate in English but are advanced enough to devise racial slurs that honestly made Jude a bit offended. Who knew those twisted and bloodied lips underneath crooked and snapped noses could form words other than a magnetic siren song from lore?

"What does this mean for us? Should we stop serving mermaids?"

Sigur re-soaped his sponge. "No. We have been serving mermaids for over twenty years. The Yggdrasil is built on mermaid meat. We will not let them slander us."

Jude suddenly became very cautious. Using words such as "us" and "them" only realized that an entire race of sentient beings hated Jude and his people. It frightened him, but he refused to let his resolve dwindle in Sigur's company. The Yggdrasil was a foundation of Icelandic cuisine, internationally recognized. There was no way that a collective of mermaids could muster a might at powerful as this restaurant. Sigur sensed this in his protégé, because when Jude turned to him, he put his hand on his shoulder with as much deftness as a baseball mitt.

“This happens every once in a while,” he said, his cold eyes staring in Jude’s, “But they are product. Much like the centaurs, much like our phoenix.”

He went inside, and Jude knew Sigur well enough to know that this was the end of the conversation.

Weeks went by and the restaurant continued to boom. One night in the middle of a rush, Jude, now promoted to sous chef (much to the chagrin of the chefs that worked under Sigur and had been at the Yggdrasil longer), was interrupted from calling orders and orchestrating the back of the house. One of the waitresses tapped him on the shoulder. She balanced a cleaned plate of what once was mermaid steak in one hand and gestured to the windows with the other. Her eyes were in shock, and the blue in her irises were faded. It was not the look of a busy worker; the girl had an issue beyond the mental chaos of a restaurant during rush hour.

“Cecile,” Jude asked, “I can’t go outside now.”

“They are asking for you.”

“They?” Jude sighed, “I don’t have time for this. Get Sigur.”

Cecile shook her head. She pointed to the dark abyss outside of the restaurant, where the floor to ceiling windows were crusted on the perimeter from frost. The black bay looked like ichor and underneath the kaleidoscopic aura of the Harpa Opera House and the dancing green of the Northern Lights, the outside of the restaurant looked otherworldly and frightening. The warmth of the kitchen felt more like a blanket to Jude, and suddenly in his forced comfort he understood. He put down his rag and pen and made sure the kitchen was alright with their orders. He wiped sweat from his brow and headed out of the restaurant.

The mermaid’s heads poked up like the shell of a turtle skimming the cusp of a lake. Fiery scarlet strands and hair the color of the sun rose up from the black water of the bay to the bridge of their nose, almost so it seemed that the mermaids were stalking prey. If Jude did not know any better, he would have assumed that it was just a group of seemingly beautiful and bold women going for a swim in the frozen waters of Iceland. But he knew better. He knew the girth of their tails that waded to keep aloft in the water, the thick meat that could be tenderized to make the most delicate of fish steaks. The rhythm of moving water pierced the stillness of the Icelandic sky.

Sigur stood on the basalt in his chef scrubs. He gave Jude a sideways glance when they met at the shore. In typical Sigur fashion, his face was hardened and calloused. He showed no emotion, and when he stood to attention, he gave the impression of an immovable wall.

One of the mermaids spoke from underneath the water. It sounded like wind chimes, trumpets, a running brook, wind on an open plateau. It was the most beautiful sound Jude had ever heard, and it sent shivers down his spine. A lump formed in his throat faster than he could recognize it, and his eyes began to sting with the advent of tears. It was a visceral reaction, a certain control of

his body that he knew was not his own. Sigur warned him of this once. Even when the fish are not trying for the Siren Song, every time they open their gills it comes out, just a bit.

“You have received our warning,” one of them said. Jude was unsure which one. “Yet you continue to capture our sisters and consume us.”

Sigur said, “I’ve been doing this for decades, and now you choose to meet me like this? On a Saturday night, when I am making my bread?”

“Your savagery must stop, Butcher. We have heard your horrors befallen the Centaurs in the forests of Scandinavia. We have heard of your ripping the chicks of phoenixes from the United States. Our children know your name. You have become the monster that keeps them awake at night.”

Sigur remained stalwart, “This is a place of business. Do you not harass and defile restaurants that sell lamb, or those that sell cow?”

“It is not the same,” she said.

“It is not the duty of humans to act their part in the food chain?”

Their eyes went wide. The water stirred. The blonde one looked at Jude and he felt his knees buckle. She said, “And what of this young one? Tell me, young one, what would you do if we ate your children?”

Jude stammered, “I don’t have children.”

The blonde mermaid took a breath. When she spoke, her voice cracked. “And soon, neither will we.”

The mermaid with scarlet hair turned her attention back to Sigur. “You’ve got a decision to make, Butcher. You end your actions, or your life. Make this decision for yourself so we do not have to.”

The mermaids drew their heads back into the water, diving with grace and poise. Their fish tails peaked out of the black lake, like a whale breaching and submerging, signifying their descent. The scales were opalescent underneath the green aura of the Northern Lights and the dancing colors of the Harpa. A deft silence occupied by a gust of chilled wind. Sigur looked to Jude and Jude looked back.

“What are we going to do?” Jude asked.

“Get back to work. The restaurant needs us.”

He shambled back, his spine upright, his posture unmoved. Jude looked for any change in his personality that would be affected by the mermaid's threats. He remained as stalwart as ever, like the roots of a resilient tree ignoring the heavy winds of a storm.

Their shoes crunched underneath the black rocks as they made their way from the docks to the back deck of the restaurant, closed today due to the sudden drop of weather. They walked past stacked chairs and cardboard boxes needing to be thrown out. The patrons of *Yggdrasil* ate and were merry, their bellies full of wine and delicacies. The restaurant looked particularly warm from the outside. Flames from the fireplaces licked upwards and the servers moved with such grace they looked like ballerinas. Jude was about to reach for the door when Sigur stopped.

Suddenly he looked very old.

"It's not about the food chain," Sigur said. He gestured to the restaurant, "although if one wanted to be poetic it could be. But it's not. It's about art. The art of cooking."

"But they can think, sir. They speak English."

"So do parrots," Sigur said.

"But parrots can only mimic English. These mermaid's-"

"Fish."

"-understand English."

Sigur opened the door. The sounds of a busy restaurant flooded in. The clanking of cutlery and plates, the shouting of orders from the kitchen, the hustled communication of the servers as they nestled between the dichotomy of worlds between back and front of the house.

"Does it matter?" Sigur said.

Jude returned his gaze to the lake. The mermaid's eyes swam into the back of his consciousness before wading up to the forefront of his mind. It was as if they were still out there, watching him, waiting for his move. Although he could not place it, Jude knew he had been strung into something larger than himself, and that falling asleep with a belly full of Icelandic vodka would not stop their beautiful, haunting eyes in the morning.

"No," Jude said, entering the black rectangle of the hallway because the light had gone out and there was no need to fix it during summer. "No, I guess not."

Jude was settling into his life outside of the *Yggdrasil*. He had found a favorite bar of his, his favorite coffeeshop. He was beginning to know the residents of Reykjavik and they were beginning to know him. The air was cleaner here, much crisper and fresher than the exhaust of

New York City. He still was not as used to the quiet, nor the lapping of waves against the basalt, nor the smell of that freshly baked Rugbrauo occupying tiny pockets near the Blue Lagoon.

One night, he had gotten drunk with a couple of the coworkers at a pub somewhere on Laugavegur street and had ended the night speaking to a beautiful woman who he had been catching eyes with all night. Her hair was a natural platinum blonde, and her eyes were as sharp and blue as ice caps. Dimples marked the corners of every flirtatious smile. Leaning on one another outside the pub, the woman leaned in for a kiss and without thinking Jude turned away.

“What’s wrong, she asked?”

“Nothing,” Jude said.

They tried again and succeeded, but it was neither a passionate kiss nor a drunken one. It felt like nothing more than a handshake. The woman leaned back, struck, wavering. They stood in a fusion of vodka from their breaths. When Jude looked back into her eyes, he saw the lake outside the *Yggdrasil* again, and felt the chill air come through his nostrils and out his mouth. The cusp of water ebbing at the bridges of their Mermaid noses as they watched half submerged under the ephemeral green of the Aurora Borealis.

Jude blinked, and he was outside of the restaurant. It was three in the morning and the cusp of sunlight, forever waiting at the horizon due the curvature of the Earth, watched him in his drunken haze. He could still smell the scent of the woman at the bar and was sure that his awkward getaway would be felt in the morning, much like the pain of wounds set in when the adrenaline runs dry after a fight. He found himself sitting on the docks surrounded by the icy lake and the basalt rocks. He was not sure if he would ever look at fish or women the same way again.

Jude came into work the next day to do inventory. Working his way up from the dry storage to the freezers, he found himself at the end of his two-hour gauntlet of numbers and checking the ounces of sauces in the basement. The heavy pounding of the butcher’s room preceded Jude’s eardrums even before he stepped down the musty stairs. It was rhythmic, almost like they were tenderizing a steak. He found his breathing getting heavy as he approached the door, and flashes of those battered faces with their lolling tongues swam to the forefront of his memory. The heavy thumping of the mallets on their skulls, bloodying their hair, each strike on their temple edging them closer from fear and pain to that sudden, lifeless death. That was when they became fish, for in death, as the butchers begin the next phase of sawing their tails from their torsos, their faces look a lot like caught trout.

He opened the door and the thumping rattled his bones. The butchers, so sensitive to the sounds of breaking bones and screaming women, were whispering poetry to themselves. There were five stations in the room, each with four butchers reciting poetry under their breath. It required three men to hold their flailing bodies down, and another to beat them to death. Shrieks of horror from the little islands of steel accompanied the flailing of their tails. One by one, the mermaids would submit to the final blow and fall limp on the table, where the butchers would move to the next

step of removing the tail from their bare breasted torso and tossing it into a black lined garbage pale in the corner. The butchers moved like machines. They moved like doctors performing amputations.

Jude stepped over a river of gore along the tiles and ignored the smell of blood and fish which thickened the room with an odorous miasma. He walked to the stack of tails bundled with twine to prevent them from falling. The scales were opalescent and glittering, and the fins were so thin that Jude was able to see his hand through the red and green film. Evidence of spinal cords stuck out like the ends of frayed knots. He counted the tails and then asked one of the butchers where the rest of the inventory was kept. The man pointed with a blood-stained hand to the freezer.

“Usually Sigur does the inventory,” he said.

“I’m doing it today,” Jude answered.

He stepped over another pool of blood and ignored the screams of protest as the final mermaid attempted to claw her way out of her restraints before succumbing to a deft and final thump of the mallet.

The walk in looked like any other in a restaurant. Blocky, metal exterior, typical grade. Inside there were four mermaids huddled together, their arms wrapped around their breasts for warmth, their tails curled up. Patches of frost gathered on their shining tails and at the edges of their lustrous hair. Blue lips exhaled clouds of air. They did not even react to Jude as he entered. They simply shot him a glance and looked away, defeated. In the opening of the door shrieks of another mermaid swept in and the mermaids started to whimper. Jude closed the door and muted the battering of their sisters. He was not sure if he was saving them from the torment or himself. He steadied himself and counted the pounds of pork chops, centaur meet, and lobster tails. He ignored their wavering breathing and they ignored him, although this mutual dynamic was particularly loud because it deafened the horrors beyond the freezer. He made his way about the room, stepping over boxes and tallying on his clipboard. The undying presence of the captured mermaids was thick and cold. Several times he had gotten his counts wrong. He tried to reason with himself that the mermaids knew they were going to die, and that he himself was not slaughtering them. It did not assuage the awkward guilt that gnawed at him as he did his inventory above, around, and including their clustered together bodies. Finally, Jude went to the door and cut through the whimpers of the freezing mermaids, he looked over his shoulder and they kept their gaze to the walls, to their huddled arms. Their tails wiggled as they adjusted positions, shedding crystals of frost like dandruff. Jude put down “four” in his counts.

The following weeks Jude felt hollow. He would stay up late and wake up late, leaving only to go to work, which he had slowly begun to dread. His resistance to cook at the Yggdrasil crept up on him, like a growing shadow underneath a rising sun. Perhaps these gnawing feelings of what would turn into disgust disguised as apathy sourced from the anxiety that he had uprooted his life as a successful chef in a Michelin New York City restaurant for Sigur. He had abandoned his old life as fast as he acquired this new one. This unnamable infraction upon his psyche affected his work and invaded his dreams. He was not orchestrating the kitchen with as much proficiency as

he had. Weekend rushes caused him as much stress as if he were new to the craft. He passed an opportunity to create a new phoenix ash dish to a colleague who was more than happy for the chance to impress Sigur, as Jude illustrated five months prior.

Jude had most difficulty serving the mermaid inspired dishes. The weather was in transition from fall to winter, and the air was blistering in the morning and at night, when the sun hibernated and illuminated the sky for just four hours a day. They were serving blackened mermaid steaks with tomato remoulade, a side of swiss char tossed with olive oil, black pepper, and pine nuts, and diced butternut squash with rosemary and garlic. Sigur's architectural genius of this dish would normally have impressed Jude, but now he was relieved when people ordered the dish vegetarian. Whenever he would put together the dish, he would recall their eyes just floating above the cusp of the water. With the chilled lake at the bridges of their nose, they asked what he would do if they ate his children, and stupidly Jude answered that he had none. The image of the mermaids in the freezer, where no doubt a new group was waiting for their death by bludgeoning in the basement, haunted his dreams and pushed him into near vegetarianism. Whenever he would see one of the guests who had paid seven hundred dollars for the dish spear the tail with a fork, Jude would hear screams of their anguish and the forceful snapping of their bones as the mallets hit their beautiful cheeks, temples, brows...and the whispers that carry throughout, little mantras of Goethe, Whitman, Eliot...because poetry is easier to hear than the snapping of bones, easier to ignore than the slaughterhouse beneath their feet. The walls of the restaurant began to close around him.

He waited for the dinner rush to subside before switching the orchestration to the line cooks. It was difficult for him to keep serving as the claustrophobia gripped him. Under the excuse that he needed air, he stepped outside where his footsteps hit the deftness of their wooded patio to the crunch of the basalt rocks. Spheres in the black ichor bobbed in the distance. He knew what it was. The mermaids were watching him from beyond, protected by the geological miracle of the Northern Lights, gazing upon Jude for weeks as he slowly lost his ability to eat, to sleep, to fuck, to cook. He took off his chef coat and tossed it on the rocks where it lay like a dead animal, the frigid air intercepting him as if he were tackled. Yet, the freedom from its weight forced the cold into submission. His face flushed; the sting of tears started blossomed in the corner of his eyes.

"I'm sorry!" Jude yelled.

The mermaids bobbed in the water. They dipped down in unison and appeared faster than Jude could register. They floated before him, just off the shore. It was the same distance as before. Their eyes peaked from the curtain of the lake; beautiful crystals adorned with hair the color of the sun, of the night sky, of the kiss of fire.

Jude fell to his bottom. The rocks poked his behind, but he did not care. He sat almost like a shamed infant and felt just the same. He picked up his chef jacket and tossed it farther away, put his head in his hands. He looked up from his knees and breathed in the cold tickle of Icelandic air.

When the mermaid spoke, the sound was not from the water. It was from the sky itself, bathed in green aura, coming from the space in between the shore, the holes of each rock once carved by lava now flowing with a river of words. A cosmic echo reverberating into his psyche. It was a variation of the Siren's Song, and Jude knew it.

"How many of us do you have? How many of our sisters are alive in this butchery of yours?"

Jude stammered. "Three, four? Last week it was four, but they are gone now. I'm sorry."

The mermaids stirred. They looked at one another, whispering. Jude heard them.

"Gone now."

"Fire and blood."

"Our sisters."

"Fire and blood."

"No more."

"Fire. And. Blood."

They returned their attention to Jude, who now had tears streaming down his face. His chest thumped with each silent sob, like a rough hiccup. The salt in his tears prevented freezing, and they traced down his bearded cheeks like icy rivers.

One of them said, "On the morrow this place will burn. See to it that you are not here."
"Please," Jude said, "please do it when the restaurant is closed. The workers here are innocent."
"None of you are," she said, "but you have redeemed yourself. You humans are savage creatures, and your butcher does no favors for your kind. We have a kingdom, you know. As do the giants, the centaurs, the elves, the treants. We may bicker, but we do not fight amongst ourselves. There is a reason why your kind has never been allowed in the Great Council."

Jude leaned in. He knew Centaurs and phoenixes existed, but Sigur had never told him of elves, giants, and treants. He suddenly felt more shame than he had, another blanket which warmed him from the frost laden air. Between him, a sobbing schmuck, and Sigur, The Butcher, these mermaids did not have a good representation for humankind. Then Jude thought of humanity's past wars, bombings, conquests. He felt the shame of a millennia of human evolution and history. He felt it for both him and Sigur, because he knew that his mentor would not.

"Where is the Great Council?" Jude asked even though he knew it was a strange question. He was embarrassed by his own stupidity, like asking for directions to a party that he was not even invited to. Yet with this sudden knowledge of a world beyond his own, farther than the reach of Humankind's perception, he was starved for more knowledge.

“Your kind will never know,” she said, “but it is at the root of the Tree of Life, where we meet in its wooded trunk. It is dying, because you humans are feeding the planet with oil and plastic.” Jude looked away.

“But it will remain resilient, as it always has. It has existed before you and will after you. You humans have a name for it, our Tree of Life. Do you want to know what it is called?” Jude looked back the restaurant, with its warm interior and white clothed tables. He returned his gaze back to the mermaids. “Yggdrasil,” he said.

“Yes.”

“What do you call it?”

“Ψγδρασιλ.”

The word was foreign to him, full of strange consonants and sounds that Jude could not even attempt to replicate with his own tongue. It was arcane, a word that he knew he would never hear again. It was one that he could barely comprehend the first time. The mermaids watched him struggle and finally sink into the rocks, aware of his own unimportance, embarrassed of his silence during the butchery of the mermaids.

“On the morrow,” one of them said, “right before sunrise.”

Jude looked up from his knees. He nodded. The scalps of the mermaids dipped into the black water with great opalescent fins following immediately after, slapping the lake with a splash that echoed in the emptiness of the air. Jude wiped his tears and looked at the chef’s coat, all ivory atop the shore of black rocks. He picked it up, felt its weight, and tossed it into the waters before heading back into the restaurant and telling the head waiter that he was going home.

Jude did not sleep that night. He attempted to get drunk at the pub but found his biology unable to submit to the numbing of alcohol. The burning slither of whiskey down his throat failed to warm him from the frosted temperatures outside, nor did it quell the pounding of his heart in his chest. He paid his tab, kept his head down, afraid of eye contact. The last time he had gazed into someone’s eyes he had failed miserably, impotently. The time before that he had half a mind to drown himself. The mermaids did not ask him to, but the call of their voice put him in a position that if they wanted, he would. He shuddered with the mysterious feeling of a real Siren’s Song, put on full blast, raving his psyche. He feared that their meeting this evening could have ended with him walking into the black waters, freezing his testicles off while they consume him alive. Jude shuddered again, embarrassed with himself that he would even think such thoughts when he had seen their anguish, their disappointment at the savagery of his species, of the brutality that forbade them from being something greater. Jude wanted to see the great hall within Yggdrasil, the real one. He wanted to see something beautiful even though he himself was not.

Jude found himself staring at his front door. It was four hours now until sunrise, and he knew that the mermaids would keep their promise. He tried to sleep but gave up almost as fast as his head, hit the pillow. He brushed his teeth, washed his face. He started to pack, haphazardly throwing his clothes—most of which were white and covered with some resistant fleck of resin, sauce, or spice—into his suitcase. It was a funny thing, Jude thought. He had almost forgotten his suitcase existed, for it had turned into nothing more than hidden furniture in his closet. Suddenly his time in Iceland felt like awakening from a fever dream, or perhaps entering one. He was not sure. All he was certain of was that mermaids exist, and they will keep their promise. He was grateful that they would not do it when the staff was working and was happy to keep his promise of the knowledge that there were no mermaids currently held in their icy prisons. Currently. Jude paused, thinking of how every morning there seemed to be new mermaids in the fridge. This meant that Sigur might be there now, hefting their unconscious bodies over his shoulder and slamming them in the corner like limp cattle. Jude collected himself, rechecked his belongings, and hurried out of the door.

It was two hours before sunrise, and Jude was out of breath as he reached the Yggdrasil. He unlocked the door and made his way down the stairs, holding onto the wobbly banister and descending two at a time. He made his way to the butchery, where the tiles were permanently tinted red, resistant to the nightly power washing. The room looked mechanical, like a factory, or an operating room. The metal tables, void of the bones, gore, and battered flesh, reflected the industrial lamps above. The butcher's tools; mallet, tenderizer, cleaver, bone saw, positioned at the right side of each station, ready to be picked up for use in a couple hours.

The freezer door was open. Jude became flushed both with relief that he had caught them in time and fear that he would have to do something about it. Sigur came out of the walk-in, rubbing his hands on his pants, glittering flecks of tail and fin smearing on his denim.

“Jude?” Sigur said. He took up the entire door. “What are you doing here this early?”

Jude swallowed the lump in his throat. “We need to get out of here.”

Sigur almost growled. “We have to prepare for brunch. It's Sunday.”

Jude steadied himself on one of the butcher's tables. He gathered the saliva in his mouth, afraid that his words will fail him. “The mermaids are going to burn this place at sunrise.”

“The fish, you mean,” Sigur said, “let them try.”

He began to walk away into the back and up the steps to the outside, where he kept his boat. Jude followed after him, but not before glancing in the freezer. There were already four mermaids tangled in one another, unconscious, their eyes fluttering. Usually the stock is two to three, but on weekends, especially Sundays, they had more to accommodate the orders. Fucking Sunday brunch. Jude trailed after him, and Sigur paid him no mind. It was like telling an ocean liner to stop by voice alone. He watched Sigur reach into the bed of the boat and with a heavy grimace pull another mermaid up and over his shoulder, where he sauntered over the basalt and down the

steps, all while Jude attempted to catch his attention. The strength of his mentor was impressive, and any of those whispers among the staff that questioned Sigur's previous life as a seafarer (almost Viking-like) was quelled right there and then.

"Sir," Jude said, "We've got to stop. Call the staff. Tell them they need to find new jobs."

"Leave me Jude. Come back in a couple hours."

Sigur huffed and dropped another mermaid on her shoulder, where she rolled off the freezing flesh of her sisters and tumbled to the icy floor, breasts exposed. Her shoulder would be in tremendous pain when she woke up. Sigur went to get the final mermaid. Jude stepped in front of the freezer, and suddenly his six-foot frame felt dwarfed by his mentor's stalwart size. Sigur's hardened gaze, the gaze of hunter, an artist, a dominator, fell upon Jude with such deftness that he only felt when others were getting fired or close to it. It was a look of ire that Jude was always relieved to avoid.

"Sir," Jude said, "the mermaids are coming. We need to leave."

"If you don't get out of my way, we are going to have problems."

Jude shook his head. He looked past Sigur and saw the mermaids in captivity. "Only if you give up this fantasy of yours. Their threat is real."

"Fantasy?" Sigur grumbled. "I am a prodigy. I built this restaurant with my bare hands when you were still shitting yourself in America. This building, and everything it stands for, is art." He paused, bit his lower lip. The white bristles on his beard bent upwards. "How do you know of this threat?"

"They told me."

Sigur put a heavy palm on Jude's shoulder. It felt like the paw of a lion and it surged with a ferocious energy. It was different than when, many months ago, a lifetime ago, that they had washed off the graffiti claiming Sigur and his staff *MUDMEN BUTCHERS*, when Sigur spoke to him with a fatherly reassurance. Sigur pushed Jude aside as if he were a turnstile, and even though he tried to hold his ground he was unable to resist his mentor's strength.

"You're fired," Sigur said, "go back to the States."

"If you don't call off the staff, I will."

Sigur grit his teeth. "This is my livelihood, Jude. Yggdrasil is my legacy!"

Jude pointed to the mermaids freezing in the corner. The ones from before were starting to stir, flutter their eyes, rub their temples. "It's their livelihood, too."

“They are just fish! Do you cry when we eat a leg of lamb? Do you get nightmares from slicing into a steak?”

“Not the same.”

Sigur pushed Jude against one of the butcher tables, hitting him in the hip. “It’s almost sunrise. Get out of the restaurant. I’m disappointed in you. So much potential.”

He was right; wisps of sunrise were creeping in through the cellar door. The mermaids would be on their way, or perhaps they were already here, waiting from the cover of the lake. Jude felt behind him, grazing the cold steel of the table, the pedestal of so much brutality. “I’m disappointed in myself, too. I’m sorry.”

His fingers found their way to the handle of the tenderizing mallet, and in one swing that pulled out his shoulder, Jude slammed the spikes into Sigur’s left temple. Sigur stumbled back, holding his face, his hands sticky with blood. He collected himself and charged at Jude, picking him up and slamming his spine on the table. The mallet fell to the floor. His eyes turned inhuman and flecks of spit and gore pattered on Jude as Sigur’s knuckles crushed his nose, his right cheek bone. In those flashes of brutality Jude saw Sigur’s eyes oscillating between the genius face and the madness lurking within, a brutal creature who uses art and bending of the food chain to sing to whatever god of dominance seething in the depths of his dark mind. Sigur punched Jude again, splitting his brow, the force of his hairy knuckles thumping against the metal table. Swathes of black splashed across his vision. Sigur looked down on Jude from the butchers table.

“Look at you,” he said, clearing his face from the blood that ran down his cheek. “You’re like one of them now, suspended on the table, half conscious. Is this what you wanted? To be a fish?” Jude looked up to the industrial lamps hanging dangling from the ceiling. They looked like suns.

He tried to speak.

“Let them come. You can burn with them.”

Sigur’s jaw dropped and he doubled over, his knees buckling. Screams of anguish erupted into the room, and he fell onto the tiled floor. Jude blinked, wiped a spittle of blood that had fallen from his nose and threatened to drip into his mouth like a leaky faucet. To his right a cascade of opalescent glimmered from the floor next to Sigur’s fallen body. Jude turned and saw a mermaid, the one who had awoken from before, laying on the floor. She held a bloodied bone saw in her hand and propped herself up with the other. They locked eyes, and they were the most beautiful eyes Jude had ever seen. They looked like galaxies. Sigur twitched and held his legs, roaring more in anger than pain. She cut his Achille’s heel with the saw and while that was enough to stop him from murdering Jude, it was not enough blood loss and shock to keep him at bay. He roared, caught eyes with the mermaid, and kicked her in the nose with his unlacerated foot. She doubled back, his strength enough to push her across the tiled floors by a couple feet, where the back of her head hit the legs of one of the tables. Jude rolled off, his stomach hitting the floor, knocking the breath out of him. He found the mallet that he had dropped and crawled to Sigur.

He climbed on top of him and slammed him once, twice across the forehead. He raised it again when Sigur's eyes finally closed, his head rolling to one side.

Jude dropped the mallet and held his chest. He spit some blood on the floor and steadied himself. Sunlight crept through, stretching more from the rectangle of a cellar door. The mermaids will keep their promise, Jude understood that. He wanted them too. He stood up, his shoes scraping along the blood that dripped from Sigur's split heel and picked up the mermaid who still clutched the bone saw in her unconscious hands. She was heavy, but Jude did his best to be tender with her. Even with a broken nose, she was beautiful. Her red hair fell like drapes and felt like silk on his arm, and her tail glittered underneath the rising sun. He walked to the lake, past Sigur's boat, and laid her down on the shore, making sure that her head was not in an uncomfortable position among the rocks. He looked at the lake and did not see any heads bobbing in the distance, and he knew that he was running out of time. Jude stood and went into the freezer, picked up each mermaid one by one, and limped his way to the shore, setting the mermaids up next to one another, their flesh touching. Hopefully when they woke, they would not be as frightened because they were together. It was now that the mermaid's appeared, twenty of them. They watched Jude from the water.

"Please," Jude said. He gestured to the mermaids on the shore and gave them a hard look to communicate that he had just saved them. "Five minutes. I beg you."

The mermaid in the front nodded. It was the same from the night prior. There was no way to be sure, but he knew.

Jude went one final time to the freezer to confirm that he had gotten them all and closed the door. Pain was starting to settle in, the strikes of Sigur's brutality were as thick as the blood that painted his face. His muscles were sore from carrying the unconscious bodies of the mermaids. He stepped over the mallet, the bone saw, and Sigur's unconscious body. He pulled out his phone and dialed the assistant managers, telling them that the restaurant was closed for sudden renovations, and that he himself was frustrated with Sigur's lack of communication. It was too much to tell them that the Yggdrasil would soon be set aflame, and quite frankly Jude reasoned that the mystery would be enough to keep their sanity and careers intact. He went into the kitchen and turned on the burners, one by one. He placed his key on a cutting board. He gave a lasting glance to the floor, where the tables were dressed in immaculate ivory linen, where smell of food wafted in and out the doors. Jude gripped steadied himself on the prep kitchen tables and fought nostalgia.

He made his way to the back door, limping, trailing a footprint of Sigur's blood on the carpet with every step. The mermaids were where he had left them at thirty feet from the shore. This gave him relief, for Jude did not know if he had the strength to run out of a burning building. The sun had level above the clouds now, casting the sky with a delicate white, turning the reflective exterior of the Harpa into fractals of orange and gold across the bay. He was on their time now, and even though their patience came as a gift for his deeds of saving their sisters, he knew that his time was limited. The mermaids stared at him from across the water, their face half buried at

the bridge of the nose. The group of them had thinned, and Jude understood that his time was indeed as limited as he feared. Soon, all around him would engulf in flames.

Jude paused. He limped back into the kitchen, past his keys, past the stacks of pots and pans and perfectly sharpened knives that will soon melt into oblivion. He went into the stockroom and swept boxes of flour and spaghetti onto the floor, revealing a faint whisper of a grey, iron box in the back. He cradled the container and went back into the butchery, where Sigur lay motionless at the foot of the table, stained in a combination of his and Jude's own blood.

"Please, two more minutes, two more minutes," Jude pleaded.

He put the box on a counter and opened it to a groggy chirp. The phoenix, more scarlet than even the lick of flame, popped its head out of the ashes that made up its nest, blinking at the sudden disturbance. It was just a chick, and even though Jude was certain it would survive the fire, he was positive that it would starve in its metal coffin, or someone as vile as Sigur would find it. The phoenix chick chirped, shook the ashes off from its feathers. A certain heat radiated from the box, like he was having his hand near a stove. He took the box in the crook of his arm and made his way to the cellar door, stopping when he passed an empty mason jar. Jude placed the phoenix on the table, its galactic eyes staring up at him with innocent curiosity, naïve and stupid to the horrors its past lives had been subjected to. Jude shoved some of the ashes in the jar and fastened it tight until his muscles started to hurt. He put the jar in his pocket and limped out of the cellar with the phoenix in his arms, careful not to shake the box too much with his uneven steps. The mermaids were gone. Jude placed the phoenix's box next to the unconscious mermaids, nestling it in between a tiny pit of rocks so it would remain steady for the chick. Perhaps it might even fall back asleep amidst all the chaos that will surely ensue.

Jude stood up, brushed himself off, and ignored the pain creeping upon his body. He passed Sigur's boat and gave a fleeting glance to the mermaids and phoenix resting on the shore, their faces so graceful, their tails the color of stars. He looked back at the Yggdrasil and turned away, knowing that he will never get the opportunity to walk this way again, to open those golden carved doors that are shaped to mimic the Tree of Life.

Jude bought his ticket back to New York City later that night. He rested on the chair with an icepack on his forehead and fresh bandages on his body. The word of the fire of the great and famous Yggdrasil restaurant of Reykjavik, Iceland spread as fast as the flames burnt it to the ground. Sigur's charred remains were easily identified, and it helped that his boat was parked on the shore. When pressed for details, some of the interviewed staff were candid about their suspicions that Sigur's alcoholism locked away some inner demons and that perhaps they had finally gotten to him.

Jude drank tea with some of the phoenix ashes. It tasted almost like a Hot Toddy. He slept long and good, and the next morning all his wounds were either healed or had been reduced to light bruises. He took the flight back to New York City the next morning, and when he got off the plane and into the once familiar smog and swears that permeate the Big Apple, he took himself out to lunch before heading into the sublet somewhere in the reams of Bushwick.

He ordered a salad and wondered if his life in Iceland was either a dream or a nightmare. He decided it was both and knew that what he knew was true was not always just. They were a part of a bigger world, one beyond the realms and perceptions of humans, and even though Jude admitted that he had learned a lot from the monstrous Sigur Edmunson, he would turn into a vegetarian. Cold turkey.

Isle of Restored Faith

By Reed Martin Miller

“What do we do now?” Faedin asked, a note of deepest concern in his usually calm and collected tenor. He was still soaking wet from the desperate swim out of the sea that had saved his life, along with the handful of other castaways that the Wisp Sea hadn’t drowned and the daggerteeth hadn’t hauled broken and bleeding down into the depths. “What are we going to do?!”

“Shut your gom, Faed.” Braedyn said as he picked himself up off the shingle, wiping his mouth with the sodden hem of his cloak and avoiding the puddle that he had retched up onto the course, red sand and black gravel beach to walk past the younger man and stare out across the cyclopean landscape before them.

It wasn’t just that the landscape was different than the rolling green hills and deep forests of their homeland. Different was not strong enough of a word to describe what they saw: It was alien to them.

Between the slow rolling fog and the wan light of the dawn they could not see more than a score of hands off of the sand, but what they saw was like nothing than any of them had ever dreamed of in their wildest fancies or recoiled from in the darkest nightmares. Even the trees were so far from the norm that the strongest of the band, a hulking brute of a man called Bram, felt an unbidden shiver course up his skin that had nothing to do with the chill of the air and sea.

“We seem then to have two choices, mates.” Braedyn said, his own eyes wide and his mouth suddenly dry. “We either get about the business of surviving or we fall on our blades here in front of these damnable trees without ever seeing what they hide.”

There were mutters of agreement throughout as well as a few supplications to the gods to deliver them, but these were few and far between which suited Braedyn just fine. He was a believer, but he felt that the gods were indifferent at best if not outright capricious in their dealings in the lives of men, and in his experience the true devotees were more trouble than they were worth.

“Trees? What trees, Bren Braedyn? I see naught but red leaved abominations and foul, blue fungus!” He heard from far behind and glanced over his shoulder to see that to his very great displeasure Pontaen Alvanis had survived to see the shore.

He was a short, and pugnacious man in his middle years that had no business being aboard ship in the first place. Indolent and prideful, he had spent the entire previous month at sea either brow-beating the crew or simply beating his servant for any one of a hundred real or presumed failings. Men like Alvanis, who used their position for gain and their religion as an excuse to be a fiend were probably nine out of the ten reasons Braedyn avoided temples and shrines as he did.

“Aye, Alvanis. You describe the vegetation true, but if I went about saying, “Red Leaved Abominations and Foul Blue Fungus,” instead of trees, the men would lose interest and wander

off into the blasted things to get themselves killed. So unless you've a better monosyllable to describe them, I think I'll just call them trees!"

A chorus of derisive laughter erupted from the men with a spattering of hisses of disapproval, but on the whole Braedyn thought well of the outcome. He hated playing at word games with men who had little else to do than sharpen their tongues, but he wasn't so stupid as to think it wasn't necessary on occasion. Establishing his command in the absence of the now deceased Bren Mern was essential to all of their survival, even the fool Alvanis who hadn't had the common decency to drown.

"Now we've made official the vocabulary, let us get down to business!" He shouted and began to give instruction to the sailors, the pride of Halpernia's Merchant Navy and was disappointed to see that only one in five of them had had the presence of mind to be armed when the storm hammered into them and tossed their ship onto the coral reef that had turned the stalwart vessel into so much flotsam and jetsam. Of those he was the only one had more than one of the small stilettos favored on the docks and harbors they frequented.

Long experience at bad luck had taught him to carry an axe wherever he went, and he'd failed to be disappointed when the time came to use it. That time seemed always to come along eventually.

"What do you need to survive, mates? Shelter, water, and food! In that order!" He shouted so all could hear and then set out putting them into groups of three and giving each group an assignment. These men knew each other, and he knew that they would work well together if given proper incentive. He gave it to them in the flavor that they all knew from home, "Victory or death, boys!"

Within two hours they had gathered driftwood and laid it out under the red-leaved trees at the edge of the beach, then covered them over with branched from the strange, yet sweet scented trees. The beds weren't much, but they would do to keep the survivors off of the ground, and help to keep them warm.

"Bren Braedyn?" A voice squeaked from behind, and the dark haired man turned to look, but he didn't have to. There was only one among them that spoke so meekly, and Braedyn knew him well enough, felt very bad for him, but knew him. How could he not have a little pity on the poor sod whose task was to wait hand and foot on a puffed up idiot such as Alvanis?

"Let me guess, Paelyn. Alvanis is upset that I spoke to him in such a rude manner and has sent you to fetch me for an ear full?"

The young man, barely more than a boy really, laughed but Braedyn could hear as well as see the truth in that laugh, that the lad was terrified either of the island, his master or his current task. Braedyn would not have been surprised to look down and see a fresh stream of urine trickling down his flaxen trousers, but before he did he looked closer at the boy and saw that he was looking past Braedyn, past the beach.

It was midmorning now, and the sun was chasing away the mist as surely as it was bringing an unwelcome and unseasonable warmth to the castaways, but the lack of mist made the crimson forest much more visible.

Slowly, Braedyn turned his head to the face the forest just in time to see a spear leave a pale and boney hand. He was fast enough to dodge to the left and suck in his stomach as he turned his profile to the attacker, but the stone-tipped spear missed him by the barest of inches. Paelyn, standing as still as a bird in the eyes of an adder wasn't as lucky, and the spear struck him center mass, breaking through his breast bone with a sickening snap that brought all eyes around to face them.

Braedyn fell over backwards, tripping over the bed he'd just created for himself and landed in a huff on the shingle, staring gape mouthed at the attacker that now brandished another spear, and screamed defiantly, whipping his head from left to right as if screaming at the whole group of survivors.

Short of stature and small of frame, the attacker looked like a sun-starved child clad in grey furs that barely covered gaunt features and a drawn, beardless face that was ashen except for the twin red stripes painted across its face from the right eye to the left cheek. It lifted the spear high, cried out in a tongue that was lilting and undulating, then threw the thing with mind-numbing alacrity into the gathered mass of sailors.

Some dove to the left, others to the right but almost all moved in some way even if it was by force of impact from their fellows. Alvanis was the only of them that didn't move, and it was his poor luck that the spear hit him in his right eye and came out the back of his skull. Braedyn, who watched this with barely suppressed terror took a moment to realize that despite everything that had gone on between himself and Alvanis, and also despite the fact that he himself had thought of at least a dozen different ways in which he'd have killed the portly old cleric, the man's death infuriated him.

"I'm going to kill that damned ghost!" He roared as he rolled over to his front and climbed to his feet. He wasn't at all sure when he'd pulled his axe from the loop on his belt but it was in his right hand and he was squeezing the haft so hard that he felt his knuckles popping even as his legs carried him towards the edge of the forest.

The ghost-pale fiend crouched and bared its teeth in challenge then leapt headlong to meet Braedyn's charge, still shouting in its strange native language as it pulled a bone handled stone knife from behind its back.

The two met where the red sand met the strange bluish grass, Braedyn grasping his axe in both hands, one on the grip polished leather handle and the other just below the bearded blade meaning to strike the fiend in the face with the haft and then jam the well-honed steel into soft flesh, but it didn't work out quite that well. Before Braedyn could react at all, the pale skinned devil ducked the haft and had both hands wound up in Braedyn's cloak. With a twist and a tug the

not too small sailor was flying tail over tea kettle into the tree closest to him and his vision was filled with a sharp flash of light from the impact, and then again when he fell from the trunk to the ground.

Braedyn heard various screams of pain and fear and anger that blended into a hellish rhapsody and try as he might he could not force his eyes to open once they fell closed. No force of his willpower could hold off the coming blackness that enveloped him, and to later to his shame he would remember of that moment that he didn't want to fight it back.

"He stirs!" Braedyn heard as soft light began to fill his vision, his mind slowly coming back to the forefront. "He yet lives!"

The voice belonged to Bram, the man that was the size and temperament of a merindrel, the huge shaggy-haired beasts of burden that the Halpernians used to operate the cranks on their dock cranes. It was a deep and sonorous basso rumble that reminded Bren Braedyn of the wheels of an ale cart rolling on hard-pack.

"Where is it?!" Braedyn spat as he pushed himself up onto his elbows, his head still spinning and throbbing from the impact and recovery. "Where's that little...?" The question died as his eyes fell on the very still and battered form that lay just a few feet from him.

"Bram killed it, Bren Braedyn!" Faedin pipped up, clutching himself around the crook of his left elbow trying to staunch the bleeding of what must have been a nasty cut. "Was a close thing though. Bram hit it in the head with a stick of green-wood as big round as my calf and it only seemed to make the haint mad! Fiend didn't even bleed! Was a harbinger straight out of the Sulphur Lakes, Bren Braedyn!"

"Settle down, Faed, and it's just Braedyn while we're ashore man. How can I be Bren of the ship when we've no ship to sail?" He said touching the back of his head tentatively and wincing when his fingers met a knot the size of a ducks egg. "Also, if there were Harbingers of Sulphur on this island, or on any island anywhere, we'd have heard the Hunting Horn of Harking to announce the coming of the gods for the Final Battle. D'you hear any horns while I mended? Didn't think so."

"But Bren...I mean, Braedyn! The thing didn't bleed! Even when Bram pulled its arms out of their sockets just like it was a fowl at a feast day dinner it didn't bleed! On my honor there just came a puff of dust!"

Finding his feet on unsteady legs he stumbled as much as walked the short distance to inspect the body and felt a deep and superstitious trepidation as he looked down at the pile of bone and fur that had been so violently animated a short time before. "No blood. What the blazes?"

"All of the clerics ran away as soon as they saw the remains, Braedyn. Took off into the trees like their hair was aflame and their tails catchin'. Screaming to the top of their lungs the whole lot of them. Should we go after 'em?"

“No, Faed.” Braedyn replied after several long moments of thought. “We’re less than a score and on hostile ground even with the brow-beaters. No, their fate is in the hands of the gods. Where are we with supplies?”

One of the older sailors, a man called Gruff answered. “We’ve found sweet water in a stream a few minutes northeast of here so as long as we can go there we’re covered for drink, sir. There were fish aplenty in that water as well. Mean, nasty looking buggers but Faed ate one and he hasn’t died yet. Was a double shock since he ate the thing raw, was more afraid of burning the wood and poisoning himself than he was with eating raw fish.”

Braedyn’s stomach grumbled at the sound, but he had more important worries at the moment than cooking with strange wood versus eating strange fish raw. Worries that were suddenly and violently accentuated by a cacophony of terrorized screams that sprang up in the distance followed by enraged howls. All of these noises faded rapidly into silence over the course of ten breaths.

“Gods protect us.” Gruff muttered out loud, his grizzled and scar crossed face going as white as fresh milk despite the now oppressive heat. “We’re all going to die on this forsaken lump of rock.”

Murmurs quickly became mutters which led to a growing frenzy of fear as the sailors on the beach began to drop to their knees and pour out supplications, but an ear splitting whistle cut them off and all eyes turned to Braedyn and all voices went silent in the face of his grim determination.

“Gruff did the gods bless you with prescience? Were you given a vision of doom?” He asked in a stony voice. The men were afraid and frightened men made mistakes that would lead without doubt to the very end that terrified them so. He had to stomp it out now, or they really were all doomed. “Because if they didn’t and you’re just talking out of your backside and whipping these good men into a fit I ought to have you flogged for a coward!”

Gruff’s face filled with red and his jaw set in a fashion that Braedyn truly loved. An angry man made mistakes that could get him killed just as easily as a frightened man, but an angry man seldom stood still like a lamb at the slaughter. ‘Good.’ The shore stuck Bren thought and continued.

“I don’t intend to give this island the satisfaction of my bones just yet! I intend to survive, and I intend to make this gods forsaken speck of land learn that to fear me and mine! This isn’t the first time I’ve been cast away boys, and I know that a few of you have been there as well! Gruff! You spent ten moons on that desert island right beside me. How many nights did you cry yourself to sleep? None! Not a single one. Blazes man, you knocked me in the head at the first sign of me giving up! Beat sense into me when I couldn’t gather it myself!”

“Blasted right I did, sir!” Gruff said then spat on the sand to a small ringing of laughter.

“Bram! Your face is wet. That’s sweat I assume? Cause I’d hate to think a man big as you’d be mewling for his mother!”

“My mother scares the dung outta me, Bren.” He said in his basso, and the laughter of the men grew with that even further, particularly when the huge man began nodding his head and saying, “it’s true, it’s true!”

“You boys with the stickers make sure they’re sharp, the rest of you grab a rock or a tree limb, or better yet both! Make yourself something to split some skulls and let’s be quick about it!”

They cheered and turned to do as they were told while Braedyn turned to look down at the shattered remains of the child-sized monster that had killed two men and scared away a half dozen others to be slaughtered in the forest. The gods only knew how many of these bone-children there were, but he was acutely aware that he only had himself and a little over a dozen men who were to use improvised weapons against these things that failed to bleed and who could toss a grown man around like a rag doll.

He meant every word that he’d said, even the bits that were as much bluster as not, but now that the men were on task, he could not help but feel a little of the fear that he’d dispelled in them. It was with a shaking hand that he put the blade of his axe to the sharpening stone from his belt pouch and began to prepare his weapon and himself for the inevitable.

They had to get off this beach, and find better shelter, hopefully away from their adversaries that they knew nearly nothing about except that they were hard to kill and didn’t bleed.

“Blast it to Dagoth it is hot.” Gruff muttered as he wiped sweat from his brow with a forearm to nodded ascents from all around him. “Was cold as the North Sea last night, not as hot as the Dread One’ balls this afternoon! Blast it to Dagoth!”

When they left the beach, they’d taken to the northeast and were skirting the stream that Faedin had found deeper into the island in a column, each man within double arm reach of the man in front and the man behind the lead man of the column falling back every few hundred spans to take over the rear. This made sure that the man at the front and the one at the rear had fresh eyes.

Braedyn kept at the front, and a little off to the right flank, trying to keep his eyes sweeping left, fore and right, but it all looked the same. Red leaved trees with pinkish skin rather than bark, with mushrooms in various hues of blue blanketing the ground. It was enough to make even the sharpest eyed man go dull, but the worst part, more than the hellish heat and far worse than the deceptive monotony of the forest was the silence that was broken only by the bubbling flow of the stream. No animal chittering, not bird calls, not even the chirps of insects.

They began to despair that they would never find shelter until they walked out of the forest into a bright glade at the edge of a sheer rock-face that was at least a hundred and fifty spans tall, and from which water fell into an impossibly deep pool from which the stream poured out into the forest.

The best find however was the small cave behind the water-fall.

More of a hollow than a cave, it was twelve span deep, and ten across with a mouth that only Bram had difficulty in squeezing into, and with a pool outside full of sweet water and fish it was perfect.

Braedyn couldn't help but think that it was too perfect. He wanted to run screaming from the place as soon as that thought sank in but for better or worse, it had everything that they needed if they were going to survive long enough to be planning an escape.

"We'll see what happens tonight, Bren." Gruff said as he took a bite of one of the strange fish from the pool and Braedyn could tell that the man had been right about them. They were ugly as sin and with teeth that made them look like a cousin to the daggerteeth out in the open ocean, but after he'd gobbled one down, and started on the second he had to appreciate that with a little pepper they'd be quite tasty.

"I hate to agree with you, old man, but you're right. We will see what happens tonight."

The temperature began to fall along with the sun, but all of the men had taken their fill of water and of raw fish, the ghastly looking creatures being unused to being lower than the top their food chain they were taken almost as easily as the tree limbs that the men took to build their beds on: reach out, grab hold and pull.

The castaways were about to begin an attempt at making a fire when Faedin yelped and began pointing at the edge of the glade, at nearly the exact point that they themselves had walked in. All men turned their eyes that way and within moments all were gathering up the stone axes that they had fashioned earlier in the day and stepping back towards the mouth of the hollow.

'You are well to be afraid, intruders.' Each of the men heard, but their ears registered no sound. The voice, cold and devoid of emotion resounded within their minds and filled them with a dread that was palpable, as if fear had crawled into their souls and festered within. 'You would have been better to have died with your ship.'

Braedyn was just as afraid as the rest, felt his knees begin to knock, his skin begin to crawl and every instinct told him to run as fast and as far as he could, to let the men at his back die so that he could survive. In his entire life he had never had such a selfish thought, had never hated himself so. Anger welled up in him so strong that his jaw clenched and his hands went white on the haft of his axe. Anger conquers fear.

“You act as if we wish to be here.” Braedyn said in a low voice, walking out into the twilight, his eyes locked on the new arrival. Unlike the bone-children, this creature stood as tall as a man, with skin the color of spun copper, a long slender nose and canted indigo eyes each the size of a fist. It was all angles and straight lines, with a long black braid of course hair that draped over its right shoulder. Every hint of its body language spoke of arrogance and cruelty. “The gods saw fit to tear the keel out from under our ship in yon reef, saw fit to drag many of our number down into the mirthless sea as fodder for the daggerteeth and crabs.”

‘Your gods are cruel, man, to deliver you to me. Your friends are drying as we speak and will be reborn as one of my Horde.’ Braedyn heard within his mind again and saw a dozen of the spritely bone-children flowing slowly out of the scarlet trees to either side of the creature. ‘Just as the rest of you will.’

“Perhaps.” The ship-less Bren said straightening, shedding the fear as a duck sheds water from its back, and letting his axe rest over his right shoulder, exuding a casual air but staring blades at the creature. “Or perhaps, they dropped me and mine here to wipe your filth from their creation! Maybe, they meant to use us as a conduit of their divine retribution!”

‘You are a fool if you think so.’ The creature replied, but there was a small, ever so small, shifting in its posture. It did not look quite as arrogant as before, yet the cruelty remained. ‘Lay down and prostrate yourself and the killing will be shift.’

“That is one option.” Braedyn said with a nod and turned his back on the creature to look back to his men. “What do you think, mates? Like sheep to the slaughter? Or like lions!?”

The crew roared, deep and resonant, then filed out of the shelter of the hollow like whiskey out of the decanter, hefting their stone axes, and cudgels in hands that no longer trembled.

Spinning on his heel, he charged forward into what he was quite sure would be his last stand, but he felt something deep within his breast, something deeper than his anger, something greater than pride. He didn’t know what it was, but he knew it felt right. Righter than anything he’d ever known, and was gratified to see the arrogance and cruelty melt away like so much wax from the creature.

The bone-children roared in response and threw themselves at him, a volley of stone-tipped spears leading the way. Any one of them would kill him, and he knew this for fact, but he held tight to that feeling in his breast as he dodged and rolled, then came back to his feet swinging his axe with all of his might at the closest fiend. It roared in pain when the dull luster of the steel sailed into it’ throat with a thud, and all present were shocked to see a flash of brilliant light burst forth from the wound, but none so much as their master.

The light flashed out in a brilliant arc of lightning that struck the next three bone-children in the row and blasted them to so much dust in the breeze. Still that feeling thundered in Braedyn’ chest, and in fact doubled in a wave that blasted all remaining fear and even his anger.

The crew cheered and began singing out praise to their gods as they met the wave of bone-children and carved into them with the ferocity of a starving man on a wheel of cheese with the same results as that first cataclysmic blow. All saw white and felt dust fall on their skin but they charged forward. All but the Bone Master, who turned to run back into the perceived safety of the forest.

“No you don’t!” Braedyn roared at the top of his lungs as he let loose the handle of his axe, throwing it with all of his strength from ten feet away. When it struck the Bone Master, the blade bit deep, sinking to the polished wood handle in its coppery flesh.

If the light of impact on the bone-children was awe inspiring, the bolt that erupted from that final blow was uplifting in a way that none could later describe. A ball of purest white blasted out into the sky and turned back down upon the earth, raking a line to the southeast for what seemed hours. When it was finally over, when the crew and their Bren stood alone next to the pool of cold, clear water they found that they could look down the length of the island all the way to the beach and out into the sea beyond at the sails of one of their sister ships anchored just beyond the reef. The trees and the fungus had been obliterated in a long path.

“Bren Braeden...What the holy blazes just happened?” Bram asked in a voice soft but rumbling. His face was covered in ash and dust, but his eyes were wide and filled with awe. “Did the Divines just ...?”

“I haven’t been to Temple in ten years, Bram.” Braedyn replied, his own eyes unblinking as they stared down to the beach. “I intend to rectify that as soon as my feet touch Halpernia.”

“I think I will be there with you.” Bram replied with a deep, deep nod and clapped the thunderstruck Bren on the back, nearly knocking him down.

They walked back down to the beach, then sailed away after recovering and burying their dead above the tideline. They soon discovered that the island, despite being on an active trade route had never been named much less placed on any of the nautical charts. It was as if no one had ever sailed there, or at least none had returned.

Bren Faltise of the Halpernian Merchant Ship Mayhew assured Braedyn that the island would be recorded, and asked him what he thought it should be named when it was put down for posterity.

Braedyn took a drink of the fiery whisky that Bren Faltise had given him and said as he looked back over the rolling waves at the island, “I’d say it should be dubbed the Isle of Restored Faith.”

Interview with Author Aaron Sommers

We had the chance to get to know Book Smuggler's Den contributor and author Aaron Sommers better. Sommers is the author of several short stories and plays. We can all learn a thing or two from this passionate writer. Check out what Sommers has to say about being a writer and advice he has for aspiring authors.

What inspired you to write a book?

I was inspired by the birth of my first child. The story had always been up there, in the attic of my mind so to speak, but after she was born, I started to write feverishly. Initially, that meant a lot of outlines, character notes, and ramblings in notebooks. After a year, I read through them carefully, and translated the story into a cohesive structure. The only way I could do that was via my typewriter.

It is often said that in order to write something, you must believe in what you are writing. Do you agree with that?

Oh, sure, I agree. Whole-heartedly. I would even take it further and say that you must not only believe what you are writing, you must love it, too. The place, time, characters, all of it. The challenge is to translate your love faithfully for the reader. Not to make readers believe your story, nor love it, but to have them enter a world where they want to. Ideally, a strong enough narrative where they'll have no other choice but to. Beyond the intentions or beliefs of any writer is the sobering fact we're all working within the constraints of twenty-six letters. So we need to make each one count!

Do you have a set schedule for writing, or are you one of those who write only when they feel inspired?

I've developed an extremely disciplined routine through the years. Traditionally, I've found the morning is the best time to let the creative juices flow. I'm not sure if it's the coffee or some carry-over from my dreams the night before, but I usually fire on all cylinders then. I've published enough fiction to give me valuable perspective on when the waters are best to cast my line out. At the same time, I know I'm going to be at my revising best (most ruthless) at night. So that's when I bust out the ax (or scalpel)!

Tell us about your writing style, how is it different from other writers?

I know a lot of writers who, understandably, bask in the glow of any praise. I'm not going to lie to you and say praise doesn't matter to me. I guess what makes me different, though, is that, at the end of the day, I look at any praise as, at its best, an enticing distraction, and, at its worst, a dangerous force. While it's always great to hear readers say how much they liked my stories, I think, as a writer, it's far more valuable to hear about what didn't work. Because the things that I'm doing right, in all likelihood I'm going to keep doing them. Those are the aspects of writing

that, through the years, I've internalized. Their not so much habits as second-nature. It's what doesn't work that matters to me. The unknowns that only become knowns when a reader interacts. All criticism, at that point, is honest, and thus, I think, constructive. That kind of feedback is gold to me.

What, according to you, is the hardest thing about writing? What would you say is the easiest aspect of writing?

The hardest thing about writing is finding the time to give all my characters the attention they deserve. Like a parent who must balance attention, praise and discipline, I have to make sure every character gets their time. Some are loud and get their needs met faster, but when you have a family you have to be careful. The quiet kid in the corner needs your help--and there's only so many hours in the day! The easiest thing about writing is watching my characters grow if I step away for awhile. Just giving them some breathing room can work wonders.

Have you ever experienced "Writer's Block"? How long do they usually last? Any tips you would like to share to overcome it?

I've never experienced "Writer's Block." When I have a story up there, the lights are always on. Thankfully, I've never struggled with a lack of ideas. If and when I sense I'm writing myself into a corner, though, I've found going for a walk to do wonders. I live in a house with thick woods on every side, so there's all sorts of great natural sights around. A ten minute stroll can be a shot in the arm for my prose.

Any advice you would like to give to aspiring writers?

I think the most important thing to remember is, a lot of people have stories to tell, but if you want to be a writer you need a voice. There are many "fixable" aspects of a story--like stilted dialogue, uneven pace, too much exposition. Every writer struggles with these "broken" pieces of a story through the process. But the one feature that cannot be fixed is a lack of voice. It also happens to be the most important one for the reader. If she can't hear anyone on the page, the rest of the story doesn't matter. Writers need to remember we're planting the seeds of a relationship here, and that only grows with trusting the reader. A strong voice leaps off the page and draws the reader in. Just as we do when we meet someone, we're going to use our first impression as a point of reference. You only get one chance for that. I think readers, particularly the ones that dive deep into novels, are a forgiving bunch, by and large. But you've got to start strong and hook them before they'll go under with you.

Are you working on something new at the moment?

I'm working on my novel, an 80,000 Young Adult Contemporary story, an unfamiliar take on a familiar trope. I'm very excited about it.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

Persistence is key. Out of all the plays I've written, and the dozen or so short stories I've published, the one I'm most proud of is called, "The Early Departure of Cameron Bailey," published in The Berkeley Fiction Review a few years ago. When I first submitted that short story, the editorial staff rejected it. At first, I was mortified. I'd worked so hard on the piece, winnowing it down--slowly but surely--to less than a thousand words over the course of many weeks. Writing short stories is a great way for a novelist to learn the importance of economy of words, but very short fiction, "flash," takes it to a whole new level. Not only does every word count, but the length of the sentences, the structure of the paragraphs, the variety of punctuation, they're all thrust under a microscope. The result can be exhilarating for the reader. But there's no room in the prose for any flaws to hide. That's a lot of pressure on the writer, but again, it's essential. I had the good fortune to have an experienced editorial staff at the journal who really liked the story. One of the Managing Editors told me why they rejected it. You never expect this when you submit. The volume of submissions just don't allow much time for them to say why, usually, it was a no.

This time, though, they gave me specifics as to what didn't work for them, and invited me to re-submit in the future. Again, I don't even remember what they said they liked. What mattered to me was what they thought needed polishing. So I went back to work. I kept their notes in front of me while I did, but also made sure they aligned with my vision of the story. The journal has a contest for Flash Fiction and, after I finished toiling on my story, I sent it off to them. Again. Now, this had happened before, and I knew addressing whatever concerns they had was still no guarantee of publication. Different readers have different reactions, and I was prepared (although not looking forward to) another no. Around three weeks later, I got an email that lifted my spirits. Lo and behold, they were not only going to publish the story, it had won first place in their contest--and the staff nominated it for a Pushcart Prize! That never would've happened if I'd thrown up my hands and given up on the story. That, I think, is the point here. The writing process--and the publishing industry--is unhurried. There are many reasons for this, but the fact is there's no way around it. But if you make the investment in writing the best story you can, readers will give you their time.

The Sad Girl's Declassified Heartbreak Survival Guide, Gigi Bella

Reviewed by A. Lawler

One of the early nights in June, I dropped by a poetry event at a local bar here in Albuquerque. Gigi Bella was the night's featured poet. Several writers had already tried their work at the mic, to varying levels of enthusiasm from the audience. By the time Gigi made her appearance, the audience in question had heard plenty of poems and downed plenty of beers. From my seat near the side of the stage, I was quite sure I had heard the full range of the night's poetry. I was mistaken; Gigi Bella managed to both surprise & captivate the booze-riddled crowd with her theatrical renditions of several poems. Maybe it was the beer, or maybe it was the brazen attitude in her poetry that led me to drop by her table after the show and buy one of her books. That night I took home *The Sad Girl's Declassified Heartbreak Survival Guide*, a tiny poetry chapbook stapled together with a black and white cover.

Starting with the poem, "Fem Renaissance" through to "i say i have never climbed a tree before &," Gigi spotlights the performative act of being a woman in the 21st century — and all the jagged edges that involves. She admits to the embarrassing moments that most of us shy away from, like falling a little too hard for a Tinder date and a good-looking TSA agent coming across very personal items in our carry-on luggage. She never attempts to sugar-coat any of the above or make it into something lyrical. At first, the honesty is jarring. After a bit more consideration, it makes sense. These are not things that can be made lyrical. The evenings alone at Olive Garden and the mornings spent scrolling through Instagram looking for something approaching self-acceptance cannot be shown in a glamorous light. These moments can (and should) only be shown for what they are: sad, and embarrassing, and so very modern.

That is what Gigi Bella accomplishes in the *Sad Girl's Declassified Heartbreak Survival Guide*. She produces a brief collection of poetry for millennials living in the modern world, which is as far from the glamour we try to portray on social media as the earth is from the sun. The feeling can perhaps be most aptly summarized in some of the final lines, "... I have never climbed a tree. The only way to get back down is to fall, break a bone. And I feel like nobody saves the sidekick. Queen of not cool, too soft for her own good. I feel like falling is all I know...."

Iris Murdoch, on the Anniversary of Her Birth and Death

Reviewed by S.B. Julian

I call them my Irises -- my copies of the novels of Iris Murdoch. They have played such an intimate role in my life that we can't but co-exist on a first-name basis. I found my first "Iris" at age eighteen while back-packing in Europe. Near my hostel in Germany was a shop which offered a few books in English. One was a tattered secondhand copy of *The Bell*. Back at the hostel, I sat up most of the night reading it, entranced and absorbed with an absorption which only grew throughout the publication of all 26 of Iris Murdoch's novels.

For me, these books and the Murdochian way of interpreting the world and the world of the mind were formative. For better or worse, this reader would be a different person today without a lifelong "Iris study". Call it an addiction, but I must re-read the Irises regularly for they make one feel steadied in a chaotic and disorienting world, providing ballast in ways too mysterious to pin down. We know they are being pinned down (in sanity) yet simultaneously launched to float free in some sort of promising cognitive limitlessness. Iris Murdoch's novels are all about mysticism, so it seems natural to describe them in semi-mystical terms. They have a life of their own, which seems entirely separate from the quotidian life of their author, at least as we glimpse it through her correspondence and posthumous biographies.

Although more a collector of ideas than physical books, I nevertheless, have collected all the Iris first editions. I enjoy their presence ranged along my shelves, situated handily for looking up the snippets and quotes which serve as mental vitamin pills. The books are like the tomatoes growing on my porch, those small objects packed with universes of invisible life and biochemical energy, of what Hildegard of Bingen called "viriditas" -- divinity manifested in nature. If one could summarize Iris's subject in a word, divinity would be it.

Not that her stories aren't earthy and human, concerning as they do the morally-middling beings she says we all are, egotists and animals to a person. Her plots sail and swoop romance, myth, psychology, existentialism, social mores. Her characters are academics, vicars, rogues, actors, civil servants, failed artists, yearning poets, dazed parents, eccentrics. They are ex-centric, but we by some pleasurable literary alchemy become centered while reading their stories, which instruct while they entertain. "Pleasurable" is the keyword: Iris Murdoch novels are addictive because they please, at least they please readers of a certain temperament, readers who don't mind what sometimes seems bizarre and what may now be considered old-fashioned. The world of today's movements and moments, of #me-too and globalization and anti-globalist new nationalism, isn't the Murdochian world, but Murdoch's are books for the ages, not the moment. Although their settings -- the neighborhoods of London or the coast of Dorset or the broads of Norfolk -- feel recognizable to anyone who has been to those places, the physical world is somehow askew in the Irises; the world of ideas rumbling below the surface is their real locale.

Besides pleasure, the other keyword here is humor. When your plots concern a tyrannical romantic eroticism which reaches mythic proportions, humor can't be far behind, subtle humor that refers to a set of scholarly correlatives which Iris expected the intelligent reader to access. That we all inhabit a personal inner reality, and forget that others have a different one of their own, and wouldn't recognize themselves in the mental drama we have created for them and ourselves makes for comic misunderstandings. As in classical theatre, the gods are laughing. It still comes as a surprise to us mortals that other people exist independently of us, and are not mere supporting characters in the drama invented by our own dreaming egos.

The lazily “dreaming ego” was one of Iris's favorite terms, indicating the thing that pulls us away from her other favorite motif, the exacting divine, which she frequently indicates with the image of a free animal swimming or flying through the elements “like a soul seeking its way to God”. Something as serious as the divine is best approached through something as profound as humor – and play – and that would be why theatre and theatrical players are prominent in many of Iris's most amusing plots.

We are indeed serially a-mused as we read and re-read these novels, for in them the muses are never far away: they live in natural landscapes, in dogs and cats, in great paintings loved by the characters, and in the characters' unconscious minds. On the anniversary of Iris Murdoch's birth (July 1919), her oeuvre remains one of the richest departments of the Museum of Reading. The test of greatness for a novel is that on each re-reading you read a new version of it. You are doing what Heraclitus did when he repeatedly stepped into a river and noted that each time it was a different river. That is why we Iris Murdoch fans continue to read her novels: they refresh us anew even now, twenty years after her death and 100 years after her birth.

Contributors

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of four review editors.

Jennifer Arnold has been lost in legends for a few years now. She started writing articles and short stories for magazines in 2010. Her first novel, *Monster Within*, was published in 2013 with I-Proclaim. The second novel, *Demons and Dragons*, was published in 2016 with Amazon Publishing. A small publishing house picked up my third novel *Paths to Kingdoms* in 2018. Kellan Publishing has just published *Three Towers* this year. Jennifer is currently taking a break from novels and working on short stories.

Daniel Deisinger lives in Minnesota, and writes for work and fun. His work has appeared in almost a dozen publications, including "Castabout Literature," "Defenestration Magazine," "Flash Fiction Magazine," "Ripples in Space," "Whiskey Island," and "Consumnes River Journal." His twitter is @Danny_Deisinger, and his website is saturdaystory-Time.weebly.com.

Glenn Dungan is based in Brooklyn, NYC. He has an eye for the surreal. When not writing, he can be found drinking black coffee and listening to podcasts about murder.

S.B. Julian, a former librarian, present book retailer, and memoirs coach. Julian is a playwright, columnist, and fiction and nonfiction writer working from home on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, on Vancouver Island, Canada. Find out more about S.B. Julian in her interview about her published piece, *Women Who Made the Word*. S.B. Julian invites you to visit her on the web at www.overleafbooks.blogspot.com

A. Lawler is originally from Texas (however now living in New Mexico). A enjoys tarot cards, poetry, axe-throwing.

Reed Martin Miller resides in Seagoville, Texas with his beautiful wife, precious and precocious daughter, along with a small herd of dogs, cats and chickens. He vacations within the pages of *Goodkind*, *Jordan and King* while also finding time to keep the air cool, the lights burning and water flowing at The University of Dallas Facilities Dept. He is still looking for the perfect turn of phrase, and avoiding sanity as much as possible.

Aaron Sommers is a writer and teacher. His short stories have been published by *The Emerson Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, and *The Olive Tree Review*, among others. You can read more about him over at aaronsonnners.com or follow him via Twitter (if that's your thing) @aaronsonnners. He lives in New Hampshire, where he's polishing his first novel, in a house set deep in the woods and on the more inaccessible side of a mountain.