



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy

Issue #147 • May. 15, 2014

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WE, AS ONE, TRAILING EMBERS

by E. Catherine Tobler

We two live as one, but also as two when we are able. When night deepens and the park grounds grow quiet, we can let everything else fall away. When night deepens, we each close our eyes and pretend the same thing: we are a single being, we are alone in our body, we make every choice on our own, for our singular self. We pretend there is but one torso rising from this pelvis, only one head and only one heart. There is not another arm or wing to find our selves entangled in, nor another set of our eyes staring at us. In the darkness, there is only one.

With eyes closed, there is a singular heartbeat, a solitary pulse, and when we stretch, there is no we. We becomes a miraculous “I,” and I drift in this place, alone but not lonely. I don’t know what lonely is or could be; it is not a thing we—it is not a thing *I* know. There is always another, but for here in the quiet dark. Still, I must be careful; if I stretch the wrong way or try to turn over, I am instantly drawn back into the “we” that I actually am. I never sleep on my side, on my belly.

If I wake first, I keep quiet. I listen to the soft breathing at my side and try to match it. Breath for breath, I can hide and pretend the *we* is still an *I*. Still a *me*. But soon enough this illusion is broken; there is a deeper breath, a waking breath, a breath that says “I am back and we are *us* once more.”

Hazel eyes look upon hazel eyes, and that mouth with its morning-dry lips curls in a smile of good morning. Sleep-warm arms and wings tangle together and we cannot help but burrow closer. Morning was once awful, returning from wherever sleep carried us, coming back to the knowledge of this body, this world. We spend these first moments entangled; it will be all right, no matter what, say these slow caresses. We bend mouths to chests, to foreheads, echoing kisses dropped elsewhere.

These soft touches lead to harder and we come together every time; we share everything from the navel down, there is no way to not share such intimacies. We still marvel at it, two minds sharing an identical physical sensation at the exact same instant; two minds momentarily obliterated by the most intense thing we have known. Until—

* * *

There is a man—Mister Hoyt—who would cut us apart.

Mister Hoyt has created the finest freaks within the walls of Dreamland, but we who travel with Jackson’s Unreal Circus

and Mobile Marmalade are new to him, made by means other than his hands. We have been on display in the carnival park the entire spring, a limited engagement before our circus train moves on again. Mister Hoyt comes once every week, to study us. He wears a suit of wool no matter the weather, one fine-fingered hand clasped above his heart. Of his other hand, there is no sign; this suit sleeve hangs empty. He watches us with glassy eyes that narrow with unfulfilled interest. He studies us because we are not a thing that has been made by any human hand.

We are displayed on an elevated turntable, in broad daylight. Long have visitors to the carnival claimed there is trickery involved, especially when we were displayed within a tent at night, but these assertions were put to quick death when Jackson moved us outside; even Mister Hoyt stopped saying we had been sewn together—he can not stop looking at us, longing for us. No one seems to mind the heat of the sun or the stench of tar and the buzz of saws against lengths of lumber from renovations deeper in the park; they brave most anything to look at us.

The turntable is three feet around, enough to hold us and whatever Jackson means to display us with. Once he assembled a collection of taxidermied two-faced cats at our feet, mounded so high they constantly spilled over the edge; once it was a

school of Fiji mermaids dangling on silver wires. They moved as we moved, nauseating in effect. Usually, as now, it is the frame of a cheval glass, within which we stand. Beneath the table, well-muscled dwarfs walk in countless circles to turn us about.

Smoke and mirrors is what they said early on, encouraged by Mister Hoyt, so that others would come see Hoyt's creations rather than Jackson's. Now, Jackson plays up the notion of mirrors, because at first glance, one cannot help but think we are a reflection. Today, flawless Beauty's reflection is that of Beast, while withered Beast gazes upon Beauty with an endless hunger. Only we and Jackson know the truth of it: we are each Beauty and we are each Beast. Only by taking turns can we find the space to breathe and live.

They watch, captivated. Park visitors pay their coin and gather around our turning base, and watch as we rotate through the afternoon. It is summer now and the unbroken sunshine turns our wings to silver and gold. If you know where to look, you can see where we are shaded blue with quiet blood and sometimes the orange of a rousing blush. These hues are secret to most; had by others for another coin.

In the sunshine, only silver and gold, only Beauty and Beast. (Jackson once twined us inside rose vines sharp with thorns; there was a single rose, dark as heart's blood, held in

the cleft of our waist, this for visitors to discover as we turned and turned.) We lift our hands—two without flaw, two withering down to bone—to the heat of the sun, allowing beaded sweat to run down our adjoined torsos. Within that hollow, sweat collects, then rivers down shared belly, shared legs. Some ladies cannot bear the sight—it is reflection only, one man reassures his wife as she turns her face away; she peeks from the safety of his shoulder, but she sees. In her eyes, we see that she understands.

She knows that this is one body, imperfectly and improperly made. She cannot tell if we are male or female, cannot know the flesh that lurks beneath the strip of silk that wraps our waist. She cannot judge by the fall of straight ginger hair, or the four hazel eyes which evenly regard her in return. But she can believe that in the making of us someone made a terrible error. We should have come from the womb separate, yet did not. Our mother, merely flesh and bone they say, was cut open so that we might live. But we think we came from the heavens. We remember a space without space, a world without end. Amen.

Later, this woman comes to our tent, this lady who could not look at us under the clear daylight. In the tent, the air is warm and occluded by the haze of cigars, cigarettes. Men have come, looked, gone, but the lady, she lingers, and without her

husband she eyes us with more interest. We bow our heads and say nothing. Here, we cannot yet speak.

Jackson who owns the circus is quick to slither up to her, to stroke a rough hand over the fall of our ginger hair and tell the lady she can have us. Anything here might be had, enjoyed, consumed. We watch her with a kind of hunger, saliva on a tongue, ready to dissolve that pink mouth should it come near enough. Jackson makes his deal, a whisper of paper money between palms, and we guide the lady deeper into the tent. The things we do are not for others' eyes.

Here, the air feels cooler, the striped canvas covered in the fragmented shade of a tree outside. Here, we lead the lady into a room, where she sits upon a chair of padded velvet; she's surprised at this chair, this small piece of civilization amid the freaks. Nervous laughter accompanies this word; she doesn't apologize. She smooths her sweaty hands over her dress, over thighs and silken stockings. We watch these hands and her face in the same instant; she radiates want and curiosity, no longer the shame and fear she displayed outside.

We come to stand before her, nudging her knees open with ours. This bold approach surprises her; she sits straighter, drawing her spine in, her breasts out. Where her stockings end, we see the marks upon her, the scars of cigarettes pressed into skin. When we study these, there comes a sharp intake of

breath from her. She paid for us, but her touch is slow to come, tentative. She touches a wrinkled arm and our eyes close. The world reduces to a pinprick; in the dark, I am singular, solitary. There is only she and me, the stutter of her damp fingers down my bare arm and then across our belly. This shared sensation is agony, pleasure and pain both because it is not wholly mine, yet within in this communal knowledge there is a doubling of want, of need.

“Which of you is Idalmis?” she asks. Her breath is a warm flutter above the silk that still wraps our waist.

“We are,” we say together, two separate voices that are of a melody together; contralto and baritone.

The woman doesn't know what to do with this information; that while we have two torsos, we have but one name between us. She looks from one to the other, and it's not confusion that crosses her features but determination.

Always give them what they pay for, Jackson has told us. They pay for our time, our attention, for the feel of four hands upon flesh. She has touched us, so now we touch her, fingers withered and not plucking at her cotton dress the way she plucks at the silk which hides our secrets away. And then, this silk comes away, and she sees how we are made, and she slides from that civilized velvet chair and takes our soft flesh into her pink mouth, and the world washes away.

We both feel that mouth and ride it to its inevitable end. Dead end, cul-de-sac, the place where all curls into a tight ball before it springs loose once more. And then, we've our hands in her hair; four hands and her eyes slit shut and she's riding her own wave, toward another dead end, an end she never sees coming. Beauty, wanting to be kind but unable, slides fingers into the woman's gaping mouth and pulls against teeth. Beast can only watch as the body comes apart—withered hands are not strong enough for this violence, withered hands cannot satiate this hunger. Fragmenting flesh blooms like flowers and is eaten petal by petal. Beast eats alone, but Beauty knows the pleasure of this moment even if Beauty cannot partake. Later, Beauty will drink cold white milk and steal bananas from the monkeys; Beauty will peel three bananas and lay them upon our thigh, eating each with five precise bites.

When all is done and the woman's skin is but a husk we toss into a back room, we clean each other in the shaded tent and step back outside to find Jackson with the lady's husband. He stands so tall in the afternoon sun, his shoulders broad. His hands look as soft as his wife's. Is he looking for her? Oh, no. He is looking for Idalmis, and after paper money whispers between palms we lead him into our tent. He smells like the cigarettes he once pressed into his wife's thighs.

* * *

Jackson knows our ways and never speaks of them—everyone hungers after all—not until he comes to our room and tells us the complication. The man was of the law, he tells us, and was looking for us, to question us about a body in New York. There will be others, when they realize he is gone.

There is no horror at this revelation—in Santa Fe, we consumed a priest, and there came others seeking to learn what had become of him. Jackson is not alarmed; there is a glint in his eye because he knows if there is trouble, Beast will swallow it away. Jackson's hands slide over our hair, the lines of our jaws, the bare expanse of our chests. We lean closer to him; he smells like the underbelly of a rotten house and we have no desire to eat him. But the praiseful stroking is pleasant and when he touches our wings with sure fingers, we shudder. He leaves us in our room, warned and ready for those who will come.

We know that in some places, people store food for times of famine. We have been unable to do this, travelling as the circus does on a train. Our time on this eastern coast will be limited—this carnival park is filled with freaks, and we are a special attraction. We are a limited-time offering; a thing glimpsed and then gone. We have no way to keep those who will come for later. Beast must suffer the gluttony.

* * *

At night, hundreds of clear lights illuminate the park, burning like miniature suns affixed to immobile poles. At night, we wander. Everyone stares, thinking this attention goes unseen under cover of darkness.

Mister Hoyt shadows us as we make our way; he carries with him a sweet scent that we know all too well, the scent of fresh meat, and we wonder who and what he has cut apart and created today. We look for him, expecting to find our selves reflected yet again in his glassy eyes, but he keeps well to the shadows tonight and we cannot pick his from among them.

Young boys trail more obviously in our wake, attempting to tread upon our wings which, when we want them to, trail upon the ground. Wing-tips flicker just out of foot's reach, frustrating the boys to no end. They leap closer; the wing tips flick away, saying no and no and in fact never. Eventually, they give up, standing angry in the middle of the paved street between tents, watching as we vanish into the crowds. A harpy, they decide. An angel, whispers a small girl who passes by on bare feet and vanishes much the way we did.

This park has become home, though it is transient. All things are, in the end. We wander without fear, watching the other freaks and ferals as we often watch our selves. Fire, steel, blood, each of these things is consumed the way others would eat fruit, steak, berries. Nothing is surprising—not even the

entire building that houses infants in small boxes that are said to grow them into properly sized people—though everything is captivating. Beast is calmed by the idea that there are such things in the world; Beauty clasps her hands together and frets until Beast unhinges them and holds one.

Beauty wants so much to be good, as good as the little girl who sits within a locked cage. Her mouth gleams with a thousand needle teeth, hands more like talons, but how this girl sits! Legs tucked beneath her, crossed at the ankles. Spine straight. There is no sign of the scale which runs a river down her belly and between her legs; a dress of white lace wraps her up perfectly. She folds her hands into her lap and keeps her teeth behind her lips even when she smiles. Beauty wants to be *this* magical thing, this animal reined in, trained, without flaw.

Beast wants so much to be awful, to unlock the cage and let the little girl tear her dress to shreds. The gleaming teeth should be shown to the world—people should count them and tremble; the talons should be unsheathed and used to tear the world asunder. The scale which brands her skin should be allowed to breathe under open sky; how it must look running with the river's waters, with the sun's light. That dress should be trampled in mud, until it is brown, earthen, gone.

Beast holds Beauty's hand, and in that heated whisper (please oh please) Beauty hears a thing she cannot deny.

Beauty will break open all the things, if only it will silence
Beast.

* * *

There is no silence. Even in the dark with my eyes closed, I can hear the breath. I breathe in and out and match that rhythm, yet realize what I am doing. There comes a point when I can no longer separate me from the we, and there comes the night when Beauty cannot separate the need to be good from Beast's need to devour. One seems inherently like the other.

We stand upon our turntable, under the warm sunlight. Today we wear white, not because we feel pure but because we wish we were. There is too much blood between us and Beauty says we must stop. But Beast demands.

Mister Hoyt watches us; we see snatches of our selves within his ceaseless glassy gaze as we turn and turn. His expression is furrowed today; there is a line which runs alongside his nose between his eyes, like a dry river waiting to be filled. We cannot tell if this is a frown, a scar, a line drawn with an ink pencil. We see a similar line beneath his jaw. He becomes a puzzle, fitted together in ways we do not yet understand.

Today we turn amid a thousand paper stars. Beth, who helps keep the circus fed with her sweet marmalades and warm breads, folded them with her clever hands as the train made its

journey to this eastern shore. She said this star is what was, this star is what will be, and this star is the future none can know. We cannot have that future, because it's in the future; we want it now because we are a greedy heart, but it cannot be had. This is why we call it the future; this is why it is always now and never then.

We close our eyes and listen to the rattle of the paper stars as we move through them. Today, we have a mirror made to look like a nebula, painted with whorls of acrylic and oils; these colors begin to run down the white silk we wear, painting patterns of their own accord. We close our eyes and lift our arms and never find our selves entangled within the strings that suspend the stars; we are fluid and like them, distant, removed, something that can be observed but never possessed.

They all want to possess. One man steps past Mister Hoyt and reaches for us, touches the hem of our silk drape. Before he can get closer, before those sausage-fingers can wrap our ankle, he is pushed back into the crowd by our tender. We watch this man; he edges closer again and we bow our heads to get a better look. His eyes are black as pitch; his teeth stained from cigars. His fingers are coarse and stick to the white silk, his head bald and sprinkled with sweat within which we see the globe of the sun, the arc of the sky. There are no clouds.

He wears a gun under his jacket, strapped to him with brown leather. Our fingers long to slide under that leather holster, ease it off and know the tacky feel of his shirt. We suspect within his pocket we would find a badge, and when at last he comes to our tent to solicit our private favors indeed we do find a badge and indeed his shirt is tacky with sweat, with warmth.

“Need to ask you about a man and his wife,” he says, and we don’t know who put him on our trail, because who was there to tell? Someone—Mister Hoyt, ever lurking?—saw the man and his wife, watched them enter our tent and never exit. We make a low sound, something closer to a purr than a hum, and our fingers slide down his shirt buttons, steadily opening each. We cannot say where anyone goes once they leave this place. Beauty wavers. Beast breaks the last button. It flies toward the tent wall, and ricochets off to then furrow into the dirt floor like a bullet.

“We did not—”

Beast covers Beauty’s mouth with a thin hand. Beauty’s eyes meet Beast’s, and then we look at the man before us. He doesn’t look wary but drugged, like every other who comes to our tent; he is impossibly intrigued at the sight of us, wants to know what lies beneath our paint-stained silk. Wants to know how our breast curves and whether we are concave or convex in

all the proper places. His mouth says either is fine, divine, sublime. Whenever anyone looks into our eyes, they fall through the brown and the gold and land in the black.

“We did not.”

These are the only words, lies though they are. Beauty carries a plea with every glance, but Beast cannot obey. Beast must suffer the gluttony

There are but two hands participating in this destruction, weakened yet resolute; Beauty caves inward while Beast gorges. *We need to stop; we cannot stop. We need to find another way; for us this is the only way. We need to stop. We cannot stop. Perhaps you need to stop, but you are not you; you are we, and we are starving.*

* * *

We fold his shirt and set the holster atop it when we are done. The shirt is dried of sweat now, crisp, and the gun smells like oil. His skin pools on the ground like empty trousers. We lick the blood from each other, slow like we are waking up and the carnival stands around us in silence. In truth, there is a tremor of sound just beyond the canvas walls. So too there is a small shadow. An eye peering through a tattered hole. Our breaths catch.

The old canvas tears easily beneath our hands, no talons required. Like the girl in her lace, we are unleashed from the

tent's confines, streaking after the small form who flees, who saw too much. Its small feet stutter across the ground behind the tents, but then we have scooped it—her—into our four-arm embrace and she shrieks. This terrible sound vanishes beneath our mouths—Beauty has no hunger but knows that this secret cannot escape. We swallow ragged mouthfuls till we choke, till blood streams our chins, splatters our chests. Everywhere, we are flushed red with terror and anger and so too lust. It is a momentary glimpse of a hunt, a life we perhaps lived before we were bound into this shared flesh.

We destroy, consume, and cough it all back into the grass. When done, there is nothing left that resembles the young child who peered through tattered canvas. Perhaps five strips of skin splay as a hand might have, but no—no, we will not see that. There are only our shaking hands, fluttering wings, and a screech flying from our mouths. What have we done? Not what we must. Beauty pulls, claws, pummels, but cannot escape Beast.

* * *

In the warm dark, at last we rest. We do not touch; we lay as still as we are able, arms crossed over chests, wings carefully folded beneath. There is one breath, because one other is held. Lungs flutter still; body waits, poised. And then a hand across a belly. Breath comes once more. Hitched this time, unmatched.

Fingers slide down shared belly, between shared legs, and curl. Soft, as if saying come on come on. Beauty wants to go, wants to come undone, and Beast refuses, but in the end, cannot. In the dark, there is a gasp. Ours, as it ever was.

* * *

We twist amid a forest made of shining metal willows today, hand-cut by Foster, who always smells of metal, of money and train tracks. Mister Hoyt has returned to watch us. He talks to us today as the crowd is thinner, less interested. His interest never wavers.

It is a simple severing, he says, and he gestures as men of the world do (with prejudice, with agency, with insistence), to the juncture between us, where waist dips into waist. Mister Hoyt wants to break us as he might a cracker, easily in two as if we were never one. We have but two legs, we remind him, and he dismisses this with a wave. One of you shall have the legs, and one of you shall have a construct. This is disagreeable, we tell him, and he gestures to the valley between our legs, eyes narrowing as the silk which wraps us folds and bulges by turn. *This* is disagreeable, he tells us. This is us, we tell him, and we vanish behind trailing metal leaves to emerge a moment later, wings unfurled. He steps back, cowed. The small crowd murmurs in wonder. Can we fly, they always want to know.

We tried in our distant youth to rocket our selves into the sky. We fell more than once. We tried from the ground, from a cliff, from the very tree tops. We bruised elbows, knees, wings. If I severed you, he tells us as we circle more trees, you could fly. But we would never be whole, we say, and our hands slide down our chests, across metal tree trunks and shining leaves, to make each shimmer. False tree, faux angel, he watches us and wants to break us. When he offers Jackson double for our time, Jackson does not deny him. We are beautiful and beastly and why shouldn't he receive double every time?

“Jabberwock,” Mister Hoyt calls us when he circles us within our tent, as if he can still figure out how we are made, how we have been joined into one imperfect flesh. The lines upon his face seem eased today, but are there in memory. “Hell needs its angels, too.”

His hands are fine and strong and they slide over our arms, over the braided confines of our hair. His fingers dig into Beauty, to send ginger hair spilling. He doesn't spill Beast, and later, when Hoyt is bent and broken upon the ground, Beast's single braid that flips down a bare shoulder gives him a handhold; Hoyt clings, pulls, until his hand spasms and opens, until it goes limp as the rest of him.

“Twas brillig,” we tell him.

We gyre and gimble, streaking the canvas walls with blood in our haste.

* * *

Park officials notice when Mister Hoyt goes missing—Hoyt was one of their finest fleshcrafters, they say; he would not simply leave without word when he had done such quality work within the carnival park's walls. The three-legged burlesque dancer; the bearded hippopotamus, the man whose every finger and toe tells the time in a different country, the miniature lady (aged twenty-seven) who can sleep in a teacup!

They question Jackson, ask of his company of freaks. Jackson is all cool denial despite the warmth of the day. The air carries with it the scent of tar; Mister Hoyt's new exhibit is close to finished, a place where people can ride boats through Hell itself and laugh at having escaped afterward. Hoyt wanted us to be a demon, the officials say; he came for us, they say, and now he cannot be found.

Once they have gone, Jackson comes again. It was never a problem, Beast's appetite, until we found our selves in this stagnant place, this world within a world, he says. Before, the train would come and go and our performances were fleeting, but now that we are the main attraction that people flock to, our beautifully strange ways are more closely observed.

Jackson will never, he says, lose us, let us go, abandon us, leave us behind, kick us out, but here—

he leans in, pulls our mouths close, and kisses us hard, his tongue forked between our lips

—here, he says, we must be more careful. We cannot do what we naturally must. In his eyes, we see all things: we see the train stretching ever out, across this land and others we do not understand; we see Jackson alone and surrounded, we see him bent and broken and young and tall; we see him leaving us (oh he said he would never) and we see our selves flying. You can fly if you show patience, he tells us.

Patience is not our gift.

* * *

We go to Mister Hoyt's Hell Gate because we cannot resist knowing. We walk through the illuminated buildings and into the dense red glow that beckons from the park's center. These bulbs have been coated in red paint and it throws everything, including us, into a strange glow. This building is larger than we guessed it would be, but then the underworld is large, vast. It must be, to hold all the dead. Its entrance is a yawning arch like a mouth, with a river instead of a tongue within; there are small boats to tightly hold two through Hell's journey. The air smells heavily of pitch here and the lights sizzle with warmth in the night's cool air.

Within the mouth of the gate into the underworld, we see the child. The child who watched us through the tent's canvas. Something lurches inside us, for this is impossible—the dead do not come back, no matter what stories say. Yet here stands this child, reassembled with clumsy hands; her leftover skin shows the trespass of not needle and thread but the imprint of broad, strong fingers. Behind her looms Hoyt, the lady and the lawman, and countless others. These dead have been remade.

Mister Hoyt does not wear his woolen suit tonight but stands before us naked, his skin a riot of lines that mark the passage of hands, blades, magic. Within this body, we see our selves: a being that is not necessarily male or female, a being that has been severed in two—the way he would have done us. A simple severing; we can hear the words echoed as his fine fingers stroke over the line that mars his hip, the line that once dipped into a separate waist. Behind him, we see that there had always been two. Here stands the other Mister Hoyt, the part he cut away, rising from hips and legs that have been constructed of abandoned skins, bones, lashed metal.

Beauty wants so much to be good.

Beast wants so much to be bad.

We dig our feet into the ground, and from our center we pull—we pulled this way in our youth, trying in vain to part our selves. It is no easier nor more possible now. We are a solid

flesh, a thing that cannot be parted no matter how we think we wish it. One would have legs and one would have a construct, and this is as disagreeable as the Hoyts who stand before us. We approach him and our feet print the ground; the grass has not grown because of the construction; there is soft dirt and stones and the debris of building this Hell Gate.

The little girl fashioned from her leftover skin bolts at the sight of us. She screams and flees into Hell and the lady with her cigarette-burned thighs follows. The men regard us with even stares, but though dead their eyes have not lost the sheen of lust for whatever it is we are. Angel or demon, perhaps we are not a thing to be named, all desires being equal in the warm dark. Even so, they withdraw, leaving only the Hoyts before us. The mister we have known smiles, mouth slightly crooked from however he has been pressed back together. He extends his hands to us; they are strong still but coated in blood and tattered flesh, the signs of his trade. Sometimes, he says, a thing must be sacrificed so it may properly live.

And who deems *proper*? we wonder. Mister Hoyt smiles again and lunges. Hell will have its angels—or its demons. Fine lines and distinctions, things we have never drawn but others always do. We turn our shoulder to him and our broad wings catch the brunt of his impact. Though these wings have never carried us into the sky, they are strong and living and bear him

backward, toward the river which snakes from the mouth of Hell. His severed twin cannot move quickly at all; this Hoyt mewls pitifully as we stride past. This is what he would make of us? How he would separate and reduce?

We are accustomed to working quickly, within the shadows. We are accustomed to silencing our prey so that none come running, and we are upon Mister Hoyt before he can cry out. But Hoyt has been remade by his own hands—be they his own or his twin's. His crafted flesh is a thing we do not understand, for it comes apart beneath us. He seems many creatures in one, leftovers bound into a whole; they part, they scamper, they reassemble deeper along the river's path. We pursue the gleaming trails in the red light, the twin's mewling growing ever more distant.

Deeper, the halls smell of sulfur and of the hot glow of the glass lights. Mister Hoyt sucks himself back together and flees deeper into Hell's ever-branching caverns. He keeps to the illuminated river bank, the freshly-sealed channel below ready to be flooded by the Styx. It is here, when he turns to gauge our distance in pursuit, that his remade body staggers into a row of lighted bulbs.

The glass shatters and there is a brilliant flare as filaments and shards rain into the fresh tar. There need be only a single spark—the tar comes to quick fiery life. The fire is faster than

us or Hoyt; his newly crafted skin browns under the heat as though he is made of bread. The fire appreciates the lines which mark him, running like water to fill every empty valley.

The burning Mister Hoyt lurches into our arms, begging. While he pulled himself apart moments before, the fire seems to be fusing his flesh into a solid lump, now incapable of escape. His tongue can barely form words before a snake of fire slides into the open hollow of his mouth. He tries to turn toward the river, to fling himself into its watery salvation but there is no water to be had, nor salvation in Hell. We hold him even as the flames stretch covetous fingers toward our wings. No, we tell him, and while Beauty sobs, Beast roars.

Bit by bit, we feel our selves becoming ash. Small pieces of us lift into the inferno: skin, wings, a string of freckles once tongue-traced in the early morning quiet. Around us, the fire spreads along every fresh line of tar in the hollow of the river channels, deeper through the caverns like some far-ranging sea creature that will devour all in its path. These arms of flame surge through the entire park, to ignite buildings, trees, tents. We can hear the screams and they sound so distant, but they are our own as the flames wrap us the way silk once did. They curl around our shoulders, our waist, to lick the cleft between, and tell us that sometimes a thing must die before it can live.

Beauty arches under the heat and tries to pull away. Beast crisps up, ephemeral dough, unable to pull with arms so withered. A simple severing, so simple, yet Beauty grasps a wasted hand that grasps in return, and pulls. Pulls us upward out of Hell and into the ashy air where we, as one trailing embers, fly.

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HERE BE MONSTERS

by Carrie Patel

The flare gun is cold in my hands. I can't shake the feeling that the little rocket inside is slowly dying.

Each day I watch the horizon, and each night I watch the stars. They can tell you a lot if you know how to read them: where you are in the world, how long you've been there.

When the abysse are coming.

The island I ended up on isn't much different from the ocean that stranded me. Blue waves roll on one side and grassy dunes on the other.

I built a shelter near the beach from some of the crates that washed ashore with me. It's amazing how quickly the sun works. The outer portion of the hut is already bleached, and it's been less than a month. Some of the crates are still filled with musket parts and mercury tablets, the freight we were carrying when the ship sank. Priceless stuff on the Ottoman front, but I'd kill for just a few more boxes of rations instead.

At least thirst won't kill me. There's a freshwater spring half a mile inland.

The remaining rations are in a box buried in the corner of my hut. I have seven left—I must have counted a dozen times before I hid them—but it helps not to look at them every day.

Especially when I should be watching the horizon.

You can recognize an abyssus by the shape of the water, but by then it's too late. There's a depression on the surface of the sea, as if something is sucking it down. Then the waters part, and whatever was unfortunate enough to get caught in the middle disappears beneath churning waves.

Being on the water when an abyssus arrives is a mercy. Whole vessels are crushed with a swift, natural economy that no manmade war machine can match. It's much worse to be caught on land. The beast will venture ashore at night in pursuit of fire and prey, but like any creature lured out of its habitat, it becomes desperate and unpredictable.

That's why I've been watching the stars. Just as abyssis suck the water from the ocean, they drain light from the night sky. The stars fade in their path, and by the time one is upon you, the whole sky is velvet black.

The only thing worse than knowing an abyssus is coming is having no idea. The sky has been cloudy for six nights now.

I watched the flat line of the sea again today. My clipper went down some fifty miles from Lisbon, so I've seen ships for the last three weeks, too far away to be anything more than

ants crawling across the bar of the horizon, and definitely too far to guarantee they'd see my flare in broad daylight. Today was the first day there were none.

With the seventh overcast night upon me, I'm beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be easiest to put the flare gun to my head.

I'm fixated on this thought, and on the feel of the cool brass in my hands, and the sand between my toes, when I hear a shuffling noise. I lean toward the edge of the hut and hold my breath until I'm sure of it. There's someone coming along the beach toward me.

I peer into the darkness, but it's useless. Between the breaking waves, though, the shuffling is getting louder. The stranger, whoever it is, is close. My grip tightens around the flare gun.

Finally, I call into the darkness. "Who's there?"

The voice that returns to me is hoarse and cracked. "A fellow survivor, seeking shelter." He doesn't mention food. If it hadn't been three days since I opened my last ration, I'd be more ashamed of that thought.

He speaks again, and now he's close enough for me to hear the ragged breaths between his words. "Mind if I join you? It's your beach, after all."

If I hadn't thought of it as my beach, it's only because I'd thought of the entire island as mine. Still, what can I say? "Of course."

Suddenly, I want to see this stranger who will be sharing my shelter. I tuck the flare gun into my waistband and pull out my cap lighter. The lid slides away with a clink, and I hear the stranger tense.

"What's that?" he asks.

"The gift of fire."

"Don't be stupid. It's full dark," he says between his teeth.

But the unreality of seeing another person makes the peril of abyss seem silly and distant. As I strike the flame, I say, "Tell me how you ended—"

"No!" A ragged cry rips from his throat, and he pounces on me, swatting the lighter out of my grasp. We tumble onto the sand, and after rolling around together, my hands trying to push him away and his easily circling my wrists, he has me pinned. He is surprisingly heavy, and his nimble bulk makes me feel wasted and powerless.

"You fool!" He speaks in a rasping whisper that sounds painful. "Have you gone mad? Do you want to bring them upon us?"

"Calm down."

“They’re already close.” Every sailor, and every man, woman, and child at a port town, knows to douse the lights at sundown. Even the Russian War doesn’t reach the coast, and enemy ships pass at sea without incident.

I squirm, hoping he’ll relax his grip and move off me. “How do you know?”

“How do you think I ended up here? They wrecked my ship.”

“What do you mean, ‘they’? You saw more than one?”

“I saw the maelstroms. At least three or four, but I didn’t stop to count.”

His knees weigh on my thighs like stones. I wrench a wrist from his grasp and push against his chest. “That’s impossible,” I say. “Nobody’s ever seen more than one at a time.”

He slides onto the sand next to me. “Tell that to my shipmates.”

I sigh. There’s no point in arguing about it right now, and having a conversation with a stranger in the dark feels too much like talking to myself. “What do you suggest?”

“Hunker down for the night, get some rest, and keep the lights off.”

I sit up, brushing the sand from my shirt. Something feels wrong. It takes me a moment to register the lightness, but when I do, it stops the breath in my throat.

The flare gun is gone.

I pat the sand around me, feeling nothing but the cool grains between my fingers.

My companion shifts away. “Something wrong?” Unease colors his voice.

“Nothing.” My head is swiveling around the beach even though it’s too dark to see anything. “It’s nothing.”

We feel our way back to the hut. He follows a couple yards behind, giving me space after our scuffle.

But why should he be afraid? He’s the one who attacked me. I should be afraid of him.

Unless he has something that belongs to me.

Ridiculous. I felt his hands on mine almost the whole time we were down. It’s lying somewhere on the beach, and I’ll be able to find it in the morning.

I’ll just have to make sure I’m up first.

* * *

The surreal thing about total darkness is that the line between sleep and wakefulness is almost invisible. It becomes difficult to tell when your eyes are closed and whether the rushing in your ears is the sound of waves or the static of dreams.

I crack my eyes open, and morning light spills in like a yolk from an eggshell. I’m alone, and I begin to wonder if the

stranger from last night was a dream until I look around the hut and realize that the flare gun is still missing.

I stagger out of my shelter and in the direction of last night's fight. It's impossible to tell exactly where we were, and it's hard to distinguish the ripples and crests in the sand from tracks. The crawl back to the hut last night didn't feel that far, but I don't see my gun anywhere. Taking deep breaths, I start walking a wide circle around this side of the beach and slowly spiral inward, dragging my feet through the sand. It might have gotten buried in the night.

I reach the center of my spiral with nothing to show for my efforts but a vague trail in the sand. A salty breeze ripples through my hair, and I look up and down the beach again. Could it be farther out? I was sure we'd fallen on the leeward side of the hut.

A voice calls out from the other end of the beach. I look back and see a man walking toward me. He looks up but doesn't acknowledge me.

We meet at the hut, and I'm surprised and relieved to see that my stranger actually exists.

He smiles in a way that shows too many teeth. "I would have woken you if I'd known you wanted to walk." He looks over my shoulder, still smiling insipidly. He sounds bored and

indulgent, like someone offering to let his kid brother help chop firewood. “Oh, I found something while I was out.”

He reaches into his pocket and I draw a shallow breath. But what he presents to me in the flat palm of one hand is only my lighter.

I feel my lips stretch themselves into a rigid smile as I take it. “I was missing that,” I say. “Where did you find it?”

“Just down there,” he says, pointing at the tract of beach that I’d just searched. “Saw the edge sticking out of the sand.”

“How fortunate.” I look at his face for what seems like the first time. He’s about average height, average build. A little on the skinny side—like he hasn’t had a proper meal in weeks. He’s got a ragged, unkempt beard, and his hair has been starched and tangled by the salty winds. The sun-burnished glow on his skin makes his eyes look bright and a little mad. There’s something blandly familiar about him that I can’t place until I figure that he looks a little like me, or the way I expect I’d look after a few weeks on the rough.

It takes me a moment to form words. “You didn’t happen to find anything else out there, did you?”

He cracks that grin again. “Like that lifeboat over yonder? If I’d found something like that, I’d be long gone by now.” He laughs, and several seconds pass before I realize that he’s joking with me, and I laugh along. Still, I can’t help but look

over his shoulder, hoping to see in his tracks how far he's walked this morning.

Far enough that I didn't see him when I first woke up.

He shields his eyes with one hand and looks at the sky. "We should try to stay in the shade. Keep ourselves from getting dehydrated." I follow him back to the hut.

We sit on opposite ends of the hut and begin the day's vigil. No ships yet.

I tuck my heels under my thighs. "So," I ask, "what brought you here?"

"We were shipwrecked a week ago." He gestures at the back of the hut and the portion of the island beyond it. "On the other side. We were just in sight of the island when we went down."

"Supply clipper?" He sounds English, but the war has bred enough profiteers that he could be working for anyone. Not that it matters out here.

"No. One of the new ironclads. Fat lot of good it did." Evading the abyss with speed versus surviving them by strength is the fashionable shipyard debate. What no one seems ready to admit is that neither matters more than luck.

"What about the rest of your crew?"

He shakes his head. "I'm lucky I made it. I must have coasted in with the tide that night." His fingers trace a pattern

in the sand. “Anyway, I walked around, and I finally caught sight of your camp in the distance yesterday. I guess I was hoping for some good news or something, I don’t know.”

“Something like that lifeboat you mentioned?”

His eyes crinkle at the edges. “That would be a start. Anyway, you seemed to be set up well enough.” And there it is again, the question of food, hanging between us like a silent accusation.

“Were you able to salvage anything from your wreck?” I ask.

“Nothing but a couple barrels of pitch and some scrap wood made it to shore with me.”

I make a little *hmm* sound and stare at the sand between my knees.

The trouble is, I’ll need to eat soon.

He clears his throat as if sweeping our awkward evasions under the rug. “How’d you end up here? And what can I call you?”

I’m grateful for the change of topic. I extend my hand to the stranger and tell him my name.

“Lee,” he says in return.

“Huh. That was my father’s name.”

He takes my hand. His grip is firm, and he holds on a little too long. “You know what they say. Small world. Especially

when you're stuck on an island." With that, he laughs again, his over-large teeth and bright eyes flashing. "But back to your story."

"It started three weeks ago. We must have hit shoals, because we started going down. Seas weren't friendly, so it was just me and some of the cargo that made it here. Small arms and medicine, mostly."

"Mostly," he says, suddenly meeting my eyes.

I look away, thinking of my rations. I can feel the blush rising under my tan. "So, what was your ship doing out here?"

The corners of his mouth twitch into a smirk. "Scouting."

And now to hear which side of the war he's on. "For what?"

He leans forward, his arms resting on his knees. "Abyssis."

I jerk back, my hands flat on the sand as if I'm ready to spring. "You mean you went looking for those monsters?"

He nods.

"Why?"

He's still hunched forward, and he lowers his voice to a whisper. "We found a way to kill them."

"Bullshit."

"Anything can be killed."

"Not by people. Not those things."

He sits back, and his grin is maddeningly condescending. "How do you know?"

“How do you?” I’m on my feet now, pacing the tiny hut.
“Have you actually killed one?”

His smile withers at the corners. “This was our first attempt. It’s sound logic, though.”

“I’m an engineer. Everything looks good on paper.”

He shrugs, willing to leave me to my folly. But he’s watching me beneath hooded lids, and I’m taking the bait.

“How’s it work?” I cross my arms snugly against my chest.

He pauses and rolls his tongue, as if he has to think about this. “It’s not as complicated as you’d think. I hate to use the word ‘bait,’ but you need people to lure an abyssus close. Large livestock might work, too,” he says, looking thoughtful.

“What else?”

“The main thing you need is a light source. Not torches, though. They’ll follow torches, you know that, but you need something that’ll drive their blood up. Something bright and explosive.”

My mouth is dry. There is a tingling sensation on my skin and a distant ringing in my ears. “Such as?”

“Dynamite, obviously. That’s the best, if you have it on hand. Though waterlogging can be a problem.”

My teeth throb, and I have to force the words through my clenched jaw. “And... as an alternative?”

He laughs, and it's the sound a wild dog makes in the night. "I suppose you just have to improvise with whatever's lying around. Why, you have a suggestion?"

My vision is starting to swim. I need to eat something.

I sink to my knees, squeezing my eyes against the hunger and the nausea. "What happens after the explosion?"

He takes a slow, deep breath through his nose. "That's where it all gets a bit more theoretical."

I want to ask more. I also want to tell him to go to hell, to ask him what he did with my flare gun. But it's getting hard to think around the hunger headaches.

Lee leans in. "Everything alright? You don't look so good."

"I need water," I say, pushing myself to my feet.

"Stay. I saw the spring on my way here."

A bucket sits against one wall. Even as I cast my eyes down, they flit to the bucket. Without a word, he picks it up.

"I'll get it next time," I say, feeling a humiliating mixture of gratitude, shame, and hunger.

"Just get some rest." With that, he's on the beach and headed inland with loud, shuffling steps.

I wait until they've faded, and then I dig up my food stash in the corner. The hunger is just great enough to overpower everything else I feel about this stranger, this thief, walking a mile in the sun to bring me water.

I dig away just enough sand to expose the painted top of the old munitions box. My hands are trembling as I pry the lid off. It takes a little more effort than I'd remembered. I reach into the box, but something is wrong.

There are six rations.

I take them out of the box, count them, re-count them, rearrange them, and count them again. There are six. There were seven. I'm sure of it.

What I don't know is how the stranger could have found my food, much less taken any without my knowledge. I'm frozen like this for I don't know how long, kneeling over two identical rows of rations, when I hear a distant sound. Like birds. Whistling. My stranger is returning with the water, whistling.

I devour one of the rations with the speed that only the desperately hungry can muster. I replace the remaining five and cover the box again, as if it matters. By the time the stranger returns, I'm huddled against the wall, steeling myself against the stomach cramps.

He screws the bucket into the sand in the middle of the room and somehow manages to find a tin cup in one of the boxes stacked against the wall. As he fills it from the bucket and hands it to me, I'm so overcome with surprise at his solicitousness, and with the almost post-coital guilt and

sluggishness of my hurried meal, that I wonder how I could have been so suspicious of this man.

And then, he belches.

He stifles it, modestly, behind a hand, and he gives me the kind of sheepish grin that would seem natural at a dinner party.

But there it is between us, a mockery of my weakness and a taunting reminder of his ability to take what he wants from me.

And like a kicked dog, I bury my face in the cup and murmur thanks.

He settles back into the sand, sitting across from me. “Hard to believe you’ve made it on your own this long.”

“Only three weeks,” I say. “Men have survived longer.” It’s another unhappy reminder of my frailty.

But his eyebrows are raised, his lips pursed. “Three? How do you figure that?”

“I’ve been keeping track.”

He gives me a long, slow nod. The kind one gives to humor a child.

“Here,” I say, setting my cup in the sand, “why don’t I show you?”

“How about we just rest here.” He doesn’t meet my eye.

“I insist.”

I lead him around and to the back of the hut, a distance so short that it makes our mutual errand, and my purposeful stride, seem ridiculous. Some part of my mind registers that the scenery behind the hut has changed somehow, that boxes seem to be missing, but I'm too focused to give it thought. Leaning against the ramshackle wall is the lid from a wooden artillery crate. Twenty-two etched tally marks form a neat row along the top of the lid, and as my guest looks on, I add a twenty-third.

When I step back to allow him to count for himself, he favors me with an unreadable glance. He flips the wooden slab.

Short, scratched lines fill the other side of the lid. At the top, they begin in even, orderly rows, but progressing down, they degenerate into crooked, irregular scribbles.

The stranger sucks his teeth.

I'm speechless. I don't count the marks, but I know there are dozens of them. Well over two hundred, at least. I wander away from the board and look at the sea.

Lee follows, standing a few paces behind me. "If my plan works, we won't be here much longer." He gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. His hand is cold and moist, like a dead fish.

* * *

In the shade of the hut, I fall into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

When I awaken, night has fallen, and I can tell that I haven't moved. As I stare at the canvas roof of the hut, I take a deep, bracing breath. I hear crackling. I smell smoke.

Leaping to my feet, I dash out of the hut and behind it. Lee is standing there, a new bonfire at his feet and a sickening grin on his face.

"I was just wondering if you were going to get up before I had to burn the shack down."

He's started the fire with a heap of smashed crates and scrap, and he's feeding it from another pile next to him. I recognize my tally board among the sacrificial offerings.

Falling to my knees and digging like a dog, I fling handfuls of sand into the fire. Lee tackles me again, easily, and he's chuckling, but there's seriousness in his voice when he speaks.

"It's too late for that. Take it easy."

"You'll bring them here."

"I know."

"You'll kill us both." Even I can hear the hysteria creeping into my voice.

"Not if we burn it fast enough."

There's a frozen moment while my animal brain does the calculation. Then, I'm on my feet and ripping my shelter apart with all the strength in my atrophied arms.

We finish in minutes, and it's a grim reminder of how flimsy my makeshift home always was. By the time we've pulled the planks, crates, and canvas down, the fire is large enough for us to feed everything into it. Lee takes off running, and I follow him up the slope and to the edge of the grass. With the relative protection of distance and elevation, we turn back to observe our handiwork.

The bonfire is a beacon in the night, and I suddenly realize how long it's been since I've seen something burn like this. I also realize that I've just helped Lee destroy everything that has sustained me on this godforsaken island.

With a glance at my face—it's actually bright enough for us to see one another tonight—Lee seems to understand what I'm thinking, and he puts that cold-fish hand on my back again, just behind my neck.

"It's okay," he says.

I say nothing.

"I had to bring one close. I had to be sure. We only have one flare."

I look up at him. "My flare." It's a plea. I'm too stunned, and too feeble, for anything stronger.

He gives the nape of my neck a squeeze. "You've been sitting on that beach with the flare gun for the better part of a year. You were never going to work up the nerve to use it."

It's an assault on my manhood, and however powerless I've felt in the last twenty-four hours, it's a slap in the face to hear it from him.

"Besides," he says, "you were down to five rations. How much longer were you going to last, just waiting like this?"

I spin to face him, and he takes a step back, his eyes wide and surprised. My lips part in a snarl, and his hand flies to his hip, perhaps to a gun or a knife. I don't care. I prepare to spring.

Just then, there's an unholy roar, a noise like the earth splitting in two. And it is. The ground trembles beneath us, sending cascades of sand downhill. We look to the bonfire and watch as it's snuffed out like a candle, the rubble beneath it collapsing and sinking into the sand. Belatedly, I reflect that I should have dug up my remaining rations. Even though surviving the next sixty seconds is the real concern.

Then, the sand around the debris pile sinks, disappearing in a widening cone of destruction. As the disaster area stretches by five yards, twenty, then fifty, there's a sharp smell of sulfur in the air, and all we can see at our spot on the beach is a writhing sinkhole.

It's here.

What was a churning crater seconds ago erupts, raining sand on our heads. Despite myself, I shield my eyes with a

trembling hand and look up. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lee do the same.

The monster before me is so unnatural, so alien in its appearance that my eyes flicker and rove around the beast as I try to make sense of it. All I can discern at first is a gaping mouth the size of a schooner. The serpentine trunk rising from the sand is large enough to cleave an armored frigate in two. And that's just the portion of the abyssus I can see. A glow deep within the monster's belly lights up circular rows of teeth, each the size of a man. I am suddenly grateful that the beast is likely to crush us in a few merciful seconds.

The creature's long, sinuous trunk twists and flails like a worm pierced by a hook. It screams, a sound like warping metal, and shakes the sand from between its bark-like scales. Its mouth snaps closed for the briefest of moments, and the world goes dark. The abyssus has sucked the light from the full moon.

Its mouth opens again, pointed toward us as if seeking us. The rounded jaws pulse. There are no eyes on its knotted prehistoric head. I have read that many creatures of the deep are sightless, but I am sure it senses us.

I look at Lee just in time to see him point the flare gun inland.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving us a head start,” he says. He fires.

The abyssus shrieks, and even with my hands pressed over my ears, the noise tears a scream from my own throat. Heat washes over me in the furnace blast from the monster’s maw. It chases after the flare, the thrashes and jerks of its trunk aided by paddling appendages tipped with claws.

Lee grips my shoulder. I can’t hear much over the ringing in my ears and the earth-shaking rumble of the frantic creature, but his mouth moves in the long, wide syllables of a shout, and he points us away from the abyssus’s frenzied path. We run.

The abyssus is a faint glow over the hills behind us, and the way ahead is almost completely dark. Lee skids to a halt, and I bowl into him, knocking both of us into a heap of wood and scrap.

I feel something sticky and viscous on my arms, and I’m sure one of us is bleeding until a pungent smell hits my nose. Pitch. Lee’s face appears suddenly in the warm luster of a little flame. I recognize my lighter in his white-knuckled grip. He holds a split plank to the flame and tosses it into the pile.

As the blaze engulfs the mound, I consider pushing Lee into it.

I grab his arm and spin him round to face me. “What the hell are you doing?” I can feel that I’m shouting, but my voice still sounds muffled.

“Keep it chasing the fires!” he yells.

“How do you know it won’t chase us?”

He shrugs and waves his hands. Either he didn’t hear me or that’s his answer. Before I can repeat my question, I notice that our fire is suddenly, and strangely, dying.

Lee pushes me forward. “Run!”

We take off across the hills, in what I can only assume is the direction of the next fire. The ground shakes as the abyssus draws nearer, headed for the fire we’re leaving behind.

The glow appears behind the hills ahead of us and to the right. It’s getting brighter. Our path is set to cross the approaching monster. I push my legs harder.

When the abyssus bursts over the hill, it’s moving faster than I would have thought possible for something meant to live in the depths. Its flailing movements look frenzied and absurd, but its size and strength compensate for the inefficiency.

By the time we’re level with the abyssus it’s one hundred yards away and closing, leaping downhill. It roars again, and my right side tingles with the burst of heat. Lee pushes ahead, throwing himself into a sprint. No matter how hard I run, the tuft of hills ahead of us doesn’t seem to be getting any closer.

I hear and feel the beast's thumping progress, and I guess that it can't be more than fifty yards behind me. If it's going to come after us, it will change its course now.

But the rumbling and roaring gradually recedes as the abyssus thunders toward the fire, and Lee and I race for the hills. When we stop again, I pitch forward. My legs are as limp as boiled cabbage, and my chest is filled with ice.

Looking up, I see another heap of pitch-sodden wood.

"Not another," I pant.

"No choice." Lee's words are punctuated by desperate, heaving breaths. "Got to keep it on the island. One more. Should be enough." He points to the horizon. "Look."

The sky is a luminescent, predawn gray, and I understand why I can see the woodpile.

I sigh. "Just a few minutes more. Rest."

In the lowlands beneath us, the abyssus shrieks.

"No time," Lee says. He takes my lighter and has the pile burning in seconds. We don't watch it for long.

"Which way?" I ask as we leave the fire behind us.

"Doesn't matter now."

We've barely crested the hills when we hear the monster again behind us. In the time that it's taken us to get out of sight of the newest bonfire, the abyssus has closed half the distance to it. There's another roar once the creature reaches it, followed

by several seconds of churning devastation. Then, the timbre of the ruckus changes. It's chasing after us.

The sky is just starting to show pinks and purples. It will be a beautiful sunrise if we live to see it.

We race downhill, following the steepest slope we can find. It would probably make sense for us to split up, but neither of us is willing to cede the slope. Our bodies lean forward, at risk of tumbling over, but we're moving fast.

Or so it seems until I feel the abyssus's smoky breath on my back.

And just then, the world flattens out. There's nothing but my legs to push me forward, and with the ground shaking beneath me, I'm one good jolt away from a fall.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see yellow break the horizon. The abyssus roars, and for just a moment, the shaking stops. I slow down enough to look over my shoulder.

"Keep running!" Lee says. Sure enough, the earth begins to move beneath us again, but this time it's chaotic and arrhythmic.

But it's strong enough to knock me down. My legs collapse under me, joggled into critical harmony. Lee looks back, briefly, but he keeps running. I would have done the same. I turn around for a final glimpse of the abyssus.

Its body is thrown into an arc against the bronze sky. The bright glow from its open mouth makes it a strangely beautiful sight.

It doesn't seem to have noticed me. It's wriggling and thrashing, beating itself against the ground and whiplashing through the air. It reminds me of an unfortunate midshipman I once saw trying to put out a fire on his coat.

As I watch, the blaze within the creature's mouth grows brighter until it's too much to look at. I cover my ears, anticipating another deafening roar, but when it comes, it's choked and cut short.

The abyssus is dying.

Just as I begin to wonder how, the glow within the creature seems to break through its skin. It happens in a handful of places first, perhaps at the joints that are straining with all of its violent jerking, scars that seem to tear and lengthen. Smoldering fissures erupt from them, running between the beast's scales in a hellish map. Soon the skin starts to rupture like a rotten wineskin, and with a final squeal, the abyssus is ablaze.

I look at the sky, where the sun has just started to peek over the horizon. It's as brilliant as ever.

But my attention drifts back to the monster, which is still burning brightly and throwing up thick, black smoke. I cough and stumble away, aware of the blistering feeling on my skin.

There's a hand on my shoulder, and I look up to find Lee.

"You said you could get us out of here."

He laughs. "There's not a ship for miles that can miss this. That hulk is going to burn all day."

He doesn't sound worried. But then he never sounded worried about any of this.

"You've got a ship on the way," I say. He doesn't have to nod. "Which side?"

He shrugs. "Russian." It might as well have been either.

Burning flesh collapses, exposing a gauntlet of flame and bone, and suddenly I can't look away. I'm looking at the fires that will burn in every port town from Naples to Aberdeen, and then, once the Ottomans and the rest of Europe figure it out, from Sevastopol to St. Petersburg, for as long as the war continues. I'm hearing the screams that will ring across the rim of a continent.

"I suppose it's time I gave this back," Lee says. He pulls the flare gun out of his waistband and offers it to me, handle first.

I take it and stare at the brass barrel, cold and yellow as a coward's death.

Lee turns his back to me and takes a step toward the burning abyssus. “Makes you wonder what’s inside, doesn’t it? Maybe nothing.”

The flare gun isn’t much larger than my outstretched hand. But it’s heavy.

Lee laughs. “I hope you don’t live near the sea.” He’s still watching the blackened monster.

I raise the gun over my shoulder. I throw my weight into my arm and smash it into Lee’s skull.

Lee falls forward and I hit him again. The thick cracking sound, and the gurgling noise as he tries to turn his head, stops me.

“Monster,” he wheezes.

I hit him again. I don’t stop until he’s as silent and featureless as the thing burning in the dunes.

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COVER ART

“After the Giants War,” by David Demaret



David Demaret is an art director/artist from Paris, France. He is a senior graphic artist working in the videogame industry for 20 years, and he does freelance and contract work for illustrations and concept art. View his work online at themoonchild.free.fr.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

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

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