

The Pilgrimage

by Sydney Kilgore

Frey wanted to see heaven without having to die. He had returned from the sea after being gone for three weeks, ranting wildly about a giant ship he had seen in the distance one afternoon. Fayiz and Aeson, his brothers, and the village doctor believed he had swallowed too much sea water and needed bed-rest. I bathed Frey and fed him soup made with roots and chicken, and he consumed an entire bowl of fruits in moments. I removed his hair from his eyes with a cutting stone and laid next to him.

"The boat was massive," he told me, "it was much bigger than any sailboat we had but it had no sails, and it was black. It was a very, a very strange... thing."

I ran my hands through his hair. I loved Frey, even when he was telling stories that couldn't possibly be true. The priest came to our chalet and knocked on the door. I let him in.

"Frey needs to rest," I told him.

Iah had been the priest for so long that he was the man who had purified me as a baby. He was a very old man. The skin on his face was the color of palm bark and very rough, and his long, braided beard was the color of rainclouds. He had narrow eyes and time had caused his eyebrows to wane. A boy, Tanon, had reached manhood last year and was the chosen person to replace Iah when he died. They sat with me by the fire.

"I need to speak to him," Iah said to me.

He was smoking a pipe. Tanon watched our conversation closely.

"He needs rest, sir," I insisted.

Frey entered the room and took a seat next to me. His flesh was deeply grooved into muscles, a sign of dehydration.

"It's okay, I want to talk to Master Iah," Frey said to me, "I know I saw a boat out there, and I want to know who — or what - was on it."

Iah let the smoke out of his lungs slowly. He began to speak.

"The ship you saw, brother, was a ship driven by spirits. I cannot tell you why they were on the sea, but they came from heaven. That

is the only explanation. After they are released from our hands, the spirits guide the dead to the great paradise.... the place where sea and sky meet at a final location. What you witnessed were the spirits on the water. Of course, it is their water to be on, anyway; it is not our sea, it is theirs."

"Maybe they were creating fish for us to catch and eat," Tanon proposed.

Iah took another puff from his pipe.

"This could be true, Tanon, that could explain their check over us," he said, "we make them happy, we satisfy them, and they will satisfy us and give us a bountiful sea and earth."

"Why would they let me see them?" Frey asked. "Wouldn't they keep themselves hidden?"

Tanon shifted uncomfortably, perhaps worrying that his place as future priest was being threatened.

"I don't know, brother Frey, but I will consult the oracle," Iah answered.

Part Two

The next morning, after breakfast, Frey called Fayiz and Aeson. They sat together outside and whispered quietly as I tended to the garden and fed the chickens. I went to the village well with our empty pitchers to fetch the daily water and gossip. No story goes untold at the well. Today, I was particularly interested in how the other women would act around me. I was, of course, married to a crazy man.

"Hey, Saga, how are you today?" Nia, a neighbor, asked.

"I'm doing wonderfully. I'm so glad to have him back. We're hoping the gods will bless us with a child this season," I responded, intentionally not mentioning the great black ship.

"I hope you are blessed... make sure to eat honey everyday." She said pryingly, "Is that why Master Iah was at your house?"

"No," I said truthfully, grabbing my pitchers and walking away.

When I entered through the back door, Frey, Aeson, and Fayiz stopped talking. I knew immediately that something was awry. Frey spoke up first.

"Darling," he said softly, "we are going to go find heaven. I want to go, and they won't let me go alone so we're all going, as brothers."

I grew angry with him.

"You're going to anger the gods!" I yelled, "All of you! You can't do this! No! You have to be dead, you have to be dead to see heaven!"

"I don't think so," he reasoned, "not if I could see the ship of the spirits, possibly the gods themselves. I want to find heaven. Do you know what that would mean for us?"

"No, and neither do you," I scoffed.

I knew it was hopeless. He would do exactly as he wanted to do. After a few awkward moments, I pushed the hair out of my face and spoke to him.

"Well, I'm also going," I said, "and you can't tell me no. You will not go without me. And that's final."

He also knew it was futile to try to get me to change my mind, especially when I had already given an ultimatum. That's one thing we hated about each other; that's one thing we loved about each other — the fact that we both knew what we wanted and would stick by our decisions. He peered into my eyes, and I into his. Unusually, I couldn't figure out what was behind them. I normally could look into Frey's eyes and know when he was lying or decipher happiness or sorrow without the rest of his face at all. Today, however, I could not figure out what he was thinking. But I loved him, regardless. He was my husband. I would follow my husband anywhere, even to the end of the earth.

"Pack the animals, pick all of the vegetables you can, and go buy more jugs," he directed to all of us.

Part Three

We loaded the boat before sunrise. The stars were still marching across the violet sky and the moon was like a bright, silver coin, casting its light out on the calm water like a pathway. The village was almost completely dark, aside from a few windows lit with the last bit of light from the dying embers inside. Frey barked orders to his brothers. Tanon and Iah came down the dock shortly after we

arrived, boarding the boat. Frey would be the captain, but Iah (with the directions from the oracle) would guide us to the edge of the sea where it met the sky — to heaven.

I traced pictures using the stars until I fell asleep. I woke up to the warmth of the sun on my cheeks and the deep redness of my eyelids. The moon and stars were gone, and the brazen sun was halfway through her trek for the day. The village was long lost from sight. Only the sea on all sides. Frey, Iah, Tanon, and Fayiz were asleep in the shade of the sails. Aeson manned the course. He was sitting with his arms resting on his knees, his bare feet planted firmly on the slowly rocking ground. His hair was blowing in the breeze.

I approached him.

"Aeson," I said, "do you think we'll die?"

"No, I don't," he said, smiling, "but I don't think we'll find heaven either."

I was confused, and I suppose my face exposed that.

"I think the gods will trick us to keep heaven hidden from the living, and we'll sail for a week or so, and land right back at the village. Even though we never turned around, you see?" He explained.

I didn't want to say so, but I hoped that theory was true.

Part Four

On the eighth day, Aeson died. The wind was blowing harder than any of us had ever seen, and the waves were throwing our boat around so violently that we feared the boards on the side would snap. We were all soaked and freezing in the wind. Aeson was trying desperately to save the food supply and was cast off of the deck. Fayiz and Frey tried to recover him, but couldn't locate any sign of him anywhere in the enraged sea.

Iah claimed the oracle had warned that someone would die. This infuriated Frey and Fayiz, who were mourning Aeson. They wanted to kill him. Frey went at Iah with a rope, wrapping it around the old priest's neck. Iah didn't struggle. But Fayiz stopped Frey from killing him. I held Tanon tightly in my arms as he cried, as we both cried.

Things got better on the eleventh day, when three good omens appeared. The sun disappeared in mid-day, and for a few moments, it was like nighttime. My fertility reared its head. But most importantly, a flock of white birds passed over us, going the direction that we were. If they had been going in the opposite direction of our travels, that would have been a bad omen. But they weren't. They flew into the setting sun; the same direction that we were going. Frey and Fayiz jumped up and down on the deck, waving their arms wildly and laughing. They threw their arms toward the horizon, pretending that their directional persuasion would affect the flocks motivation. We all smiled and laughed.

Those birds had been the first land animal life we'd seen for days. The dolphins came and went, as they normally did. They were our friends and protectors when we ventured into their kingdom. We were very thankful to have them, on this journey and always.

Part Five

The thought of death returned on day thirty-nine. We all had to man oars for two days in a row, because the wind had abandoned us. Iah chanted a prayer to the gods. Against Frey's wishes, we decided that if the wind had not returned by the next day, we would turn around.

"The gods must be upset with us," Fayiz said, as he churned the water with his oar.

"Of course they are! Look at what we're trying to do," I said, tearfully, pushing all of my weight against the water.

Frey never lost sight of his goal. Even when the food had spoiled and the water was being rationed, he believed we would make it to heaven. I believed we would too, but that we wouldn't be alive. At night, I fingered my crystal amulet and evoked Raji, the mother spirit and protector of children. Like never before in my entire life, I felt like a child. I was completely dependent, wishing that the sea would bestow the ultimate mercy upon us and save our lives.

Early the next morning, the winds returned.

As I was holding Tanon, who had grown ill, and watching the dolphins playfully circling our boat and jumping in and out of the water, I heard a scream.

Fayiz had spotted land.

"Land! Land! Heaven! Oh, shit! Heaven, Frey! Iah! Everyone, Look!" He screamed, pointing to the horizon.

The wind blew my hair fiercely and I used my arms to gather it up in my hands. I looked past the wild, loose strands across the water. It was true. The mountains grew up out of the blue abyss like ant hills from grass. We couldn't believe it. Only when it was absolutely necessary did any of our eyes leave that distant coastline. No one spoke, except to praise the gods. We cried for Aeson's safe arrival to the great, luscious home of the gods. We prayed that we were not being tricked.

Tanon was the first person to jump from the ship and dove smoothly into the crystal waters. He swam toward the beach. I followed his lead. I held my nose, squeezed my eyes shut, and jumped. The water was icy and cut through my dress, soaking me to the bone. I pushed downwards with my arms, floating up toward the surface of the exquisite water. I cleared the water from my eyes and opened them. Everything sparkled. Frey was lowering Iah, in a canoe. Tanon had already made it to the beach. He had stripped himself of his wet clothes and was grinning madly; his hands rested on his hips. He was the first living person, to our knowledge, who had ever stood on the beach of the gods.

I swam toward Frey and Fayiz and helped them pull Iah to the sand. The sand was warm beneath our feet, but not hot. It pushed up between my toes as I walked to the shadow of the palms. There were strange, red flowers in the grass. Frey picked one and handed it to me. His sun-scorched face was glowing with strokes of sunlight and patches on shadow. I couldn't stop smiling. He embraced me, and we kissed.

"We made it," he whispered, "and I'm glad you're here with me."

Iah, Fayiz, and Tanon approached us. Tanon was dressed now, but shirtless. Fayiz wrung the water from his hair. Iah held his hands up toward the sky. We were all smiling.

Part Six

We were unsure which way to go. We continued to praise the gods for their bountiful forgiveness. However, we were parched.

"I think we should go deeper into the belly of the island," Fayiz suggested.

"No," Frey said, "We should follow the beach. There will be a river or stream for us to drink from, eventually. The mother-island feeds the sea, so there should be giant, clean rivers. And we need to find one."

I held Frey's hand as we all walked along the beach, taking in all of its glorious bounties. Crabs scurried across the sand by the dozens. The palms were massive, the canopy high. The lush forest floor abounding with fascinating plants and flowers of all colors. The crystal water lapped at the black rocks. We had journeyed long, but not far from our boat (and from our rations) when we came upon a stream. I cupped my hands. The water was pristine. When it's coolness touched my tongue and descended my throat, I immediately felt the most alive I had ever felt. The water seemed magical, the way it breathed life into our tired lungs once again. We energetically drank from it until our bellies were full of the fresh, delicious water. We rested on some grass in the shade of a mysterious tree.

"Tuk," Iah said, evoking the god of the gods, "thank you for your ultimate mercy on our human souls. Your home is truly a wonderland. May we live immortally here to praise you and your absolute glory."

He was almost in tears.

I rested my head on Frey's chest.

"I love you, Frey," I said, "I love you."

We fell asleep in the early-afternoon and awoke only hours before nightfall. We woke up to a terrifying sound.

"What in the hell?" Fayiz said, startled, posed above the group. Frey rose.

We heard the sound again. It sounded like a demon. It was a high-pitched yelling sound, but not from any human.

Then we saw the beast.

It came dashing out of the canopy and landed on a branch belonging to the mysterious tree. It was covered in brown fur, and had a ugly, almost human-like face. Its eyes were dark. Its teeth were huge. It screeched again, and jumped to another branch. It had hands in place of its feet. It was truly a terrible creature.

I hid behind Frey, but that was futile. We were all petrified.

Part Seven

For days, we followed the stream into the belly of this land of enchantments. The encounter with the beast left us tormented and desperate, and although we could never forget its face, the island wouldn't let us forget its howl. It echoed behind every tree.

"Maybe we angered the gods by coming here," Fayiz said as he walked ahead of us, "maybe they sent the beast to mock us and scare us away."

"It was definitely mocking us," Frey responded.

"It wasn't a demon," Iah concluded. "Demons cannot live in heaven. But it was a mockery of man. It had to be."

Even he seemed shaken. I just walked.

We began following a river. It was murkier than the stream, and was so wide that one of these mammoth palms could not have created a bridge across it. The water in the river moved unhurriedly in the opposite way that we were walking.

At night, we'd stop to rest. Frey or Fayiz would create a fire with flint and Tanon and I would cook some of the recognizable — but detestable — leaves and roots in the area. It was especially difficult to see the stars through the thick canopy, which made the forest floor darker than any night we'd ever experienced. The beasts screeched and chattered in the trees all around us.

"Where are we?" I finally asked. It was something I had been wondering for quite some time.

The men glared at me.

"Well, we're not in paradise. If we were, we wouldn't be eating this shit and scared for our lives every time we fall asleep," I said angrily.

"It was made clear by the gods that heaven was only for the souls of the righteous dead," Iah answered, "and we are not dead. We are in heaven, yes, however, it is not ours in which to reside."

"Yes, we did go where sea and sky meet. You saw it, Saga. This is no island. It goes on forever. You saw it when we were out on the sea. You couldn't see the end anywhere. We couldn't go around it," Tanon said.

I wasn't pleased.

"I was a good person, back home! All of us were! Even if we are alive, we shouldn't be treated like we belong to Yurip! Like we're evil and destined to suffer!", I screamed.

I went to the river's edge and cried. I rationalized that I was not in the home of the king demon Yurip. He lived deep below the island, only revealing his kingdom through ash, destruction, and liquid fire. I shuddered at the thought of finding myself with him.

Part Eight

Only four of us ate breakfast the next morning. Iah never stirred. His body was bloated and cool in the morning air. Dew had settled on his fingernails and beard. We were unsure what to do with the old Master's body. Usually, it would be arranged in a canoe. The canoe would be punctured with holes on the bottom and released where the sea is most at peace. Prayers would be chanted and after the mourning party would return, a feast and dancing would occur. The feast would have been especially large and extravagant with this death, the parting of a priest. It would also include the new-era ritual, the ceremony exemplifying the new priest.

This time, the new priest is Tanon. He realized it the moment that we covered Iah's face with a leaf. He didn't speak a word.

"We can't bury him," Frey said, "we have to return him to the water, but we're too far from the sea to carry him back."

"What do you think is the right thing to do?" I asked.

"I think we need to put his body in the river."

I looked at the Master's body. A fly landed on the back of his hand.

"Alright," I said, "me too."

"Tanon, sir. You're the priest now, give Master Iah respects and begin the prayers," Frey commanded to the frightened boy.

"Oh-okay," he said, and took a deep breath. He went to Iah's feet and began the sacred prayers. Frey and Fayiz picked up Iah's body and carried him down to the edge of the water. They walked a few feet in (the surface of the water landing right below their waists) and gently slipped the Master into the calm murkiness, head first. Tanon finished the prayers. No one cried.

We ate breakfast and continued on our journey. I carried the amulet in my left hand and a walking stick in the right. After a while, the trees grew even larger and the beasts halted their eternal screeching. We came upon the smell of decaying flesh and expected to see ants. Instead, a monstrous flower filled our view. Its petals were bulbous and the color of bruised skin, as if they were full of coagulated blood. It was as wide as a man lying on the ground. It emitted the terrible scent.

We prepared to spend one more night in the forest.

"I think we need to follow our tracks and go home," I suggested, steaming roots.

"Yeah, I do, too," Frey said.

Everyone was genuinely surprised to hear Frey say that. He had never given up on anything. This change made me anxious. Although no one asked, we all wondered where we were. It wasn't heaven, it wasn't hell, and it wasn't like home. It was a whole new world. I couldn't sleep that night. I remained awake far after the forest lost its battle against the night. The trees, the grass and ferns, the river — all of the earth seemed to be sleeping. The only light came from our fading fire. Frey snored loudly behind my head, but right before dawn I thought I heard the sound of a large animal only steps away from where we were sleeping.

I pushed Frey so that he would get quiet. I looked all around the camp. I couldn't see anything. I heard another footstep, but thought

to myself that that just couldn't be true. It wasn't a demon. It wasn't a person. It wasn't a god. It was just an innocent animal walking nosily across the leaves. It was dawn, the forest was stirring for the day, I thought.

"It's just a bird," I whispered to myself.

The sound occurred again, and this time I knew it was no bird; or, that bird weighed as much as a beast. I listened all around. My hearing seemed more precise and I realized this was because my heart was beating so heavily against my ribs. My hearing was always better when I had to hear what was going on.

A bush rattled on the other side of Frey.

Unexpectedly, a beastly man flew from the shadows into our camp, his right hand held high above his head and a ghastly howl emerged from his core. He struck the back of Frey's head with a club. I ran without thinking, but moved swiftly across the forest floor. The vines and trees collapsed into a blur all around me. The only thing in focus was what was directly in front of me. I ran, and quickly realized at least one man was gaining distance behind me. I pushed myself harder. My heart pounded against my ribs, every breath I took pierced my insides.

I yelped when a man grabbed me.

He drove his knee into my lower back and tied my wrists together. My ribs no longer hurt with each breath. Tears poured down my cheeks and I could feel leaves and dirt clinging to my wet face. The man forced me on my knees.

Another man grabbed my chin and examined my face, harshly brushing off the dirt. Through my watery eyes, I looked up at the man. Even in the very low light of dawn, I could see the humanity in his eyes. They were deep brown and his face was the color of burnt wood. On his head was a shiny, rounded headdress. His body was covered in the same shiny material.

He peered into my eyes and removed his grip from my chin. My breathing was erratic. My clothes were falling off and my breasts were exposed. One man pointed at them with an unfamiliar tool and they both smiled and laughed. I wanted to fight but felt hopeless.

From behind, a man slipped a black bag over my head.

