

Wings over Golgotha

By Paul Lister

(Writing as Saul P. Tiler)

Berl's nextfather still had an hour in the dirge fields collecting stories from the tragedy spiders' webs. The town of Homolony sat in a canyon and was well protected from the Mare storms, but you could never have too many dirges to keep the minds dry.

She could use the time. Her backpack was nearly ready, but she still needed to gather provisions. Berl spread her gear across the trench hammock and thought about the things there. The light from the wicksticks played upon the items that she had taken so long to find.

Carefully, Berl picked up the faded Bermuda shorts. They were the originals worn by Bermuda himself. It had taken her two treefalls to make the decoy duplicates. She couldn't do it all herself. She had had to have nomake with one of the

harpers in the loom tunnel to get the cloth right. And promise nomake to old Thad to copy the designs. Not that she was going to, but she was sure that just the idea was enough for him to milk.

She couldn't do it alone with her memory. Not after she had been swept. Thoughts fell from her as she recalled the winds pulling her into the air away from the peak. Berl whimpered and placed her hands on her face to try to stop from losing parts of herself. She knew what she had seen. She knew it was real. And she would prove it.

There was more than one god.

The reason she had ran last time was because she had worked out her age wrong. Berl had thought that she was thirty-three trees which meant this treefall she would be thirty-four and ready for make. You weren't supposed to know who you were going to make with but Helda worked in the Homolony church, mostly clearing the memesin lines before group. She was always a bit crazy because of that and you had to take the things she said with a pinch of salt. But she said that the Raised ran the make lists trees ahead of the time that people were ready. That way they could start pairing the people off early, so it seemed more natural when God decided

that they should make together. Just another reason that she had trouble believing in it.

Helda would say she was silly. After all, how could you not believe in God when you could see him everyday. She always looked so sad when she said it though. In fact, she could never remember seeing Helda smile. And that bothered, her even though she didn't know why.

What Berl hadn't realised at the time was that the last time someone had attacked God it had caused an early treefall, so she was a tree younger than she thought she was. It meant she still had a while before she had to marry Tuus. So really it was her Dad's fault that she had run last time. After all he had caused the early fall when he had tried to kill God the first time.

The front door slammed shut just as she kicked the pack under the hammock. She lay in it pretending to read The Journey so that her nextfather would be less likely to interrupt her, but it wasn't him who opened the valve. It was Tuus.

She flipped out of the hammock and made the signal to the sky, turning her head up and raising her right hand.

"We wait again," she said.

"To be taken and freed," replied Tuus. His response more convincing than her initiation.

"I was expecting my father Watcher, he will be back from the fields soon," she said. There was a lack of sureness in her tone. She was not afraid that Tuus would try to make with her. Any such intention would have been read in Group and the Raised would have expelled him. But he was a Watcher and as such knew her rebellious nature. Not just from the memesin reads but from the time they had spent together in his attempts, or rather the church's, to have them familiar before make.

"I have asked the field foreman to have him do an extra shift. "

"Why Watcher?" she asked, her throat feeling tight.

"Tuus, Berl. Please, you can just call me Tuus."

She was about to pointlessly object when he waved a hand across her face to stop her from talking in that imperious way of his. It had got on Berl's nerves from the start.

"This is not important. The Raised know Berl. They are coming for you in a few buds."

She laughed nervously. They could not know. Her firstfather, before he had fallen, had taught her cogtricks to hide her thinking. Using dirges so that her intimate thoughts were hidden, without the blind spots that had exposed her

mother. Tuus was shaking his head with that almost supernatural prescience that Watcher's seemed to have to read others.

"It was Helda, Berl."

For some reason Berl he had thought it was safe to include Helda in her plans. She really had no choice as she had needed to view the artefacts to replicate them. Helda's memplex was so distorted due to line cleaning that she was a hard read and so Berl thought she was safe. It was hard to tell with her. Since being on the pipes she babbled a lot.

"But--"

Again, the wave imperious.

"She was at capacity. The psyches from the lines had began to infect her and her own ego was in danger of loss. They ordered a cleanse, despite her protests."

Which meant that all the stuff that she had heard and seen had been extracted to save what she was. Cleanses only needed to be done every three or four trees. It was bad timing. And the extraction would be analysed by God. The Raised knew.

Tuus was not wearing any of his ceremonial shotguns or pistols. He was not here in an official capacity. He had not come to take her.

"Why are you here Tuus?" she said. Was he going to try to blackmail her? She could not make yet no matter how much he tried, but they could not make. The thought sickened her, but it might give her time. Berl smiled at him and ran her hands down her smock so that the shadows of her breasts were more visible. He reached out a hand toward hers and she steeled herself for a touch unwanted. But to her surprise he merely took it and moved it delicately to her side.

"Not for that Berl. I know how you feel about me and I know that even if we make you will do it with reluctance. But despite the way you feel I have honest feelings for you. And I don't want to see you punished."

She didn't shrug off his hand this time as she had so many times before.

"Tuus, you have never said this before."

"I have never had to," he said taking her hand in both of his and squeezing before letting go.

"Now you have to go. I can misdirect them but only for so long."

Berl pulled out the pack. If this was a trap they had her anyway and if it wasn't then Tuus was right, she needed to move. She put it on and then pulled on a poncho hoping it would hide the bag. Berl moved to the door and then stopped.

"Thank you Watcher Tuus," she said, this time saying the title without any of the malice that she usually attached to it. She kissed him on the cheek before leaving.

The last time she had been swept she had made it look like an accident. Berl had released some of the hoggrubs out of their pen and nextfather and her had to round them up. Berl had already walked one to the south ridge earlier and tied it down, so it gave her the excuse to make her way there following her firstfather's map. Before he had risen he had hidden his memesis in a blocked clearance pipe and rigged it to only replay back the next time Berl was in group. He had not believed in God. She looked up at their Lord now. The long saucer shape of Him hovering above the Church. It's coiled tentacles hanging down, penetrating the top of the building. God looked a little jaded now, not as shiny as she had seen in the memories of firstfather. But it sat in the Sweep, unmoved by the winds that kept anything from flying into the canyon.

And anything from flying out.

Berl remembered when was a child telling her Dad how much she had loved God. She would say the mantra that you learned in five ring school.

'Taken are grounded because of the dangerous sky but God will protect them because only he can fly.'

Her father had always pulled a face back then when he heard it. He would just sit quietly and whittle at some pieces of strangely shaped wood.

Then one day, when a Mare storm kept everyone inside and the thick dark that came with it obscured even the eyes of the Watchers, her father took her up to the south ridge. Her mother had protested, more about the fact that she was 'too young' rather than the danger of taking her out in the storm. And for a fearful moment she had thought that her father was going to nomake with her. But he was her father, so she trusted him. Her fear stayed, and it wasn't until they made it to the top of the ridge that he revealed his true intentions.

Out of his poncho he brought out the wood that he had been whittling. He had three pieces of different lengths and thicknesses. In the dark and rain with the memories of the Swept flickering through them, he clipped the three pieces together so that they formed a cross shape, the arms thin and the main body rounded and tapering. He held it up into the wind and shouted.

"Let me show you another God," he said before throwing the wooden thing down into the canyon. It dipped and fell and Berl watched it, sad that something that had taken so long to make would be so quickly destroyed.

But then a miracle happened. The end of the thing started to point upwards and the arms stabilised until the cross was level with the ground.

And it flew. It glided over the trees and their family's Hole and then finally came to rest in the dirge farms.

Her father looked down, watching her, examining her reaction. Berl looked confused for a moment and then she looked up at her father, other people's thoughts running down her face. Running over the smile that was beaming through the storm.

"There's more," he said. Ten rings later he was dead. Four rings later her mother was gone too.

Berl stood on the peak's south ridge. She could feel the edge of the Sweep above her, maybe twenty limbs away. A Stray breeze licked at her hair as if teasing her to go further. But she didn't need any encouragement. Because from here she could see the Styx. She didn't understand the word and neither did her father. But it was what the First to be Taken had called it and it had been handed down through generations of the Hidden. The Church had forbidden the word long ago. But it was still what they called the crack in the

peak. A ravine so tiny that her father could not squeeze himself through. But she could, and she nearly had.

The hoggrub had been her undoing the first time. She had tied a lead around it and walked it up to the Styx. It was a fat little hog but with some pulling Berl had managed to take it along with her. No matter what was on the other side of the crack in the rock, they could not afford to lose livestock and she had left it out by itself for long enough. It was a surprise that a wild tragedy spider had not killed it already.

The ravine was tight, and she had been scared that she would not make it through. At one time it had been a wide passage but rockfalls had made it almost impenetrable. She was only a few limbs from the end when the Sweep came. Despite the buffeting she had taken, Berl had clung on as the winds hit her. Forcing her head up she stared into the storm to see what was beyond.

And despite the sting of the dust she could see a familiar shape. A large cross with stars on its the horizontal spar. It was like her firstfather's model. Another God. The wind must have panicked the hoggrub. They had a defence mechanism if they were chased or caught in a storm. They would open the flaps that sat in between their myriad legs, becoming a sort of fleshy umbrella. The wind caught the grub and

whipped her backward, the lead that she had tied around her wrist causing her to be dragged back. Berl could not remember much after that. She was battered and bruised as she was dragged back through the Styx until she popped out of the other side. The hog had somehow been yanked up into the Sweep, pulling her into it. Berl must have passed into unconsciousness as the next thing she knew was in a bed at the Healer's. But she never told anyone what she had seen. And Helda had helped hide her memories from group. The memories of the new God.

This time she was came prepared. No hoggrub to catch her out. And Berl had copies of the artefacts. Before entering the Styx, she took off the poncho and fished the items out of the pack. She pulled on the Bermuda shorts over her trousers. Then Usaf's jacket. It wasn't perfect, but it was made from the good leather of an Egg Oxen and she had got most of the designs right, down to Usaf's own name emblazoned across the breast. Lastly, she put on the funny little Saylor's hat. Berl didn't like it. It had been easy to make but its round design reminded her a little bit too much of God. It wasn't quite the same, her design had a strap tied to it, just in case the winds came again and tried to pull it off. These things had been worn by the First to be taken and Berl hoped that wearing

them meant that it would give her safe passage through the Styx.

Then just for good luck she took out a charcoal stick. Pulling up the jacket sleeve, she drew a design on her skin, hoping that somewhere the new god and her father would see it and bless her with safe passage. With a deep breath she pulled the pack back on and pushed forward into the ravine.

This time it was easier, Berl had learnt from previous mistakes. Without the hog to burden her and with lighter clothing she made good progress through the Styx. Even with the pack it was simpler. Within ten buddings she was most of the way through and the Sweep had not appeared.

She said a little prayer for Tuus. Whatever he had done to distract the other Watcher's and God seemed to have worked. At least for now. A few buds later and she could see the exit to the ravine.

And something beyond. A valley, a glittering valley.

Berl walked out of the other side of the Styx and the glare flared her pupils, her eyes trying to cope with the contrast of the dark ravine. Slowly Berl's eyes adjusted.

The valley was full of Gods. There were the flying things, differing in size but all the same shape as her

firstfather's model. Also, there were some colourful little box things with wheels and walls half-glassed.

And other shapes. Long, sharp, craft like chisels but with towers set upon them. Now her eyes had become accustomed to the light she could see them more clearly. They looked worn, rusted, broken in places. These were not new gods. They were old. What she thought might be salvation was just a graveyard.

A spotlight from above played upon her and her pupils became pin pricks again. Then a sound hit her. Noise. Of a type that she had never heard before. It made her eyes haze and her ears ache. Berl tried to cover her senses with her hands but it was not enough. As she lay at the entrance of the Styx, about to pass out, she saw the shadow of God pass over her.

It was five ring day and Berl sat in Group. Helda disconnected the clear pipe from the back of her head, wiped up the excess sin and then looked Berl in the eye to check she was okay. There was something about her face that made Berl think that she was going to say something but then the familiar quiet sadness descended upon her face and she moved away.

Berl felt much better with all her memesin removed.
Watcher Amsk walked over and sat beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, I guess. I'll miss him though, we were well matched for make" answered Berl.

"He was a good Watcher, but he should have been more careful in the Mare storm. God watch over him."

"God watch over him," Berl repeated, the words misshapen in her mouth, as if they were trying to remind her of something with just their taste, but it was gone.

Amsk smiled at her.

"Now we are matched I hope we can get to know each other better. Maybe a walk later?" asked the Watcher.

"Yes, that would be nice," she replied. Amsk got up and left but Berl decided to wait for a little while.

She looked up at the mural of the First being taken, silhouettes floating up to God, their arms raised in exultation as they were delivered from the evil of the old world. Berl was distracted by an itch and pulled up her sleeve to scratch it properly. She was surprised to see that her wrist was covered in an inky scrawl. A strange design, like a cross with lines sweeping across it, like the winds of the sweep. Guiltily she looked up to see Helda looking at her.

A picture that made no sense entered her head of firstfather and Helda sitting outside their Hole laughing, watching as Berl played. Helda nodded, so slight that even a Watcher would not notice and looked down at her wrist. Berl looked at her own wrist again, taking in the thick black lines of the cross.

Then she saw her fathers face, a tear falling as a tiny wooden god flew across the valley. The winds buffeting it but never defeating it.

In that moment Berl realised, despite the cleanse, that escape did not mean following someone above or someone below. But something else.

And when she looked up, Helda was smiling.

End

