

Fred Saberhagen - Berserker Short - Sign Of The Wolf

The dark shape, big as a man, came between the two smallest of the three watchfires, moving in silence like that of sleep. Out of habit, Duncan had been watching that downwind direction, though his mind was heavy with tiredness and with the thoughts of life that came with sixteen summers' age.

Duncan raised his spear and howled, and charged the wolf. For a moment the fire-eyes looked steadily at him, appearing to be a full hand apart. Then the wolf turned away; it made one deep questioning sound, and was gone into the darkness out beyond the fires.

Duncan stopped, drawing a gasping breath of relief. His charge had not been courage. The wolf would probably have killed him if it had faced his charge, but it did not yet dare to face him in firelight.

The sheeps' eyes were on Duncan, a hundred glowing spots in the huddled mass of the flock. One or two of the animals bleated softly.

He paced around the flock, sleepiness and introspection jarred from his mind. Legends said that men in the old Earth-land had animals called dogs that guarded sheep. If that were true, some might think that men were fools for ever leaving Earth-land.

But such thoughts were irreverent, and Duncan's situation called for prayer. Every night now the wolf came, and all too often it killed a sheep.

Duncan raised his eyes to the night sky. "Send me a sign, star-gods," he prayed, routinely. But the heavens were quiet. Only the stately fireflies of the dawn zone traced their steady random paths, vanishing halfway up the eastern sky. The stars themselves agreed that three-fourths of the night was gone. The legends said that Earth-land was among the stars, but the younger priests admitted such a statement could only be taken symbolically.

The heavy thoughts came back, in spite of the nearby wolf. For two years now Duncan had prayed and hoped for his mystical experience, the sign from a god that came to mark the future life of every youth. From what other young men whispered now and then, he knew that many faked their signs. That was all right for lowly herdsmen, or even for hunters. But how could a man without a genuine vision ever be much more than a tender of animals? To be a priest, to study the things brought from old Earth-land and saved--Duncan hungered for learning, for greatness, for things he could not name.

He looked up again, and gasped, for he saw a great sign in the sky, almost directly overhead. A point of dazzling light, and then a bright little cloud remaining among the stars. Duncan gripped his spear, watching, for a moment even forgetting the sheep. The tiny cloud swelled and faded very slowly.

For centuries now the berserker machines had warred on Earth-descended man. Automatons loosed in some forgotten war, the machines moved as raidersthrough the galaxy, destroying whatever life they could find and overcome.

One such machine slid out of the interstellar intervals toward Duncan's planet, drawn from afar by the Sol-type light of Duncan's sun. To turn life into death was a berserker's function, and this sun and this planet promised life.

The berserker machine was the size of a small planetoid, and its power was immense, but it knew well that some planets were defended, and it bent and slowed its hurtling approach into a long cautious curve.

There were no warships in nearby space, but the berserker's telescopes picked out the bright dots of defensive satellites, vanishing into the planet's shadow and reappearing. To probe for more data, the berserker computers loosed a spy missile.

The missile looped the planet, and then shot in, testing the defensive net. Low over nightside, it turned suddenly into bright little cloud.

Still, defensive satellites formed no real obstacle to a berserker. It could gobble them up almost at leisure if it moved in close to them, though they would stop long range missiles fired at the planet. It was the other things the planet might have, the buried things, that held the berserker back from a killing rush.

Also it was strange that this defended planet had no cities to make light sparks on its nightside, and that no radio signals came from it into space.

With mechanical caution the berserker moved in, toward the area scouted by the spy missile.

In the morning, Duncan counted his flock--and then recounted, scowling. Then he searched until he found the slaughtered lamb. The wolf had not gone hungry after all. That made four sheep lost, now, in ten days.

Duncan tried to tell himself that dead sheep no longer mattered so much to him, that with a sign such as he had been granted last night his life was going to be filled with great deeds and noble causes. But the sheep still did matter, and not only because their owners would be angry.

Looking up suddenly from the eaten lamb, he saw a brown-robed priest, alone, mounted on a donkey, climbing the long grassy slope of the grazing valley from the direction of the Temple Village. He would be going to pray in one of the Caves in the foot of the mountain at the head of the valley.

At Duncan's beckoning wave--he could not leave the flock to walk far toward the priest--the man on the donkey changed course. Duncan walked a little way to meet him.

"Blessings of Earth-land," said the priest shortly, when he came close. He was a stout man who seemed glad to dismount and stretch, arching his back and grunting.

He smiled as he saw Duncan's hesitation. "Are you much alone here, my son?"

"Yes, Holy One. But--last night, I had a sign. For two years I've wanted one, and just last night it came."

"Indeed? That is good news." The priest's eyes strayed to the mountain, and to the sun, as if he calculated how much time he could spare. But he said, with no sound of impatience, "Tell me about it, if you wish."

When he heard the flash in the sky was Duncan's sign, the priest frowned. Then he seemed to keep himself from smiling. "My son, that light was seen by many. Today the elders of a dozen villages, of most of the Tribe, have come to the Temple Village. Everyone has seen something different in the sky-flash, and I am now going to pray in a Cave, because of it."

The priest remounted, but when he had looked at Duncan again, he waited to say, "Still, I was not one of those chosen to see the sky-gods' sign; and you were. It may be a sign for you as well as for others, so do not be disappointed if it is not only for you. Be faithful in your duties and signs will come." He turned the donkey away.

Feeling small, Duncan walked slowly back to his flock. How could he have thought that a light seen over half the world was meant for one shepherd? Now his sign was gone, but his wolf remained.

In the afternoon, another figure came into sight, walking straight toward the flock from the direction of Colleen's village. Duncan tightened the belt on his woolen tunic, and combed grass from his hair with his fingers. He felt his chin, and wished his beard would really begin to grow.

He was sure the visitor was Colleen when she was still half a mile away. He kept his movements calm and made himself appear to first notice her when she came in sight on a hilltop within hailing distance. The wind moved her brown hair and her garments.

"Hello, Colleen."

"Hello, Duncan the Herdsman. My father sent me to ask about his sheep."

He ran an anxious eye over the flock, picking out individuals. Praise be to gods of land and sky. "Your father's sheep are well."

She walked closer to him. "Here are some cakes. The other sheep are not well?" Ah, she was beautiful. But no mere herdsman would ever have her.

"Last night the wolf killed again." Duncan gestured with empty hands. "I watch, I light fires. I have a spear and a club, and I rush at him when he comes, and I drive him away. But sooner or later he comes on the wrong side of the flock, or a sheep strays."

"Another man should come from the village," she said. "Even a boy would help. With a big clever wolf, any herdsman may need help."

He nodded, faintly pleased at her implying he was a man. But his troubles were too big to be soothed away. "Did you see the sky-flash, last night?" he asked, remembering with bitterness his joy when he had thought the sign was his.

"No, but all the village is talking about it. I will tell them about the wolf, but probably no man will come to help you for a day or two. They are all dancing and talking, thinking of nothing but the sky-flash."

She raised puzzled eyes beyond Duncan. "Look."

It was the priest, rushing past half a mile from them on his way down valley from the Caves, doing his best to make his donkey gallop toward the Temple Village.

"He may have met your wolf," Colleen suggested.

"He doesn't look behind him. Maybe in the Caves he received an important sign from the earth-gods."

They talked a while longer, sitting on the grass while he ate the cakes she had brought him.

"I must go!" She sprang up. The sun was lowering and neither of them had realized it.

"Yes, hurry! At night the wolf may be anywhere on the plain."

Watching her hurry away, Duncan felt the wolf in his own blood. Perhaps she knew it, for she looked back at him strangely from the hilltop. Then she was gone.

On a hillside, gathering dried brush for the night's watchfires, Duncan paused for a moment, looking at the sunset.

"Sky-gods, help me," he prayed. "And earth-gods, the dark wolf should be under your dominion. If you will not grant me a sign, at least help me deal with the wolf." He bent routinely and laid his ear to a rock. Every day he asked some god for a sign, but never--

He heard a voice. He crouched there, listening to the rock, unable to believe. Surely it was a waterfall he heard, or running cattle somewhere near. But no, it was a real voice, booming and shouting in some buried distance. He could not make out the words, but it was a real god-voice from under the earth.

He straightened up, tears in his eyes, even the sheep for a moment forgotten. This wonderful sign was not for half the world, this was for him! And he had doubted that it would ever come.

To hear what it said was all-important. He bent again and listened. The muffled voice went on unceasingly, but he could not understand it. He ran a few steps up the hill, and put his ear against another exposed earth-bone of rock. Yes, the voice was plainer here; sometimes he could distinguish a word. "Give," said the voice. Mumble, mumble. "Defend," he thought it said. Even the words he recognized were spoken in strange accents, like those of a man from some far tribe.

He realized that darkness was falling, and stood up, in fearful indecision. The sheep were still his responsibility, and he had to light watchfires, he had to, for the sheep would be slaughtered without them. And at the same time he had to listen to this voice.

A form moved toward him through the twilight, and he grabbed up his club--then he realized it was Colleen.

She looked frightened. She whispered: "The sun went down, and I feared the dark. It was a shorter way back to you, than on to the village."

The berserker moved in toward the night side of the planet, quickly now, but still with caution. It had searched its memory of thousands of years of war against a thousand kinds of life, and it had remembered one other planet like this, with defensive satellites but no cities or radios. The fortifiers of that planet had fought among themselves, weakening themselves until they could no longer operate their defenses, had even forgotten what their planet-weapons were. Then the life on that planet was helpless, and the berserker had left no life upon it, taking only a few prisoners to learn the cause of their weakness.

The life here might be shamming, trying to lure the berserker within range of the planet-weapons. Therefore the berserker sent its mechanical scouts ahead, to break through the satellite-net, and range over the land surface, killing, until they provoked the planet's maximum response.

The fires were built, and Colleen held the spear and watched the sheep. Wolf or not, Duncan had to follow his sign. He made his way up the dark hillside, listening at rock after rock, and ever the earth-god voice grew stronger.

In the back of his mind Duncan realized that Colleen had arranged to be trapped with him for the night, to help him defend the sheep, and he felt limitless gratitude and love. But even that was now in the back of his mind. The voice now was everything.

He held his breath, listening. Now he could hear the voice while he stood erect. There, ahead, at the foot of a cliff, were slabs of rock tumbled down by snowslides. Among them might be a cave.

He reached the slabs, and heard the voice rumble up between them. "Attack in progress. Request human response. Order one requested. This is defense control. Attack in progress--"

On and on it went. Duncan understood some of it. Attack, request, human. Order one requested--that must mean one wish was to be granted, as in the legends. Never again would Duncan laugh at legends, thinking himself wise. This was no prank of the other young men; no one could hide in a cave and shout on and on in such a voice.

No one but a priest should enter a Cave, but probably not even the priests knew of this one. It was Duncan's, for his sign had led him here. He had been granted a tremendous sign.

More awed than fearful, he slid between slabs of rock, finding the way down, rock and earth and then metal under his feet. He dropped into a low metal cave. It was as he had heard the god-caves described, very long, smooth, round and regular, except here where it was bent and torn under the fallen rocks. In the cave's curving sides were glowing places, like huge animal eyes, giving light enough to see.

And here the shouting was very loud. Duncan moved toward it. We have reached the surface, the scouts radioed back to the berserker, in their passionless computer-symbol language. Here intelligent life of the earth-type lives in villages. So far we have killed eight hundred and thirty-nine units. We have met no response from dangerous weapons.

A little while the berserker waited, letting the toll of life-units mount. When the chance of this planet's being a trap had dropped in computer-estimation to the vanishing point, the berserker moved in to close range, and began to mop the remaining defensive satellites out of its way. Its scouts could not efficiently depopulate the whole planet; but the berserker could.

"Here I am." Duncan fell on his knees before the metal thing that bellowed. In front of the god-shape lay woven twigs and eggshells, so old as to be hardly more than dust. Once priests had sacrificed here, and then they had forgotten this god.

"Here I am," said Duncan again, in a louder voice.

The god heeded him, for the deafening shouting stopped.

In a glassy place beside the god strange things appeared: there was a huge ball, with little red specks crawling its surface, and a little red ball the size of a fist moving toward it.

"Response acknowledged, from defense control alternate 9,864," said the god. "Planetary defenses now under control of post 9,864."

How could you ask a god to speak more plainly? Duncan gaped at the moving things in the glass, and waited for enlightenment.

After a little time of silence, the god said: "Request order one."

That seemed understandable, but to make sure, Duncan asked: "You will grant me one wish, mighty one?"

"Will obey your order. Emergency. Satellite sphere ninety per cent destroyed. Planet-weapon responses fully programmed. Activation command requested."

Duncan, still kneeling, closed his eyes. One wish would be granted. The rest of the words he took for a warning to choose his wish with care. If he wished, the god would make him the wisest of chiefs, or the bravest of warriors. The god would give him a hundred years of life, or a dozen young wives.

Or Colleen.

But Colleen was out in the darkness, now, facing the wolf. Even now the wolf might be prowling near, just beyond the circles of firelight, watching the sheep, and watching the tender girl. Even now Colleen might be screaming--

Duncan's heart sank utterly, for he knew the wolf had beaten him, had destroyed this moment on which the rest of his life depended. He was a herdsman. And if he could make himself forget the sheep, he could not want to forget Colleen.

"Destroy the wolf! Kill it!" he choked out.

"Term wolf questioned."

"The killer! To destroy the killer! That is the only wish I can make!" He could stand the presence of the god no longer, and ran away through the cave, weeping for his ruined life. He ran to find Colleen.

Recall, shouted the electronic voice of the berserker. Trap. Recall. Hearing, its scattered brood of scout machines rose at top acceleration from their planet work, curving and climbing toward their great metal mother. Too slow. They blurred into streaks, into fireworks of incandescent gas.

The berserker was not waiting for them, it was diving for deep space, knowing the planet-weapons reached out for it. It wasted no circuits now to compute why so much life had been sacrificed to trap it. It saw new forcefields thrown up ahead of it, walling it in. No escape. Dispassionately the berserker computer reversed engines, and the machine hurtled once more toward the planet. There was a chance, with a final charge, of destroying a little more life.

The whole sky was in flames, the bones of the hills shuddered underfoot, and at the head of the valley the top of the mountain was torn away and an enormous shaft of something almost invisible poured from it infinitely up into the sky.

Duncan saw Colleen huddling on the open ground, shouting to him, but the buried thunder drowned her voice. The sheep were running and leaping, crying under the terrible sky. Duncan saw the dark wolf among them, running with them in circles, too frightened to be a wolf. He picked up his club and ran, staggering with the shaking earth, after the beast. He had given up everything to kill this wolf, and now the gods were raging.

He caught the wolf, for he ran toward it, while it ran in circles without regard for him. He saw the sky reflected in its eyes, facing him, and he swung his club just as it crouched to leap.

He won. And then he struck again and again, making sure.

All at once there was a blue-white, moving sun in the sky, a marvelous sun that in a minute turned red,

spreading itself out to vanish in the general glow.

Then the earth was still at last. The mountain was dark against the rainbow sky.

The birds were up from the fields, crying and whistling morning, for the shaking had driven them from their nests, and they thought the sky was daylight.

Duncan walked in a daze, until he saw Colleen trying to round up the sheep. Then he waved to her, and trotted after her to help. The wolf was dead, and he had a wonderful sign to tell. The gods had not killed him. Beneath his running feet, the steadiness of the ground seemed permanent.

The End

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