



**STORIES IN WHICH SOME KIND OF TRADITION PLAYS
AN IMPORTANT ROLE...**

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FIRST PLACE

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A Summoner's Tale

by John Burrridge

Today was going to be the year Grandma finally chose me to summon the spirits of Halloween. This year wasn't going to suck like last year when she'd chosen my cousin, Laura; or the year before, when it had been Will—who was okay, I guess. The year before she hadn't chosen anyone and had done the summoning herself.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the clouds. It wasn't raining; that always brought out droopy, soggy spirits. The laurel hedge and the trees cast twilight shadows over the backyard. Just the thing to begin a night of mystery.

All of my relatives—uncles, aunts and cousins, and great-aunts, great-uncles and cousins once removed—stood holding hands. We made a great circle between the back porch of Grandma's beat-up old Victorian house and her koi pond. Outside the circle, Grandma shuffled through the fallen oak and apple leaves around the circle's outside. The sapphire pendant she wore glowed like a morning star.

She went around twice. My right hand tingled and Mom squeezed it; I was supposed to be spinning the protective energy of the circle counter-clockwise. To me, the circle's like a whirlpool. I mentally pushed it along.

The third time Grandma circled, I knew: this was going to be the year I was allowed to join the adults as they scried the veil between the worlds for holes that needed fixing. Instead of staring at Grandma, I fixed my eyes straight across the circle and my gaze fell on my older cousin, Melissa. Back when I was a kid and she was teaching me kung fu, I kind of had a crush on her. All of us boys, and a few of the girls, had crushes on her. She had seemed so mysterious and bad-ass then. I shifted my gaze to slacker Uncle Mike standing next to her.

The leaves rustled as Grandma drew closer. I held my breath. Grandma's steps slowed, and then she walked past me. My stomach dropped. She stopped on the other side of my parents.

"Samantha," Grandma said to my kid sister, who was barely fourteen, "would you like to do the summoning?"

Someone to my left whispered a surprised, "Oh."

Samantha's gaze flicked to me for about a half-second before she said, "Yes, Grandmother."

Crap, crap, crappity-crap! This was not happening. I'd practiced for tonight for the last three weeks. I was the oldest unchosen kid. Next year I'd be eighteen. Only losers like Uncle Mike were called so late. Mom squeezed my hand again. If breaking the circle wouldn't have fried me with its power, I would have left. Which was nothing compared to what Dad and everyone would have done to me afterward.

I gritted my teeth, realized I'd been holding up the power, and slammed the protective energy along.

Grandma stood behind Samantha, covered her hands with her own, and took Samantha's place in the circle.

Samantha stepped forward into the center. She raised her arms and inhaled slowly. "By north and east."

I would have started in the east for new beginnings, but her choice worked, and earth energies bubbled up. Within my Sight, sparkles streamed down from the sky.

“By south and west!” She gathered the magical force as it built. “By the center where we meet as one! As the wheel of the year turns, hear me now!” She reached out and grabbed earth force with her right hand, and the energy from the sky in her left. I frowned. That should have been me working the energy.

“Emblem of wind,” she said, “fire given form by rain and earth, make the portal now!” She brought her hands together. Wind sprang up and scooped the leaves off the ground. A thick column of them whirled into the center of the circle and shadows thickened within and hid Samantha.

A flutter in my stomach signaled the portal’s opening. The first of the spirits of Halloween to appear were rolling pumpkins, rumbling like thunder in the twilight. We kept holding hands and they rumbled clockwise within our circle, contained until Samantha was ready to direct them.

Second came the shadow squirrel. Next, the leaping stag with the moon in his antlers. Then, the great horned owl and the white raven; the umbra cat like a panther with eyes of flame; the horse of bone, and others. Sam called them all—a little Disney-looking, I thought. Part of me wanted Samantha to open the portal too wide or for a rogue spirit to appear so I could leap in and save the day. But the family was gathered together and the wards in Grandma’s garden were strong, so that didn’t happen.

From within the fountain of spiraling leaves and shadow, Samantha called out. “To the Hunt! The Hunt!” The cavalcade of spirits spiraled up in the sky and over the hedge on their way to join the Great Hunt that rides when the sun is at the mid-point between equinox and solstice. The spirits and energy of the Hunt would cleanse the local ley lines of blockages.

The leaves scattered. Samantha kneeled. “May the circle be open,” she said, “but never broken.”

Like opening the gates of a dam before there’s a flood, the magical pressure between the worlds had been relieved for another season. Hooray for my sister.

We all let go of each other's hands. Mom and Dad walked toward Samantha, no doubt to congratulate her and invite her to the adult scrying.

Grandma walked up, her sapphire not quite so bright. I waited for her explanation of why she didn't choose me. "Jack," she said, "the younglings need someone to go with them trick-or-treating." She patted my forearm. "Will you keep them safe?"

I knew the veils between the worlds were thin; it was possible something from the spirit world might stalk them tonight. But I also knew the neighborhood was at greater risk from my cousins than the other way around. Over Grandma's shoulder, I saw Melissa gave me one of her mysterious-sensei looks. Whatever.

I shrugged. "Sure." It wasn't as if I had any choice. I did not roll my eyes at her.

Grandma nodded her head and smiled. "Thank you."

Mom, Dad, and Samantha walked past me. Mom slowed and gave me a questioning look as if to ask if I was going to be okay.

Please don't hug me, please don't hug me, I thought. I knew I had to say something. Something nice. "Congratulations, Sam." If I could have called a lightning storm, I would have.

Dad was beaming at Samantha, who kept her eyes focused on the ground.

Everyone broke into small groups and wandered inside, the kids to get into their costumes, and the adults to prepare for the scrying circle upstairs. I stayed outside and shoved the spent energy of the circle. It whirled a little.

Melissa paused as she walked by me. "Hey, Jack. If it's any consolation, I got passed up until I was twenty."

I smiled the smile I saved for clueless teachers. "Yeah."

She put on that damn mysterious look that always makes me want to break things. "You know you're welcome to come by the dojo any time."

“Uh, thanks,” I said. As if I wanted to be nagged to persevere or focus. I’d be the oldest green belt there. Probably all my friends had blue belts by now.

“Remember, everything’s a test.” She patted me on the shoulder and went inside.

Just what I needed, platitudes. I turned and faced the koi pond. It’s supposed to be calming. Stray shimmers from the ritual sparkled along the ground and air as if to taunt me. “By east and south,” I said, and flicked my hands out. A faint ripple shook the energy. “By west and north.” A leaf leapt up then settled back onto the ground.

I could shape the threads of magic. I had been shaping since I was thirteen. And what did they have me doing? Babysitting.

I growled and went to find the kids.

*

Troupes of costumed trick-or-treaters and their parents walking from house to house muddied up the energy of the street. It was stupid. I tried showing the brats how to spot any stray and potentially dangerous elementals, but they were more interested in candy. Ingrates. I’d like to see their faces if a rogue earth elemental showed up. But so far, I’d only spotted more typical shadow-wings, wheeling like small bats over the trees. Harmless—and the brats said so when I pointed the first one out to them.

“By east and south,” I said, as I waited at the end of a walkway. There might have been a subtle motion of energy, but noticing it was like noticing a ripple in a busy pool in summer. I wondered if I could do something with all the mundanes around.

“Trick or treat!” chorused the kids.

“By west and north,” I said more forcefully and a small wiggle of energy pulsed. Hah, I’d like to see Samantha do better.

“Thank you!” the kids shouted and ran toward me.

I held out a hand palm out. “No running. You owe me a candy bar tax.”

Two hours later, I dragged them back to Grandma's. By then it was that tired time of Trick-or-Treating, when the little kids have finished, candles are starting to gutter out, and mostly older kids are scavenging around. The candy bars I'd levied sat heavily in my stomach. It seemed like a good idea at the time. The things I suffered through to save the brats from a total sugar overdose.

We went through the front door and into the front sitting room. A cauldron of snacks sat on a long table, along with hot cider, and small sandwiches. Melissa was there, cup in hand, dressed in her black sensei outfit, with a star drawn on her forehead. She typically patrolled the yard, countering any stray spirits that show up and discouraging kids who wanted to TP the house. The mundanes would think she was some sort of mystic ninja.

"Hey guys!" Melissa said, "Are you back from trick-or-treating?"

"Yeah," the kids said, and "Look what we got!"

I ditched them and snuck out the back door.

The full moon came out from behind a cloud, sharpening shadows and turning the leaves gray and black. I stepped off the porch and toward the koi pond. The energy from the evening's ritual earlier had died down.

I imagined the evening as it should have gone. Only maybe with thunder and lighting. Unlike Samantha's domesticated summonings, mine would have some wildness in them. "By east and south!" I gestured with my left hand. "By west and north!" I gestured with my right. It wasn't fair. "By the center where we meet as one!" Yeah, but some of us are more equal than others. "As the wheel of the year turns, hear me now!" My voice echoed between the worlds and rippled away from me. Leaves scattered. A lot. Apples and acorns fell from the trees.

"Crap!" I scuttled backward to the porch as Melissa rounded the corner of the house.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I'd gotten a little carried away and put too much power into my words. The laurels at the edge of the property swayed as something fled the

garden's wards. From the other side of the hedge, I heard some middle-schoolers shouting "What the?" and "What was that?"

Oops. Something skittered around the property and away. It might have been a raccoon. Or something.

"Jack," Melissa said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing." I looked at the ritual ground, which had a dormant feel to it. I'd only stirred up the energy a little, and I hadn't summoned anything. At least not on purpose.

Melissa folded her arms across her chest, took an instructor stance, and waited. Crap.

"It's not fair," I said. "I should have done the summoning, not got stuck babysitting."

"What did you summon just now?"

"I don't know. Nothing." It was true. I hadn't done a full-blown ritual. "I was just saying the words as if Grandma had chosen me." And flicking the energy around a little.

"How long have you been 'just saying the words'?"

I shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe since I got humiliated tonight."

"Stop pouting and think."

What the frick? I wasn't going to stand here and take this. I started for the kitchen.

"Jack! If you've been muttering the words under your breath all night, you've defined a large area for the spell to work with."

Maybe I had been muttering part of the summoning spell while I stood at the end of walkways while my cousins got candy. "So?"

"Where'd you send whatever you summoned?" she asked.

The streetlights went out. The kids in the house squealed.

We both froze.

“Ja-ack?”

He held out my hands. “I didn’t send anything anywhere because I didn’t do any ritual.” God, she was treating me like a three-year-old. “I’m not stupid.”

“No,” she said, “but you’re angry, and anger is power.” She stopped and sniffed the air. “And we might need that power.” She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then her eyes snapped open. “C’mon, Jack, I’ll need your help.” She sprinted around the house.

I followed. I could sense something drawing nearer to the front of the property. Damn. Then I nearly killed myself when I tripped over the fricking garden gnomes Grandma has along the side of the house.

By the time I limped up to Melissa out front, she had already swung half of the rusting wrought iron gate shut. I closed the other half with a clang.

In the moonlight and the flickering flames from the jack-o-lanterns at the gateposts, I glimpsed a rolling blob of shadows and glints the size of a large beach ball. It was a pumpkin, a really big one. It thundered back and forth in front of the gate and sucked up leaves. I thought I heard a breathy “Trick or treat.”

Whoa. I took a step back. Before I could ask Melissa if she’d heard it, the blob-pumpkin threw itself against the iron curlicues, and began to ooze around the bars. Some leaves on our side of the gate flew up and stuck to it.

A sinking feeling grew in my stomach. The quivering, dark pumpkin glinted here and there, as if a kindergartner had made a sloppy picture with a black crayon and some glitter. Large, untamed, and shadowy; yep, I’d summoned this alright.

Melissa planted her feet on the ground and held up a palm. “Avert!”

Flames from the jack-o-lanterns around the gates sputtered, but her spell only slowed the blob-pumpkin down.

I looked more closely at it. Its glints were foil and its shadows were candy bar wrappers and some leaves. It smelled like a combination of a compost heap, Halloween candy, and dog poop. My stomach flopped a little. It would be through the gate soon.

I took another step back. “Why isn’t the gate stopping it?”

“Good question,” Melissa said. She crouched down and got closer to it than I would have. “It’s connected to you.” She straightened and pointed at my chest.

I looked down. A thin foggy ribbon of ectoplasm ran from me to the blob. Frick! I passed my hand through the ribbon a few times. It felt like a connection, not a drain—at least not yet.

“Congratulations,” she said quietly. “You’ve created a junk pumpkin out of your anger. I’m guessing those are the wrappers from your candy-bar tax.”

Crap, the brats had squealed.

“So,” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“Me?” I hate it when adults ask you that. “You’re the kung fu lady guarding the circle.”

“You summoned it. Have you noticed it growing larger? You can’t let it get into the house or it’ll trash Grandma’s sanctuary. What if it eats Grandma’s sapphire?”

“Whatever.” I raised my hands. “I’ll just banish it.”

“How?” she asked. “If you send it away, it’ll only become bigger and haunt the street—” It *did* look bigger. “—And don’t forget it’s connected to you.”

Gah, she was right. The blob-pumpkin hadn’t been summoned, exactly; it was a construct I’d made unconsciously. The ectoplasmic line would let it follow me home or to school, pressing against any wards around me. I had a feeling it would easily slurp up all the leaves and wrappers it could until it was the size of a house.

“You’ll have to re-absorb it,” she said.

“Eeuw,” I said.

“The longer you let it run loose, the bigger it’ll get.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just figured that out.” I tried to recall what I’d read about magical constructs. There might be another way to deal with this thing.

Melissa’s eyes narrowed. I’d seen that look before, when she was getting ready to teach a student a lesson, usually by letting them try to flip her.

“Look,” she said, “I don’t know, but I guess Grandma probably chose Samantha because she’s got discipline.”

Thanks for reminding me. “You mean she’s sweet and compliant.” I pointed to the junk pumpkin, which was nearly through the gate. “What’s your point? It’s nearly through.”

“Okay.” She took a breath. “Did I ever tell you about the Halloween when I unleashed a bunch of squirrels?”

“No way!” Spirit squirrels were part of the reason the house was so beat up. “You summoned squirrel-pocolypse?”

She held her hands up, palms out. “Not my proudest moment. My point is, if I had fessed-up right away, I would have only had to deal with five squirrels instead of an army of them.”

I snorted. The kung fu lady had messed up. Wow. I guessed sharing her dark secret was her way of saying she wasn’t perfect. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

The first step was letting the construct know who was boss. I faced it and pointed to the ground. “Sit,” I said, as if addressing a dog. “Stay! Nice angry junk-pumpkin; let me undo you with love and good vibrations....”

The blob quivered on our side of the gate. It jiggled closer until it pressed up against my leg and tugged my pants. Eeeuw. I closed my eyes, the better to see the red glowing tendril of energy flowing from the blob to me.

A wave of anger passed over me. Damn Grandma anyway for starting this with her stupid initiation games. I gulped the cold night air and unclenched my hands. I fought the urge to kick something. It was a good thing my big toe was still throbbing from the garden gnomes. Anyway, getting mad at Grandma wasn't going to help. Besides, she was only following a family tradition far older than her.

"You can do it," Melissa said.

In my mind's eye, Mom, Dad, and Samantha walked in front of me. My heart pounded. They could have at least said something. Samantha always was Dad's favorite. I should test her; I could anchor my pumpkin blob to Samantha and see if she was smart enough to banish it. That would be funny.

Augh, the pumpkin blob was growing. Man, it knew how to push my buttons. The smarter part of me knew the blob was trying to engineer situations where someone would be really pissed off so it would have anger to feed off of.

Good intentions. Right. Maybe saccharine would dispel the blob. "I love my sister," I said. Euew. But the anger pulsing off the pumpkin lessened.

Mom had looked concerned; and at least Samantha was embarrassed. I guess if I had a stupid son or brother I'd feel bad, too. Why did I have to be so stupid?

Through the connection I had with the blob came the suggestion that I could be powerful instead of stupid. I *had* laid down a wide foundation for a spell. A surge of power came through my connection with the junk pumpkin. The wind shifted and picked up. My hands tingled and I felt my Sight expanding to a bird's eye view of the neighborhood I'd walked with the kids. The sleeping energy of Grandma's backyard woke up. The apple and oak trees woke up, too. Clouds rumbled overhead.

My hands lifted and my fingers played with the threads of the veil between the worlds. With the Sight, I saw a silver circle, with my adult relatives' faces looking down through it. The pumpkin's senses were showing me my relatives as they scried the spirit world in Grandma's silver bowl.

“Jack,” Melissa said evenly, “you’re ripping the veil between the worlds.” She was right; the ectoplasmic cord between me and the blob had damaged the boundary to let more magical force through.

I opened my eyes as a flock of air elementals slipped through the fissure. Melissa’s hand flashed into her ninja sash and she threw a handful of maple seeds into the air. The sprites latched onto them and began to wear themselves out keeping the seeds whirling.

“That thing will use you for its own ends if you let it,” Melissa said. “You’ve got to—”

A swarm of fire elementals, small flames without candles, flashed into our world above the junk pumpkin.

Melissa lunged for a jack-o-lantern at the gatepost, opened its lid, and held it aloft. “Fire find form, by water, earth, and loam!”

Her spell grounded most of the sprits into the jack-o-lantern, but three got away and buzzed toward the house. Melissa sprinted after them, the incandescent jack-o-lantern held like a football.

“Shut that thing down!” she shouted over her shoulder.

The skies rumbled and the moonlight dimmed. I felt a sharpening in the air, as if a very large bullseye was shrinking and closing in on where I stood. Grandma’s circle must have noticed the tear in the veil.

I focused on the quivering blob at my feet and took a deep breath. “Bad junk pumpkin. You are not going to use me. Now help me fix this.” I closed my eyes and with my Sight, I unraveled a thread from the ectoplasmic cord from the blob and ran it through the veil near its rip. The electrical tension in the air increased.

Fine. I ran the thread across the fissure and drew the ragged edges together. Lighting flashed red through my eyelids and thunder rumbled overhead. I stitched more of the fissure together. Grandma thought I couldn’t do adult magic. A spell focused on me with a psychic click. I pulled the veil closed. Well, I’d show her. I

pulled more ectoplasmic thread from the blob. Its quivers grew still as I pulled power from it and mended the fissure. See that, Grandma? I closed up the last of the fissure and knotted the thread. Anyone can summon, but I'd just mended the veil between the worlds. Thunder sounded again, but fainter this time.

I'd used up a lot of the blob; it was smaller now. I pulled the remainder of its energy back into me.

I shook all over and opened my eyes. The blob was a debris pile at my feet. "Ugh." I stepped away. "There."

"Good." Melissa walked back from the house, two bright jack-o-lanterns in her hands. "How do you feel?"

I took another step away from the pile and shook my leg where the thing had sidled up against me. "Dirty. Tired." And something else. "Uh, grounded?"

The streetlights came back on.

"Remember what you did tonight." She put the jack-o-lanterns by the stone gateposts and opened the gate. "Let's talk more tomorrow. C'mon, we need a rake."

I noticed that she'd said *we* and not *you*. "Okay." I walked beside her on the way to the tool shed. Maybe next year I could guard the circle with her. "So, just before you told me about squirrel-pocolypse, you got a funny look on your face. What were you thinking?"

She gave me a sideways glance. "I was thinking if I flipped you into that rolling blob of yuck, you'd reflexively blast it apart. End of problem."

"Oh." Crap, I would have smelled like a psychic compost pile for weeks. "Uh, thanks." The questions I had about squirrel-pocolypse remained unasked.

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SECOND PLACE

Gina Burgess is a writer from Tasmania. Her stories range from unsettling to uplifting and often take readers down unexpected paths. Her work has appeared in *Wizards in Space*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine* and *Re:Fiction*.

Break

by Gina Burgess

We drove to the beach every summer. The day after Christmas while everyone else watched cricket and fought over junk on sale in the shops, Dad warmed up Old-Val's engine until she stopped sounding like she had hiccups and Mum packed our stuff into the boot. Then we locked our little flat and drove a gazillion hours.

It was easy to tell when we were getting close. The air turned fishy and I wound my window down to get a good whiff. Then a million colorful shacks appeared on the sides of the road. Dad drove slower as we passed them and the snail-speed just about made my head explode because I wanted so badly to start having fun.

I wriggled and bounced and leaned out the open window, getting a face full of salty breeze. Between the shacks and gum trees, I glimpsed thin slices of beach. On the long drive I'd decided that each grain of sand had a little bit of fun in it and I planned to play with every single one.

"Sit back, Tommo," Dad said, meeting my eyes in the rear-view mirror. "Keep your seatbelt on."

"It is on," I said, though it barely counted, since I'd untangled myself from the chest part. Even though the road was bendy and hard to follow, Dad kept his frown on me until I slithered all the way back into my belt.

Finally, after forever, our shack appeared. It was the smallest and plainest of the lot, the paint flaky and the lawn covered in brown, bald patches. But I didn't care. It was like my teddy, who still snuck into bed with me sometimes—old and worn out, but in a good way. Just like I knew which parts of my teddy had lost their squishiness, I remembered which veranda steps were wonky and shouldn't be walked on.

The moment Old-Val stopped outside the shack, I rammed open the car door and ran a couple of crazy laps across the front lawn, dodging the bald patches, which I pretended were quicksand. The run ended with me slamming against Dad and wrapping my arms around his waist. He laughed and rested his rough hand on my head.

Instead of heading to the front door, Mum led the way around the side of the building, past a fallen wheelie bin and broken dinghy. When we reached the backyard, I made myself ignore the swing set, walking with Mum and Dad onto the back porch. Before the fun could start there was an important job to do, and as always it was up to me to get it done.

Dad removed the glass slats from the little laundry window. He passed each one to Mum, who carefully stacked them on a grubby picnic table. When the window was a dark, spooky hole, Dad beamed at me.

“Ready, Tommo?”

I held my arms over my head and Dad's big hands lifted me up. He turned me about until my toes faced the opening then he slowly fed me into the shack. That was my favorite moment—being half in and out of two different places, partly scorching in the sun and partly not. A moment later, my feet found the sink and I straightened up inside the shack.

“Go on, Tommo,” Dad whispered from outside. “You know what to do.”

I nodded even though he wouldn't see much through the little window then I stepped from the sink to a bench and slithered down its cupboard door like a rock climber. As soon as the worn-out vinyl was under my shoes I shot through the shack.

I ran by the kitchen with the wonky table, rocketed into the musty loungeroom then into the hallway. From there it was a short skip and a jump to the front door, where I tippy-toed, stretched and reached the lock. I laughed as I clicked it. Other years I'd needed to pile up books—make a step—to reach it.

When I pulled the door open, Mum and Dad were waiting in the sun. Mum's arms were packed with our stuff, but Dad's hands were free, and he ruffled my hair.

"Good work, Tommo," he said, easing me aside so Mum could get in.

"That was a tight fit through the window," she said over her shoulder. "You're getting big, Tom. Doubt you'll fit next year."

"Guess you better find that door key you lost, eh, Dad," I said as we followed Mum to the kitchen.

"Yeah." Dad scratched his stubble, smiling crookedly. "Or a neglected shack with a bigger window."

I frowned. Why would we go anywhere other than our own shack?

Dad laughed and shrugged. "We'll figure something out."

*

Dad moved the car down the road a way—he didn't like it sitting in the yard for some reason—and Mum drew the loungeroom curtains closed. She said it was to keep the heat out, but it didn't work that good. It was warm and a bit stuffy, and with the curtains shut we couldn't see the beach or the other shacks.

It would have been great to head straight to the beach, but Mum wanted to unpack first. While we waited for her, me and Dad headed into the backyard with a cricket bat and tennis ball. I was soon giggling flat-out at Dad's hopeless tries to catch the balls I hit, and Dad needed to remind me over and over that playtime in the backyard had to be quiet. After forever, Mum came out looking grumpy. She made a shooshing noise that sounded way louder than my giggles.

"The neighbors will hear," she hissed, and ordered us back inside.

“Can we go to the beach now?” I asked.

“Not quite yet,” Mum said. “We have to get supplies first.”

*

Mum liked to call them supplies but they were pretty much the same as groceries. Just milk, bread and chocolate spread if I was good. “Good” mostly meant I shouldn’t complain about being hot when Mum and Dad insisted we all put on jackets before heading out.

It took a bit to get Old-Val started but eventually she took us up the road to a shop. We hadn’t been to that shop before. Mum and Dad thought it was exciting to use a different shop each year. This one was a tatty old place with a faded sign, and inside we found owners that looked even older than the building. We walked to the aisles with me in the middle, swinging on Mum and Dad’s arms. Then we split up.

Mum went to the counter to ask the gray-haired shopkeepers a ton of questions that I was sure she already knew the answers to. Like: was there somewhere to get a nice counter meal—yep. And: did the beach have lifeguards—nope. She even asked how to put bait on a fishing line. I was about to remind her she did it fine last holiday, but Dad dashed from the aisle he’d been in, took my hand and coaxed me away. Together we explored the rows.

“Whoops, I forgot a basket.” Dad said the same thing every year. He was the most forgetful person in the universe. He lifted bags of raisins and nuts. “Pop these under your jacket, Tommo, just for safe keeping.”

I was lowering my jacket’s zip before the words finished coming from his mouth.

“Now, go and wait by the car for me, mate,” Dad said as he stuffed flour and bread into his own coat. “I’ll be out after I pay.”

When I reached the front of the shop, Mum was still talking with the old couple behind the counter. As they rambled a lot of words at her, she made sneaky little shooing motions at me. Determined to be good and earn my chocolate spread, I hurried from the shop.

Not long later, Dad met me at the car. He looked chubby instead of his usual skinny. With one hand he held his fat middle, while he used the other to unlock Old-Val. After I scooted into the back seat, he let the stuff under his jacket pour onto the seat beside me.

I stripped down to my t-shirt then sifted through the shopping. It was mostly stuff we got all the time, but the brands were different, which made it feel special. The juice had a picture of fruit slices on its label instead of the usual bright sun, and the cereal box had a cartoon elephant instead of a monkey. There wasn't a photo of the cereal. No way to guess the flavor. Just the cute elephant and some big, bold words.

"What does it say, Dad?"

Dad tilted his head. "You don't know?"

I shrugged. I knew some of the letters but not the whole words. "What is it?"

"Well, it's..." Frowning, he looked at the shop. "You know what, Tommo, I need one more thing. Wait here, okay?" He marched off.

Mum passed him in the middle of the carpark and her eyes widened. "Where are you going?"

"Get Old-Val started," Dad said. "I'll only be a tick."

Mum looked small behind Old-Val's steering wheel. I'd never seen her there before because Dad drove us everywhere. And I soon found out why. Mum stomped on pedals and twisted the key, but Old-Val wouldn't start for her.

"Dammit," she hissed, which I pretended not to hear because we weren't supposed to swear. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she shot a grin over her shoulder. "If only we could fit a new car under our jackets, eh, Tom."

I smiled even though I didn't really know what she meant.

After a bit, Dad left the shop again and moved fast towards Old-Val. “Why isn’t the car running?” He waved Mum away and she scrambled over the gear stick into the passenger seat.

Dad turned the key, but Old-Val only coughed. “Bad timing for a breakdown, sweetie,” he murmured as he patted the wheel. “Come on. Don’t let me down.”

Mum gasped and squeezed his shoulder. “Ma and Pa Gray are onto us.” She stabbed a finger at the front of the shop where the old owners were standing. With frowns and slow steps, they started crossing the carpark.

“Oh, hell,” Dad muttered, twisting the key. When Old-Val choked and sputtered, he swore much worse than Mum had, but it didn’t seem a good time to remind him not to use bad words.

“Come on, Val,” Mum moaned, eyes on the old people who were almost at the car.

“Come on, Dad,” I squealed.

Finally, Old-Val hiccupped then revved. Without even asking me if my seatbelt was on, Dad shot the car forward. He turned her so fast I squashed against my door then he rocketed us into the road.

As we flew past shacks, Dad laughed, and I cheered like I did on rides at the fair. Mum didn’t join in. She sat sideways in her seat, a scary looking stare cutting into Dad.

“Whatever you went back for better be important,” she said.

“It is.” Dad patted his t-shirt which was a funny, square shape. “It’s a surprise for later.”

Mum and Dad decided we shouldn’t go back to the shack for a while. We parked Old-Val under some trees where the shadows made her disappear, then Mum asked me where I’d like to pass the time.

“The beach,” I said, which made Mum and Dad laugh.

Mum squeezed me close. “Like there was ever going to be another answer.”

We walked through the hot sun all the way to the beach. By the time we got there, Dad was soaked with sweat and smelled bad, but he looked happy. He whipped his t-shirt off, somehow keeping his surprise present hidden. I copied him, chucking my t-shirt onto the sand beside his. Mum didn’t take hers off because girls don’t do that.

Mum didn’t come in the water either, which was okay because it gave me and Dad time to be boys together. We splashed about in the waves, going further out than Mum would have let us.

Mum smiled at Dad when we finally plodded back to the sand.

“I peeked at the surprise,” she said.

“Approve?” Dad asked.

“We should have thought of it sooner.”

I looked between them, grinning. “What is it?”

Dad tipped his chin towards his t-shirt bunched on the sand. “Take a look.”

I dug into its folds and drew out a book. Colorful cartoons smothered the cover. Animals, furniture, buildings and even a car that looked like Old-Val. It seemed like the book had every single item in the world drawn on it.

“The pictures are good,” I said.

“Yeah, they’re great,” Dad replied. “But it’s the words that are the best.”

I pulled a face. Words were strange puzzles that didn’t make sense to me. They were confusing, like the weird chats Mum and Dad had sometimes. Those talks that they told me not to worry about.

“This is an alphabet book,” Dad said, shifting closer to me to turn the pages. “I’m going to teach you all the words in it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well... because...” He smiled. “Because knowing words makes people better at not losing keys or forgetting shopping baskets. They help people get better starting cars too.”

“But you know words,” I pointed out. “And you forget stuff all the time.”

“You’re right, I do know words,” Dad agreed. “But not all of them and not much else. After I teach you words, I’ll teach you numbers and then someone smarter than me can teach you all the harder stuff. Then one day, maybe you will have a shack that comes with keys included.”

He wrapped an arm around me and turned to page one.

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THIRD PLACE

Leonie Harrison lives on the north coast of New South Wales, Australia. She studied Creative Writing at the University of Canberra and writes mainly short stories and flash fiction with several publications to her credit.

Gone, the Sailor

by Leonie Harrison

There are rules about burial at sea. Olive hadn't expected to learn them quite so soon. "A Viking send-off," Ron had said. "No hole in the ground for me. I want to go out in a blaze of glory." He'd explained how when a Viking dies, his body is set adrift on the sea in a burning boat. "Then his mates keep watch through the night," he'd told her. "And if the sun comes up red the next morning, it's a sign that he was a true Viking warrior."

Stupid bloody idea thought Olive, dismissing it out of hand. Ron couldn't call himself a sailor. He could barely go out in their little runabout without feeling seasick. The closest he came was the half-finished boat in their back yard. Hours he spent on that boat, he and Tim their youngest. The other two had left years ago. Robert, the oldest boy, had some fancy job in computers and Colin worked as a consultant, something to do with business management. They'd both tried to explain to Olive what it was they did, but they may as well have been speaking a foreign language. She could never understand how she and Ron had grown these two young men who lived in such alien worlds. There was the occasional visit home, but the seaside town where they grew up was too small to hold them.

Tim was the practical, down to earth one. Rock solid like his dad. He loved the small community and his job as a mechanic at the local garage. Most of all, he

loved working with his father, the two of them, side by side, lost in the rhythm of bending and shaping the hull. Olive sometimes thought they'd be sorry when it was finished, they'd miss that easy companionship, except now they never would build their dream.

A carpenter. That's what Ron was. A man of wood. His hands were calloused from years of sawing and rasping and planing. He was never happier than when working with his beloved timber. Ron was a solid man with thick neck and shoulders. True he'd gone a bit soft around the middle, and he didn't have much hair left, but his arms were still firm and strong. He wasn't pretty, but he was dependable as they come, always ready to lend a hand. No local fundraiser would be complete without Ron's smiling face and booming voice guaranteed to part even the most reluctant scrooge from his money. "All in a good cause," he'd say. Ron thought the whole world was a good cause, but behind the ruddy complexion and jovial manner lurked the menace of high blood pressure and a struggling heart.

Of course he had to play in the veteran's grudge soccer match. When he pitched full length on the field after scoring the one and only goal, Olive was shocked but not surprised. It took the crowd a little longer to realize that Ron would never get up again. The whistles and cheers hung for a moment in the air then vanished into stunned silence. There were people who still couldn't bring themselves to look Olive in the eye, ashamed to think they'd cheered, as Ron lay helpless on the ground. She wanted to tell them it was okay, that Ron wouldn't mind. He would have enjoyed the rousing finale, but Olive couldn't find the energy or the words. She couldn't find the energy for anything these days. Except the images. No matter how hard she tried they never changed. Time and again she saw Ron kick the ball. Saw the fluke, magnificent goal, and the wide triumphant smile as he punched his fist in the air. Time and again she saw him topple, but she never saw him rise.

Burial at sea was out of the question. "Was he a fisherman?" they'd asked. "Did he serve in the navy?" Ron was neither. How to explain what the sea meant to a landlubber like Ron? The smell, the feel of it, the dip and rise of the swell that to him was like a beautiful symphony. The sea was Ron's soul place.

"You do know there are depth restrictions?" No, she didn't know. Seems Olive didn't know much at all. There was a form of course. A sea dumping permit they

called it. Olive shuddered at the thought of Ron being dumped at sea in waters at least 3,000 meters deep. It was a relief to hang up the phone.

Now, here she sat on the beach surrounded by close friends, as she watched her eldest son attempt to launch the makeshift raft that held his father's ashes. At least Ron wouldn't be on the raft. Olive didn't think she could take that. In his place, on a bed of straw, sat a wooden urn; all that was left of Olive's warm, larger than life husband. It didn't seem right somehow that the great lump of a man who'd meant the world to her could be made so small. Now they would burn him a second time, only events weren't going so smoothly.

"Keep it discreet," Alderman Haynes had said. He'd never had such a request before and wasn't sure what to do. "We'll make it unofficially, official. No need to involve the police. I'll have a word to Tom Bryce. Make sure he's on patrol somewhere else at the time. "

It began just fine. Sunshine. Calm sea. A perfect day all things considered. They hadn't counted on the quirks of nature and the fragility of raw nerves, or on the fact that the whole town would gather to witness Ron's last hurrah. The discreet ritual was turning into a public debacle.

Robert had insisted that he be the one to launch the raft. "I'm the eldest," he'd said. "It's up to me." At thirty-three he looked younger than ever to Olive. She felt a thousand years old herself. She cursed Ron and his grand schemes. This was too much to ask of a son. She'd promised, but promises and crazy notions are not the same as reality. Reality is a son dressed in his best suit, about to burn what remained of his father. Ah, the suit. Robert had insisted. "For dad," he'd said. "I want to do him proud." Olive didn't have the heart to tell him that the rolled up sleeves and trouser legs spoiled the effect.

Olive watched as Robert pushed the raft out through the flat surf, carrying a lump of timber wrapped in a fuel soaked rag. This makeshift torch would light his father on his way. Knee deep in water, Robert steadied himself and leaned forward to give the raft a gentle push. A wave came out of nowhere, tilted the raft, pulled it from Robert's grasp and dumped him in the water.

Probably the only wave in the whole ocean today. Just as well his brothers were there to drag him spluttering from the surf, otherwise they might be having a double send-off. The other two at least had the sense to strip down to their swimmers.

The crowd that had gathered were mostly neighbors and townsfolk, with the odd tourist craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the local color. Olive sensed their concern and support but wished them anywhere but here. They watched as Robert tried his best to wring out his drenched suit, only to give up and wade back out to the raft. His hand reached into his pocket. Out came a soggy box of matches. To make matters worse, the torch he'd dropped when he'd been dumped by the wave was drifting away down the beach, too wet now to be of any use. A groan ran through the crowd.

The look on Robert's face might have been comical under other circumstances. Olive knew that look. She'd seen it countless times. When he was three and the duck bit his fingers. When he was five and the chain broke on his new bike. When he was thirteen and he found out that Sally Wilson had kissed his best friend Jimmy Reynolds. Olive was caught between tenderness and irritation, as she watched the grown up Robert's face crumple, the "oh" of surprise as he struggled to work out how come his matches were wet and what to do next. His brothers weren't much help. There they stood patting their bare chests and thighs searching in invisible pockets for dry matches. Neither of them even smoked.

Olive's friend Betty stifled a moan. Olive's eyes darted to Betty's face, afraid of what she might see there. Olive herself didn't know whether to laugh or cry or curse. She felt rather than saw the crowd turn, heard the indrawn breath as Sergeant Bryce appeared. He was a good man Tom Bryce, and a good policeman. A loner, he'd kept even more to himself since his wife Julie had died two years before. Olive understood that now. Problem was, Sergeant Bryce wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be somewhere else, turning a blind eye. He walked toward her dripping son who was trying his level best not to cry and to look as if he was in control. The men of this town have a lot to learn, thought Olive. She didn't notice the can, not until the Sergeant handed it to Robert, along with a length of dry rag and a lighter. Then without a word he turned and walked away.

The onlookers watched the Sergeant walk back up the beach and barely restrained themselves from clapping and cheering.

Robert took a moment to collect himself while his brothers rescued the drifting raft. He set out again more warily this time. His suit was beyond redemption but he held his arms high to keep the rag and lighter out of the water. When he reached the raft, Tim and Colin held it steady while he doused it in petrol. Tim took the empty can and he and Colin turned to go but Robert called them back. He tore the rag into three strips, one for each of them.

“Oh, my,” thought Olive. She was having trouble breathing now. A great slab had lodged in her chest and something hard had clamped around her throat. Betty’s grip threatened to cut off the circulation in her arm.

Robert lit the rags and together the brothers tossed them onto the raft. Olive’s heart lurched when the petrol caught in a rush and threw the boys off balance, but they managed to steady one another. As the smoke settled and the flames took hold, they leaned forward as one and pushed the raft out to sea. It didn’t go far, just sat there bobbing up and down in the gentle swell. In its bed of flames the urn sat silent and still until the timber burnt through and it slipped beneath the waves. Olive watched as the three grown men, her boys, stood with their arms around each other thigh deep in water. The plank in her chest swelled and threatened to burst at the sight of their heaving shoulders.

The crowd watched in silence as the raft burned. When the last of the flames died, all that was left were a few charred pieces of timber floating on the water. The brothers turned and waded to shore and made their way up the beach towards Olive, their faces stretched in grief and pride. People nodded their heads in respect and clapped them on the back as they passed. Smiles mingled with tears as they dropped, spent and exhausted, at Olive’s side. The four of them huddled together and held each other tight. It was done. Robert tipped back his head and gave a great howl. His brothers joined him, their voices soaring to a crescendo of triumph and relief.

At this signal the crowd erupted into a mighty cheer that turned to a buzz of excited chatter. Gradually, conversations petered out and now that the ceremony

was over, people felt awkward, not sure what to do. Several shuffled toward Olive for a brief word, a kiss, a hug, or a few tears before heading home. Others stayed to begin preparations for the night's vigil.

The mood soon turned to one of celebration as picnic baskets and coolers began to line the beach. There was outright laughter now as logs were piled high for the bonfire. Food and drink softened the night and brought shared memories, teary speeches, and toasts to Ron and Olive and their three sons. The older folk settled into quiet conversations of "remember when" while the young ones fed the bonfire and their spirits.

Out on the ocean against a backdrop of music and laughter, bobbed the charred remains of a timber raft.

*

Olive felt a hand on her shoulder shaking her awake. She didn't remember falling asleep. She rubbed her eyes and looked up to see Tom Bryce standing over her. Out of uniform he looked younger, more relaxed. The boys were already awake, coaxing the embers of the bonfire to life. A light breeze played across the water and the only sound was the gentle lap of the waves.

"You won't want to miss this," said Tom. He pulled Olive to her feet, took her gently by the shoulders and turned her round to see what was unfolding. People had begun to stir. They crawled out of their sleeping bags or from under blankets and rose to their feet. Dozens more leaned against the handrail and at some unspoken signal, linked arms to form a human chain of support and solidarity. Olive gasped as she turned toward the headland. There must have been twenty or more cars, with more still, down on the breakwater, the beam of their headlights pointing out to sea. The town had come to pay its last respects.

Olive opened her mouth to say something but there were no words for what she felt. Tom nodded. Something in his eyes told Olive that he understood. He smiled at her, handed her a steaming mug of tea, and looked towards the sea. Olive turned to follow his gaze and caught her breath. Before them stretched the first glimmer of a new dawn. It began as a bright line of silver along the horizon. It ran across

the water, up into the sky, and pushed aside the stars and the darkness. The spreading light stained the morning first a pearly white, then yellow, then gold. A gasp rippled across the headland and along the beachfront as a giant, red ball climbed from the ocean up into the sky. It rose to welcome a Viking warrior home.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Jacob Mooney is a Game Designer working in Chicago, Illinois. He majored in Game Development and minored in Fiction Writing in college. Since he was young he's been enchanted by fantasy, and now all he wants to do is take apart his favorite games and stories to see how they work.

Breathe

by Jacob Mooney

Hernam regularly left his Magic lessons early to wander. And when he wandered, he always wandered to shore.

It was a bright morning with brisk wind and the call of gulls overhead. A strip of beach separated the woodland from the sea. It was as if the forest and the water were kissing, and the beach and the shallows were where their faces met. Hernam admired the trees for their strength and their flexibility. Like water, they could crash or they could wave.

Sudden movement caught the merfolk's eye. He watched as a pale-skinned woman, an elf, emerged from around a bend in the shore pushing a small boat into the water. The merfolk sank down and swam closer. He had never seen an elf on the water.

A small anchor was dropped a little way from shore. Then something else was dropped. Something large. It made a dull crash as it broke the surface and threw up a curtain of bubbles. The merfolk watched as the curtain pulled away to reveal the elf again, this time wearing some sort of ingenious contraption over her head and shoulders. It looked like a knight's helm and pauldrons, except for the large panel

of glass over the face, and the tank of air strapped to her back. When she saw him, her eyes lit up. Her first instinct was, for some reason, to reach out and grab him by the shoulders. Startled, the merfolk squirmed out of it, and the elf apologized. Or, she appeared to—no sound escaped her enclosure, but he could read her expression.

On the surface, she opened the face of her diver's helm, and words spilled out.

"Oh my gods I am so, so sorry. I just—this is my first field test with this prototype—and I didn't think it was going to work, and I *certainly* didn't think I would meet a merfolk and—"

The merfolk smiled and laughed, which confused her. "Let's start with names," he said, lifting a palm above the waves they tread. She touched her palm to his in the merfolk greeting.

"Hernam," he said.

"Shallah, nice to meet you."

"B'isgual," he returned. It was Elvish for "likewise." For some reason he wanted to impress her.

"Oh—you know some?" Her reply came in Merfolk. Though her accent was terrible, she clearly knew it better than he knew Elvish.

*

They spent the day together. Hernam aiding Shallah in various tests of her new breathing apparatus. They found it easy to speak to one another. They found a shared history between themselves.

"You know, I often take walks in this forest," he said. He was in the water, his hands gripping the rim of the boat. She was inside, making miniscule adjustments. They were ringed on three sides by rock cliffs, and Hernam was showing her the entrance to a cave beneath the surface.

“You do?” She cocked her head as if she could not see why he would. Her braid of blonde hair spilled over her shoulder.

He nodded. “Though it wins me less than love from my school.”

“What does ‘school’ mean in the common tongue?” she asked, for they had been speaking in Merfolk.

“It can mean my classmates and teachers, or it can mean my whole community—everyone I migrate with. In this case, it’s both. Because nobody likes a landwalker. It’s ‘irrational behavior’. And that can’t be trusted.”

“Can’t be trusted!” Shallah laughed, then grinned rebelliously, “I certainly know how you feel.”

“You do?” Waves clucked about the side of the boat as Shallah straightened up and donned the helm. Hernam moved to better see her face.

“Absolutely.” Her words echoed slightly in the helm. “You’ve never seen an elf look anything like *this*, I’ll wager.”

“That I have not.”

Shallah descended into the water with a crash, then tread beside him, opening her panel to speak. “My clan has all but disowned me.”

“No!”

She nodded, “It is true. Nobody will speak to the girl who left the forest at a young age to travel south, and learn Artifice in the city. It’s unnatural. And for elves, nothing that isn’t natural is to be trusted.”

“Well,” Hernam’s arms slid back and forth across the tops of the waves, “I trust you.”

“Good to hear! I trust you too, Hernam. And I really have to thank you—I’ve gotten more research done today than I would have all week... So thanks.”

Hernam waved it off, “It’s nothing... But you will have to show me around the forest in return some day.”

“Well that’s only fair I think.” She looked at him then, recognition in her eyes. “I’m looking forward to it.”

They explored the cave safely, and said goodbye near sunset. Shallah returned to her clan to make calculations and adjustments. Hernam went back to his school to lie about where he’d been all day.

The next week they met in the Forest. Shallah taught him the names in Elvish of the plants and trees which Hernam had admired for so long yet had never investigated. It was sunny and hot, but humid. Shallah explained that, in the City to the South, it was never this humid. It was always hot and dry. Hernam would not last one minute there, she explained. But Shallah loved it. The bricks upon bricks upon bricks of the city. And where there were no bricks, there was tile. Gorgeous and in as many colors as there were shells in the sea.

“Then why come back?” Hernam asked.

Shallah laughed as if it should be obvious, but then had difficulty forming her answer. “I suppose you could say my studies brought me home,” she said finally. “I’ve always loved the water and there is precious little of it in the south.”

Hernam sat at the bank of a river, his feet cutting into the clear waters, “You could say it was Destiny that brought you back.”

“My father would say that, but... I don’t believe in destiny,” she said with a hint of disdain. She sat cross-legged beside him, not getting her boots wet. “It was rational to leave the desert in order to study the ocean.”

Hernam placed his webbed hands behind him and leaned into a shaft of sun that was warming his back. “Suit yourself,” he said placidly, then closed his eyes.

“You aren’t mad?” She placed her hands behind her as well. They fell close to his own, inches from touching. “Mad I don’t believe in... what you believe in?”

Hernam snickered, “I don’t believe it’s my *Destiny* to be mad at you.”

Shallah rolled her eyes.

“Besides, I already don’t believe in what my *school* believes in. This overriding notion that every little thing needs to be carefully reasoned and perfectly logical.”

“Sounds like a wonderful change of pace to me,” Shallah said. She let her voice trail off into quiet.

*

They sat there for a little longer, nobody saying much, listening mostly to the wind in the trees. The birds overhead. The gurgle of the river before them.

“When do you migrate away?” she found herself asking.

Hernam turned to look at her. “In a little over a month...”

“Ah.” Shallah nodded, but looked sad.

“When do you resume class at the Academy?”

“A month and seventeen days. I could argue for a continuation, but either way you’d be gone before I got back.” Then she looked at him. “It seems we weren’t destined to know each other very long.”

Hernam closed his eyes again and sighed contentedly. “We will see. Besides, you don’t believe in Destiny, remember?”

*

They continued like this for some time, meeting every few days, sometimes for hours, sometimes just briefly. Inevitably, someone from Hernam’s school was sent to see where he was wandering. Inevitably, someone from Shallah’s clan was sent to follow her. And inevitably, the two were seen together, alone, where sea met shore. Kissing.

For their part, Hernam’s school had sent his sister after him. When she saw their lips meet she sprang from the shallows despite herself.

“Hernam!” she cried, her voice a muddled twist of confusion, surprise, and anger.

Simultaneously, a thin wiry elf in fabrics and face paint emerged with a rush from the nearby tree cover. Shallah looked at the elf. Hernam looked at his sister.

“Wait!” he called, but she was well away, her bright blue face bruised red with shame. A splash only, and she was gone. Hernam glanced back to Shallah, who continued to stare angrily at the distant painted elf. The painted elf turned and spat, then fled into the forest like a startled deer.

“Who was that?” asked Hernam.

“A despicably nosy cousin.” Shallah turned from watching the painted elf go. Her forehead was wrinkled in deep, worried thoughts. “I assume you knew the merfolk?”

Hernam nodded. “My sister. My entire school will have heard within the hour.”

“Mine too.” She sighed, then covered her face with her hand.

“Well, what do we do?” Hernam asked. He was used to Shallah always having a well-reasoned plan at hand. But while she’d known this might happen, she had nothing. They kissed goodbye, and braced themselves for what was waiting for them at home.

*

“How could this happen?!” Hernam’s mother cried, hands fluttering to the brooch which marked her as headmistress of the school.

Hernam did not answer. The question was rhetorical. In the corner of the chamber floated his sister, scowling. She would have cried, could merfolk shed tears.

“My son, highest in his studies.” His mother pinned him with her gold-eyed glare. “That he—that *you*—could make such an error, it’s—”

“Inconceivable.” Hernam mouthed it. He dared not speak.

“Inconceivable!” his mother thundered.

In the water, it was work to gesture with one's whole arm. Hernam's mother worked. She pushed forward, swimming closer and chopping her hand down like a blade.

"She is not of your school." The blade came down.

"She is not of your culture." The blade came down.

"She is not of your *species*!" The blade came down. "The relationship is completely irrational, and it reflects poorly upon your family." She glared at Hernam, nostrils flaring with her gills. "I forbid you from seeing her."

Hernam met her gaze all at once. "You couldn't be more *wrong*. She is more like me than anyone I've met. To pursue someone who makes you feel at home... is perfectly reasonable. And I am far past the age at which you can forbid me from doing *anything*."

The confidence left his mother's face. In the corner, Hernam's sister drifted forwards, sensing it was coming to a head.

"I will call a vote tomorrow," his mother said. "We will begin the migration early."

Hernam called the bluff. "To call the school to migrate on account of your troublemaking landwalker son... Now *that* would be irrational. And besides—when the next migration begins, I will *not* be coming with you."

"You can't be serious!" Hernam's sister butted in. But she was cut short by his mother.

"...I can assure you he is," she said. Hernam expected her to go on, but she didn't. She just looked into him wearing a face weathered with wisdom and worry. The silence grew painful before she finally beckoned him over, and they hugged.

"There is nothing I can say to change your mind?" she asked, sadly.

"Nothing."

She pulled away to look at him again. “Then it is an experiment... One which I still think will fail, but one which will hopefully bear fruit. You will be here when we return, at the least. A year is not such a long time.”

“Thank... you.” Hernam said, completely astonished by his mother’s reversal.

“You can’t allow this!” Hernam’s sister exclaimed, “What he’s doing is... It’s more than irrational, it’s disgusting!”

“You show your bias, then.” Hernam’s mother turned to his sister. “I don’t condone this line of action—even slightly—but I cannot stop your brother from doing what he feels is right. So even though I think this is the most absurd of follies, I am hoping to be proven wrong.” She turned back to Hernam. “Every set needs its outliers, Hernam. I was always glad you were one of mine. Even if I didn’t show it.”

They hugged again. “We will miss you,” she said.

“As I will miss you,” Hernam replied.

*

The next day, Hernam found Shallah sitting in her boat—anchored, but drifting. “Hello,” was all she said when he surfaced. She shifted to compensate for the weight he leaned on the lip of the vessel.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“You first.”

After he told her how his school had taken the news, Shallah said, “That’s amazing... I’m so glad you’ve decided to stay.” Then she began to tear up. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and let out a shuddering sigh.

“What happened?”

Shallah paused, as if waiting to say it would make it less true. “I have finally been disowned by my clan. The elders are erasing my name from the histories of my people. When they are finished, it will be as if I never lived.”

“Gods, Shallah... And your family is *okay* with that?”

“My father is the one who called for it.”

Hernam gaped. “There is nothing we can do to stop it?”

She took a deep breath and blew it out. “No,” she said, “but it hardly matters. If I will not be remembered by the Elves, I will be remembered by the Humans. I will be remembered for *this*.” She lifted her breathing apparatus and placed it over her head.

*

From time to time they would be witnessed by some curious merfolk or wary elf, but for the most part they were left alone over the weeks that followed. When Hernam’s school migrated, he was there to see them off. There were those that did not understand, and those that cursed him, but there were more who wished him well, and more who would miss him. Shallah threw herself into her studies. She changed, though never into someone who Hernam did not love. But her invention was what she spent all her energy on. When she needed to rest was when they strolled through the forest, was when he felt closest to her. He helped her build a modest hut hidden in the forest, but close to the sea. Trips were made back to her clan’s enclave to retrieve maps, notes, books, and tools, and the looks they got were far less than savory. In time, Shallah left for the Academy and argued to continue her field study. Several weeks passed before she returned with raw materials and a small forge. “I’m going to need a bigger hut!” was the first thing she said to Hernam before running into his arms.

Her research advanced in leaps and bounds, as did Hernam’s knowledge of the forest. But sometimes he felt as if life had gotten away from him, as if he bore no resemblance to the him that had existed before. He imagined himself unanchored to the future, adrift amongst several possible Destinies, each a river with a depth too dark to judge.

*

Winter was difficult. The waters finally ran too cold, and Hernam moved ashore, into Shallah's hut, which they had expanded. Her dives had stopped too, but her work continued. A new design—lighter, stronger, greater air capacity. She spoke of a shipwreck at the bottom of the bay that had caught her interest. A dive deeper by far than any they had tried before.

"Is that safe?" Hernam asked. A hot damp towel combatted the chill and dryness of the winter air.

Shallah regarded a chalkboard festooned with calculations. She rolled the chalk across her knuckles. Finally, she said, "The chance of an accident is insignificant enough that I would risk it."

"So it *isn't* safe."

"It's roughly as safe as that cave we explored the first time I met you."

"Okay..."

Shallah left her notes to come sit by Hernam. She took his hand and said, "Thank you, though."

"For what?"

"For being worried."

Hernam smiled, then exchanged his towel for a new one from the pot of water by the fire.

"I never see you studying Magic," Shallah said.

"That's my problem. I've never needed to. My teacher would show me the next spell and I would simply get it. Now all my teachers have gone and I have no idea how to teach myself anything new."

"Oh." Shallah sat still as if an idea had struck her. "I could teach you that. That's basically all I've ever known. How to teach myself, that is."

“I’m honored. But you’re too busy with your research right now.”

“I could make time.”

“That’s okay... Maybe after this next dive, huh?”

Shallah smiled.

*

At the height of spring, the waters finally warmed. Shallah had been working ceaselessly on her new diving helm. Meanwhile, Hernam scouted the shipwreck they would be exploring. There was nowhere Shallah could dive that merfolk had not already been, but Hernam had not visited the wreck for many years. He did not remember it well. When he arrived, he found it even larger and grander than he remembered. An immense galleon, snapped in half by some monster or storm, its many masts collapsed inwards and leaning against one another like the legs of some exhausted spider. Seaweed and mold colored its rotted bulk. Inside, there were dozens of rooms. Hernam spent the day there and saw perhaps half the ship. “If all goes well, Shallah will be picking it over for eons,” Hernam thought.

*

It was a week later that the diving helm was ready. Polished bronze alloy with shiny steel rivets. A wider view-panel that bubbled outwards from the wearer’s face. Canisters which held more air more securely. Shallah was very pleased with the results of her effort.

“Don’t forget,” Shallah continued, “if something unexpected happens and I need your help getting to the surface, don’t rush. There’s just enough of a pressure difference that it could cripple me.”

“Delightful,” Hernam called, picking his head out of the water as he powered the rowboat out into the open bay with his kicks.

She wore her rebellious grin.

*

They had picked a good day to dive. Clouds flew scattered overhead, but there were no signs of storm. The sun warmed them, and the air was calm and fresh. When they reached their destination, they dropped anchor, and Shallah donned the diver's helm.

"How do I look?"

"Enchanting, but it's got nothing to do with the helm."

She laughed, sealed the viewport, and slipped over the side.

*

Shallah was much more graceful underwater with the lighter diving helm. Hernam took her by the hand and led her gradually to the ocean floor, passing in and out of shadows thrown by clouds as they went.

"Amazed," Shallah said, using the underwater signs Hernam had taught her.

"Amazing?" Hernam signed back. Shallah nodded from inside her helm. They were at the sea floor, and the ship towered above them.

"What was her name?" Shallah asked.

"I never found out. Must be hidden." Hernam pointed to the exterior of the hull and signed, "Seaweed," then, "Barnacles."

Shallah floated for a moment, thoughts rising and falling with her body. "I'll call her Daugerodeen." She had to sign the sounds to Hernam, who could only scratch his head at the name.

"I'll explain later."

They began at the back of the ship. A massive gouge where the hull had run up against a stony outcropping made it easy to swim inside. There, they found some sort of vault or trophy room. Large empty cases of tarnished bronze were arrayed all around them, their glass panels long since shattered and embedded into the sodden crimson rug, and their treasures long since stolen by opportunistic

merfolk. Shallah was taking notes using an enchanted pen and journal left by Hernam's school. Her words were inked white on green kelp pages.

The next door led to a hallway lined with rusted candelabras and ruined portraits. Another room was storage. Everything had been touched by the sea. Barnacles, mold, anemones, urchins, mollusks—it all covered and was covered by the paraphernalia of this decadent coffin. They swam up some stairs, where the first door they tried was stuck. Shallah braced herself against the wall and pulled. The door popped open, tearing a chunk off the rotten frame. The interior of the room was dark. And flat. It was a moment before they realized they were staring into a wall of skin. Then a barrel-sized knot of flesh opened to reveal a yellowed eye.

Hernam and Shallah reflexively clasped each other's hands. With a deep groan, the great octopus twisted and shook, then exploded upwards through the galleon. Timber flew through the water. A hole was punched through to the top deck. The current created by the beast tore at them and sucked them through the ruined doorway. By the time Hernam realized what had happened, he was upside-down, sinking back towards the sea floor along with tons of debris that had been kicked up by the monster's departure. At some point, he had let go of Shallah's hand. He looked for her, but she was lost somewhere beneath him in a cloud of settling sand. A shadow passed above, and he turned to see that one of the ship's masts had cracked in two, and one of the halves was tumbling down upon him. It nearly took him out, but he avoided it. Then he thought of Shallah.

The sand had settled and the sun was shining down through the hole in the ship clear to the bottom when he finally found her. She was alive, but pinned beneath a shattered desk. Weighing down the desk were layers of debris and the fallen mast. All he could see of her was her upper body. Her bubble visor had hairline cracks, but wasn't leaking. Despite that, there was water in the helm. Something had ruptured.

"Oh," she said into the visor, "There you are."

"Don't speak," Hernam signed.

“Right... Sorry...” she signed back. Her fingers were sluggish, as if she were ready to go to sleep.

“Are you hurt?”

“Yes, but not bad. I’m pinned. Lost an air tank. My full one.” There was some life that came back to her eyes. He had to move her, but how? She was low on air. He could conjure more, but not forever. He also couldn’t fix her suit. He needed more time. He needed more power. He needed...

“Stay calm,” he told her. “I’ll be back soon.” He began to swim away, but she caught his foot. When he looked down, she was pointing to something half-buried in the sand. It was the kelp journal, with the enchanted pen. When he picked it up, she motioned for him to leave it by her. He gave her the journal, and held her hand as he pressed the pen into it. Then he was gone, swimming like an arrow through the water.

Hernam had not checked the sandhomes in weeks. It was still early, but there was a chance they might be back. But when he crested the dunes overlooking the sandhomes, merfolk were in sight, tending to the damages inflicted by a year of neglect. He found his sister amongst a handful of workers. A crowd had already gathered around him to see what was going on. When he explained what had happened, one of the merfolk beside his sister scoffed.

“You expect us to care?” the merfolk signed. “Deserter, you are owed nothing. And besides, you and that revolting woman are getting just what you deserve!”

Then Hernam’s sister unsheathed her blade. Fortunately for Hernam, it was not pointed at him. “Stow that talk,” she signed, “before I make you eat those fingers. This is my brother you’re speaking to. And even though we might not like it, he’s done nothing wrong. If he needs our help, we’re helping.” And as simply as that, he had the school behind him.

*

Shallah was not moving when they returned to the wreck. The water in her helm had slowly risen. She had laid on her side to keep her mouth above the water. The

merfolk, through their strength and their Magic, set to work shifting the debris, while Hernam conjured air into her helmet. Her eyes fluttered awake.

“Just in time,” she signed. Each word came so slowly.

Hernam held her hands still, “Take it easy now, we’re getting you out of here.”

They shifted the debris, and the water went red. One of Shallah’s legs had been crushed. Simultaneously, water rushed into the helm from wherever it was ruptured, and air started seeping out of the cracks in her visor. Hernam tried to force air back in, but it was no good.

His sister appeared at his side. “We need to get her to the surface,” she signed, trying to hide the shock on her face.

“Not too fast. The pressure could kill her.”

“Drowning will kill her faster.” Then she added, “We’ll be careful.”

*

They worked together to raise her. Two merfolk carried her while Hernam and his sister fought to flush water out of the suit and to give her air to breathe. It was difficult to say if any of it was helping. At the surface, they loaded her onto the rowboat and Hernam climbed in. Clumsily, he undid the helm. Shallah’s leg was alarming, but he forced himself to focus on her face. He leaned over and started performing compressions on her chest, every few beats checking for breath, then putting his lips to hers and pressing air into her. It was a technique Shallah had taught him for just such an occasion, but now there was nobody to tell him if he was doing it right. He became conscious of the stillness all around him. The wind had died. There were no gulls overhead. The merfolk looked on in a ring around him, silent—scales aglitter on a bright blue day. The only sounds were of his hands against her chest, and of the waves clucking against the sides of the boat.

“Breathe,” he asked.

“Breathe... Breathe!”

“Breathe-breathe-breathe. *Please*, breathe.”

Water spurted out of the elf’s mouth, but she did not cough or move. A cloud drifted over the sun. The body would not breathe.

Hernam sat back, stunned. He was dimly aware of activity around him. Merfolk moved about. His sister asked him a question and he answered, though he didn’t hear himself respond. She put something into his hands, and he recognized the kelp journal. He would have cried, if merfolk could shed tears. A merfolk could still sob though—and wail—and lash about until his sister holds him close.

*

Figures were standing on the beach. When the merfolk grew closer, they recognized the figures as elves, clad in all manner of skins and bones and scales. There were perhaps seventy of them. The whole clan, maybe. They looked like a painting. Pale faces in earthy clothes against the greens of the forest, with tan beach beneath them and blue sky above. Despite their somber, reserved looks, Hernam clenched fists at the sight of them. The rowboat ran aground on the beach, and seven of the elves stepped forward onto the sand.

Hernam stood protectively before the rowboat and the other merfolk. “Why are *you* here?” He addressed the elf at the center, who seemed to be their leader. He had a beard with leaves in it, and antlers adorned his shoulders. When the elf looked at him, Hernam was struck by the sorrow that was there.

“It is natural for a father to know when he has outlived his child... We’ve come to mourn her.”

“You struck her from your histories. You disowned her, erased her.”

“Three of my deepest regrets.” The wind put fingers through his beard as he walked up to Hernam and offered his hand. Hernam eyed it warily.

“Will you give her to us? It has been a long time since she was home.”

“Will you write her back into your clan?”

For some reason, this was the moment her father began crying. Eyes wells of tears, all he could say was, “Of course.”

They clasped wrists, in the elvish fashion. Hernam attended the funeral, endured a mixture of looks, from grateful to murderous. Afterwards, he was invited back to the school. He continued to live in Shallah’s hut while he considered it. He still had all her notes, her books. He still had her helm, pristine except for the rupture and the hairline cracks in the glass. It was almost like he was looking at her face.

For what must have been the hundredth time, he took out the kelp journal and read the notes she’d taken that day. Some were plans she’d already had to improve her prototype, others were notes on the ship. He could tell what had been written when because her handwriting changed. After she’d been pinned, she wrote:

“Daugerrodeen: Elvish goddess of death and curiosity.”

“I should have known what I was doing when I picked that name, but as you keep reminding me, I don’t believe in fate—or in tempting her.”

...

“I promised I would teach you how to teach yourself.”

“Quite simple, really.”

“Just fail.”

“Then don’t stop failing—slowly, failures get smaller.”

“Well, sometimes.”

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

...

“Had hoped dying would feel different.”

“More special.”

“Somewhat let down.”

...

“Is this what Destiny feels like?”

“I forgot to say I love you.”

...

“Well, I do.”

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HONORABLE MENTION

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D.N.I.F.

by Andrew MacQuarrie

The first flash arcs across the edge of Bunko's peripheral. It's about to happen again, and at the worst possible time. Except it could be worse. It could always be worse. Isn't that what he's always told himself? When his mom got sick and he had to delay pilot training a whole year. When he got orders to stay at Vance as an instructor pilot and spent his first assignment in the backseat of a T-38 on long, boring training sorties over Enid, Oklahoma. And now here, flying a refueling track somewhere out over the Atlantic waiting his turn to approach the tanker as his vision goes to shit. Truth is, it could be worse. At least if something happens out here there isn't anyone below. No innocent women or children or suburban development to pay the price for his refusal to accept what's been so damn obvious for so damn long.

Another arc flashes, this one more jagged, a whole swath of the wild blue yonder outside his cockpit disappearing for a long, fraught second before snapping back, shaken and out of focus. It's been happening more often—at least once a week the last few months. It was only a matter of time before it happened here. He should've known. He should've said something. He should've ripped the wings off his chest and never set foot inside a jet again. That's what he should've done. But here he is, soaring through the air at 29,000 feet, his eyes filled with chaff and

flare, and all Bunko can do is grip the stick and brace himself for the first airborne ocular migraine of his career.

“Boss-27, cleared to refuel.”

Bunko double-taps his comm to signal that he understands, that he’s ready. But he’s not. He tracks his wingman as the nimble Viper drifts down and out into the kaleidoscoped farrago of lights and waves that aren’t actually there. The flashes are worse than usual. His head usually doesn’t hurt until after, but this time it’s already pounding. He decides to hold his breath. That’s worked before. He can’t close both eyes, so he closes his left.

“Boss-27, cleared to refuel.”

Bunko double-taps his comm again. He forces a deep breath. He focuses on the tanker up ahead, its boom extended like some sort of loaded mechanical proboscis, then eases his jet forward through the obedient air at 300 knots.

Another flash. The biggest he’s ever seen. And now his whole left eye is fucked.

Bunko eases back on the throttle. He can feel the sweat dripping down his neck. His heart is racing. He waits for it to pass. It has to pass. It always passes.

But this time it’s not passing.

“Bunko?” The tilt in his wingman’s voice is more perturbed than worried.

“Yeah.” Bunko releases the comm and tries to think of something to say to buy some time. He’s never been one to slow things down, but right now that’s exactly what he needs. “My door’s jammed.”

It’s a shitty excuse. He knows it as soon as he says it, his right eye still clear enough to make out the manual override in front of him.

“Did you pull the handle?”

Bunko double-taps the comm. The question annoys him more than it should.

“DC-34, standby. Boss-27 is having some trouble getting his receptacle open.”

It’s a full-on rave in Bunko’s left eye now. He can’t see shit, and the icepick twisting into his temple is twice the size it was a minute ago. He’s going to have to write this up. A jammed receptacle door and a failed manual override? That’s a big deal. Potentially catastrophic. Of course the maintainers aren’t gonna find anything wrong. They’ll just assume he was confused or distracted, that he wouldn’t know the difference between a jammed door and a jammed toe. But at least they won’t know what really happened. He can handle everyone in the squadron thinking he’s a dumbass. It’s the alternative that scares the shit out of him.

“Bunko, I’m gonna fly over. If you can’t get it open, we’re gonna have to call BINGO and head home.”

Bunko clambers for an excuse to call him off as the Viper swings back into the last clear patch of blue he can see.

But then it breaks. Thank God, it finally breaks. Not completely—there are still squiggles in the lower corner of his left eye, but the rest is clear. His head hurts even more now, worse than he ever remembers it hurting before, but at least he can see. Thank God, he can see.

“Belay my last. Door is open. Boss-27, ready to refuel.”

His wingman says nothing. The crisp double-tap of his comm is as loud and clear as any of the shit he’s going to get back at the squadron after they land. He’s not worried about the shit, though. At least he’ll be there to take it. At least he’ll fly another day.

*

The first time Bunko’s eyes went batshit was in college. Before he was Bunko. When he was still just Matt, the front-of-the-classroom aerospace engineering major who would’ve traded his arms for wings if he could. He was at a party with the other ROTC kids and a couple dozen civilian undergrads who’d been brave enough to take on student loans. It was the Friday after midterms, the fall

semester of his junior year. He didn't normally go to those parties. There was always too much work to do, and he wouldn't dare risk showing up to his Saturday morning flight lessons cooked, not when a single sub-stellar eval could be the difference between his chances at a pilot slot or being diverted to navigator school.

That semester, though, had been particularly brutal. The work was getting harder, the intro courses from his first couple of years giving way to an onslaught of 300- and 400-level classes, most of which had dealt him only-slightly-above-average grades that wouldn't do him any favors when it came time to stand out on the pilot selection board. His roommates—who were also cadets, who would've been perfectly content falling into some boring contracting or personnelist job and paying back their time *en route* to a six-figure career in the civilian sector—went out every night, partying with all the other kids who hadn't signed their lives away, bringing back more girls to the apartment than he knew by name. That life had never appealed to him—those guys were running their engines on afterburner before they'd even taken off. But that semester, and that night in particular, he couldn't help but wonder if he was the one stuck on the ground.

The party wasn't fun. It was at some beat up split-level off campus with cheap Halloween decorations and old University flags hanging from the stairs. The place was buzzing—music thumping, cheap beer flowing, laughter bouncing off the walls—but it all seemed to float right through Bunko. It felt like forever since he'd had a good night's sleep, the last few weeks having been perforated with cram sessions and all-nighters leading up to his final midterm earlier that afternoon. After an hour or two of pretending to enjoy himself, he decided to go home and sleep it off and rethink his life in the morning. But then he bumped into one of his roommates, who was with a girl, who was with a friend who was pretty and thought it was so "hot" that Bunko was going to be a pilot, her hand touching the inside of his arm as she said it.

So he decided to stay. He let loose. He flirted. He downplayed how hard he'd worked to get as far as he had and let her thank him for the service he was yet to fulfill. She made him her favorite drink. He gulped it down. He invited her back to his place with a confidence pumping through his veins like he'd never felt before.

Then when she bit her lip and took him by the hand and whispered in his ear it started pumping elsewhere.

They never made it to the apartment. The flashes in his left eye started shortly after they stepped outside. He tried to ignore it at first, her warm breath on his neck enough to overpower just about anything. But then the flashing got bigger and brighter and his left temple started to throb.

“Are you okay?” she said. There was concern in her eyes, whether for him or for the night she’d wagered on him, he couldn’t say.

“I’m sorry,” he said, struggling to get the words out, his whole left eye a scintillating shit-show. And then he left her there. He stumbled home, his eye squeezed shut and still going nuts, then popped three Motrins and buried himself in bed and waited for it to end.

*

He skipped his flight lesson the next morning, then spent the rest of the weekend scouring the internet for answers. He went back to the house where the party had been, the weathered facade looking somehow even gloomier by the light of day. No one else had had any sort of reaction, and nobody knew the girl he’d tried to go home with. He couldn’t remember her name. Her touch, the warmth of her breath in his ear—he remembered those as clear as the sky above. But not her name. And where that warmth had filled him with desire only a few hours before, now the thought of it only made him angry. Everything about that night had been a distraction, a symptom of his weakness, and having come up with no better explanation for why his eye had short-circuited, he made up his mind that the girl he’d almost gone home with must have put something in his drink.

Then the anger devolved into horror. Monday, in between classes, a call from his First Sergeant: Drug test. Routine. Random. Report no later than one hour. They happened all the time. He’d taken at least half a dozen whiz-quizzes since his freshman year. They were more of an annoyance than anything else. This time, though, it was so much more. This time it was the end of everything he’d ever wanted.

He waited as long as possible. He drank as much water as he could stomach, hoping that maybe it would dilute whatever miscreant was lurking in his piss. He double-timed over to the library and pounded out a desperate, typo-laden memo cataloguing in as much detail as he could the events of that Friday night. He printed it, signed it, then ran across campus to the post office and mailed it to himself, thinking that maybe a postmarked, sealed testament would prove it was all just some big mistake when he popped positive for LSD or mushrooms or whatever it was.

He couldn't go. His bladder was beyond full. The tension on his lower abdomen, far past the point of discomfort, shot lightning-bolts of pain into his groin. He could smell the nervous sweat radiating from his scalp. But he still couldn't go.

The reluctant observer assigned to stare over his shoulder tapped his foot impatiently.

"Sorry, do you mind?"

The observer shrugged and turned around.

The piss finally came, hot and clear and blighted with the substance that would clip his wings before they'd even started to form.

He nearly cried as he handed the warm, sealed and signed cup over to the poor contractor who spent her 9-5 cataloguing cadet piss. At that point he was in no shape to make it to his 1500 Aerodynamics Lab, not that an aerospace degree would mean anything if it couldn't get him into pilot training. So, instead, he went home and took a shot of his roommate's Jim Beam and tried to come to terms with life on the ground.

*

His urine never flagged. He never got that dreaded call from the First Sergeant, never had to report to the Commander to explain himself. He never opened that letter—the signed and sealed affidavit proclaiming his innocence. He didn't touch it until the day he graduated and pinned those gleaming gold butter bars onto his shoulders as the Air Force's newest 2nd Lieutenant.

He sat at his desk that night holding the letter in his hands, his graduation gown draped over his chair, his pilot training selection notice pinned proudly to the corkboard in front of him. That letter had gotten him to the finish line. It was a constant reminder to keep his head low, to focus on his dreams and avoid the distractions, to do whatever it took to fly. But, most of all, it reminded him how close he'd come to losing everything.

He held the letter in his hands, remembering the emptiness he'd felt as he'd typed those words. That feeling was a distant memory. So too were all the questions he'd had about that night his eye went batshit. The details weren't important. All that mattered was that he'd gotten through.

He looked again at the pilot selection notice. He'd made it. Nothing could take that away from him now. With one final sigh, he held up the letter and lit a match. The envelope curled in the ash tray as it succumbed to the flames. He watched with satisfaction as the ribbons of smoke climbed lazily toward the ceiling. If he hadn't felt so invincible in that moment, maybe he would have thought again about that glaring question he'd never been able to answer: if his drink wasn't spiked, if it wasn't a drug that made his eye go haywire, then what the hell was it?

But, instead, he leaned back in his chair and gazed longingly out the window into the vast blue sky he would soon call home.

*

Bunko hangs up the phone. He spins in his chair and updates the spreadsheet, the ache in his neck tightening every second he's left staring at this god-awful monitor.

Mission planning. A necessary evil. As tedious a job as there is for a pilot, and if the tanker drops last minute or a warm front sweeps in and shits on your refuelling track, it's damn near as stressful. Flying the desk. They all hate it. They're flyboys at heart. Any time spent out of the cockpit, every single second wasted on the ground is just another reminder of how much better life is up there. But if the planning doesn't get done, there won't be anywhere to fly. There won't

be a tanker to give them gas. They'll all be stuck on the ground. So they take turns. They suck it up and serve their time—service before self and all that.

Thing is, lately Bunko's been carrying more than his usual weight at the mission planning desk. The others probably think he's just aiming high, trying to pick up an extra bullet for his performance report, making his case for CGO of the Quarter or a below-the-zone promotion to Major. Truth is, Bunko is looking out for himself, just not in the way any of them are thinking.

"There's a system coming in from the west," Bunko says. "I'm thinking 636 again for tomorrow."

Grits grunts and mumbles something to himself as he glares at his own monitor.

Bunko assumes the affirmative. He copies forward the coordinates from the previous day's mission.

"This little speckle of birdshit?" Grits spins his monitor around. It's bigger than Bunko's, which only makes the little weather system lingering over Ohio seem even less formidable. "Did you happen to see the shitstorm brewing over the Atlantic?"

Bunko checks again. Sure enough there's a system, this one at least double the size of the one he's supposedly trying to avoid.

"Jesus, Bunko. 636 every damn time for you. If you love the ocean so much maybe you should've gone Navy."

Someone in the office next-door laughs. Bunko does too. He wants to tell them the truth—that he hates 636, that flying over the ocean in a single-engine jet without an airfield in sight makes him as nervous as it should, that he keeps flying 636 not because he wants to, but because he'd be even more nervous flying over elementary schools and hospitals and unsuspecting subdivisions the way things have been going for him lately. But it's easier to just shut up and laugh.

The Director of Operations walks past the office, coffee in hand, flight suit tied around his waist.

“Banzai,” shouts Grits. “636 or 219 tomorrow?”

“219,” Banzai says, already halfway down the hallway. “Bunko, you wanna swim so bad, join the Y.”

Grits turns to Bunko and mimes some sort of masturbatory gesture with his dominant hand.

Bunko laughs—the only thing he can do—then turns back to his monitor and updates the spreadsheet.

*

The alarm goes off at 0430. Bunko snoozes until 0500, but doesn’t sleep another second. Fly days used to be the easiest for him to wake up, the adrenaline from his dreams of pulling Gs high above an endless cloud deck lifting him back into consciousness. Back then he would’ve been up, showered, and sitting out on the porch finishing his breakfast before the alarm even realized what it’d missed. It was a powerful feeling, sipping his coffee and staring out at an empty sky that God had never intended for mankind to touch, a sky that he and a pack of his fellow Viper pilots would turn upside down just a few hours later.

These days, though, it’s been dread that Bunko feels every time he looks up. His sleep has been less restful, that endless cloud deck from his old dreams replaced with congested cityscapes and complex terrains over which he always seems to be flying just a bit too low. This morning in particular he feels especially groggy. It’s a big exercise, today’s sortie. There’ve been whispers of a deployment coming down the pipeline. Somewhere in the Middle East. Operation Inherent Resolve, or Noble Watch, or whatever they’ll decide to brand it by the time his squadron gets the nod.

Bunko should be excited. It’s the sort of thing he’s waited his entire career for. It’s what he signed up for. It’s what he was trained to do. But as he’s swiping through the day’s NOTAMS he feels a dull but familiar twinge in his left temple—the same spot where he felt it the other day. He tries to tamp it down—*not now, definitely not today*—but the ache only grows and the muted glow from his iPad only makes it worse.

Bunko sets aside the iPad, turns off the lights, and lies down. After a few minutes he starts to feel better, so he goes back into the kitchen to finish his breakfast. His eggs are tasteless. The coffee is bland. He dumps a couple spoons of sugar into his mug, but it still tastes like hot tap water.

He gets in his car and drives to work, hoping that it's a false alarm. It has to be a false alarm. He's never had two in the same week.

Bunko manages to convince himself that everything's okay.

The first flash strikes just as he pulls into the squadron.

*

It's a great day for flying. There's not a cloud in the sky, at least as far as Bunko can see through the daisy-chained flash-bulbs igniting in his left eye and the variegated shrapnel cutting across to his right. He's still in his car, parked outside the med group, sunglasses on and seat reclined. Sick call started 40 minutes ago. 20 more minutes and they'll make him schedule an appointment. But he's still not ready to go in.

"Can you fly?"

His commander couldn't possibly have grasped the gravity of that question. In many ways it was the exact same question Bunko had been asking himself for the past few days.

"Can? Or should?" Bunko faked a cough and forced a snuffle, his commander's glare distorted in the miasma of his left eye. It was the best he could come up with, or at least the most he was willing to give.

"Goddamn it, Bunko. Ya look like shit," the commander snarled, not even trying to hide his disgust. "Get over to medical. You ain't flying today."

Bunko closes his eyes, which doesn't help but seems like it should. If only it was just for today. One day on the ground means nothing, but Bunko knows it's going to be more. From everything he's read online, there's a good chance the migraines are only going to keep getting worse. The right thing to do—the integrity-first

thing to do—would be to walk into medical and tell them exactly what’s wrong with him, what’s always been wrong with him. To get disqualified. To have his wings clipped. To retrain or get out or get court-martialled for hiding the truth for so long. Either way, Bunko knows he can’t fly. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever again.

He gets out of his car. There’s a tightness in the center of his chest, the kind he’s learned not to bring up with the doc. He’s not going to bring it up this time either. There’s no point. Not because he’s afraid he’ll get DNIF’d or disqualified or compelled to do a ton of tests and labs and scans to prove that he’s healthy before they’ll let him fly again. He’s not going to bring it up because he knows exactly what it is: it’s the end of Bunko, the reincarnation of Matt—a wingless thirty-two year-old with a bachelor’s degree and no marketable life skills suited for a career on the ground. It’s the weight of his childhood dreams sitting on his chest, begging him to hide the truth for just one more flight. The weight of all those innocent people he’s sworn to serve, who he puts in harm’s way every time he leaves the ground. There’s nothing in the world Bunko wants to do less, but he knows it’s the only thing he can do.

It isn’t until he reaches the overhang of the clinic that he hears the first engine, that sweet buttery roar of the omnipotent Pratt & Whitney engine that’s held his life in its hands so many times. The first of his wingmen taking off for 219. The mission he planned.

And then there’s a flash in his heart even stronger than the one in his eye. He can’t do it. He knows he has to, but he can’t.

*

The blood pressure cuff squeezes like a noose around his bared left arm.

“What brings you in?” asks the tech, whose face Bunko can’t even see his eyes are so fucked.

His heart pounds. His head throbs. That tightness in his chest deepens. “It’s just this cough, man. I think I’ve got pneumonia.”

*

“Thank you for your service.”

For Bunko, becoming a pilot wasn't about serving. It wasn't about prestige or grandeur or honor either, at least not initially. Bunko just wanted to fly. For as long as he could remember, before he'd ever set foot on a plane, probably since the first time he saw a bird do it and realized it could be done, all Bunko wanted was to fly.

“Thank you for your service.”

Three weeks after his 26th birthday Bunko completed RTU training in the F-16 and officially became a Viper driver. He reported to his first base not quite sure he was ready to be a fighter pilot and at least a little wistful for those easier, more predictable days back in Enid. Pretty soon, though, he started to notice the idolizing gazes of the young airmen around base, the way the guards at the gate saluted him a bit more crisply than they had before. He was a hero, a defender of the sky, the pride of the Air Force. It didn't take him long to start believing it. He wore his flight suit around town after work. He grew a mustache. He learned to love the taste of Jeremiah Weed. He proudly nodded any time a kid or senior citizen or pretty clerk asked if he was a fighter pilot. Eventually, Bunko started to believe that he was serving, that these were the people he was doing it for.

“Thank you for your service.”

That first year flying the Viper, it happened again. His eyes had gone batshit a few times back at Enid, but only after a bender or if he went a couple days sleeping five hours or less. This was the first time it happened on a normal day, during normal hours, without any obvious cause. It scared the shit out of Bunko. He faked a cold and got himself DNIF'd and went home to find answers. He scoured Google, his left eye sealed shut, the pyrotechnics still flashing behind his closed lid. Soon enough he had his answer: Ocular Migraine. Reassuring in some sense. Non-fatal, relatively common, no need for surgery or anything like that. That reassurance quickly came crashing down, though, as soon as he Googled his next question: “Can I fly with ocular migraines?”

“Thank you for your service.”

There are lots of ways Bunko has responded to that pervasive, sometimes-sincere turn of phrase over the years:

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re worth it.”

A nod and a smile.

More recently, though, he’s spent a lot of time thinking about the weight of those words—what they mean, who they’re for, how much he’s going to miss hearing them when he’s done. Now anytime someone tells him “Thank you for your service,” his reply is simple: “Thanks for letting me.”

*

“Good to have you back, Bunk.”

Bunko nods at his wingman as they split off to pre-flight their jets. He was cleared by medical this morning after a heroic recovery from the brutal “bronchitis” that had grounded him just a few days before. Fit to Fight. Returned to Flying Status. DNIF removed.

DNIF—Duties Not Including Flight.

Bunko ducks underneath the left wing and thinks about what that means. What other duties could there possibly be that don’t include flying? The only thing redeemable about mission planning is that it eventually leads to a take-off and a landing. There’s Stan/Eval. There’s safety. There’s fitness monitor, deployment monitor, health monitor. All of them important, all of them duties that need to be done. But none of them mean a thing if they don’t include flying.

He walks to the rear of the jet and stares into the gaping engine nozzle. Soon it will be spewing hot air, catapulting him skyward out toward 219 at 300 KIAS. He thinks about the heat, the noise, the thrust. Nothing in his life has ever wielded as much power as this engine. Nothing on the ground ever will.

“All set?”

Bunko looks over at his wingman. There’s a flash of light behind him, the scintillating waves in his left eye revving up for action. It’s happening. He could feel it as soon as he woke up this morning. He could feel it as he smiled and took his deep breaths and convinced the doc he was safe to fly. He’s not safe to fly, though. Not like this. But he’s pressing anyway. He’s missed too many flights. If he has any hope of making this deployment, of proving to himself and everyone else who matters that he can still fly, he has to do it. So he ignores the flashes and focuses on the parts of his vision that are still clear and carries on.

*

Bunko’s entire body lurches backward as he pushes up on the throttle. The thrust twists the icepick into his temple even deeper, so he opens up the afterburner and powers through. His head is searing, but he’s determined to fly this goddamn plane and go on this goddamn deployment and there’s nothing on this goddamn planet that can keep him, Matthew “Bunko” Stevens, on the ground.

It happens as soon as he hits V1 and rotates: the biggest flash of light he’s ever seen, his entire left eye gone dark as the world falls away beneath him.

*

For the second time that day, and the third time that week, Bunko sits in the waiting room of the med group, clipboard in his lap.

Reason for Visit?

It’s a simple question. It’s a simple answer, too, however complicated the consequences will be. He clicks the pen for the hundredth time and stares at those simple, earth-shattering words.

That last mission was the deal breaker. It was the most scared he’s ever been in his life. His vision came back a few minutes into the flight, well before they started the exercise. Things were a bit blurry and his head still hurt like hell, but he finished the sortie, landed safely, and debriefed as if it wasn’t the last time he would ever

debrief as a pilot. But he was shaken. What if next time his eye didn't turn back on? What if the right one went out too?

The thought sits heavy on Bunko as he stares at the form, still clicking his pen, still unable or unwilling to write it down and make it official.

"Captain Stevens?" the tech says, completely unaware of the cataclysmic role she's destined to play in Bunko's life story.

Bunko looks once more at the question. He knows he'll have to answer it soon enough, but he'd rather say it out loud than hide behind a piece of paper. He's been hiding for long enough as it is. He stands up and follows the tech into the exam room, ready to sacrifice his career, ready to sacrifice his dreams, finally understanding for the first time what it really means to serve.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Thomas Shea is a San Antonio based writer hailing originally from the snowy lands of New England. He has a wife, two daughters, a day job with "Writer" in the title, and a number of Opinions.

The Irish Lion

by Thomas Shea

The boy's steps whispered through the fallen needles of the woods; the crash of the sea on the island's rocks was softened to a murmur by distance. And the forest. The forest choked all sounds not its own.

He tilted his head and listened to the forest's voice. Darkness left his eyes useful only for avoiding what was already under his feet, but his ears still caught the wind's hiss, the owl's hunting calls, and the soft scuttling of rats or squirrels. He turned slowly, shifting his grip on the smooth yew of his spear's haft. His hands had held a spear for nearly as long as his feet had walked, and his ears had known the voice of the forest at least as long.

But he did not hear the song he sought. Not yet.

He turned away from the sea's murmurs and pushed along a pig-path through the scrub. He would find the dark, growling song of his prey. He must.

Days (or a lifetime) before, he had listened to other voices. Outside his father's hall, he had listened.

*

“The boy must have his Hunt.”

Father’s voice carried like the grumble of a rainstorm through the low, cozy hall. His wife’s braids made a soft hiss against her furs as she nodded. The boy could picture her face, the hard lines of worry and want — both familiar visitors in this hall — cutting deep furrows beside her eyes and mouth.

Father rumbled once more, “He must, or the other men will never see him as a man.” The timbers of the floor creaked as the towering clansman stepped toward her. The boy imagined him brushing a stray hair from her eye with a calloused three-fingered hand. “What woman would have an untested boy? Even our son?”

At length, she answered, in tones somber as a winter sunset. “The beasts are harder to find each year.”

Father’s reply carried a bleak weariness. “But each year, they are found.”

*

The memory quickened the boy’s step and hardened his face. He knew the stories the elders told of their Hunts, of the fearsome *cait fhiáine* who lurked soundless and deadly in forest and field. Father’s father had never told the tale of his Hunt without relish, but then, his had never been equalled.

Most sought the first *cait* whose tracks they crossed; any *cait* was challenge enough. But Grandfather had set out with spear in hand to find one beast, one foe. A massive animal that had killed countless chickens and sheep, and savaged farmers returning late from their fields. A terror that had taken so many from the tribe that it had earned a name: *Bás Leanaí*. The Death of Children. The creature had dragged away Grandfather’s own sister when he was still a child himself.

Grandfather had spent three days and nights tracing the terrible beast, and driven off four lesser *cait* in search of his quarry. When at last he had found its tracks (fully the span of his hand, to hear him tell it), uneasiness had settled into him even as he followed the spoor.

Through the quiet of the forest’s voice, he had known.

Through the scent of rotting prey in the still air, he had known.

Bás Leanaí had found him as well.

In some tellings, he scarcely had time to react before claws slashed into him. In others, he laid a clever trap that wasn't enough to protect him from the beast's ferocity. The scars that laced his chest told the truth of it; had the hunter not been slightly harder to kill than the *cait*, there would have been none to share the story.

Bás Leanaí's hide still hung in the hall. His story was retold before each Hunt.

But the boy had only seen *cait* as they were carried in by men returned from their Hunt. His eldest brother had been four days on his Hunt, before he returned with a mottled beast the size of a starved sheep. His middle brother had not returned at all.

A cousin he skipped stones with had crawled back, defeated and begging for someone to bind a leg covered in boar wounds. He had died days later, from a fire in his leg that no herb could quell. Still a child.

The boy did not know which fate to think worst, so he hunted on.

Hours passed. He followed a tinkling song to a tiny stream, then gratefully dropped to his knees, filled his hands with stream's offering, and drank. He began settling into a cold camp, drawing what remained of his dried mutton from a pouch. His mother and father spoke once more in his memory, concern filling their voices as he stood unseen just outside the hides that sealed the hall.

*

"Husband, consider the harvest."

Father scoffed, "What has it to do with the boy?"

"The rats."

Silence fell like a heavy snow. Father sighed his understanding; this year's yield had been plagued by vermin.

Mother's words sparked like struck flint, "They take more every year. Soon we'll be hunting them to survive the winter."

"And what would you do?" Father's reply held the menace of a coming storm, "Deny him manhood?"

Braids swished vigorously as Mother shook her head. "There must be another path. There must."

"This is our path." Father's voice had taken on the keen edge of a well-knapped blade. "This is our way."

*

An eerie, agonized caterwaul split the night and yanked the boy from the edge of sleep as it hung in the air for long moments. The forest had taught him *cait* songs; what this one sang of he could not guess, but he sprang up and set off toward it all the same, all thoughts not of the Hunt flushed like birds from a bush.

He strained to hear another *cait*-song, but the forest's voice was bird and breeze.

He inhaled deeply, but the wind was at his back, and his prey somewhere ahead.

His eyes scanned the ground in the murk. And he saw *tracks*.

No wider than half his hand, but distinct in the mud of yesterday's rain.

A hunter's grim smile crept across the boy's face as his heart began to pound. Quiet and quick, where the tracks lead, he followed.

He slowed to a soft-footed walk as the voice of the forest faded around him.

He slowed to a prowl as the smell of old meat and skins slunk into his nose through the still air.

He raised his spear, weariness forgotten, as the gloom lightened with the birth of a new day.

He edged along a thick patch of brush, stilling at a rustling within. Close enough that he could have reached out and touched it. Close enough for claws and teeth to rend furs and flesh.

He nudged aside an errant branch as if it boasted talons. The breaking dawn revealed his quarry, a beast the size of a wolf, laying sidelong in a dry den of grass and leaves.

Four squirming young, still birth-wet, suckled peacefully on her.

The boy froze.

*

His mother's soft, somber words echoed in the moment: "And when they are all gone, husband? What will our path be then? What will our way be?"

Father's pacing footfalls, soft for a man of his size, drew creaks from the floor. "If our son does not take the *cait*, another will. Denying him his Hunt will change nothing for the beast, but for him..."

*

The boy's spear had tasted blood before. He had slain fish and fowl, rabbits and deer, even broken a flint spearhead off in the thick hide of a boar. He was a hunter, and this was his Hunt.

He drew back to strike, and some shift of sound or scent alerted the mother *cait* that it was not alone. First her pointed ears, then her head pivoted toward him, fangs bared as she started to shake her young off. Her throat worked around a growl that seemed to roil up through her from the earth itself.

She shifted to find her feet, and her kits began to protest, undeterred by the mother's warning snarl. The boy saw a clean shot, but did not move. A poor story, taking a mother as she nurses. Better by far to kill her as she ran.

He stayed ready, his grip firm but loose, and watched as the *cait* rose, her tawny eyes locked onto his, and her white, white teeth, long enough to tear open a throat, flashed in the wan morning light.

She gained her feet, but did not turn, nor back away. Her kittens pressed themselves mewling to her legs and staggered blindly to the edges of the nest. The mother *cait* crouched over them, quivering with fury or fear. The young hunter held his spear between them bobbing slightly with every heartbeat. The *cait* let out a roar like tearing leather and slashed at the spearhead with a pawful of blurringly swift claws. Flint thunked against wood as the impact drove the tip of the blade against a nearby oak-trunk. The mother beast closed in a streak of living rage.

The boy had just long enough to realize he could have simply told a better story without having to live it before the desperate mother's leap brought claws to his shoulder and chest.

He staggered and dropped his spear, desperate to fend off the animal now latched to him. Fangs surged toward his throat, but found his left arm instead. Jaws strong as a rockslide closed on his forearm, and teeth met in the flesh between the large and small bones. Stumbling and screaming under the thrashing weight of the beast, he grabbed for the knife in his belt with his free hand.

The boy cleared the blade as he had a thousand-thousand times, in darkness or light, in rain or in sun, and drove the point up with every hope he had. He felt flesh slow the tip and the *cait* let out a horrific snarl that resonated through him from the bones it still held in its jaws. He yanked the sharp flint free and stabbed again, harder, feeling skin tear and blood flow.

Boy and *cait* writhed and ripped at one another, the mad rage of survival silencing all other sounds like the ocean swallowing the rain. Their hot blood mingled on flesh and fur and dirt, and the hunter collapsed beneath the predator even as his blade at last found its heart. It let out a final, defiant caterwaul, muffled by the bloody arm still clutched in its jaws, and he felt its life flow out onto the wounds torn on his belly.

He lay, tattered, aching, and weary. His eyes were heavy, but Grandfather's words reached him: to sleep with unbound wounds is death. With a determination he had never known he possessed, he tore strips from tunic and leggings, and began binding them about his many hurts. The arm he did first, instinct and agony driving him to seal the swelling flesh away. But as he swung most of his tunic's remains around his middle to bandage the gashes there, the forest brought him a new song; tiny mewls, tinged with distress.

He picked up his spear as reflexively as a *cait* taking his claws, and strode toward the den. He pushed back the branches, with little care for sound, and beheld a black rat the size of a man's head, gleefully dragging the smallest of the kittens away.

His spearhead pierced the vermin and only stopped when it hit an oak root two inches under the earth.

The boy leaned against a tree trunk thicker around than his father, bent double, and retched. There was little but brookwater to heave up, so the tears that streamed down his face would have been the same color were they not mingled with blood. The tears continued long after the retching stopped. His pain was staggering, and an alien sorrow held the place he had hoped would be filled with his victory. His *cait* was the last *cait*, his hunt the last Hunt.

The boy continued to weep as he bound his wounds, and wept as he cleaned the kill. Tears dried as he tied the beast's legs about his shoulders and hefted it. It was a long walk to his village, but he would return a man. At last he stepped back toward the thorny bushes to reclaim his spear. He would not to look into the den. The fate of the kittens was not his concern.

But again he heard that piteous mewling. His eyes were drawn down as if by the pull of the earth. One had been killed by the rat. Another was curled up and did not stir even to breathe. The third was simply gone.

The fourth, a mottled gray thing with emerald eyes, blinked up at him and let out a soft, plaintive sound.

The tears he had willed away returned with his mother's words. "When the last of them is gone, what will our path be?"

The young man bent, and rose holding the tiny kitten to his bandaged chest. It purred and nuzzled the rags of his bandages. Perhaps they could find a new path. Perhaps they could tell a new story.

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