

In the Forest

By Hannah Guerra

Inspired by a two-sentence flash fiction, author unknown.

We skulk in the forest, eyeing the large wooden compound hovering in the dark. Our feet press delicately between sticks, quiet, creeping cautiously, but ever, ever, closer.

A lantern flared suddenly in front of the building, a tall man waving it around.

“Hurry!” he called. “Hurry, hurry!”

We look at each other, all our eyes widely gleaming. They’d spotted us. But somehow, they had mistaken us for a normal group of humans, fleeing desperately in the night.

I take the first step, leading us, now confidently, forward. Not one of my steps falls unsure as we jog out of the black forest, across the long field of rustling grass, and to the boundary of the sanctuary. A ring of gleaming pink salt surrounds the structure, the only true color--besides the lantern’s flames--in the pale midnight world. I step across, my companions following, though their steps crunch with fear.

“Try not to disturb the line,” the man tells us, his eyes darting across the landscape as he welcomes my group into his supposed refuge. It’s now apparent that he’s quite elderly, a gray-white beard clinging to a mask of copious wrinkles. “Rock salt’s the only thing that keeps them out.”

“Sea salt,” I clarify. “Sea salt’s the only thing that keeps us out.”

His eyes freeze and mouth parts as my knives flick out of my sleeves.

“B-but it’s salt,” he blubbers, in shock. “It’s all salt.”

“No,” I tell him with a sigh. “Sea salt has the echo of the sea.”

The sweet sound of a blown horn rides across the valley, encapsulating me in the same freeze that locks the old man. We stand still as statues, the moisture drying on the human's lips and eyelashes. I whip towards the forest, staring off as if I could see a Party coming our way, the glow of their fires through the trees. The forest stays silent, its secrets buried underneath the menacing canopy. My knives stand at the ready, now pointed towards the forest.

"Get inside," I snarl to my group. It's not safe out here any more. They obey, turning and rushing towards the shelter. I edge backwards, following them with my gaze still on the forest. The old man creeps backwards beside me, his lantern held up to illuminate the hillside, his expression hopeless. With each step, he moves an inch farther away from me, and self-corrects himself away from the others in my group as well. But there's still only two ways to go for him--through the door with us, join whatever friends he has inside, or run and trust in the Party out there.

We all rush to the double doors, one of which opens for us with a deep whine, a crowd of scared-looking people behind it. The old man pulls on the door's twin and squeezes in there, while we squeeze into the human crowd. They pull back, naturally, glancing at my knives with confusion. They didn't get to hear my little speech, or see my little knife flick. I let my associates heave the door closed and turn to them, knives pointing down to the floor again. More lanterns ring the sizable room, and the light dances on the tips of my blades quite suitably.

"Now," I announce to the room, brushing an errant strand of hair off my forehead. "Now-" I'm thrown off my words as the old man draws back and hurls his lantern towards me. I throw my hands up, catching the lantern not nearly as smoothly as I would like to admit, the flame inside catching my hands in its warmth.

"Don't try that," I hiss. "Don't try anything."

The humans draw back farther, murmuring, eyes reflecting fear, not light, finally catching on. There's art to be seen in their predictable ways. The old man holds his hands up in front of him, no weapons left, and draws back, though not with his words.

"We-we have money," he pleads. "Valuables. Weapons. We're more useful alive."

The crowd nods, seeming to spiral as it shifts in position--young being shoved to the back, and larger and older adults stepping in front. So predictable.

I start again. "Now--"

The hunting horn rings out, louder, longer, nearer. The oldest of instincts flutters in my chest, urging me to run, crawl under a rock. My companions fidget. But I stand firm. I scan quickly over the room again. Maybe a hundred humans. Seven of us. Factoring in the fact that some are too young to even fight properly, we could take them. But not right now--it would be a waste of time right now, when the most urgent matter is avoiding that horn. I clutch the lantern in my arms and hurry to the left wall of the room. The old man scrambles out of my way--just my, since my companions are still trying to block the door.

"No use," I hiss at them. They leave the door and run over to me, clutching their weapons like talismans. I try a door in the wall near me, but it's locked, and we don't have time to kick it down.

"Rozeldin..." Mysho says, his voice small. I ignore the fear in them and run along the wall now, towards the back and the rest of the building. The ring of lanterns rests on a large mahogany shelf running around three sides of the room. The carpet is short and gray, more revealed as the humans scurry away from us. I swing through a door-less doorway at the back, one of two at either side of the wall, and take a standing place right outside, in the dark corridor. My companions file along the wall beside me--Mysho, Jur, Ywan, Shiel, Truvfinga, and Kabi.

Right in time, the horn sounds again, bellowing so loud it might as well be on our front step, the note stretching on long enough to sing a story. It leaves silence in its wake, silent breaths beating out. Even the humans are still, gazing at the wall as if seeing through it.

The note rings again, blaring through the landscape, but its call only grazes our refuge. They're going away.

"Why do they blow that horrible horn?" Mysho breathes crackedly.

"It's a point of honor," I tell him--the newest and most inexperienced member of our group. "Give the reasonable ones a chance to run. More than you think don't."

"Reasonable or cowardly," sneers a human inside the main room. Her red hair blazes like the lanterns. I swing out from inside the hallway.

"Reeeeeeally? Who's hiding inside this old temple?" I gesture, amused, around the room, and the humans packed in like fish in a drought. "Or whatever it is."

"It is a temple," the old man sighs. "For a forgotten religion."

"Don't answer the vampire," the red-haired human hisses.

"What's so forgotten about it?" asks Kabi.

"Don't talk to the humans," I hiss at him, mimicking both the red-haired human and my now-lost dignity. The old man blinks, then steps forward, lantern light shining on his pupil.

"I don't know. I suppose everything, though I don't know what could be left." He points to the back wall, where an alcove houses an asymmetrical clay sculpture. "Perhaps that was the main god. Or goddess."

I squint at it. It looks sort of like a person--or the tongue of fire. Or a bush, whose limbs have severely rounded tips.

"It looks mildly like Aledi, goddess of fire." I decide, recalling information from books so long ago read. "She appears in a human-fire form."

"Aledi?" the old man looks at me quizzically. The other humans look at him and then me, their faces guardedly intrigued. Humans. Yes. I let the lantern drop to one hand and lift my daggers slightly. We should take the opportunity to kill them now. Yet...

I let my knives fall back to my side.

"Aledi was a goddess who was worshipped very much hundreds of years ago. She represented one of the major, most mystical gods in our religion. Her popularity died out with the others, of course, but she had a form vaguely like that. Although no human religion would ever include her, of course."

"Did-" the red-haired human pauses, seeming stunned that the word slipped out. "Did she represent anything besides fire?"

I shrug.

"Light, warmth, patience, wisdom. The sea was her opposite--it represented cold, darkness, anger. The two of them were in an eternal dance."

"That's interesting," remarks the old man. "In human lore, the meanings of fire and water are reversed."

"Were they in a literal dance?" the red-haired human asked at the same time. I shrug again, starting to quite enjoy this conversation, if that's what it can be called. I've always liked discussing historical cultures and actions.

"They weren't in a literal dance, but they were always in this push-and-pull of enemies and allies. They hated each other, but they were both trying to protect the world, not destroy it. They were able to win a lot of battles by working together, but there were some that could have been won and were lost by their refusal to make peace," I explain. "As for the opposite meanings which caused this feuding dance, that ends up being the moral of many stories involving them--they're more similar than they ever thought, it's just how you look at it. For example, another meaning commonly used of fire is guardian. She's the wise old lady guiding travelers home. But the sea is used to represent home--it's the place that travelers are guided to. But both could be considered as the other. A guardian can easily be a home, and a home is most certainly a guardian. The similarities are a bit harder to see with the other aspects, but they're there."

"Keep going, make them clearer to see," the red-haired human encourages.

"Wait, I have a question," interrupts the old man. "Why is it sea salt and not rock salt?"

I look over at him first.

"I told you, it has callings of the sea--"

"Yes, but why does it have to have callings of the sea?" he asks. I pause, considering their questions. They want to stall me, buy themselves time to live. I don't care, however. I can pretend they do.

"Long ago, when the race of the *kakaeri* left the sea, the sea cursed them. It told them that if they wished to leave the sea, they could never return. From then on, the *kakaeri*, or sea vampires, could not touch or reach the sea. They could not go beyond the rim of the sea, across any remnant of the sea--no matter how small--, or under any residue of the sea. Sea salt works quite well as a boundary like these." I take a deep, mournful, breath. "But anyways, deprived of the nourishment of sea water, the *kakaeri* were forced to turn to another food source, which they chose as human blood. And the humans were all too happy to fight back, since they had already been fighting them since the beginning."

"So, war," Jur hisses darkly, her deep purple hair shining with flames not quite all from the lanterns.

"Then a few brave humans joined up with a third race, the formarili, the hunters, and they formed the vigilante, sketchy, Parties that, though few, could actually take down a vampire, blah blah blah, modern-day, you know the rest," I finish. The old man nods stiffly. The red-haired human looks at him again, then at me again, also out of questions.

"Do you ever wish for peace?" The question jolts me out of my skin, and I twist to see who dared say it.

A human stands next to me, on my left. A small one, a youngling.

Never.

In no way.

Every cursed day.

"I-" I choke, lost for words.

"No," says Jur listlessly.

"What else would there be to do?" Mysho asks. The correct answer. The old man seems thoughtful as he stands there.

"I'm Ryzlelkin," he admits suddenly. It's an unusual name for a human. "What's yours?"

He has no weapon. I feel the urge to sheath my weapon. It feels dishonest to hold weapons while trading names instead. I hold my forearms towards the ceiling, letting my knives slide back into their sheaths.

"I'm Rozeldin," I tell him. "This is Jur, Mysho, Ywan, Shiel, Truvfinga, and Kabi."

He nods, and gestures at his people. They look back at me, warm lantern light reflected in all eyes, all around.

"This is Raechel, Morgan, Patricia, Fellowen, Matthew, Carul, Henry, John, Timothy, Eliis, Billie, Coie and everyone else."

My companions' weapons have all disappeared, and I'm not sure when. I don't completely know why either.

"Would you like to shelter with us tonight?" asks the old man. "For one night."

"Sure," I say, my voice as sure as ever. "For one night. Yes. Let us shelter together."

For one night.