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A Fleeting Wisp Of Glory
by Laura Resnick
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Jackie is fascinated by old Jonah, and she can listen for hours to the stories he tells. Me, I can take or leave him, though I still tag along after dark when there's nothing else to do and it's not safe to go alone to his cave. Not safe for Jackie, I mean. She's just a kid, after all. We're pretty isolated in these mountains, but that doesn't mean we never see Marauders, and there's no telling what they might do. Especially to, you know, a girl.

Jonah was named after a prophet who was swallowed by a whale. A whale is a big fish that breathes air. It's just a fairy tale, of course. I don't believe that anything like that ever existed, even before the Armageddon. Jonah insists that there were such creatures, though, and that they filled the seven seas with their songs before the waters boiled and the sky caught fire. He says they could get as big as the giants frozen in Rushmore's Rock. So Jonah -- the one in the story, I mean -- was swallowed by one of these things and lived to tell the tale, and then our Jonah was named after him.

Jonah is the oldest person I've ever seen. His skin is so loose it hangs on him like rags, and it's as dun-colored as his tunic. His wife and children were killed by Marauders a long time before I was born, and he's too old and weak to work now. In a lot of places, he'd just be left to die now that he's no use to anyone; it's hard enough to find your own food, let alone extra food for some broken old man. But these mountains are better than most places, and there aren't so many of us to feed as there are down below. So we bring Jonah food and water, and he tells stories and sometimes fixes things that no one else knows how to. Not useful things, dumb things. We found a little box one time, and Jonah fixed it so that now it makes an ugly growling noise when you push a button. It has a special part that's supposed to go in your ear, but why bother? I don't like to listen to the growling. It makes me think of Night Devils, with their glowing eyes and melting flesh, even though I know that's just a fairytale, too.

Jackie thinks the box is really interesting, and she believes that stuff about the whales. She mostly likes to go to Jonah's cave, though, to hear about Camelot. That's her favorite story, and I don't think I could count how many times I've heard it. It's my mother's favorite story, too, and she even believes it's all true. Since my father can't speak or hear, I'm not sure what he thinks about Camelot, or if he even knows the story. That's all there is in my family now -- me, my mother, and my father. I had two brothers once, but they caught the Sickness and died, one right after the other, blind, vomiting, and screaming. Sometimes I'm afraid Jackie will get the Sickness, but she says she's as strong as me and won't. She doesn't look that strong,

though. She's sort of delicate, all blond and pale and skinny, with blue eyes that water under the hot yellow sky.

I don't usually tell her that I worry about the Sickness killing her, or Marauders taking her, because she just gets huffy and tries to pretend that she's as tough as me, even though she's a girl. Anyhow, I'm a full year and a half older than Jackie, and I just know some things that she doesn't. I know that people die even when you don't want them to, and I know that the Sickness comes without warning and takes your mind away before anyone has a chance to say goodbye.

I also know that Jonah's stories are just a lot of toxic waste.

"If you don't want to listen, then don't come," Jackie says as we approach Jonah's cave. The entrance is pretty well camouflaged. You've got to know right where it is, or you could stumble around the hill half the night.

I shrug. "I got nothing else to do."

"And be nice to Jonah," she adds, crawling between the branches that cover the mouth of the cave.

"I'm always nice to him."

"And don't look so bored when he talks," she whispers.

"Okay, okay." She can be really bossy sometimes.

It doesn't smell too good in Jonah's cave. Odors of sweat and blood have been trapped in here without a good breeze for as long as the moon has been red. Sometimes I sit very close to Jackie, who smells of grass and wet bark and the wind, and I forget that I don't like this cave very much.

Jonah has boiled a bunch of leaves again, and he makes us drink the brew, which he always says will stop our bowels being all yellow and runny. After we finish every last drop, he gives Jackie some more of the sweet-smelling salve he always wants her to put on her skin before going out in the sunshine. He tries to make me take some, too, and Jackie pokes me, but I don't want to go around smelling like that, so I refuse again. Jonah sets great store by these medicines, but most folks don't believe that there are secret colors in the sun that can kill you, though my mom always tells me to drink the brew in case you really can catch the Sickness from invisible spirits in the water.

Jonah finally asks if there's anything else he can do for us, as if he doesn't know why we've come, and Jackie says, "Tell us the story, Jonah!" She bounces a little and claps her hands. She's still pretty young.

"Which story?" he asks slyly, stroking his beard and looking all innocent.

"Tell us about Camelot," she insists.

"You want to hear about Camelot?"

"Sure," I say. "We've only heard the story a hundred times."

"Stop it, Bobby," Jackie hisses. She looks at him again and smiles, her teeth small and pretty straight. "Please tell us, Jonah."

But Jonah is looking at me, his eyes hooded and strange. "Do you think you've heard the story too often, Bobby?"

"Well..." Now I'm embarrassed. He's just a lonely old man, and my mom will be mad if she hears I've been mean to him.

"Do you think you've heard it so often that you know every word?" Jonah continues.

"Yes." I roll my eyes at Jackie. I don't know why she wants to keep climbing up to this smelly old cave every few days to hear the same old story again and again. Trying to be nice, I say, "But you know a lot of good stories, Jonah. Maybe you could tell a different one tonight."

"Do you think you could tell the story of Camelot as well as I can?" Jonah asks. "Without getting anything wrong?"

"I don't know." Who cares? "I guess so."

He smiles and looks excited. "Then tell it."

"Aw, come on, Jonah." He's punishing me for what I said before, I'm sure of it. "I don't want to. You tell it. Go on. I didn't mean what -- "

"No," he says firmly. "I want to hear you tell the story tonight. I

want to see if you can."

"Go on, Bobby," Jackie says. "You're so smart, you tell the story tonight."

I wish I'd let her come alone tonight. She deserves to get carried off by Marauders. Her cheeks are dimpled as she scoots away and sits near Jonah. They watch me in smirking silence, waiting for me to begin the tale. I hate this. It's hard to talk in front of a lot of people, and the two of them suddenly look like the whole clan. I clear my throat. I open my mouth, but my tongue is too dry to talk. I feel silly as I swallow and start over, wishing Jackie would look away for a minute. "Once upon a time, this land here, and all the land as far as the eye can see, east, west, north, and south, was part of a great kingdom." I stop, already stuck, not sure what comes next.

"That was before the Armageddon," Jonah says to help.

"That was before the Armageddon, before the air burned our lungs, the waters burned our flesh, and the earth opened up to swallow our dead."

"Tell about the food," Jackie prompts. This is her favorite part.

"There was food for everyone in those days, and no one in this kingdom ever went hungry. There were juicy red meats, flaky, white fish, and sweet-tasting birds that were basted in butter and wine and... and..."

"Cooked so that the flesh fell off the bone and melted in your mouth," Jackie says, looking hungry all of a sudden.

"And there were a thousand kinds of fruit in as many different colors, with smooth shiny skins and firm, sweet flesh." Now I'm getting hungry, too, so I decide to get to the next part of the story. "But this kingdom needed a leader, and so a brave warrior came from the north, from the port of the hyannis, and with the strength of his sword Excalibur, he made himself the ruler of this land from sea to shining sea."

I look to Jonah, and he nods to let me know I'm doing all right so far. "King Kennedy was young and handsome, and he took a beautiful woman to be his queen."

"Her name was Jacqueline," Jackie interrupts. I've been expecting this. She always interrupts Jonah at this point.

"Jacqueline was the daughter of..." I'm not sure, and Jonah doesn't help me this time. "The daughter of Lot," I say at last, hoping I'm right, "and she came from the north, too. Her dowry was a round table, and when Kennedy saw it, he invited knights from all over the land to come to Camelot, where he lived in a big white palace, and he asked them to pledge allegiance to the flag and join the round table. No one could sit at the head or the foot of the round table, and Kennedy said that made it perfect for a democracy."

Jonah once said that a democracy is like a family after the children have become as big as their parents and can argue instead of just doing what they're told.

"Many knights came to Camelot. Sir MacNamara, Sir Rusk, Sir Galahad, Sir Warren, and Sir Bobby, who was the king's brother and most special advisor. Bobby and Kennedy were educated by a wizard named Merlin, so they knew more than other people." I stop again, thinking I've forgotten someone important.

"Who was the best knight?" Jonah asks softly.

"Oh! Sir Launcelot. He came from France, like Sir Salinger, but he was very brave even so."

"Tell about the Lady of Shallot," Jackie says.

"No, that part's stupid."

"Bobby!" She gets all huffy about it, so I decide to let her have her way.

"Her name was Marilyn, and she was a famous movie star." I'm not sure what that means. Jonah once said it meant Marilyn was a kind of storyteller, but she lived in a much better place than this cave. "She had hair the color of the sun, and she was every man and woman's ideal of beauty and grace. Kennedy and Sir Bobby both loved her, but she fell in love with Launcelot,

like girls always did. But then she got half sick of shadows and..." I shrug. "And I guess she got the Sickness."

"No." Jonah shakes his head. "People didn't get the Sickness then. The Sickness came after the Armageddon."

"Oh, right. Anyhow, she died, and then Launcelot fell in love with the queen." I hesitate, feeling confused. I realize suddenly that the story hasn't always been the same. When I was just a kid, it was different somehow. Bit by bit, it's changed. "Have I got something wrong?"

"No, no, you're doing fine," Jonah says.

I guess he should know. "So Launcelot was afraid for his honor, because it was wrong to love the king's wife, so he went off to find the Holy Grail. All the other knights decided they should do good work, too, so they went off to far foreign lands like Africa and Asia and Thailand where they taught ignorant people to be just like them."

"And the women," Jackie adds. "Women went, too."

"Yes, and the women, too." She looks really impressed now, even though she keeps interrupting. "And the men and women of the round table taught people how to do all the wonderful, miraculous things that people in Camelot knew how to do. They taught them how to make water flow into their homes, how to build smooth shiny roads, how to make the Sickness go away -- "

"Not the Sickness," Jonah says. "Just diseases."

"And they taught them how to make food like the people had in Camelot," Jackie says wistfully.

"I guess so."

"So everything was perfect in Camelot?" Jonah asks.

I know the answer to this. "It was perfect for a while, and people thought they were living in Paradise. Kennedy had many friends, like Sir Peter, who was a famous storyteller like Lady Marilyn, and King Pellinore who came from... the north, I guess. But Pellinore never stayed long, because he was always looking for the Questing Beast.

"Kennedy had an evil sister though, a sorceress named Morgause, and a child was born to their... their..." It's a big word, I know that.

"Their incestuous union," Jonah says.

"Their incestuous union. His name was Khrushchev, and he was a jealous, evil prince who grew up with Morgause's other sons, Gawaine, Agravaine, and Castro. He grew up to rule an evil kingdom, far, far, far away from here... and I think he loved Jacqueline, too."

"Everybody loved her," Jackie says, touching her own hair which is blond, but maybe not as blond as they say Jacqueline's was. Or was it just Marilyn's hair that was blond? I almost ask Jonah, but suddenly I wonder if he really knows the truth. Not that I believe any of it's true, of course.

"I don't think Khrushchev loved Jacqueline," Jonah says, but he doesn't sound very sure. "He might have loved the Lady of Shallot, but not the queen."

"Oh." He's so old. Is he forgetting how all the parts of the story go?

"Tell about the Holy Grail," Jackie says.

"Um, the knights of the round table were looking for the Grail, but instead they found missiles in Cuba, the kingdom of Prince Castro. The missiles were very powerful, more powerful than Excalibur or Merlin's magic or anything, and people were afraid. They knew they were in terrible danger." This is the part of the story I hate, and I don't want to go on.

"What happened, Bobby?" Jonah says. "Continue."

"Khrushchev wanted to rule in this kingdom, too, but Kennedy wouldn't let him. And so they began the war." I lick my lips, which are always cracked and sometimes bleed. "Armageddon." My stomach twists and burns, and I hope the brew Jonah made will work this time.

"You forgot the important part," Jackie says.

"What part?"

"Why didn't Kennedy want Khrushchev to rule in this kingdom?" Jonah asks. I know the answer, but for some reason I don't want to tell him. I don't really know what it means, and I think it should be left out of the story.

"Bobby?" Seeing that I won't say anything, Jonah sighs and says, "He wanted us to be free. You must remember that."

"Maybe he just wanted to keep the kingdom for himself."

"No!" Jonah looks agitated. "No, you mustn't say that. You mustn't doubt."

"Finish the story," Jackie says. "I have to go back soon." She's starting to look pretty tired.

I try to remember what comes next. "Armageddon," I repeat. "The end of the world. The end of Camelot."

I wonder, for the first time, if Kennedy knew about the Sickness when he started the war. Did he know the sky would burn like the heart of a fire? Did Merlin warn him that there would be nothing left when it was over, nothing to eat or drink, no place to live or sleep? Did he know that all the wonders they had in Camelot would be gone forever?

"No one can make water flow now, no one has a white palace..."

"You're skipping a lot," Jackie says, sounding upset.

"The sky burned, the air exploded, the sea boiled... You know all that," I say. "Everyone died."

"But -- "

"Everyone died, except for a few people who were... in good places. Like this place."

"And Kennedy?" Jonah prods.

I've heard this story a hundred times. I shouldn't feel so bad tonight. I don't want to finish it, but I can see that it's very important to Jonah that I do. "The king died and was carried off to Avalon, a secret place, where a magic spell was cast upon him. On the third day he arose and ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again, to judge the living and the dead."

"And so we wait for him," Jackie whispers.

"His sword, Excalibur, rests at the bottom of the lake, and when he returns, he'll claim it and... Which lake?"

"What?" Jonah says.

"Which lake is the sword in?"

There's a long silence. Finally he says, "The lake near Avalon." I know he's lying. And because he's bothered to lie, I believe for the first time that some part of the story must be true. But which part?

"And he will use his sword to enforce right with might and to protect the meek," I say, finishing quickly, wanting to go back over the story and find out what's true and what's not.

"Well told, Bobby," Jonah says, crawling to his feet. "It's rough in a few places, but you'll soon know the story as well as I do." He's going to finish now, saying the part that's his alone to say. "This story is our past, and we must never forget it. My grandfather told it to me, as his grandfather's grandfather told it before him, as I tell it to you, and as you will tell it when I am gone. Each evening from December to December, we remember the wonders of Camelot and its brave king, waiting for him to return to us and make again the world that men knew then."

"He won't come back," I whisper suddenly, sure that this part, at least, isn't true. "Everyone dies, Jonah, and no one comes back."

I'm afraid for a minute that I've made him very angry, but then I see that the sparkle in his eyes is water, not anger. He slumps and looks older than he ever has before. "Then we must keep him alive with our stories," he says at last. A tear slides down his cheek, and I know my mom will beat me if she learns I've made him cry. "We must remember that there was a better world before this one, and believe that there will be a better one again. Otherwise, how will we go on?"

"You said you'd be nice to him," Jackie whispers angrily.

"I'm sorry, Jonah." But I don't really know what I've done wrong.

"It's all right, Bobby. You should take Jackie back, now. It's getting late."

We leave the cave, and the smell of the night is a relief. I wonder what nighttime in Camelot smelled like? Did it smell of cooking fires and sewage like this night does? Did the rain sting, did the wind burn, did the air taste of dust? Was the moon fat, red, and streaked with orange? Did Kennedy and his knights fear the Night Devils? No, of course not -- Jonah told me that Night Devils came after the Armageddon. What devils did they fear, then?

"Do you really believe it, Jackie?" I ask as we walk away from the cave.

"Enough of it."

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to know there was something better than this."

"But this is all we have."

"That's why we need the story," she says.

Something rustles past us in the dark, and she takes my hand. "You told it very well," she whispers.

Her hand is still so small. She was born without all her fingers, but I don't care.

"Will you tell it again sometime?" she asks.

I squeeze her hand and wonder why the twisting in my stomach is worse. "Sure." I guess it can't hurt to tell the story again.

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