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White Horses

The front door of Number Five Shaker Row clicked open. A girl in a white night-dress walked steadily down the path, bare feet not flinching from the freezing paving stones. Pushing the gate wide, she crossed the lane to the steps leading to the beach. The tide was in, lapping at the pebbles at the high water mark. The moon hung in the sky like a circle of ice. A gentle breeze lifted long black strands of hair, teasingly wrapping them over her face.

She flitted down the steps and crunched across the pebbles, ignoring the cut made in her heel by a shard of glass. Moving swiftly, she came to the water's edge. Sea-foam caressed her toes as waves slapped on shore.

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She paused, absorbing the calm around her.

Then, raising her arms above her head, the girl opened her mouth, clenched her fists, and gave out a deep, rumbling roar—a sound out of all proportion to her size. It poured from her like the onset of an avalanche, echoing across the sea. The elements were alert to her call. Wave crests formed out in the channel; the wind began to pick up strength; clouds straggled across the moon, blotting its face.

The girl's white nightdress now flapped against her legs. Her hair twisted and writhed in the spray whipped from the sea. A lid lifted off the rubbish bin of Number Four and rolled down the street on its rim in a crazy wobble. A door banged.

Opening her fists, pointing her fingers at the sky, the girl called down the storm's power. A forked lightning bolt leapt from a cloud to touch the tip of her index finger, illuminating her in a halo of crackling white light. A deafening boom of thunder rolled across the skies. Rain fell in torrents, plastering the girl's hair against her scalp. Waves crashed about her knees, trying to pull her down, but she stood firm. The largest surges clawed at the cliff behind, working to undermine the rock.

The storm-raiser laughed.

Pleased with the fury of the onslaught, she sent the tempest inland, directing it with a jerk of an arm over her head.

Unleashed upon the streets of Hescombe, the storm wound among the houses like a crowd of rampaging hooligans, up-ending bins, blowing loose tiles from roofs, uprooting trees to fall on walls and cars, crushing them like cardboard. Car alarms wailed. A ginger cat streaked across the empty roads, seeking shelter from the hail of missiles.

On the beach, waves crashed against the cliffs as the wind howled like a wolf. Spray flung itself into the air to dash on the pebbles at the girl's feet. Out to sea, as the breakers rolled inland, shapes appeared on the crests of the waves. Storm-tossed manes and flying hooves galloped headlong towards her, whinnying in tormented voices. Reaching the shore, the white horses of the sea converged on the girl. They danced around her, leaping, their legs arched. Foam flew as they smashed into each other in the stampede. They had not been released from their stables for many long years and rejoiced to find a new companion. She, however, was oblivious to them, wrapped up in the storm she had summoned. Spurred on to test their bond, one stallion split from the herd and cantered along the edge of a breaker. It collided with the girl, dousing her with water as it dispersed in a flurry of

spray. Jolted from her tempest-dream by this fleeting encounter, she gasped for breath, let her arms fall, and crumpled to her knees. With equal suddenness the storm dropped, the waves subsided, and the remaining horses faded into shapeless foam, tossed like a white mane at the sea's margin.

Now the storm had passed, Col Clamworthy and Skylark, his pegasus companion, emerged from their shelter to trot home along the beach. Forced to land, they had taken refuge in a sea-cave while the tempest blew itself out. They were now enjoying the return to peace in a comfortable silence, Col's fingers wrapped in Skylark's snowy mane. Col loved these times with Skylark—they were what he lived for—but he knew they soon had to part. The little port of Hescombe was just round the next headland and the pegasus must not be seen by other humans.

'Ready to fly again?' Col asked.

Skylark sniffed the air. 'Yes, the storm's gone. It should be safe for me now.'

'You'd better get going then.' Col yawned: it must be four in the morning.

Skylark shook his mane, trying to stay awake. 'Trust a party organized by your father to be such a riot. My head aches from all that rock-dwarf music.'

‘So does mine.’ Col leant against Skylark’s neck, breathing in the familiar smells of hay and horse. ‘Thanks for coming.’ He slid from Skylark’s back to the ground.

‘My pleasure. It was worth it just to see your father with the Kraken,’ replied the pegasus with a whinnying laugh.

‘Yeah.’ Col grinned. ‘That was cool.’

Col still hadn’t recovered from his father’s abrupt announcement the week before that he had decided to marry again. He was perhaps even more shocked that Evelyn Lionheart, a friend of Mack’s since childhood, had said ‘yes’—she had no excuse of ignorance and must know exactly what she was taking on.

‘You know, Skylark, my dad has a definite wild streak,’ Col mused. ‘Just look at the party tonight.’

‘Yes—it’s not often that the host abandons his guests like that,’ said Skylark.

Col’s father had celebrated his engagement with a beach barbecue for his friends in the Society for the Protection of Mythical Creatures. The evening must have felt too tame for him because, at midnight, he had on impulse run into the sea clad only in his boxer shorts. He had dived under the surface, emerging a few seconds later spouting seawater in a glistening arc. Then out of the water had emerged one of the long

tentacles of the Kraken. The limb had curled around the swimmer and lifted him high into the air, Mack shouting with delight as he soared upwards. With a snap of its tentacle, the Kraken had cast him out to sea. Mack had disappeared under the water but soon popped up again, shaking droplets from his hair.

Col had been impressed but also frightened. He had never seen his father on the surface with the Kraken before: it was quite something. The Kraken challenged the skill of his companion with five more throws, each one calling for more difficult and extravagant dives from Mack. The competition over, apparently to the satisfaction of both, Mack had swum back, accepting the applause of the onlookers as his due. Mack thrived on the primitive challenge of man against beast—the danger excited him. He would have had no sympathy had he known his son's fears on his behalf.

'That party was my dad all over,' Col told Skylark. 'I just hope Evelyn knows what she's doing.'

Skylark snorted sceptically.

'I wonder what Connie thinks of her aunt marrying him.' Col hadn't yet come to terms with the prospect of his father abandoning his life on the road and moving in to Shaker Row, only a few

streets from where Col lived with his grandmother. It felt really weird that he and his best friend, Connie, would now in some ways be ‘sharing’ his dad. He felt a little jealous of her as there was no talk of him being invited into the household after the marriage.

‘Yes, it’s going to be hard for everyone,’ Skylark agreed, reading his companion’s conflicting feelings through the bond between them. ‘A Kraken, a banshee, and a universal companion under one roof: perhaps you’re better off with your gran?’

Col laughed softly. ‘Thanks, Skylark. See you later.’

The pegasus galloped down the strand, white wings beating for take off. Once airborne, Skylark disappeared over the cliffs in the direction of Dartmoor. Col turned and began to trudge home, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Col would never have noticed Connie if he hadn’t almost tripped over her. She was curled in a ball on the stretch of beach in front of her aunt’s house, asleep. He looked up and down the shore: it was deserted. What was she doing here?

‘Connie?’ Col shook her gently by the shoulder.

Her eyes flickered open for a second, then closed.

‘Connie? Are you all right?’ Col was concerned now—this wasn’t like her at all. ‘What’s happened?’

Connie’s eyes opened again and this time she uncurled. She rubbed her arm across her face.

‘Where am I?’

A wave broke on the pebbles a few metres away, pawing at the stones like restless hooves.

Col touched her arm. She was freezing, soaked to the skin. ‘We’d better get you indoors.’

Connie scrambled up stiffly. Clutching her wet nightdress to her body, she saw that the arm and leg on which she had been lying were deeply marked by the imprint of the stones. She must have been here for some time. A whisper of memory returning, she suddenly felt scared—scared of what she had done. She moved a step away from Col, gazing at him as if he were a stranger.

Unnerved, Col tried to make light of it. ‘You probably walked in your sleep.’

She shook her head, her whole body shivering. ‘I d-don’t sleepwalk.’

‘Come on: let me help you back.’ He held out his hand.

‘I’ll manage.’ Wincing with pain, Connie stumbled up the beach unaided as fast as she could. She hobbled to the back door of Number Five and found the spare key under the flowerpot.

Col knew he couldn't leave her like this. He followed her in. The house was quiet—Evelyn sound asleep upstairs. A clock ticked in the hall. Connie limped through the kitchen and into the front room where there was an old electric fire. She switched it on and sank on to the sofa, wrapping herself in a blanket. Col stood in the doorway, watching her.

'What's going on, Connie? You do know, don't you?'

'I . . . I'm not sure.' Connie felt humiliated that Col was seeing her like this; she wished he would go.

'I'll make you some tea.'

He went into the kitchen, leaving her alone in front of the fire. Her skin smarted in the heat, red-raw as if it had been flayed by a whip. Feeling down to check her numb toes, she discovered that her heel was bleeding. When had she cut herself?

The clock continued to tick calmly in the hall, out of step with the stormy sea of panic surging inside her. She could make no sense of this. How had she ended up on the beach? She felt a hum in her bones as if she had been encountering some powerful creature. As the single living universal companion in the Society for the Protection of Mythical Creatures, Connie was the only person

able to communicate with all creatures. That meant she could have been bonding with anything. But what beast or being had the power to draw her out of her house without her knowing about it? And what had they done together?

Her suspicions turned to Kullervo, the shape-shifting creature who was her enemy—and her companion. He was her counterpart in the mythical world, able to assume any shape and communicate with all creatures. She had encountered him twice over the past two years and each time only barely escaped with her life. In a desire to punish mankind for the damage they had done to the world, Kullervo intended to destroy humanity. To do this, he needed the universal to channel his formidable powers so he could wipe people from the face of the earth.

Had he been here tonight?

Connie bit her lip, hardly daring to feel out for his presence as she knew she should. Surely he wasn't? The Society said he was in the Far East. Six of the leaders, known as the Trustees, had gone to fight him and his weather giants in that region. He couldn't be in two places at once—could he?

Long shivering minutes dragged past. Exhaustion gained the upper hand; the warmth of the fire caught her like a tide and began to drag

her into sleep. The photos on the mantelpiece swam before her eyes; the figurine of the bronze bear gleamed softly; the statue of a white marble horse leaping from the waves shone with a frosty light. Connie drifted into a state of half-sleep. Images flickered in her mind: the flash of lightning, white horses arching over her, pale hands raised to a black sky. Hands—her hands!

Connie woke with a start from her drowse and stared down at her palms, turning them over, searching for a sign of what had happened to them. They seemed exactly the same as usual—if a little blue with cold around the nails. Yet she knew that they had done something bad.

But what?

Col returned with two mugs of tea and sat beside her, nursing his in his palms, waiting for her to speak.

‘I think I summoned a storm.’ The confession tumbled out. She hadn’t meant to say anything, but Col was her closest friend, and he was here—it was difficult to keep it from him.

‘You what?’ Col put his mug down. He felt angry, remembering how spooked Skylark had been as the wind had blown him about. ‘You mean you did that? But Skylark and I were out in it—we had to land—didn’t you think of the damage you might be doing? Why on earth did you do it?’

‘I . . . I don’t know.’

‘What was it? Weather giant?’

Connie gave a miserable shrug.

Col stared at her: her mismatched green-brown eyes, so like his own odd pair, seemed very large and scared. He’d not seen her so unsure of herself for a long time. Whatever had happened, she clearly hadn’t done it on purpose. His mood softened into anxious pity for her. ‘You’ve got to tell someone,’ he said.

She gave a hiccup of laughter. ‘I’m telling you.’

‘No, I mean someone who can help—Evelyn . . . ?’

She looked down. ‘I can’t bother her—she’s all excited about the wedding.’

‘Don’t be stupid—she’d want to know.’

Connie clenched her fists in her lap. ‘No, I’m not spoiling everything for her. I’ll . . . I’ll sort it out. Maybe it was just . . . just something that happens to universals. I mean, none of us know how . . . how . . .’

She stopped. Col felt she had pushed him away by bringing up her gift. Of course he didn’t know what it was like to be her—he was only a pegasus companion. Connie was unique—and part of him was frightened of her powers. He didn’t fool himself that he was any match for her.

‘OK, fine,’ he said stiffly. ‘I’d better go.’

Connie realized she'd upset him. 'I'm sorry, Col, I didn't mean it to sound like that.'

'Yeah, I know.' Feeling he had been too quick to take offence, he gave her a proper smile. 'Look, why don't you sleep on it? I will as well. We can think what to do when we're not like a pair of zombies.'

'OK. But you won't say anything to anyone, will you?' Connie felt desperate to keep her role in creating the storm secret; she was ashamed of her loss of self-control.

'I won't if you don't want me to, but . . .'

She interrupted him quickly. 'Thanks, Col. See you tomorrow then.'

He got up, wondering if he was doing the right thing leaving her without waking Evelyn. 'Yeah, it's Rat's assessment, don't forget to come early.' He picked up the mugs to take back to the kitchen.

'No, I won't.'

'Will you be OK now?'

'Yeah, I'll be fine.'

When he'd gone, Connie stayed where she was. She pressed her knuckles in her eyeballs and pummelled herself awake. White streaks swirled before her closed lids.

Not as white as the light that had pierced them earlier, a voice in her head whispered.

The clock in the hall struck six and Connie heard the central heating hum into life. A bath: that was what she needed. A nice, warm bath that would wash away this nightmare.

But as the water pounded into the iron bathtub standing on its clawed feet, Connie heard an echo of the fury of the waves. She knew then that she would not dare to close her eyes again until she had no choice but to give in to sleep.