

Untitled Story by Teela Davis

Another strike of lightning lit up the beach and the lone figure cursed under his breath, tripping over debris brought in by the tide. It sure was a hell of a night for the lighthouse to be out.

The storm had torn through the lake with speeds Calen Jacobson had not yet seen in his three weeks residing in the bay. Though it's true the sun had started the day behind clouds, there had been no other indicators the weather would become this severe, so rapidly. When he applied for the open Surfman position at the Sunfish Point Lighthouse watching over Lake Superior, Calen had thought he'd already seen the worst nature could do.

He'd been wrong.

Just this week he'd seen waves taller than houses, water so cold it became ice upon slamming into the metal hulls of the ships, and the wind, oh the wind! The strength of it was currently pushing Calen around like nothing, picking up anything not lashed down for fodder on its destructive path. It conjured childhood memories from stories told by his father and uncle, who for years battled the waters of this same lake with their modest 100 foot schooner, trading items along the coast.

'Nigh', Calen heard the warning voice of his storm-weathered uncle as he fought to keep his hat and footing through another gust, 'those gales'll pick up a man bigger 'en you and toss 'im right inna the drink w'out a second thought, they will. Yeh keep yer tether an' yer wits abou' yeh, and yeh'll be righ' enough.'

Wits, Calen thought ruefully, he had. Though shaken, they remained intact. A tether on the other hand... The water crashed over him for the umpteenth time, successfully taking his hat and leaving a freshwater lining inside his raincoat. His grip on the looping rope guiderail kept him on his feet, and he let out a nervous breath.

The rain had started shortly after dawn and remained relentless, combining forces with the wind to carry sheets of rain and lake water inland to wreak havoc on the bay. He had been soaked since stepping out that morning.

The Keeper had needed everyone early on when an ocean-faring saltie and her crew had disregarded the heavy rain and set course to attempt outrunning the storm. Their voyage, though hard-pressed to succeed, was inevitably short lived. And although every attempt was made, they had not been able to save it.

Calen knew wrecks like this were frequent in the bay, especially when winter moved in, but he hadn't had to leave anyone behind from one before. This storm, however, made it so. His crew's lifeboat was overweight and damn close to capsizing during the thick of it. In order to save more, they had to leave men behind. Calen was willing to go back for them, but when another monstrous wave engulfed the wreckage they clung to and they didn't reappear, the Keeper told them their work had reached a natural end.

He knew it wasn't his burden to bear the guilt of those lost, but he couldn't shake it. The survivors had been scattered long and far after the ship broke apart, making their task daunting. But the Surfmen were tireless in their efforts, doing all that they could. The newly organized United States Coast Guard could not be sorry with how well the Sunfish Point crew had worked. Indeed, the Keeper announced he would be sending commendations in the morning.

But the praise felt tarnished when Calen knew everyone aboard had not returned.

It was days like these that made him doubt joining the Life Saving Service, and wonder if his mother had been right in worrying. Would he too, follow in his father's footsteps one day and be among those the lake claimed? It was something he thought about often enough, more so with this inclement weather. Death would come for every man, but he had inherently placed himself into a dangerous profession with no guarantee for another sunrise. As every Surfman recited, 'You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.'

His father had likely repeated that motto as often as Calen did. All without incident too, up until the last time he went out. Calen wondered if his father knew the lake would eventually take him, if one day he figured he would go out and never come back to his life, his family. Had he pictured it?

Calen gulped, he couldn't do that to his mother, he swore, not a second time. To leave no trace or a goodbye for her or his young kid of a brother? He refused! He wouldn't let the water take him too, and yet... he knew destiny wasn't one's to deal.

Steady, he muttered to himself, refocusing on his task at hand. That way of thinking would only split his focus and ensure his end.

As his uncle had advised, he needed to keep a level head, though it was easier said than done. For one thing, the storm was still raging, with no end in sight. For another, he was all alone on the beach in complete darkness. Calen couldn't recall when, but his light had been doused by the waves some time ago. He'd carried on, working with the little bit of light there was, but now that night had fallen completely, he was without a tether or his sight, and perhaps soon, his wits.

It wasn't the dark that concerned him, Calen wasn't afraid of the dark. If he had been, he wouldn't have joined a job that often put him in darkness with only a sole beacon of light, literally, to brighten it. Nor was he superstitious. A few on the crew were, dreading when they would have to walk this stretch after ships went down, looking for bodies. They feared the dead would be angry and their ghosts would try to harm them or some such nonsense.

Calen didn't believe that, however. The dead were dead, and he doubted any miserable souls would come back just to torment the living. If anything, he would think they would want to help those alive, warn them about danger. That's what he would do, anyway.

But, he laughed silently, ghosts weren't real so it didn't matter what he thought of them. Although he had heard local tales like that of ol' Three Fingers Riley, Calen hadn't had the pleasure to come across him or any other ghosts. Maybe if he did he'd change his tune.

Movement in front of him caused Calen to jump, head momentarily full of ghouls, when a single glow came out of the darkness toward him. Had he been too quick to dismiss the supernatural? Though spooked, he stood his ground. He blinked and the glow became shapes. His legs tensed, ready to run, but after another blink, he recognized the shapes. First, that of a lantern, then a uniform.

Calen's shoulders dropped with relief. It wasn't some specter out for revenge, just a man. Another Surfman maybe, though not one from Calen's crew. Perhaps a former Surfman, he thought, seeing wisps of gray around the man's temples. The coat was an identical cut, but not quite the same as Calen's. Instead of an orange slicker with bold black lettering proclaiming him to be part of the SUNFISH PT U.S.C.G, it was a faded rust in color with scraps of peeled lettering and patches on the front making it difficult to read. He figured the man must be from another light, or wearing a retired uniform. There were several lights along the coast, so it wasn't impossible.

The stranger, if not for his lantern, would have been lost to him in the night. They may have even passed silently by the other without realizing until morning broke and the sun revealed their tracks, if the rain left any.

Rejuvenated by the sight of another, he picked his way over to the stranger, giving a shout to catch his attention. Calen was sure the man wouldn't hear over the crash of the breaking water, but his head snapped up and startled eyes seemed to gaze right into Calen's being. First with wild surprise, but then a cold, suspicious stare took over and Calen's feet slowed, before halting completely.

Both appeared to hold their breath, perhaps questioning if the other were real, or a storm-induced hysteria. At least, that's what Calen was weighing, until another wave smashed over them, and the man was still there. Even if the visage in front of him was supernatural or a hypothermic vision, Calen didn't wait for another swell to fall before he broke the silence.

"Hello! Sorry to startle you, but I saw your light. You really shouldn't be out right now sir! If you come back to the light with me, we can..." as Calen spoke he turned toward the

footpath but stopped mid-sentence. The boardwalk he had just traversed was completely submerged and violently churning as the waves surged with the storm. The rope he previously clung to, lay snapped from the force of the water and frayed into lengths, swirling with every tidal pull. The longer he stared at the spot he passed over, however, it seemed eroded not only by the storm, but somehow time itself. Behind him, a voice reminded him he was not alone, and he turned toward that sense of grounding.

“Aye, you best come with me I think.” The man’s voice, though low, cut through the howling wind and Calen found himself nodding, hurrying after the form sloshing away from him, to the caves near the far edge of the bay.

Once inside, Calen wasn’t surprised to see a small camp set up. People often stayed here for a night or two during the summer. He wouldn’t have thought anyone would want to sleep in the elements this time of year, though. The weather was decidedly brisker, as well as more temperamental this far in the year. But, Calen had to admit after leaving the dampness and wind outside, the mere barrier of a wall gave him enough warmth to think of the space as cozy. If it weren’t for the pervasive chill, comfortable even. His host motioned for him to have a seat and he yielded almost immediately, his abrupt exhaustion leaving no room for argument.

As the man moseyed around, Calen sat, took his boots off, and emptied them into the sandy floor. He placed his feet near a smoldering fire and shivered in reaction. Visions of bedrest and meals of tepid broth swam in his eyes and he prayed he hadn’t caught any prolonged cold. The Keeper would have his hide if he did. Frowning at that possibility, Calen looked up in time to see the man staring at him before averting his gaze.

Calen realized then, he hadn’t introduced himself or thanked the man for the brief respite of shelter. How rude he must seem! He decided to only stay long enough to get the feeling back in his fingers, then he would be off to finish his sweep of the beach.

“Forgive me, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Calen Jacobson, of the Sunfish Point U.S. Life Saving Service.” Calen could have been mistaken, but a gleam of something like pride flashed

across the other's eyes, pride and something deeper. It may have just been the fire, though, for as quick as it appeared it was gone.

"*Surfman* Calen Jacobson? It's a pleasure, a damn pleasure son." He took Calen's hand and shook it animatedly. Calen was surprised not at the grip, but how the man's hands were even colder than his own. "That's good work done at the light; I'd wager your family is real proud of you. Folks around here call me Salvor." He nodded his head and after a beat of staring at Calen, went to rekindle the fire.

Something about the other felt familiar, hovering on the edge of his mind. Though, the harder he tried to remember what it was, the hazier it became. Oh well, he could dwell on it later, when he was dry, warm, and had time to spare. It was probably the fact he had someone next to him to converse with instead of just himself that made him suddenly hunger for more company. What he needed was a night of cards with the lads, or a trip home to visit his family. Until then, he would simply enjoy this sense of kinship and not question it. His new companion, Salvor, sat down and after watching Calen covertly through the fire, asked what happened to beach him in the area during the worst godforsaken storm in nearly 40 years. Huffing out a laugh, Calen smiled at the man's vocabulary of almost entirely nautical terms and answered.

"Much like you I imagine. I mean, I hadn't planned for the storm, but the water will always call and someone will answer. And," Calen chuckled, "someone has to answer to the call of those who're doomed by their own foolishness of getting caught out there on a night like this." An acknowledging nod was his only answer for several minutes as Salvor stoked the logs.

"Some would consider it more foolish to try and rescue those who doomed themselves," came a thoughtful response and Calen shrugged.

"Well perhaps, but one can only hope our deeds, foolhardy or not, will eventually be weighed against their intent when all is said and done. So even if I am a fool for helping my fellow man, I can't say I'll regret it when my judgement comes." Salvor listened quietly to Calen's sentiment, face showing neither agreement nor dissent throughout. When his moral

justification was over, however, a sad smile came over the man's face and he nodded with the smallest of movements.

"Sounds like a Surfman through and through If I ever did hear one. I didn't mean to insult you, friend, I was merely curious to hear your answer."

"It's fine, I took no offense. You wouldn't be the first to suggest I might be better suited with a jester hat instead of this," he reached up to tug the brim before remembering his hat had been lost in the gales, "well, instead of the Surfman's uniform. My mother would surely rest easier." They shared a chuckle over his mother's concern, acknowledging how deeply universal a mother's concern for her child ran, that she might prefer them to become a literal fool if it meant their continued safety.

"So," Calen said, continuing their conversation, "Salvor huh? Is that what brought you here? You're a salvage man?" Salvor's laugh quieted as he glanced at Calen, but he gave a nod.

"Salvage of sorts." The smirk and whimsy dancing across his features slowly vanished, replaced by a hardness Calen couldn't place. Silence filled the room, apart from the soft crackles and pops of the fire, but the atmosphere shifted. It wasn't calm and jovial anymore, but tense and charged. Calen didn't know what had changed, but felt the urgency to tread carefully.

"Not just ships then, cargo? Items like your coat?" As soon as the prying words left his mouth he regretted them. Salvor stiffened, back going rigid and his outstretched hands warming by the fire curling defensively. One dropped down to pinch the weathered fabric of the hem and he seemed lost in thought, weighed down by whatever unpleasantness ran through his head.

"I'm sorry, that was too personal. I just, thought I recognized you as a Surfman from it, earlier, but I see that's not the case. So I thought maybe you had gotten it from a wreck, which if you did that's fine! You don't need to-" Salvor held up a hand and Calen stopped spewing words.

“It’s alright, no need to apologize for your curiosity. Some memories are just too much to think of in their entirety, even with time. You caught me off guard is all. It came from the Gitchi-Gummi all right, but she kept something far more important...” Ah, Calen realized, he must have lost someone to the waters.

“I... understand.” Calen murmured, his own past leaping to the front of his head.

“You do!?” The outburst caught Calen off guard and he jumped, nearly falling off the surf-polished boulder. Salvor looked expectant, on the edge of his seat as his eyes bored into Calen’s.

“Well, yes, I,” Calen cleared his throat and broke the tense eye contact, “I lost someone to the lake as well, never said goodbye.” Emotions flooded through him and he took a moment to compose himself. When he looked back to his company, he saw a queer look upon Salvor’s brow. A crestfallen sadness marred his amicable expression.

“I see. I thought with the coat... but that’s... I’m sorry, brother.” Calen arched a brow, opening his mouth to ask what his coat had to do with anything, when a sound outside caught his attention. He stood, turning to the entrance. Had that been a yell for help? He turned to Salvor, but jumped in surprise. He was beside him already.

“I know what you’re thinking, but don’t go out there. Please!” Calen, startled by Salvor’s sudden nearness and pleading, took a step back. When he did, he heard it again, cries on the wind. The men from earlier, at least one of them was still alive! He had to go, had to- the grip on his arm tightened and Calen gave a yelp.

“Salvor, stop! I need to get out there, someone made it, they’re still alive! I have to help!” Calen forewent his boots, as he brushed off Salvor’s hand, deciding they weren’t necessary. He turned to leave, but again was stopped. This time the grip was harder to shake, and when he finally did, Salvor was on the ground crawling toward him begging him not to go.

“I’m sorry Salvor but I have to. A fool has to go out, but he doesn’t have to come back.” He smiled as he began stripping layers and ran out of the cave. Salvor, defeated, sat back on his heels and let his head hang.

He could picture the scene happening in the water right now. Calen, swimming in the water until he came to the man who had clung to a barrel for nearly nine hours. Calen pushing the barrel and man closer to shore. Calen... being swept away by the final wave that crashed over the pair, as the barrel and man drifted close enough in for him to climb out of the water to safety. The man, a fool to guide his ship into a storm... surviving, while his rescuer became lost at sea.

* * *

The next morning, Salvor walked into the town diner discouraged. The news on the TV talked about anniversary plans for the defunct lighthouse, how 40 years after her worst storm, she might now be a museum... but he didn’t listen.

He walked to the corner booth and set the old jacket down in front of Calen’s brother. The man, younger than him, held his perpetual frown. Pushing fifty, he seemed less and less keen on these yearly meetups as time went by. He would probably stop coming here once Salvor died, the older man realized sadly.

He sat down on the empty side and sighed, grabbing one of the coffee mugs already in place.

“I’ll take it by that sigh, you’ve not been successful in bringing him home.” Salvor shook his head and had to close his eyes.

“I really thought this time, I really I did. I thought with the coat...” The younger man scrutinized Salvor with his eyes and let out a long sigh himself.

“Look, I know what this means to each of us, but maybe it’s time to give up the ghost on this, let Calen be.” Salvor’s eyes turned on the man quickly, a dare held within.

“Calen rescued me. He risked everything to bring me back, and lost everything to save me... I’m sorry, but I can’t... won’t rest until I return the favor.”

“He might never realize he’s dead you know,” the other stated sharply, and Salvor nodded. He had considered it.

“Maybe so, but as long as he’s out there, patrolling the beach and warning people about the storms, he’ll never find his peace. He deserves that after all he’s done.” Calen’s brother nodded slowly, admitting defeat. Salvor wasn’t wrong.

He dropped his eyes, deep in thought and neither of them broke the silence. The waitress came and refilled their coffees, a short raincloud passed overhead, and a group of children out from school ran past before Salvor dug a bill from his pocket and placed it on the table.

“Until next year,” Salvor said, and after clasping a hand on his old acquaintance’s shoulder, walked out. Until next year, the younger man agreed, leaving the diner with his brother’s salvaged uniform underarm.