

Bad-Ass Faeries

IN ALL

THEIR GLORY



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# SELK-SKIN DEEP

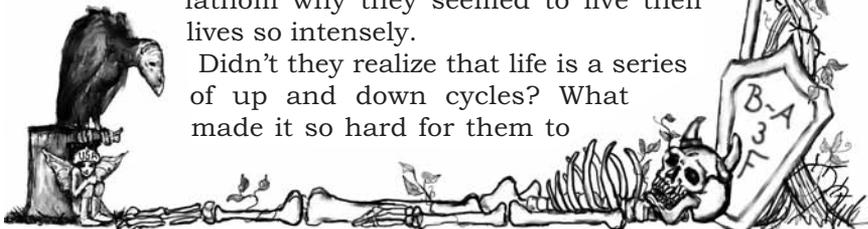
KELLY A. HARMON

C ADE OWEN STOOD ON THE FLIGHT DECK OF THE AIRCRAFT carrier *USS Livingstone*, watching the crew of an ammunition ship loading armaments on board. The night sea cooperated. Gentle waves in the Gulf of Tonkin lapped at the two navy vessels. Men from the other ship, the *USS Redoubt*, sent over bomb after bomb until a crewman from the *Livingstone* pointed to a large wooden crate and made a cutting motion with his hands, halting the transfer.

Cade itched to know what the man's agitation signaled. But from this distance, and under these lighting conditions, he couldn't make out the problem. The carrier needed those munitions. Without them, the fighter jets couldn't make their ordered strafing runs north of Hanoi in the morning, and he couldn't rendezvous with the other SEALs later in the week with the Biet Hai Commandos in Da Nang.

*Thank Manannán mac Lir. And President Kennedy*, he thought, who created the SEALs only recently. He hoped this special mission would grant him a reprieve from the boredom his nearly immortal life provided him, even if he had to live among humans to find surcease. Humans weren't a bad sort; he just couldn't fathom why they seemed to live their lives so intensely.

Didn't they realize that life is a series of up and down cycles? What made it so hard for them to



accept that and move on? How can there be anything worth fighting over—dying over—when all things circle back in the ebb and flow of life?

He would love to discuss it with Friedman, but that would mean telling Friedman his bunkmate wasn't human. Perhaps they'd known each long enough to swim that current. Long days confined together with the threat of war hanging over their heads had shaped their friendship far more quickly than a casual friendship might have. He'd give it some thought.

Until then, he would observe their intensity first hand. For now, he was just another man on the ship. And if he died serving? More the better, for it gave his life a purpose: something more than living and dying with the sea; yet, still living and dying *by the sea*.

The trident insignia of the Navy SEALs on his lapel gleamed in the moonlight. The brooding look on his face took on a more thoughtful aspect. He reached within his coveralls and pulled a small, rolled fur from around his neck. Shaking out the seal-shaped pelt, he moved into the darker shadow cast by an F4 Phantom and stripped out of his clothes. He draped the skin over his shoulders, letting the length of it drape down his back. Then, he grabbed the edges, pulling and tugging, smoothing the skin around himself until it grew large enough to cover him, turning him into a seal.

In an instant, the darkness disappeared, and Cade could see almost as well as if there were daylight. He opened his mouth, tasting the salty tang of the ocean on his tongue. He drew in a large breath, savoring the smell. He had waited too long to return to true form. It always felt this way to him, after the change, like the sea wooed him back. If he were his human self, he would have smiled from the pleasure of it.

He dove into the water, falling forty feet through the air, cutting into the sea in a graceful arc. He plunged deep into the water, then surfaced and made his way around the side of the carrier and closer to the argument.



Cade slipped off his seal skin. In human form again, he climbed the metal hand-holds on the side of the *Livingstone* and popped his head over the edge of the flight deck. The ordinance officer was purple-faced with anger. He shook like a terrier, his hat sliding back to reveal short-cut grey hair. He turned to face the small crew on the *Redoubt*.

“These are goddamned comp B bombs!” he shouted across the water. “I can’t take these on board.”

The young officers from the ammunition ship looked like they wanted to be anywhere but facing down the old salt. One replied, “We don’t know anything about that, sir.”

“They’re older than dirt. We can’t use this shit.”

“It’s all we’ve got.”

“We’re the goddamned United States Navy. This can’t be all we’ve got. Take ’em back. We can’t use ’em.”

“Can’t, sir. Our orders are to deliver munitions.”

Cade stole a look at the crates as they arrived aboard the carrier by way of the underway replenishment line. Black mold crusted the bottoms and sides of many of the crates. Several looked rotten. Cade saw the year 1935 stenciled on one. He swore softly under his breath.

*Manannán mac Lir, help us, he thought. These bombs were made half a decade before World War II, and WWII ended more than 20 years ago . . .*

He watched as an uncrated bomb advanced along the line and was lowered to the deck by a hoist. Cade recognized it by sight: round and wide, sailors referred to it as a *fat-boy*. The only time he remembered seeing one was in training class, having to watch the old black and white WWII footage, with the large bombs falling out of the back of planes.

*Gods!* he thought. Composition B bombs exploded full strength, not like modern munitions, which were built to blow at a lower rate if they went off accidentally.

Cade climbed back down to the ocean. As he swam away, he could hear the chief saying, “I really don’t like the look of these things. I swear they’ll go off in a heavy vibration. Hell! They’re so decayed there’s no telling what will set them off.”

He didn’t blame the ordinance chief for being worried.



“We took on four hundred tons of ammunition, Friedman,” Cade said. “Some of them are so large, I don’t know how they’ll fit them to the jets.” Cade tossed the nine of clubs onto the stack. “All of them are old and filthy—a few are rusting out of their casings. The ordinance officer was pitching a fit. He swore some were leaking.” Cade moved all the clubs in his hand to the right side where he could reach them easier.

“Two cards,” Friedman said. He dropped the three of clubs then laid his hand face down on the table beside his tattered copy

of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. "Where'd the bombs come from?"

Cade played the king of clubs. "Guys on the *Redoubt* said they picked them up in the Philippines. They've been stored in Quonset huts: no walls, no nothing, out in the storms and heat all year round. They found snakes and tree frogs in some of the crates." Cade waited for Friedman to play a card. "I heard one of them say that these are the only thousand-pound bombs the navy has right now."

Friedman said, "And they could blow any minute?" He looked up at Cade.

"According to the ord-O, yes," Cade said. "And they're not sitting safe in some warehouse . . . they're right on deck, exposed to everything that could possibly set them off."

Friedman looked surprised. "The ordinance guys didn't stow them?"

"Too dangerous in the hold."

"The captain didn't have anything to say about that?" asked Friedman.

"I hear he wired over to the *Redoubt* and ordered them to give over newer bombs. They told him they didn't have any other ammo, and besides, they had their orders. *Livingstone* had to take them."

"Unbelievable," Friedman said, shaking his head.

"Do you blame them?" Cade asked. "Under ordinary conditions, the *Redoubt's* an explosion just waiting to happen. I can't imagine what they felt ferrying those garbage bombs to us."

Friedman tossed his last card on the stack, winning the game. "I'm out," he said, picking up his book and tucking it into his back pocket. "Pretty scary. But do they expect us to do our job with an extra four hundred tons of ammo on the deck getting in our way?"

"I don't know, Fried. I really don't know." Cade shuffled all the cards together and stowed them in his trunk. "I pulled steering duty in the morning . . ."

"Duty officer always treats you guys like parasites."

"You want to trade?"

Friedman's eyes lit up. "That's prime reading space."

Cade shook his head, smiling, as he said, "You're going to get caught, one of these days."

"Give me some quiet and a good book to read. I don't care if that room is no bigger than my pop's sedan," Friedman said. "I don't know how you can stand all the noise on the flight deck."

"Noise doesn't matter when I can be that close to the ocean."



On the open sea, seventy-five miles east of Ha Tinh Province, men swarmed across the flight deck of the *USS Livingstone*, preparing for an attack on a rail line in North Vietnam. They planned to disrupt enemy supply lines by both crippling the tracks, then burying them under an avalanche caused by bombing the nearby mountains. In order to accomplish that, the ordinance crew, the red-jacketed *BB Stackers*, loaded the thousand-pound *fat boys*—bombs larger than the planes normally carried—onto as many planes as they could for the first strike of the day. Crewmen loaded Zuni rockets—as many as twenty-four at a time—as well as Sidewinder missiles and Shrike or Sparrow III missiles onto planes when the fat-boys ran out.

Cade wore Friedman's purple jacket, just like the other *grapes*: men assigned to fuel the large planes. Hose in hand, he watched the crews load the composition B bombs under the wings.

*Damn but they look like antiques*, thought Cade, watching the ordies load, *but at least they're getting some of that ammo off the deck. I'll feel a little safer when all of it's gone.*

Just then, a rocket fired across the flight deck.

*Lir! If anything blew*, thought Cade, *I would have laid money on the fat-boys, not a rocket.*

As if in slow motion, he watched it launch from a starboard F4 at the extreme rear of the ship and fly at a forty-five degree angle across the flight deck.

It ripped by the safety officer checking armament on an F4, blistering his face and hands. Soaring hundreds of miles an hour, the missile headed across the deck toward Cade. It missed him, knocking him off his feet as it passed. He tumbled over twice, losing his grip on the fuel hose, and landed on his chest, scraping his hands on the deck.

The rocket ripped through the right shoulder of a red-jacketed ordinance man, severing his arm, and spinning him around like a top. Then it struck the fuel tank of an A-4 Skyhawk preparing for take-off.

Four hundred gallons of JP5 jet fuel spilled onto the flight deck. Flames engulfed several nearby crewmen as the blistering rocket exhaust whipped by them. The jet fuel on deck ignited. Wind, and exhaust from waiting jets, pushed the fire toward the rear of the ship. All of the A-4 Skyhawks parked on the port side of the ship caught fire. Fuel poured out of their gas