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The Firefly Trapper

Jona L. Pedersen

When the world was still burning, the angels came to us with rain. They extinguished all of the world's fire. But when the rain turned eternal, we got down on our knees and prayed for warmth and light again. In their pity, the angels released a vermillion star into our realm. They might as well have said "Prometheus" when they told us that—in order to restore the world's fire—we must recover the Star.

As I wade through the shallows, I bear the lantern. Fireflies flicker inside of it, murmuring luciferin codes. The hundred-year-old rain drowns out the thuds of their exoskeletons ramming against the glass.

Something brushes past my ankles. I lower the lantern. The light of the fireflies allows me a glimpse into the murky waters. A carp's dragon-scaled tail shimmers, then disappears into a forest of reeds. I press on. The fringes of my cloak float on the surface. I listen to the water lapping against my knees. Waves stretch on till the end of the world.

The farther I wander from the village, the higher the water climbs. Eventually, it reaches past my shorts, then to my waist. I'm about to turn back when I notice a glow from the mangroves. The branches shelter a swarm. While I've never seen stars—they're long concealed by rainclouds—I think the fireflies might look like them.

I cast my net over the swarm. Then I pull back. With arachnid precision, I pluck each firefly and place it in the lantern. I collect a couple dozen throughout the night.

Guided by the firefly lantern, I return to my lighthouse. There used to be a coastline in its stead, but now, the structure stands halfway underwater. To get inside, I must either climb or dive.

I dive. The fireflies grow frantic as I submerge myself. Their frenzied, blinking light ward off the eyes watching me from the depths.

I plunge through the door of the lighthouse. My chest tightens from asphyxia. Once inside, I push against the staircase steps, propelling my body upwards. The weight of my clothes holds me back. But I reach the third floor. Water ripples over the floorboards as I breach the surface. Gasping for air, lungs burning, I hoist my body onto the planks.

My cloak drips. I quickly undress, hanging my clothes on the curtain hanger of the nearest window. Outside, I see the distant treehouse village, sleeping above rafts and paddy fields. Marshes separate it from my lighthouse on the coast. For a heartbeat, I linger on the view; linger on a life that is no more. The lantern crackles as the fireflies flash their abdomens, anchoring me in the moment. I am not a fisher anymore. I am something else.

I am a seeker of the vermilion Star.

I go up to the fourth floor. In the center of the room, a wick connects to the ceiling. It winds upwards like Jack's beanstalk. Once upon a time, the lighthouse would cast its beam here. But no longer. Instead, fireflies sit on the walls, the ceiling, the wick. They are the only light in the dark.

I pry open the lantern. My newest firefly harvest trickles out. I watch them from my hammock as they join the rest of the swarm. The hammock—which I made from the sails of a shipwreck—holds me in a coarse embrace. The hundred or so fireflies twinkle softly, slowly drifting around me into the misty hours of morning. Some fall asleep in locks of my hair. And that night, we dream of stars, like so many nights just like this.

I trap fireflies every night. Most nights I find none, but I still look. Except during nights of the full moon. Only then does light shine through the clouds. Under the moon's nebulous glow, I travel to the treehouse village. The villagers greet me on the docks. They offer me food and supplies in exchange for information about the landscape and fish migration routes.

When I finish trading, I hear the light drumming of footsteps running across the dock. “Trapper! Trapper!” a small voice shouts.

I turn around. A young girl runs up to me. I nod in greeting.

She returns the gesture with a short bow. “How many did you catch this time, Trapper?” she asks.

“More than last time.” I smile. “But you’re not here to talk about the fireflies, are you?”

Her gaze turns down to her feet, where fading leech marks cover her russet brown skin. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but no words come out.

I reach into my satchel. The girl dares a glance at me as I do. When she sees me notice, her cheeks redden. I pull out a card. The faded paper frames an illustration of an antlered serpent, coiling itself around a bridge. Some of the edges are iridescent, indicating that it may have been coated at one point. But most of the color is gone, and the text has paled with time and dampness. The only part which remains legible informs me that the card is supposed to represent an “enchanted creature” of some sort. In the corners, there are numbers and symbols I don’t understand. “I came across this in one of the ghost towns. You should add it to your collection.”

As I hold out the card, she snatches it into her tiny hands. She exclaims, “I can’t wait to show Courier!” Almost immediately, she scurries off. “Thank you, Trapper!” she shouts on her way down the dock. I watch her disappear into the hollowed-out trunk of a tree. Her frame is just small enough to fit through.

Once she is gone, I head to the tallest tree. The trunk is so wide that my arms can’t reach around it—I would need at least three other people to encircle it. I climb up the branches. The Elder waits for me on top. She sits cross-legged on the veranda, which is nailed into the crown of the tree.

“Welcome back,” she says.

I bow to her. She gets up, then heads into the little wooden treehouse. I follow.

Inside, I watch her gently wrap dried sheets of seaweed around

hard-boiled seagull eggs. The steadiness of her wrinkled hands always surprises me. After months of trapping, my own hands are shakier, wearier.

She offers me seagull eggs for supper. I accept. As we eat, she asks, "Are you closer to finding the vermilion Star?"

I shake my head. "I have near a thousand fireflies. But no Star."

"Don't lose hope, Trapper. Our fishers say they've seen the Star hiding in the firefly swarms, like a wolf in sheep's clothing. But none of them share your dedication." She rubs a pale worry stone between her palms.

"Sometimes I wonder if leaving this place behind will be worth it," I say.

"I understand why you might think that way. But you're braver and cleverer than most. You just need patience. And caution. Another bloom will roll through soon."

I look out the window. Beyond the hanging branches, endless tides lie undisturbed on the horizon. The rain is barely a drizzle, and it's difficult to imagine that anything will happen. But even if her conviction is a mystery to me, I thank her for the meal and advice.

I make the journey back, bringing provisions with me from the village. The Elder's warning comes true the following morning. When I wake up in my hammock, jellyfish surround the lighthouse. They cling together like mold, painting the sea scarlet. Their sheer numbers are enough to cover the ocean's surface. As they float, it almost looks like I could walk on top of them. But I know better. For the next days and nights, all I can do is watch as they infiltrate the marshlands and encroach on the village. I am trapped, waiting for the whims of the tides to carry the jellyfish away. But they linger and fester, soaking the sea in red.

As time goes on, the fireflies start to lay eggs everywhere. Their eggs—shaped like tiny, white pearls—cover the cupboards, the tapestry, and even my hair. The parents warm them with their abdominal torches. And, on the fifth night, they hatch.

The Elder once told me that firefly larvae only hatch in the summer,

then pupate in the spring. But in the never-ending rain, they lost track of time. Sometimes metamorphosis comes swiftly, other times not at all. My brood hatches weeks earlier than normal, and they pupate prematurely. Over the next few days, a hundred crystallized larvae form dimly lit constellations on the ceiling. It keeps my mind off the bleeding sea of jellyfish, off the tiring taste of seaweed, off the thrumming rain.

On the eleventh night, the fireflies complete their transformation. They gnaw through their own flesh, finally freeing themselves. Some are missing their forewings. Segmented plates—remnants of their larval stages—stick out from their thoraxes and abdomens like broken glass. Then, in their contorted flight, they join the rest of the swarm.

A vortex of light takes shape in the center of the lighthouse, gradually, until the swarm surpasses a thousand. Their buzzing grows louder than the wails of the last bison, a sound ingrained in my memory from when it drowned in the marshes. The light and noise merge into a blinding, deafening sphere.

For the first time in a hundred years, the lighthouse ignites. A flame crawls up the wick as fireflies consume it in their light. My gaze is drawn to the window, as a beacon now surveils the horizon. The ray of the lighthouse bounces off the bodies of the jellyfish, scattering shimmers of red throughout the air. Light blankets the world.

From the beacon, a silhouette emerges. The figure floats on paper-thin wings, advancing towards the light source. Towards the lighthouse. As red reflect off the jellyfish, the figure is tinted in vermillion. They reach out their hand to knock on the window. I open it.

The being enters. Brilliant light obscures their features, but their silhouette mirrors the shape of a human—aside from three pairs of dragonfly wings growing from their back. The first pair looks stunted compared to the second and third, which almost span across the room.

"You must be the Trapper," the being proclaims. Fireflies flit around them.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"The angels sent me," they say.

I understand now. "That was a long time ago, Star."

"I waited."

"They all say you're too late."

"Yet, you searched for me all this time, did you not?"

When I don't respond, the Star reaches out their hand. I take it without second thought. Their touch is so warm I almost flinch. But before I can react, the swarm swells around the Star, soon swallowing my hand in their light.

I pull back. There is no resistance. Only warmth. As I stumble, the hammock catches my fall.

At the same time, the vortex of light engulfs the being. Light crackles around them like electricity. It grows and grows, like a moon afloat in the lighthouse. It grows so bright I can no longer distinguish the fireflies. Then, the light bursts through the opening of the window. I run over.

Only a single firefly—its deformed wings unable to carry it—lingers on the sill. The rest of the swarm tears up the sky in a ball of light. I watch them disintegrate like a comet. The Star disappears alongside them.

In their trail, a crack forms. Clouds part, and light trickles through. The silence is larger than anything I know. Louder than the last bison, louder than the swarm. I hold my breath. The smoke forces me to cough.

The rain stopped.

The lighthouse burns.

Jona L. Pedersen grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. Their work appears in *Floodwall*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Allegheny Review*. When they aren't studying or writing, they like to explore the outdoors, roll dice with friends, and create art. Other passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. Check out their other work at www.jonalpedersen.com or follow their Twitter @JonaLPedersen for updates.