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of MONSTERS and BRAVERY
by Aimee Baker

It was dark and humid, and there was a monster in Calum's closet.

Or at least, it looked like there's a monster hunched in his closet, tucked between his coats and the partially open door. It was probably just the light, a trick of the shadows that sat heavily against the stark white door and bright yellow walls. Probably. Unfortunately for the six-year-old, probably didn't remove the terror that sat like a stone in the pit of his stomach.

Before, he would have called for his parents, screamed and cried until they broke open his door and flooded light in from the hall. That was before his little sister was born, before the mantle of Big Brother was bestowed upon him like a knight receiving his title.

If it was light that had banished monsters before, then he would wield it as a sword.

Slowly, as if moving through water, Calum drug himself from bed and across the floor. Careful not only to keep that open closet door in his sight but to avoid stepping on any of his toys that littered the floor. If he dropped that concentration now, he'd never make it to daylight. One foot at a time, over a battalion of plastic army men, lined up for battle and across the scattered remains of a train system, he walked towards the wall.

In a sleepy sigh, the summer breeze stirred the curtains surrounding his window, rustled with the leaves in the trees just outside. Shadows danced across Calum's room, reached their fingers long across every surface. They lapped at his feet, pushed him up on his toes and closer to the light switch.

There was a moment of breath, the hesitation between dark and light before Calum flipped the switch and snapped his eyes shut. The darkness behind his eyes was a mottled TV static of greens and blues, and as he peeled them open again, it remained. Nothing had happened. The ceiling light was still dark, his room illuminated only by the faint moonlight that slipped syrup-slow from behind sluggish smog. Flipping the switch again did nothing, no matter how many times he tried.

Flick. Flick. Flick. Half a dozen soon became uncountable, a manic beat of plastic that filled his room until Calum had to drop from his toes back to the wood floor.

The shape was still there, but now it had grown eyes and teeth.

"It's called a rolling blackout," he remembered his father saying earlier that week, "it helps the city save power when it gets too hot, and makes sure those who need it can have it."

Calum didn't understand how other people could need power right now when it was him that had such a beast lurking in the dark. It didn't matter in the long run; if the power was out, and he had no overhead light, he'd have to get creative.

There was a flashlight under his bed. Calum knew that, because he remembered kicking it days before in his haste to find Patch before their trip to see his cousins at the lake. A flashlight didn't need the power grid to work, it just needed batteries.

Calum's feet stuck to the floor as he crept carefully towards the bed, toeing between scattered battlefields of toys left abandoned in their ranks. The heat of late July bore heavy on the city as a whole, seeped through the open window of his room and made his pajamas stick to his skin. Clearly, the monster didn't mind, or else it wouldn't be hiding in a closet full of clothes. No, it would be slipping out, blending with the shadows on the walls and leaking onto the floor in a puddle.

Unless it already had.

The thought wasn't what brought the boy to his knees, but it was what kept his head above the mattress. Pointed towards that partially open door, watching for signs of movement. Something sharp dug into the skin of his leg, the sword of a knight or one of his army men gone AWOL from the battlefields.

It alone wasn't enough to make him move, but he had to be brave. Bravery would bring his eyes from the closet, to face the shadows under his bed, and the monsters that could be lurking there. Calum braced himself for eyes, for uncountable teeth and a dripping maw to greet him as

soon as his head met the floor. Instead, he saw almost nothing, save for the tote of winter clothes pushed against the wall under his headboard, and the bright yellow flashlight.

Excalibur itself wasn't as prized as that cheap little plastic cylinder. This was salvation, breaking the shackles of oppressive darkness and heat, exposing the creature as nothing more than what it truly was. A shadow, a figment of Calum's overactive imagination.

With a determination that could outshine the sun itself, the boy rose to his feet, pointed the lens at the crack in the door, and slid the toggle across the barrel. Nothing happened. No light, no click, not even a sputter from the flashlight. Just darkness, foreboding and all-encompassing, and the heat that never seemed to waver.

"Mama." Calum's whisper was nothing more than a rush of air, said on wobbling lips and with hope diminishing. His mother wouldn't hear him, not this far down the hall, this deep in sleep. He was alone in the dark, staring down a monster that grew larger and more frightening with each passing minute he stood next to his bed. The saving grace he'd been holding out for, his flashlight, was dead. Abandoned against a fiend so wholly unnatural, Calum was sure this was the end. What else could he do?

A siren wailed in the distance, a neighbor's dog barking in response, and a thought came to him then. There were more flashlights in the house, he'd seen his father use one that morning, plucked the big yellow and black thing from under the kitchen sink to help him in the garage. The light hadn't completely faded yet. It couldn't.

Patch was a strange thing for a child to have; a long, snaking dragon of iridescent white fabric that ended in pale blue scales was far out of place in his room. Nothing about it said children's toy, in fact, the tag that had long since faded once warned against those under thirteen playing with it. Calum had been persistent when faced with the air spirit in the toy store window, and the dragon had been his best friend ever since. If he needed to go downstairs, Patch would get him there.

He'd need all the help he could get, especially when he opened his door and found the usually dimly lit hallway dark. Though, that was nothing compared to the abyss that took over the stairway. Dark didn't begin to cover the abyss, a lack of light and sound that curtained the entirety of the downstairs from his gaze; what would have been a friendly sight in the daytime, full of family photos that held familiar faces smiling down at him, turned nightmarish.

With a firm grip on Patch, and a hand on the banister for safety like his mother had taught him, Calum took the first step into the void. When nothing leapt at him or clawed at his feet, Calum took another step. At his side Patch's tail dragged on the stairs, the beads that made up most of his weight shifting in tumbling sands.

It wasn't as dark in the living room, with all the windows shining silvery blue with moonlight. In fact, if Calum was any older and any wiser than he was, it might have felt holy. Sacred. Instead, it held an otherworldly stillness that settled over every flat surface, held tightly in the grip of the humid heat.

Something shifted upstairs, a rattle of noise and shuffling of movement. The beast was making its move, and he was running out of time.

Calum took the last four stairs at a fast pace, verged on frantic in the way the young boy all but ran between familiar couches and the big chair his father watch television in. The edges of the coffee table were soft when he knocked a leg into it, padded against not only his daily races but the future ones he would run with his sister. If he survived the night.

The kitchen opened up in front of him, a gaping maw of darkness backlit only by the moonlight. Where soft, familiar yellow nightlights would have lit the countertops in a friendly glow, the darkness swallowed it whole. This was it, the last trial, his final quest. Calum was running out of time.

Hope filled the dark spaces around him as he set Patch down on the floor, small hands fumbling for the doors under the sink. More sirens echoed off the houses outside, crying in sharp falsettos broken up only the sharp slam of the door hitting the cabinets next to it. Glee and joy mixed sweetly with the waterfall of success.

It came down in a shattering crash when the flashlight wasn't there.

Among the bottles of cleaner, the box of sponges and the old faded blue toolbox, was a distinctly empty space where the flashlight was earlier that day. Perfectly preserved in an almost cylindrical hole between the dish soap and the spray disinfectant.

A door creaked open, and for the first time all night, Calum heard his sister cry.

Frantic thoughts turned swiftly to actions, snapping up Patch from the floor and bolting back the way he came. Around him the shadows stood still, mocking his attempt at salvation. What knight could best such a thing with no sword? No hope? Calum would try. He had to, if she was crying that meant the worst.

Rounding the bend to the stairs, movement caught his eye, and Calum's worst fears came to life. A shadow at the top of the stairs, the monster had escaped. It was here, to gobble him up just like it had done his poor baby sister –

“What’re you doing up, Cal?”

That was his father, standing in shiny green gym shorts and no shirt, a baby fussing softly in one arm. Even as haggard as he might have looked to anyone else, to Calum, not even a god could have stood as proudly as the man above him. Reverence, relief, fear, and paranoia all overflowed in his small body until Calum found himself sobbing with it. With his face buried in Patch, he only heard the heavy steps coming towards him, felt the warmth of his father's hand in his hair.

“Bad night?” he asked, and when Calum could only nod into the damp fabric of his stuffed dragon, there were no more pressing questions thrown his way. “You’re okay. Give me your hand, bug. Mama’s got her candles going in our room, you and Dahlia can bunk with us tonight.”

Excalibur may have been a lost cause by then, the monster still lurking ever vigilant in his closet, but to Calum, it didn’t matter anymore. There at his father’s side, listening to the bubbling sounds of Dahlia, he was safe.