

The Longhouse

A Short Story by Jeffrey A. Limpert

Adapted from a portion of the author's soon-to-be released novel
Unfolding: Nexus

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We arrived fashionably late, missing the invocation by only a few minutes. I am one of the most punctual people in the world, but when I am with Carol or Candice, I hardly ever make it anyplace on time.

It wasn't the worst faux pas; I had wanted to watch how everyone's energy joined together. Candice was aware of how I felt and I was aware how she felt knowing it. So, in that silent way we can sometimes communicate, we mentally held each other for one timeless moment in our own invocation, thanking each other for being part of what we had become.

Several dozen people had formed a line snaking around the edge of the common room, waiting their turn to walk before the three food-laden tables. I found an open spot for Candice's pot of chili, that had taken so long to cook, and quickly retreated. The hole I had made in the line quickly disappeared as people clustered around this latest offering.

Tyler, the ex-cop and still in control, spotted me from the food line and pointed to the seats they reserved using their jackets and blankets as markers. I waved my thanks and gave a smile to Carol and Andrea, who were standing next to him.

Candice, watching me take a seat, picked up her plate and asked, "Not hungry?"

"Line's too long.... Military ruined me. There's usually some kinda' vegetarian food left over. It's the way of the world. I'll hold down the fort 'till the line's shorter." I waved her away saying, "Go ... mingle ... graze."

I watched my companions drinking in the noisy excitement of the hungry diners anticipating what choices of food they would be able to pick from when it was their turn at the tables.

Those who had prepared the dishes were jittering, looking around people ahead of them trying to see how popular their food was. Others were making sure they took from the less popular selections to assure each cook knew their dish was as good as any of the rest. An exception was for the people who bought plastic covered cakes and doughnuts at the last minute. Promises were made to return for a bite "if there was room."

I made eye contact and waved to people who Candice, Carol, and I had grown close to when we had made the effort to visit camp two or more times a year while adjusting to our new lifestyle. It had been difficult and expensive to make the

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pilgrimages, but well worth it in the rich experiences we had here and the long-time friendships we forged.

After a few minutes I grew impatient, so walked over to the beverage table, put a small stack of cups in one jacket pocket, picked up a pitcher of punch and a carafe of coffee then went around filling glasses and cups while renewing friendships.

I passed Tyler, who by that time was near the head of the line, when he asked, “Been put to work?”

“Naw,” I answered. “This is how the camp runs. It’s not perfect, but when someone recognizes there’s something to do, it’s more than likely you’ll see them pitch in. You have to be careful though, if the work calls for a craftsman, you might be better to decline the help.”

He laughed.

In front of him, Carol and Andrea were having an animated discussion with a spiritualist named Dianne. The topic was something about a dead aunt of Andrea’s who had advice for her. I drew Andrea aside, whispering, “Was that aunt worth listening to when she was alive?”

“No...”

“Think about why she’d be any smarter now that she’s dead.” Andrea smiled, touching my arm for a second as she stepped back into the discussion.

I made two more passes around the hall before quitting my job and stepping to the end of the line. Candice, who was only five people ahead, walked back to be with me.

“Enjoying standing around?” I asked.

“It’s been fun. I was talking with Patsy about the herbs she has started to use. You would have liked it.”

“If I could remember that stuff, what was it?”

“A recipe for a ginger detox.”

“Oh.”

“Not ‘OH.’ You’ll like it when I make some tea for you. It’s supposed to help you release the stress you carry around. It will make my life easier if you can relax.”

“I’ll relax when people around me relax. They’re killing me with their suppressed fear and anger.”

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“Really!? I didn’t know,” she chided. “Is that what makes me so edgy? Your being all wound up? What happened to Mister ‘I can transmute anything?’”

I touched her shoulder, “OK, I’ll have some with you when it’s ready.”

“Drew, you better start relaxing right now. You look like—”

At that instant, a half dozen scenes simultaneously presented themselves to me. I felt I had been falling backwards. I was lucky that day. My short sword managed to stop the Carthaginian who had been rushing towards me. His left hand was on my cloak, his blood covered my face and chest when time stopped. The blood felt as if thousands of crawling, stinging ants were each taking one eternal burning bite. The spilling blood had formed a scarlet ribbon between us. “Blood brothers,” I realized.

In the next scene, I was not so lucky. Here time did not stop. It crawled forward. Three grenades had landed around us and exploded. I couldn’t hear sounds once the explosions started, though I could feel them when bullets whizzed by or tugged at different pieces of equipment I was wearing.

The machine gun was about forty meters away. Unable to move, I watched the gunner walk the spray in bursts over two men to my right before the bullets tore into me. The grenades might have been enough, but he wanted his fun too.

I would carry the experience over into my future lives for centuries, I had learned to NEVER come back from a patrol the same way I went out, no matter WHO said it was safe. Good habits do help to keep us alive.

Andrea was playing on the dining room floor with her sister where it emptied into the living room, making me step around her. She wore a different body ... was about to become a teenager. Still, I’d know her anywhere by the look she always had and by her essence, no matter what her name, the color of her hair, or skin.

It had been eleven months since I last visited home. She had seen me coming down the hall from the front door wearing my uniform. I looked good then and saw that she had grown up enough to have noticed. Hurrying past, I smiled at her. *Too young again*, I thought, laughing to myself. She presumed I was laughing because I had caught her giving me the eye and she liked it.

I hugged her mother, Catherine my future wife, and my brother, Cid Andrea’s father, who hadn’t been murdered by the raiders yet. We grownups were all happy and chatting wildly attempting to say as much as we could before it was time to

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stop; in the last moment my eyes locked with Andrea's or Artemis as she was named in this lifetime.

Now I saw her twenty-two years later. She had come aboard the small merchantman I sailed between Rota, Barcelona, Valencia, and as far north as France when there was cargo. She'd been in the Coastal Protection Fleet for fifteen years, captain of her second ship for two and had a young man in tow the night she stepped off her gig onto my gangway.

As we were at ALL STOP, I chased the helmsman away when they entered the bridge. Once we were alone, she told the man to stand in the light where I could see him. Pointing her index finger at his chest, he opened his shirt revealing the tattoo of a Viking ship above his left breast. I became angry and almost killed him where he stood, but she stopped me. I was supposed to take care of him. Hide him for now.

Before she left the bridge and my charge, she gave me a kiss, a real kiss, captain to captain, a first for me. I appreciated she had waited until Catherine had passed on.

The time wave I was riding started to collapse, much as surf does when it reaches land. Now, not only was everything all happening at once, it was jumbled as the swirling wave became smaller and smaller.

I felt the heat from the hot desert sand flowing across my sandals with each step, smelled, and tasted the water stored in animal skins out of reach, stacked high on the rolling wagon, I was guarding. There was a charge of opposing cavalry, airplanes diving, and another explosion tearing down the wall of a home I would be born in, shaking the earth under my feet.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and jumped.

"Do you mind if I step in line?" It was one of the new campers.

"Yes... sure, please," I answered, relieved that I had not mopped the floor with him instead.

"Sorry," he added. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I heard Candice, "Drew, are you OK now?"

"Thirty seconds, I'll be fine."

Next was Carol, "Let's get him to the table."

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They sat me down. I learned not to fight it when they wanted to help. The truth was, I was glad they were around.

“You stay with him, Carol. I’ll get him some food.”

“You OK?” asked Tyler.

“In a couple more moments,” I answered.

Tye had another question, “What were you doing there? You looked like you were frozen.”

God bless him, I thought, *he worried as much as the women*. “Frozen in time — wait.”

Carol rose to get coffee for me, saying, “You need a small jolt to rattle your brains and see if you have any left.” Addressing Tyler and Andrea, “One of you sit by him. I’ll be right back.”

Stephen was next. He must have seen it, too. “Well, did you bring any messages back? Where did you go?”

“Ancient past and future; ‘wars and rumors of wars,’” I said while laughing to myself as the chaos continued swirling around me. “I’ll sort it out and let you know if it’s anything important.”

“What wars, Drew?” asked Andrea, as soon as she saw things had settled.

“One you’d be interested in, about a hundred years after the collapse of the European Union, just before the end of the Second Dark Age, when things are being put back together. We are in Spain along the Mediterranean. You are my niece then. Raiders came and killed your father, my brother.”

“What happens to me?”

“You follow in my footsteps, earn a commission and eventually a ship you use to track down the remnants, and keep our coasts safe.”

“What footsteps?” she asked, as I stopped to accept a cup from Carol.

“I was ... will be, in a local naval unit hitting them back. That’s why they went after our homeport, as a reprisal. Your mother and you survive. I married your mother and kept after them. We finally wiped out their bases on Corsica, which lead directly to the defeat of the cities they captured in Spain and their last western stronghold, in what’s left of present day Marseilles.”

“Who were ... will they be?” asked Tyler, who looked like he’d like to get in on the action, too.

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“Marauders, pirates who prey on anyone and everyone who doesn’t wear the symbol they have tattooed on their chest. After the fall of Marseilles, we continued to kill anyone we found who had one. No questions, no quarter. It served as a warning to anyone else who might be considering a life of adventure.”

“Drew, that’s twice now since we met, you’ve mentioned Andrea as a warrior. I still can’t see her ever becoming angry enough to kill people.”

Growing uncharacteristically cold she said, “No one murdered my father in this life, Tyler. You’d be surprised what I might be capable of.”

“I guess I might,” he allowed.

I sighed, “If I’d been able to do my job better, you wouldn’t have had to take over. You could have had a decent life in a home, had children, and let them play with your father. I’m sorry about that, Andrea.”

Candice came back with dinner for both of us. “Drew, you think too much. Have some of this veggie stew and cornbread. That’s a long way away. Enjoy where we are today. That future will take care of itself.”

While I shoveled hot food into my mouth, Andrea asked, “Candice?”

At this, Candice and I stopped and looked at her, noting between ourselves that she wasn’t afraid, wasn’t asking for herself.

“Yes?” responded Candice cautiously.

“I’ve heard people travel through lives in groups. If you really can see the future, if you really know the different outcomes, tell us if Tyler is going to be safe in that time Drew is talking about. Is there anything he has to do now that will help him in that future?”

Candice gave Andrea a sympathetic look, “That’s really a question more for Carol or Stephen here. I can only see details for the life I am living.”

Andrea wavered and the thrust of her bravery passed.

Turning to look directly at Tyler, Candice said to him, “You’re a danger to us right now. You’ve just seen what Drew has to go through. Visions like he had this evening aren’t random. You’re in there somewhere. Your girlfriend is right, but she doesn’t know why. If you really want to progress, if you want to see what’s possible, you had better stop trying to control the events around you and work on yourself. But, if you really cared—”

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“Thanks, Candice,” I interrupted. Switching to telepathy, I asked, *Did you see the vision?*

By telepathy I heard, *Yes!*

Do you know who the young man she brings to me is?

Tyler.

Whispering, with our heads nearly together, I continued, “He was tattooed when he was twelve years old. The coast of Spain had already been freed two years. He was only a kid who never hurt any of our people and had been in hiding for more than ten years.

“We killed hundreds of men and women after we kicked them out. By the time Andrea got to him, she realized the pirates they had been killing weren’t growing older, but remained young. Instead of summary execution, she talks to him and finds out he was a child who didn’t have a choice and never attacked us. She won’t be able to go through with it and dumps him in my lap to take care of.”

You mean ‘again,’ Brother, Candice thought in reply and whispered back, “She’s got you cleaning up after her in this life and in the next.”

At that, Candice started laughing out loud. We all started to laugh – Stephen, Candice, Tyler, Andrea, Carol, and me.

“They don’t have a clue do they?” she whispered.

“No, they don’t.” I answered still laughing. “Hilarious isn’t it?”



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