

Very Much Drama

By C. Jade Wyton

Baran Grimalkin is out hunting in the woods. He doesn't have much on his mind besides the order he received for deer meat, and the overwhelming horror of his mortality and how gruesome his death will be— So, the usual.... He soon finds a small herd of deer in a clearing and notices a very unusual doe among them. Is it injured? Is it sick? Or, perhaps, is it his daughter's druid friend who vanished into the woods during a mental health episode?

A collaborative short with my friend Vanessa.

Contains mentions of death, violence, and mental health issues.

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Baran Grimalkin was out hunting again.

He'd received a phone call from that old codger, Jed Brimstone, asking about deer meat.... When he'd said he didn't have any in stock, the man had shouted something through the phone that was only half-audible, and Baran had rudely agreed to go out hunting as soon as it finished raining.

And now it had finished raining. So Baran was out in the woods and mud, trying to track down an animal worth his bullet.

Baran shifted his rifle carefully as he squat down, keeping it from swinging or brushing into the mud as he inspected some deer tracks.

He gave a haughty sniff and pressed back his ears in frustration; his snout crinkling up as he caught the faint-but-fresh smell of deer.

On the one hand, wet weather made hunting and ground tracking much easier. But, on the other, it made it harder to move silently and follow scents.

He sniffed again, his snout twitching as he did.

The deer were still nearby and, judging by their tracks, they were simply ambling along at a relaxed pace. That would make it easy to catch up to them.

*Unless something spooked them. Like a bear.*

Baran felt a twitch in his jaw as the thought crossed his mind.

Someone had reported a bear by one of the roads earlier this week.

It would be just his luck to be mauled by a bear....

A quiet hiss escaped the tabaxi man as he rose to his feet.

Horrible, knife-like claws and gnashing teeth, pulling his organs from his body before he was even dead—

That was a very Grimalkin death to die.

He shook himself out and began to track the footprints in the mud, moving slow and careful and keeping his ears turned to listen to the world around him.

It didn't take long for him to find the deer.

They had been close, just as he predicted. Grazing in a small clearing not too far away.

They were an interesting lot of does, he thought as he watched them. Most of

them looked relatively normal. But there was an out-of-season fawn, and two or three of the does looked like they weren't native to the area....

His attention was quickly drawn to the most unusual doe of the group; a white-speckled thing with a pelt that was much deeper red than the solid browns and greys of the others. She brushed past several of the other does, her movements slow and solemn, before she broke away from the group and looked up to the cloudy sky.

Baran watched them for a while, intrigued by the doe with the speckled red pelt.

He'd only seen deer with unusual patterns like this maybe once or twice in his life before. And it was always fleeting, as they typically didn't last long in the wild.

The tabaxi crept forward carefully, trying to keep his balance in the soft muddy ground while avoiding the fallen twigs and leaves. His dark fur helped him blend in with the shadows of the overcast woods and he found he was able to creep out of the undergrowth a fair amount without disturbing the animals— Though he paused when an elderly, greyish doe lifted her head and looked around with an expression that Baran could almost place as *suspicious*.

Baran ducked down and held still; knowing that a deer this old had been able to grow so old for a *reason*....

Only when she gave a low moan and called over the out-of-season fawn to feed did Baran let out his breath.

It was echoed by a much louder huff from the red-pelt deer, who continued to stare up at the sky.

Something seemed off about that one. More than seemed off about the rest of the herd....

It didn't feel right, and for a moment Baran wondered if he shouldn't be here, hunting these deer.

Hunting *these* deer.

But then he thought about Jed and how insufferable the man would be if he didn't get his meat, and he slowly swung his gun around, double-checking that it was ready to fire.

The red deer had lowered its head, now, and was grazing again.

*She wouldn't last long, anyway, Baran told himself. And her pelt was....*

He paused.

*Scarred.*

This doe had deep scars running along its side and back, and another along its shoulder.

Baran's eyes narrowed, and he wondered if the deer had been hit by a car or taken a tumble down some sharp rocks at some point in its life; injuries healed wrong would explain its unusual movements—

The deer reared up on its hind legs, taking several steps backwards before leaping up and kicking out in a way that sent it tumbling into the mud with a loud *squelch!*

No.

That was *not* normal, even for a deer that had sustained injuries.

He aimed his gun to the red deer, and steadied his hand.

*Perhaps he should put it out of whatever misery it was in.*

It was clearly suffering from *something*.

But something deep in Baran's gut told him... *no*.

*Not that one....*

Baran's ear twitched, and he lowered his gun.

If something was wrong with this deer it might not be safe to eat. And if he was going to waste a bullet today, it would be to fulfil Jed's order.... So Baran switched targets to one of the other deer; an overweight doe with a very subtle dappling to its pelt.

It was the perfect deer. Plenty of meat for the Brimstones, and a beautiful new rug for Tanya....

Baran shifted his weight onto his other foot as he lifted his rifle to take aim and....

The muddy ground didn't hold.

His foot slipped, carving a deep score into the soaked earth, and Baran threw his arms out to steady himself; accidentally squeezing the trigger of his gun and sending a shot into the trees above.

The deer all let out surprised bleats and bellows and scattered; most running to the woods, except for two.

The red deer, who'd whirled around in a very not-deer way to look over the clearing instead of escape it— And a tall, pale deer which made straight for Baran and reared up, flailing its hooves and attempting to stomp on him.

Baran let out a hiss, summoning his pact weapon into his hand and taking a few swings at the furious doe. He let out a yowl as its hoof planted firmly on his tail, and then looked up in surprise when his cry was echoed by the odd-speckled red doe.

The strange doe got between Baran and the other deer, turning it away and herding it towards the trees.

All Baran could do was sit in the mud and watch on, panting and confused, as the unusual deer stopped at the edge of the trees and watched the other deer disappear into the woods.

Then it turned, looking straight at him.

He froze, swallowing as it stared him in the eye....

Then it heaved a large sigh and shook its head in a very person-like manner.

Baran's brow furrowed.

He did not like this creature. There was an odd look in its eyes; some spark that deer simply did not have.

Slowly, carefully, and not taking his eyes off the strange doe, Baran rose to his feet.

'*Easy*,' he said softly, holding out his free hand as he dismissed his magical weapon and reached for his rifle.

The doe rolled its eyes and stomped its hoof in annoyance, causing Baran to freeze in place.

His fur stood on end as the creature raised one of its front hooves and waved it around in an expressive manner— Though what it was expressing, Baran had no idea. The noises the creature made were deer-*like*, but were not natural deer noises....

It was like it was trying to speak to him.

Or... *scold him*.

It took all of Baran's effort to make his fur lie flat as he picked up his rifle.

*This creature was not a deer*, he confirmed to himself as he slung the strap of his gun over his shoulder and held up his empty hands submissively. *It must have been some sort of guardian spirit, here to protect animals from men like him.*

Baran swallowed, wondering what this creature might have done if he'd not missed his shot— And what it might have done if he had gone through with shooting it.

*Killed by a vengeful forest spirit*; that wasn't exactly the *usual* Grimalkin death, but it would no-doubt be as gruesome as some before him had been....

'I'm leaving,' he said, slowly and clearly to the deer-shaped creature. He took a step back to emphasise his point, but paused when it cocked its head at him and let out a confused bleat.

Did it... *want* him to stay?

Ooh.... He did not trust this creature.

No.

Not one bit....

Not one... bit?

Baran's brow furrowed as the creature caught sight of its own hoof and acted... confused. Like it was surprised that it had a hoof. And he took another slow step back as it began to circle; looking itself over before jumping in place and bellowing at him loudly.

Then it reared up, and Baran took another hurried step backwards as its body contorted into—

*'Becky?!'*

Just as Baran realised what he was looking at he tripped over backwards into a bush.

*Becky Bloom!*

He was looking at fucking *Becky Bloom*— His daughter's half-elf friend who had been missing for a week?!

'What are you *doing?!'* he exclaimed, fighting his way out of the bush so he could storm over to Becky and grab her firmly by the arm. 'I could have been *shooting you!* I was almost *shooting you!*'

Becky gave a weak, almost half-hearted, struggle against Baran as he yanked her close and held her too firmly for her to escape.

'You are *filthy!*' he snapped— And then paused, his expression momentarily betraying a look of concern as he took in the state of his daughter's friend.

She was a mess.

She was covered in mud and dirt and leafs. And her hair was tangled even more than it normally was. And her usually bright eyes were sunken and listless; with deep dark bags bruised underneath them....

She looked *terrible*.

'What is wrong with you?' Baran asked, surprising himself with his gentleness. *'Becky....'*

'What's wrong with *you?*' she retorted, and Baran heard in her voice that she was *trying* to sound angry, but was too tired to get all the way there.

'I was hunting,' was the only explanation he offered. Then with an exasperated sigh he let go of the girl and quickly took off his coat, wrapping it around her shoulders.

His expression grew stern when she tried to shrug the coat off, and he held it over her until she gave an exhausted, defeated sigh and pulled it around herself.

Her shoulders sagged as she did, and Baran noticed she was trembling.

*She needed to go home.*

A week in the woods without her medication had not done her well.

Whatever sort of episode she was having was not going to get better if she stayed out here.

'Is *this* what you have been up to?' Baran chided, taking her by her shoulders and steering her back the way he'd come. 'While everyone worries? Being deer in woods and rolling in *mud*?'

'*Maybe*,' Becky answered, pitifully.

She wasn't putting up a fight; which was a surprise.

From everything he knew about Becky —what he'd heard both directly from his daughter, and from Becky's parents as they'd begged all of the local hunters and rangers for help searching for her— he thought she would be the sort to argue with him.

But it seemed he was mistaken.

'Well? Has it solved your problems?' he asked, almost smugly. 'Or are you having same problem but covered in mud?'

'It solved *some* of my problems,' Becky whined, and Baran tightened his grip on her as her expression changed from apathetic to annoyed.

'Your parents are worried,' he told her, the smug edge disappearing from his tone as he grew serious again. '*Malinka* is worried. I am having people coming onto my porch asking about child who is not mine— You better be having *good* reason for being muddy and deer!'

Becky dug her heels in, then, and Baran jolted to a stop as she let out a loud huff and stomped her foot. 'I'm *sick* of people!' she exclaimed. 'People always want to make drama for, like, *no* reason! Deer at least don't stab their friends in the back! We actually *look after* each other!'

Baran echoed Becky's angry huff, rolling his eyes as he tried to shove her forward. 'Making "drama"?! *You* are making drama! You are making drama *right now*! Disappearing into woods is— Is—' he stammered, trying to translate the words in his mind. 'It is *very much drama*!' he gave Becky a mighty shove, now, practically dragging her through the mud as she resisted him. 'For *no* reason! You haven't got good reason for yourself!'

'You don't *know* me!' Becky accused, her eyes beginning to tear up as she dug her heels in deeper and pushed hard against Baran's weight. 'You don't *understand* what I'm *going through*!'

'Do not understand?!'

'No! Jareth—' Becky cut off, a haunted look passing over her as she suddenly lost her fight and her knees buckled underneath her. She collapsed to the ground, bursting into tears and letting out a loud, mournful wail as she flopped down limply.

The only reason she didn't end up face-down in the mud was the death-grip

Baran had on her arm.

The man looked around frantically, a panic in his chest as his ears folded back and his breathing grew fast and shallow.

*Oh*, he hoped nobody was going to find him here, right now! If someone came across the sight of him dragging a sobbing teenage girl through the mud— *His reputation was already bad enough, with the rumours that he was a serial killer!*

The *last* thing he needed was for people to think he had kidnapped *Becky Bloom*.

Lynched by half the town after they mistook him helping a girl for being a kidnapping monster— Now, that was a *very* Grimalkin death!

‘B-Becky, stop!’ Baran stammered. Then he cleared his throat and crouched down, taking her shoulders firmly and giving them a squeeze as he hardened his voice. ‘Becky! Stop—’

Becky threw her arms around Baran, hugging him tightly and wailing into his chest.

Baran froze still, let out a displeased rumble in the back of his throat and feeling his fur poof out angrily as Becky clung to him.

‘He knew!’ Becky sobbed into Baran’s chest. ‘He knew that— He *knew that Jezzibeth*—’

Becky’s voice became so high, and whiny, and filled with sobs, that it was impossible to understand what she was trying to say.

After a few moments of simply remaining perfectly still and letting out a low, constant growl, Baran sighed and awkwardly pet Becky on her head.

‘Becky. Get up,’ he sighed, rising to his own feet.

He didn’t really care if Becky stood of her own volition or simply clung to him. She weighed nothing to him....

Baran frowned as Becky’s grip loosened and she slid down his front; smearing mud and tears (and probably *snot!*) into his shirt before finally letting him go.

She took several short sobs in, each one growing more even as she caught her breath.

‘Why— Why would he do that?’ she asked, though Baran had no idea what she was talking about. ‘I told him I was scared of that *exact thing* happening, and it’s like he went out of his way to *make it happen!* He’s supposed to *love* me! I’ve been trying *so hard* for him! And he— He— He does *that?!*’

Baran stared at the girl, his tail lashing about uncomfortably as she gave a loud, wet sniff.

‘You are.... This is all because of *boy?*’ he growled, slowly, before gesturing towards Becky and then up to the clearing. ‘You have worried us all to *death* over fight with *boy?*’

Becky let out a long, miserable noise and nodded.

Baran gave a heavy sigh of frustration and pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘You need to be going home, Becky,’ he told her. ‘You are making more problems for your *parents* and for your *friends* than you are for this *boy.*’

He then paused for a moment, rather pleased with himself for saying what he had.

It sounded rather wise, he thought. Like something his Tanya would say to

their daughter.

Becky didn't seem to agree, however. As she let out the loudest, most miserable noise that Baran had ever heard in his entire *life* and burst into tears again.

'You're right! He doesn't care!' Becky sobbed. 'He doesn't care about me! He *never* cared about me! I've *always* bothered him! Ever since we were kids! He *hates* me! He's *always* hated me!'

Baran took a step sideways, just in case Becky tried to cling to him again. 'B-Becky! Stop. Stop crying,' he said, trying to keep his voice firm as he took ahold of her again and held her upright. 'Listen to me. Da? This boy. This boy: is he stupid?'

'No!' Becky wailed. 'He's one of the smartest people I know! Only Malinka and Adam are smarter than him!'

A quick flicker of pride filled Baran as Becky mentioned his daughter, and he had to stifle a chuckle. '*Then*,' he said, firmly. 'If he is not stupid, he would not be wasting time on people who are bothering him. Da? *Da?*'

Becky gave a loud sniff, swallowing down her wails into quiet weeping, and looked away.

'He would not be driving you around on motorcycle if he hated you,' Baran told the girl, lifting her clear off the ground and placing her on her feet; facing the direction of home. 'Boy is not only person in world. Go home. *Shower*. If boy show up, break broom over his back. Vorked for my sister back home.'

'I don't *want* to go home,' Becky whined, taking in an uneven shaky breath. 'They'll make me be a *person* again. I don't want to be a person again! I want to be a *worm*. I wanna get eaten by a bird, and pooped out onto someone's car!'

'A *worm?*' Baran echoed with disgust. Then he shook his head and gave an exasperated sigh and nudged her forward. 'Vell, that is too bad. I am taking you *home*. You can be whatever creature you want *there*.'

Becky gave another sniff. And then she hiccuped and rubbed the tears from her eyes.

She took a step in the direction Baran had nudged her.

Another step.

Then another.

Then... she lay down on the ground and turned into a raccoon.

Baran let out a loud, frustrated sigh and picked her up by the scruff of her neck; storming off through the woods towards home.

He was too tired to argue with her anymore.

If she wanted to be a raccoon, then *fine*.

She would be a raccoon who found herself seat-belted into the passenger seat of his truck.

—END—

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