

Honorable Mention: No One's Child

by Barbara Purbaugh

Not again, Abraham thought as he entered the grocery store.

Police officers, members of the general public, the local media, and one very distraught little girl stood around a gumball machine.

He stared at the gumball machine. It was one of the large ones where a child deposited a quarter and the gumball tumbled down a yellow maze. He watched as a police detective slid the tooth into a plastic bag.

Evidence, he thought.

Little Emma or Sophia or whatever they called kids these days had deposited her quarter thinking she'd get a bright gumball to chew. Instead, she got a tooth.

And now he'd have to get the tooth back. It was his job.

To humans, tooth fairies were the stuff of legend, and collecting teeth was harmless. He scanned the crowd for the witch. One always came. A child's tooth in a witch's hand was a dangerous thing.

He was an officer in the lost tooth department. His department had a 94% lost tooth recovery rate, but the other 6% of those teeth fell into witches' hands. Hair and nails in a witch's hands could really make some trouble for children, and those problems had their own departments, but a child whose tooth fell into a witch's hands always led a tragic life. His department's failures meant that 6% of children met with tragic circumstances because of a lost tooth.

He was not even going to speculate how the tooth got there. Sometimes, it was just a sheer human occurrence like a simple drop of an eyelash. He couldn't recall how many times he'd fought off a witch while digging through the sand of a playground or how many flushed teeth he'd retrieved.

But often it was a careless fairy. He rolled his eyes, just thinking about them. Tooth-collecting fairies were the worst. Those fairies were like hippies on one long acid trip. They did their job but in the most reckless, irresponsible way.

He moved through the crowd. He sniffed the air. Witches had a distinct odor about them, sweet and candy-scented to attract children.

He shook his head when he saw her. She was disguised as a middle-aged woman in a bright-red coat. His stomach dropped. He had hoped he'd never have to see her again.

"Wynonna," he said, approaching her.

She knew his name and using it would have increased her power over him, but she said nothing.

"You know I can't let you have the tooth," he said.

She smiled a slow, icy smile. He remembered when that smile wasn't so slow or so icy. In the time when neither of them knew their family history, before they were marked fairy and witch. Now, he had no choice.

"You always had a choice," she had said then.

And maybe that was true. He could have chosen her, but then he would have had to walk away from his responsibilities, and he just wasn't built that way.

He had not seen her in almost six years. He had no idea if she had been collecting teeth all this time. How many of his 6% percent involved her? He shuddered.

He watched her. The smell of sugar wafted from her. He remembered the taste of her skin.

The policeman slid the tooth into a box and handed the box to another officer.

"Why do you want the tooth?" Abraham demanded.

"I am not a tooth collector," she said.

"If you don't collect teeth, why are you here?"

"This tooth belongs to someone I know," she said.

And then he saw her movement, just a tiny flick of the hand, and he knew she had the tooth.

Damn it, he thought as he reached out and grabbed her, just as she popped out of the grocery store.

Abraham hated this part, riding the vortex. Witches loved it, but it made fairies want to puke.

He could feel Wynonna squirming and cursing. She was shouting his name, and the more she said his name the more his grip loosened, and just as the vortex ended, he lost hold of her and landed with a loud thud.

Abraham was sick, but he managed to sit up. The room was shiny. It glittered.

"Mommy," a little voice said.

"Everything's all right," Wynonna said. She slid the tooth under the little girl's pillow. "See, I told you it was just lost somewhere. The tooth fairy would not forget you."

The child smelled of flowers, the way female fairies do.

Abraham looked at Wynonna.

"No one's child should live a cursed life," she said.

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