

## Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

### Third Prize The Mage's Light

*By Lord My'k Podgor of Cleveland, Ohio*

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The pumpkin tumbled down the hill, torn free from its vine by the oncoming storm. Had it a more human mind, it might wonder at how the clouds looked like faces tearing through the sky. It continued down the hill and down the forest path until it hit the pointed shoes of a wandering mage.

The mage, a student of an ancient school of magic, looked up at the sky through the tops of the trees and frowned. "They're trying to get through again."

Had there been time, the mage would have found some allies to beat back the things that threatened to break the sky. But they had been craftier this time, choosing a spot with few people to witness their coming, leaving little time to do what had to be done.

The mage looked down at the pumpkin and knew she needed at least one ally in this, so she took out her knife and got to work. Soon the pumpkin was carved, the face a simple one, expressive and, if the mage had to describe it, rather silly. But it would do the job she needed. Time was short.

She pressed both hands against the sides of the jack o' lantern, smelling the fresh-cut meat of the pumpkin, and energy began to course through her hand and the pumpkin itself. Every bit weakened the mage, but the things in the sky already seemed to be fuller, more in this world than theirs, so desperate measures must be taken.

The energy coursed and the mage felt herself weaken, going down to one knee, then both, finally unable to do much more than prop herself up against a tree. Yet inside the pumpkin, the mage's light swirled. At first it was a tiny dot, but soon it was big enough to illuminate the jack o' lantern's interior. The thing fell to the ground and rolled.

The lantern cried out, "What gives?"

"Not what, but who," corrected the mage. "Look at the sky."

The lantern looked up, wondering how it knew what the sky was. It saw the things breaking through and knew they were a threat. It felt it must know this because the mage had imbued it with a portion of her essence.

"You must use my light to turn them back," she pleaded. "And your connection to the natural. I know the information is flawed, incomplete, but you must do this."

The mage said no more, and the lantern—Jack, it decided to call itself—wondered if she was resting. The alternative seemed too sad to contemplate, and his feelings were so new that he wasn't prepared to deal with the death of the being who had given him life.

There was a task to do. Jack looked to the sky and wondered how exactly he could do it. He focused on his stem. The connection was weak since the top of his head had been severed, but it was still there and could be repaired. And if it could be repaired, perhaps more connections could be repaired or even built.

Jack looked to the tops of the trees, and recalled his home, and had a plan.

The first attacker from the sky broke through the barrier between its reality and the other, and surged downward. Because it lacked a body, at least a solid one, the creature's speed was high. It hit the ground and tried to sense life.

All it saw was a tiny pumpkin, but with the spark of life. The creature charged toward Jack. It was unprepared when the brightness of his spark grew and burned the thing from the other world. The thing, having barely a mind to speak of, looked at Jack curiously while it burned away as if it had never been.

Though their scout was defeated, the other things broke through, all heading toward Jack. Yet as they came down, Jack's spark of life expanded. It reached the land and the things that grew.

Where one small pumpkin had sat, now stood a whole field's worth, cradled in a nest of branches and vines with limbs made from the trees of the forest itself. Jack's face was etched large upon it. The light within pulled from the lives of the plants and created a beam of light powerful enough to penetrate any creature that dared pierce the barrier.

Then a massive hand gripped one side of the break, followed by another, and another, until six hands formed a hexagon and wrenched the portal open. A thing with a single massive eye made of thousands of smaller ones pulled its way through and attacked Jack.

Jack knew no fear. He grappled back, massive oak-tree arms and pine-tree legs lashing out at the creature. The thing pulled out bits of Jack's flesh and tossed them toward the forest floor. Their battle took them far and wide as each grew wings and the means of flight.

The entire countryside witnessed some of their battle, though no one saw Jack impale the thing upon a mountain and burn it away with the mage's light.

Jack's task was not yet done. He looked up toward the sky, where more attackers were massed, and knew what he had to do. He poured every bit of the mage's light into the hole in the sky, burning away the hole. As he sealed it, he lost bits of himself: slowly at first, then more quickly, until the only things left were one small pumpkin and a mage barely clinging to life.

The things still threatened, but the people, without knowing why, began honoring Jack and the mage: Each year they carved pumpkins, and their light kept the darkness at bay.