

# Line of Descent

by Marian Allen

A short story set in the world of  
**EEL'S REVERENCE**

~ Kindle Edition ~

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“No, this way,” Goby told Grunion, his youngest nursemaid. Grunion watched in admiration as the older mermaid flipped a cloud of silt up with his fluke, then doubled back and punched an imaginary shark with his fist.

Grunion mimicked him, stubby tail digging too deep and throwing up a chunk of rock. It didn’t go very far.

“Better,” Goby lied.

Grunion’s tail was still only half his body’s length, not quite long enough to balance comfortably on out of the water, and not long enough to use for much beyond simple swimming. Goby’s tail was long enough to curl once and sit on, but it would be another year before it had enough length for him to move as quickly on land as an eel on the sea bottom.

“Watch me again! Watch me again, Goby,” the tad said. Then he froze, drifting gently with the current, his eyes on something behind his nursemaid.

Goby swiveled, prepared to fight, incredulous that a threat had gotten past the pod’s sentries.

It wasn’t a threat. Not an outside threat, anyway. It was Silversides.

Silversides took no notice of the two, of course; they were far beneath him. An anomaly among the mermaids, he set himself apart: never participating, never accepting or offering friendship, never sharing. He had been nurtured by a random passer-by, like everybody else, but he didn’t even seem to have any feeling for his nurshen or nursemaids.

He was followed by a line of his nurslings: five almost identical tads, one year apart—almost identical to one another, and almost identical to Silversides. His nurture pouch bulged with his youngest, which would undoubtedly be another copy. Again unlike other mermaids, all Silversides’ nurslings were called Silversides, after their

nurshen.

A mermaid's breeding habits were nobody's business, but there was a major abnormality about Silversides'. Next year, the oldest Silverside tad would be a breeding adult, and that worried Goby. It worried a lot of people.

Grunion swam closer to his older nursemaid and murmured, "Goby, Goby, Goby."

Goby put an arm around the tad and patted him on the shoulder.

"I want to go home," Grunion said.

\* \* \*

Goby left Grunion with their nurshen, a gray-haired, slow-moving elder named Manta. Manta hadn't taken a tad into his nurture pouch for years. Then, one day, he had been indifferently watching fish feeding on hatchlings when one of the newborns had run right to him and hidden in one of his braids, just behind his right ear. Manta had batted the baffled fish away and, bemused, stuck the hatchling into his nurture pouch. That had grown to be Goby. Afterwards, he had kept to his shelter during the Days of Emergence, but one year a hatchling had somehow found its way into his grotto. He always suspected Goby might have picked it up somewhere and, not old enough to nurture, had brought it to him. That one was Grunion.

\* \* \*

Goby swam away from the pod. Everyone's nurshen always warned against it, but almost everyone did it, anyway. The pod was settled for the season; hatching, with its rich feeding opportunity for predators, was long past; short-range rambling was relatively safe.

The only thing to watch out for now was the two-tails, and they were so rare they were nearly legendary. The old folks said they came in giant shells that floated on top of the lower sky, and they only came into the lower sky if they were dying. They had weapons, the elders said, that looked

like sticks, and they sometimes hurt or killed a mermaid when they mistook one for a fish. That's what the old folks guessed, anyway. They said that mermaids had caught a two-tails now and then, and had tried to bring it to the pod, but it had always been a sick one or an old one, because it had died before it had been brought very far.

Goby felt a disturbance in the currents. It wasn't a shifting or a turmoil, for the currents were too deep and too powerful for that, but there was an indefinable turbulence, nevertheless. He moved closer to the surface of the lower sky, and found the turmoil more pronounced. The light grew no brighter as he approached the upper sky where the birds swam through the thin, impalpable substance the old folks called "air". It was a storm, then.

He stuck his head above the surface, letting the wild waves take him for a swooping, directionless ride, while more water fell from above to join the sea.

Deafened by the racket of rain and wave, he didn't hear the two-tails's shell approaching, didn't see it until it was almost upon him. He wriggled away with a few powerful strokes of his tail and, turning head-down, rushed back into the serenity of deeper water.

His heart thudded. The shell had come so close! He could almost have touched it. He wished he had. Still, he would have a fine boast to make to his peers, and it would be gratifying to compare his experience with those of the few others in the pod—all much older than he—who had also seen the shells pass.

With a crash he could hear, deep as he was, a two-tails plunged toward him. It wasn't swimming with purpose, though; it was thrashing the way the old folks said two-tails do when they're dying. Bubbles poured up from it as the weird thing flailed and fought the water. Its skin was loose and it had two scalps, one on top of its head and one under its mouth, both covered in thick black hair. Its loose skin

sloughed off in pieces, and Goby realized it was artificial skin made out of something else, intended to protect the two-tails' real skin. He wondered who had made the artificial skin and put it on the creature.

He had to admire its courage. How it struggled against its death! It got its head turned upwards and its tails downwards. It flicked its tails separately and worked its way back toward the surface.

Maybe this one wasn't sick. Maybe this one fell out of the shell by accident—flung out by the storm waves. Maybe the shell would come back for it, if it could stay where the other two-tails could see it.

Drawn by curiosity and an urge he couldn't explain, an urge that had to do with helping life continue, he followed the two-tails up into the storm.

The creature flickered its tails and swept the water with its arms, trying to keep its head above the water. Waves washed over it, and it heaved its chest, making odd rasping sounds that seemed to push the water out.

Suddenly, Goby understood. The two-tails were like whales and dolphins: They needed air or they would die. They didn't die in the water because they were sick or old, but because they couldn't breathe in it!

Impulsively, he grasped the animal around the waist and, undulating his tail, hoisted the two-tails farther out of the water. It jerked and cried out and stared at him with eyes unprotected from the spray by a nictating membrane, as his own were. It was a clever creature, though, and understood he wanted to help it. It put an arm around his shoulders and waved the other hand—a hand with no webbing between the fingers!—over its head, pushing a cry of distress out of its mouth that went, “Hi! Hi! Heer! Heer!”

The storm swept over them, and then was past. They watched it wash over the ocean until it was out of sight, carrying the shell with it. The shell didn't return.

And now what did he do with the thing? If he were right, and it needed air, he couldn't take it home with him. It would be unkind to leave it to sink, and he could hardly stay with it.

The answer was so obvious, he felt foolish for not having thought of it instantly. Not far away, there was a mountain that rose above the sky into the upper sky of air. Adult mermaids, who could tolerate sunlight and air better than youngsters or elders, went onto the edge of what they called land to dig clams or turtle eggs or, sometimes, to gather exotic fruit from the land plants. If two-tails were creatures of the upper sky, maybe land was familiar and safe to them. Maybe they died if they spent too long in the water, just as mermaids died if they spent too long out of it.

Goby told the two-tails his idea and promised to take him to the land. The creature didn't understand, of course, but seemed to sense his good will, because it let him shift his hold, and it relaxed and allowed him to swim freely, towing it with him at the surface between the two skies.

It cried out when the land came into view. When Goby released it, it lowered its tails and did something he would never have believed if he hadn't seen it for himself: It put its weight on its tails and, balancing on one and then the other, walked on its flukes as an octopus sometimes walks on its tentacles or a crab on its legs. In fact, those things Goby's people called two tails must be a form of leg. Or perhaps walking on its tails was a trick peculiar to this particular animal. It was an entertaining sight, anyway.

The two-tails made a sound at him, as if it were saying thanks. Goby raised an arm in salute and hurried for home. He was farther away than Manta would want him to be, and farther than seemed entirely wise.

\* \* \*

Goby said nothing about the two-tails. It was tempting to brag about his encounter with one of the dangerous

though delicate creatures, tempting to show off how he had solved the puzzle of their dying in spite of their would-be rescuers. And, if anyone doubted him, he could take them to the land and show them!

But then, of course, Manta and the other elders would be cross about his going so far from the pod alone and with no one knowing where he was. Manta would say *Why did I bother to nurture you? Why didn't I just pick up a piece of sandstone and put that into my nurture pouch?*

Even worse, the creature might be gone. Or he might have guessed wrong and the creature might be dead.

So he held his tongue and the days passed. He grew—well, all the tads grew, including the Silversides clutch. The youngest came out of the pouch, a fingerling that clung to his next-oldest nursemaid's hair and refused to associate with anyone who wasn't a Silversides.

"It isn't natural," Manta confided to Goby while Grunion played with other tads. "It isn't healthy. And that oldest tad will be parenting soon. He's your age, isn't he?"

Goby nodded. When Manta gave him a look of sudden realization, he couldn't hold back a bashful grin. Manta made an indulgent noise and gave him a rough hug.

"What'll it be?" Manta asked.

"Eggs," Goby said. He had been feeling a fullness just below where his skin blended into his scales. When he put a hand there, a slight swelling was just noticeable.

Manta was long past producing egg or sperm, but the news made him look years younger. "Oh! I'll show you all the nicest places to deposit your clutch! It has to be somewhere fish can't find them but sperm can. Somewhere there's a chance of someone taking one of your hatchlings to nurture before the predators snap them all up. My little tad—spawning! And in another year or two, you'll be wanting to nurture. I can hardly believe it."

It was embarrassing, being dragged around, shown off,

discussed and made over by the adults in the pod. His only consolation was that his age-mates were suffering the same rite of passage. It made him feel very mature and very strong—a link in the chain of reproduction that kept the pod vital. He was glad it would be a while before he would face the possibility that he might be a nurturer. Little Grunion tagged along, his expression and his body language screaming of jealousy and admiration.

Only Silversides and his oldest avoided the community's excitement at the coming of the spawning season. Nobody ever saw them scouting the usual spawning sites, in spite of the fact that Silversides and his oldest were both more and more obviously heavy with eggs.

“What if you did?” one of Goby's age-mates—bearing seed, by the placement of his reproductive bulge—asked, as the group shared a gathering of seaweed. The other seeders laughed nervously. “What if you did fertilize Silversides' eggs? I wonder who's done it before. Do you think he picks somebody and leads them to his clutch? I mean, it's *always* eggs with him, isn't it?”

“It happens,” a spawner said. “My nurshen's nurshen —”

“It happens, but how often? Not very often. It's usually one thing sometimes and the other thing other times. Almost everybody spawns some years and seeds some years. Sometimes both.”

Another seeder said, “Nobody's ever *seen* him during the season. Nobody's ever seen him take a nursling; nobody's even seen him at a hatching, but he's always got one in the pouch when the hatching's done.”

This was unnerving—disturbing, like so much about the Silversides.

Nevertheless, it became a game among the seeders to follow the Silversides whenever they came across them, as if they were competing to see who would fertilize the

precious Silversides eggs. Even some of the spawners played, hanging back so their condition wouldn't alert Silversides and his brood to the joke. As the season grew nearer, the two older Silversides would leave the younger ones in care of an elder and swim, seemingly at random, as if hoping to bore or lose their followers.

Goby was playing this game one day. He was on edge, checking for small predators, who would be along soon in search of egg sacs to devour. One by one, his friends turned back as the original Silversides and his oldest nursling went further afield. Finally, Goby realized only he was left, and he was so far back he doubted Silversides even knew he was there.

To be sure of it, he kept to whatever cover the shadows and rocks and plants provided, and he kept on Silversides' trail. Because, once their playful escort had tired of the sport, Silversides and his oldest nursling headed straight for the island where Goby had left the two-legs.

He couldn't see them now, but followed them by the faint, indefinable trace in the water by which the pod kept track of one another, almost dissipated at this distance. They skirted the island's small sandy beach, a notch in an otherwise unapproachable coast. He thought they were going beyond the island, but suddenly he lost their track.

Goby turned back and swam closer to the island. *There!* The trace picked up and grew stronger as he neared the rocky shoreline, led him down and into a tunnel in the rocks not far from the sea bottom. The tunnel was good to know about—a handy bolt-hole, if he needed to dodge a large predator. The Silversides' traces were stronger here. He followed it as the tunnel slanted up, and the water pressure lightened as he neared the surface; with a whispery splash, his head was above the water.

The tunnel opened into a cavern, its floor covered by little more than a film of sea water. There was light ahead,

and a breeze circulated in the cavern, bringing with it the sound of up-talk—the vocal language merfolk used out of water.

Goby awkwardly balanced himself on his long fluked tail and slithered forward, hoping the wavelets he made wouldn't alert the Silversides to his presence.

“—deep enough and more,” the elder Silversides was saying. “I keep these shells to dip the sea water from the tunnel and carry it here several times a day, so the pit is always filled.”

“Well-shaded,” the younger Silversides said. “Isolated, secure....”

Goby thought young Silversides' admiration of what he was being shown was mixed with uncertainty.

“Utterly secure,” the older Silversides said, the self-admiration in his voice unmixed with anything but smugness. “So now you know the first part of my secret. Here is where I always deposit my clutch.”

No wonder no one ever saw him during spawning season! He was far from the pod, *on land*, keeping watch over his egg mass instead of dropping it and going about his everyday life like everyone else. And this was not just a one-year aberration; this was a yearly obsession: an annual, ongoing concentration on his own eggs that was so unnatural it was almost past understanding.

“And...,” young Silversides said, “...and I'm to do this, too?”

“No,” the elder Silversides assured him. “This is for me.”

“Ah. Well.” The alarm in young Silversides' voice dropped to disinterest when the subject no longer concerned himself. “You said you'd show me where to deposit *my* eggs.”

“Anywhere but here,” the older voice said. “There. Or there. Anywhere out there.”

“...But.... I can’t drop my eggs on land or in fresh water. Certainly not out there, in the sunlight. And not in this private place. They’d never get fertilized.”

“That’s the idea.” The older Silversides hissed in frustration. “You are not to reproduce, don’t you see? As long as I produce eggs, only mine are to be fertilized. Only mine are to hatch. And now, *two* of mine are to be nurtured—one by me and one by you. And next year, when your next younger nursemate is old enough, *three* of mine.”

Goby had never heard anything so twisted. Like any other creature, he felt driven to take part in continuing the strength of the pod, in taking his chances in the great gamble of reproduction. Once he’d carefully placed his eggs or broadcast his sperm in the breeding grounds, his interest would end unless he took an urge to nurture.

Young Silversides’ mind seemed to have swum the same stream, because he said, “What if I’m not ready to nurture this year?”

“It doesn’t matter. All I need is your pouch to hold one of my young. I intend take all responsibility for him. I want him to imprint on *me* as his nurshen. Always on me.”

“And...and when I want to nurse a tad myself—”

“No. Only mine.”

There was silence while young Silversides digested this.

The older voice said, “You haven’t asked me the most important question yet. Have you guessed my biggest secret?”

After a moment, the younger mermaid asked the question Goby’s age-mates had already asked each other about Silversides: “Who fertilizes the eggs?”

“I do! That’s my biggest secret. I produce eggs and sperm in the same cycle and fertilize my own eggs and nurture my own tads. You’ll all help me, one by one as your bodies are old enough, until I’m surrounded by myself.

Until the entire pod is Silversides!”

Goby waited for the young Silversides to object—to reject this perversion of nature. He pressed himself against the cavern wall, listening....

“Gotcha!” Grunion pounced on Goby’s tail. “What are you doing way out here?”

Goby snatched his young nursemaid up and threw himself headlong back toward the tunnel, using the momentum to slide across the wet floor.

Webbed hands grasped his flukes and he jerked to a painful halt. He should have released Grunion, should have shouted to him to swim for help, but instinct betrayed him and he clutched the young one rather than let him go careening away. The Silversides pulled and shoved the nursemaids into the outer cavern, past the older Silversides’ egg pit and onto a ledge above a freshwater pool. Nictating membranes snicked over their eyes, protecting their vision from the harsh sunlight and turning the world to shades of gray.

The older Silversides wrenched Grunion from Goby’s arms and held him over the drop.

“Be still! Be still, or I let him go!”

Goby froze in place. “Give him to me.”

“No. Be quiet. Let me think.”

Young Silversides held Goby’s wrists tightly.

The older mermaid seemed to speak to Grunion, as he said, “This is my secret. No one else must ever know about it.”

Grunion, not too young to recognize danger, squeaked, “I can keep a secret. I promise.”

“Can you?”

“I really can. I’d prove it to you, but I can’t tell any secrets I know or they wouldn’t be secrets anymore.”

The older Silversides chuckled. “Clever tad.”

“I can keep a secret, too,” Goby said, though the

thought of keeping this private sickened him. It was like knowing where an octopus lurked and not warning the pod.

“Can you?” the older Silversides said again. “Do you swear? If I promise to give you back your nurse mate, do you swear?”

Choking on it, Goby said, “I swear.”

“And do you....” He smiled, and tentacles of fear touched Goby’s spine. “Do you swear to come back here at hatching time and take one of my hatchlings into your nurture pouch and stay with me until the tad is ready to take his place at my side? And do you promise to do it every year, as long as you can nurture?”

Goby couldn’t answer at once. The horror of what was being asked, the impossibility of refusing with Grunion’s life at stake, paralyzed his voice.

“You don’t promise. I can see you don’t. Ah, well.”

The older Silversides released Grunion, who squealed as he fell, with a splash, into the unsupportive fresh water.

With a bellow worthy of a walrus, Goby tore himself free of young Silversides’ grip and threw himself at the older mermaid. They struggled on the ledge, arms interlocked, tails writhing, trying to gain purchase on the slippery stone and against each other. Silversides was bigger and more powerful, and his tail had a full adult’s length and muscle, but Goby was powered by rage and terror.

The older mermaid yanked one of Goby’s braids, pulling him off-balance, and slammed his head against the floor. Goby jabbed a knuckle upward at random and caught Silversides just under the eye, driving him back.

He only had a second’s breathing space, then both Silversides converged on him at once.

He wrestled with both of them. In a welter of thrashing arms and tails, all three rolled over the edge and crashed into the pool below.

*Grunion!* Goby’s gills drew in the unwholesome fresh

water, finding only traces of the richness a sea creature needed to survive. The tad was so young—Goby couldn't remember, in his flash of panic, if Grunion was old enough to have functioning lungs yet. If he could find him...if he could get him out of the pool...would his nursemaid have a chance to escape over land?

The fall had separated the three combatants, and Goby dove deep into the pool to search from the bottom up for his nursemaid. *If he only missed the rocks.... If he only didn't hit too hard....*

*There!* The limp little body hovered among the stems of the water plants, sunk in the less buoyant salt-free liquid. As Goby neared, Grunion's eyes opened, a puzzled look in them, and his lips parted. A series of bubbles floated upward, and Goby laughed. *Air bubbles! Functioning lungs!*

"Goby..." Grunion gasped. "Something wrong wi' th's water..."

Goby scooped him up and shot to the surface—but at an angle toward the pool's rocky edge, not directly up.

Goby tossed his nursemaid onto the land, saying, "Go!"

"Go where?" Grunion wailed.

Goby turned to face the Silversides as they surfaced and streaked toward him. As he did, his eye was drawn to a movement on the shore: a figure with hair on its face and chin, that crouched on the rocks and that rose onto two tails.

"Hi! Hi!" Goby called, waving his arms as the two-tails had done at its departing shell. "Heer! Heer!"

Then the Silversides were upon him, one grappling at him and the other trying to land himself and go after Grunion.

They pressed him toward the low bank where, to his dismay, he could hear Grunion cheering for him.

A shower of dirt sprayed over his back and into the eyes of his opponents. They dove, letting the water clear their vision.

He took the opportunity to turn, and ducked in time to avoid a second shower. Grunion was doing his best to adapt the tail-flip of his shark-bashing lesson to land, scooping rocks and grit through the thinness of air.

“Grunion—go!” he shouted. “Go overland! You can do it! Get back to the—”

Again, his braid was jerked painfully, snapping his upper body back, forcing his eyes up toward the burning sun. He felt one of the Silversides slide past him while the other towed him away from the pool’s rim and Grunion.

He heard unidentifiable sounds from the pool’s edge. What was Grunion up to now? Or was it the two-tails? If that creature did anything to hurt Grunion....

The grip on his braid released and he rounded on his attacker, momentarily blinded by his protectively darkened eye membrane, and struck out at random. His fist connected with something hard, and his enemy grunted in surprise and pain.

Again blindly, he shoved the heels of both hands toward the source of the grunt and connected with what felt like a chin. With a flip of his tail, he sent himself racing toward Grunion.

“Oof!” He slammed into another body, driving it into the muddy rocks around the pool’s edge.

A hand fastened around his wrist—the unoiled skin of it feeling like dry sand—and he was hoisted out of the water and onto the rocky edge. Grunion clasped his little arms around his neck.

In the shade of the overhanging trees, Goby’s inner eyelids opened enough to show the two-tails, his tails—or lower arms or legs or whatever they were—braced apart from each other for better balance, throwing stones with impressive accuracy at the nearer Silversides. The more distant one, the elder, kept his distance and shouted alarms.

The younger one responded and dove, joining his

nurshen—and dam and sire—underwater.

The two-tails bent and selected handful after handful of rocks, stacking them in a stump by his side. He nodded toward the pool and toward the rocks, pointed to himself and the rocks and mimed throwing one. His mouth moved and sounds came out, as if he were trying to communicate.

Goby scooped Grunion up and held him tight until the tad wriggled for room.

“You all right, sprat?” he asked.

“I scraped my flukes. Is that a two-tails? Is it really?”

“Yes.” Goby reached out and stroked the two-tails’ upper arm. “I saved its life. I think it’s trying to show its gratitude.”

Grunion reached out, too, and Goby held him close enough to touch the dry skin with a small finger.

“A real two-tails! Can we keep it?”

A webbed hand slapped the ground next to the two-tails’ fluke or lower hand as the older Silversides tried to haul himself up.

The two-tails balanced stiffly on one tail, bent the other one up, and brought it down on Silversides’ hand. With a sharp cry, Silversides slipped back into the water.

Goby gave the two-tails a final approving pat and, Grunion nearly throttling him with excitement, slithered into the undergrowth, following a path no doubt worn by the two-tails between the pool and the beach where Goby had first left it.

\* \* \*

He and Grunion returned to the pod, hurtling past sharks and age-mates alike, to find Manta and tell him what had happened. Manta gathered the other elders and they followed Goby back to the tunnel entrance, ordering him to wait for them there. When they came back out, the Silversides weren’t with them.

“Couldn’t they get back up on the ledge?” Goby asked.

“I can lead you to the pool from the beach. The two-tails might stop throwing rocks at them if I tell it to and they can come out the way Grunion and I did.”

“It’s too late,” Manta said. “They were in the fresh water too long.”

Goby felt sick. Life was dangerous—everybody knew that—but this was wrong. It was so bizarre. And it felt like his fault. They would still be alive, if he hadn’t followed them. If he hadn’t brought the two-tails to Silversides’ secret place.

“It didn’t mean to kill them,” Goby said. “It didn’t know any better.”

Manta stroked his hair. “Nobody blames the animal,” he said. “And nobody blames you. If they hadn’t died before we got here, we would have killed them. The older one, anyway, for trying to kill you and Grunion *and* for...the rest of it. You had a lucky escape, and so did Grunion and so did all the Silversides nursemates. He would have stolen all their young for as long as he could, and the descendents of their young. The beast you saved didn’t mean to, but it did the pod a favor.”

\* \* \*

So it was that the pod began keeping a two-person watch near the border of the upper and lower skies. One day, one of the two-tails’ giant shells entered their waters again, and one of the watchers darted back to the pod to alert them. The other broke the surface, waving his arms and shouting the two-tails cry Goby had taught them all: “Hi! Hi! Heer! Heer!”

Two-tails crowded to the rim of the shell, pointing and making sounds at each other. One pointed a stick, and the watcher, having been told such a stick could shoot death, kept away until the stick was lowered.

Soon, another mermaid surfaced farther off and gave the cry and the first one dove below.

The ship changed course to follow, as one member of the pod after another hailed it, leading it toward the island where Goby's two-tails was stranded.

Meanwhile, Goby raced to the island. His two-tails had fashioned a shelter just under the tree-line where it went to escape the worst of the sun. Goby called it out and pointed to sea.

The two-tails must have had better eyesight above water than a mermaid, because it laughed and shouted and jumped up and down before Goby caught his first glimpse of the shell. It moved with surprising quickness on its two nearly rigid tails, using them to lever itself to the top of a stony hill, where it stretched high, waving its arms and calling out to its fellows.

Goby slipped back into the water. The other mermaids joined him for a triumphant return to the pod's territory.

Two-tails and their shells became more common in the area for a while, but they were easily avoided. The Silversides tads were taken in by other nurshen. They never really fit in with the pod, but their debased line was soon scattered in the wholesome impersonal reproductive process that was natural to the highest species.

## **EEL'S REVERENCE**

From Echelon Press

When elderly priest of Micah, “Aunt” Libby, goes on a Final Wandering, she’s accosted and then befriended by an amphibious mugger. The area known as The Eel is infested with worse than minor criminals—it’s under the thumbs of a coalition of greedy, brutal priests. Aunt Libby is a frail barrier to stand between peace and violence, and the worst violence may not come from her enemies...but from her friends.

Aunt Libby is run out of town by the coalition, then brought back by true believers. When her presence is discovered, she becomes a pawn in game of politics, power and prejudice, with her friends held for ransom and her life as their price.

A fantasy with no sorcery or warriors, EEL’S REVERENCE explores the kinds of choices ordinary people have faced through all time and in all places, and shows the contrariness and heroism with which they’ve dealt with the consequences of those choices.

### Chapter 1

Priests can get their noses out of joint, and old women still have their pride. I’d been a priest of Micah for 68 of my 82 years and a woman for all 82 of them; when my congregation began drifting away to the flashy new temple down the street, something snapped. If my parish wanted a new priest, I wasn’t going to stay and hang on by my nails.

I announced my intention of going on a Final Wandering, dismissed my sexton, and said goodbye to my temple, my plants, my parishioners. I released my wolves from our devotion, posted my temple as vacant, and started walking. North, why not?

I took a sour pride in the picture I presented: a tiny, yellow-brown raisin of a woman in a cassock of forester's green; a poor unwanted old woman with iron gray hair and tin gray eyes, staff in hand and a bundle on my back, making my lonely way through the morning mist.

One of my erstwhile parishioners, a floatboard salesman who traveled by dory, spoiled the effect by asking me to keep him company around Windycliff and up the coast to Malmana.

I gratefully accepted passage, but not his offer of breakfast nor his apology on behalf of his fellow votaries.

I left Malmana on foot, moving pretty briskly along the road of hard-packed sand. The road became more frequented as the morning passed, but my fellow travelers seemed strangely disinclined to speak to me. No one offered me food or a ride, and only one person, an old man, even gave me any money; he dropped a handful of pennies at my feet, made as if to pick them up, then waved them down with an "Ah! Let them go!" and went on.

I decided I might be better off leaving the high road and cutting through the scrubby wood to the beach itself. If push came to shove, I could probably dig up a clam or two to steam over a driftwood fire.

The rough path through the wood made me glad of my walking stick. I was wobbly, anyway, having feasted at breakfast on delicious self-pity instead of contenting myself with common bread and milk. Now, past noon, the pity had been consumed, and I still hadn't eaten. Perhaps I wouldn't wait for the clams. Perhaps I could gather some fresh

seaweed; I didn't care for it raw, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

I came out onto the beach from behind a crop of rocks. On a rise to the north stood a town, a fair-sized one. Probably Port Novo, I thought. I had been past it aboard ship, years ago, but it had grown. The high road emptied into its middle. Its eastern limit ate into a heavy belt of trees, pushing the edge of the town toward the Crescent Desert.

A narrow mouth led to a large, deep harbor; across from this mouth rose a high flat rock. The rock seemed to have grown, like the town. A building had been erected on the rock, partly cut out of it, partly built of the same kind of stone. It soared three stories high, with peaks and pinnacles adding more height. It boasted windows of all shapes and sizes, many of them glazed.

"What have we here?" said a voice just ahead and to my right. "This must be my lucky day."

I looked for the speaker, and there stood a young mermaid. I've been around the world four times, and the youngsters of my late parish included the usual percentage of ruffians, but this was one of the toughest-looking sprigs I've ever seen. He looked like he ate oysters in the whole-shell. I say, "he". I always call mermaids "he" (because they have no breasts, I suppose), but of course they might be one or the other or both at any given time, so it really doesn't matter, and they don't seem to care.

He slouched against a tree just around the point of the rocks, his grayish-silver tail, six feet from his waist to the tips of his flukes, curled loosely around the bole. His pearly-white skin glistened with the oil mermaids secrete out of water, and showed fresh bruises and old scars, especially on the arms. His eyes looked completely black through the inner lids now protecting them from the glare of the un-

watered sun. His sleek, waist-length blong hair hung in a braid over his shoulder onto his muscular chest.

The gill-band around his neck wasn't the standard, three-to-a-pack at any apothecary model: It fastened with a lock and studded with short spikes. No-one was going to snatch that band off in a fight. He wore a wide belt with a knife sheathed at either side and a large pocket hanging on the right.

I guessed him to be not much more than a tad—about five years old—equivalent to a fourteen-year-old among us landfolk—a young adult, in other words.

“Hello,” I said. “I think it’s going to be a fine day, don’t you?”

He looked a little puzzled as I came up to him, going so far as to slit open his inner lids to show himself some color. He didn’t speak again until I stopped at arm’s length.

“Alms?” he said, with a dazzling grin.

“Are you asking or offering?” I said, surprised into a smile. Priests are poor prospects for robbery. “Either way, the answer is ‘yes.’”

The mermaid looked puzzled again, but held out his hand. He spread his fingers, making a cup of the webbing between them. I emptied the pockets of my cassock and covered his pearly palm with copper.

“Is that all?”

“You’re welcome to it,” I said gently.

He dumped the coins into his pocket and uncoiled his tail from the tree. “I’m going to search you,” he said. “Dump your stuff and throw away the stick.”

I had to laugh. I shrugged off my bindle and leaned my walking stick against the rocks. “Surely you don’t think a desiccated old scrap like me could hurt you with my little staff.”

“Dried meat’s tough,” he said. He slithered to me, eel-like and quick. He unrolled my bundle and shook it out: a spare cassock, a thin blanket, a few squares of rags useful for this and that, a tinderbox, a small metal pot suitable for wet cooking or drinking, a small metal plate suitable for dry cooking or eating, a pair of eating batons I’d whittled myself out of local wood, soap, toothpowder, toothbristles, and a wooden comb. He fingered it all, and all the folds of my cassock. He felt up my front and down my back, and all points in between. He wasn’t brutal, but he was thorough.

“I might’ve swallowed something,” I said. “Shall I vomit?”

He shook his head absently. “Nothing,” he said. He turned to me, looking at me as if I’d defied a physical law. “You have nothing.”

“I have the Everlasting Presence of Holy Sweet Micah,” I said quietly. “What did you think I had?”

“What kind of a priest are you?”

“Just a priest. I lost my parish. My parishioners...” He didn’t care. I let it go. “Now I’m on a Final Wandering. Haven’t you ever seen a mendicant priest before?”

“A what kind of priest?”

“Homeless. Begging.”

He laughed. “Homeless? Begging? A *priest*? Priests don’t have to beg. They’re rich.”

“No.”

“Sure. I’ve been all over the Eel. I should know.” The youngster began to look uncomfortable. I began to feel uncomfortable, myself.

I thought I knew his problem: Five years ago, a mermaid had deposited some egg jelly on an undersea rock. Sometime the same week, another mermaid had seen the jelly and deposited sperm on it. Two months later, a swarm

of tads had hatched out. They had been no longer than a dressmaker's pin, no bigger around than an eating baton. A few had been given refuge in the nurture pouches of passing mermaids. Most had been eaten by fish. Some had been overlooked by protector and predator, and had starved to death. Survivors had reached physical maturity in three years, reared by their foster parents, whom they call nurshen, capable then of functioning in the simple culture of the sea.

There had always been some mermaids who found the culture of the sea entirely too simple. These had learned they could stay out of water longer, without hyperventilating, if they covered their gills with water-retentive filters. These had established a trade relationship with landfolk. Their experiences with landfolk trading practices had given the mermaid racial character its wide streaks of cynicism and amorality.

These days, most mermaids went ashore occasionally; some, often; a few spent more time on land than in the water. Very few "seabodies" never set fluke on land and didn't even carry a gillband, just in case.

At any rate, within the last two years, this young tough had decided the sea wasn't big enough to hold him. He planned to show the surface world a thing or two. He knew his short strip of seaside and he thought he knew the world. Now he wondered just how little he did know. A more important question, to him, was just how vulnerable his ignorance made him, and to what.

My own discomfort stemmed from what the boy's ignorance told me: In the Eel—this strip of coastline from the southern cliffs to the northern delta, east of the sea and west of the Crescent Desert—they had no true priests. They hadn't, for perhaps five years.

I sank onto the sand. No wonder the people on the road had shirked my acquaintance.

“That isn’t how it is where you come from, is it?” the boy asked. He lowered his body to my level by coiling his tail from his flukes almost to his waist.

So young. He had just taken my money, searched me, possibly been willing to hurt me if I’d resisted. Now, since I posed neither temptation nor threat, he saw no reason not to be companionable. He had no hard feelings; it didn’t occur to him *I* might have.

“I knew when I saw you there was something wrong,” he said. “You look hungry, and your robe doesn’t sparkle.”

“Rich, fat priests with sparkle woven into their robes,” I said, “are common everywhere. They’re called ‘reaver priests,’ and they’re an accepted blight on the landscape. They line their pockets, giving lip-service to Holy Sweet Micah, and they serve congregations of hypocrites like themselves. I should know. My parishioners... One made himself available, and they dribbled away to him. Not all of them, but enough to make me see... But nowhere—*nowhere* have I ever found reavers in the majority. Nowhere have I found *no* desire for a true priest.” I began to tremble.

“Are you all right?”

“*Is* there no desire for a true priest?”

“Mermaids aren’t supposed to have souls, so priests are just, like you said, a blight on the landscape as far as we’re concerned. There’s three of them in Port Novo—” he waved to the town ahead, “—and one’s worse than the other.”

He pointed to one of his bruises. “See this? Didn’t get out of the way fast enough when a churchwarden wanted to pass.” He pointed to a scar running across his chest.

“Isabella had me held while she watched this given to me.”

He looked up with a grin. “For impudence,” he said. He

pointed to some smaller scars on his arms and chest and one on his chin. “Phineas caught me hooking a kelp-cake from a vendor. The vendor didn’t mind, but Phineas had his people take my gill band. Then they dodged around, keeping between me and the water, till I passed out. They might have kicked me home; I wouldn’t know. I came to at the bottom of the harbor, anyway. That’s when I got these new bands.”

“You seem to make a habit of being on the wrong side of authority,” I said.

“I do, don’t I?”

“They would probably frown on beachfront robbery.”

“I have no doubt. Then again, who’s going to report me? Are you going to report me?”

“I haven’t been robbed,” I said.

“You haven’t been robbed...” he said. “—Where are you headed?”

“Nowhere.”

He laughed. “That’s Port Novo, all right. But I don’t think I’d go there if I were you. Go around, or go straight through. Better yet, go back where you came from. That’s my advice, anyway.”

“Why?”

I had the feeling he rolled his eyes behind his inner lids. “Because,” he said, “I told you I’ve never seen a priest like you around here. That means the priests we do have don’t want priests like you around here. That means around here is a bad place for priests like you to be.”

“I didn’t plan to stay,” I said, rather offended.

“Don’t get sniffy,” the tad said. “What do I know? You’d probably be safe enough, especially if you spread it around you aren’t planning to stay long.”

“Safe? Safe from what?”

“From the priests,” he said, with heavy patience.

“From the...” My shivered with chill, but my forehead and scalp prickled with heat. A cold sweat came over me.

“Haven’t I been telling you?” He waved his webbed hands at himself, at the marks of violence he had been showing me. “Priests had this done. Didn’t I say so?”

The tad put a hand into his pocket and pulled it out again, empty. “Look,” he said awkwardly, “I’m sorry if I scared you.” He held the empty hand out to me. “My name’s Loach. You’re Aunt...”

“Aunt Libby.” I grasped his hand, as if it could pull me out of a mire. His skin dry and horny, like the foot of a duck in a yard, glistened with an oil which couldn’t be felt and didn’t come off.

“Aunt Libby? Are you all right?”

The tad couldn’t be saying what he seemed to be saying. He must have misunderstood something, or I had. After all, I was old... Not feeble—of mind or body—but too old to be running away from home like a child in a snit.

Loach’s hair and skin seemed to take on a glow. His plait became a braided gold chain, his muscles glowed like pearls. A gold and white haze filled my eyes. I fainted.

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Marian Allen writes science fiction, fantasy, mystery, humor, horror, mainstream, and anything else she can wrestle into fixed form.

Allen has had stories in anthologies, on-line and print publications, including *Oceans of the Mind* and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies 22 and 23, on coffee cans and the wall of an Indian restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky. She has three novels—*EEL’S*

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