

The Harbor of Paper Lanterns



Yavuz DEMİRKIRAN

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In the village of Lantern Harbor, autumn winds carried the smell of salt and woodsmoke. Every year, when the tide grew slow and the sky turned pink, the villagers sent glowing paper lanterns onto the water. Each lantern carried a wish for travellers far away. Grace watched from the harbor wall, her red boots swinging, her brass lantern charm warm against her chest. She never missed a single lantern night.



The Lantern Keeper stood tall in his teal wool coat, his silver moustache white as sea foam. He showed Grace how to fold the paper and fix the little candle inside. "Every lantern is a small hello," he said, his dark eyes crinkling. Grace nodded. She had helped him all afternoon, and now the harbor was filling with soft, golden light. "Ready?" he asked. "Ready," she whispered.



The sun dipped below the sea, and the first lanterns floated out. They bobbed and twirled, painting the dark water with gold. Grace clapped. Then she frowned. The lanterns were drifting sideways, then backward, against the current. "They're going the wrong way!" she cried. The Lantern Keeper's eyebrows rose. "Strange," he murmured. "I've never seen that before." The lanterns gathered into a glowing line, pointing toward the cliffs.



Grace followed the floating lights along the shore, her red boots splashing in the shallows. The lanterns drifted past the old pier and around a rocky bend. There, hidden behind tall boulders, lay a small cove she had never seen. The lanterns clustered above the water like fireflies. Grace peeked around a rock and gasped. Something tiny was moving on the sand.



A little boat no bigger than a teacup lay tipped on its side. Beside it stood a tiny traveler with pale lavender-blue skin and tufty silver hair. The creature wore an acorn-cap hat with a sprig of ivy and a patchwork coat of green and gold. Delicate wings shimmered like a dragonfly's. "Oh!" said Grace softly. The traveler spun around, amber eyes wide.



"Hello," Grace said gently, kneeling in the sand. "I'm Grace. Are you all right?" The tiny traveler bowed, wings fluttering. "I am Pip," came a soft, chiming voice. "Our boat struck a rock, and now we cannot sail home. My friends are waiting in the cove." Grace saw more tiny figures peeking from behind the boat, their faces worried. "We don't know how to fix it," Pip said.



Grace's heart swelled. "Don't worry," she said. "I know people who can help." She ran back along the shore, her lantern charm bouncing. The Lantern Keeper was still on the harbor wall, lifting lanterns with his long pole. "Come quick!" Grace called. "There are visitors, tiny ones, and their boat is stuck!" The Lantern Keeper set down his pole and followed at once.



Back in the cove, the Lantern Keeper knelt beside the little boat. His gentle eyes took in the cracked hull and the worried little faces. "We'll need rope and cloth," he said. "And maybe a bit of tar." Pip's wings drooped with relief. "You'll help us?" Pip asked. "Of course," said the Lantern Keeper. "That's what neighbors do." Grace squeezed Pip's tiny hand, careful not to hurt.



They hurried to the village bakery, where warm light spilled onto the street. Mrs. Tamsin was kneading dough, a flour smudge on her cheek. Her plum apron was dusted with white. "Mrs. Tamsin!" Grace called. "We need rope and cloth and tar. There are tiny visitors whose boat is broken!" Mrs. Tamsin wiped her hands on her apron. "Tiny visitors? Well, then!" she said. "Let's get to work."



Mrs. Tamsin bustled through the village, her wooden spoon tucked in her apron pocket. She knocked on doors and gathered helpers. Soon a line of villagers marched to the cove with rope, cloth, and a pot of tar. "Make way!" Mrs. Tamsin called. "We have a boat to fix!" The tiny travelers watched from the sand, their amber eyes wide. Pip stood tall, greeting each villager with a polite bow.



The villagers worked together as the moon rose. The Lantern Keeper held the boat steady while Mrs. Tamsin patched the hull with cloth and tar. Grace threaded a needle and sewed a tiny sail. Others brought fresh water and berries for the visitors. Pip's wings shimmered with joy. "We have never seen such kindness," Pip chimed. "You make us feel welcome." Grace smiled. "That's what home feels like," she said.



But the visitors still needed to find their way home in the dark. Grace had an idea. "The lanterns led me to you," she said. "We can use them to lead you back!" She took the Lantern Keeper's pole and lifted lantern after lantern into the air. Mrs. Tamsin and the villagers helped, sending a glowing path across the water. The lanterns bobbed in a line, pointing toward the open sea.



Pip's boat was ready. The tiny travelers climbed aboard, their wings folded. "Thank you, Grace," Pip said, pressing a tiny acorn into her hand. "You followed the lanterns and found us. Now we can follow them home." Grace's eyes shone. "Will you come back?" she asked. Pip nodded. "Every autumn, if the lanterns allow." The villagers waved as the little boat pushed off into the glowing path.



The boat followed the lanterns, bobbing over the dark water. The villagers watched until the tiny sail disappeared into the night. The Lantern Keeper put his hand on Grace's shoulder. "You did a good thing," he said. "You made a path for strangers and turned them into friends." Grace held the acorn tight. The harbor felt warmer than ever, as if the whole village was lit from within.



The next morning, Grace found a tiny shell on the harbor wall, a gift from Pip. She placed it on her windowsill beside her brass lantern charm. The villagers talked of nothing but the tiny visitors and the night of the lantern path. Mrs. Tamsin baked a special loaf shaped like a boat. "For our new friends," she said. "Wherever they are." Grace smiled. She knew they were safe.



And every autumn after that, the lanterns of Lantern Harbor floated out to sea. Sometimes they drifted in strange directions, and sometimes they led to new visitors. But the villagers always remembered: kindness and a warm welcome make everyone feel at home. Grace would stand on the harbor wall with her lantern charm glowing, ready to follow wherever the lights might lead.