

## Familiar Territory

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Every morning they went crabbing. Winston would carry the pail, and Buster would trail behind, stopping to sniff dead fish and complaining when his delicate paws sank in wet sand. Sometimes people would coo over him -- they seemed drawn to a cat on the beach -- but usually they would watch from a distance.

Winston knew the town thought him strange. They called him that crazy guy with the cat, and most never visited his shop. Only tourists came in, and they usually bought the mass-produced items, not his specialty items. Those he sold to select customers who never returned, although they recommended the store to their friends. He did a steady mail order business, shipping weekly all over the United States, Canada, and Europe.

He didn't care about the money. It was merely a way to maintain his warm and cozy home, built on a cliff overlooking the sea. He had worn a path from the back door to the beach near the small town of Seavy Village, and he and Buster tramped down the path daily at first light, crabbing if the tides allowed, and playing in the sand until nine a.m. Then Winston returned home, showered, and drove to his shop on a decrepit section of Highway 101. Buster complained about the drive, but flirted with the customers shamelessly while Winston studied his books behind the counter.

It was a small life, as magic ones went, but it was his, his and Buster's. They had shared it since Winston fled San Francisco twenty years before and arrived in Seavy Village to find the cliff house for sale, and a rain-soaked kitten who spoke perfect English huddled beside its front door.

Only this morning, Buster didn't wake up. He remained curled at the foot of the bed, eyes half open, skin already cool. They had known the end was coming -- few cats made it to twenty and remained as healthy as Buster -- but they hadn't thought it so soon. Kind of Buster to wait until Monday, the only day the shop was closed.

Winston put his hand on Buster's still black-and-white side, and wished that instead of all his tiny powers, he had a single large one: the power over death.

But he didn't, and he never would. He sighed once, cradled his best and only friend for a long time, and then padded into his workshop to build a ship.

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Buster had requested a Viking funeral.

The cat, being 90% feline and only 10% familiar, didn't care about state regulations regarding the ocean. He didn't care that it was against the law to throw anything into the waves. He didn't care that Oregon hated people tossing the ashes of loved ones onto the sea, and would probably charge Winston with a felony for tossing a dead body in.

You can cover it, boss, Buster had said. Use a small spell, a shield or something, to make sure nobody sees you.

I thought cats hate the water, Winston replied, a tad grumpily.

You observe, but you don't see, Buster said. Cats love the water. They just hate to get wet.

You'll get wet with a Viking funeral.

\_Naaaw,\_ Buster said. \_I'll be ashes by the time I hit the water. \_

\_Why do you want a Viking funeral?\_ Winston asked.

Buster had looked at him from his perch on top of an end table. The look implied that Winston knew nothing about cats. \_Blaze of glory, my friend,\_ Buster had said. \_Blaze of glory.\_

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What Winston knew about Viking funerals came from his English lit class in high school over three decades before; half a dozen old movies; and a program he had fallen asleep to on the History Channel. Some of the Arthurian myths had Merlin give Arthur a Viking death: the proud king, wrapped in his fur robes, heading out to sea in his burning boat. Winston had made the mistake of telling Buster that story one rainy afternoon when they should have been mixing a love potion for a woman in Puget Sound.

Buster had adored the idea.

Winston didn't like the parallels. Buster was supposed to be his familiar, not his king, and while Winston had clear talents, he was no Merlin. No wizard had been that great in over a thousand years.

But in the time they had been together, Winston had only denied Buster one thing -- (\_Neutered, boss. Neutered. You know what that sounds like? Sounds like nullified. How would you like it if I neutered you?\_) -- and he had done that for Buster's safety, and for the sanity of all the female cats in Seavy Village. Buster had mellowed as he got older, when he saw the effects sex had had on the wild toms. \_The fights they get into\_, Buster had said, \_and all over a woman who'll slap 'em when she's done.\_ Somewhere around the age of ten, Buster realized that his sex drive would have shortened his life, and while he never admitted that Winston had made the right decision, he had stopped focusing on it.

Buster loved his life near the sea, with the storms and the fish and the adoration of the tourists who filled Winston's shop in the summer.

Buster loved all twenty years of it, and who was Winston to deny him his final request?

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The ship, when finished, was two yards long, and two feet high at its lowest point. A dragon's head with oddly feline features rose from the front to guide the ship on her way. Winston had made little holes throughout which he would stuff with gas-soaked rags when the time came. He'd also lined the hollowed-out center with newspaper and kindling. Over that, he had built a box long enough and wide enough to hold Buster. He placed Buster's favorite pillow in the front of the box, and around it he put all of Buster's toys.

It had taken him twenty-four hours of concentrated work to finish. Twenty-four hours in a cold house, his fingers raw from strain. He had let the fire die and had turned down the heat so that Buster's body wouldn't decay quite as rapidly. Still, twenty-four hours wasn't enough to do this kind of work unassisted. He had to use four craft spells, one no-doze spell, and contact the restless souls of three ship-builders to help in the process.

He was so tired his body hummed.

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But it was finished, and it was as perfect as he could make it. Now all he had to do was rig the hand-sewn sail, wait till the tide was going out, and find a friendly current.

The morning dawned clear and cold with no real wind. A few fluffy white clouds dotted the sky. From his window, he saw the tell-tale green-gold line of a riptide, and he knew this would be his best chance to send Buster out to sea. Winston placed his friend in the ship, stretched his limbs (thankful that rigor had eased) and set his head gently on his pillow. Then Winston stuffed a bag full of rags and tied it to his belt. He carried the ship outside.

The chill was brisk, waking him from the exhaustion that clouded his eyes. He needed enough strength to finish this, and the chill gave him some. He balanced the ship under one arm, making certain the weight was right, and picked up the half full gasoline can. And with his burden, he walked down the path to the beach.

His hair rippled in the ever-present breeze, but it wasn't great enough to be considered a wind. The beach was a winter beach, strewn with rocks, the sand hard-packed and firm. He stood for a moment on his favorite spot, a flat black lava rock that stood a bit back from the surf. Then he climbed beside it, set the boat and gas can down, and gazed at Buster.

Buster's sleek dark fur shone in the sunlight. He was a beautiful cat. It seemed odd for his features to be so still; even in sleep he had moved -- a whisker twitch here, a kneading paw there. Winston touched him, ever so lightly, and felt the lifelessness, the lack of breath, the lack of vitality.

"I miss you already, buddy," he whispered.

Then he sighed, and prepared to work.

The beach was empty. Even so, he took Buster's advice and made a shield spell, placing it around him, the ship, and the stretch of beach and water extending to the riptide line. He removed the rag bag from his belt, opened the gasoline can, and carefully soaked each rag in gasoline. After a rag was soaked, he shoved it into the holes he had prepared. When he finished, he capped the gasoline, and carried the ship to sea.

Even with the sail and the riptide, there was no way the ship would go into the ocean alone. It would get caught in the tide, and hug the shore. Buster had wanted what they both had imagined to be a Viking funeral; it meant disappearing on the horizon in a burning ship. Despite his exhaustion, Winston had one more thing to do.

He waded into the surf, wincing as the cold water made goosepimples run up and down his skin. Then he set the ship on the water's surface, and blew lightly, mouthing a wind spell as he did so. The sail filled up, and the ship moved forward, slicing the waves like a ship of old.

Buster would have been proud.

Winston waited until the ship reached the riptide line, then he snapped his fingers, reciting a simple fire spell. Sparks touched the soaked rags, and the ship ignited. It continued to sail forward, dragon's head proudly leading the way as it headed to the horizon. Plumes of smoke rose from it, and the flames licked the sky.

A blaze of glory.

He wished he had been able to do it at twilight, as the sun was setting. Such a magnificent sight it would have been then, but he couldn't, since his powers often waned at dusk.

Still, Buster would have enjoyed it. The burning ship sailing toward eternity.

Winston stood in the surf, the water numbing his feet and ankles, and watched as the flames consumed

the dragon's head. The air smelled of smoke and sea salt.

Was this what Merlin smelled that twilight so long ago? Or had he turned his back on the burning ship, walked across the land, and gone back to his life?

The ship broke apart in a spray of sparks. Pieces burned on the water's surface, then sank, slowly, the dragon's head disappearing last.

For a moment, the black smoke mingled with the white clouds, and formed a black and white cat running toward the horizon.

Then the smoke dissipated, and Buster was gone.

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Winston cleaned up his mess, broke his shield spell, and carried the gas can back up the path. He showered, ate a small breakfast, and napped until he had to leave to open his shop.

By the time he got up, clouds were rolling in. The horizon looked blurred. Rain wouldn't be far behind.

He drove his ancient Gremlin the two miles down Highway 101. The rusted and battered car seemed like an affectation without Buster inside, paws on the dash, tail wagging as he watched the passing traffic. Winston had always worried that Buster would die in a slow-speed collision, something that could have been prevented if the cat had but listened and sat under the dash.

But, as Buster had always said, he was 90% feline and 10% familiar. He followed rules only when he made them.

Winston parked behind the shop and reached for the passenger side before he could stop himself. He drew back, and left the car empty-handed.

The shop was cold and damp. It smelled of incense and cat food. He turned on the lights, lit the candles, and sat behind the large counter, wondering who would flirt with the customers now. He couldn't. He had never been as social as Buster. Or as friendly.

What was a wizard without a familiar? His mouth went dry. He had gone without a familiar in the early years, as he apprenticed, and then went out on his own. He had claimed to his master, a disaffected beatnik, that he didn't like animals. His master had shrugged.

\_You will\_, he had said.

His master's familiar was a five-year-old sow that he had special permission to keep inside the city limits. She had been the opposite of Buster: grumpy, anti-social, and nasty. Winston had vowed then not to take on another soul.

And then had gone out on his own. After two months, his potions spoiled, his bottled spells rotted, and a young woman who had special-ordered an aphrodisiac had nearly died. Fortunately she hadn't yet shared it with her boyfriend and he had gotten her to the emergency room. The cops had thought it a drug overdose, and had thought Winston the supplier. He had left San Francisco in a dead run, stopping only when he saw Seavy Village and its gothic landscape.

Two days later, he had the house and Buster.

And he never made a mistake again.

He put his head in his hands. The nap hadn't helped. He felt lethargic. The bell tinkled, indicating the arrival of a customer, but he didn't have enough energy to look, to see who it was.

"Excuse me," a woman's voice said.

He looked up. His next door neighbor, the owner of an antique store, hovered inside his doorway. She was a pear-shaped woman whose pink polyester pants and white shirts only emphasized the flaws in her figure. She always went out of her way to be kind to him, and he was kind in return, but they'd never had more than a passing familiarity with each other.

"I -- I -- ." She waved a hand at the door. "I was wondering. The magic and all. Did you see the burning ship this morning? It's all over town. People are calling it a ghost ship."

A shiver ran through him. He stood, then gripped the countertop, and nearly sat again. Were they coming for him so soon? Did the spells curdle without a familiar?

"Did you see it?" he asked.

She nodded. "I -- ah -- we -- "

And then he realized that half a dozen people crowded outside his shop door.

"We thought maybe you had an explanation."

"Did you call the Coast Guard?"

"They had no record of a vessel. They scanned the waters and found nothing. No one radioed a distress call. They thought we were making it up."

He tried not to swallow hard. He was trembling. \_The whole city saw your blaze, Buster\_, he thought.

"Did you see it?" she asked again.

He nodded.

"Was it a ghost ship?"

How to formulate an answer that was honest and yet maintained the mystery? "I don't count something as a ghost unless it appears in the same location more than once," he said.

"If it wasn't a ghost, what was it?" she asked. "It didn't seem quite real somehow."

"It was real enough," he said. "There was a cat in the smoke."

"Yes!" she said. "A black-and-white one. He looked quite satisfied with himself."

Winston smiled. "He did, didn't he?"

She smiled in return, and then her smile faded. "What do we do if we see it again?"

Ah, the real purpose for her visit. Not just comfort, but comfort magic. "It depends," he said. His trembling had stopped. Somehow it relieved him that someone else had seen Buster's farewell.

"Depends?"

"On whether or not you want to exorcise the ghost or use it to promote Seavy Village."

"Promotion." She rubbed a hand on her chin. "Hmm. A ghost ship. It looked rather Viking-like to me, but they didn't come up this far, did they?"

"I honestly don't know," he said.

"And it was burning. I wonder if any ships went down that way in the harbor. Do you know?"

He shook his head.

She glanced around his shop, her gaze taking in the crystals and the globes, the incense burners and the bottles of potion lining the walls. "I tell you what," she said. "If I discover anything, I'll let you know. It'd be quite a boon to your business."

He hadn't thought of that. "Thanks," he said, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Don't mention it," she said. "I'll be back when I know something."

And then she let herself out. She explained things to her friends out front, her hands moving expansively. Rain interrupted her small speech, and the crowd dispersed.

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The day turned out to be one of the busiest he'd ever had. Fifteen phone orders for potions, twenty-five mail orders for specialty items, and six customers, all of whom bought. The last told him that a store like his needed a cat, and he had said softly, I know.

By the time he left, the rain had turned into a squall. One of those coastal storms that Buster had so loved. Winston was glad he hadn't waited for twilight. The storm was too severe. He never would have gotten the ship afire.

The Gremlin coughed its way home. He would have to think of getting another car. Too bad the car companies no longer used magic items in their names. But he had kept the Gremlin far too long. Her usefulness had passed.

He put her in the driveway, and sighed. The day had been so busy that he hadn't had a chance to mix the new potions, let alone put up the "closed" sign for a few hours while he visited the local pound. He doubted any of the cats there would talk to him, but he had to see. He couldn't believe that Buster would leave without planning for a successor. Buster had always been too meticulous to leave any detail untended.

Winston grabbed his umbrella, opened the car door, then opened the umbrella outside, stepping into a puddle as he got out. He cursed softly -- his feet had gotten wet enough this day -- and then he ran the few yards to the back porch.

In his haste to get inside, he almost missed it. The tiny black cat, fur spiked by rain and wind, huddled against the wood pile. For a moment, he thought it was Buster. Not the old Buster, but the baby Buster come back. And then he realized that this kitten was all black. It had no white at all.

He crouched, letting the umbrella protect them both, and held out his hand. The kitten came forward and sniffed his fingers. Then it looked around. When it saw he was alone, it said, "You could at least offer a girl some fish."

Her voice was sultry and not childlike at all. Buster had also come kitten-sized, but with his voice and personality full grown.

"I have some inside," Winston said. He opened the door, and the kitten trotted in as if she owned the place. She went to the cool fireplace and shook the water off her fur. Winston closed the umbrella outside, and then put it in its holder. He went immediately to the refrigerator. He had some salmon he had planned to make for dinner the night Buster had died.

He took the salmon out and picked some pieces off it, putting them on a small plate. As he worked, he glanced at the fireplace. The kitten was cleaning herself, making her black coat lie flat.

Then, because he couldn't remain silent, he asked, "Did Buster send you?"

"What do you think we got a referral service?" she asked.

Her gruffness shocked him. He wasn't ready for gruffness yet. He wasn't ready for a new personality, a new life.

A small body wrapped itself around his leg, and a purr so strong it vibrated his skin echoed up to him.

"You just want the fish," he said.

"You bet," she said.

He set the plate down and she ate quickly, without Buster's innate grace. She had been hungry for some time.

When she finished, she sat back on her haunches and glared at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ruby," she said.

"Ruby, I don't know if I'm ready for another familiar."

"You can't go without, big boy. We keep your spells fresh, and your mind from wandering."

"It took me years to find Buster," Winston said.

"He knew," she said. "And he figured you could last maybe a day alone."

"I thought you said you didn't know him."

"I never said anything like that." She stood, arched, and yawned. "We all know each other. Familiar doesn't come from your magic practices. It comes from ours. Buster had a feeling you and I'd work out. And if this fish is any indication, he was right." She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "But don't get any ideas about burning me at sea."

"I think we have a few years before we need to discuss your funeral."

"Good." She sauntered toward the fireplace. "Now, how about a real fire so a girl can nap?"

He snapped his fingers and a fire appeared in the grate.

"Real," she growled.

"As you wish, your highness," he said, hurrying toward the pile of logs beside the fireplace. She had already curled up on the rug. She was different, and, for all her big talk, she was tiny. She would never replace Buster. No one could. But she'd make the world a little less lonely.

"Do you like clams?" he asked.

"Only in the mornings," she replied.

"I go clamming with the morning tides. Should be just after dawn tomorrow."

"I'll make sure you're up," she said sleepily. Then she opened one yellow eye. "Finished that fire yet?"

"I will," he said, feeling lighter than he had all day. He built her a tiny blaze. One to keep her toasty and safe, and to let her know she was welcome in his small life. His small, magic life.