

MIKE LONGMEADOW

FORREST CROSSES
OVER



A TALE FROM THE STORYROOM

Forrest Crosses Over

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The day has finally come!

All his life, Forrest had been the spectator in a series of events that continually shove him around. Now, after what felt like two lifetimes, Forrest gets the chance to cross over and finally discover the true nature of the promise he must execute.

Praise for Cosmic Consciousness

From Amazon certified reviews.

"I always love a story that leaves me pondering the truth as we currently perceive it. This book is cleverly crafted and an enlightening read."

"Opens up the imagination to new possibilities."

Dedications

To my father, who's recent passing has reminded me we have but one life to live.

To the crow that has started to hang around near the house, seemingly spying on me.

Acknowledgments

To all the peace fighters battling daily to make this world a better place. The battle is just beginning.

From Mike with Author Academy Elite

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Passing Through

When I saw that Jasper and Stephen had taken up residence at the Fairchild farm, it was as though I had seen them just a few hours earlier. I hugged the fence, trying to understand this feeling, unsure of how to re-establish contact. They both saw me at the same time, and Jasper casually waved me over. Surprised by my own reaction, I jumped over the fence and headed to the house, feeling as though what was currently happening was all carefully planned. A seed of doubt sprouted with the idea that they might not be who I thought they were. When I reached the house, I stood at the base of the porch in silence, trying to see if they were who they seemed to be. Jasper gave me a crooked smile, and Stephen smirked in a way that was neither happy or angry. I felt relieved. It had to be them.

“It is a happy day to see us rekindle our connection, dear Forrest.” Said Jasper in a singing voice. “Took you long enough to notice we were here.” Added Stephen.

I looked at them and only one question came to mind. “It’s been over ten years since the last time we met. You haven’t changed. Not even a little. At worst, your beard is a few days longer.”

“Simple, really. We visited the other side of existence. Time is very different there — it moves in circles rather than a straight line would be the simplest way to explain. What is clear is that we jumped ahead in this reality.” Jasper said.

“Watch if you go. There are things over there so vile you can’t even imagine how bad they are.” Said Stephen, gazing up to the sky.

“Don’t mind him, he ran into some Mares and had a bit of a bad moment.” Jasper said while rubbing his friend’s back. I knew how

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bad it could get with the Mares and felt a wave of empathy for Stephen. “Suffice to say we can continue from where we left off. How can we be of service to you, dear friend?” Jasper added. We started talking and by the time we exchanged a few pleasantries, it was like we were back in the alley in the city. Jasper explained they had found their way here the same day I didn’t show up after school — when they also found my empty apartment — all those years back. Once they got here, they had spent time in the Land of the Fey on an invitation from someone called Delphina.

“And why were you invited?”

“Your answer is as good as mine, but I’m happy we went.” Answered Jasper.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that they wanted our life energy, but in the end, here we are.” Added Stephen.

Jasper quickly drove the conversation in a new direction. “I’m sure you have other worries, like fruit picking, how’s that going?” He asked.

“Fine, I guess.”

They told me that a few weeks into their return, Jasper and Stephen had sent a message to the makeshift village in the city and many people arrived and pitched their tent on the Fairchild farm’s land. Many of those who came started to work at the orchard, which gave us enough staff to keep up with the tree’s production. I couldn’t wait to tell my cousin Claudia we would be able to pick and transform the whole harvest without incurring any overtime fees. That said, she had been acting weird lately, so I couldn’t be sure how she would react. In fact, I hadn’t seen her in a few days and couldn’t help but wonder if it had anything to do with Asteria and her friends. But there was no time to think about that — we needed to build a schedule for the orchard and organize the new village’s activities. I was delighted to find that most villagers were already used to this reality and there would be no time lost trying to organize everything. Withing days, cooks were designated to prepare the food, while the

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tasks of cleaning up were equally split between the residents. The local police took some interest in the growing village, but the fact it created fresh manpower for the local farms meant they kept their distance, albeit a short one, waiting to pounce if things took a turn. The provincial police force provided the local authorities with a surveillance truck which was parked in a field across the road, where there was always someone inside, with regular shift changes every eight hours. They didn't hide what they were doing, and their presence didn't change anything in the village. In the end, there was some drinking, and a few joints were smoked, but there was no major issue with the villagers, so they were left alone.

After a week, we were rolling — the orchard was clean, and the fruit trees were in good hands. Those who worked at other farms were paid in part with food rations that were prepared with love for the community. But there was still no sign of my cousin Claudia; it was starting to bug me.

“Did you happen to see my cousin Claudia recently?” I asked Jasper one day.

“Is that the mean girl that runs the roadside stall?” He wondered out loud.

I chuckled at his description. “That’s her, but to be fair, she’s not mean, just extremely focused on what she wants.”

“Potato potahto, in the end, she only thinks of her needs. And no, I haven’t seen her. In fact, the stall hasn’t opened in a while.”

That was true, we had sold the most recent harvest wholesale — something Claudia frowned on. Soon worry began to rise in the pit of my stomach. I realized I hadn’t seen my mother or Uncle in a while either. I couldn’t say how long, I had been so busy. I wanted to speak with Asteria and made a beeline for my room, where I settled in for a nap, hoping she would come to me without too much effort on my part.

I laid myself down and focused all my thoughts on Asteria to hopefully have her come into my dreams. Once I fell asleep, which happened surprisingly fast, I opened my eyes and saw I was in an alley that looked a lot like the one behind my house in the city. I knew I was inside a dream because a bird flew by, going backwards. I

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began looking for Asteria. I couldn't see her, and the odors that filled the air were full of sweet fruits, not the dank alley smells. This told me my spirit was still at the orchard, that I was only a passenger in this dream, that there was little chance I would meet up with her. Another reason I was having trouble going deeper was something that kept rubbing against my face — it was furry and soft — but it wasn't inside the dream.

"Forrest, wake up!" A tiny voice screamed from behind me.

In the dream, I turned, but there was no one there — just an empty alley. "Open your eyes." The voice was so tiny and shrill, I had no idea who it could be. The furry sensation kept getting worse, now it was almost blocking me from breathing. I awoke in my bed in the middle of a coughing fit with a squirrel sitting at the edge of my bed, shooting me a sideways glance that said "Let's do this!" I rubbed my face, unsure about where I was. My mind was filled with memories of the time I watched the pond bubble and boil, and the squirrel had started to tap his feet impatiently. Am I still in the dream? I thought. The squirrel squeaked. "This no dream." Is what I heard in my mind. "Are we actually communicating?" I asked it.

The squirrel looked at me for a second without moving, then nodded and ran away.

"Wait!" I got up to run after it. It was headed for the pond.

When we got there, Clyde was chilling, seeming to play with a racoon. Clyde was picking flowers that he gave to the racoon, who then placed them in a pile, careful to create an ombre effect with the colors as its pile grew wider and wider.

"Hey, having fun guys?" I said, amused by what I saw.

He looked at me, smiling. "This little guy is so cool, he's the ultimate organizer." He looked at me and chuckled. "You just get up from a nap? I should take a picture; you got the perfect bed head."

"I was sleeping. The squirrel brought me here, it seems to think we have something to do."

As I said that, the squirrel took off toward a mushroom patch that Clyde and I had been studying ever since we noticed the release of its spores was visible, which was — is — never the case with other mushroom patches. I ran behind it. Following the squirrel's lead, I

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stopped near the patch. Clyde, who followed me and the squirrel from close behind, ran his face into my back.

“What the hell, man?” He yelled, holding his nose with both hands. Clyde danced around as if his nose had been crushed, but there was no blood, so I kept my attention on what the squirrel wanted us to see. Before Clyde could articulate more disapproval of my conduct, I pointed to the spores pouring out from under the mushrooms in waves. They moved up doing loops, as if pushed around by a powerful breeze — except the air was barely moving. A light glow emanated from the mushrooms that reflected off the tiny particulates that rose to form a series of round openings. This was the same thing we saw on the video we had set up to observe the patch. Our camera was movement sensitive, which meant we saw a lot of small animals and a few foxes. Then there was the one time when a series of openings were created with its spores and some floor moss. The circles all shimmered, but it was hard to see on the screen if they led anywhere. What had attracted my attention the time it happened was that one of the openings seemed to react to something passing through it. For a second, its shimmer evened out and we could almost make out an image inside the circle. Now the circles weren’t just a recorded image, they stood before our eyes, floating in mid-air, and were starting to pull at us. My mind drew a perfect blank, and I stood still.

Clyde took a step towards the circles while I cowered behind, unsure of what to do. Clyde gingerly took another step, his eyes peeled on the multiple openings. Motivated by his never-ending curiosity, I forced myself to follow close behind. I got close to him and matched my steps to his while peeking out over his shoulder to try and make some sense of what we were seeing. The mushroom spores picked up the moss as they rose, before thousands of tiny, invisible fingers expertly braided it in mid-air. They created multiple small circles that surrounded a bigger one in the middle in mere moments, right before our eyes. After a few minutes, the spores gradually tapered off and soon the openings began to quiver. The image was distorted, but it was clear there was something on the other side. I leaned in, making sure I stayed behind Clyde.

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“Relax, man.” He said. “This is our way in.” He was smiling from ear to ear.

He stood with his shoulders square to the grouping of circles and took a deep breath. I went to move out from behind him, but tripped and fell awkwardly as I tried to keep my eyes on the circles while I went down, afraid they might disappear if I looked away, even for a fraction of a second. I ended up on my back, with my gaze focused on the group of circles, that were still there, shimmering and waiting, giving me strong vibes of impatience. Clyde reached down to help me back up.

“You ok, dude?”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

I dusted myself off and could distinctly hear laughter coming from inside the moss and spore circles – which were now vibrating even more. I tried to see who or what could be laughing but only saw the circles continue to shimmer, as if they were made of liquid. It emitted a scrambled image that only gave short glimpses of clarity. I felt no disappointment in not being able to see what was there and in reality, I didn’t want to know. It was clear that the laughter clearly came from the middle circle, so I tried to focus on it only. It was bigger than the others, and we could clearly see some movement behind the scrambled image. I stepped up to look closer while Clyde frantically turned the pages of the journal he kept of the activity around the pond. It was mostly made up of things I told him, but also included his personal research on the subject of the existence of Fey Folk over time.

“I don’t think your journal will help here.” I said. The air around us had become still, and my voice felt weird. Something was happening, and it was new to both of us.

Clyde looked up. He bit his lip and shut the book before putting it back in his pocket.

“You’re right, all we really know is that the mushrooms are the guardians of the veil that separates our worlds. We’ll have to wing it.” He said, the sound of his voice barely able to reach my ears.

He moved to get closer to the biggest circle, raising his hand to try and touch it. The instant the tip of his finger touched the liquid that

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held the image in the circle, Clyde disappeared. He wasn't gradually sucked into the circle, he just vanished, as if he was never there. I stood where I was, stunned and unable to move. I could see Clyde's footsteps in front of the wall of circles while I tried to grasp at something tangible to understand what just happened, I felt my legs starting to give way.

"Come now, it's time to fulfill your promise." Said a voice coming from inside the circle.

It seemed to be so far away, yet I could hear it as if it were whispering in my ear.

"Touch the opening, Forrest." The voice said, more forcefully this time.

I raised my hand and held it inches from the wavering image in the circle.

"Do it now! We cannot predict the next opening of the passage."

The voice was becoming shrill and gave me goosebumps, but I couldn't pull my gaze from the reflection I saw in one of the smaller circles, where a man was standing at a table, seeming to fold some sheets or something like that. Was it my father? Why did I feel this man was him? A flock of birds took flight around me, making me step back for a moment. The wall of circles quivered.

"Forrest! Now!" The voice was screaming.

I had to do it; Clyde was there. We promised each other to travel together if we ever found a passage and this was that time. I never actually believed it would come to be and now that it was happening, I felt hopeless. I took a deep breath and stepped forward with my arm outstretched. My finger came close to the opening, and I closed my eyes.

I felt a light tingle on the edge of my finger. I had an irresistible urge to open my eyes — everything around me felt different — but managed to keep them closed tight. If I did cross over, did that mean my physical body was dead? I finally opened my eyes. I was still standing at the same spot I was when I outstretched my arm. The trees around me were all where they were supposed to be. Except they seemed made of some sort of living liquid that emitted a discreet, pulsing glow. The liquid that flowed up on the inside carried

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a green hue, and back down on the outside, where the bark would be, wearing a blue hue. The tree kept its shape but seemed to have no solid mass. I turned to look behind me, and I could see the passage that I used starting to unravel. The floor moss the spores used to build its structure were returning to their original position, floating back to the humid ground. My whole existence was disappearing behind an invisible wall, and I couldn't understand why I felt so calm. Just before the passage closed for good, I imprinted the memory of the homestead in my mind. The opening finally closed. My mind was empty. And I couldn't see Clyde.

“Welcome Forrest.”

It was Asteria, who was looking at me perched on a tree branch. Except trees here didn't have any mass. The liquid energy that was its only structure emitted a dark glow to delineate the space it occupied. I tried to find something tangible I could call real to help slow my racing mind. Nothing was there — even the pond was gone. What was left in its place was a dark mass that seemed to pull all the light towards it. It was pitch black yet glowed ominously in the space it occupied.

All around me were tree shaped flowing rivers of energy that created a connection from the ground to the sky. I knew they were my fruit trees; I could even decipher which was which. This calmed my mind, and I took in the privilege of being able to deepen my relationship with my trees even more. I walked up to one, trying to see it beyond its liquid form. Within the flow of energy, there was a tiny swirl happening about halfway up, a little off center from the frame. This was an apple tree. The one with a big knot about halfway up, a little off center from the frame. Excited, I started looking around to see if I could draw up a map in my mind. After a moment, I realized it felt familiar being here, in this reality, and memories of the times Asteria brought me came rushing back. What I had believed to be nothing more than a dream state created by my mind turned out to be a real place after all. The familiarity I felt being here was soothing — those dreams were happy moments after all. When Asteria took me here, it was so we could play and be jolly. Joy filled my heart, and I took the time to look around, happy to visit this

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place with a fully conscious and alert mind. Asteria just sat on her perch, staring at me with a wide smile on her face. Despite my desire to let loose and embrace everything this place had to offer, there was one thing missing.

“Where’s Clyde?” I asked, trying to somehow stay connected to my world.

“I can only presume he is ok. Now come.” Asteria said.

I didn’t like her choice of words. “Why do you need to presume?”

“Because if he had died, or was taken, I would know.” She stood up then fluttered away.

I watched her leave, and I quickly realized she wasn’t going to wait for me. Although I felt a sense of relief that she was probably taking me to Clyde, I wasn’t able to move a single muscle. The ground also had a liquid appearance, and my body refused to let me take a single step. I couldn’t shake the feeling I would be swallowed by the ground if I stepped on it. I saw nothing tangible around me.

Everything was liquid energy, and it flowed in chaotic ways that showed no discernable pattern. The only constant was that all the energy that came near the pond was sucked into its darkness. My eyes were slowly adapting to the environment and the contour of the pond, thick and pulsing, came into view. At each beat of the pulse, spores of renewed energy came back out into the chaotic flow. The trees then swallowed it, taking the energy from the sky to the ground and back. I took some time to admire the spectacle, almost forgetting I had to get going.

Asteria was then swallowed by a curtain of darkness and my heart sank. I was alone and felt highly vulnerable. I knew I had to follow her. But would I sink into the ground if I do? I didn’t know and panic was setting in. Seconds before I succumbed to the terror invading my thoughts, something caught my eye. In the direction Asteria went, there was a trail of dots of light floating in mid-air — I chose to believe she left that for me to follow and that filled my heart with enough courage to try and move in that direction. Soon I was ready to go, surprised my legs were willing to cooperate without resistance, although they felt numb all over. The trail Asteria left lingered in the air but seemed fragile, as if the slightest breeze would

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push it away. Come on man, pick it up! I ordered myself. Blood began to return to my legs on that command. It felt like a million tiny ants appeared on my skin, taking tiny bites as they passed. I waited for the sensation to pass, and within moments, my legs felt normal. At first, I took the time to lightly tap the ground with the tip of my foot, trying to avoid any surprise. It seemed sturdy, and after a few tentative steps, my confidence grew enough to let me walk normally. Within moments, I was walking briskly. The trail of light was still there, unmoved by the energy flows around it, waiting for me. It felt like I was walking on something that floated just below the water, the ground moved under the impulse of my weight but didn't let me through, and it was exhilarating. Although I couldn't shake the feeling I would be swallowed by the ground at each step.

“Forrest, I await your arrival.”

It was Asteria. Her voice just appeared all around me — it wasn't coming from anywhere in particular; it just filled the air around me the same way it did in the dreams we had together. I managed to reach the strand of light she left for me and followed its trail. My thoughts danced around between the realization I would not be returning home tonight, hoping I would find out if I really saw my father in one of the openings, and finding Clyde. My mother is gonna freak out I told myself. That single thought calmed me down in an instant. If anyone could find a way to bring me back to my world, it was her. With the help of Uncle Ralph, it was almost guaranteed she would find a way.

The trail of light led me through a maze, forcing me to constantly change directions, making me wonder if we were still on the orchard. I tried to keep track of how many turns I made, but it didn't take long for me to lose count. Soon I came to a mass of glowing darkness blocking my way. I couldn't see the trail of light anymore, so I decided to reach out and try to touch the mass of energy. There was no mass and my hand disappeared in its midst. My mind was flooded with images of the orchard over generations, all seen from the point of view of one of the fruit trees.

During that instant, I saw the pond when it was surrounded by tiny saplings. The confrontation the tree I was looking through had to

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endure with the one next to it over the years as both fought for the most sunlight by stretching their branches out to block the other. I felt a pang of regret as each year, I would prune this tree to let the others grow — I didn't know this was the main tree, the one who's connection spans the entire orchard. In the next moments, it showed me the fruits growing and being picked, year after year. Everything appeared in one single instant in my mind, but I could distinctly feel each of the tree's moments in time over the years in that fraction of a second. That filled my heart with joy, but my mind slipped into confusion, and I just stood there, inert. I was unable to move and felt my connection to the tree grow with every second. My thoughts were getting pulled in one by one, gradually turning my mind into a vast field of passive contemplation. I felt a wave of Love for it, and without question, I felt it loving me back. Our connection went beyond anything any human could begin to imagine. I felt my life melding with that of the tree. Its life force was simultaneously filling me up with its energy and sucking mine out. As I let myself slip deeper into a deep rooted contemplation, I felt something push me hard and the next moment I was flying through the air, flipping head over heels two or three times before landing hard on the ground, face first. No more connection, no more feeling of weightless contemplation, just one of surprise and pain.

"Who did that?" I screamed, spitting out pieces of forest greenery that lodged into my mouth and nose during the fall.

"You're welcome." Asteria said, smiling. "You have much to learn about this place. Stay close to me if you don't want to be sucked into the abyss of the cosmic ocean."

On those words she took off once more, again leaving a trail of light for me to follow.

"Stay close. Easy to say for something that flies." I said, looking back at the mass of dark energy that still stood proud. I felt it calling me and wanted to rekindle the connection but managed to keep moving forward and stay with Asteria.

It seemed that trying to navigate this place without killing myself would be my main task, so this time I followed the trail of light diligently. I needed to fully accept I now was in a different place.

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Everything felt unusual, even if it seemed to be the same. If I stretched out my arms, I could feel the air on my skin as I had always felt it. The tree that tried to merge its existence with mine did show me my world. That meant I was still on the orchard, that we weren't in some faraway land hidden on the dark side of the moon. I stopped and focused on another dark shape that stood before me. I thought came to me that if it sees the other side, it can also take me there — I had to keep that option active in my mind. My eyes had fully adapted to the environment around me, and I could clearly see the tree's branches, the hanging fruits, the leaves dancing in the wind. This could work, I was sure of it. I looked at the energy mass emitted by the tree and felt a deep sense of love for it. I prided myself in the fact I knew each tree individually, but now I realized I only knew about their physical existence.

"I'll make sure to be attentive to your energy signature when I get back, that is a promise." I said to the tree.

The tree's energy mass began to vibrate, as if responding to my words. The vibrations touched the air and moved directly towards me in waves. As soon as it touched me, I fell into a stupor. Within the vibration was a view of the orchard as seen from one of the hanging fruits. No longer in control of my movements, I reached for a fruit hanging on the end of a branch, trying to peer into its incandescent energy, hoping it would carry me back home.

"Seriously?"

It was Asteria, who was sitting in the same tree, looking at me with a mean gaze and her arms crossed. Her eyes were two straight lines, and the lines on her forehead told me she wasn't happy. Her angry gaze helped me regain control of my muscles, and I sheepishly pulled my hand back.

"Good." She took a deep breath. "From now on, please be careful, reality is fluid in this world." She fluttered down to the ground. "We have almost arrived, let's keep it up, there are people who are eager to meet you."

This time she didn't flutter away and waited for me to join her. Her gaze was intimidating, and it threw me. I approached with my head hung low. Despite her small size, she commanded all the attention if

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such was her desire.

“There is no need for such attitudes here. If you follow my lead and show the proper respect, you can walk with your head held high.”

I was a little taken aback by Asteria’s tone. She had been nothing but inviting and funny since I met her, but now she was showing signs of impatience and had a general harshness about her. It was unnerving.

“Do not interpret my tone as an affront. You are new to this place, and as a human, you are an unwelcome interloper. There is someplace I need you to go, only there are many obstacles between here and there and I cannot let you frolic randomly.” She paused, staring into the distance, then added: “I made a promise to deliver you safely. I shall not fail.”

“Why didn’t we immediately land where we needed to be?” I asked.

“The mycelial network runs the show.” Asteria said with a flat tone.

“We decide nothing. They open either the time or the place or both, it’s their decision. All we can do is be ready when a door opens. It’s true that some of us can travel freely, but most of us can only contact humans through the dream state. Unless, of course, the network opens a passage.”

While the realization grew on me that I was stuck here, my thoughts went to Clyde, and I could only hope he was somewhere safe.

Asteria and I kept walking through a dense forest for far longer than I thought was needed. She did say that we had almost arrived, but then we just kept walking for hours on end. That said, I didn’t feel any pain in my legs nor was I hungry, so maybe it hadn’t been that long.

“Do you know how long it will be now?” I asked.

“Curb your impatience. We are moving in the right direction.”

She didn’t say anything else, even making a conscious effort to avoid looking in my direction, always staying a step ahead of me. She fluttered a few feet above the ground, her body turned away from me. Regardless, I was busy observing and learning what I about this place. I hoped Clyde was doing ok but couldn’t help but imagine the

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worst. I knew about the existence of Faylandia, spoke with its people, came to visit in my dreams — yet I still felt completely out of place. He had a sparse theoretical grasp at best, I could only imagine what was going through his mind. Asteria stayed ahead of me — she looked like a dog following a trail. Her two tiny nostrils were pulsing as she changed directions ever so slightly every few steps. In an effort to keep my mind busy, I tried to get the conversation going again.

“You said you’d tell me about my mother’s promise to you after leaving that place. Is now a good time?”

Asteria stopped and turned to face me. “It could be a good time for a break. I crave refreshments.”

She fluttered down to a big rock and sat there, looking at me. She shook her head, urging me on.

“Um, refreshments.” I looked around. “And where, may I ask, will I find a lemonade stand?”

“You’ll find what you look for. If you go looking for fear and doubt, then that will be your trophy.”

“Then I guess I’d better look for refreshments then, huh?”

She looked at me with a serious face, making it clear to me that it was my job to find refreshments and that my humour was weak. You find what you look for — my mother always told me that when she tried to pull me away from believing in these people, this place.

Except that only generated more questions, not answers. How much did my mother know about all this?

“How goes your search?” Asked Asteria, pulling me out of my thought bubble.

“I know, I know. I find what I look for.”

I looked around, decided to start by locating a source of water. I realized that would probably mean entering thicker parts of the woods. A voice I didn’t know kept whispering that’s where the nightmare creatures lurk. Don’t think about them, just find water, I told myself. Using every ounce of focus I could muster, I closed my eyes and thought only of water — a babbling brook, a flowing river, a freshwater lake. The result was twofold. I was now thirstier than ever and had to pee. The sensation caught me by surprise. I hadn’t

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had any physical needs since I got here. I was sure at least a day had passed, but could it be more?

“Asteria, I have a question.” I said.

“Refreshments first. Fulfill your obligation and I might respond.”

I started grinding my teeth out of frustration, which surprised me with a sense of relief. Feeling my teeth meant my physical body was somehow present, so I knew I wasn't dead. Before I resumed my search, I went to relieve myself but found the need to pee had passed. I couldn't help but wonder if there was an unconscious version of me who keeps peeing himself in the human realm. I pushed those thoughts away, motivated by my thirst. I looked around and picked a direction for no other reason than it felt right. It didn't take long — after a few steps, I spotted a light glow just a few feet to my left. I bent down and ducked under a bush to see more. I was greeted by a lush cluster of flowers, all glittering with droplets from a fresh rain under the glow of an invisible moon. I took another step, and the flowers at my feet dissolved into a deep puddle of water almost instantly.

“Asteria?” I shouted, the water now up to my knees. “How do I do this?”

“Refreshments.” She shouted back.

Her new attitude was not pleasant. I couldn't understand why she was being so curt — I needed her help and support way more now than I ever did. For no clear reason, she was distant and cold since we got here, and it was weighing more and more on my soul. I made a conscious effort to focus on the water, I was thirstier than ever, and I wanted to pull my mind away from the growing darkness it was producing. I looked around, trying to find something that I could use as a container. I spotted a hollow piece of wood just ahead, but that meant stepping on more flowers and the water was already pretty high, now well above the knees. I didn't want to become the cause for some freak flood, but still pushed forward and went for the piece of wood. I took two quick steps and the water rose to my hips. My feet were sinking in thickening mud, and I was stuck. Desperation washed over me, but I managed to keep my focus. I gave the flowers around me a good look, although I had no qualification to properly

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analyze them. I tried a different approach and bent over to pick one up. I plucked it expecting some more flooding, but it remained complete and glittered from its thousands of droplets. I plucked another one, and immediately, something began pushing from under my feet. In moments, I was back on solid ground and on my way back to Asteria with two dripping wet flowers that were somehow filled with gallons of water. I walked over gingerly, it felt as if I was carrying two glasses that were filled to the rim.

“For my lady.” I said with a smile as I bent down to offer Asteria a water flower, hoping to rekindle with the one who was happy and supportive.

“Much appreciated.” She replied with no emotion.

She took the flower and began to slowly drink one petal, pursing her lips around it like one does with a straw, smacking her lips between each sip. I felt my chest fill with pride; it felt as though I was starting to understand how this place worked. I decided to embrace my situation and live it to the fullest. Assuming she had to go slow because of her small stature, I put the whole flower in my mouth.

“Oh dear.” Asteria said as the flower entered my mouth.

I chomped down on it and my mouth filled up with gallons of water that badly needed to come back out due to the lack of space. The water immediately began to spew out of me through every hole available — I even felt some water leaking out of my ears and eyes. Asteria looked at me stunned for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“That is one way to consume the water flowers, very human of you.” She said between two giggles.

Still working at catching my breath, I didn’t know if that was a diss, but I really didn’t care. After taking a moment to gather myself, I realized the water I did manage to swallow gave me a full boost of fresh energy. Asteria was still busy sipping at her flower, so I took advantage of the situation.

“My promise. You are refreshed, we have a moment, all is quiet.”

Asteria smiled. “Tis true.” She changed her position, getting more comfortable. “Settle yourself so I may share the tale with you.”

I sat cross legged and avoided touching the large mass of dense, vibrating energy that was calling on me next to us.

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“You must know, when this promise was made, your mother was not in an advantageous position.” Asteria paused, but not long enough for me to respond. “Your mother almost died.”

A shadow then flew over our heads, which attracted Asteria’s attention. Believing she was trying to find a way out of giving me an answer, I pressed her for more.

“Don’t try to evade the question. What do you mean she almost died? I need to know why I’m here. And when I can go back home?” Asteria ignored me for a moment as she scanned the woods in front of us. Seemingly satisfied about whatever she saw, she continued. “Your father made a deal to save your mother, and she accepted — we only expect what was promised.” She scratched her chin and added: “You can leave — you will leave. But a complete time cycle must pass first. Once that happens, the mushrooms will open the passage.”

“This is true.” Said a voice from behind us.

It was the blue woman from the pond, walking out from behind a tree. She kept her gaze locked on Asteria.

“My friend, tis rare I encounter your presence in these parts. Is that a result of your soft skinned company’s behavior?”

Asteria chuckled. “Nothing so dramatic, dear Zanna. He seems arrogant, but he is not. He is an idiot, his brain and his mouth do not cooperate much, but his heart is pure — I attest to it.”

Zanna turned to me. Her eyes were deep, blue, and carried an energy that captured my soul at first glance. I wanted to be offended at what Asteria said, but when Zanna’s eyes fell on me, my chest tightened, and my mind began to wander. It created images of us walking nude in a field of lilies hand in hand while a light breeze caressed our skin. Her eyebrows were downcast in an angry manner, but her lips were smiling ever so slightly. I couldn’t look away, and found I was unable to produce anything interesting to say as my mind went blank, except for the images of us frolicking aimlessly.

“You are Zanna.” I said. To Asteria’s point, my mouth and brain were slow to cooperate which made me sound like an eighty’s robot.

Zanna smiled, which sent my mind into a tailspin and engulfed my soul. The way her mouth parted just slightly and how her eyes

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crinkled just a little bit illuminated her whole face, and I felt an immediate and deep sense of affection for her. I basked in the love my heart was generating, but managed to keep it to myself, unsure if it would be well received.

“Yes, Zanna of the Isle. I know you are Forrest, son of Madeleine and friend of Clyde.”

Hearing his name kicked my mind back in gear. “You know him? Do you know where he is?”

Zanna shook her head. “I can begin a search. Maybe I could ask for the assistance of your dragons?” Zanna asked Asteria.

“My dragons will assist you.” Asteria said. “Except for one difference. I shall escort the quest and you stay behind with our friend — he has many questions, and it is becoming tedious. More importantly, my dragons are tricksters that will give you headaches if they are not guided properly.”

Zanna shrugged her shoulders and pouted, then caressed my cheek with the back of her hand with smiling eyes. The discharge of energy almost made me faint. She saw me turning pale and giggled.

“Poor thing, he shan’t comprehend the answers I have for him — I fear his heart will shatter.” She said. The melody of her voice washed over my mind, my heart, and my soul. I had to sit down before my legs gave out.

She sat in front of me in the lotus position and began fiddling with blades of blue grass. I was sitting on a tree stump, unable to turn my eyes away from Zanna. Each of her movements were pure grace and ease, and I felt my heart swell a little more with each breath. The only thing holding me back from letting this sensation explode was tied to a spot of worry that held on at the back of my mind — was she subjugating me through some sort of spell? And if so, was it dangerous? Because if that was the case and it wasn’t, I was happy to keep going.

Asteria took Zanna’s action as a sign of acceptance and lifted her arms to the sky. She began to rub her fingers together and produced a sound so melodic, yet so strident that I had to place my hands to my ears to avoid being overcome by the energy emanating from it. In moments, the air was filled with a buzzing sound as hundreds, if

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not thousands, of dragonflies arrived. They gathered around Asteria, hiding her behind a living wall. Zanna, seemingly unimpressed by the spectacular show, chose to come and sit next to me. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“You look pale, what ails your soul?” She asked. Her voice was soft and angelic.

I started shaking from excitement from having her so close to me. My mind was blank from the intense emotion, but my heart was filled with so much joy it didn’t matter. She caressed my back, which calmed me down and soothed my soul, but something still felt sour. I felt like no one wanted to tell me about the reason for my presence here and that was starting to get old. When I was a young boy, my mother told me I couldn’t understand the ramifications. Later Asteria explained I couldn’t understand the real reasons since I was in the human realm and had no idea of life in Faylandia. Now I was here, and getting answers was like pulling teeth from an enraged alligator. Despite it all, at that moment, I was happy, content. I had no idea why, or how, I could feel any level of contentment, but I did. Feeling as though I had regained control of my mind, I decided to try and get something from Zanna.

“Do you know why I’m here? What the promise was?”

Zanna continued to rub my back and began humming a tune that was almost imperceptible at first but quickly grew in strength. My impatience to find an answer dissipated under the spell of this harmony, which entered my mind and caressed it with its soft melody until I forgot I asked the question.

“Discontinue your bothersome worry — rejoice in the action taken in your name.” Zanna said as Asteria continued to rise toward the sky with the dragonflies in tow. They followed one and other in an orderly fashion as they lined up to form a perfect cylinder that turned on itself like a billowing cloud of smoke.

With my mind clear of any questions, I turned my attention to the dragonflies’ show. Their rise was slow and methodical, which gave me time to appreciate the event — it was soothing to watch. I had to almost break my neck just to be able to find Asteria. She was standing on the plume of dragonfly smoke, gathering more of them

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still. She kept rubbing her fingers and continued to rise, but I couldn't hear the strident melody anymore. It was covered by the buzzing of the dragonflies' wings as more kept coming. They joined in their compatriots without hesitation, joining the billowing funnel with ease. I couldn't help but marvel at the perfection of the cylinder the dragonflies built as it rose under Asteria's call. It reminded me of the plume of smoke from a rocket rising to space.

"Focus your awareness." Said Zanna, pointing a finger toward Asteria. She seemed excited now as she looked at the spectacle with wide eyed wonder. "It happens now."

At the top of the cylindrical funnel, Asteria stopped rubbing her fingers and the dragonflies stopped beating their wings. For the smallest fraction of a second, the air stopped moving, the trees held their breath, time stood still. During that moment of perfect stillness, Asteria looked at me and winked before snapping her finger. The Dragonflies responded by taking off in every direction, disappearing in a split second. Asteria lingered for a moment longer. She looked at us and waved goodbye. I watched her flutter away, disappearing beyond the treetops at a very leisurely pace.

"If we find danger, Clyde shall be awarded protection." The voice appeared in my head, which provoked a powerful wave of relief that wiped away all worries and questions — for a time.

Zanna was still rubbing my back, and now I felt a faint vibration coming through her fingers. The vibration matched the melody she was humming and soon I felt the song inside my body. The vibration spread through my body and within moments I felt extremely weary. I laid on my side and fell into a deep sleep, carried into my dreams by the melody Zanna was humming.

Unable to know how long I'd slept, I woke up dazed and confused with Zanna looking at me with intent. For some reason, I was deeply uncomfortable knowing she had watched me sleep.

I looked around and saw we were not in the same place as before. "Where are we?"

Zanna softly caressed my hair with care. "Worry not, dear Forrest. I carried you as you slept so we may advance faster."

I was floored. "You carried me? How? You didn't even wake me up.

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Did we get very far? Are you tired?" My mouth was firing the questions out one by one, ignoring my brain's orders to shut up. "Did my falling asleep make you angry? Are you going to tell Asteria? And if you do, does that matter?"

Zanna placed her hand on my mouth. Feeling her skin on my lips shut down my mind and I looked at her with a blank stare.

"You are an amusing human." She said. When her gaze locked on to mine, it took everything I had not to faint. "Let me try to answer your queries. I did not wake you because I'm the one who put you to sleep. Carrying you was much faster than waiting for you walk your way here. What was the other? Oh yes. No, I'm not tired, but I would appreciate if you carried your own weight for a while." She rubbed her chin, giving me a sideways glance. "I'm not angry, and I will not tell Asteria, it is of no interest to her, I'm sure. You have shown yourself to be a decent human thus far, I shall honor that by showing you some respect."

I was crushing hard on Zanna. Her demeanor, her voice, her intelligence, the power of her presence, everything about her made me quiver with joy. I usually feared to use the word love, but now it wanted to come out of my mouth with a flourish. Suddenly I realized what she said.

"You put a spell on me? Is that forever? Will it change me? Am I at your service without knowing it? How do I reverse it?"

Zanna fell to the ground, laughing her heart out.

Watching her laugh only gave her a new layer of beauty and this time I managed to keep my mouth from asking more inane questions. Zanna regained her composure and dusted herself off.

"You are such an inquisitive human." She said with a sly smile. "Very well, you deserve some truth. I laugh for there is no spell. I wanted to play with you."

Her smile alone would make me move mountains for her, but as she reached in and placed her hand on my shoulder to reassure me, I was overcome with joy and wept. She placed my head on her shoulder for a snuggle and we didn't move. I didn't want it to end, her shoulder was a haven of comfort I had craved my entire life. She

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could put any spell she wanted on me if this was the reward.

“So, do you sleep at all?” I asked, hoping we could extend our time in this position with a conversation.

“I replenish.” She answered.

I had hoped for a lengthier answer just so we could stay where we were, but now I was curious. I raised my head, immediately regretting it and craving her warmth.

“Replenish?”

“Yes, you saw me at your pond. That was my time to replenish.”

My mind went back to that day. It seemed so long ago, yet if someone told me it just happened, I would believe it. I realized I hadn’t had a thought for Clyde for a while and a sense of guilt filled my heart.

“Do you think Clyde is ok?” I asked.

Zanna tilted her head sideways and glanced at a distance. “We can’t know that. All we can do is keep moving. Asteria will join us and then we will know.”

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THE END

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The final Tale of the season

Only one more episode to go!

This is the next to last Tale that will come to be known as season one. To all the readers, you have my deepest gratitude to have taken the time to indulge me in this endeavor. Within the next month or so, the last episode of this season will come out and you will get all the answers pertaining to Forrest's promise, and to what the Queens want to talk about.

Mike Longmeadow

About the Author

It's my goal to help keep wonder alive in this cold, cold world..

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