

Torji's Deal

A Tale from the Storyroom



MIKE LONGMEADOW

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Forrest's cousin, Claudia, enters the Tales as she gets an offer from Morrigan that is hard to refuse. Madeleine and Ralph, Forrest's mother and Uncle, are pushed to pass to the other side to try and find their family. Torji the Gnome, ever the negotiator, offers to help.

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."

Torji's Deal: A Tale from the Storyroom

This tale This Tale exposes the realities that we face when travelling to the Land of the Fey. A place where none of our usual references are valid. A place where negotiation is central to all actions.

Dedication

To the growing number of people who are jumping on the bandwagon. Although we are few at the moment, it gives me the push needed to keep the Tales going.

To the squirrel who comes into my house to watch me write while munching on nuts.

To any and all who believed in me from the start, you know who you are.

Torji's Deal: A Tale from the Storyroom

From Mike Longmeadow

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Tales from the Storyroom

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the Orchard

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1- Claudia

It took longer than she would have wanted, but after years of waiting, Claudia's father had surrendered, and she finally opened the road-side stall to sell fresh fruit. It had been a long road for Claudia. "You're too young," he said at first. Then when she was old enough, "There's a lot to learn to run a business." She promptly registered for many online classes and took a job at the village general store to gain experience. After that, her father came up with another one: "We need permits to have a road-side stall." That one had been easy; Claudia was planning on him using that excuse and had the permit already approved. At that point, Ralph conceded and helped his daughter build a proper stall that could withstand weather variations and still be attractive to customers. Claudia could finally sell the fruit they grew at a decent price, not the low-income generating bulk price they have traditionally done.

Today, as were the other days of this week, had been another great day, as just about all the fruit she had exposed was sold, and she gave herself a mental pat on the back. She was wrapping things up at the fruit stand when a flight of birds took off from the pond.

"What are these idiots doing?" asked herself, thinking Forrest and Clyde were up to no good again while the birds scattered in all directions.

She placed the cash box in her bag and started cleaning up. A crow flew by and forced her to duck before it landed on a nearby branch. Claudia gave it a mean glare and continued her closing routine. Once she finished cleaning everything up, Claudia locked up the roadside shed, relieved to see that the crow had gone somewhere else.

"Excuse me." There was a tap on her shoulder.

Claudia was startled and tripped as she turned, landing on her back. The cash box flew out of her bag and broke open, spreading the money under the counter. Claudia's heart stopped for a full second. This is it; I'm being held up. A woman was standing there. Her gaze was squarely on Claudia, and she showed zero interest for the paper bills lying at her

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feet. She had long, black hair that covered her torso almost completely, with streaks of bright red hair running through. Her deep blue eyes pierced a hole into Claudia's soul. The woman raised her hand and placed one finger on her mouth. Her fingers were long and black, the tips more akin to claws than nails. Why should I? Thought Claudia. She was shocked to find she couldn't speak, and tried to say something. The woman smiled.

"You cannot speak. I forbade it." She said in Claudia's mind.

Her smile was beautiful, compelling, powerful. Claudia understood she had lost control. Desperation was growing and hoping to break out of whatever this was, she made another attempt to speak. Daddy! I need help! Right now! She tried to shout, but nothing came out. Tears began to fill her eyes, yet the woman kept smiling, indifferent to Claudia's plight.

"Cease your worry. You shall regain the power to speak after our conversation. I need to ensure none shall hear our words." The woman continued with her mind.

Claudia was dazed. She could see what was going on, but couldn't understand it. I have to speak to my dad about this. Claudia thought. The woman stepped in and grabbed Claudia by the throat, her face suddenly tense and angry looking.

"You shan't speak of this to anyone." As she spoke, a group of crows gathered around them. "You are called, such is enough for you to ken." She added.

Not my choice. Thought Claudia.

"Irrelevant. You are my chosen. At my service you shall be. You may call me Morrigan."

Claudia lowered her head despite her attempt to resist, to which the crows began to celebrate by cawing and flapping their wings. Within moments, a cloud of dust rose to cover the woman. The dust settled almost immediately, and Claudia was lying on her back, awakening from some sort of slumber.

What just happened? She thought as she scrambled to get up. The cash box was laid open at her feet. The coins had been grouped into a small pile and the paper money was neatly stacked inside it. Her mind was spinning out of control, but she still knew to grab the box and the coins

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before stuffing it in her bag. The last thing she remembered was locking the shed door, which was around four o'clock, but now dusk was falling which meant a few hours had passed. She held her bag like a baby and went to the house, thinking she might have to ask Forrest for help. She hesitated before walking into the house, the air around her felt heavier than usual. She tried to slip in unnoticed, but both her father and aunt were looking at her. Both looked concerned.

"You ok honey?" Asked her father. "You look pale." Added her aunt. Claudia stopped to answer, but found she was still unable to speak. She gave them a quick smile and walked away. She passed in front of her aunt Madeleine's room and without thinking, she slipped in, feeling a powerful urge to find something she knew she needed.

She dove into her aunt's closet, blindly tossing everything to the floor behind her. She didn't know what she was looking for, but her mind was entirely focused on finding it. She would know when she saw it. Her mind had become clear and calm as she bulldozed through Madeleine's closet. Something caught her eye and she stopped.

"This is it."

Ignoring the fact that she had just spoken out loud, she kept her focus on a rectangular piece of cloth that could be used as a veil. She stuffed it in her pocket and left the room with no regard for the mess she created. Now her focus changed toward the heaviness she felt in the house and on the grounds. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, and ran outside to free herself from this discomfort. The air felt different, it was more intense somehow. She took a moment to look around and could feel all the energy emitted by the trees and forest around the orchard. She could hear it breathing, sensed its thoughts.

Claudia began walking, aware she needed to take the veil to the woman who came to her in a dream earlier – Morrigan. Except she had no idea if it really was just a dream, or how to get to her. She had no doubt this woman would return sooner rather than later, but Claudia didn't have that kind of patience. Plus, the air around the orchard was harder than ever to breathe, she had to get away. A crow landed close-by and cawed. Claudia was surprised to understand.

"True, I will find my way." Claudia replied as she began walking into the woods, followed by the crow.

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The orchard quickly disappeared behind the trees as Claudia advanced with a confident stride. The crow kept up with her pace, cawing a happy song that made her smile. Claudia stayed focused on the path that had revealed itself to her, until she reached a small clearing, at which moment the crow flew away. She spotted a small shack at the back of the clearing. It was barely standing, with all its windows busted and seemed completely inhospitable. Still, she knew she was in the right place. Claudia decided it was best to wait and found a rock to sit on. But being who she was, it didn't take long for Claudia to lose patience. She got up and walked over to the shack, almost afraid that just being near it would cause it to crumble. The wood was seriously rotted on the front porch and the roof was seemingly suspended in mid-air save one tree trunk lodged under the pinion, holding everything up.

"Come in." Said a voice from inside.

The voice had a cavernous echo that sent shivers down Claudia's spine. Yet it was alluring, inviting. It pulled at her soul, but Claudia stayed put, unable to move a single muscle.

"Don't fear what you can't see, please join me."

This time, there was a distinct crackle in the voice. The kind customers at the road stall make when she's just about to break their negotiation attempt. Whatever was inside the crumbling shack was not as confident as it pretended to be. Maybe I can get something out of this, she thought to herself. Bolstered by a rise of courage in her heart, she set a foot on the porch. It felt surprisingly sturdy. Once she was standing on the porch with her two feet and saw it was solid, she stepped inside the shack, shrinking her head into her shoulders to avoid the door frame. Claudia was dumbfounded. She was standing in a beautiful, modern kitchen – the kind she'd been begging for at home for years. It was perfect, complete with a massive wood stove that occupied the back wall to feature its humble origins, flanked by beautiful white quartz counters. A large round table occupied the center of the room with pride. Claudia felt an irresistible urge to sit at the table. The counters and cabinets around her felt brand new yet were adorned with ancient carvings that depicted a group of eagles flying down on a village to take the children. Claudia was too entranced by the work, admiring the detail in the carvings to dwell on the horrifying nature of it. She sat at

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the table, admiring how the rays of sunlight coming in through the windows created beautiful contrasts on the counters and felt a wave of jealousy fill her chest. The way the light bounced off the different elements present in the kitchen was spectacular, as if each ray was a controlled spotlight. Except something was off. Was it sunny when I came over? Why don't I remember how I got here? She asked herself. A door opened at the back of the kitchen and the woman who called herself Morrigan walked in the kitchen. Her black hair flowed on her shoulders, propelled by an invisible breeze, and the red streaks in her hair was glittering. Before Claudia could speak and demand to know what was going on, Morrigan smiled, which made her forget all her worries and filled her mind with joy.

"If it pleases you, dear Claudia, state the motive for your presence in my abode." Morrigan said as she sat at the table. Claudia's hand went for the veil, but she stopped herself.

"I believe you know. I want in on how you did this to me."

Morrigan was still smiling, except this time Claudia felt a tug of fear.

"And what is it do you think I am capable of? Was it not your wish to create submission around you so you could do as you please?"

Morrigan's choice of words surprised Claudia. "Well, submission is a little strong, —"

Morrigan cut her off. "Don't dwell on the choice of words, you want submission. I can provide that for you. But my services carry a price."

Claudia abhorred getting cut off mid-sentence but chose to stay silent. She felt she was close to getting somewhere.

"What is your price?" She asked.

"It pleases me that you accept my offer." Morrigan said.

"Wait, I asked for price, I haven't accepted anything yet." Claudia replied in a huff.

Morrigan pressed her hands together, looking at Claudia like a car salesman who knows he has closed his sale. "My dear, asking for the price is akin to accepting our exchange. Once price negotiations begin, it is understood an agreement has begun." Morrigan locked her eyes with Claudia. She was not smiling. "If you turn back now, I will hunt you down and make your life so miserable you will wish for death, which I will not grant." Morrigan then turned her head and gazed through the

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window.

Claudia's heart was racing. She tried to turn her focus to the negotiation, but her mind was busy dreaming of unimaginable riches brought on by imposing her will on others. Morrigan then reached under her cape. She pulled out a bracelet. "Wear this at all times and your wish shall be fulfilled." She said, putting it on the table.

Claudia looked at the bracelet and felt a wave of disappointment. She still had no idea why she was here, or even how she got here, but the last thing she expected to be given a simple bracelet. Afraid of what might happen if she refused, she put it on, which instantly clouded her mind. She tried to pull it off, but found she had become a passenger in her body.

"Here is my price. The union of a Fey and Human will bring a bastard child to the world—bring it to me and I will spare your kin." Morrigan leaned in and whispered in Claudia's ear. "Forgo your duty and a curse shall descend on your family and the generations that will follow." She caressed her cheek with the back of her hand. "Awaken to fulfill your destiny."

The next moment, Claudia woke up to the sweet perfume of fruit that filled the air. She was lying in her bed. Something felt heavy on her wrist — a bracelet.

"What just happened?" She almost screamed, sitting in the middle of her bed.

A raven landed on her windowsill and cawed. Claudia's heart leapt to her throat, and she grabbed her phone to see what time it was. A whole night had passed. She walked down to the kitchen where her Aunt Madeleine and her father were having coffee. They were laughing, enjoying a morning joke as if nothing was wrong. Seeing them so casual caused a wave of anger to wash over Claudia, but she managed to hold it in. Now is not the time to be belligerent, a voice resonated in her mind as she walked into the kitchen. Both looked at Claudia with a confused look in their eyes, which made Claudia wildly uncomfortable. "What?" She barked, feeling the anger floating at the edge of her throat.

Her father looked at Aunt Madeleine and they both smiled as he shrugged his shoulders.

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“Well, it seems you had quite a night.” He said with a sly smile.

Claudia was fighting hard not to let her anger explode, but more than that, she had no idea why he would say that.

“Excuse me.” She said through her teeth as she took off toward the bathroom.

Claudia closed the bathroom door and immediately looked in the mirror. Standing in the reflection was a dishevelled woman with leaves and twigs sticking out of her hair. She couldn't understand what she saw. Her eyes were bulging, and she had an unexplained fat lip that felt very painful to the touch. Her clothes were tattered and ripped, with scratches covering most of her forearms. The bracelet was the only thing that shone. It looked brand new, fresh out of the box clean. She gave it a tug, but it refused to come off.

Her father came to the door and knocked. “You ok honey?” He asked.

Claudia could only think of his comment about her having “quite a night” and felt the anger in her soul crystallise and a sense of calm washed over her.

Claudia answered with a non-committal “Uh-huh.” and took a moment to try and remember the events that transpired last night. She remembered everything as if it had happened, but still woke up in her bed, as if it had all been a dream. The bracelet was the only thing that said it was more than that.

There was another knock on the door. “Claudia? What's going on?” This time it was her aunt.

Madeleine's voice made Claudia cringe. But if anyone could help, it was her. She took a breath.

“Be right out, everything's fine.” She said with her most amicable voice.

She reached for the bracelet to try and remove it again. Except this time, as soon as her hand touched the inside edges, an intense electric shock passed through her body and Claudia was thrown back, falling head over heels in the shower, with the curtain ripping off its hinges and wrapping itself around her. Hearing the racket caused by her fall, her father busted the door down. He and Madeleine grabbed her by each arm and pulled her up. That's when they noticed the scratches on Claudia's arms and looked at each other, worry showing in their eyes. Claudia pulled her arms back and hid them behind her back.

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“Don’t worry about it, it’s fine. I just tripped into a bush. Don’t say anything, I feel stupid enough.”

Her dad grabbed the arm with the bracelet. “Let me see.”

As soon as he set his eyes on it, he froze, and so did Madeleine, both bemused by the bracelet. Claudia had the impression they had entered a time bubble; she took time to admire it. It was magnificent in its simplicity — a piece of red wood with beautifully engraved indecipherable scribbles, all wrapped in a gold frame. As her father gazed into it, the scribbles began to dance. His eyes immediately glazed over and the next moment, he let go her arm.

“All right, just making sure.” He nudged Aunt Madeleine. “Come on let’s go, she needs to refresh.”

Madeleine seemed confused, and opened her mouth to protest, but he unceremoniously pushed her out and didn’t give her a chance to resist. Claudia closed the bathroom door behind them. Her mind was reeling. Her father was not one to accept a stupid accident as a valid excuse, but he did. She looked at the bracelet. The scribbles were beautiful, but she had no idea how to read them. She tried to remember what happened when she was gifted the bracelet, but her dream had dissolved, having become a vague remembrance of cloudy memories. The scribbles on the bracelet then began moving again, slowly morphing into miniature drawings depicting some sort of chase with horses pulling luxuriously clad beings in ornate chariots. Suddenly, three words appeared. “Find the child.” Claudia had to sit, overcome by a strong dizzy spell. A voice then rang in her head, seeming to come from the depths of her mind. The child is Forrest. As if hearing the voice, the bracelet began to shine brightly. The brightness spread over Claudia, erasing the scratches as it passed over her arm. A feeling of power was growing inside her — her father accepted my lame excuse, which meant the spell Morrigan placed was real. Claudia jumped in the shower and washed out the leaves and twigs stuck in her hair. Now feeling much calmer and composed, she went to the kitchen. Her dad had left but Aunt Madeleine was there, getting started on the preparations of her famous pulled pork. Her secret was using ginger ale instead of dark cola. “It gives the pork a sweeter taste.” She liked to say. It made no difference to Claudia, who found all the food made by Aunt

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Madeleine tasted the same. This morning, she looked at Madeleine working on her recipe, and felt no ill-will towards her, just pity – although she couldn't say why if asked. All her focus was now on finding Forrest. She hoped this would lead to getting rid of him and finding someone competent to run the fruit orchard. Lost in thought, Claudia didn't see that Madeleine was focused on her arms. She felt it better to say something.

"Told you it was nothing. It looked way worse than it was." She said while rubbing her forearms, still amazed all the scratches were gone. Claudia couldn't help but keep on caressing her arms, the skin felt softer than ever. She kept stroking them with her hands, fingertips, and couldn't stop. It was too soft, too perfect. Aunt Madeleine placed her hand on Claudia's to stop her.

"Be careful who you make deals with." She said, her gaze fixed on Claudia. "And be clear on your demands." She added.

She seemed to want to say more, but she just smiled and returned to her preparations. Claudia hated her grandma like way of giving advice, but she had a point. Had I been clear in my demands? Claudia asked herself. There had been something about promoting submission, but it wasn't clear if she had submitted, or if it was a power to submit others that had been granted to her. Claudia promised herself to try and meet up with Morrigan again and clear this up. But first, she needed to find Forrest. Claudia took advantage of her aunt turning her back on her and got up to leave.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Madeleine said, "we had a break in. It's very strange, they only rummaged through my closet, and it happened while we were here." Claudia froze. "I know you took the veil. But its powers have been depleted, it's useless." Madeleine added without turning around.

Claudia pretended that she didn't hear her aunt as she walked out of the kitchen, but she was close to falling apart. She ran towards the same spot in the woods she went to in in her dream, determined to find her way back to Morrigan's cabin. The air around her felt the same as before, heavy and uncomfortable. It was impossible that everything that had happened had been only a dream. Claudia wanted more details about the deal she made, and she was ready to go the distance

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to find out. She was walking with purpose without knowing if it was the right direction, but her instincts told her this was the way. A crow was waiting for her at the edge of the woods and cawed at her approach.

“Welcome back.” It said.

The fact she understood its language was proof last night’s dream had been real, although she was still wrapping her mind around the fact she could.

“I need to speak with Morrigan.” She said to the crow.

The crow gave her a sideways glance – its gaze dug into her mind. Its black coat reflected specks of light that began to rise and dance in the air. Claudia’s mind was flooded with images of Morrigan’s shack in the woods, but she raised the guards in her mind, refusing to let herself be fully hypnotised.

“Don’t show me, take me.” Claudia said. She pulled then away from the crow’s insistent gaze and immediately felt a sense of relief. As she worked at gathering her thoughts, the crow began hopping around and cawing loudly, as if it was laughing. Then it took off.

“Wait! How can I follow you like this?” Screamed Claudia, who thought it would show her the way.

Her father often told her to be wary of crows and ravens – that they know things and can read your mind. He always said: where there’s a crow, a witch is lying in wait. To Claudia, crows are just mean-spirited. They possess deep intelligence; they have to plan their misdeeds after all, but she always thought they were mean little buggers. The crow cawed in the distance. Carried by a rising wave of anger, Claudia took off after the sound to try and catch up.

She took no more than ten strides when she stepped on a large mushroom, violently releasing its spores into a cloud that instantly wrapped itself around her. Claudia felt compelled to stop. The cloud floated around her for a few moments, spreading out to form a series of opaque circles, all different in size. As she admired the process, she thought this is something Forrest would be so interested in. If Claudia could let herself think like him, she knew she could find him faster. Pushing those thoughts into her mental waiting list, she wanted to get going again. Except she was already on the edge of the clearing that hid the old shack. This is impossible she thought. She barely took ten

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strides into the woods. Nevertheless, it was the same clearing, this time with its floor covered in small echinacea flowers and lush grass. Claudia felt a strong desire to lie in it and let the sun's rays shine down on her and the multicolored bed of perfumed delights. A light fog floated just above the ground that produced tiny rainbows that glistened for a moment before dissipating.

Unable to refrain herself, Claudia lied on her back. As soon as her head touched the ground, an influx of energy entered her body. A mixture of powerful sensations soon overwhelmed her, both carnal and emotional. Claudia was about to faint as the fog slowly seeped into her skin, causing goosebumps to crawl across her skin, producing chills of excitement that were mixed in with shivers of fear. The crow cawed; it was standing right next to her. The surprise pulled Claudia out of her cloud of painful ecstasy. She sat up, her eyes bulging from anger, and took a few blind swings in the air, hoping to hit the dark feathered joker.

"What the hell?" She screamed to the crow.

It was standing in front of her, a smile clearly visible in its eyes. It cawed again, this time pointing its beak at its leg. A small piece of paper was tied to it. The crow stretched out one wing to lean on Claudia and lifted its leg for her to grab the piece of paper. Still shaking from a mixture of anger and drunken delight, she had trouble focusing. The crow emitted a low growl, as if it was cawing some impatient comment under its breath. Claudia finally managed to grab the piece of paper and the crow immediately took off, disappearing behind the trees.

Claudia looked around, hoping to see the rainbow laden fog, but it had dissipated. The grass had yellowed, and the flowers had withered and hung precariously on their stem. A wave of sadness washed over her, and tears began uncontrollably running down her face. The clearing was bare, and closed all around, with no visible path to follow. Claudia tried to step into the forest, but she was pushed back, as if stepping on a trampoline skin. Her desire to return to the fog's extasy was starting to shift into fear. The piece of paper in her hand had gotten warmer. She looked at it, half expecting it to burst into flames. It was a message from Morrigan.

Your significance is meaning.

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Your acceptance is my prohibition.

Find your kin.

The piece of paper then began smoking before bursting into a million dust particles that dispersed in seconds despite the stillness of the air.

“Wow, really helpful.” She muttered to herself.

Claudia was surprised by the sound of her voice. It was as if she was in some large sound room. There was no echo at all, and the air felt too still.

“Hello?” She called out.

The air was too calm. As soon as the words left her mouth, it was like they were swallowed into the air.

“Hello.” Said a voice from behind her.

Claudia spun around, expecting something or someone to be behind her. No one was there.

“Who’s there?” She asked, almost screaming.

The response was silence. She wondered if she’d heard anything at all. Ignoring the questions that filled her mind, she looked to find a way out.

“You won’t find the exit like that.” Again, it was behind her.

This time, Claudia stayed put. “Then how?”

Silence.

“Am I a prisoner?”

There was a chuckle. “Oh no. Not unless you want to be.”

Claudia turned her head, trying to widen her field of view. “And why would I want that?”

Something moved and she distinctly heard footsteps. “You tell me. I could only guess as I have not been granted access to your garden of secrets.” The voice was calm, which made Claudia nervous.

She didn’t recognize the voice and was starting to feel a strong need to know who this was. “It’s for me to decide who I share my garden with. Why do you stay hidden?” She asked, trying to turn the tables on whoever was there. A few more steps, it was closer.

“Most humans lose their mind when they enter this place. You seem quite present and alert, it worries me. And makes me curious.”

Claudia felt her chest swell from pride, she made a point to be present and alert in her daily life. Then she realized what he said.

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“Wait, what do you mean this place?”

“Humans call it the Land of the Fey — I call my home Faylandia.”

Claudia was flabbergasted. Her father had been right all this time. Her brain began searching for any memory about what he said when he rambled on about the Land of the Fey. Unfortunately for her father, who believed he was educating his daughter, it didn't interest her in any way, and she retained nothing from the lessons.

“And how does one cross over from the human world?” Claudia asked, hoping that talking it out could bring back some memories.

“Oh, I know nothing of such secrets. That knowledge is preserved and executed by the mycelial network. It decides when and if someone passes.” The voice was calm and emotionless, like a voiceover from a boring documentary.

Claudia thought about the mushroom that exploded under her foot.

“But how could they know where someone will be?”

Whatever was here with her was now directly behind her. She could hear it breathing, the sound of rustling clothes as it moved. “The mushrooms know far more than we could even imagine. They are the connection between all living things. I like you, so I will advise to forget trying to understand their power.” Still no trace of emotion.

“Noted. I'm going to turn around now.” Claudia said, feeling a need to announce her movements.

“Please do.”

She turned slowly. Claudia had come to the conclusion it was friendly enough, otherwise she'd be in a very different situation. But without visual contact she couldn't apply her negotiation check list, the one she uses at the stand—are the clients fiddling with their fingers, do they look her in the eye, are they sweating? Without it, Claudia had nothing to go on to measure her advantage. She kept her eyes on the ground as she turned to show whoever was there that she meant no harm. It didn't move and Claudia slowly raised her head. Standing before her was a two-and-a-half-foot hairy looking creature. It wore nothing else than a dark red cape, and its arms were filled with bracelets that were studded with rubies and jade. Its shoulders were broad, and the thick fur made it hard to make out where his body finished and where its legs started. Two large claws were sticking out from under him which

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Claudia assumed were his feet. Its eyes were two small dots that sat almost too high on its face, yet they carried a power, a strength that prevented Claudia from locking her gaze on them. She noticed they were glazed over, as if its thoughts were far away, and felt unnaturally calm. She couldn't tell if it was deciding if it would help or harm her, but she felt a rise in her chest that told her she was ready if it wanted a fight. Either way, she felt ready to play along.

"I'm here in the name of Morrigan. Can you help me find what I seek?" She said to break the silence.

Morrigan's name caused the creature to take a step back. It looked around, as if it was checking no one else heard. "Such name is banished; you would do well to not pronounce it again." It paused, scratching its chin. "But I understand your conundrum. You cannot renege on your promise to she we do not name, yet you cannot announce your intentions without naming her." Another chin scratch. "I can help you, but there is a cost."

Claudia put on her best sales smile. "State your price. Be warned I have little to offer." She said, aware she had just accepted to enter a transaction.

It smiled, which completely transformed its face. Before, it was downcast, from the eyes to its chin—it wore a sad look. Now, as it smiled, its eyes lit up and its face had become joyous looking. Claudia liked his range, he could sell a lot of fruit, she thought.

"I'm sure we can find something—our needs are many and varied." It spoke with such assurance that Claudia felt her confidence wane. It must have felt it too because its smile shifted ever so slightly and now carried an evil scowl. She tried to switch it up to try and regain some leverage.

"My name is Claudia." She said, extending her hand to shake his. It made a clumsy curtsy that made Claudia smile as she pulled back her hand.

"Torji of the Tuginkey line. Surely you have a last name?"

Claudia was starting to get nervous. It wasn't about telling him her last name, but rather the fact she was trapped in a situation she couldn't control. Her life revolved around the idea that everything must happen in an established order of things. Now she felt not only was there no

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order, but the chaos around her was rampant. This was either a dream, or maybe she fell and hit her head while walking in the woods and this was, although from a different origin, a dream. She'd had enough and decided it was time to take over the conversation.

"Look. I don't have time for any shenanigans, I've got somewhere else to be. Can you help me or not?" She looked at the hairy creature from head to toe. "And what are you anyway?" She added curtly.

The creature turned his gaze away and Claudia felt her mind returning to her. Ever the negotiator, she started taking mental notes of how things change as it spoke and moved to try and see what she could use to her advantage.

"I am of Gnomic descent, if that is what you meant by your question." He—it placed its hand inside its cape, making Claudia take a step back. It pulled out a necklace. "We believe in returning what we borrow. I believe this belongs to you."

Claudia couldn't believe her eyes. It was the necklace she lost the same day she got it all those years ago. It was from her father for her sixteenth birthday. She remembered setting it on her nightstand when she went to bed and the next day it was gone. The necklace hung loosely in her hand, and she didn't know if she should be angry or happy—how did they steal it, and why? Claudia tried to downplay her confusion.

"It looks like it. But it could be any —"

Torji the Gnome cut her off by turning the heart that hung at the end of the chain to show her the inscription. For my daughter, it read. Tears began to run down Claudia's cheeks. This was no dream; she really was inside the Land of the Fey despite her long-held disbelief. She had prided herself in being fully present in this life, accepting no other truth than the one she could touch, feel, know about. All of it was useless right now, she felt lost and broke down crying.

"Please help me." She sobbed.

The Gnome took the necklace and placed it around her neck. The tears became a torrent as she thought about how she treated her father when he tried to teach her about this place. He had ever only tried to tell her the basics, never forcing the knowledge on her beyond speaking about it in case she ever crossed over. All Claudia did was push him

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away each time.

“As I said, there is a price for my help.” Said the Gnome.

“I understand.” Replied Claudia. She didn’t, but basic negotiation was to show a confident front when starting a deal.

“Good.” He sat down. Unsure of what to do, Claudia joined him. “I use the term price because that is what humans understand, but I have no interest in money. I want your land.”

Claudia burst out laughing. “And how will I, we, make that work?”

Torji fiddled with a blade of grass and pulled it from the ground. He rubbed it between his fingers and within moments, he was holding a tiny pile of shiny dust in the palm of his large hand.

“You see, your land is filled with precious metals that I want. You don’t need to do anything, I will mine it without you even knowing my workers are there. My problem resides in the fact that I cannot access the land because there are protection spells all around it.” He looked straight at Claudia. “Which you can remove.”

“And why wouldn’t I just start my own mining operation instead and keep everything for me?” She replied, hoping to gain some leverage in this negotiation.

Torji laughed. His laughter made Claudia feel happy, which she found to be very displeasing.

“You would fail. We mine for the essence of the earth, something you cannot even begin to understand. All you would find with your brutish human machinery is dirt and rocks.” He rubbed his chin. “But I can promise to give you one piece of jewelry each year from the precious metals we dig up. Each will be priceless in human value.”

Claudia stuck her hand out, relieved to see this deal didn’t require much from her, and he returned the gesture. The deal was made.

“Now show me the way out of here.” She said.

Torji nodded and invited Claudia to follow him.

2- Madeleine and Ralph

Ralph shook me awake. Confused and startled, I blindly threw a punch that landed on his chin. He didn't fall over, or even wince. His eyes were bulging, and his skin completely red. Confusion was still very present, but now tinged with fear.

"What's going on Ralph?" I asked. I tried to pull away, but he was holding me down. "Let me go and tell me what's going on?" I said, giving him my best angry big sister stare, hoping to force him to let me go.

"They took Claudia." He said in a low growl. "We have to go now if we have any chance of finding her. If we don't get in now, we'll lose her." My head was spinning. Who would want to take Claudia?

"Who's they, and where did they —" Suddenly it dawned on me. They took my husband so many years ago, and I had lost hope he would ever return. I looked at Ralph. "You want to open a passage?"

He nodded, now seeming much calmer. "I think I know how to make sure we arrive safely to the other side."

I took a breath. He had showed me what he can do, and I knew it could be a way for me to find my Clarence. "I trust you. You've been studying this for so long I know you can create an opening."

Ralph lowered his head. "But what if I'm wrong? You saw how Claudia completely changed in the span of a few days, what if we find her and she doesn't want anything to do with us? I'm sure she's fallen under a powerful spell. When I looked at her new bracelet, I was overcome by a force that overpowered any other thought I might have had. She could still be under that spell." He looked up and fixed his gaze on mine.

"Nothing says we'll find a way back. What if you find that Clarence is happy without you and doesn't welcome you with open arms? Are you willing to risk that?"

If his rant had me worried at first, I quickly understood he had entered his personal spiral of doom, when he only sees negative outcomes and becomes convinced they are the only truth. Knowing this grounded my mind and I knew what to do. He was now standing besides the bed so I

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slid out and moved around him to hug him from behind.

“Ralph, whatever we are faced with we can overcome together. If we can’t come back, we’ll find a way to build a new life over there.”

He forced himself out of the hug by pushing out with his chest and turned to face me. The haze was gone from his eyes. “Ok then, let’s cook some herbs and mushrooms.”

The next day and a half were spent preparing the mixture that would open a passage to the Land of the Fey. We had to start over twice because Ralph didn’t think we had the right balance of mushrooms in the mix and without it, we could end up in the wrong place, or worse, stuck between the two worlds. He relentlessly went over his recipe. He would run to the cupboard where we kept all our fungi, come back with a specific mushroom, go over the recipe, and run back to choose another one.

“Ralph, we good to go?” I asked, trying to get him to focus.

He stopped his back and forth and turned to me. “I think this is it. But I need to be sure.” He started back towards the cupboard.

“Stop!” I commanded. “We’ve been cooped in here for almost two days. You’ve been over your recipe more times than I can count. I trust you Ralph, you got this.”

I was running on pure adrenaline at this point. Then a thought hit me.

“Do we get tired, or hungry, or feel any part of physical life over there?” I asked.

Ralph stopped what he was doing and looked at me dubiously. “I dare believe we leave our physical self hanging in some sort of atomic sized limbo. That we’ll be present in spirit form. So no, we won’t feel any hunger, or feel tired, or any other physical sensations.” He went to the small bookcase and pulled out an old book. It was almost falling apart in his hands. “This is the only book that shares any information on life on the other side that I’ve found. Problem is, it’s a lost ancient language. So old, the scholars I brought it to were only able to translate a third of it. And what they did translate I just shared with you. So, it’s important to keep an open mind and be ready for anything, we don’t really know what we’re getting into. Hunger and energy still might be an issue.”

He immediately turned to the stove and turned it on. We sat quietly as the heat filled the pot filled with his carefully chosen ingredients. Ralph

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stirred softly, making sure the heat was spreading evenly. Steam began to rise from under the top layer, which was the cue to add some herb infused water. As the mushrooms withered into the warming water, the steam began to thicken. I went to stir it one more time, but Ralph grabbed my arm.

“No, it’s happening. Look.”

The steam that was rising from the mushroom stew was gathering at one specific point above the pot. Each strand of steam was pulled in by a small, spinning ball that kept growing, spinning faster as it went. I kept my eyes on the spinning ball, anticipating the moment it would open into a passage. Ralph was back to looking at his recipe.

“What do you think you’ll find by reading that again?” I asked tersely. He looked at me and gave me an angry laugh. “Ok, you tell me what the quantities are.” He grabbed the first page of the recipe and began to read. “To activate the mycelial passage, Polypores are to be included. Yet one might not but ne’r preclude to also pick some chlorophyl, Hygrophor, without forgetting the delicious milky cap. One can alter the taste without worry with the right amount of Tricholoma. Yet if thou doth, don’t forget the corky man of the woods.”

He looked up at me with his eyebrows high in his forehead. “You tell me, Madeleine, what are the right quantities? You must know that I did a liberal translation, so I have no idea if it’s right.”

“Polypores and Hygrophor are mushroom names, right?” I felt foolish. All he wanted to do was make sure we were safe.

Ralph’s face was bright red. “Yes. They are.” He said, his teeth clenched. “I’m sorry. I’m on my last nerve, I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

Ralph didn’t answer, he was looking over my shoulder and his face lit up. “Look!”

The spinning ball over the pot kept growing under the impulse of constantly rising steam and now showed a tiny opening in its center. I leaned in to look through, filled with the impossible hope that I could see my husband.

“Careful, Madeleine, don’t get too close.” He said, his voice trembling a little.

“Well, we’ll have to pass through at some point, no?” I said, feeling an irresistible temptation to touch it. My finger grazed the spinning ball.

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Suddenly, I was inside a cave lit by the dancing flame of a campfire. The walls of the cave, of a greige hue, were natural rock that had been chiseled into a perfect dome. I knew I had passed through. I was in the Land of the Fey. I hoped Ralph understood all I did was touch the opening and would follow me in. I looked around, trying to find a way out. Footsteps echoed in the cave.

“Ralph? Is that you?” I yelled out.

No one answered. That better be you Ralph I screamed in my mind while looking for a place to hide. The whole room was empty. It was perfectly round from the floor to the ceiling, with no corner to hide around or furniture to hide behind. I cowered against a wall, hoping the dancing shade of the fire would hide my presence long enough for me to know who was coming. A thud echoed in the room, but I was still alone.

“Madeleine?”

It was Ralph. I felt a wave of relief wash over me, but I still couldn’t see him. “Ralph? Where are you?”

“In a large cave. It looks like someone carved it out into a perfect dome. Where are you?”

“Same place. Why can’t I see you?”

“We might be here at different times.”

The footsteps echoed once more, getting closer.

“Do you hear that?” I whispered.

“Yes, is it you?”

“No, it’s not.”

Something then began to rise from a crack located at the angle of the floor and wall in front of me. The next moment, I found myself in front of a broad-shouldered hairy creature with two small eyes sitting almost at the top of its face. Two long thorns popped up from under it that looked like large eagle talons and frankly, it all made me nervous. It wore a beautiful dark red cape, and its leather bracelets were studded with rubies and jade stones that were intricately inserted with style and taste.

“Greetings.” It said.

“Hello.” Answered Ralph, which meant he saw it too.

“May I ask for the reason of your presence here?” It asked.

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As small as they were, its eyes were powerful. They stared right into my soul, yet at the same time seemed so far away. It has a husky voice, but it carried a calmness to it that made me wonder if I should be reassured by that.

“We come to find my husband.” I said.

“And my daughter.” Added Ralph.

The creature began to scratch its chin. It looked away for a moment.

“My my. Your ties to this place are many... and profound.” It scratched its chin again. “I may be able to help, but I can only accept that you speak the truth. Let’s begin with your names.”

“My name is Madeleine. He is my brother Ralph.”

The creature pinched its mouth. “You humans amaze me. Ralph sounds like a digestive outburst and Madeleine is a pastry. Why do you deface name giving like that?”

The creature tried to hide a smile as it spoke, telling me it might be just teasing us. Seizing the moment, I tried to push the conversation ahead.

“Why can’t I see my brother?” I asked with a stern tone, hoping to show the creature I wasn’t to be messed with.

“No need for aggression.” It said woefully. “It is not of my doing if you are unable to see the person right next to you. More than that, you have yet to ask me my name.”

Now I knew it was playing with us, so I decided to play back.

“I do apologize for my outburst. I’m sure there’s a simple explanation. But before I ask for your name, I would prefer we find a way to leave this place. Shall we be on our way?”

The creature frowned. “To where? You have yet to accept my terms.”

The creature pointed right next to me. “He’s right there.” It sighed.

“When I think of how limited your minds are, it makes me a little sad. Then I remember I don’t care and I’m happy again.” It scratched its chin. “Tell me, what is your need?”

“To get out of here, find my husband and my brother’s daughter.”

The creature continuously rubbed its chin while I spoke. “Those are three separate things. We shall first negotiate getting out of here.”

“What if we made an arrangement and bulked them together.” I said with a smile. Keeping in mind what happened to my Clarence, how he

disappeared after making a foolish promise, I knew I had to be precise in my demands.

The creature shrugged its shoulders. "Well, I don't know if I have any interest to help you any further than finding the exit. But should your presence become less repugnant to me after we leave, I might be persuaded to help you further."

It sat down without saying another word and started playing with a loose pebble on the ground. It rubbed it between his fingers, slowly at first, then faster, and the pebble turned to dust that fell into the palm of its hand. He stretched out his arm and showed us the dust in his hand. It shimmered like a thousand tiny lights.

"I know how to find treasure in the most unusual places. If we are to share an adventure, you shall receive a full barrel of a dust filled with precious stone powder that you can do what you please with." The creature looked at me, then to the empty space besides me. "What do you offer in return, or shall I decide the price?"

My mind was racing. What could I have to offer that would be considered acceptable to this... thing? "Can we confer?" I asked, hoping to gain some time.

"Please." The creature responded.

It stayed put, turning its attention back to the pebbles on the ground while it waited.

"Ralph, we need to see each other, why is this happening?"

"I think it's because we didn't enter at the same time. We already know time doesn't work the same way here, so even if I was only a few seconds behind, we ended up in different time spaces even if we're at the same spot."

The creature raised its head. "This one is not as laughable as most humans." It stood up and looked straight beside me, stepping in to face Ralph.

"Tell me, this daughter of yours, what name does she carry? Maybe I have heard whispers."

"Claudia."

As soon as Ralph pronounced her name, the creature stepped back, and Ralph appeared next to me. Although surprised by the turn of events, we both kept our cool, Ralph had prepared me to keep my

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mind open for anything. The creature looked like he had heard the name of a ghost and paced around the cave, scratching its chin. Suddenly, it perked back up and turned to us. His sudden change in attitude made me wary.

“Yes, I have heard whispers about this Claudia. I remember her name because it reminds me of a cauldron, that’s hard to forget.” He paused and a smile appeared on his face. “I have chosen to help you further after we leave. My offer remains the same, one barrel of shiny dust. You have yet to offer anything, so here is your price.” He looked at me first. “Madeleine is a pastry, so you are to produce all the pastry my family can eat.” He then turned to Ralph. “Ralph is a disgusting sound, but you are wise. You will remain in Faylandia after your daughter’s return to serve with our Great Elder.”

“Like hell he will!” I shouted, stepping towards the creature.

It reached its hand under its cape, and I froze, fearing it would take out a weapon. “You did not have an offer for me. I chose for you and so it shall be. There is still time to renege. No action has yet been taken.”

“It’s fine.” Ralph said with his teeth clenched. The next moment, the cavern walls were gone.

We were on a dark road under the bright glare of a full moon. The road before us split into two paths, each one seemingly parallel to the other. Both looked to have no end.

“One leads to Claudia, the other leads to Madeleine’s husband. Both lead to the other, but not in the same order. You decide which needs attention first.” Said the hairy creature.

I said my husband, Ralph yelled Claudia’s name.

“Then that is how it shall be. One path for each.”

“Wait, we can find a way to agree on a path.” I said, despair rising in my heart.

“The path will only accept those who choose it. A choice can only be made in an instant. You have made yours, so has your brother. Now go, and do not forget your promise.”

On those words, the creature placed its hand on Ralph’s back and nudged him towards one of the paths. They entered together and the opening instantly disappeared, as if it had never been there. The trees had reclaimed their chaotic order, with no path in sight. The moon’s

light cast a long shadow on everything, and I began to wonder if I'd actually seen the opening, except Ralph was really gone.

I slapped myself. Hard. I Somehow expected that to bring me back to the hut at the orchard, but all it did was scare a squirrel that had come closer to investigate. After watching it run up a luminescent tree, I resigned myself to enter the path I still saw. A few steps in, a feeling of doubt crept up in my mind and I turned to go back. Except there was no going back. Behind me, the path disappeared as fast as I advanced. I started walking backwards and saw the forest reclaiming its true form in real time with each of my steps. As I moved, the branches and trees returned to their original position without a sound. If I stopped, it stopped, but if I tried to go back, it stayed put, some branches even stretching out to push me back. I continued into the path, my heart filled with fear and my mind racing to understand how to navigate this place. Unable to see the end, I started to think that we were duped. But there was nothing else to do than walk, so I walked.

To be continued...

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THE END

Coming in December in the Tales from the Storyroom:

Forrest and Clyde cross over to the other side and find themselves separated almost upon their arrival. Accompanied by Asteria and Zanna, will Forrest finally find out what promise is hanging over his head?

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About the Author

Mike Longmeadow is an author fascinated by the invisible realities that permeate our lives. He is a curious bookworm who's constantly looking to learn, discover new things that will augment his outlook on life.

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