

# FULFILLING THE PROMISE

## A TALE FROM THE STORYROOM



MIKE LONGMEADOW

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Fulfilling the Promise

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## Fulfilling the Promise

### Promise fulfilled!

Forrest, now much more comfortable in his new environment, finds himself alone with Zanna. Ignorant of the fact he was about to fulfill his promise, he falls hard for the Lake Maiden.

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### **Dedication:**

I dedicate this final tale of the season to my son, who's quest for happiness has been done with Courage and Love.

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### **Acknowledgements:**

To all the characters – from Forrest to Claudia, Lugh to Delphina – you accepted my ravings with humility and grace, and you have never missed an opportunity to inject your ideas just at the right moment to move the Tales in the right direction.

For that, and also because you accept me as is, I am deeply grateful to have met you.



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From Mike with Author Academy Elite

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# Found Clyde

Leaving Forrest with Zanna wasn't ideal. Except I had to find Clyde, and it was much safer this way than letting Zanna go look for a human she didn't care about. She was a dear friend, but generally did as she pleased, which meant there was never any guarantee she would do what she set out to do. On the flip side, there was also little chance that she would choose to be mean, and that was a pillar of strength in our friendship, and I knew Forrest was in good hands. Plus, I couldn't be prouder of my soft skinned biped. Forrest's transition and the way he quickly adapted to Faylandia's unique reality was impressive. He still had many human-centric questions, it was the only reality he knew, but after his body was almost disintegrated and inhaled into a tree, he understood this world was different despite the many resemblances. Now I can leave him and be confident he will be fine – even if Zanna goes off on one of her benders.

As was their habit, my dragonflies led me the best vantage point to begin our search for Clyde. I fluttered down to join my search party, which now included some bees and many butterflies. I landed on the rock next to the lead dragonfly and gave it a pat on the head to show my gratitude. It smiled with pride, then pointed into the distance, over the horizon.

I couldn't see anything specific. "What should I see?" I asked.

All I could perceive was a peaceful forest canopy with the treetops swaying elegantly to the wind's rhythm which created a beautifully hypnotic choreography. The forest's energy flowed freely from tree to tree – pollen grains, mushroom spores, dust particles charged with the power of life all mingled in the air, hoping to find a proper landing spot where they could grow and prosper. In response to my

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ignorant immobility, the dragonfly then flew out about one hundred feet and began to hover, pointing its whole body in the direction it wanted me to look. It took me a moment, but as I focused my attention on the desired spot, a slight disturbance in the forest's energy became apparent. It created a glitch that was almost imperceptible but still clearly visible.

I chose to walk to it, so I could stay under cover until I knew more. The only thing I was certain of was that a body foreign to Faylandia was present, but it was impossible to know who or what. Unless there are Shadow Folks scrounging for food. They emit a strong disturbance when they are hungry, and their condition could make them react badly to my presence. With dry spots multiplying in the land of the Shadow Folk, they could be famished which means they would be dangerous. On the other hand, humans emit the same type of energy when in Faylandia, so I had to see.

When I reached ground level, I jumped from hiding spot to hiding spot, edging ever closer. A few dragonflies flew in with me, patrolling the area for any issues. Some butterflies headed straight for the disturbance. They fluttered straight in, disappearing behind some invisible yet opaque cloak. For a moment, an ominous silence blanketed the forest. The dragonflies stopped patrolling, the bees hid in flowers, and I crouched behind a tree stump. I could feel the anxiety rising with every second while we waited for the butterflies to emerge.

For what seemed like longer than necessary, nothing happened. The tree closest to the disturbance sparkled with life, its atoms performing an intricate choreography to keep its shape intact while hiding what was behind it. But the air around it was still – far more than is usual. There was no sound of battle, no voices, no movement, nothing happening at all. I ventured closer to the disturbance, hoping to see something. Before I could take a step, two butterflies flew out, heading directly towards me, landing each side of me. Both were smiling, which was reassuring. I took a deep breath, let the anxiety slip away, and walked into the disturbance. "Hello?"

The voice sounded devastated, but it was clearly human. I stopped.

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“Greetings.” I replied.

“I can’t do this again.”

The voice broke into uncontrolled sobs, and soon a heart wrenching scream filled the air. I took a few steps to get closer, until I could see a foot sticking out from behind a tree. I remained on guard, what I saw was a human shoe that could welcome any kind of foot. I chose to assume it was human, because I had a good idea who it could be.

“Does the name Clyde sound true?” I asked.

The sobbing stopped almost instantly.

“Ye-yes. Yes, it does.” The voice mumbled almost inaudibly.

The foot pulled back, and soon a human walked out from behind a tree.

“I’m Clyde.” He said in the faintest of voices.

I’d seen Clyde on my visits to Forrest, and this did not look like him. This human was barely alive, its skin was pale and bloodied. Its clothes were lacerated to shreds by some sharp instrument. Its hair was caked on the head, from dried sweat and blood, and it was covered with swells, as if stung by a thousand wasps. Its eyes were two swollen blobs with closed slits.

“Are you Asteria? For real?” Asked the human.

“Yes.” I answered. “Tell me, what series of incidents could cause you to be in such a dire situation?” I added, hoping he would be able to muster some kind of response.

A few dragonflies and bees approached, awaiting their next orders and curious to see the cause of the disturbance. Clyde cowered at their sight, falling into a ball on the ground.

“No! Don’t let them near me. I can’t do this again... Please make them leave.”

“What causes such fear in your heart?” I asked him, feeling this was the work of some Mares.

His eyes opened ever so slightly, and he saw my troops were composed of bees and dragonflies, which seemed to calm him. “I was attacked by so many wasps, I couldn’t do anything but get repeatedly stung until I lost consciousness. As soon as I was out, there were monsters waiting for me in my sleeping mind who turned my dreams into unspeakable nightmares.” He said, now sitting up.

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It was Mares after all. Wasps they never attack without provocation, they only defend their assets. Unless the Mares incite them to attack. It had to be them. They couldn't get to Forrest and took Clyde, hoping to pull some information out of him. I approached the human.

"Be reassured, those you see are not of ill intent. They come to bring sustenance and healing."

The human forced himself to look around. A tear slid out from the swollen gash that was his eye hole.

"The other said that too, and said its name was Asteria." Clyde suddenly seemed more alert. "You actually look like the Asteria Forrest described to me." He looked at the bees. "And by now I've got nothing to lose. If you're planning anything that even resembles what just happened, I die." He tried to rub his face with both hands, but it was clearly too painful to accomplish. "You said something about healing and sustenance?" He added, some color now returning to his skin.

I signaled a few bees to come over. They flew in and rolled around in some flowers before flying over to Clyde and hovering above his head. One by one, they started to shake their booty, which created a cloud of pollen that slowly fell towards Clyde, penetrating his body through his skin pores as soon as it touched him. The swelling in his eyes instantly began to shrink. He looked up and the cloud of pollen covered the rest of his face. The bees flew away, and Clyde seemed a little better. But the Mares and wasps really did a number on him, it was clear the swelling would take some time to go away.

"That it? I feel better, but not that much." He said bluntly.

On any other occasion with any other human, a comment like that would be enough for me to leave, maybe even call the Mares back to finish the job. But Forrest often told me how Clyde spoke a kind of truth that had no filters, that it sometimes came out brutish. I would argue he was mean, but Forrest insisted Clyde had no mean bones inside him. That his honesty was more the result of his personal philosophy – one which states that honesty, even when brutal, is the only option. I took a breath to wash away my desire to leave.

"That is all you need for now. In the immediate, my team and I will

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help you to return to Forrest's side."

Clyde reacted with a nod of the head, and I waited for a moment for him to show his appreciation, perform an act of gratitude, but got nothing. I pushed down the frustration rising in my heart, and on my signal, a large group of dragonflies appeared, flying two by two, each duo carrying a tree branch. They lined up behind Clyde, forming a line of branches that was soon turned into a stretcher.

"Lay yourself down — they will carry you." I told him.

Clyde let out a chuckle.

"Yeah, ok."

I was about to sermon him on Faylandia etiquette when he began to verify the solidity of the stretcher.

"Just give me minute to check the knots on this thing. Last thing I need is to fall off mid-journey."

We would need to have a good talk about his unsolicited habit of imposing his thoughts on the proceedings. I held my mouth and gave the dragonflies a head nod to proceed. We had to get going, the sooner we met up with Forrest and Zanna the better. His unfiltered honesty thing was not my favorite and I think I needed Forrest's help to decipher his speaking patterns.

Clyde laid himself on the makeshift stretcher and the dragonflies lifted him up with no effort. The butterflies flew ahead to open the way, while the dragonflies were busy maintaining the weight and balance of their patient. I joined the butterflies, gazing down at the three tops, seeking some indication as to the direction we should take. A light breeze arose to showed me the way. I rubbed my fingers to send the directions to the troops and we flew back towards Forrest and Zanna.

## Forrest and Zanna's union

If you were to ask me how long we'd been walking, I would be forced to answer I have no idea. It could have been days or months, unless it was hours or mere minutes, it's anyone's guess. I completely understood time doesn't work the same in this place, yet I still needed to rid myself of the habit of counting time on a straight line, it was becoming a hindrance that stopped me from fully appreciating this place. One thing I now knew for sure was that what counts as time in Faylandia are moments, not the passing seconds. Where, how, or why they land when they do in human time is irrelevant. Nevertheless, my life before coming here existed according to a time frame that invariably moved in one direction and events landed neatly along a straight line that never wavered. The more we advanced on our path, the more Zanna looked relaxed. She was smiling more and less prompt to focus on my human flaws, and I took that as a sign she was warming up to me. I began looking for ways to take full advantage of this occasion, feeling a genuine connection growing between us. Though I remained silent – I was worried that sharing these feelings would push her away. I didn't know how I would react if she rejected my advances, but I suspected I would be crushed. I hoped she would be the one to bring up our relationship status and kept silent in the meantime. Besides, I had no complaint, my heart was overjoyed just to have the privilege to walk alongside her. Every now and then, we would stop to refresh ourselves, dip our feet in water and drink a little before moving on. It was idyllic and if this was to be the rest of my life, it was perfect. A few minutes after our last energy resupply – in true human form, I couldn't help but count time – Zanna spotted a small creek a little off our path and invited me to join her so we could dip our feet once



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more. Although we just refilled our energy, I accepted gleefully, any moment I could just be with her was a perfect moment. There was nothing to show me I would soon have an answer to the promise I was called on to fulfill. We placed our feet in the pond in unison, and she then strolled to the middle of the creek, touching the water with the tip of her fingers as she advanced. Her elegance, her stature, her unspoken confidence made my heart quiver as I found myself unable to look away. Once she reached her goal, she lowered herself into the water. With both hands she drew a circle, her fingers being the only part of her to disturb the creek's mirror surface. The circle seemed to stay in place – it floated without moving – a small ripple on the perfectly still water. Suddenly the two circles contracted, imploding around Zanna before merging, then accelerating in my direction. My heart jumped, the circle's small indenture was rising and falling as it zeroed in on me without bothering anything around it. Zanna created a second circle around her, which remained perfectly still, awaiting her orders. My circle slowed as it came close to me, as if waiting for some form of acknowledgement.

"It's ok. You'll see, it's very refreshing. Just remain still." Zanna's voice was soft and comforting, and it was enough to calm me down. I did as I was told and didn't move a muscle, which prompted the circle to surround me around my ankles since I hadn't moved in further. The water located inside the circle then crystalized and I instantly felt a surge of energy. It quickly rose to fill my entire body, injecting every single molecule with a fresh dose of energy in a fraction of a second.

"It's refreshing to do it like this, I appreciate the fact you shared this with me." I said, thinking it was done.

"Oh, but we are not done." She said with a seductive smile.

I was petrified. My heart was racing, and my groin was filling with blood. Somehow, I felt calm and serene, ready to accept what came next with open arms. The circle at my feet began to expand as did Zanna's. They both stretched out into oblong and wavy water snakes, their outline becoming thinner as they expanded, seemingly reaching out for each other. The energy it had infused in me was already waning, but by then I was more than happy with what had

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happened. I felt rejuvenated and ready to go. Or so I thought. The moment the circles touched, a violent surge of erotic energy invaded my body, my mind, and my soul. A feeling of ecstasy wrapped itself around me, and I found myself absorbing each nanosecond of this experience with a mixture of fear and pleasure while at the same time feeling as though I was losing control of my body and my mind. Nothing in my life — even if I added them together — came close to the sensation of pure delight I was having at that moment. Zanna was looking at me with a wide smile and lost myself in its splendor. She threw her head back in one elegant motion and let out a deep, melodic sigh. The sound wave she created quickly spread in all directions and enveloped itself around me, its weight forcing me to lay down under the water. The thick liquid wrapped itself around me, and I held my breath. Within seconds, I couldn't hold it any longer. Fear and anger filled my mind as saw myself being forced to take a breath and swallow this thick muck before I drown. As I edged ever closer to my fatal last breath, my heart was crushed by Zanna's betrayal. I couldn't understand what I did to deserve this. Knowing I was at the last second of my life, I couldn't help but wonder what she would say to Asteria to justify my death.

Unable to hold my breath any longer, I finally inhaled, feeling unusually calm at the idea of seeing my life end here. I often thought about my death and dreamed about getting a hero's goodbye. I was surprised to find that it didn't bother me that it would be so uneventful. What did bother me was how Zanna played me. Before I could slide deeper into my despair, I realized I was breathing. The water wrapped itself around me, but stayed just above my skin, which let enough air flow in.

Although my mind was on the verge of imploding as I tried to understand what could be happening, the thickness of the water now seemed much more agreeable. I took a few breaths, battling against a wave of shame that washed over me for doubting Zanna's intentions. The air was warm and humid, like a hot mid-summer day. The water was like thick jelly — it felt as though there was a thousand hands caressing me all at once. Soon any and all negative thoughts

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were overwhelmed by all my pleasure nodes bursting in unison. Now I was curious to expand on the pleasure I was experiencing. I began to swim in the murky thickness. I remember reading that earth worms are covered with sensory receptors and could taste and feel with every part of their body. Now I knew how that felt, and the sensation was amazing. I was in my own slow motion movie scene, and it was perfect in every way. The water touched my skin just enough to create a sensation of being caressed everywhere at once by millions of adept fingers as I swam, sending shivers of pleasure through my whole body.

“Now let go. It’s time.” Zanna whispered, her voice caressing my soul.

As soon as she spoke the words, the water around me lost its thickness and began to flow freely. It almost turned to steam as it seeped into each individual pore of my skin, filling my body and my mind with even more delight and pleasure. My mind was flooded with images of Zanna and I swimming side by side in a vast ocean of erotically charged water. Our bodies swam in unison as one, while the currents carried us around the globe in moments. The sensations of pleasure kept growing – getting more and more intense with each passing moment – and I was afraid I would soon lose my mind. No human was designed to absorb as much ecstasy as I was now, and I felt I was close to shutting down completely.

Zanna appeared in my field of vision. Her brows were furrowed, which gave her a worried look that did nothing to help me overcome the rising fear. It was growing alongside the unbearable ecstasy that was trying to pull me apart, and I didn’t know how to deal with this. The sensation of pleasure had become far too intense, and I was close to imploding, both mentally and physically. Zanna grabbed me by placing both hands on either side of my face – covering my ears in the process – and I instantly lost consciousness. I awoke laying on the side of the path, with Zanna caressing my head. I felt both exhausted and rejuvenated. I saw our path, Zanna was humming a soothing melody, everything felt normal, as if nothing just happened.

“Did I pass out again? How long has it been?” I was disappointed to

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ask about passing time, but it the only thing I was able to say. “Your fondness of counting time is tiresome. Time is nothing, it encompasses everything. To try and count and quantify it is useless. Stop doing that.”

Although she spoke with a firm tone, her eyes were filled with love. Her gaze calmed my soul, and her smile soothed my heart. I noticed her cheeks had reddened ever so slightly against the stark white of her skin. She could be blushing, but what could she have to blush about?

“Our union was powerful.” She said. “I see now why you were so important. It’s not you, it’s your energy.” She paused and gave me comforting smile. “And the fact you and your energy are one is perfect, I’m happy it happened this way.”

I sat up. “So I didn’t dream it, we really swam together?”

Zanna took my hands and looked me in the eyes, sending shivers down my spine.

“Yes. And it was beautiful.” She took a deep breath. “I didn’t know how to tell you how special you have become in the short time we’ve known each other and thought this was the perfect way.”

I wanted to believe her, but a pang of doubt hung on at the back of my mind. Moments ago, I felt myself almost dissolving into a particle state. The last thing I saw before passing out was her worried look. Then she, well, she knocked me out. In a flash, I remembered she didn’t gently place her hands on my face, she slapped me hard with both hands. Was she trying to get rid of me? Not my Zanna. A voice spoke up in my mind – I think it was Asteria. She is complex, yes, but malicious she is not. Still, I had to know. My mind swirled with contrasting ideas that were locked in a battle. While I was still trying to think of something to say, my mouth took the lead and asked questions without my brain’s permission.

“I’m told that to answer a question with a lie is as foul as wasting food.” I said. Saying it out loud calmed my internal battle and I felt my mind slow down.

“That’s a strange way to put it, but yes.” She said, giving me quizzical look.

“Were you trying to get rid of me when you slapped me? Then

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change your mind?”

Zanna’s shoulders slumped, and she looked genuinely disappointed. Seeing her react like that made my heart sink.

“It saddens me to see that your trust is so weak. I wanted to show you a part of my life but didn’t realize it could become so dangerous for a human.” A tear fell from one of her eyes. “I understand if you wish to continue alone, I will leave you be.” She began to get up, ready to leave.

The pit of my stomach turned into a million knots that felt like molten metal. I hurt the only person — being — that’s ever touched my heart and soul so deeply. I began to shake, feeling an emotional tidal wave of regret.

“No!” I screamed. I took a breath. “I mean, please don’t go.” I added, fighting hard to keep my voice at a normal level.

She smiled, and my heart swelled. The palm of my hands began to sweat profusely, and my legs were no better than liquid jelly. “I love you Zanna. I love you with all my heart and my whole body. My mind lives and my soul burns to celebrate you. Stay with me.” As I spoke, I realized I had never said these words to anyone. Ever.

Zanna cocked her head sideways, smiling but squinting her eyes as if thinking about what I said, which both confused and excited me.

“I feel your energy, I must admit it is enchanting. I’m not certain I understand the thing you call love, but I deeply appreciate your company. I would be honored to stay at your side.”

“Oh, Zanna. What conundrum have you begotten?”

Asteria was sitting on a rock, looking at us. In fact, she was looking at Zanna with a stern gaze and a mocking smile.

“How long have you been there?” I asked, again letting my mouth take the lead.

Zanna gave me a gentle elbow to the ribs.

“Enough with counting time. Plus, it’s the wrong question.” Zanna turned to Asteria. “What did you see... or hear?” She asked.

Asteria was gathering pollen from the flowers around her. She plucked one flower at a time, gently shaking it over her free hand and gathering the pollen dust that fell in her palm. Focused on her task, she didn’t answer right away. Instead, she took the time to roll

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the dust in her hand into a ball that she delicately placed in her mouth. I was itching for an answer, but Zanna seemed relaxed, as she also began plucking leaves from the tree to suckle on them for some water.

Asteria took the time to savor her ball of pollen, which seemed quite pleasurable. "I heard enough to know you have deceived my Queen with your intentions." She finally said.

"I bear oath to no Queen, and I refuse to serve. By connecting with him the way we did, I can protect him from some nefarious plan, none can take him from me." Zanna spoke with a firm tone but a slight quiver in her voice betrayed her unease.

Asteria gazed into the distance.

"True. However, he now finds himself at a crossroad. His promise has been fulfilled, yet he has not spoken with the Queen."

"You carry Celeste's protection; it is our safeguard." Zanna looked at Asteria. "And tell me, how do you know his promise has been fulfilled?"

Asteria raised a hand. "We have much to do. I had come to report Clyde is on his way. But progress is slow, as my dragons must carry him."

"Is he ok?" I asked.

"Yes and no. He still breathes, but the Mares had quite a time with him."

A ball of anger settled in the pit of my stomach. The Mares. That was the name of the creatures that had terrorised me all through my childhood and now they were attacking my friends.

"Stay with us. It's me the Mares want. Clyde will be fine."

Asteria looked at me with wonder. "Love suits you well, human." She said with a smile. "I accept to remain with you."

I wondered how she knew I had fallen in love, but my constant smiling was probably a dead giveaway. Zanna kept her gaze locked on Asteria in silence. I wanted to know more about Asteria's comment, but when we were ready to leave, the path was now filled with a thick, opaque fog. The cloud was stark white and uniform, with wisps of grey forming a sort of frame around the edges. I stretched out my arm to try and feel it.

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“No!” Zanna shouted as she pulled me back. “This fog is death for humans. We must wait for it to dissipate.” She traced a line on the ground while she said this, as if marking our territory.

I wanted to ask how long it would take, but managed to refrain from asking and found a different question.

“Why is that so?” I asked, giving myself a mental pat on the back for not asking a time related question.

Zanna smiled with pride. “That is the correct query.”

I felt a surge of pride at her comment, but still got no answer. She looked at the fog, clearly pondering her next move. She and Asteria’s eyes met, and with a quick eyebrow twitch, Asteria fluttered closer to the fog. Zanna turned back to me. “The fog often rises as a result of the passing of a Fey Person – its soul spreads out into a fog that floats in the air until its energy is absorbed back into nature. If a human enters the fog, the dead Fey’s soul will instantly take over that body and live on in the physical world in the guise of whichever human was passing at that time.”

I looked toward the cloud. “It wasn’t there a minute ago. Does that mean someone died in the last minute?” I asked, to which Zanna shrugged her shoulders to state her ignorance.

Asteria returned at the same moment. She fluttered down from the treetop, keeping her eyes peeled to the fog. She seemed genuinely distressed, causing her nose to wrinkle. Butterflies appeared out of nowhere and gathered around her, positioning themselves in a circle to keep an eye out in every direction. She landed on a low branch.

“It’s the dry. If we continue in that direction, we will lose our connection to the network.”

They both remained silent, contemplating the situation. I was grasping at straws trying to understand, but at the same time I was happy not knowing – enough had happened already to keep my mind busy for ages. That said, in the silence of that moment, I felt calm and serene. I had told Zanna I loved her; she had returned my declaration with a loving reaction that created a small crease in my heart where her love could live for all eternity. I stayed silent and waited, aware I had nothing to bring to the table.

“Then we must help the mushrooms maintain the network.” Zanna

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said suddenly, breaking the silence.

Her tone was unequivocal and shook me back to reality. It kicked my flight or fight reflex into gear, and today I wanted to fight. The adrenaline surge from Zanna's words gave me courage, and I was ready for anything. Asteria and Zanna were already gathering dead leaves while the bees and butterflies carried tiny buckets of water – made from maple leaves – dumping their loads in the same spot, slowly creating a humid stain where Zanna and Asteria placed the dead leaves. I picked up a few twigs and dried sticks and added them to the pile.

“It will give it some structure.” I said, hoping I didn't ruin their work.

Zanna grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me on the cheek.

“You continue to surprise me, it is pleasing.” She said. A rush of blood instantly filled my head and almost made me faint. She giggled. “Now we need to find some fungi to create a wall that can stop the dry — or at least slow it down.”

Without hesitation, I began to explore the ditch along the path for any sign of mushroom patches, but there was nothing to find.

Asteria told me to listen for the network song. That it would float in the air like perfume to guide my search, but all I heard was the buzzing of the busy bees, who had provided enough water to a point that our pile of leaves was now soaking wet.

I was ready to change my search zone when a faint musical breeze touched my ears. I looked around me to try and find its direction. The music grew stronger as I got closer to the ground, but still gave no clear direction as it came from all directions at once. Despite my unsuccessful search, I took a moment to celebrate with myself that I was doing something according to Faylandia rules and understood what it was. After a quick celebratory mental high five, I concentrated my attention on the melody that was now filling the air around me. It carried a melancholy that was heart wrenching and made me want to help the creator of this song. It wasn't just sad, or angry, or regretful, but all of those at the same time. I had no idea what human musical instruments could create this sound; all I knew is that it had an ethereal feeling that was rooted deep in the ground. I wanted to sit and listen, let myself get carried away by its hypnotic



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rhythm. Then, as if prompted by the music, I turned my head and saw it. A small patch of tiny mushrooms was lying under a young shoot that would someday become a bush. Excited by my success, I plucked a little more than half of the patch, leaving some so it could rebuild itself.

As I returned to Zanna and Asteria with my stash, something caught my eye. I couldn't say what it was, but it seemed I was the only one who saw the shadowy shape loitering at the edge of the almost opaque cloud of fog. Asteria and Zanna were still scouring the ground, hunting for mushrooms, oblivious to what I saw.

The movement started again, and something came closer to the edge, its outline now clearly visible. The shadowy figure stuck its head out of the cloud. My heart jumped to my throat. The creature looked at me and sent chills down my spine as it gave me a smile that said it was hungry for violent murder. It had an elongated face that was almost horse-like, yet its eyes were clearly human. They were entirely black with no eyebrows, which melded perfectly into the skin, which seemed made of old, thick leather. A trail of drool was slowly gathering at the bottom of its mouth. The creature didn't move, its floating head fixated on me. Its breathing sounded like it was suffering through a harsh asthma attack and now I was sure my two friends didn't see the same thing as me.

"Do you see that? Or hear it?" I asked.

Zanna looked at me and expressed her impatience with a sigh.

"Be patient my dear human. Fungi does not reveal itself to impatient gatherers. Asteria and I are trying to listen so I must ask that you be quiet. And I suggest you try to focus and help us. I know this is a herculean task for a human but focus you must."

I felt proud to share my findings, but still had to understand what was happening with this nightmarish creature.

"You can stop your search; I've found some." I said, extending my arms to give them my stash. I looked at the creature, who winked at me. "I'm talking about the evil looking horsehead that's staring at us right there." I pointed to the creature, who looked back at our little group with a genuine smile, as if challenging my two friends to see it.

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Asteria looked to where I was pointing. She began to flutter towards it, blind to the danger that lay before her. She was unceremoniously pushed back by an invisible force. The creature snickered under its breath. I knew that sound. It was a Mare.

“I fear Zanna and I have been blocked from seeing them. If you are the only one who can see, this means that you are called to a battle. We walked right into their trap, now we must accept if we are to pass. Should we refuse, this is where our existence will end.”

My heart was beating faster with each word she spoke. “Called to battle, what’s that mean? It’s a Mare, I recognized the snicker. I could just close my eyes and ignore it until it leaves, no? Like I’ve always done?”

Asteria lowered her head. “Not this time. You’re in Faylandia now.” Zanna placed her hand on my shoulder. “Be brave. The spell cast prevents us from helping you. Worry not, if this is a call to battle, he is alone as well.”

“And if it’s not a call to battle and they just want to murder me?” Zanna answered with an uncomfortable smile. “Be brave.”

Both then turned their backs on me, leaving me to confront the creature alone. It returned its gaze to me – he understood that if Asteria and Zanna turned their backs, it meant they accepted the proceedings. The beast confidently stepped out of the cloud. As it approached, I had to crane my head to look up at this gargantuan creature. It licked its lips, revealing multiple rows of teeth filled with pieces of rotting meat and flesh that fell out as it passed its wet tongue around its mouth. The creature crept ever closer, its smile widening with every new shade of pale my skin went through. All the blood had left my legs and it felt like I was cemented in place. The creature kept coming closer. It seemed to grow with each step, getting taller and wider, blocking out my entire field of view. Its legs almost seemed to thin, but he sported a powerful looking body that quickly pushed away any question I might have about his anatomy. He came close enough that I could see the look of his skin was caused by extremely short hairs that were tangled in patterns that mimicked leather. Not a single part of the beast showed any fat. With each step, every one of its muscles contracted in sequence.

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“Hey.” I said as casually as I could with a trembling voice. “So how does this work? Do we get a choice of weapons, or if not, can I use something to defend myself?”

I used every ounce of energy I had to maintain a conversational tone, hoping that would disturb the creature long enough for me to find a solution. It only laughed.

“We fight, you die, I celebrate.”

Its voice was so guttural I didn’t understand what it said. I understood with my mind, but in my ears, all I heard was “wwwffghtyoudyycdebate”, so I decided to try to work with that.

“Um, so no weapons?” I ventured, trying to keep my confused human façade going, which somehow gave me some courage. He looked at me with intent, seemingly unsure of how to react to my query.

“I apologize if I seem confused. I’m not used to your language and didn’t understand what you said before.”

The creature smiled, sending a new wave of shivers down my spine.

“We fight, you die, I celebrate.”

This time, it was clear he made an effort, but it was still laughably cryptic to my ears. I sensed I was starting to gain some sort of advantage, although I didn’t know what yet. I decided to keep up the charade.

“Ok, so don’t get mad, but here’s what I understand. Tell me if I heard correctly. W’ght, You’l, I Sheshebate.”

I heard Zanna giggle from behind me, which gave me a boost of courage.

“Listen, we can do this all night. Tell me again. And ar-ti-cu-late this time.” I said, feeling a little cocky.

Drool was now pouring out of the Mare’s mouth, and its breathing had become erratic. I felt as though I should be very afraid, but I felt perfectly calm. The Mare was clearly unhappy with my talking, so I pressed on, beginning to understand this was to be my weapon of choice.

“And before you speak up, let me say this. On behalf of the little boy — and young man — you terrorized for so long, I’m here to tell you it didn’t work. You took advantage of my fear of the unknown. Now I

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know, so there's really nothing you can do to hurt me." I wasn't sure if I was making sense, but I stood my ground with my shoulders squared to show some strength and it felt exhilarating.

The Mare looked at me with a puzzled gaze, pursing its lips from the growing frustration. Clyde had always taught me to pump the bullies up because when they get mad, they get erratic and thus easier to evade. Looking at the creature's chest rise and the glare in its eyes told me I had succeeded in that regard. It lifted its arm, opened its hand, and held it there. As slim as its arms were, there was no doubt they were powerful and strong. Its hands were made of three fingers that each ended on a thick claw. A glint of light reflected off them, showing they were razor-sharp, and the hand began to descend on me. I closed my eyes. Open your eyes! A voice screamed in my mind. It wasn't my usual inner voice, but I did as ordered without question and opened my eyes. The hand was inches away from my face.

Suddenly, everything was happening in slow motion, and I could see that when that hand would hit my face, the claws would split my head in two. Look him in the eyes! The same voice again. Whoever it was, it was direct and forceful. The hand was now so close I could feel the air displacement on my skin. I could only see one eye through its fingers and locked my gaze on the black, anger-filled eye of the Mare. Instantly, the hand stopped. I could feel a trail of blood slide down my cheek where the tip of a claw had touched my skin. Keeping my eyes locked on his, I took a step back.

"Careful, kiddy-boy." It growled.

This time I clearly understood with both my ears and my mind. While resisting a powerful need to blink, I took another step backwards.

Talking was my weapon of choice, so I went back to that strategy.

"You know, I could help you with your diction problem. I'm sure you often get frustrated that people don't understand what you say." I said, starting to feel giddy about standing up to a Mare face to face for the first time in my life.

The Mare growled a low, guttural moan. But keeping my eyes locked on him seemed to work.

"You die today, here, now." It growled.

It was now very articulate and clear. But I couldn't let him know that.

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“Getting better, I think you used the word here in there somewhere. Am I wrong?” I said while still slowly backing away.

At this point, I had backed up far enough so I could begin searching for something I could use as an actual weapon. My eyes were straining, but I kept them on the Mare’s as I bent down to feel around for a rock. It was fascinating that I could hold such a powerful beast at bay with as little as a stare. My hand came on a branch. Feeling I couldn’t linger much longer, I stood back up with my new weapon, unsure of its real potential. I lost my balance for a second and took my eyes off the Mare. In an instant, it was running at me, its mouth wide open, preventing me from seeing its eyes. Frantically, I traced a circle around me.

“This is my spot, you cannot enter.” I yelled as I drew it.

The idea popped into my mind from an old fairytale book I suddenly remembered from my childhood. It didn’t work. The charging Mare ran into me, and we landed violently on my back with the Mare lying on top of me, knocking the air out of my lungs. It roared with fury, spilling what felt like gallons of spit all over me. It raised its arm again, ready to finish me off. Our eyes, or one of our eyes to be exact, crossed paths and again I locked my gaze on his. The effect was instant and once more, the Mare froze. Except this time, I was firmly stuck under its heavy weight, and it was hard to breathe. I barely got any air back in my lungs after the shock so I took mini breaths in the fear I would not be able to take another one if I exhaled completely. Our one eye stayed locked, and I began to try and wiggle my way out. That was not happening. Adding to my discomfort, now that I had immobilized the Mare, it felt even heavier.

Exhale, it will give you space. That voice again. It was starting to bother me I didn’t know who it was. This time I had to think about it. Even if I exhale, it doesn’t give me that much more space. It just relieves the pressure I feel when my lungs are filled with air. I kept all my focus on my one eye locked on the Mare’s but the tears that were starting to flow out caused a distortion in my vision and it worried me that it would break the hold. But the Mare stayed put as the tears streamed down the side of my face.

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Exhale, it will —

“I know, I know, it will give me space.” I said out loud to the voice in my head, to which the Mare squinted his eyes inquisitively.

I complied and let the air out of my lungs. I was flabbergasted. Not only did that give me some space, it opened a chasm that I could slide out of. Keeping my eye on the Mare, I began to try and wiggle out from under it.

“You will regret your actions.” It whispered in a deep growl.

As he said that, a swarm of butterflies broke out of the fog cloud, quickly followed by some injured dragonflies. The butterflies were slapping their wings together, creating a distinct beat that I interpreted to be some sort of message.

“Stay focused, Forrest, we will take care of this.” Asteria shouted as I saw her rise to the sky in my peripheral vision.

I wanted so badly to peel my eyes away and look at what could be happening, but I was still under the Mare, who had murderous thoughts. This was my battle.

“Be careful, Zanna!” I shouted. I got no response, but heard the nearby stream turn into a raging river in seconds.

I felt as safe as ever, although my one eye was pouring tears, screaming for me to blink. I was cramping up in my forehead from restraining my facial muscles from doing what they naturally do. I finally pulled myself out from under the Mare and stood, just as a new blob of spittle dropped where I laid a moment ago. Now I had both eyes on it, but I didn’t dare close any — I had to finish this. I raised the branch I had picked up and lined it up like a spear, aiming for the forehead. The Mare’s eyes changed ever so slightly when I did this. It was as if it was happy I was about to kill it.

Around us, the air was filled with loud buzzing sounds as Dragonflies and bees were locked in a battle with frenzied gremlin-wasps. They encircled the Mare and me, but couldn’t, or maybe they wouldn’t, get closer. My peripheral vision was flooded with a wall of flying insects, but I kept my eyes on the Mare, who was now smiling broadly.

“Let me be your first kill.” It said, its words now crystal clear and his voice was soft, infused with a touch of melancholy.

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It lowered its head, exposing a softer part of its neck, breaking our ocular connection. I blinked furiously, trying to regain some focus in my vision. The Mare stayed where he was, which felt wrong. I placed my hand on the back of its head and stroked it. Still no reaction.

“Look at me.” I said.

The Mare raised its head. The dark anger that inhabited its gaze earlier was gone. Its eyes had become a charcoal grey mud of indifferent ignorance. The face seemed longer, its snout seeming to soften and bend. Zanna appeared in my line of sight carrying a water funnel that soon reached the circle of flying fighters and sucked every one of them in as it passed. The Mare shed a tear. I placed my hands on either side of its face and forced it to look at me.

“I understand who you are, what you do. You helped me confront my fears, you helped reveal my prejudice, and I have no doubt you have helped me in ways I have yet to understand. For that, I love you and accept you.”

The Mare looked at me stone-faced. After a few seconds, its chin began to tremble and soon it was whimpering. Before I knew it, the Mare was balled up on the ground, sobbing loudly. The water funnel was slithering its way into the woods, carrying the army of wasps in its midst after releasing the butterflies and dragonflies. Asteria and Zanna could now see the beast and they approached. We all looked at the Mare as it cried uncontrollably, letting out long screams of despair every other moment.

“What did you do?” Zanna asked.

“I told him I loved him for helping me overcome my fears.” I looked at Asteria. “Was that you in my head?”

“I had no time to message you, plus it goes against the rules of battle to bring aid when not agreed upon beforehand.”

I looked at Zanna, she only shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. “Maybe it was your own inner voice.” She said.

“Well, whoever it was, it was appreciated, it helped a lot.” I wrapped one arm around Zanna’s shoulder and invited Asteria to sit on my open hand. “Come on, let’s go.”

The Mare, now much calmer, gathered himself as much as he could and shrank back into the fog, which dissipated as soon as he

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entered. We tried to see which way he went, but he was nowhere to be found. We were good to go. Zanna looked at me with concern in her eyes. The deep blue of her eyes had lost its sparkle, and they were downcast. I felt a cold draft rise around us.

“I must speak with Queen Celeste. You continue, we will meet up later.”

“You have fulfilled his promise before it was time, haven’t you?” Asteria asked Zanna.

“It was not what I had planned, but yes, I believe so.”

Without letting me respond, she was on her way.

“Zanna, wait.” I called. She walked away without looking back.

I didn’t want her to go, but I felt it had to be this way. Now I was back to trekking in an unknown land with Asteria. I could only hope she was in a better overall mood. Although my resolve felt stronger than ever, so whatever she had for me, I was ready.



## Clyde Returns

After Zanna left, Asteria stayed close to me. She was of a much brighter outlook, looking to initiate the conversation, which was reassuring. Little did I know that she wanted to pull the embers from the fire and find out what had happened between Zanna and I.

“Tell me, dear Forrest, what activities did you and Zanna partake in during my absence?” She asked.

“If I knew, I would tell you.” I replied. I decided then and there to keep quiet – I didn’t know what I could say or not.

A murder of crows landed somewhere close by, possibly where we stood a moment ago, squawking and cawing loudly. I grabbed Asteria’s hand and squeezed, which she acknowledged by squeezing her hand as well. I could hear with my mind that the crows were there to investigate – they were asking a lot of questions. But whether it was about what had just happened, or if were they looking for us, I couldn’t say.

“We should keep moving.” I said. “There’s no need to wait and see what they find.”

“You have become adept at survival in this place, that pleases me.” Replied Asteria, now fluttering ahead of me but still holding my hand.

My chest bulged from pride. I barely had time to revel in that feeling as we stopped soon after – just far enough not to hear the crows anymore. Asteria stopped to settle herself on a tree stump and began plucking the pollen from a flower.

“This is a good place as any.” She said while rolling the pollen into a small ball before tossing it up in the air and catching it with her mouth.

Her demeanor told me we would not move from here for a moment, so I looked around for a comfortable spot to sit. A racoon was close by, his attention entirely focused on us. He looked at me with an

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apparent smile in his eyes, and I couldn't shake the idea I knew him. "He awaits Clyde's return as well." Asteria said. "They have become true friends."

That's when I recognized the little beast. He would play around with Clyde hunting for flowers and colorful wild grass to create magnificent bouquets. As a gesture of good will towards the racoon, I got busy gathering what flowers we had around us and he ran over to grab them. I then watched him build the most beautiful bunch of wild plants. His attention to detail, how he chose what flower went next to which with maniacal focus was fascinating. There was a small puddle nearby and he cleaned his hands between each manipulation. The bigger his bouquet became, the more the flowers glowed, as if lit by some invisible LED light hidden inside the petals. Soon there was some pollen floating just above the center of the flower arrangement, seemingly waiting for a breeze. I never felt as far from the human realm as I was now, and I was beginning to enjoy this place. The racoon brought me back to the present moment as he hissed at me to hurry, giving me aggressive hand signals as he pointed to the bunch of flowers next to me that were still in the ground. I plucked them for him, and he theatrically rejected each one except one blue ground ivy. The racoon looked at it with love, then placed it in the middle of his bouquet before tying everything together with a loose vine and handing it to me. It was a work of art. Wild plants mixed in with delicate flowers, all wrapped in tressed twines made of leaves and small twigs. Each stem, each leaf, each petal where it was supposed to be. I held it delicately; I was afraid I would damage it somehow. The racoon scurried away before I could thank him, disappearing in the bushes in an instant, off to find more flowers.

"Looks like you made a friend. Is that for me?"

It was Clyde. The bouquet began to tremble in my hands. I threw the flowers on the ground and ran to him, grabbing him by the shoulders while the racoon wailed from the bushes as the bouquet shattered upon hitting the ground.

"It's really you!"

The Clyde I knew would have come back with some sort of

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disparaging remark, but he stood there and smiled. Asteria fluttered to my shoulder.

“He met the Mares, he is a changed man.” She said in a matter-of-fact tone. “We’ve been practicing restraint as to not call attention to ourselves.” She added, giving Clyde with a stern gaze.

Clyde kept his eyes on me, they were filled with tears. I didn’t know what to do, he was usually the one helping me make sense of things. I kept my hands on his shoulders. Our eyes locked.

“This will get better, please believe me.” I told him.

He looked at the racoon, who had returned to fix the shattered flower arrangement, and gave me a crooked smile.

“No, it’s not. Not for us.” He said flatly.

I wanted to say we can rebuild our life until it’s time to return to the human side. I wanted to ask him how he survived the terror inflicted by the Mares. I wanted to say we found each other, that it was the first step to finding a true solution.

“Why not for us?” is what I asked.

He furrowed his brow and pursed his lips.

“Don’t you get it? We’re nothing in this place. Humans in Faylandia are like unused compost in the human world — corrupted decay.”

“That can be true for many. Still, some are handpicked to join our ranks and take part in Faylandia’s business with full privileges. That can be your truth.”

We looked to where the voice came from in one unified motion. It was Zanna. She emerged from the trees as she spoke, her smile casting a bright light on everything it touched. It felt as though she just left, how did she have time to accomplish what she set out to do? I pushed that question aside, with my heart beating so hard it created waves of sound that spread into the forest around us. A light that was pure and powerful was shining through her skin, seemingly originating around her belly. Her eyes had turned into crystalized opals, hypnotizing and irresistible. They carried a glow to them that I had never seen — there was something that lied just beneath her iris — and I let myself get lost in them. More importantly, there was something else. Her stomach showed a clear bump that wasn’t there before. I decided to ignore it, there was too much left for me to

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learn to assume anything. I was far too happy to reunite with my one true love to begin asking awkward questions. She placed her hands on her belly and smiled.

"I didn't understand at first, but now I know you have fulfilled your destiny." She whispered.

As soon as she spoke, the ground around me trembled ever so lightly. Dust particles rose just above my feet and started to swirl around my ankles.

"What's going on?" I asked, surprised my voice was shaking from worry.

Asteria and Zanna looked at me with love. Clyde looked at the growing swirl with curiosity.

"You have fulfilled your destiny; the mushrooms are asking you to leave." Asteria said.

The swirl had now risen to my knees, and I could see it pulling in more mushroom spores from the nearest patch. A mixture of confusion, rage, and fear filled my mind and my soul. No one had told me anything except cryptic parables and now I had fulfilled my promise?

"What was the promise?" I screamed, releasing a deep seeded rage that had built up for so long. "I deserve to know what the promise was and why is this swirl of dust rising on me?"

"My friend deserves an answer." Added Clyde, who's calm demeanor helped regain some degree of control.

He stepped in to pull me away from the rising swirl of mushroom spores and was violently pushed back, flying ten feet in the air and landing heavily on his back in an explosion of dust and dry leaves. Seeing us trying to stop this, Zanna had a confused look on her face and was incessantly rubbing her belly. I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed to be growing before our very eyes. When the swirl had reached my waist, I began to feel a tug. My body was slowly being pulled into it, one particle at a time. Panic reared its ugly head in the pit of my stomach. My skin broke out in sweat and my vision began to blur.

"Please, tell me what I did to fulfil my promise?" My voice cracked as sobs of panic made me stutter. "And no run around." I managed to

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add.

The two Fey looked at each other. Zanna spoke first. “Remember our moment in the pond?” I nodded, suddenly unable to speak. “Well, our union was successful.” She added, holding her belly with both hands.

My mind was swirling. I didn’t understand how a moment of refreshment in the pond, no matter how pleasurable, could be the reason I was called here.

“What was successful? How can that moment be so important?” My voice cracked from the ever-rising emotion.

The swirl was now at my shoulders, and now I could feel my body disintegrating, sucked into the dust cloud that was filled with mushroom pollen. I felt myself fading from this reality. I wasn’t about to faint, it literally felt like I was less present in this place.

“Please, in simple words, what was the promise?” I don’t know if I spoke or thought it, but Zanna stepped closer to whisper in my ear. “I carry our child.” She said. As she pulled back, her smile was more radiant than ever. And her belly had grown a little more.

## Forrest is back home

I was in shock. Before I could ask her to repeat what she just said, I found myself standing near the pond at the orchard, and I wasn't in Faylandia. I took a deep breath and choked. The air felt humid and thick and there was too much of it. After taking a moment to get used to the thicker air, I looked around me. The trees around me looked like trees. I had returned to my world. Feeling a need to confirm, I felt an irresistible urge to touch a tree and make sure I was home. I gently caressed it with the tip of one finger, ready to pull myself back if it tried to suck me in. It was just a tree. The bark felt like bark, it stood stoically in front of me, sturdy as a tree should be. I was definitely back in the human realm. I scanned the area, hoping to see Clyde, but he was nowhere to be found. Did I hear correctly? Did Zanna say she was pregnant?

I ran toward the house. I had to speak with my mother about all this. I was ready to lay down everything that happened in detail, ready to ignore her attempts to explain away anything. I had to ask her how could she have made the promise I would produce a child? Would I be able to see it? Will it be a part of my life, and how does all this work in the end? I reached the house ready to argue and fight. An unnatural silence blanketed the place. Leaves littered the porch, something my mother would never let happen. There was no smoke coming from my uncle's shed chimney. Surprised there was no activity, I entered the house.

"Hello? Anyone here?" I yelled. My voice only echoed on the walls of the empty room.

With worry rising in my heart, I ran to the shed where Uncle Ralph spent most of his days experimenting with plants and mushrooms. Then it dawned on me. Mushrooms, he was testing mushroom recipes because he wanted to open a passage to Faylandia. I walked up to the shed, my heart racing with anticipation. I don't know why I

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was expecting something big to happen, but I felt like a young child on Christmas morning. I entered; the shed was empty. A cauldron was sitting on the stove, its bottom covered in burnt mushrooms that smelled awful. Did he and my mother know where my father was all this time?

“You look so different than what I imagined.” Said a voice that came from the shadows.

I spun, surprised to hear someone else was here. A man was sitting in the corner. Something seemed so familiar about him, but I couldn’t say what exactly.

“I do apologize it took me this long, son. But I wasn’t the one who decided when I could come back. Looks like it could only happen if you fulfilled your promise.”

“Dad?”

I wanted to yell at him for making such an absurd promise, but as soon as he stepped out of the shadow and opened his arms, I ran to hug him. We stood there for minutes on end, and I didn’t want to let go.

“You were on the other side all this time?” I asked, my face buried in his shoulder.

“I was. But it wasn’t so bad. I served in a laundry room and had to clean out a regent’s sheets daily.” He chuckled. “Let me tell you, he could dirty a set of sheets like you wouldn’t believe. I didn’t know why they got so dirty, but in the end, it was ok. Just dirt, leaves, and branches, nothing gooey. The hardest part was figuring out how long I was there. Time in that place is liquid, you might think you just blinked, but days had passed in the human realm. And on the opposite, you could feel like a week, or even a month had passed, but it was mere seconds here. When I was invited back, I didn’t know if you were still a young boy or had lived your life and died.”

“Why wasn’t I told what happened?” I asked, feeling confused and angry.

“I couldn’t say. My guess is they wanted to avoid trying to explain what was inexplicable. And maybe they feared having another family member might be taken if they spoke of it — or worse.”

I took in his thoughts and couldn’t help but agree. “I think mom and

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Uncle Ralph found a way to pass and went to Faylandia to try and find us." I said, my cheek still firmly pressed against my father's shoulder.

A crow then flew into the shed, which broke our embrace as my father jumped back, his face stricken with fear. He raised his hands to cover himself and emitted a pathetic squeal. The crow landed on a counter and focused on my father. Its eyes sparkled, and I could swear it was smiling.

"Be careful, Forrest." My father said, his voice vibrating from the fear. "It wants me, don't try to stop it."

The crow cawed. "Clarence, remember your promise to Morrigan's kinsfolks, lest you lose your freedom." It said.

I heard the voice in my head and kept silent. The way the crow ignored my presence told me he must believe I can't hear it – or didn't care if I did. I made sure to play deaf and stood idle as if I didn't hear anything. My father lowered his head at the crow's words.

"Why must I be the one to deliver the message? Can I not send a pigeon... or you?" Asked my father with his thoughts.

The raven cawed. This time there was no doubt. That was a laugh, and it was smiling.

"You alone can deliver this message; it is central to your return to the human realm. Refuse now, and a fate far worse than what you have experienced awaits you."

The raven then flew back out, raising a puff of dust as it took off. The dust settled slowly, and we stood facing each other.

"We have to find Morrigan. That's all I can say for now." My father said as he walked out of the shed.

I bit my tongue and kept to myself the fact I was once again presented with a vague explanation. While we were in the shed, Jasper and Stephen had approached and were awaiting outside, accompanied by a small group.

"Welcome back," Jasper said. "Now we can start preparations for the coming Rade." Added Stephen.



## Asteria helps Clyde

Forrest had returned to the human realm, Zanna had already disappeared into hiding, and now we stood idle.

“So, dear wooden creature, now what?” Clyde asked me, seemingly ready to go somewhere.

Forrest had told me enough stories about Clyde for me to know that he had no malicious intent by calling me a “wooden creature”. That said, I felt it was important to let him know that wasn’t acceptable. I raised my hand, calling a group of bees to attention. A dozen of them approached and began to hover around Clyde.

“Say again? What name do you believe is mine?” I said defiantly. Clyde cowered. “Whoa, sorry. Asteria, I meant Asteria.” He said throwing his hands up, the twinkle of fear well imprinted in his eyes. With a wave of my hand, the bees scattered and disappeared.

“Much better. Please remember that if you want to refer to me other than by name, I am a Forest Nymph, not a wooden creature. Your place in this realm is at the lowest rung. The least important breed of life present in Faylandia is the human. You must remember that at all times.”

Clyde lowered his head. “I understand. I spoke from the idea you had a penchant for fun repartee, I believed calling you by what composes your body would be funny.”

Anger churned in my stomach. “I see. You’re saying that if I called you a sack of organs that would be considered funny?”

Clyde chuckled. “Very much so.” He looked at me with a sideways glance. “It’s funny because it’s true.” He said with a wink.

I looked at Clyde from head to toe. I’d never been one to accept an insult as funny, but all I saw before me was a human with a pure heart that had no knowledge of Faylandia etiquette. I promised myself I would begin his education promptly; he deserved a chance to learn. Plus, his relationship to Forrest made him an important part

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of this Tale. He locked his gaze with mine, seemingly waiting for me to speak. Before I could say anything, he decided to speak up.

“So, when’s a comment funny or not? I’m always open to learn new stuff, but I’m not really good at watching what I say.” After a pause, he added, “Don’t get me wrong, I do want to learn the ways of this magical place, I’m just not sure how long it will take me.”

His smile was so genuine it broke me. I vowed at that moment to help this clueless sack of organs to learn the ways of this magical place, as he so eloquently put it.

“Your intent is pure but has no clarity. Candor can lead to servitude if you are not careful. Our laws may seem similar to those of the humans, but their application differs greatly. For example, if you feel in your heart that a companion makes you happy, you must state it outright, with tact and poetry.”

Clyde squinted his eyes. “But intent is everything. Without it, any action taken is impossible to fulfill. In my experience, when you have a pure heart and clear mind, your words can never be taken out of context.”

His answer shook me. Most humans I encountered in Faylandia had broken minds. They would either be submerged in fear, as Clyde was but a few moments ago, or their spirit broken by the realization of the existence of this world, or both. I thought Clyde was broken when I found him, but he was only defeated from having been beaten to a pulp. His mind was as strong as ever and I admired that. Forrest had told me he was special and now I saw he meant.

“Had you ever set foot in Faylandia in the past?” I asked.

“Nope. First visit, except maybe for a dream or two. We came over when some strange circles opened up above a mushroom patch. I got pulled in when I touched it, and before I could understand what had happened, I was getting beaten up until you found me.”

I knew his education would be difficult. Although he was level-headed and alert, he was only human and clearly didn’t yet grasp the severity of his situation. I began gathering bits of wood, strands of grass, picked a few flowers and some mushrooms. Small creatures came to help — squirrels, birds, and a racoon joined me.

“What are you doing? I don’t think the place needs to be cleaned

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up.” Said Clyde, grabbing a handful of dirt in his hand as an example. “Such a thought is erroneous.” I replied distant-mindedly, still organising my collection of nature’s scraps in front of me with the help of a racoon bent on arranging the elements by color.

I sat in front of my collection of woodland elements gathered for me. The racoon was still playing around with the flowers, creating a beautiful color layout in his quest to find the perfect combination. Finally, I grabbed a stick and a rock.

“Listen closely.” I said, looking at Clyde in the eyes. “This stick and this rock may seem different, yet they are part of this flower.” I randomly picked up a flower from the pile, causing the racoon to freak out as it feverishly worked at keeping the flowers in an order only it could understand. “These objects are as much a part of this world as you and me. The connection between all things is what governs our world. Everything is included. Yet there are rules to follow – the stick must perish for the flower to bloom, time must pass for the rock to harden. As I told you, it is essential to be pure of heart and demonstrate it clearly. Then you must recognize the hierarchy that rules this world. Your actions must reflect that.” Clyde raised his hand to stop me. “I can’t agree to such an arrangement.” He lowered his head. “Believe me, I understand about interconnectedness of all things. But my intentions are the only thing I truly control, and I don’t see how I can change that.” I noticed his voice rise as he spoke, from anger, fear, or both, which told me he was starting to realize the depth of my words. That was good.

“Since you are of low rank, you must act accordingly. Reverence is an absolute, politeness is a given. To gain the respect of your superiors, you must show those features. Your presence here will never be perceived as positive — ever. But your words and actions can lessen your suffering.”

Clyde was listening attentively, but I could barely sense his mind. I could see his emotions, but not feel them. Was he consciously blocking my access, or did he unknowingly possess such a power? Either way, an idea sprang in my mind. I rose my hands above my head and waited. Moments later, a bracelet was carried to me by a

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dragonfly. I placed it on Clyde's arm as he watched me do it without saying a word.

"Never remove it. Tis your talisman."

Clyde leaned back, looking at the bracelet with wonder. "It's super nice, actually. Thank you."

"Never say thank you, I do not want any debt left between us. If you thank me, you acknowledge that I served you, answered your request with no exchange of services — that we still have a continuing contract. Tis a bad omen to use those words in Faylandia. When you want to please a Fey, say something like your gift is timely, it shall be useful. Or your generosity is appreciated, I shall make good use of your gift. More than that, you must also be aware your choice of words can convey arrogance if not used properly."

Clyde looked at me with dismay. "Geez, sorry for acknowledging your gift. That's what humans say to convey appreciation."

"True. Now go and say that to a Wendigo or the Mares that terrorised you earlier."

Clyde shuddered. "Ok I get it. I appreciate your offer; I shall wear it with pride." He said as he got up and dusted himself off.

"Almost, remove the with pride part, it feels forced."

Clyde threw his arms up in frustration and started walking.

"Clyde."

"What?" he asked with a loud exhale that showed exasperation.

I looked at him with a stern gaze. He stopped walking and turned to face me with his hands cupped before him.

"What?" He repeated, this time with a soft tone.

"Much better. I wanted to say we have to go this way." I said, pointing in the opposite direction he was headed.

Clyde burst out laughing. He joined me and we were on our way, led by my faithful butterfly scouts.

"Aren't those monarch butterflies?" Clyde asked.

"Where do you think they got their name?" I answered coyly. "I am their monarch after all."

Clyde accepted my response by nodding and squinting his eyes.

"How long before we get back?" He asked.

"Time as you know it has little meaning here, we will reach our

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destination in due time. For now, we must focus on the coming Rade.”

End

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## End of season 1

This marks the end of the first season of Tales to come from the Storyroom. The second season will be an adventure centered around the visit of the Fey People in our world during their Rade, starting in the fall of 2024.

Until then, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to all the readers who have let themselves be tempted by this special adventure. As I continue to discover more about the amazing world of the Feys, I know I've found my main source of inspiration, and I sincerely hope that will please you in my future writings.

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### About the Author

It is my goal to protect, as much as i can, the folly of our imagination, which is often rejected in this cold world.

In the meantime, let's Connect:

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