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## *Return to The Gray Forest*

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Lady Ferlinda grew up in an untidy heap of a castle. From the tall windows encircling her tower room she could see the towers and walls piled like a giant infant's building blocks, surrounded by a garden.

### Keywords

Fiction; Return to the Gray Forest; Margaret L. Carter

## 1

## RETURN TO THE GRAY FOREST

By Margaret L. Carter

Lady Ferlinda grew up in an untidy heap of a castle. From the tall windows encircling her tower room she could see the towers and walls piled like a giant infant's building blocks, surrounded by a garden. All this, however, was of little interest. She preferred gazing at what lay beyond: the fields, woodlands, and villages of the Ward whose Lady Guardian she would soon become. Too often Master Elphido, the court mage (and her guardian and tutor), had to snatch her away from her daydreaming there.

"Straining your eyes and woolgathering is not the way to learn your future responsibilities," he would grumble. She could not explain why that blue-green vista, with the misty blur of the forbidden Gray Forest at the horizon was so alluring.

When rain limited her view, Ferlinda spent much of her liberty (which, in truth, was not small, since Elphido did not care to neglect his own studies) gazing at a picture hung in the empty room just below hers. The painting showed only trees. Pale light rippled through their leaves to cast leafy shadows on the mossy ground. Drops sparkled on each leaf, as if a summer shower had just ended. Ferlinda sometimes felt that if she could just tilt her head the right way, she could see around the tree trunks and into the cascade of an invisible fountain. That the droplets signified a fountain she knew only by the title under the painting, "The hidden fount, the healing fruit," which sounded like a line from some forgotten verse. A strange title, when both fount and fruit were so well "hidden" they could barely be seen. About this she never asked Elphido; she felt this was the kind of picture the mage would not approve of.

Only on her coming-of-age day did they at last speak of the painting.

In the castle's great hall she sat on the high dais and received from Master Elphido the coronet signifying her Guardianship. As he bent close to place it on her head, he whispered, "You've turned out better than I expected, Milady. Your father would have been proud." Ferlinda felt only the smallest pang of sadness for her long-dead parents, whom she hardly remembered. At that instant, her strongest reaction was surprise at hearing the mage call her "Milady" instead of "child."

After the knights and village elders of the sparsely-populated Ward had sworn their homage, Ferlinda presided at her first banquet as Lady Guardian. At her right sat the highest-born of her guests, Prince Toriel. She looked with pleasure on his handsome, ruddy face beneath a shock of tawny hair. She

blushed when his fingers touched hers. She was not displeased by Master Elphido's hints that a wedding should take place as soon as possible.

Ferlinda was puzzled, however, when late that night, after the noble guests had been bedded down, Elphido insisted that she report to his chambers for a private talk. Settling into a well-stuffed chair, she grumbled as the mage lit the oil-nut lamps on the wall, "What is this--some arcane affair of state? What couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

Elphido undraped the ceremonial robe from his plump form and smoothed the neck-length fringe that was all that remained of his sandy hair. His eyes actually twinkled for a second, belying the weariness in his face. "I have a duty to fulfill. Your father trusted me to tell you what he himself was told on his eighteenth birthday."

"It is some family secret, then." She tried to speak lightly, though she could see that the man sitting opposite was all seriousness now.

"Your mother would have told you if she'd lived," he sighed. Ferlinda's mother had survived her birth for only a few days. "What do you recall about your father?"

"Why--he died before I was five. I do remember visiting him in his room sometimes." Before this moment she hadn't thought of those visits in years. "A sad old man, always sick in bed."

"He was not yet twenty-five years old." Elphido rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath as if delaying the words he had to speak. "Everyone born of your line falls victim to a wasting sickness in his or her twenty-fifth year and dies within months."

Ferlinda leaped up, then slumped back in her chair, too shocked to voice the cry of protest that rose to her lips.

"There is a tale that claims to explain this fate." The mage's voice took on a cadence that she knew well from her lessons. "Know, Milady, that in the immemorial past the noble founder of your line dwelt with his consort in the midst of a green wood whose heart was an enchanted fountain where grew trees laden with golden fruit. The wood yielded its abundance for them and they were well content. Their daughter and two sons were made ready to rule the trees and beasts in their parents' place."

"The hidden fount--my picture!"

Elphido frowned at this interruption in the rhythm of his recitation. "Yes, the painting in the empty room in your tower does purport to represent that fountain."

He resumed the legend. "Alas, it came to the minds of the young lords and lady that the green wood was but a poor realm. They took counsel with their parents to range abroad and conquer other lands. When the Lord and Lady would have no part of this design, the three rode forth on their own.

"They did indeed establish a goodly Ward and this castle in which you dwell. But 'tis said that the moment the last stone was set upon the topmost tower, a blight fell upon the enchanted wood. It became the Gray Forest, where nothing grows but thorns, where

no creatures dwell but venomous creeping things."

Ferlinda gasped at the mention of the very forest she saw from her window, but she refrained from interrupting again.

"The eldest of the three sought to enter the wood and learn how his parents fared. Alas, the path to the fountain was lost and he had much ado even to find his way out again. Still more dire, he and his brother and sister were stricken with a wasting disease. Within a few moons' change they were as twisted and gray as folk of fourscore. Ever since, Milady, all of your line have died before the end of their twenty-fifth year. But 'tis said that if ever the hidden fountain is found, the health of your family will be restored."

"Then why hasn't anyone found it?"

"Child--Milady--it's but a legend." He shook his head as if in despair at her credulity. "Only two things are certain: This sickness is real; I saw it take your father and grandmother and great-uncle. And none who've entered the Gray Forest have ever come out."

She tossed her head impatiently. "When was the last time anyone tried?"

He stood up and put a hand on Ferlinda's shoulder. "This nonsense is distracting you from facing the real need of the moment." She felt his fingers tighten and heard the sorrow in his voice.

"It is necessary that you marry Prince Toriel at once."

"Before it's too late, you mean? Produce an heir before I die?"

He disregarded the harshness of her tone.

"Of course. Toriel won't know the truth until--until it comes."

"No!" she rasped through tears of rage. "Lie to him and break his heart? Bear children and orphan them? No, I won't marry him."

"Would you orphan your people?"

"The sooner I am dead and forgotten, the better." She took bitter satisfaction in shocking him with that last sentence. "Besides, what do you think will happen to me if I search for the fountain? Do you think the forest is haunted by nightwraiths? Or infested with rock dragons?"

Elphido winced at her sarcasm.

"You know very well those are mere fables. But the place would not be shunned without cause. Come, my dear, you'll think better of this tomorrow."

"Tomorrow at dawn I ride for the Gray Forest." She tightened her shoulders and lifted her head in half-conscious imitation of some epic heroine, well aware at heart that her deepest motive was not a self-sacrificing regard for Toriel's happiness and her family's honor. Rather, if there were any chance that the picture around which she had woven her dreams for most of her life might be real, it was a chance she could not lose.

The mage stood up and said, "At least allow me to consult my art. Perhaps I can find some omen for this mad adventure--or some message forbidding it." Together they went from the sitting-room into Elphido's

laboratory, a high ceilinged chamber lit by violet flames coiled like snakes in transparent jars.

"Please sit, Milady," said the mage pulling out a three legged stool. He cleared a space on the nearest table and produced a gleaming silver bowl.

"Give me your hand," said the mage. She obeyed, and so quickly that she had no time to cringe away, he nicked her finger with a tiny knife. He squeezed a few drops of blood into the bowl and used a feather to spread them over the viscous lump. The liquid changed, becoming clear and deep like a dark pond.

Elphido muttered a few unintelligible syllables, all z's and x's, which she knew for words in the language of sorcery taught only to adepts. A picture began to appear. Ferlinda saw lacework--no, a net of gray, bare branches. Elphido pronounced another command and the magic reflection grew. It showed tree trunks. Everything was gray, including the moss on the trees and the thorns between them. All looked dry enough to crumble at a footstep.

"You see?" he whispered, "Nothing but death."

She leaned closer, impatient for more. The mage gestured over the bowl and the reflection grew to show a footpath. Slugs and many-legged creepers slunk between the thorns. A snake wiggled across the path, hissing soundlessly. Suddenly the ground began to shake. The shaker appeared, its hooves raising a gray cloud. But this creature was not gray. Everchanging colors flowed over his flanks. Gold sparked from his mane and tail which were as long and luxuriant as a woman's hair. His brow seemed translucent for a blue light glowed there.

Ferlinda knew this being only from tapestries and ballads.

"The Star-singer!"

"Impossible!" hissed the mage.

The radiant creature looked at them and spoke--sang, "What seek you, Ferlinda?"

"Impossible," Elphido repeated, drawing back, "There isn't supposed to be sound."

"The fountain." She could hardly force herself to speak. "I must find it."

"You must seek your desire alone and on foot. You must not kill any creature you meet. Remember, the path to the hidden fount can be seen only by the blind."

"But how--" She stopped. The vision was gone.

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Just before sunrise, Ferlinda was at the stable where Elphido waited with a pair of riding beasts. One was the same horse, now old, whose long neck she had so often clasped in girlhood. Only a single stable boy was there to witness the departure. She need not try explaining her quest to the curious.

The sky was paling from deep rose to lavender as the two of them set out. Avoiding conversation, Ferlinda chewed nuts and dried fruit from her pouch. She carried little else: water, a ball of red twine, and the dagger she could not bring herself to leave behind. Because of the Star-singer's prohibition against killing, she went without a sword, unarmored except for a leather tunic.



After nearly two hours' ride, Elphido and Ferlinda reached the edge of the Gray Forest. The trees grew so densely that they could not see into the wood at all. Ferlinda felt she was staring into a dirty fog bank. Elphido broke into her bemused gazing.

"Milady, there's still time--"

"To return?"

Stirred from her brief trance, she dismounted. "No," she said, "not until I find what I came for." She handed her reins to Elphido, patted her beast's mottled hide and as an afterthought gave the mage her seal-ring. "Go, I don't want to lose any more daylight."

With a resigned sigh he leaned over to kiss her, then turned the animals back toward the castle. Ferlinda did not linger to watch him. Turning sideways, she squeezed through the outermost row of trees.

Looking over her shoulder she caught a glint of sunlight from outside the forest. Otherwise, all directions looked alike. Here the trees were not so closely packed; she could walk between them, barely. Tying her twine to the nearest branch, she set out. Twenty paces further on, every faint ray of light had vanished. Without her string she could not have told where she had started. She kept walking, unrolling the twine to avoid retracing her steps and praying that it would prove long enough to mark the way to the wood's center.

The small gray shapes that crawled, slithered, or scuttled from underfoot every few paces did not seem threatening. In any case, her boots would protect her from stings or bites. Thorns snagged her trousers and scratched the skin beneath but seemed to bear no poison. A stale, dusty smell filled her nostrils, intensifying whenever she crushed a clump of the gray fungi dotting the ground. She sipped water now and then to wash away the musty taste of the air, though she felt little real thirst.

Still, despair overtook her when the string ran out. Standing at the juncture of five trails, she faced the choice of returning upon her own track, defeated, or striking out on an unmarked path with no hope of returning at all. She thought of climbing a tree to find the edge of the forest by sight, but when she clutched a nearby branch, it crumbled into a cloud of ashes.

Suddenly the Star-singer's words came back to her: "The path can be seen only by the blind."

Master Elphido was right; the oracle made no sense. But she could test it, at least, by making herself as good as blind. Tearing a sleeve from her underblouse, she tied the strip of cloth over her eyes. She turned in a slow circle, then stood motionless, a little dizzy, waiting.

Nothing came. Arms outstretched, she started forward. Blindfolded, she felt even less awareness of passing time. She stumbled in random directions, usually off rather than on the trails. Thorns grabbed and tore at her legs. Scraping against the trees, she released clouds of choking dust. At last she found herself shoving through a hedge so thick

that even her face was slashed by the brambles. Once through the barrier, she fell full length and buried her face in her arms.

"There is no path! The Star-singer must have meant something else or the vision was nothing but an evil spell of this place!"

She sat up and ripped off the blindfold. To her surprise, she was surrounded by a wall of thorns like a room with no door. She saw no gap in the hedge where a human body could have broken in. More important, with only a dagger, she could not hope to break out.

"That's it, then. I shall die here." She drew her knife and stared at it. The steel was useless here.

At that moment she heard a rustling behind her. She leaped up and whirled to face the sound.

Inside the hedge, there crouched a skinny, scaly creature. It had six clawed legs, a whiplike tail, and fanged jaws. Legends called such a thing a rock dragon. A growl rumbled in its belly and slime dripped from its fangs. As each drop hit the ground, it sizzled as if boiling. Where had the reptile come from? Even this crawling thing could not worm its way through that wall of thorns. Shifting her knife in her hand, Ferlinda waited. Forbidden to kill here, she could only hope to scare it off.

Its body twisted in surprisingly sinuous coils. She stabbed at it and missed, barely saving her hand from its poisonous jaws. She tried to dodge around it and found herself blocked. The monster reared onto its four back legs, swiping at her with its front claws. She fainted with her knife, trying to frighten without hurting. Clumsy work. Her arms-mistress would be ashamed. One claw slashed her remaining sleeve. She lunged at the creature's exposed belly.

Startled at how easily the dagger sank in, she jumped back. Dark blood oozed from the wound. It was muddy brown, more like the remains of a smashed insect than animal blood. The monster fell on the gray moss, twitching. If it died! Ferlinda leaned over to jerk her knife from the wound.

More of the noisome fluid spurted out. The creature raised its head and spat in her face.

Screaming, she fell, rubbing her burning eyes. She expected an attack, but in her agony it did not matter. Hot tears washed the poison from her eyes. After a minute the pain lessened to a bearable itching. She began to wonder why the reptile had not rushed her. Too weak? She heard its rattling breath fainter with each second.

Abruptly she realized that she could hear it but not see it. All was dark. Now she was truly blind. Forever? Did the question have a meaning? Was there any time in this place? And if she could not sense time's passing before, what would it be like now, in this boundless dark?

Suddenly she did see something--one thing. Leading away from her was a line of hoof prints shining with a pale blue glow.

Feeling her way with extended fingers she followed the shining track. Strangely, she felt no wall of thorns. Nor did trees block the way. She seemed to be walking

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a clear path. She followed the trail, sensing no progress, yet never growing tired.

Ahead, she heard a noise, distinct from her own rustling footsteps. It could only be the dragging gait of the wounded monster. When she stopped to listen, the sound stopped, too. When she tried to outrun it, the marks vanished and she stumbled. She had to follow the disembodied guide at its own slow pace.

At last she heard a new sound: the bubbling music of water. A short time later, the dusty smell was washed away by the fragrance of water and flowers. For the first time she felt real hope. Ferlinda dropped onto hands and knees to follow the hoof prints at a crawl. Before she realized what was happening, her hands were bathed up to the wrists in icy water. She splashed her face, then cupped hands to drink. The water danced in her veins like wine, but brightened rather than muddied her thoughts.

She looked down at her reflection, astonished at the light in her green eyes.

She could see again!

She heard a coughing growl at her elbow. Lifting her eyes from the spring, she found the reptile stretched beside her. Slime dripped from its mouth and the dagger wound. Though it made no move to attack, she feared what might happen if she dared touch it again. But the Star-singer's command had been clear and the rest of the oracle had proved true. Ferlinda glanced around the clearing. The rim of the fountain had once been paved with a mosaic of colored pebbles. Just beyond the spring stood a few stone blocks that must have formed part of a wall. Above the water hung the branches of a flowered tree bearing one golden fruit. The resemblance to her painting confirmed that this place must be her ancestors' lost home.

She filled her waterbag from the spring and bathed the creature's mouth and belly. It ceased growling and lay still. Then its breathing stopped.

Had she killed it after all?

The body collapsed upon itself. In its place appeared the shining being of the vision: Star-singer!

He sang in a voice at first inseparable from the rippling water and pulsing blue flame on his brow.

"You have done well," he said, "Take the fruit."

Ferlinda reached across to the laden bough and plucked the golden globe. At the touch of it, her numbed body woke to hunger and thirst.

The Star-singer added, "Eat. Your sickness will be forever vanquished. Plant the seeds in your garden. Return with your consort and restore life to this place."

Before she could gather herself to speak, he was gone. She looked around, almost expecting the forest to change from gray to green before her. That did not happen, but she could see clear sky above the enchanted tree.

Ahead opened a broad path toward home and Prince Toriel, who she married in her own good time.

## ABRUM'S TALE

By Susan Warner

It was dusk again, and the alien sun had been particularly scorching. Abrum had gone for a swim to cool off. Now he was thinking lazily of dinner. He began his slow movements along the lakeshore, alert for the small, fluttering lifeforms that had come to be the staple of his diet.

He had learned that it was only at night that he could move quietly around the shore of the lake, hunting. The primitive life was abundant and was refreshingly tasty after the months of bland food that the life-support fluid chamber had provided. Abrum was even beginning to think that the visit to this planet would not turn out all that badly.

Unfortunately, the visit had begun with a crash landing. It was supposed to have been a typical landing on a typical primitive planet circling an average class 7.3 star. He had placed the ship's entry controls on automatic, for the guidance system was run almost totally without his assistance. The ship began to slip through the atmosphere, then jolted hard. The drive centroid must have come out of alignment during the rise from subspace; nothing else could explain the crash, for it shouldn't have happened. Nevertheless, he had managed to rescue his auto-beacon and himself.

The automatic signal would bring a rescue party soon. But meanwhile at the edge of the lake, he lived in comfort.

Abrum floated lightly for a moment, slowly breathing the warm, humid air. It was dark on this side of the planet, but there was light being cast by the solitary moon just visible as it rose, fully reflective, over the low hills of the planet. The light showed him to be floating in a large lake.

Suppressing a sigh, Abrum turned on his back and began stroking slowly and evenly along the shore. Afterward, he blamed himself for being too relaxed, too ready to accept the alien planet as a non-hostile and comfortable world. He never saw the trap, but moved right into it, thinking of dinner.

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"Gotcha!" the boy screamed, pulling the twine that triggered his primitive trap. The net rose into the air with a sharp snap as the young sapling, freed from its forced arch, sprung back into shape. The boy ran forward to where the net hung jerking with residual bounce, holding its captive entwined.

"Gawd Almighty!" swore the boy, looking at his catch. "I caught me the grand-daddy of all frogs!" He pulled out his knife and quickly cut the strings holding the net in the air and whipped the remaining ends of string around the corners of the net making an effective sack. Then, cradling the net and its contents carefully, the boy turned and ran up the hill from the lake.

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