

A Fair Trade

by L. F. S. Alden

Lady Sierra and her brothers scrambled through thick brambles to a low granite wall. The uneven, moss-covered wall stones gapped where bedrock pushed up bare above leaves and duff, and a few graceful white birches marked the old cow-path. "Looks like more woods, Sierra," Zeke told his sister and wrinkled his forehead.

The young lady reached out to hold Zeke's hand. "Be not afraid, my brother. Fair adventures await, and so long as we travel together, we'll come safe home. I have journeyed many times in this realm, and have learned to read the landmarks!"

Tyner looked back to be sure Mom and Emma were still napping by the picnic basket.

Sunlight winked on his mother's hair making it the same color as the tiny meadow flowers, but Emma was still under the giant oak tree's shade. He caught up with Sierra and Zeke. "What do we do now? Is there a magic word?" he asked Sierra.

"It will not be long," she answered. "We wait for the gate to open." She stood straight, still holding Zeke's hand, and tilted her head, listening.

Tyner waited smiling, hands in the pockets of his denim jacket, watching Sierra.

At the sound of hooves, Sierra's knees bent and she leaned forward as her brothers' heads whipped around. Three deer bounded into sight, just clearing a fallen beech tree, now dodging between copper-leaved saplings. At them, at them, the deer ran. Hooves sounded hollow on the floor of the woods. Tyner felt drumming on the ground through his feet. Flash! They raced past, close enough to touch, through the gap in the old stone wall.

"How did you -"

"Shh! Ready to run, brothers. Right after the hounds."

Tyner's head snapped back along the way the deer had come. Two dogs ran, eyes on the deer's trail, tails high.

Flash! The dogs passed and "Run!" cried Sierra, and she pulled Zeke through the wall with her, Tyner close on their heels.

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Many hours later, Tyner led the way home, back through the gap in the wall. With shining eyes, he bowed slightly to the sentinel who stood stock-still with proudly arched neck. Little Zeke reached up and gently stroked the deer's soft fur over lean muscle. Sierra left last, passing through the stone wall with a sigh.

Tyner ran ahead a few steps. "You're right! Only a few minutes have passed! Our good mother sleeps still in the meadow!"

Sierra pushed Zeke down toward the brook. "Let us splash a bit so we have a tale to tell when she wakens. And time to restore thee to everyday speech!"

Zeke zoomed straight into the water after a minnow.

"You speak like Beryl and the others, why can't I?" asked Tyner.

Sierra took off her sneakers and socks before wading. "Folk are used to it in me. They think I'm daft but are kind about it. If suddenly thou spake like me, they would begin to investigate. The Forest Folk must remain secret."

Stretching out on the bank, Tyner conceded. "You're right. See? I said it plainly. But listening to Beryl jabber on and on, those words do work themselves in!"

"I think she's very lonely between my visits. Our visits, now, yes?"

"Of course I'll go again! Her uncle says he'll teach me to shoot a bow and arrow next time! And I told Beryl I would bring some games to play. I thought she'd like that wooden ring-toss that Grandpa made us. We could keep it with her so she'd know we were coming back!" Tyner took a thoughtful breath. "Is she always so sad when it's time to leave?"

"You noticed? Her governess calls her Princess Petulant. But I think her very, very sad. I've never seen another child over there, and it must be ages and ages between my visits. We've played in her forest all day, but our watches say only twenty minutes."

Zeke straightened up, frog in hand. "Hours!" he shouted. "Food!" And whoosh, he was off up the hill toward the picnic basket.

Sierra and Tyner climbed up through the meadow more slowly, watching the crows circling over the cornfield beyond. "Do you always go through that bargaining?" asked Tyner. "Telling her you have to go and that you'll come back?"

"Every time," his sister answered. "Every single time she asks, 'Will you stay forever?' Even the very first time I was there, that question was in deadly earnest. I'm glad I was with you to give answer for you this time."

Tyner shaded his eyes and looked up to where Zeke was halfway through another sandwich. "I'm glad, too. If I had stumbled in there - or if Zeke had found his way on his own..." He paused. "Words are more than sounds there, aren't they?"

His sister nodded. "Just think before you speak. Mayhap we should tell our brother to go only in our company." She stopped short. "Emma," she whispered.

Her little sister's blanket lay rumpled and empty near their just-stirring mother.

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"Hi, Mom!" Tyner began, too loudly. "Did you have a good nap? Boy, I'm ready for another sandwich!" He grabbed two more from the basket and as he did so he saw Sierra run beyond the first row of trees.

Mom stretched. "Wow, I didn't think I'd actually fall asleep. Where are the girls?"

"Oh, they're playing in the woods. Together. They're fine. Emma woke up a little

before you." He looked around. "Hey, Zeke, why don't you tell Mom all about the pretend game we played with Sierra in the woods? You know her crazy imagination? Well, we went with her and the way she can tell a story, it was just like we were there!"

Zeke tried giving the frog a strawberry. "Really? I can tell?"

"Sure, Z, since it's all pretend. And tell about capturing the Frog Prince, too!"

Zeke looked down. "Oh, yeah!"

"Sure, Sweetie, tell me all about it," Mom said, sitting up. "I'm glad you guys played in Sierra's Pretend Forest!"

"Great," said Tyner. "I'll just take them these sandwiches they asked for." And he was off faster than his Mom could ask him a question.

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Emma loved her new friend. Beryl could turn their mud pies into real pies, and make little leaves dance.

She placed a piece of bark on top of her structure of stones and sticks. "There. That's a fairy house," she explained.

Beryl made a funny face. "'Tis not!" she cried putting her hands on her hips.

"None I know could ever -" She cut off at the sound of Sierra calling.

"Emma! Emma are you all right?" Sierra pulled to a stop, her toes stubbed from running barefoot. She pushed her light brown hair off her forehead and sat down very carefully. "Hello, Beryl. I see you've met Emma."

"Yes. We are best friends. She is a better friend than thee, for she will stay forever." And with a twinkling smile, Beryl threw her arms around Emma and Emma hugged Beryl tight.

Sierra gulped. "Did she say so?"

Both small girls nodded. "I have a best friend, Serry!" said Emma happily.

Beryl set her lips. "Emma said she will stay forever, Sierra. She said."

Sierra pushed her hands through her hair. "Emma is very little in our world. She's only four years old. She doesn't know how long forever is, she -"

"I do, too, Serry. Forever is always!" broke in Emma.

"Yes. Um. Yes." Sierra tried to think. "OK. What if Emma stayed in your heart, like a best friend does, but she still goes home to her family between play times?"

Beryl's violet eyes narrowed. "She said. In words. 'Tis a bond."

All three of them turned at the sounds of Tyner's approach, accompanied by the silent sentinel.

He had heard a few words. "It's a bond? Already?" Beryl nodded. "Then that's that. The only thing that could change a bond," he looked sideways at the slender girl, "is a bargain."

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"We are geniuses, Brother," said Sierra, squeezing Tyner's hand. "I'll stay with the girls. Run!"

Tyner thrust the sandwiches into her hands and sped off with the deer beside him. Passing easily through the stone wall, he turned. "Not long. I'll be as fast as I can!" he told the sentinel.

First across the edge of the forest to the cornfield, then down to the oak tree he ran.

"Hey, catch your breath, Sweetie!" said his Mom. "We were just about to get out the cookies. Why did you pull up cornstalks?"

His brown eyes flashed around. "Yes! Cookies! Yum! Thanks... um... we can't eat

those without the girls, dessert has to be sharesies, right? Come on Zeke, let's go get the girls!"

"No, I'm gonna have my cookies -" started Zeke.

Tyner grabbed his arm. "Great idea! Bring the frog, too!" and dragged his little brother in one hand and the cornstalks in the other.

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Zeke led the small procession to Beryl's clearing, proudly carrying his frog. Tyner had shucked the small corn ears and collected all the silk into a smooth bundle. The sentinel quietly brought up the rear. The boys sang loud verses of "Deck the Halls With Boughs of Holly" as they marched.

Beryl stood up and watched as they approached, a shadow of grown-up scowl on her face.

"We have returned, Princess," declared Tyner. He tucked his bundle under the frog. "A prince on a cushion of silk, as I promised."

Beryl approached Zeke and the frog. She looked at the frog from all sides. "It is

as thou said. And thy sister has not let Emma or me out of her sight. I believe you both are in earnest." She turned her eyes to Zeke's blue ones. "And wouldst thou stay with me forever along with this prince?"

Zeke, having been coached on this matter, scrunched his face up so that no words at all could escape his mouth.

"Well. A bargain was made." Beryl shook Sierra's hand, then Tyner's, then took the frog into her own hands. "Emma, you may depart freely."

"I want to play with Froggie, too!" Emma said.

Then Zeke did dare open his mouth to distract his little sister. "Emma! Cookies!"

That did it! Emma stood up, hugged Beryl and the frog. "Cookies! I'll be back to play another day!" And off she went, down the Forest path, hand-in-hand with Zeke, escorted by the great sentinel.

Sierra curtsied and Tyner bowed. "You know we'll be back, Princess," Sierra reassured Beryl who suddenly looked very small and lonely. "We promise."