

## THE VILLAGE OF FOGLAND

The yellow and brown leaves were falling sadly on that grey, cloudy day. The sky was covered with dark, silver clouds; bringing long shadows over the valley called Lowland. The little village of Fogland was tucked among the shadows. Engulfed in white fog, it was completely hidden from the eyes of the travellers passing by. Sometimes, the most curious ones would climb up the slopes of the Mysterious Mountains which surrounded the village, but the thick fog did not allow them to see much. Autumn melancholy was typical for Fogland, as it was always autumn there. Its villagers, of course, could sow crops during the sunny days of the year and gather them on the cold days, but how exactly that should be done was decided by Fog Almighty, who made sure Foglanders did not starve and had, in abundance, almost everything they needed.

Fleex had a spring in his step that day. He was full of joyful anticipation as he headed towards the local cafe to meet Fin – the village beauty with whom he was desperately in love. She had insisted on the meeting herself, which was quite unusual for her. So Fleex was full of hope that she had finally decided to respond to his feelings.

Fleex had ended up in the village a few autumns back and was still trying to figure out how and why that had happened. He was tormented by the thought that he did not know who he had been before arriving in Fogland.

His first memory was of a rose garden, breath-taking in its quiet beauty, yet somehow sad at the same time. While he was sitting there, confused, among the hundreds of roses, Fops had found him, named him Fleex and taken him in. In that little triangular house, Fleex saw his face for the first time in a hand-carved, wooden bowl full of crystal-clear water. At least he was young. He liked the big, brown eyes and the long, dark hair of his reflection. But when he ran his fingers through the hair he felt tentacles which moved, coiling into various shapes. Most often they would turn into little red hearts and that earned him the name 'Roseheart' among the Fogland villagers.

Fleex walked through the gate and into a yard where a lot of tables had been arranged in the shade of the vines. As soon as

he spotted her auburn hair, tied in a bun, her fine profile with her turned-up nose and prominent upper lip, his heart leapt and Fleex froze. He took a few moments to calm himself down before approaching the triangular table.

‘Good autumn, my friend!’

‘Good autumn, Fleex! You look great today! I hope you feel great too?’

Fleex sat at the table.

‘It’s very nice to see you, Fin. I’m looking forward to hearing all your news and seeing what’s on your mind.’

A sad smile crept over her unusually-pale face. She lowered her eyes and sighed, ‘Shall I get straight to it then? I haven’t been able to find joy in anything recently, my dear friend,’ she said, looking sadly at him with her beautiful, brown eyes. ‘I even can’t find happiness in dancing and singing anymore!’

She stopped speaking and started scribbling with a pencil on a white piece of paper in front of her. Fleex had noticed that change, but he had hoped that it was caused by secret love. For him, of course!

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘It’s that thing-nobody-speaks-about that’s troubling me...’

The young man waved at her to stop. He knew very well what she was talking about. Every new arrival in the village stopped remembering who they were before, where they had come from and why. But sometimes, someone would remember and would tell their story. If someone’s past became public knowledge, thick fog would descend over them and take them away forever. If the memory was shared with only one person, the fog would leave them both alone. But it didn’t usually go that way. The story would be passed word-of-mouth round the village within a day-and-a-half, as the people loved gossiping and sharing other people’s secrets.

Fin was probably going to share her story with him.

‘I remembered!’ she said, suddenly. ‘I remembered who I am and I’m not going to stop until I say it all. It’s been bothering me and I can’t live like this anymore. So, here goes...’

Her voice attracted the attention of the other visitors in the café garden.

‘But Fin, why don’t you tell me everything in private? Why did you choose here where everyone can hear you? You know very well what’ll happen to you.’ Fleex was not going to give up; he was determined to make her see sense.

‘No! It doesn’t matter anymore; there’s no life for me here!’

However, after short consideration, she lowered her voice so he was the only one who could hear her story.

‘I was a wealthy heiress in Richland, the land of the rich diamond deposits. I had two suitors; one was wealthy and the other was poor. Dane, the poor one, was handsome and kind while Chaz, the wealthy one, was only handsome. The poor one made a proposal to me first, but I rejected him just because of his poverty. The other one got my ‘Yes’, and we started organising the wedding.’

Roseheart was listening, leaning on the small triangular table, his cheeks turning redder and redder, and the tentacles on his head gradually curving from their hat-shape into pulsing purple hearts. That always happened when Fleex was not able to keep his emotions to himself. Love aroma pulsed out from the little hearts. And this time the aroma poured out over the visitors of the little café, making them start confessing their love to the first creature in possession of a pulse that they caught sight of. That caused some confusion at first, but was enough to distract those around them from Fin’s story. Once the love aroma wore off, they were going to forget everything they had heard.

‘A week before the wedding, Chaz and I argued at the town’s open market,’ Fin continued. ‘He didn’t want to pay the price of the wedding jewellery which I had ordered from a trader a long time earlier. He called me ugly names in front of people who had gathered around us. At that moment, Dane was passing by and, when he heard the quarrel, headed towards us. He was just in time to hear what Chaz was calling me. Dane stepped in between my future husband and I and told him to apologise to me immediately if he didn’t want any trouble. Chaz sneered at that and started ridiculing us. Dane slapped him in the face and the two started fighting. Chaz just managed to come out of it alive, all bruised and bleeding, and then Dane took me home.’

‘Of course, Chaz broke off the engagement and cancelled the

wedding but, a week later, Dane was charged with murder. On the day of the fight, someone broke into Chaz' house and killed his father with a knife. There were witnesses who claimed that Dane was the murderer. They also found the bloody knife in his house. He was sentenced to death but he managed to escape abroad and I never saw him again... I'm trying to remember his face, but I can't! Soon after that, his mother fell sick with sorrow and shame and passed away. I knew Dane was not a killer, but even if I had said it, nobody would have believed me. And the feeling that it was all my fault made me leave my home and wander away.'

'I travelled through many lands and, you know what? People outside Fogland don't look like us. They are taller and they don't have....,' she hesitated for a moment, 'for example, your family, you have tentacles which you call hats. The Gerions, on Round Street, have three arms. The Soleys have a light on their foreheads and they shine like torches all night. Where I come from, hair is hair, people have two arms, and their heads are not like bedside lamps in the dark. This is a strange place here.'

Fleex was thinking. Fogland was definitely a land which you could enter but could not leave. Not on your own. It was a place with a purpose. But exactly what that purpose was, none of the locals knew.

He turned to Fin, 'What's the last thing you remember before you came here?'

'I remember a small forest, all green. I was walking along a path leading downwards. There was no other way, only down. In the thickest part of the forest, the path just disappeared. I was tired and sat down to have a rest. I must have fallen asleep because I remember that the path had reappeared when I woke up, and I followed it to the Rose Garden.'

Bright tears filled her eyes, held on for a moment and then ran down the silky skin of her cheeks. Fleex was looking at her with a heavy heart. So heavy that his face turned pale and the tentacles in his hair hung down like the dead limbs of an octofruit. He felt sorry for Fin. It was nice that she had chosen him to share her story with, and he was not going to tell anyone. And if she kept quiet, the fog was not going to take her.

A creepy, accusing shriek jolted him out of his thoughts.

‘Gold digger! Greedy, insensitive cow!’ Somebody was screaming and the voice was coming from the vines twisting over the café. Then there was a rumble as something round and clumsy rolled down the path and sped away.

‘The Gossiper! She’s been hiding above us all the time, eaves-dropping!’ Fleex whispered, as he held the hands of his loved one. ‘Fin, whatever happens, I want you to know that I love you and...’

Before he could even finish, white and grey clouds of fog suddenly descended from all sides and surrounded Fin, blackening the sky and the garden. Wet cold froze them. The fog formed into the ugly face of an unknown creature, with black holes for eyes and sharp teeth. Fin was still squeezing Fleex’ hands when strangely fleshless yet strong fingers suddenly grabbed at his, forcing them apart. A powerful pull and then the fog monster pushed him aside with its enormous paw and opened its mouth. Fin sank inside, in a flood of tears. The fog spiralled up, taking Fin with it.

Fleex was stunned. It took him hours to realise she was gone and he was never going to see her again. Without looking at it, he took the piece of paper from the table and put it into his pocket. She had merely decided to share her secret with him, but the fog had taken her. Because of the Gossiper.

## **THE GOSSIPER AND HER EVIL DEEDS**

The houses in the village of Fogland were built in a spiral, starting at the village green. The first settlers set the trend and others followed. As per an unwritten rule, each new house continued the spiral. Under the same rule, the height of the buildings was kept more or less the same. The Gossiper was born in the ground. The creature bore several funnels protruding from her pumpkin body. When the first house was built, her creeping, sticky vines moved her up onto its roof, shooting more sticky vines to every house that followed, forming cable-like bridges on which she could move around. That was how she was able to get to every house and listen to every conversation (especially before the soundproofing was done). Then she would jump on the bridges to distribute what she had learnt by means of her funnel-ears that served as speakers.

It did not matter very much that the houses were soundproofed once Lipo the Builder turned up in the village. Those who were in their homes did not hear anything, but the Gossiper knew that and broadcast all day when the gardens and streets were full of people. Nobody knew exactly how the pumpkin with ears had appeared and why she behaved as she did – was it just out of pure evil or was she following an order from Fog Almighty? Was she hiding some big, personal secret? Would she disappear if someone revealed it to everybody?

## THE MURDER OF THE PUMPKIN

Fleex woke up in his bed. He hadn't the foggiest idea how he had got home. Someone must have brought him. No memory about that. He got up and his head was throbbing. He felt something sticky and looked at his hands – purple streams were flowing down and dripping onto the floor, forming a little puddle at his feet. The hearts on his so-called hat were bleeding. Uncle Farn and Auntie Farnella, who he lived with, were nowhere to be heard, which was quite extraordinary for them. Merry and noisy, they usually got up at dawn and, with their jokes and laughter, woke everybody up to five houses away. His other relatives lived in the house next door – Uncle Fops and Auntie Fappa. The Hatters, as they called their clan, lived carefree and often dined together, telling each other made-up stories and giggling a lot.

Fleex grabbed a colourful scarf and tied it round his head, hiding the bleeding hearts. He went into the kitchen where he found his aunt making tea. She looked at him with concern, tried to say something, but just started sobbing and hugged him. They stayed embraced for a while until Farnella eventually stepped back, poured tea into a big mug and handed it to him. 'Have some of my strongest relaxing tea. It'll calm you down in no time at all.'

'Thanks Auntie, but I'm fine,' said Fleex, sipping carefully.

'Drink it, my boy, it'll help you. Sleep won't do you any harm, and there is no work at this time anyway.'

They did not say a word about Fin. Fleex spent the next few days sleeping. When at last, one morning, he refused to have the calming tea, he had the feeling that both Fin and her disappearance were just a nightmare. He decided to go out for a walk. He was alone at home and there was nobody to stop him.

As soon as he stepped out, he felt a sharp pain in his eyes. There was too much light and it blinded him for a moment. But there was something else. He felt a strange, heavy warmth, rather unusual for that time of the year, when the eternal autumn was entering one of its most unpleasant stages. It was brighter, warmer and wetter, in spite of the grey clouds which were covering the little piece of sky

over Fogland. And there was some unexplained tension in the air, which felt thicker and made breathing rather difficult.

He headed north along the empty street. He did not meet anyone; people had hidden in their houses, away from the unusual light and warmth. He felt lonely and cold, despite the heavy air. He was overwhelmed by thoughts of Fin. Her face came up in his mind: the gleam in her sad eyes, her delicate movement when dancing, her hair flowing down her back... That was how he wanted to remember her. His world was dark now, almost all colours just seemed grey. Joy had left his life.

A shrill scream tore through the silence, digging sharp teeth into his mind. 'I'm going to bloody kill you! Come here! Bloody Gossiper!!!'

Fleex stopped in the street, wondering what was going on.

All of a sudden, the Gossiper rolled around the corner. Her funnels were all working at full speed, moving her fast over the gardens. Nolis, one of the builders, was running after her barefoot, brandishing a knife. Thick, dark-orange liquid was dripping from the blade. Just then, Fleex noticed that the Gossiper had left traces of the same colour everywhere she had been. She changed her trajectory sharply and headed straight for him. Nolis did the same, cutting through the neighbour's garden and jumping on top of her with his eyes glazed. He lifted the knife and swung. Fleex ran to him and pulled him back. 'Stop! What are you doing?'

'Dirty little buggar ... just eavesdropping ... wouldn't leave us in peace ... You know what she did this morning? I was talking to my friend Shmoro in MY home, and this little buggar was hiding there, listening! Then she ran around the whole village telling everybody!' gasped Nolis, with a hoarse voice. He was squeezing the pumpkin between his strong thighs. The funnels were wriggling desperately, but were helpless. Thick, orange juice was colouring the ground around them.

Fleex was perplexed. The pumpkin had never entered a house before. Never! Not once. She was quite happy floating along her network of sticky vines and catching unprotected conversations in the streets or through open doors or windows. Whatever had made her change her behaviour?



‘I’ll kill her, I’ll save all of us from this monster,’ shouted Nolis, gathering strength and swinging with all his might again. Fleex did not manage to react in time.

The knife split the Gossiper’s peel and an orange fountain sprang out of it. The funnels trembled more and more slowly until they finally fell limp and lifeless. The juice kept on coming. Something inside moved and started pushing to come out. The whole torso slowly split into two. The halves rolled over and Fleex could see that each of them contained three small pumpkins, their funnels going wild. They jumped out of the womb of their dead mother and raced away. Fleex and Nolis watched them, shocked, until they disappeared from view. The seeds that had fallen on the ground immediately sank into the soil and their vines crept up around the house, then along the other vines, and from there – to the other houses. A completely new overhead transport system was developed in no time, ready to accommodate the new little gossipers.

Nolis started crying.

Fleex decided he had had enough of a walk and left Nolis in the hands of the worried people from the village who had turned up to see what was going on. He had no strength to comfort anybody. He needed comfort himself, but he doubted he would find any. He felt more and more anxious as he walked briskly home. Too many unusual things were going on and that made him feel that something really bad was coming, something that could not be undone.