

Once a year, the fireflies gather to dance. By an inversion of the magic that illuminates them at night, they travel invisibly under the cover of day: through the wetlands and mist of the Southern Marshes, down the arroyos and across the plains of the West, up from the lowlands, and down the cliffs, carried by the unruly and temperamental wind of the Northernmost Reach. They travel with an unfaltering energy and an infallible sense of direction, gathering at a place and time chosen according to the frequency of bittersweet smiles; the shape of sea foam as it crashes to shore; the particular fragrance of a particular peony; the riddles of dragons and the counsel of songbirds.

Tonight, they convene at the Karst Forest. Ragged towers of stone extend skyward, the tallest among them reaching halfway to the clouds, the shortest mountable by a practiced climber in half a minute. A bed of moss and clover winds through the valley, quieting footsteps and softening echoes.

A place like this accretes mythos simply by existing, and there are (at current count) one hundred twenty-seven tales of how the Karst Forest came to be. One collection of children's fables tells of an innovative young dwarf who realized, after pondering their distaste for digging, that it was much more expedient to create tunnels by simply pushing the earth straight up. Another tale, recorded by hand in a vellum-bound book lost in a corner of a neglected library, as such things often are, claims that the karst towers were once true trees that, foreseeing a great need many years hence, petrified themselves for centuries to come. A third, quite popular among adults, relates that the Karst Forest truly would have been a forest if only the Divine Creator hadn't, in spite of Their reputedly limitless wisdom, invented fruit and fermentation just a bit too soon. Good times were manifold in the days that followed and several divine tasks were postponed; consequently, imbuing the spark of life to the Karst Forest remains to this day a forgotten task at the bottom of a godly to-do list.

Regardless of its origin, tonight, as the sun dips below the horizon, the karst towers flare red and gold. The crags and cracks in their surfaces are smoothed by the light, leaving noble monoliths that cast deep shadows. The wildlife here received no forewarning, but they understand, and they quiet not only with the coming night but with reverence, as well. The last firefly arrives without fanfare, completing a journey that would take a mounted rider three wearying days, just as the last of the twilight slips across the valley and over the horizon.

Slowly, the fireflies flick on their lights. They hang in the air, spilling light in irregular patterns throughout the dark, like the firmament brought to earth. When finally the valley brims with miniature stars, they begin to move, flowing around each other in regal patterns. Then they accelerate, tumbling together like a forest stream set free to

play without gravity to supervise. Faster and faster they twirl, imitating a downpour in all directions, a whirlpool with no center. Then, from the chaos, patterns emerged.

And what patterns they were. Flowers blossomed in a sphere, whose surface morphed into a map of the world as it was three centuries ago. Cubes bobbed in the air, assembling themselves into miniature fortresses and disassembling into idyllic villages. One large cube was subdividing itself indefinitely, intent on infinite recursion. And glittering leaves fluttered on the karst towers, bringing the forest to life for the first night in many years.

An owl broke the silence. Then a frog, and a cricket, and then a shout of pure, unadulterated joy; and the contributions grew creature by creature until the valley filled with sound. But listen closely: This is not interruption. It is *participation*. The hoots and croaks and chitters and chirps blend in a symphony of wonder and awe, an appreciation of and an accompaniment to the fireflies.

And the fireflies danced to the music: in waltzes and two-steps; in lines and circles and squares and icosahedra; in languid arcs and rapid flutters. They danced to the music and the music sang their dance, a duet in harmony and motion. After many hours, the sunlight hesitantly crept from the east, reluctant to interrupt, but it needn't have worried. The chorus and the fireflies ceded their territory, gently returning the audience to the Karst Forest they had arrived in.

But it was not the *same* forest, not to those in the audience. As the sun washed over them and the fireflies dispersed, as they contemplated the karst and the night and the new day, they understood the night's gift. For in each one, the memory of the fireflies still danced, keeping safe the knowledge that anywhere, even a stone forest with no trees, holds the possibility of wonder and the possibility of joy.