

The wine seemed to be the tree's major export. Finished bottles were placed in a large basket and carried out of the building. Muddle wasn't sure, but it appeared they were the only product taken out of the tree.



# Community Tree

A Never Realm Tale

©2019 David Woodruff – all rights reserved

---

**M**uddle Vestergaard was a bit of an outsider. First, there was the name. What kind of parent calls their son Muddle? To make matters worse, he wasn't prone to disorder. In fact, he preferred a little order. No, Muddle was a creative type in a world which prioritized conformity and success on the first try. Creativity, on the other hand, often led to unsuccessful attempts or experiments which didn't work out as intended. The world wanted drones and Muddle wanted to be a butterfly who designed his own wings.

He spent his time out in the dappled forest, wandering about the trees and the lakes enjoying the beauty of a well-designed world. During the day, the forest was mostly empty. Goblin armies only tended to cross the fens at night and the woodland creatures tended to lay low to avoid the chance encounter with a hunter. The whole place had a fresh pine scent to it along with the sporadic smell of wet bear. It felt nice to be out here alone, listening to the chirp of insects, away from the bustle and sweaty work environment of his home village. Nobody likes an outsider.

By the old mill pond, he spotted what appeared to be a woman bathing in the water. She was quite ... well, let's simply say she was wearing the traditional attire one associates with bathing. Muddle ducked into the bushes. It was not because he wanted to watch her, but out of fear, she might see *him*. After all, if he wanted people looking at him, he would go back to the village. Still, her costume – or rather total lack thereof – tended to draw his attention. Her long, midnight-dark hair flowed over her shoulders. It had waves and curls like the edges of a wheel. The water was barely higher than her knees, meaning there was a lot of pouring of water over her upper form. She carried scoops of water from the pond high with her delicate hands. But this also left her exposed. For her part, she seemed not at all concerned she might be observed.



On the one hand, Muddle wanted her to go away, so he could return to the silence of his solitude. But on the other hand, he was in no hurry for her to leave. He was so distracted, it took Muddle a few minutes to realize she was a dryad. Her form was certainly human enough, although a bit too perfect for her to be one of the local girls. No, the dead giveaway was dark, almost black, wolf guarding her against the trunk of a tree. Its yellow eyes glazed protectively off into the distance. Its muscles clenched, ready to pounce. Human girls simply weren't watched over by my massive wolves. Wolves, like most animals, didn't take kindly to being associated with humans.

All too soon, to Muddle's thinking, she got out of the water. Still, she made no attempt to cover herself but lay in a beam of sunlight, the wolf beside her. At length, she rose and walked right into a tree. The wolf following behind her. Muddle wasn't so much confused by this, after all, dryads have their own ways. Weird perhaps to humans, but as common as breathing to those who travel in the realms of the mystic. He was, however, curious.

Muddle approached the tree. It was an old thing, its branches knurled, and the trunk was covered in bumps and irregular shapes. The bark was smooth, unlike the rough bark of the surrounding oak trees. Near the base was a crack, in the shape of an upside-down letter v, like an open door. It was through this opening the dryad and wolf had passed. Inside the crack, it seemed as if the tree had been hollowed out, but he couldn't see what was inside. Throwing caution to the wind, he stepped inside.

Muddle was expecting to have to wait for his eyes to adjust. But instead of adjusting to the darkness, he found himself squinting in bright light. He couldn't make out the source, but it was strangely cool. Not the light of the sun or a fire. Before him, a spiral staircase descended. Seeing little alternative, and having already abandoned his usual caution, he came down the narrow steps.

He saw everything before he even reached the bottom. It wasn't a room, but a massive chamber, filled with hovels and cozy-looking cottages. Unlike the underground dwellings of the dwarves, this place was bathed in light. The space inside the tree was so massive, looking up, Muddle couldn't make out the roof. On the ground, there were bright flowers of all varieties everywhere. They lay before the doors of the huts like blankets of color. It seemed a perpetual spring day. Filling the streets where a gaggle of women. Some with human-like skin, others with red hair and various shades of green. All of them seemed to have a unique disinterest in fashion of any kind. Muddle had never seen so much sk ... well, let's say that a working dressmaker would never be able to sleep in this place. He scanned for the one who had been washing in the lake, but there were so many of them. It was like seeking a grain of wheat in a haystack.

There was no point in ascending the steps, they had already seen him. He approached them cautiously. He didn't want to attract the attention of any wolves which might be lurking about. Muddle reached out with his toes after the last step. Carefully checking to see if the soft-looking floor was an illusion. It was spongy, but it appeared able to bear his weight. He took his final step down and looked into the eyes of the assembled dryads. Muddle gave them a deep bow, "Ladies."

The one closest to him spoke first. "Mr. Vestergaard, welcome to the tree. My name is Thisei." She introduced herself. Muddle extended a hand. He realized he had no idea if dryads shook hands or if they would find such a form of close contact provocative under the circumstances. He lowered his hand when none of the girls seemed to reciprocate. He smiled. "I'm really not very formal. You can call me Muddle."

The girls all giggled. Normally Muddle was disturbed by the sound of girls giggling. The local girls in the village giggled at him enough for his tastes. And he didn't find their snickers at all to his liking. These titters had a different tone. More suggestive of embarrassment than of ridicule. He certainly wasn't used to the laughter of a crowd of women all wearing far less than he was. He didn't know how to respond.

Thisei gave him a knowing smile. "Welcome to Human Day," she announced. She gleefully waved her arm at the community under the tree and the crowd gathered to allow Muddle to enter. He slowly walked into the center of the exceptionally underdressed women and made his way toward the town center.

"Human Day?" asked Muddle.

Thisei was quick to answer. "Yes, once every hundred years we welcome an outsider, from the world above, into our community. We've decided to welcome you on this honored day."

"Well, I don't know what to say." Muddle replied.

Thisei pointed to a woman in the crowd. "Allow me to introduce you to Trillia our Matriarch and the one who created Human Day." Before him, Muddle saw the woman who led this world. Up close, Muddle could see she was painfully attractive. With a perfect shape which would make a sculptor weep.

“You’ve met Drum,” she pointed to the wolf. “This is Galya, community leader of the naiads.” She indicated a woman with a thin and delicate figure, her long ears tapering to points far over her head. Her black hair seemed to float about her shoulders as if kept in motion by an undetectable breeze. She gazed at him with an unwelcoming look. It had an unearthly quality to it. It was not at all empathic but seem more like the gaze one gives an unwanted bug found crawling into the room.

Trillia turned to her right and indicated Persea, who she indicated was her assistant. She had a more human-looking appearance, especially around the ears. Her long, wild mane of red hair contrasted sharply with her light green skin. With her head, she gave the slightest nod, but not to Muddle, but to Trillia. “Come, we’ve provided a home for you.” She directed him further into the town.

“That’s most generous of you,” Muddle declared. The tree dweller’s welcome had been most disingenuous. It made Muddle even more nervous than he already was. Now, anxious to leave, Muddle addressed Trillia, “But I really must be getting back. You know, work to do. Grains to harvest. Chairs to mend.” The turned in the direction of the stairs and found a dark naga coiled where the stairs had once been. It was a sharp-featured snake with a humanoid head, but with more teeth than an oversized gear. Muddle trembled involuntarily when he realized the steps had been nothing more than the spines which ran down the sinuous creature’s back.

“Nonsense,” Trillia declared, “you have to at least look at the house. Persea will show you the way.” She waved the two of them off.

Persea grabbed Muddle’s arm and took him off deeper into the town. The dryad’s touch had a tingle to it. He found he had no desire to resist her in any way. Her touch had a somewhat calming effect to it.

“Play along,” Persea whispered in Muddle’s ear. “Trillia may be wonderfully liberal and advanced and have no problem with humans, but the others tended not to be so generous. Quite frankly, they think more of the wolf Drum than they think of you.”

Muddle tried to be casual. “Am I a prisoner?”



“No,” Persea replied, “Prisoners have some hope of parole. You have none.” They passed all manner of buildings. Some little more than tents, a few merely piles of twigs. There were animal skin huts and longhouses made of tree bark. The two of them stopped before a well-made wattle and daub house. It was finer than anything Muddle had even stepped in, much less occupied. Persea led him through the low doorway. Inside the floor was covered in soft straw. A skillfully-crafted rope bed sat in the corner behind a table and two chairs.

“The straw is for you to ...” Persea explained, “Well, they don’t expect you to be house trained. You’ll find facilities in a small building behind the back. You know how to use them?”

“Of course,” Muddle lied.

“Best not to stray too far from the house,” Persea warned him. “Or you might not see it again.”

She headed for the door. “Wait a minute. where are you going?”

Persea gave Muddle a serious look. “You don’t expect me to stay here, do you? This structure, well, it’s preposterous. All straight lines and angles.” She clearly shivered. “Besides I have duties to attend to. I’ll be back later. There is a dinner planned for tonight. You’re the guest of honor.”

“I hope I’m not the main course,” Muddle stammered.

“You’re disgusting,” Persea exclaimed, exiting the house.



Muddle found the atmosphere quite invigorating, to say nothing of the view of the lovely creatures outside his windows. The air had a freshness to it he had never tasted before. From time to time, Thesei and drum dropped by to bring him food. What she brought had a taste he had never experienced before. Sweeter, more robust than anything he had ever enjoyed before. And that was only the vegetables.

The only thing missing seemed to be a modicum of companionship. The locals were all friendly enough, but they had a tendency to treat him more as a pet than as a real person. Asking questions always got him the same general response; their ways were simply beyond the understanding of one such as Muddle. “Mustn’t trouble yourself with such kinds of inquiries and thoughts.” they’d say.

After a few weeks, Persea dropped by. “I managed to get you a job,” she said giving him a production line smile.

“Excellent.” Muddle answered gleefully. The prospect of getting out of the house and doing something was akin to manna from heaven. “What will I be doing?”

“The tree has a small vineyard and wine shop,” Persea explained. “We make all our own wines by hand. You’ll be working there.”

Muddle found himself clapping with joy. It was an odd gesture, even for him. Persea gave him an unusual look and Muddle put his hands down at his sides. An embarrassed smile filled his face. Persea took him down to one of the buildings which resembled a bark-covered longhouse. Inside where all types of young ladies working away frantically. There were redheads, brunettes, blonds and one or two with green hair which Muddle had never seen before. They were all outstanding delightful looking; youthful and athletic. It struck Muddle he had never seen anyone over the age of thirty since entering the tree. He noticed that the blonds were relegated to making bottles. The redheads were engaged in crushing grapes, while the brunettes were all busily mixing ingredients. The greenhairs seemed to be the supervisors. It was a social structure which seemed based on hair color. Muddle had always been a dirty blond himself. He wondered what class his hair put him in.

Muddle didn’t have to wonder long. Persea introduced him to one of the greenhairs and she directed him to stand in a corner; out of the way. From time to time, one of the greenhairs had him move a stack of bottles from one part of the structure to another. It was all very mind-numbing work. Not very creative as an outlet. What it did do, however, was pass the time. Before Muddle knew it, Persea arrived to escort him home. All the girls left as well, a new shift coming in to replace them.

They arrived back at the cottage and Muddle spent some time looking out the window. He had learned to judge the passage of time by the number of meals. The inside of the tree was always lit. The light was

unchanging, never varying, and there was no dark. The girls seemed to be afraid of the dark. After the third meal, muddle went to sleep on his rope bed. It was surprisingly comfortable without a mattress. Muddle always slept long and awoke fully rested. About every twenty-one meals, a group of young blond girls came in and changed the straw on the floor. May times they asked about his health after seeing the clean state of the straw. "Are you eating enough?" they'd ask.

Shortly after this, two redheads would appear with buckets of water. They would pour the water over Muddle's and rub the soap around using long-handled, heavy brushes. The type of scrubbers Muddle had used, in the past, to wash down horses. Now each day, Thesei and the wolf would drop by to escort him to work. Persea apparently was too busy with other, more urgent tasks to drop by. Muddle gleaned from Thesei's mutterings that he was her special charge, and she was none too happy about it. He stood in corners and moved a few odd bottles from place to place. They were very clear with him about his capabilities ... in that, as far as they were concerned, he had none. They were only letting him be in the building to show Trillia how liberal they were.

What Muddle was doing, unbeknownst to them, was carefully observing their process. Within a few weeks, he had all the ingredients and proportions memorized. The cooking times and the mixing procedure down pat. The wine seemed to be the tree's major export. Finished bottles were placed in a large basket and carried out of the building. Muddle wasn't sure, but it appeared they were the only product taken out of the tree. He was never allowed to taste it, but if it was anything like the food, he could make a fortune making it – if he ever managed to escape. Already he was looking for ways to make a blanket, so he could cover himself and hide in the bottom of one of the baskets.

Unfortunately for Muddle, textile manufacture was not one of the girl's strong points. He couldn't even find a table cloth. Good thing the girls didn't seem to have any allergies. Blowing your nose in the tree would have been a messy process to be sure. What with there being nothing to wipe your nose. In the meantime, Muddle racked his brain trying to figure out how he might secretly construct a loom.



Garthnac leaned back from looking into the orb. He was wearing a deep-blue robe covered in gold embroidery. They seemed to be shaped into some form of symbols, although no two of them appeared to be from the same language. His long white beard covered up a number of them which were sewn below his neck and chest. He scratched his completely bald head. "I think he's about ready," Garthnac declared.

The orb was a massive glass ball, about the size of a boulder. Inside the crystal sphere, one could see everything going on in the tree. Right now, it seemed to be focused on the rear of the building where Muddle worked. Several of the girls were bringing out a load of wine in a basket.

Beside him was an odd-looking man in trousers and a jacket of the exact same color and material. In the place of the gold symbols, there were equally spaced vertical threads of silver in the material. Under the jacket, he wore a white shirt, decorated with only a scrap of red material which hung from his throat. "I'm not sure I get the connection."

"It's simple really," Garthnac explained. Twisting his fingers in immutable patterns, a swirling vortex of lights and colors appeared in the warehouse behind them. Gazing into the orb, a similar vortex appeared

in the tree directly behind the wine factory. The girls put down the wine basket and stepped away. The vortex swallowed it like a hippo downing a meal. At the same instant, the vortex behind then brightened like a flashbulb and then disappeared. But instead of wine, the room was filled with about 150 barrels of crude oil drums.

"I still don't get it," Mr. Castantin complained.

"Physical transference," Garthnac grinned. "What's wine on their end of the multiverse is top grade crude oil in ours."

"Still," Mr. Castantin noted, "That's not very efficient. "Even at \$60 a barrel, you've only got about \$9,000 here. It took those girls over a week to produce it."

Garthnac looked pleased. "You're forgetting the time differential between universes. From this one site, I can produce this same amount 600 times a day. That's \$5.4 million every day. In US Dollars; I don't know what it is in Rubles." Garthnac paused to let the number sink in. "Right about now, our human friend will be desperate to get out of there. Once I rescue him, he'll be happy to set up even more refineries."

Mr. Castantin's face changed from limited disinterest to full-on greed. "How did you find this place?"

"It's been found a few times by religious scholars over the centuries. It explains why the image of paradise is alike in so many religious schools and philosophies." Garthnac rubbed his hands together. "I was studying in a monastery in Tibet and ... well, that's not important."

"And you pay them nothing?" Mr. Castantin asked bewildered.

"That's the best part," Garthnac grinned wildly, "I ship them nuclear waste as payment."

Mr. Castantin appeared shocked. "Are you mad? You'll kill them all! You're killing the goose that laid the golden egg, man!"

"You're forgetting the physical transference differential," Garthnac explained. "Here it's nuclear waste. Over there, in their multiverse, it can be eaten as a gourmet meal with no ill effects."

Mr. Castantin rubbed his chin. "So, you want me to get you nuclear waste and you change it to oil? Then we split the profits?"

Garthnac grinned. "Exactly. Do you think you can get us some of the waste from Chernobyl?"

Mr. Castantin considered the possibility. "I'll see what I can do. This whole set up is most impressive, most impressive. You make it easy to fall in love with Capitalism. I think you've created the ultimate outsourcing operation here. It'll make Guatemala look like a backwater."