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First Edition

Content Warning

People with sensitivities to the following subjects may find some sections of Arboreal Path difficult to read:

Suicide
Death of an unborn child
Loss of life partner
Combat involving animals



CHAPTER 1



The shadow donned three faces. One for each life trapped within. Sunken features rippled across a vaguely human-shaped head before giving way to a feminine silhouette. Then masculine. It cycled between each face like a spinning roulette wheel. For the shadow to take form of its own volition... such a thing hadn't occurred in a lifetime.

Hali stared at the tattoo on the underside of her left forearm. A circle with two lines inside, forming a bottomless triangle. The ink changed from white to black like dye spreading through water on her brown skin. As it spread, the two colors swirled and floated along the rune, never settling on one color for long. A cord of black mist connected her tattoo with the shadow spirit.

Face mid-transition, the shadow slithered up the knotted oak tree behind Hali. She scrambled away, letting the book and ragged black coat in her lap fall to the grass. Patting herself in search of her daggers, she found only morning-dew-soaked leaves coating her black tunic and pants.

Any onlookers would assume he was a shadow puppet created by the morning sun and clever use of fire magic, but nobody came to the unkempt, forested park behind Wilton's town library. She was alone. Without weapons or any useful spells prepared. Did it even matter? For all the good they'd do, Hali may as well defend herself with the acorns littering the dirt road.

The shadow's upside-down head peeled itself off the branches and stretched down to stare at her. Hollowed-out eyes with purple grape-like flesh stretched over them. Her stomach churned as the sour stench of oranges wriggled through the air.

With an outstretched boot, Hali attempted to drag her book closer. There weren't any spells inside capable of fighting Kthon, but this cursed spirit couldn't be allowed to reclaim Hali's family.

Hundreds of tiny hands burst from the shadow's stomach and grabbed the book before Hali, passing it up to Kthon's long, spindly-fingered grasp. The spirit scraped a finger along its cover, only to pass right through it. Every hand lining Kthon scratched and tore at his body, and shadow gave way to a pulsating orange underbelly. Kthon's mist rejuvenated, not quite keeping pace with the rebellious hands. Exaggerated, monstrous proportions shrank into that of a human man. His empty eye sockets caved in on themselves, and the shadow's face shifted again. To that of Hali's son—Rasal.

Rasal and Rev—Hali's partner—had won. Or at least their intertwined existence within Kthon had. When Rev had been added to Kthon's collection, she'd somehow fought back, and instead of becoming masks for Kthon to wear, Rasal and Rev had merged separately. A combination of the two, yet neither. Hali had named this new existence Ikazu. It was thanks to Ikazu that Kthon had been trapped deep within his own body—until now.

Hali crashed between the tree's roots, clutching her book as if dropping it again would trigger an earthquake. "How about a warning next time?"

Ikazu's hands latched together into the sign for "Sorry." Although Ikazu couldn't speak, Hali had taught him to use hand signs. Even if Ikazu

wasn't truly her family, being able to talk to a facsimile of them still brought its own twisted joy.

"Don't be. This is my fault for getting complacent. There's not much you can do from inside the rune. I promised to set you free from Kthon, but it seems we're running out of time." Hali sighed. "At least you're okay."

Despite lacking facial detail, Ikazu's mouth twitched and contorted into something resembling a smile. No voice, yet Hali could hear his laugh. Like a distant memory of how Rasal might have sounded if he had been given a chance to live.

A recurring thought crossed her mind. *Would Rasal look like me without those shadows obscuring him?* She imagined a man with the same bouncy, dark auburn curls as her. Observing the world through green eyes.

Or would he have taken after Rev more? The man in her head changed. Pink hair with peacock feathers sticking out from the back, extending down past his shoulders.

He couldn't inherit Rev's hair color and feathers, but it was cute to imagine Rasal that way regardless. Rev's feathers were Hali's favorite part of her, so Hali would have been grateful if Rasal had inherited them by some miracle. Hali even had the same purple and green feathers knit into the black cashmere cowl wound tight around her neck.

"Memory please," Ikazu signed. Despite learning many words to express himself, Ikazu rarely said more than this phrase. Sometimes it made her regret teaching him.

"No—wait until I sleep."

Ikazu—and Kthon before him—siphoned energy from Hali's memories while she slept. The ones with Rev were most effective. Whether because Rev liked to reminisce or Rasal found joy in watching his moms interact, Hali wasn't sure. The process gave her vivid, almost lucid dreams. Forced her to live out an approximation of her past.

Sometimes Hali wished he would erase her memories so she could live in ignorance. Pleasant or depressing, they were all painful. But the

recollection-fueled nightmares were what motivated her to shun sleep altogether. Even if Ikazu had become better at avoiding nightmares, he slipped up from time to time, and skipping sleep was preferable to experiencing such paralyzing fear.

While Hali wanted Ikazu to recharge, letting him do so in a public park—even if nobody came here—was too risky.

Ikazu drizzled onto the dirt in ribbons.

Pouting? Please don't let that become a trend. “Stop being dramatic. We’ll memory hop later, got it?”

His head undulated as if a swarm of insects might burst through until a feminine face sprouted in the back. Rev. Was she going to scold Hali for being mean to their son? Hali smirked, wishing they had such ordinary family moments.

Hali traced the rune on the book’s white velvet cover with her finger. It matched the binding rune on her arm. Except the color was a static, faded black. She pried the book open and flipped to her rune reference page in the back. A dozen or so of her favorite runes were listed on the page. Each set of symbols represented a spell written in the language of spirits. Though the effects weren’t easy to predict, Hali had become adept at determining a rune’s spell based on the symbols. To the point where she’d learned to create her own spells from scratch. No mixture of runes had ever managed to release her family from Kthon, nor destroy him, but Hali tried every day. She’d read every book in Grenvel to glean any new information she could, and most of her life had been spent crafting new spells in the pursuit of her family’s freedom. She was close to a breakthrough, but every design she came up with required an immense power source.

Ikazu’s hand grasped Hali’s wrist.

“I’m trying to read.” Her attempt to swat him away only resulted in her hand passing through chilling air. If anyone else had interrupted her like that, she might have thrown a dagger instead. Reading time was sacred, even if this wasn’t a for-fun read like a novel.

“Memory please,” Ikazu’s hands repeated. Only this time, Hali swore she heard a voice in her head croak the phrase in conjunction.

“I said later.” *Time to return you to the rune.* Hali raised her hand into the air. Blood burned in her body, her veins swelling as light emanated from her binding rune.

Ikazu’s gentle features peeled back, revealing Kthon’s eyes as shadow tendrils squirmed into Hali’s skull. As they burrowed, Hali’s world darkened. With a moist click, countless sets of judging eyes creaked open around her. Something Hali hadn’t witnessed since a time she’d gone by a different name.



The air within Sky Tower’s expansive stone stairwell tingled Sereia’s throat like inhaling a cloud of pepper. It was strange seeing the bustling center of research and education abandoned. Every workstation had been left in immaculate condition—beakers and flasks tucked neatly into one corner and stacks of books in the other. As if the tower’s alchemists and mages had to follow strict organization guidelines. How did they have time to put everything away so neatly after receiving Rev’s evacuation notice? The quarantine zone was so far from here, Sereia would have left a mess to get there in time. Just looking at the workstations made her want to knock everything over.

Two voices spoke at once within Sereia’s head. *My celestial, you must focus or this spell will kill you.*

Please don’t read my mind, Malakine, Sereia said with her thoughts. *I cannot help that any more than you can help breathing.*

Being linked to the celestial spirit was the worst. Sereia had spent years as a celestial without having a spirit take residence in her body. While Malakine’s presence greatly expanded Sereia’s power... the sooner Malakine was gone, the better. *When this is over, I’m never linking with a spirit again.*

Without my power, what hope do you have of curing the ethereal plague?

Sereia reached the top of Sky Tower and peered over the edge. *The spell may have been your idea, but I'm doing all the work.*

It had taken months to perfect, but Sereia had cured ten people. The method required celestial magic—which only Sereia could perform. She had to absorb the plague into her own body, then use a special binding rune painted on her forearm to keep herself safe while cleansing it. But tens of thousands were infected, and anybody cured ran the risk of becoming reinfected. Somehow, Sereia needed to get every drop of the plague at once. Including the bits lingering in the air.

Clasping her hands together in a vain attempt to appear ready, Sereia said, *You're only here so I can afford the blood toll for a spell of this magnitude.*

Runes had been painted along the tower's base and up the walls. The result of several days' worth of labor on Sereia's part. Being the highest point in Thaum, this was the only spot where the spell could properly cascade through the entire country.

She walked to a massive telescope at the tower's edge and glanced into it, adjusting until the tiny tents of Rev's quarantine zone came into view. People the size of ants wandered about as doctors tended to the infected.

Studying the plague had been enough to convince Sereia to take this job. Instantaneous loss of magic always came first. Even the best mages succumbed. Which element of magic sparked within their blood didn't matter either. So long as somebody was born with magic, this plague could take hold.

The second symptom was far worse in Sereia's mind. Fading memories. Witnessing children become strangers to their parents in days was by far the worst. The thought of forgetting Rev and Rasal drove her the whole way through developing runes to amplify her celestial magic's reach.

Malakine's deep voice drowned out the softer as they said, *Use my power to open the Lunar Vault. With it, you can power your runes safely.*

A jagged, shimmering green scar lingered in the sky. The Lunar Vault. A reminder of when it threatened to rain destruction onto the world beneath it. Even with years more experience and Malakine's help, Sereia knew harnessing the Vault's power would cause more harm than good. Sealing the Vault was the first thing she'd done as a celestial. The whole reason she became one to begin with. And now everybody expected her to repeat that success here with the plague.

Great idea. End one disaster by causing another. Opening the Vault would kill hundreds of thousands of people in every country, not just Thaum. Grenvel, Wolloisha, Diya... Sereia said, tugging on one of her curls. *I sealed it for a reason. Our power is enough. And should I die from the blood toll... exchanging my life to save those countries is an easy choice.*

And your son? Malakine asked.

As if on cue, Rasal kicked Sereia's ribs from the inside.

Sereia patted her protruding belly in gentle reassurance. *This would've been easier in a month, but the plague won't wait for Rasal to be born. Make sure we survive. And if I hit etheric drought, you can escape with my son.*

My celestial cannot die. Do you realize how long I waited for a new one?

Anyone can become one. I'm expendable.

Rasal will be protected. Malakine's presence sputtered as they receded, hiding somewhere within her veins. The unpleasant feeling of being stretched over Malakine like a couple-sizes-too-small dress remained, but at least there was quiet. Putting up with this was worth it for the cure and Rasal's safety.

Kneeling at the tower's center, Sereia painted a diamond and connected its corners to the runes on the tower's sides, then placed her hand in the

diamond's center. Each rune took its toll, boiling Sereia's blood. Light filled the lines, tracing a path along the runes until Sky Tower became a blinding beacon. Pink, green, and purple vapor wafted off the runes and poured over the tower's edges, stretching across Thaum and beyond.

The blood toll was a mere tingle as the spell connected her to the plague lingering throughout Thaum's air and within the country's people. Sereia hadn't imagined Malakine's help would trivialize such an expensive spell. There wasn't even a hint of lightheadedness, much less the intense boiling she had experienced while curing a single person.

The vapor crawled back up the tower, changing from its bright ethereal colors to white as it surrounded Sereia with a lovely citric scent. Every muscle in her body tensed as she pulled the plague-infused vapor towards herself.

Standing with her arms towards the sky, Sereia's skin might as well have been melting off her bones as the plague seeped in through her binding rune. Its black ink quivered as little white dots speckled the rune, and she coughed a cloud of white and black fog onto the stone floor. The fog writhed. Something about it was different than she had seen previously. It was alive. A spirit, much like Malakine and the ones from Sereia's celestial trials. Had her spell somehow pulled in a spirit?

Before she could ask Malakine for help, the fog shaped itself into a jagged claw and latched onto Sereia. It dragged her in as a gaunt face with eyeless sockets formed.

A second claw crept from within and pierced Sereia with an unnaturally long, crooked finger. She recoiled as a crushing headache took hold. Each time it prodded, it merely passed through her as harmless as a cloud—except for the worsening scraping in her skull. Her own heartbeat blasted in her ears in step with each pump of blood threatening to burst her veins.

Everything became muted as the claw ripped Malakine from Sereia, forcibly unlinking her from the spirit. Obscured by the deepening fog, only their glowing white half was visible until they vanished into a circle of glittering stars.

Gray mist dripped from the fog's fingers into its embedded face, and Sereia's insides twisted. She screamed, but no sound came. Crying cut through the silence as the fog coalesced into the appearance of a human baby.



The shadow released Hali, face-changing from Kthon to Rev. The mist faded as the binding rune reined the now-feminine Ikazu in and trapped her within Hali's forearm tattoo.

Twice in a day you've saved me, Ikazu. Keep weakening Kthon for me until I figure out these new runes.

Memory hopping like that was worse than the dreams. Something about the way Kthon used the ability increased every painful sensation a thousandfold, and he obsessed over reminding her of every mistake. Every flaw.

Reaching for her book again, Hali stared at the runes she'd used for the ethereal plague cure. *If I was still a celestial, it would be simple to power a rune and free my family.*

Was that the solution? Hali may not have had celestial magic anymore, but she knew how to unlock it. It might not be possible for anybody to become a full-fledged celestial again, but only basic celestial magic would be necessary. All she needed was somebody to teach.

CHAPTER 2



Books and games of both the board and card variety lined little shelves on the bark walls of Tio's tree home. Flicking the leaf-shaped charms dangling from the silver bracelet on his left wrist, he checked each for its sharpness until he found one that still had its edge. Blood trickled down golden-brown skin as he pricked a finger. Placing the hand against the wall, pressure built in his veins and the tree wriggled in response. The blood evaporated, consumed for his flourish's magic. The tree accepted his guidance and its bark stretched into a new shelf.

Homes like Tio's were a dying style. Not enough druids to tend to them. Newer districts in Belsa resorted to building homes by molding dirt and stone with the earth flourish. Not preferred, but at least they weren't built with dead wood like most of Grenvel. Seventeen people had been born with the nature flourish in the past seventy years, and only fourteen were still alive.

Tio placed his newest card game, *Volatile Lemurs*, by itself on the pristine shelf. It looked lonely. *Guess I need to add to my collection to fill this space out.*

Playing seemed unlikely since it required at least three participants, but the cute cartoon lemur on the box was irresistible. It was asking a bit much of him to gather people. Belsa was a sparse city to begin with, and Tio didn't go out of his way to make friends. Plenty of his other games could be played solo, so he had options when nobody was around. Which was always.

Purring came from below. A fuzzy black cat hopped off one of many cushions thrown about his floor and rubbed against Tio's legs. He petted Sir Fluffyboi—the name she'd chosen for herself—in return.

"Feed me, kitten," Sir Fluffyboi said, following with a meandering meow.

His own familiar referred to him as a child, despite him being twenty-six. All because speaking to animals didn't come naturally to Tio. Other druids had deep bonds of respect with their animal familiars. Practicing seemed the obvious choice, but the cat slept through her days. Talking to other animals was more interesting than talking to people, but it scared him in equal measure. What kind of druid was he if holding simple conversations with animals was a struggle? People would laugh. Besides, leaving home was too much trouble. Tio always kept that excuse in his repertoire, so it would be ready at a moment's notice.

Tio tried his best to say, "You ate already." But, "I ate all your food," came out instead.

Sir Fluffyboi clawed at his leg in response. "I'll go hunt for myself then, kitten." She hopped out of the tree's open circular window.

Hunt? Go begging on the streets, you mean.

Brushing a cat's worth of fur off his ill-fitting pants and oversized brown tunic, Tio grabbed some tangled green vines with yellow leaves to cinch his clothes. He didn't care to maintain his appearance under ordinary circumstances, but a meeting with Belsa's druid Conclave was more than a little important. Even with the makeshift vine belt, Tio's tunic was more like a robe, with sleeves drooping off his elbows and the bottom almost

touching his knees. Shopping for clothes for this meeting hadn't occurred to him before, so this would have to do.

Tio wrapped his new green cloak, embroidered with the Conclave's golden fig-leaf insignia, around his shoulders and clasped the matching metal leaf. Combing back his short, grassy-green hair with his fingers, he slipped into his woolen shoes as he walked through the drapes that served as his front door.

A steep drop to his right led to the twig-and-grass-covered ground level, where people tended to sheep and blackberry brambles. Air-flourished mages guided animals with gentle gusts. A water mage misted the plants. Soil churned under the power of earth mages, and fire mages checked on nearby lanterns.

Some outsiders had trouble adjusting to Belsa's way of life, but Tio had felt at home right away. Learning to treat flora and fauna as equals made sense to him. Other parts of the country harmed animals for food, supplies, territory, and even sport. Belsans—whether druids, mages, or pallids—only used renewable goods created by plants or animals, such as vegetables, fruit, milk, wool, silk, leaves, or other non-vitals. In exchange, druids gave food, shelter, or protection. No harm came to anything here except in self-defense, and even then, the defender was likely to become a pariah. A dedicated druid once struck a deal with a wolf pack to act as their servant. He did anything the wolves wanted as long as they agreed to protect Belsa's wildlife from other predators and hunters. Nature magic was key to this way of life. Mediating trades was impossible otherwise.

A series of cypress-tree homes stretched ahead of Tio. Belsa's old residential district. The sun-blocking canopy was his favorite part. Afternoons got hot in Belsa, even in fall. It was also the least crowded area, and Tio had built his home on the edge of this district with isolation in mind. Each tree connected to the next with thick branches that could pass for trunks, wide enough for five people to walk side-by-side.

Jumping off and breaking his legs seemed more appealing to Tio than walking past those homes. As few people as there were, somehow somebody tried to talk to him every time he took this route.

Suppressing his desire to go the long way, Tio forced his obstinate legs to carry him through the residential district. Red, yellow, and brown leaves sprinkled the walkways as he moved, careful not to step on them to preserve the pretty aesthetic. Fall had only just started, so plenty of gaps were within reach of his long legs.

He reached the residential district's end and rushed down the stairs, skipping every other step. At the bottom, he nearly crashed into a man carrying an enormous watermelon. Tio squeaked out a barely audible apology before the man spoke up.

"Hey, Tio, how's it going?"

Hoping to dissuade further discussion, Tio stammered out a short response. "H-Hi. I'm fine." He stopped in his tracks when the conversation didn't end on the spot. *You know better, Tio. Be more assertive. Say you don't have time.*

"Great, great. Me too! What was your subject in school again? Eth... ether—"

A former classmate? Can't remember his name, so let's call him Melonlord.

"Transmutational etheric alchemy." Ether studies sufficed, but Tio found the nonsensical descriptive title way more fun to say. People's eyes always bugged out of their head like it was either the most impressive or ridiculous thing they'd ever heard. Generally followed by judgemental questioning, arguing he might as well have been mastering acting or religion for all the good studying ether accomplished.

"Yeah, that," Melonlord said. "There was a rumor the Conclave hired you because of it. Your cloak confirms it! Who would've thought?"

Being a druid and having strange schooling granted him more than enough fame, but when the Conclave hired him seven months ago... Now the city itself knew his name.

Okay, now's the time to excuse myself. “It’s true. Actually, I have a meeting—”

“Are you part of the winter solstice celebration? I heard all the druids are growing a new great tree. I’m hoping it’s for a tavern. A modern place to hang out would be great.”

A tavern? Tio finally remembered Melonlord from school. He spent more time planning parties than paying attention in class and had the air flourish but might as well have been a baker with no flour. Not that flexing skill with magic was the purpose of attending school. It wasn’t one of Grenvel’s academies after all, which were less schools and more mage training centers.

Druids weren’t accepted into the academies. Most magic was about exerting control over an element, but nature could never control—only communicate and influence. Given how rare it was and how different it was to teach, none of the academies believed it was worth employing druid teachers, so people born with the nature flourish had to come to Belsa if they wanted to learn how to use it. Tio was one such outsider, born in Ahsiem on the Wolloisha’s side of the Trachea. If it weren’t for his mom convincing him to learn to use his flourish, Tio would be working the mines in Iron Swamp.

Without giving Tio a chance to respond, Melonlord continued, “Are you going to be the next Conclave elder? There hasn’t been a new one in thirty years. Guy like you, bet you could grow the new tavern tree by yourself, am I right?” He nudged Tio with his elbow, grinning as if the two were the best of friends.

Dying inside, Tio snatched his arm away and rubbed it as if wiping away filth. *Would it be rude to tell him not to touch me?* With an exasperated sigh, he said, “Look, the Conclave is waiting for me. I have to go.” Tio walked away without waiting for a response.

“Oh, okay! Didn’t mean to be a bother—”

Whatever else Melonlord had to say was somebody else’s problem now. Brown cypress trees shifted to white ash trees, marking his arrival

in the education district. Belsa's library and school looped around the district in a large wooden circle consisting of sixteen large sideways trees. At the back, a redwood tree overshadowed Belsa. That was the Conclave's meeting tree.

Hordes of people wandered the plaza with an assortment of birds, wolves, and deer roaming amongst them. Students hauled their books to class in grass satchels, mages headed to the library to hone their craft, and various Belsans climbed the redwood's bark stairs to take their concerns to the Conclave. Tio's hands shook until he clasped them tightly together.

Deep breaths, he chanted in his head as he squeezed through the crowds, trying his best not to touch anybody.

Controlling his breathing calmed his nerves all the way to the redwood. Stairs molded from the skyscraping tree's bark led from the bottom of its trunk to the top. About three quarters of the way up, a big hole guided Tio to the waiting room.

It seemed as if more people were stuffed inside the small room than he'd passed to get here. Of course, that was impossible, but his brain didn't listen to reason. Perched on a stone, a small, shiny yellow warble acted as a receptionist for druids. Tio scanned the stone up and down until he found his name.

Malakday | Twelfth bell | Mona, pastry chef

Sylday | Third bell | Tio, Conclave druid

Third bell? That was later than Bel had mentioned. Unless he'd misheard her? All the names above him were from yesterday, so they weren't busy.

The bird chirped at him. "Tio, you're early. Please take a seat. We'll be with you in a moment."

With slow and deliberate words, he tried to respond with, "Can you ask the Conclave if they can meet now? I was told first bell." Instead, it came out more like, "I'm number one—tell the old people I'm here." He fiddled with his bracelet, cursing himself for butchering the words.

It gave a condescending song in return. “Just sit, Tio. They’re preparing for your meeting as we speak.”

Green floor cushions and rugs covered the floor, and most were occupied. He looked for one without people next to it, so he could sit alone. A series of scoffing whistles urged him to hurry up. Either that bird disliked Tio or its job. Probably both.

Rushing across the room, Tio sat squished between two people and only then realized how exhausted he was. *I need to exercise more.*

People chattered all around him, nearly shoulder to shoulder. It felt like every word of every conversation floated through the air, smothering him. Was it just him or were there thousands of people in the room? Tio tugged on his cloak as the racket threatened to drown him in a sea of words. He closed his eyes.

“Was that Tio? He had a hard time with the receptionist,” a shrill voice said.

“I know, right? The Conclave must be desperate for druids at this point,” a burly voice said.

Everything sounded more and more warped, as if they were speaking through a glass bottle.

A third voice whispered, “Shameful, truly.”

His breaths echoed. Walls inched closer. Closer. Tio was trapped. His hands jittered. *Deep breaths.* Hoping to snap out of it, he poked his fingers into the dull-edged leaves of his bracelet, but nothing happened. *Deep breaths.*

A beak pecked him on the forehead, and aggressive tweets raided his ears. “Pay attention, chick. I said the Conclave is ready to see you.”

Tio gave the bird a blank stare. “Sorry.”

He glanced at the sea of people with black, red, brown, and blonde hair. Nobody was talking about him at all. Even if they were, none had the nature flourish necessary to have overheard the bird. His anxiety was playing tricks on him. Again.

An acolyte approached the bird's stone wearing flowy white robes with green triangles along the bottom and on the sleeves. The outfit was associated with healers, though druids couldn't heal anymore. One of many powers they'd lost over the last few centuries. Seeing the robes in person made him appreciative of his cloak. It was fashionable by comparison.

From the top of the stone's list down to Tio's name, all the engravings filled in until there was no evidence they had existed. The acolyte carved several new names and times on it before giving Tio a smile that screamed, "I'm just here to do my job." *I can relate.*

"Please follow me," she said.

Relieved to get away from the crowd, Tio exhaled once more for good measure.

After traveling one more story up and passing through an extravagant green curtain, all three Conclave elders stared at him like something straight out of a nightmare. They were seated at a square table, with one empty chair waiting for him. The furniture grew from the redwood itself and remained attached to the floor—an older, inconvenient style of seating nobody used anymore.

That's going to get annoying. What if I need to adjust my chair? Tio turned to thank the acolyte, but she was already gone.

"She won't be joining us," Ren said as she brushed her green fishtail braid from her shoulder. Her tone always made Tio think she hated him, at least compared to the other elders. She was even taller than Tio, which was a feat considering he was accustomed to always being the tallest in the room.

"Your first meeting as an official member of the Conclave. I look forward to seeing what you've brought for us today," said the soft-spoken Pai. His name always reminded Tio of food. *Maybe I should bake a blueberry pie when I get home?*

Pai's hair and long beard had grayed with age, but flecks of teal were still sprinkled throughout. Tio wasn't looking forward to the inevitable religious debate Pai would drag this meeting into.

A notebook and pencil waited for Tio at the empty seat across from Ren. He looked to his left at Bel.

Bel gave a warm smile, sans a few teeth. “I know how you like to draw while we bicker amongst each other.”

Her name was the most common in Belsa for all genders—which made it difficult to know if people were referring to Archdruid Bel or some random person. Tio couldn’t understand why anybody would voluntarily name their kid after a city.

At 113, Bel was the oldest living druid. She was also the shortest of the elders, even without being hunched over. Her short curly hair looked like ocean waves the way the white and blue mixed together. Given her age, it was surprising any blue remained. Pai would have people believe it was a sign Bel had a strong connection to the spirit tree, like their ancestors.

When Tio sat, he found a mural dominated his view. Splotches of haphazard paint on the wall depicted the spirit tree as branching pure light atop a yellow whale’s back—back when people believed the Corporeal Realm resided on a frog’s head with its three eyes as moons. Cosmic whales and frogs didn’t strike Tio as the answer to life’s big questions, but the imaginative nature of the past never disappointed.

Pai smacked his lips as he prepared to speak. A sign he was about to put on his Conclave elder voice. “Tio, you’ve had months to verify your claim that the spirit tree is dying. Did you find anything at Spirit Arboretum?”

Tio made a conscious effort to sound knowledgeable. “The arboretum’s haze barrier had no outward signs of weakness, but I detected some abnormalities.” As he spoke, he drew lines on the notebook, connecting them into triangles or squares. “How ether surges form barriers is unknown, but the relationship between surges and magic is clear from Thaumatic texts and Diyan enchanting books.”

Ren stood and slammed her hands on the table. “Get on with it! And stop drawing. Show a little respect.”

All the words in Tio's head fell out through his ears. How was he supposed to respond to that?

Pai's words soothed the sting. "Ren, let the young druid speak. This is his meeting, after all. We're here to listen."

"And have my time wasted?" Her chair, still attached to the floor, scooted forward and forced her back into it.

Bel tapped her fingers against the table. "Sit down. You're an embarrassment to your namesake."

She always knew where to hit somebody. Ren was named after Drassil Ren, the first known druid. Something Ren was proud of and quick to remind people of, despite it just being a name.

"Tio, please continue. Skip to what you discovered. We have enough background," Bel said, rubbing her temples.

With regained composure, Tio resumed. "Ether leaks from surges regularly, by all accounts giving us magic. I determined ether has five components. Upon close examination, four shared several similarities with blood-test results from mages of each flourish. Since nobody has performed similar analysis on nature-flourished blood, I believe the fifth component to be nature."

Combined triangles formed a circle on Tio's notebook as he juggled talking and drawing. "The nature component was smaller than the others. About one thousandth the size. I believe this is linked to why druids have become so rare."

Pai stroked his beard. "The disparity between these 'components' is eerily close to last year's Grenvel census results."

Adding antlers to the circle on his notebook, Tio said, "In addition, ether has had a drastic reduction in overall output even in my brief time investigating. The nature flourish will be gone by this time next year. The other flourishes will share the same fate within three generations."

"As dire as that sounds, what does your discovery have to do with the spirit tree?" Ren asked.

“Tio, could you elaborate for our dear Ren?” Bel’s words had a sweetness to them, but a venomous tang coated Ren’s name.

Putting down his pencil, Tio glanced at each elder as he spoke. “Surges, particularly those with haze barriers, once facilitated long-distance communication for the Conclave. Our historical archives describe it as ‘speaking through the roots of Empyrea.’ If Empyrea’s roots are inside surges, then I propose the reduced ether output reflects Empyrea’s health.”

Ren slouched in her chair. The look on her face said she was taking in everything he’d stated while searching for a flaw. “Bel, you’re the one forcing us to give this theory credence. Suppose it’s true. What are we supposed to do with this information?”

Bel set a jewelry box on the table and removed thirteen rotted seeds from it one by one. Each of the first seven were more decomposed than the last. “Since the time of Drassil Ren, these have been passed down from archdruid to archdruid. Empyrea’s seeds. The first rotted long before any among us were born. Three more have done the same in the last two years.”

If Bel hadn’t already mentioned what they were, Tio would’ve sworn the six healthy seeds were white ether lights meant to be strung up as winter solstice decorations.

“These are all we have left,” Bel said.

Pai gasped so hard he choked and coughed spit into his beard.

“When were you planning to share the news with the rest of us?” Ren asked as she leaned over to get a good look.

Tio couldn’t take his eyes off the seeds. A subtle mist surrounded them—they really were made of ether. White was an unusual color for ether, which usually came in shades of pink, purple, and green. What made it stranger was ether only became visible in high concentrations or when stimulated by magic.

Bel returned the seeds and closed the box. “Previous archdruids assumed they were simply expiring as all seeds do when not returned to soil. I did not believe it cause for alarm until now.”

Gears turned rapidly in Tio's head as he tried to place this new puzzle piece into the equation. "Why not plant them before they rot?" *It could be valuable to at least see what would happen.*

Pai said, "Plant Empyrea's seeds in the Corporeal Realm? Blasphemous."

After druids first noticed their numbers dwindling, a new subsect had formed that treated Empyrea as a deity of sorts. Tio contributed it to loss of knowledge... or desperation. The rest of Grenvel treated the spirit tree as a druid religion too. This played a big part in druids losing their place in Grenvelian society, since the country had grown wary of religion after casting out the previous Old Faith regime. But how could one prove the existence of Empyrea when the only evidence was old text, same as any religion?

Pai continued, "What right do we have to plant them without asking first?"

No argument there. Pai had a point. Druids always asked permission before using their flourish on any flora. Connecting with magic was enough to allow a quick exchange of thoughts, but how did one ask permission of Empyrea when it couldn't be seen or touched?

"Each archdruid tells the next not to plant them unless the need is dire, but I don't think blasphemy has anything to do with it, Pai. Drassil Ren and other archdruids planted plenty. Two failed attempts can be found in Spirit Arboretum. I fear the reason for failure was lost to time, but they meant to renew our flourish," Bel said.

It's a shame nobody ever taught archdruids to write things down.

Tio shaded in the triangles on his notebook. "Maybe no locations left are capable of supporting one?" It may be a leap, but a seed from Empyrea could require ether to grow. In that case, the issue likely involved finding a place with sufficient ether to facilitate the seed's growth. Like a surge.

"Enough of this. If the spirit tree is dying then the need is 'dire,' but what is it you expect us to do about it, Tio?" Ren asked.

“You don’t have to do anything. I believe I can find a way inside ether surges, with enough time. Just give me an official blessing to do so, and your part is done.”

“To step inside would surely lead you to the Ethereal Realm! Mortals cannot—should not be on the same plane of existence as Empyrea. It would be against our teachings. The spirit tree sits above all things.” Pai was even more dedicated than Tio thought.

It seemed he was taking a literal interpretation of an old proverb. *Empyrea is to be aspired to but never attained. Leave it to Pai to twist a life lesson about working hard without seeking perfection into dogma.*

Ren smirked. “Young Tio thinks himself Empyrea’s equal.” She never passed on opportunities to rile Pai up.

Before Pai could respond, Tio said, “The other side of a haze barrier is not the Ethereal Realm. Surges are points where ether leaks through the Ethereal Realm to ours. Haze barriers form when too much ether sits in one location, and acts as a dam, controlling how much ether gets to us. It isn’t as simple as walking into the Ethereal Realm—”

He stopped himself before he got even more technical and lost his audience. Diyans theorized the Corporeal and Ethereal Realms sat on top of each other, occupying the same space somehow, but it wasn’t a vacation destination to pick out on a map.

Bel brought the conversation back on topic. “You have my blessing.”

“Breaching the haze barriers could be dangerous. Both for the boy and for us. I can’t approve of this course of action.” Ren sounded concerned. Almost. She was either trying to suppress it to save face or didn’t really believe what she said. Tio couldn’t decide which was more plausible.

Pai stroked his beard harder this time, as if he were trying to remove crumbs before anybody noticed. “If surges don’t lead to the Ethereal Realm... I feel better about allowing a druid through. What is your plan? Should we rally the other druids to go with you?”

Tio had no clue what to expect. For all he knew, the inside of a surge was identical to the outside. One thing he knew for sure was that he didn't want other druids involved. Ideally, he would work alone. The only people worth bringing would be fellow ether experts.

For once, Tio was happy to hear Ren speak. "Between winter preparation, Spirit Arboretum maintenance, fauna trade routes, city renovations... we have no druids to spare."

No longer in need of the distraction, Tio put his pencil down. "Don't worry, help is unnecessary. I'll start with the two known haze barriers at Spirit Arboretum and Tovaloreande Sanctuary. All I'm going to do is investigate. Finding Empyrea's roots and checking for damage is my priority. With luck, a way to heal it will be revealed."

White teeth shone through Pai's beard. "Healing the spirit tree... what a noble goal. A righteous goal. You have my blessing."

Bel looked to her left. "Ren?"

Ren straightened her posture. "I still believe we don't know enough to put a druid's life at risk. We are too few." She paused and looked Tio dead in the eyes. "Do what you want, but if you get a single hint what you're doing will cause yourself or our people harm... abandon this quest for Belsa's sake. You have my blessing."

Bel handed the jewelry box to Tio. "Take the seeds. Better with you than sitting in my stuffy house. Learn what you can from them."

Ren took a pen and paper from a bag hanging on her chair, writing as she talked. "Tovaloreande Sanctuary has been closed off from the public for a couple years. You're going to need a letter of introduction to get entry permission from Gren Consortium. Don't expect them to do you any favors. Our word isn't worth much these days, I'm afraid."

With druids out of favor, Gren Consortium had taken over as Grenvel's sole governing force. Every major group of people had representation except druids. Mages had the headmasters of Grenvel's mage academies. Scholars had the head librarian. Merchants had the president of Sipherra,

a mining and engineering company. Even farmers had somebody, though he was more well known as the leader of the Dreamer mercenaries than for farming.

“Thank you. I’ll prepare to leave tonight.”

Breaching Spirit Arboretum’s haze barrier alone was unlikely. His first destination was Wilton to discuss his discovery with Barbaroli Pensa. None of Tio’s findings would have been possible without Barbaroli, since he’d written one of the few modern books on ether.

At this time of year, he set up shop at Wilton’s makeshift marketplace, Tent Town. Last year, Barbaroli had visited Belsa to meet Tio and discuss ether, showing him a special map of Our Stranded Lands. Ether surge locations all around Grenvel, Wolloisha, and Refulgent Wastes had been marked on it. He’d even included whether the surge had formed a haze barrier.

If all goes well with Barbaroli, we can recruit his protégé, Rachel. No doubt about it. The three of them could solve the Empyrean dilemma.

Tio arrived home to find Sir Fluffyboi slapping his new game off the shelf. *Never change, jerk.*

Hugging the black cat, Tio clasped his hands and poked a finger into the sharp leaf charm to draw a drop of blood. Talking may prove difficult for Tio, but he couldn’t mess up words in a communion—a direct connection between the minds of both parties. Unlike speaking, communing required a blood toll. The cost was lower the higher the druid’s bond with the animal was, so it was often reserved for familiars like Sir Fluffyboi.

Sir Fluffyboi’s thoughts indicated more of the same. *That was fun. I’m hungry, Tio.*

Emotions slid between them, intermingling until distinguishing druid from cat proved difficult. *Relief. Love. Happiness. Anxiety.*

Tio sent his own thoughts in return. *I’m leaving Belsa, probably for a long time. Take care of yourself, okay? Don’t leave our home in shambles either. You won’t like me when I’m angry.*

Purrs joined the linked thoughts. *You don't get angry. Everybody knows that, kitten.* Sir Fluffyboi rubbed the top of her head against Tio's. *Don't worry, I'll keep the place warm for you. My fur will be everywhere.*

The mental connection ended when the hug was released, sending waves of relief through Tio's veins like air being released from a balloon. Tio hadn't traveled for more than a week at a time since coming to Belsa. It was unclear how long his investigation would take, so it was good Sir Fluffyboi was home to say goodbye.

Given how tired he'd been after climbing the Conclave's meeting tree, Tio thought it wise to bring an okapi to ride and carry his things. Besides Sir Fluffyboi, the long-necked horses with black-and-white striped legs were the only animals that treated him with respect despite his speech impediment.

After gathering veggies, fruit, bread, and pastries into his grass satchel and strapping a sleeping bag to his back, Tio entered Belsa's uninhabited forest to find an okapi.

CHAPTER 3



Late again. By this point, Alim knew they hadn't left a good impression. But who schedules a lecture at first bell? Either the library hated sleep or ancient magic wasn't a popular subject. Of course, Alim chose to believe the former. *Librarians are a cranky bunch. Knock over a bookcase one time...*

"No running in the plaza," a guard said as she stepped in front of Alim. "Headed off to war with that armor and fancy helmet?"

Being outsized was normal for Alim, but this person made them feel tiny. Positive it would annoy the guard, they drummed a finger against their worn-down steel helmet on one of many small dents. Each repetition soothed Alim's nerves.

"I'm late for a lecture is all." Alim pointed towards the three-story-tall library with its glass walls and roof.

"Armor doesn't seem necessary for that." The guard gave Alim a suspicious once-over, as if examining their sun-engraved steel cuirass for vulnerable points.

"You haven't seen the size of the books in there. Now, if you'll excuse me..." Alim walked around the guard, but she grabbed their bare arm and stopped them.

"Keep your visor up, kid. It's rude to hide your face," she said.

With their helmet's twin crescent moon visor down, only Alim's pale chin and mouth were visible. Orange and yellow paint, on the left and right moons respectively, had chipped and faded from frequent exposure to the unending harsh sunlight in Refulgent Wastes. Their dad always said the visor's eye slits made Alim's gray eyes appear like roaming storm clouds. Even lifting the visor didn't reveal any distinguishing facial features, which they preferred.

Kid? I'm twenty-four. "Nobody else in Wilton minds my helmet." Based on the fire-breathing mole—a pyre dredger—on the guard's gambeson, she was from the city of Oressa. "But I'm sure you'll recognize this." Alim dug a long yellow cloth out from under the bracer on their left wrist and dangled it.

The guard's eyes widened, and she released Alim. "Sorry, didn't know Dreamers were posted in this backwater. Forgive me."

Former Dreamer, but she doesn't need to know that. Alim shrugged as they tucked the cloth back into their bracer. "I'm not 'posted' anywhere. Move aside."

With no further delays, Alim pushed past the guard and continued through the brick plaza. The library's large open interior was bombarded by sunlight from all directions, cooking Alim within their armor. All three floors were visible from the bottom due to glass floors and walls. A neat effect, but they'd lost count of how many times it had made them trip. The concept was an extension of the glass ceilings libraries had across Grenvel due to being converted from abandoned Old Faith churches, where the glass allowed gods to witness the worship—or something along those lines.

The first two floors were packed with people and shelves, but the top was still barren. This was where Hali's classroom was. Alim climbed

the bookshelf-lined spiral staircase in the center of the library, fighting the falling sensation accompanying each step. At the top, they found the classroom and nudged the door open.

“Lecture’s canceled. What’s the use in a sign if nobody reads it,” Hali sighed, looking up from a white velvet book. The binding style reminded them of old tomes found in Refulgent Wastes. With only slightly yellowed paper and frayed edges, it didn’t appear hundreds of years old. Like somebody had taken impossibly good care of it.

“Oh, Alim!” She stood and straightened her asymmetrical, jagged coat. Her tunic’s collar and belt straps poked through where the coat opened above its tied sash. All black, as was her usual style. “Have you considered paying attention to time?”

“Hey, I have a good excuse this time. Some monster of a guard stopped me! I could climb on your shoulders and we’d still be shorter.”

“Let me guess, you used your golden distraction? That’ll backfire someday.” Her unusual accent always sounded like an elegant song to Alim.

“Are those runes? Planning the next lesson?”

“A side project.”

“You wanted to talk to me after class today, right? Is that canceled too?” Alim asked.

Hali closed her book and tossed it onto a stack. “Today’s lesson would’ve been about Thaum’s techniques for analyzing blood before machines existed.”

They braced themselves for the worst news since finding out they were pallid and had to retire all notions of becoming a mage. “What, did you discover some new disease tucked away in my sample? How long do I have?”

With a serious tone barely stifling her laugh, Hali said, “Seventy or eighty years, tops. You’re healthy, so relax.” She looked away and straightened the bookstacks and pens across her desk. “What if I told you there’s a type of magic you can learn as a pallid?”

“Like runes? That’s ten kinds of illegal—not gonna invite that kind of trouble into my life.”

“Oh, please. As if anybody in today’s world can recognize runic magic. I don’t intend for you to use runes.” Hali walked to the board behind her desk and scribbled dots on it with chalk. A night sky? “Celestial magic. It’s what Thaum’s founder used.”

“Really? Wasn’t the founder the first born with magic? Able to use four gifts at once—air, water, earth, and fire.”

“First to use modern magic is more accurate. To have magic come from within rather than deriving it from runes. Though its source was a bond with spirits, not birth.”

“Spirits? Like what druids believe in?” Alim had never thought Hali to be the religious type.

“Not exactly.” Hali drew a stick figure wearing a helmet, arms held up towards the stars she’d drawn earlier. Above the stars she added a tree and squiggles flowing from it, down through the sky and around the stick figure. “Celestial magic connects you to the source of the world’s ether—don’t make that face.”

Is my confusion that obvious? Alim covered their mouth with a hand. “I can’t help it. You’re throwing a lot of information at me. Are you a celestial?”

Alim had decided to attend Hali’s lectures when they’d heard she could teach people magic despite being pallid herself. Having attended for some time now, it was clear Hali knew more about magic than any mage Alim had ever met. Maybe this celestial magic was the reason?

Hali tugged on the peacock-feather cowl around her neck. “Not anymore.”

Anymore? Is the power temporary?

She slapped the books on her desk. “Let me wrap up my research for the day. If you’re interested in becoming a celestial, meet me at The Amethyst Snag. You know the place?”

“Best food in town—of course I know it!” Alim salivated at the mere mention of the inn. A tad pricy for their wallet right now though...

“For somebody who hides their face behind a helmet, you emote far too much. Put away that frown.” Hali drew a chalk smiley face inside the sun on Alim’s breastplate. “Food’s on me.”

Alim left the library and followed the dirt path acting as Wilton’s main street, curving between plain wooden structures that looked like the town architect had stacked a pile of logs and called it a day. As they arrived in the newer part of town, steel buildings with dome tops littered the town square, a brick road connecting them. In the absence of the usual glowing twin moons, a giant festival wheel illuminated the darkening sky with pink, purple, and green lights.

It’s never too early to celebrate winter solstice! In two or three months, when celebrations began, the wheel would be the centerpiece of Grenvel’s biggest winter solstice festival ever. Alim had planned their whole year to ensure they’d be in Wilton for it.

A glass-tube sign shaped into a dead tree flickered with neon purple mist, marking the entrance to The Amethyst Snag. The last time they were here, they’d spent half their night weighing the merits of each item on the menu until deciding to resolve the dilemma by ordering one of everything. One among many reasons their wallet was on strike.

Rain pitter-pattered against their helmet as they finagled the inn’s janky front door. It never opened on the first try, requiring more of a shove than any business owner should be comfortable with. Every visit, Alim braced himself to plow over some poor patron on the other side by accident.

With a bang and a slight stumble, Alim made it into the jam-packed dining room. Raucous visitors chowed down at communal tables covered in blue cloth and speckled with silver snowflakes. Matching banners hung from the walls among dangling lanterns, shining light through pink, purple, and green tinted glass. Even the cushions on the bar stools had been reupholstered with the same pattern. The bartenders and waitstaff

dressed in variances of the same colors, and a bard strummed peaceful winter melodies on the stage.

Most places didn't appreciate somebody waltzing up like a human-sized living frying pan ready for war. Alim removed their cuirass, bracers, and shin guards, leaving everything with the innkeeper. A loose-fitting sleeveless yellow shirt, dark pants, and brown boots with gray metal on the toes were all that remained in the absence of protective gear. At least the helmet stayed on.

Alim sat at one of the few tables with two empty seats.

"If it isn't the helmeted runner," an off-duty guard seated at a nearby table shouted across, barely audible over the music and adjacent conversations.

Great. Her again. "That's me."

"Where'd you get that helmet? Never seen a Dreamer wear something like that."

"Custom-made."

Allister—leader of the Dreamers—had commissioned it for Alim as a reward for finding a cache of enchanted artifacts. He'd based the design on the company's insignia with meticulous accuracy. Right down to the order of the moons and the way they mirrored the horizon at a new month's beginning, with clouds in the center to represent the collective dreams and aspirations of the Dreamers. Allister was a pretentious poet and it showed in the company's branding.

The guard said, "Surprised you're not on duty here. Pay is great, and this year's solstice will be huge with Gren Consortium finally acknowledging it as a national holiday in remembrance of kicking Diya out of Oressa!"

"Solstice time is about fun. I'm in it for parties and pretty lights. Not to work or be patriotic."

The ethereal lights were the best part of the solstice—no, the whole year. Every city in Grenvel took to the streets at night, not wanting to miss

them. Alim often took shifts going without sleep to scout for the lights. Skipping sleep was otherwise not an Alim-sanctioned activity.

The natural light show started at the Lunar Vault. Looking like an angry god had left a wicked green scar in the sky by smashing a moon, the Vault would unleash an array of purple, pink, and green waves. Each color twirled and frolicked in the air, like a group of artists were smearing paint on the sky but couldn't agree on a color. The whole event lasted ten to eighteen minutes before the lights blasted southeast, towards Refulgent Wastes.

Before the guard could tear into Alim for lacking love for their country, a completely soaked person crashed through the door. His hood fell back as he caught himself with not a drop of poise, revealing shiny green hair. Wrapped around him was a green cloak wrapped with a prominent golden-threaded fig leaf embroidered on the back.

What's a druid doing in Wilton? Alim hadn't met a druid before. How many were left? Fifty? This could be an opportunity for a new friend!

The innkeeper grimaced from behind the front desk as the druid left a series of puddles in his wake.

"Yo, druid!" the guard called out loud enough to burst an eardrum. "Come join us—we could use an overwatered houseplant."

Everybody laughed except Alim.

The soggy druid didn't say anything for a moment longer than was comfortable before announcing, "No thanks. I hate people."

Now that's funny. Alim wasn't sure whether to think of the druid's remark as a joke or the most honest statement ever made. Either way, he had guts.

Alim tried to calm the stewing guard. "Would you hang out with somebody who greeted you with an insult?" *And, seriously, houseplant? Sounds like a phrase children would sling at each other.*

As if nothing had happened, the druid grabbed a room key from the innkeeper and walked by their table towards the hall of rooms.

The guard snatched the druid by the wrist. “Walking in here with a hood... what’re you hiding?”

This again?

One of the guard’s friends yelled, “Go back to your shrub-husband!”

Another heckler joined in. “And your dog-wife!”

Sweat built under Alim’s helmet. Their heart pounded, yelling at them to intervene. *This isn’t going to end well.* Confident they were going to regret picking a fight with a woman twice their size, Alim forced the guard off the druid. “Leave him alone.”

The druid scrambled behind Alim.

Fire manifested in the guard’s palm. “You think you’re tough with that bucket on your head, kid? Let’s see your gift.”

Didn’t know I could feel so little empathy towards a person after such little time.

“Hey, magic’s not allowed in here!” the innkeeper yelled.

Alim mirrored the guard, extending an open palm and wiggling their fingers. “I’ve no gift to use. How about we skip the whole fighting thing?”

“They let plagued lung sacs in town now?”

Oh good, now we’re comparing pallids to the ethereal plague. This guard truly is the queen of slights. Alim’s last drop of empathy flushed down the drain. *I don’t want to hurt her, but if it comes down to it...*

Alim wanted to retort with some witty historical fact, but a gust of wind snuffed out the guard’s flame. As they searched for the source of the magic, Hali glided into the middle of the feud. Taller than Alim, she still only came up to the opposing mountain of a woman’s chest. All the same, Hali approached the guard with a this-fight-is-already-over swagger. Alim had assumed the scars on Hali’s chin and cheek would be a mundane story, but now they wondered if she’d taken part in an epic battle.

“We got two druid lovers in our midst?” the guard asked.

“Druids don’t concern me,” Hali said. “But showing respect for plague victims concerns everybody.”

“It’s been hundreds of years. Don’t be so sensitive.”

Patting the guard’s back, Hali spoke with a seriousness Alim hadn’t heard in her voice before. “You’re right. We’re well past caring about such things. Sit, relax. Don’t blame me if the plague victims’ phantoms haunt you.”

Hali’s palm came away with a dark red stain on it as the guard crumpled like an emergency restroom visit was imminent. *What happened?*

“Watch,” Hali whispered to Alim.

With a crash, the guard fell, hitting her head on the table and knocking it over. All the drinks poured onto her face, and the entire dining room guffawed in unison, with mocking applause mixed in for good measure. A crowd circled them.

The innkeeper squeezed through the people and glared at them. “Alim... should’ve known you were causing trouble.”

“Sorry, I’ll clean up the mess.” Alim whipped the yellow cloth strap from their bracer, tying it around their elbow.

“Oh... a Dreamer. We gotta get outta here.” One of the guard’s annoying friends untangled her from the festive tablecloth.

As the druid haters left the inn, Alim noticed something red on the guard’s gambeson. Between the crumbs caked on it and the parts washed away by drinks, they couldn’t tell the exact shape. Was it a rune?

Hali lifted the table back in place and collected the empty cups while Alim dispersed the onlookers, their Dreamer cloth doing all the convincing.

“You okay?” Alim asked the druid, only then realizing he was almost as tall as the guard.

He sputtered and tripped over his words like a kid trying to explain himself to an upset parent. “H-Had better days...” Silver leaves jangled on his wrist as he poked each one in turn. “Thanks.”

“Wilton isn’t usually like this—promise.”

Anti-religious fervor had been part of Grenvel since the Old Faith had been kicked out of power at the beginning of the new calendar, 700 years ago, but it was worse in Oressa. Anybody caught with references to

a religion were treated like monsters, whether druids or Solstorans—even if they weren't practicing the belief themselves. It was a surprise the guard hadn't fussed over the sweltering sun of Solstora sitting on Alim's breastplate earlier. Being so close to the druid city of Belsa, Alim had assumed druids wouldn't experience any trouble in Wilton.

Keeping his distance, the druid said, "I know. Not my first time here."

"Can I get some food to make it up to you?" Alim asked.

"You're welcome to eat with us, but Alim here can't pay for squat," Hali said.

"Aw, come on. Don't call me out in front of our new friend," Alim whispered to Hali.

A tinge of nervousness remained in the druid's voice. "Not hungry, uh—Alim, how should I address you? Dame or sir?"

Another person confusing Dreamers with knights. "Just Alim is fine. Dreamers don't deserve titles. We're not knights." *Even if they wish it like children hopped up on fairy tales.* "Secondly, neither title would apply to me." Alim tapped their helmet. "I am my armor. Whatever's under it is of no consequence."

The druid shifted his weight awkwardly as if he were unsure whether he'd offended Alim. "Got it. Not a knight, no title necessary, identifies as a helmet."

"I might identify as an axe on some days too," Alim said, laughing, reassured by the druid's willingness to make a joke. "And you are?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm so bad at introductions... How—I—Tio, my name is Tio."

"My curly-haired friend that moves like she paid big money for walking lessons over there is Hali."

"Don't listen to Alim. 'Rich people walking lessons' aren't a thing," Hali said as she sauntered towards her seat with exaggerated swagger.

Hali spun in her barstool and threw her arms wide as if presenting the town to Tio. "Welcome to Wilton, land of the uninteresting and ignorant."

“Don’t pretend you aren’t in love with this place, Hali.”

“I’d much rather be on a beach with a good novel. Or at least holed up in Wilton’s dinky excuse for a library.” She sniffed and recoiled. “Was somebody drinking orange juice? Alim, you’re dead to me if it was you.”

“Smells pleasant to me,” Alim said.

Tio laughed and, for a moment, almost looked comfortable. “I won’t be here long. One visit into Tent Town tomorrow and then I’ll be on my way.”

“Going shopping?” Hali looked the druid up and down. “Maybe new clothes? I wouldn’t normally recommend anything from Grenvel, but Tent Town imports a good selection of Wolloishan fashion.”

What a nice way to tell him he’s dressed like a homeless person.

“No... I’m recruiting assistance for something important,” Tio said.

Hali sighed. “I was joking. Your affiliation with the Conclave is clear from your cloak, so it’s obvious you’re not here to shop.”

“Recruiting? Can we help?” Alim asked.

Hali gave a not-so-subtle glare of disapproval. “The Conclave doesn’t need assistance from the likes of us, Alim.” She poked their helmet between the eyes. “Can we talk somewhere private, to finish our conversation from this afternoon?”

“Sorry, Tio. Hope you find what you’re looking for!”

Hali dragged Alim through the winding hall of rooms, away from the noisy dining area and a relieved-looking Tio. The pair stopped at the dead end, where a metal bench awaited outside the last room.

Grinning from crescent to crescent and body still pounding with excess energy, Alim shook Hali like a bottle of celebratory champagne. “How did you do that wind thing? I thought you were pallid?”

“Would you believe me if I said the inn is haunted?”

“No.”

Hali punched Alim on the shoulder with more force than seemed possible for her slight frame. “Are my lectures sticking? Sparks aren’t the only way to use magic.”

“It still throws me off when you use the word spark.” Recovered texts from Refulgent Wastes were the only other time Alim had seen the word spark used to describe magic. Besides Hali, only people from Belsa, where flourish was preferred, didn’t use the word gift.

“Old family habit. I like it better. Gift sounds too much like somebody gave you magic out of kindness. People are born with their magic, you know? Neither earned nor given.”

“Was it runes?”

“If you’re asking as a Dreamer, my official answer is that I don’t use runes. I merely study them and would never think to call upon such dangerous magic.”

Alim laughed. “Former, and they’re mercenaries. They don’t enforce the law—they do odd jobs.”

“For Gren Consortium and Sipherra. The company might as well be Grenvel’s military.”

“Can’t argue there.”

It was true that Dreamers had become more and more ingrained in Grenvel’s political affairs over the past century. When Alim had joined the company, its focus was less on combat and more on making expeditions into Refulgent Wastes. While side jobs involved a lot of guarding, escorting, and generally being tough and scary, the company’s main income had come from filling libraries with discovered texts and magical artifacts, though that had shifted since the Dreamers had been bought by the Sipherra mining company. Being used as a weapon had left a bitter taste in Alim’s mouth.

“For real though, did you draw one on your palm?” Alim took Hali’s left arm by the sleeve to get a closer look.

Hali yanked her hand back. “Did I mention how great your outfit looks? You should go armorless more often. Casual suits you.”

“Don’t change the subject, Hali.”

“Fine, yes. I used two runes.”

“That’s amazing.” Alim had no idea Hali put her ancient magic expertise to practical use. Since runic magic was considered part of the Old Faith, people using it were condemned and labeled witches. “The sickness was obviously the poison rune you’ve mentioned in lectures. What was the other?”

“A force rune. Small and focused. Crushes with air pressure. Too much and you’ll cave somebody’s chest in. Too little and you might as well be tickling them. Requires finesse to tweak runes enough to hit the mark, you know?”

“Must’ve taken a long time to achieve such skill!”

“Longer than you could imagine,” Hali said.

“Don’t underestimate my imagination! How old could you be?”

She paused, like she was counting to an impossible number in her head. “Thirty-three.”

“Is that old? You’re still in your prime! Anyway, I’m ready to hear all about celestials and spirits.” Alim tapped their helmet in anticipation. “There’s no mention of celestials in any of the Thaumatic texts I’ve read. Where did you learn it?”

“I’m sure there are hints strewn all over Our Stranded Lands. Nobody knew what to call it. Every Thaumatic mage cities sought to reproduce the founder’s power, so we all worked towards that goal.”

“You’re from Thaum? I thought all the survivors relocated to the Coveted South?” After the Quake had split the southern countries from the northern, there was no way for refugees to return.

“Most did, but Diya and Wolloisha have Thaumatic descendants too. Oressa was safe on the Grenvel side of Thaum’s Runegate. Every mage city was south of the gate and evacuated for fear the spreading wasteland would reach them. Only Grenvel outright refused to take on refugees—they were convinced the ethereal plague hadn’t been cured.”

“Your accent isn’t Wolloishan or Diyan.”

“My family and I lived as isolated as we could, so our Thaumatic accent stuck around. I’ve only been in Grenvel for a few years.”

“Why’d you come to Grenvel?”

“To create new runes,” Hali said.

“And why are you offering to teach me celestial magic?” Alim asked. There had to be a catch.

“My rune research is at an impasse. Everything I create should work in theory but fails to activate with every attempt.” Before Alim could ask why, Hali continued, “Ether is the foundation of all magic, you know? Whether spark or runes, it all has ether at its core. Our blood isn’t rich with ether—in fact there’s precious little there compared even to the surrounding air.” Hali twirled her finger like she was wrapping it in invisible strings. “A supply of dense ether is necessary for these new runes. The simplest answer is to draw the rune with blood containing concentrated ether, since a celestial wouldn’t be required.”

For the first time all night, Hali broke eye contact. If Alim didn’t know better, they’d swear she was nervous given the way she kept grabbing at her cowl.

“Does such blood exist?”

“It’s preferable to try with a celestial first.”

“How does me being a celestial factor into this?” Alim asked.

“Celestials control ether itself. You’d be providing my runes with ether.”

“And the goal of these runes is...?”

Pulling her feet up, Hali sat cross-legged. “After losing my celestial powers, runes were all I had left. Only for a celestial to still be required...” She lifted her left sleeve, revealing a simple tattoo. A circle with an upside down “V” inside. “This is a binding rune. Specially made for storing large quantities of ether. See that weird ink?”

How could they not? It was everchanging between black and white as the two colors clashed and retreated in a battle to fill the symbol. “What is it?”

“I wasn’t born pallid. There’s a spirit trapped inside this tattoo, sapping my magic. Kthon took away my celestial powers and spark alike.”

“So we remove Kthon and you get your magic back? I’m all for it.” Alim had a hard enough time being pallid in a world of mages and druids, so they could only imagine how difficult it must’ve been to have had their magic stolen.

“No.” Hali slammed her fist onto the bench, cracking one of its wooden slats. “My spark doesn’t matter. Neither does celestial magic. Kthon killed my son. Then my partner. They’re both a part of the spirit now. Freeing my family and letting their phantoms rest is all I care about.”

Here I am whining about being pallid... “Say no more—I’ll do everything I can. You mentioned bonding with spirits is how I become a celestial, right? You’re sure a pallid can do that?”

Rubbing her eyes, Hali said, “The first celestial became one at a time when sparks didn’t exist. Anybody can do it.” She rolled her sleeve down and dug through her bag.

Right. The founder. Master of four elemental gifts. “Will I be able to use my water gift? And the others?” Alim stifled their grin but failed miserably. This was a dream come true. Literally. Dreamers had to pick a goal as their “dream” when they joined the company. Alim had chosen “learn magic” as theirs, even knowing the impossibility.

Hali scooted over and set a series of books on the bench between her and Alim. “With years—decades of practice. You’d have to change your blood’s elemental affinity. Too dangerous. Stick with ether control. That level of mastery will come with time.”

This might be the first time I’ve wished I was a decade older. “What’s the process then? It can’t be easy since nobody else has it figured out.”

“You’re not wrong. First, you need to break through each ether surge’s haze barrier using ethereal blood. Find the eidolon inside and eat its spirit fruit. Each fruit attunes you to a spirit and strengthens your connection to the spirit tree.”

Alim thumped the bench leg again with their boot. Ethereal blood? Gross. Spirit tree? *That’s a real thing?* Ether surge? *Sounds like a potent drink.*

“Sorry, Hali. None of those words mean a thing to me. All I heard was ‘eat fruit,’ and I have no idea how to find an eh-doe-wutzit.”

“Then you caught the important bits.” Hali took a book from the top of the stack and flipped through its pages. “Give me a few weeks to figure out how to get through haze barriers.”

“Figure out? Haven’t you done this before?”

“Ethereal blood is something only a druid can get,” Hali said.

“Let’s ask Tio!”

“He has his own assignment. Not to mention he was dying to stop talking to us the whole time, or did you not notice?”

“But maybe he’s got ethereal blood?” Regardless, Alim just wanted an excuse to befriend Tio. He was gutsy when he wasn’t looking uncomfortable to exist. A little more time and he would’ve warmed up to Alim and Hali for sure.

“Not a chance.” Hali shut the book with an unceremonious sigh. “The nature spark is too weak to contact eidolons, and that’s the only way to get ethereal blood.”

“What exactly are eye-dough-loans?”

Hali groaned. “You’re doing that on purpose now, aren’t you?”

Maybe a little.

“An eidolon is half-tree, half-animal. Think of it as an animal empowered with magic by spirits and the reason surges exist at all.”

“I won’t have to kill one, will I?” Alim didn’t like the idea, but if it was to help Hali’s family...

“What? Of course not. As if you could. Best case you’ll get on its good side and it’ll give you one. Worst, stealing is always an option. Violence isn’t recommended.”

“So, while you’re sorting out the haze barrier puzzle, what should I be doing?”

Hali set the book down and pushed the stack closer to Alim. “You have reading to catch up on.”

“Seriously?”

“Do you expect to reshape ether at will when you don’t understand it first?” Hali gave a subdued laugh, the way she always did when justifying why ancient magic was an important topic to skeptical students.

“I guess not,” Alim said as they grabbed the first book from the stack, *Enchanting & Ether: A History* by Barbaroli Pensa. “What a dry title.”

“Right? At least it should give some hints as to where to find the surges.” Hali got up from the bench. “Sorry we spent so much time discussing this. Let’s get that meal I promised.”

Reading wasn’t what Alim had expected for their first week of celestial training. How exciting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jason M. Vallery, Lover of Cats, Demolisher of Snacks, Video Game Encyclopedia.

Creating characters, worlds, and stories has always been a favorite pastime of mine, from text-based role-playing games, multi-user dungeons (MUDs), multiplayer role-playing games, to short stories. Learning to apply those experiences towards writing was a fun and exciting challenge which has resulted in my first novel, *Arboreal Path*.

If you enjoyed this preview, you can purchase the book at

books2read.com/arborealpath