

SUNBORN RISING

Beneath The Fall

Aaron
Safronoff



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BENEATH THE FALL

by Aaron Safronoff



NEOGLYPHIC ENTERTAINMENT
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Sunborn Rising: Beneath the Fall

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Sample Edition

CONTENTS

Chapter 1. The Secret Remains

Chapter 2. Stretched Thin

Chapter 3. Buckling Down

Chapter 4. The Coppice

Chapter 5. The Rush

Chapter 6. Alone in the Dark

Chapter 7. A Mother's Imperative

Chapter 8. Harbingers

Chapter 9. The Council's Reach

10. Kudmoth Traps

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CHAPTER 1. THE SECRET REMAINS



The Secret Remains

Barra's mother had never said that Barra *wasn't* allowed in her father's study. Maybe because she'd never asked. She hesitated at the threshold, feeling her mother's disapproving eyes even though she wasn't home yet. But Barra was determined, and she crossed into the dusty room.

The urge to know about her father was overwhelming, and her mother's memories weren't enough anymore. Barra wanted something all her own, a unique connection, and searching the rest of the den had turned up nothing. Even her mother's room with its keepsakes and journals had revealed little Barra didn't already know. She clung to the hope that some missed trinket remained in the old unexplored study. All she had to do to avoid disappointing her mother was not get caught.

Stalking around the study on all fours with her claws retracted and her long tail in the air, Barra was careful to disturb as little as possible. Her efforts were probably unnecessary, as the room had grown wild. The living boughs of wood that composed the floor, curved walls, and domed ceiling had been left

untended for more than ten rings, and time had twisted the room's shape, shifting and obscuring its contents.

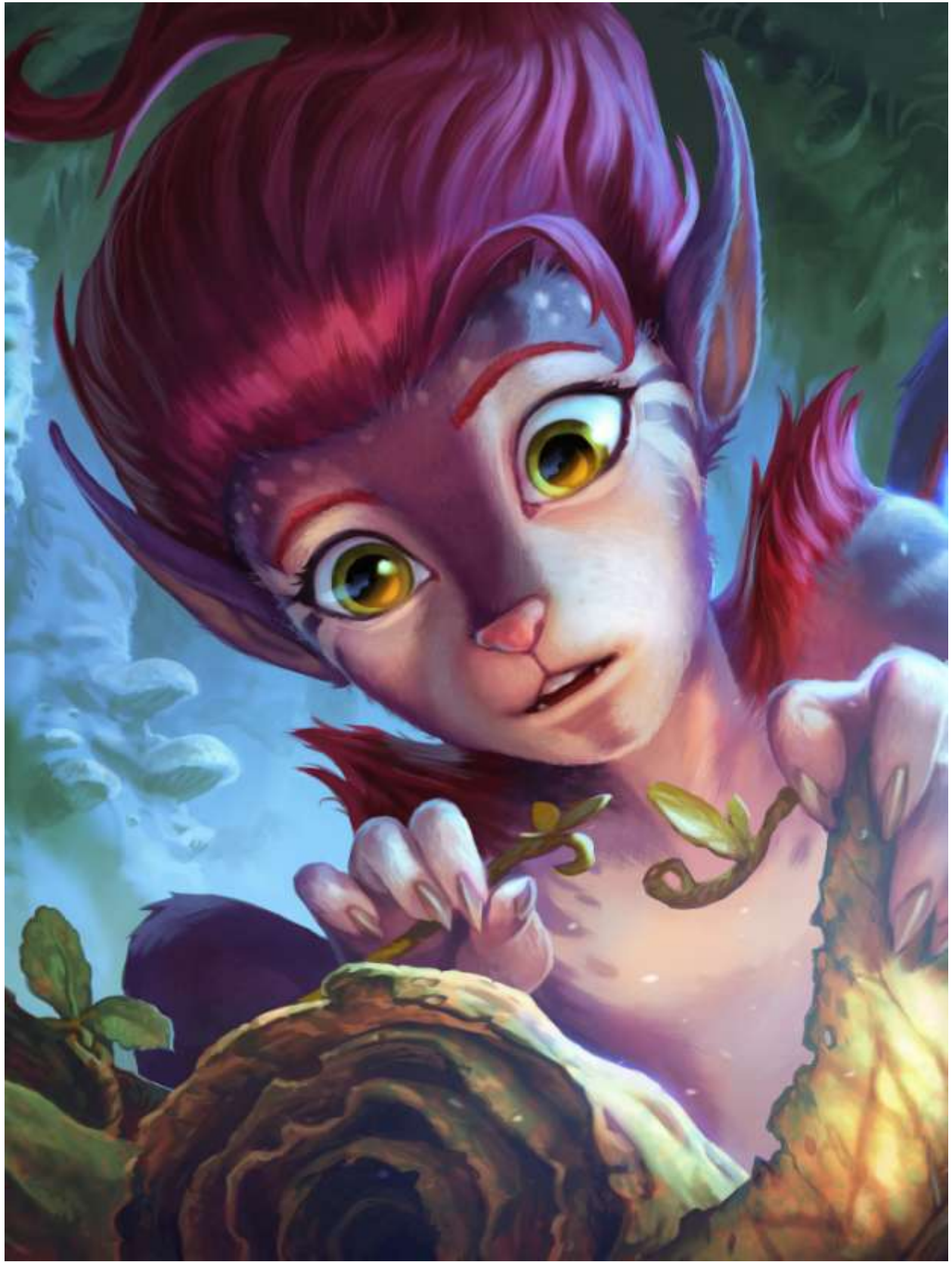
Few of her father's possessions remained. Barra's mother had cleared the room of any personal or important items long ago, preparing the study to be reclaimed by the trees. The lingering knickknacks were not at all what Barra had hoped to find. Still, she felt closer to him simply being in his room. There was a desk, the smoothed surface of a large braid of wood, arching up out of the floor against the far wall, and she was drawn to it. She thought about her father spending hours at that desk, and wondered if he'd ever held her there while working.

Barra spied a curious deformity, a recess, in the wall behind the desk. A withered cover hung to the side, its texture and markings meant to match the wall, concealing itself and the recess behind—and whatever was held within. Barra saw several sheaves of leaves rolled and tied into tight bundles deep within the hidden cubbyhole.

The rhythm of Barra's heart became a brief rapid staccato like an urgent knock at the door. Barra didn't hesitate. She answered. Reaching inside the cubbyhole, she pulled the sheaves out one at a time.

Laying the sheaves down side-by-side on the floor, Barra gathered seven bundles before the cubby was empty. Each was numbered, and she eagerly undid the braided-willow twine that secured the first. She unfurled the wax-thickened outermost page. The inner pages of leaves were old and thin, but treated with resin to prevent them turning brittle. Etched into the middle of the top leaf was a symbol. Barra recognized it from the archives as the symbol for Cerulean: a spiraling ball of fire with a ring around it. The fire represented the sun, the space around it the ocean, and the ring was the canopy of the Great Forest.

Barra knew her father had written many journals, but her mother kept all of those in her room, on display. Her mother used to read aloud from them to help Barra sleep at night. *These* sheaves were something new. Something even her mother didn't know about.



Unfamiliar emotions surged through Barra, pressure building in her head as tears welled in her eyes. Laid out before her were her father's private thoughts, and Barra might be the first to ever know them. As though from a distance, Barra watched her own trembling hand grasp the edge of the top leaf and turn it over. She began reading:

As I sit down to these leaves, I can't help but wonder about what I'm doing, and why. I need an honest record somewhere. I don't feel safe sharing more with Brace. She probably knows too much already, and there's no reason to distract her right now. This is harder to do than I thought...

My recent presentation to the Elders did not tell the whole story of what I discovered in the Middens. I withheld information at Jerrun's request. He said he spoke for the entire Elder Council. Maybe he did, I still don't know for sure. I believed him when he said my early observations of the Creepervine were dangerous, and might cause a

panic. So, I presented my findings with no hint of the threat growing at our feet. I lied.

Watching myself write that out? Feels so strange. I guess I thought I'd feel relief, but instead I feel judged and I'm the only one here.

But in my defense, I was sure my research would continue! I was sure my silence was for the greater good. I mean, I didn't have enough evidence to pass my own scrutiny. I only had my suspicions, a handful of observations, and a few archival anecdotes—but I'm lying to myself. I had seen the Creepervine with my own eyes, and still I allowed the Council to convince me otherwise. There are no excuses. I lied, and now I'm trying to make it right.

The Council has redirected me to taking nectar samples in the Reach for the rest of the ring, and that's no coincidence. It's only been a few days since my presentation. When I asked for an explanation, and stressed that we needed to continue looking to the

Middens, Jerrun pretended like we'd never even talked! He put it back to me that there was, "nothing more to see in the Middens," according to my research. To challenge him openly then would have been to discredit my work and my name forever! He trapped me in my own cowardice. I can't understand his motivations. But he underestimated me. I'm continuing the research alone.

Barra looked up from the loosely scrawled text. Goosebumps turned up the flesh beneath her fur, and she shivered. She felt like she'd summoned the ghost of her father, but it spoke with a voice she didn't recognize. Her father wasn't a liar. The words couldn't be trusted.

She found herself fussing over her tail, nervously tapping the mementos she'd woven into the Thread coiled around it. The Thread held memories, the story of her life told through a collection of baubles. She cared for it meticulously, but had a bad habit of scratching at it whenever she was anxious. Catching herself, she noted—not for the first time—the painful absence of any curios for her father. Other bups had many mementos for both parents,

and Barra felt like her Thread looked empty by comparison, only half what it should be. She shook off the thought, stopped fussing with her Thread, and continued reading:

I wish I could talk to someone instead of just writing all this down.

Brace knows something of my work of course, but I never told her about the conversation with Jerrun or that I altered my presentation.

Better she doesn't know too much in case that old Rattlebark comes sniffing around the den. It bothers me not telling her everything, but

it's not only paranoia about Jerrun that holds my tongue. I can't have

her suspicious, wondering where I'm going at night, if I want to

continue the research. She has to believe everything is normal. I'm

lucky she's so busy preparing for Barra's arrival—whenever she asks

about my strange behavior, I just say I'm anxious about our first.

She'd try to stop me if she knew I was planning to explore the

Middens alone. I have to lie to her. I can't see any other way.

I'm going to prove my theory about the Creepervine, or prove myself wrong, and either way, put an end to this need for secrecy. For now, the burden belongs to me and these pages, and I just have to look forward to the day that I look back on all of this, laughing at my silly paranoia.

The last portion of the leaf was empty. Barra slouched onto her hind legs, thinking. This side of her father was completely unknown to her. She'd never imagined him as anything other than a fearless explorer. Barra couldn't understand why her father would hide from anything or anyone. She sat forward again, flipped the leaf, and read:

To understand this world, our home, Cerulean, we must first understand the basic organization of its parts and how they interact. Having established this understanding, we can then make meaningful assertions about its health, its balms and its banes. We need to be the caretakers of the Great Forest in order to ensure that we

Arboreals can thrive among its boughs. From the archives, Cerulean comprises a star at the center of a vast ocean covered by flotillas of Great Trees woven together by their roots. Those roots carry water and light all the way up the trunks and into everything that lives and grows in our world. All the flowers and berries, all the wood and leaves, everything we see—even us—it's all the result of the relationship of star, sea, and tree. But something is wrong with that relationship. We are in almost perpetual twilight in the Loft, while the archives are full of bright descriptions. I believe that we've been in the dark for so long, and no one questions it..

Barra's tail swept the air as she looked beyond the body of the text. There were notes in the margins, her father annotating the changes he was making to his presentation. This was the original. The words weren't always legible, and often seemed nothing more than rambling anecdotes. Barra flipped ahead, hastily. She was running out of time. Her mother had to be close to home, Barra was sure of it.

Quickly skimming the pages, she tried to digest as much as she could.

Her eyes flew over the words, picking fragments from each of the leaves.

There were sketches of insects, flowers, and funguses. Charts were drawn on a few pages showing the flow of water and “relative luminescence”—whatever that meant—over time. She stopped on a leaf that was obviously outside of the formal ordering of the pages:

The archives are either too disorganized, or sheaves are missing, or both. I've been trying to investigate without raising suspicion, but the Council is everywhere, and with Jerrun as the Head now, I'm not sure I can do much more there. I better avoid the archives for a bit..

I've had dreams lately, like I'm living in the Cerulean of the archives.

But the dreams all end the same way—scared and alone in the darkness. I discover the tendrils of the Creepervine in the dream, just like I did in reality, but in the dream the vine is writhing and reaching for something. The Creepervine grows in long, jagged black

lines over everything I see, capturing the light and strangling the flow of water. My once vibrant dream is eaten whole, swallowed by the shadows, and I wake up each time in a cold sweat. Brace knows there's something wrong, something more than nerves. But I'm close to the answers, I can feel it. If I could only get a sample to live long enough to examine it away from the Middens, but severed portions shrivel and die in a matter of moments. I'm overworked, filling in my normal time in the Reach and my spare time below. I cut myself exploring tonight. It was a careless mistake. The wound already looks nasty, and now I have one more thing to hide from Brace...

Barra turned over the odd leaf and saw a drawing. It was a menacing, curvy fang, or so she thought until she saw the label that read *Creepervine Thorn*.

Barra turned the page back over and read it again. The change in tone of her father's writing bothered her. He sounded confident in his research, but that

confidence in the margins faltered, and broke completely on the loose page she held.

Each of the seven sheaves was full of more leaves than Barra cared to count, and there was no time to even look at them all, much less read them all. She'd have to come back—but she couldn't tear herself away, not yet. She pointed her ears and listened closely to be sure; her mother still wasn't home. Barra opened the next sheave, and the next, parting the stacks in half, taking them in at a glance. There were more inserted leaves, and she picked one out to read:

I don't know if I'm any closer to understanding, and I'm frustrated.

Every time I go down into the Middens, I think I'll come back with

answers, but I only have more questions. I've skipped some of my

days assigned to the Reach to sneak down into the Middens. I think

the vine recedes during the day? But that seems impossible,

because I've marked only increasing encroachment since I started.

And it seems like it would only be wasted energy to hide? So many

questions. If I go by my nightbloom measurements, the vine could be growing all the way into the Nest in less than a dozen rings! And lately, I feel like I'm...

“Barra? Honey, where are you?” her mother called out from the kitchen.

The young Listlespur whipped her body around instinctively and knocked a loose seed free from a nearby weed. Barra snatched it from the air in a flash, and tucked it into her cheek to add to her Thread later. It wouldn't exactly commemorate a moment *with* her father, but it was pretty close. She scooped up the sheaves and placed them haphazardly on top of the desk preparing to tuck them back into the cubbyhole, but a quick glance around the study convinced Barra the effort would be wasted. There was no disguising that she'd been there. She stopped fussing with the sheaves, and then crept to the window and slid out into the treescape.

There were branches and dimly illumined foliage in every direction. Barra's fur bristled as she climbed onto the roof of her father's study. She padded onto the adjoining roof of her mother's nestroom, and then stepped—she hoped,

silently—onto the kitchen roof. There was a porthole in the center of the roof, and Barra sat down beside it. She began grooming herself as though she'd been sitting there all day.

“Barra!” Her mother called again, irritated.

“Up here!” Barra put her face through the porthole and smiled.

“Get down from there,” her mother said. She sighed, shaking her head.

“You know I don't like it when you dawdle on the roof. You're like a thief skulking about up there.” She continued with a raised eyebrow, “Couldn't you at least *try* to be *somewhat* civilized? For me?”



“Sure. I can *try*,” Barra said as she dropped through the porthole. She landed

lightly, arched her back, and stretched her tail up. Then she stood and faced her mother only to be greeted by a familiar look of disapproval.

Her mother opened her mouth to speak, but just then her soft pink nose began twitching. She sniffed the air suspiciously. "Where have you been? And *what* have you gotten into? Smells, hmmm, old and dirty." Barra's mom squinted at her and waited for an explanation.

"Nowhere." Barra shrugged. She wanted to tell her mother about the journal, but at the same time she wanted to keep it to herself. If she was silent about her discovery now, she could always tell her mother later.

"The Middens again?" her mother guessed.

"Aww, Mom. It's not dangerous," Barra said. She *had* been in the Middens, so why not go with it?

"Well, go wash up. Dinner soon." Barra was off the hook, and she scampered off before her mom could identify any other scents.

Brace shook her head and began washing berries for dinner. Of course, she'd recognized the smell immediately; Gammel was never far from her

thoughts. She was okay with her daughter exploring the old study. Brace was even okay that her daughter didn't tell her about it. It was good for a young bup, especially her Barra, to find her own limits. Besides, there wasn't anything dangerous in the study. Just a bunch of old, crazy dreams.

Alone in the kitchen, Brace said, "She's your daughter, Gammel."

CHAPTER 2. STRETCHED THIN



Stretched Thin

Plicks approached from upwind, and though Barra couldn't see him yet, she could smell him. She could tell he was steadily closing in on her.

Barra was strong and lean, fast. Confident she could outrun most Listlespurs, she knew she could outrun a Kolalabat. For this game though, she had to hide. Barra found a tightly knit web of branches and climbed into it. The plush of short, slick furs that covered her body made her difficult to catch and hold, and also, difficult to see. Settling into position, she flexed the fine muscles beneath her skin that adjusted her fur. The follicles bent and shifted in a fluid cascade that tricked the light. Barra blended into the branches and leaves. When the hypnotic movement of her fur stopped, she was almost invisible. Her ears stuck out, but they passed for the pink petals of a lily. She tucked her limbs to cover her less furry hands and feet, and wrapped her long, striking tail around and beneath her body to conceal the braid full of colorful mementos which was wrapped around the end. Her Thread served many purposes but not one was stealth.

Certain she'd taken care of any tell-tale signs, Barra sat statue and listened through the pulse in her ears for any movement from Plicks. She waited. He advanced.

There was a rustling through the thicket, Plicks' approach suddenly clumsy. Barra still couldn't see him. She peered through the close foliage, her large emerald green eyes open wide, gathering light from the dim wood. For a moment, she wondered what it would be like if the flowers and radiant mosses shined as brightly as her father described, but the thought ended abruptly. Plicks was close. She snapped her eyes shut, not wanting to risk their reflections giving her away.

It seemed a great deal of time passed without another sound or any hint of Plicks' movement. Barra had to fight off the urge to open her eyes. Plicks was so close that she couldn't imagine why he would have stopped. He definitely hadn't passed by her. She tried to count to one hundred, but gave up at thirty-three—she hated sitting still. Opening her eyes only a slit, she strained to see her furry friend. She saw nothing. Stretching one hand out from behind

her cover, she started to climb down, but a sudden crash of breaking branches froze her solid.

When the leaves settled, Plicks' small defeated voice called out, "Barra? Barra, I'm stuck."



Barra hesitated. She remembered Plicks and Tory whispering conspiratorially before the game, and wondered if they were trying to flush her out of her hiding place with a trick. But it only took Barra a moment to dismiss the idea. Plicks just wasn't a trickster. Good-natured, hopelessly clumsy, and maybe a

little gullible—definitely not capable of deceit. And now that she thought about it, he *was* frequently stuck.

Graceful as a feather falling, she lowered herself down to the pathwood.

This particular pathwood had been abandoned long ago, along with the rest of the Middens though at one time the wide bough must have seen hundreds of travelling Arboreals a day. The bark of the thoroughfare was petrified, ancient and worn. Barra couldn't sink her claws into the pathwood, it was so tough. She did her best to pad softly in the direction of Plicks' voice.

"Barra? Help! *Barra!*" Plicks cried out.

Barra pushed through some large ferns, and there he was. The Kolalabat dangled from above, suspended in a hammock of his own furry skin. Plicks' scruffs, the two large flaps of stretchy skin growing from his back, had snagged on some brambles overhead, and he must have tripped and gotten all wrapped up in them on the way down. Plicks' purple and gray fur stood on end all over his body, thick and puffy-looking.

Plicks struggled as Barra finally announced herself. “Hey, hey, *relax*. I’m right here,” she said as she scrutinized the tangle.

“Oh! Hello!” Plicks tried to sound cheerful. “I don’t know what happened. I thought I had you for sure! But then... then *this*,” he added with a little wriggle that must have been a shrug.

Barra was irritated that the game had ended without a clear winner, but she went to work at the new game of Untangle-the-Kolalabat. Her mind kept wandering to her father, and though she pulled and swung Plicks around vigorously, she wasn’t getting very far.

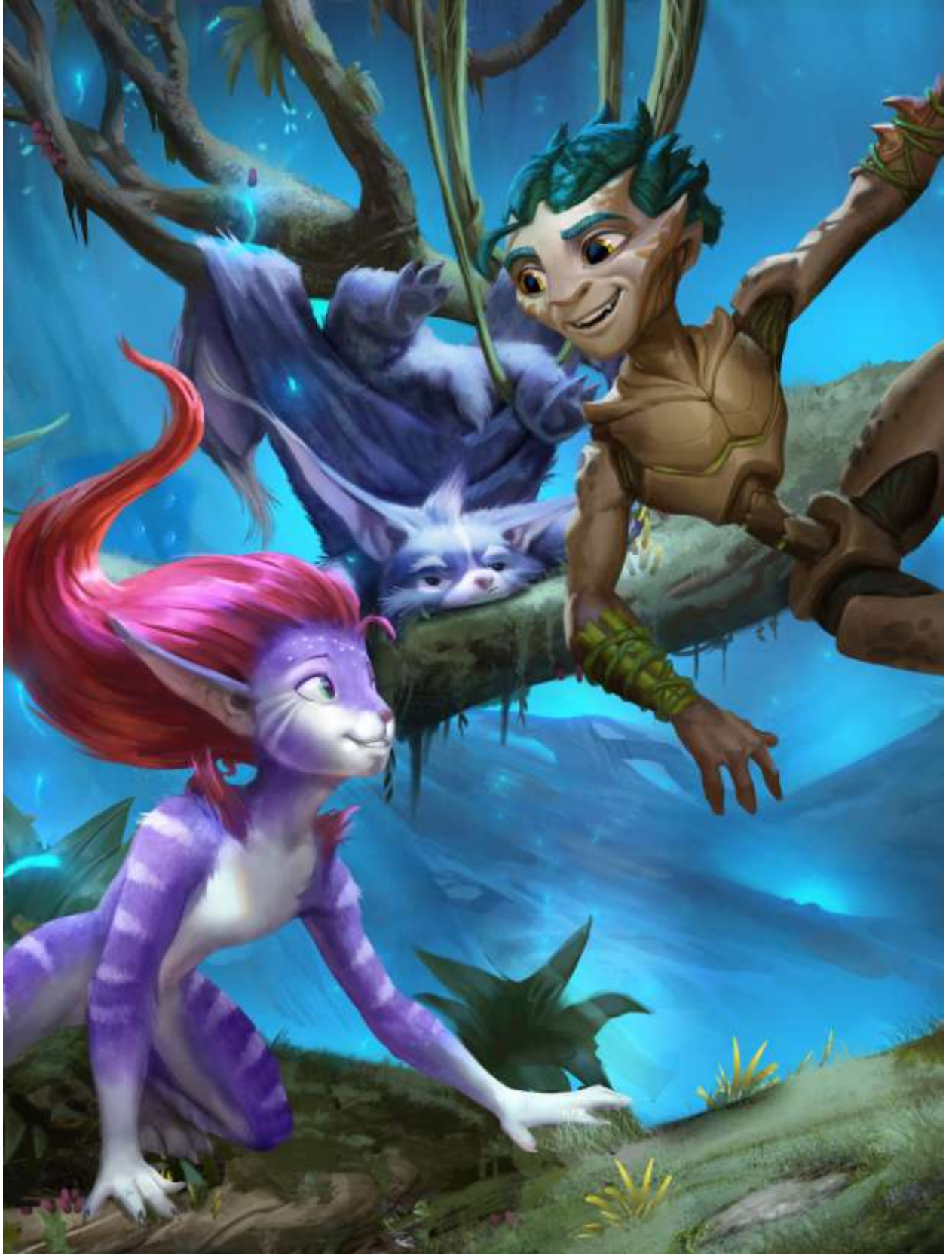
“So, uh, how bad is it?” Plicks asked.

Barra imagined he was nervously chewing away at his lip or clicking his talons together within the bundle of fur. She teased, “Well, I’m pretty good, but even I might not be able to get you out of this one.”

Plicks’ fur was accented sporadically by long, bright-violet whiskers. Usually, the whiskers helped him sense subtle shifts in air currents, but they were also

effective indicators of his mood, and now they bristled in agitation. He was becoming frustrated. "Can you get me out?" he pleaded. "Where's Tory?"

Splashing through the thick leaves overhead, Tory appeared as if on cue. He jumped down, landing with ease. He stood up. A head taller than Barra, with arms as long and almost as strong as his legs, he might have been intimidating if not for the casual way he held himself. He grinned, and asked, "Hey, hey. What's goin' on?" Then he added, whispering out of the corner of his mouth, "That's five to four. I win." *He* didn't care, but he knew Barra would.



Barra scoffed at him, "No way. Uh-uh. This game doesn't count."

Tory kept on grinning, irritating her even more. Barra couldn't always tell when the young Rugosic was teasing her. He didn't have fur or whiskers, or a tail, or anything like a Listlespur that she could understand as body language. Instead, Tory was covered in a flexible layer of minerals bonded to his otherwise fragile skin. The tough second skin was thicker in some places, thinner in others, and it was cracked all over like the wrinkles in the palm of a hand. Barra'd had to learn to read the cracks, and sometimes, the translation was difficult and annoying. In particular, she'd been anxious all day about her father's journal, so she had even less patience than usual. She still hadn't told her friends anything about what she'd found. She wasn't sure what they'd think about it, what they'd say about her father.

She held up one finger, extending a sharp claw from its tip, and pointed it at Tory. "It's a draw if it's anything," she said.

Through his scruffs, Plicks said sarcastically, "It's a *tough* decision. Really. It was such an *important* game for both of you—I'm such a *worthy* adversary.

How can we ever settle this? Maybe whichever one of you helps me down first? Hmm? Maybe?”

Barra glared at Tory, waiting for his agreement, but he wouldn't admit the draw. He shrugged off her annoyed look and slid over to Plicks. Without warning, he lifted Plicks up and flipped him over once, starting a reaction that unwound the Kolalabat completely. His scruffs tugged free from the brambles, and he fell to the ground in a heap.

Plicks stood up, long whiskers twitching to either side of his wide, stubby nose. He was only a little more than half Barra's height. He began carefully gathering up his scruffs, flexing the muscles in his back that bunched them closer to his body. Out of habit, he reached into his pouch and inspected his Thread to help him concentrate. When Plicks noticed his friends staring, he tucked his Thread away in a hurry. But the nervous energy had to go somewhere, and he tapped his talons on the pathwood.

Tory said, “Hey buddy, don't be embarrassed.”

Plicks shrugged. He was the youngest of eleven brothers and sisters and their persistent teasing had given him a thick skin, an armor of his own, so to speak. The armor worked well against overt ridicule, but offered no protection when he disappointed his friends. Tory and Barra were always careful not to hurt his feelings, but somehow that only made it harder to take. He wanted to impress them, not be consoled by them. He slouched and was glad the game was over.

Jerking a thumb at Barra, Tory added, "We all get tripped up sometimes. Even the *perfectly balanced* one over here."

Barra's mind had wandered, and she didn't notice the verbal jab. She surveyed the treescape the way she imagined her father would have, and wondered what other secrets were in the journal. She found herself edging away from her friends, wanting to go home to read more.

"Whoa, whoa. Where're you going?" Tory asked her.

"I was just..." Barra tried to think of an excuse to leave. It was getting late... it *was* getting late. She demanded, "What time is it?!" while looking

around frantically for a dayflower. She scrambled up a bough and pulled a large urn-shaped flower into view. Through the translucent leaves, she could see the thick fluid inside had risen almost to the bottom of a dark mark. She didn't need an excuse, after all. "Oh no. I gotta go!" she said, but didn't move.

Speaking over the top of one another, Tory and Plicks said, "Well, get going!" and, "Better hurry!"

Barra's eyes grew wide. "Right!" She bounded along the pathwood, her tail flicking after her.

Barra jumped up and out of sight. The tip of her tail seemed to linger like it was reluctant to leave, but the slack ran out and it was dragged away. Plicks watched her go, and asked, full of hope, "Do you think she'll make it?"

"She's fast, but... I don't know. Maybe?" Tory said with a devil-may-care grin. Neither was in a hurry, so they started walking along the pathwood in the general direction of the Umberwood Nest. Tory may not have been concerned about Barra getting home, but something else was nagging at him and he

asked, "Did you notice how out of it she was today? I wonder what's bothering her."

Plicks thought about it, and said, "I noticed, but I guess I think she just gets like that sometimes." He shrugged.

Tory nodded, but he thought there was more to it than that. He changed subjects anyway, and asked, "Been adding to your Thread?"

"Yeah. My weaving skills need some work," Plicks said. His Thread was ragged, the baubles loose.

Tory pointed out, "Well, it's not just your weaving, right? Your Thread is supposed to hold the most important moments together, not *every* moment."

Tory held up his right forearm where his Thread was wrapped clean and tight.

There were baubles and trinkets tastefully woven into the tough braid. "Each one is special to me," he said. He was distracted by one for a moment, his

eyes shimmering. He shook his head and went on. "Anyway, what're all those?" he indicated Plicks' Thread.

Frowning, Plicks defended his misshapen Thread and the haphazard mementos it held. "Look, when you have as big a family as I have, there's lots to remember. Their story is my story too you know." He frowned at his misshapen Thread, "I just have to, erm, find a better way to weave it all in."

Tory seemed to accept the explanation, and they continued along the pathwood without saying more about it. Even though he spent a lot of time in the Middens, it was still new and wondrous to him whenever he took a moment to look around. The abandoned treescape was within the Loft proper, the bottom of it actually, though it often felt a world apart. The unique dens found throughout were mysterious, ancient, and warped, stretched by gravity over many rings. Each den gradually imposed on its neighbors, and they crushed together into a tangled mess. The Middens was entirely unlike the bustling Loft where the majority of the Arboreals lived, and sometimes it felt like a private space reserved only for the adventurous.



Different and exciting an area as it was, Tory rarely went to the Middens alone. The top few tiers were safe enough and that's where they spent most of their time—they could even see through to populated pathwoods, they stayed so close—but any deeper was risky. The deepest tiers were thin, boughs uncertain, and beneath the lowest bough was the Fall. He didn't like to think about the endless emptiness, branchless and frightening as it was, and it was easier not to think about it with his friends around.

Tory squinted, spotting a clear shot through the branches overhead. He challenged Plicks, "Seed throw?"

Plicks was dubious. "You can make that throw?"

"Are you kidding?" The confident Rugosic didn't wait for an answer. He knelt down and picked up Plicks. "Get ready," he said.

Plicks hurriedly gathered his scruffs for the throw.

Tory tucked and rolled backwards, head over heels three times, and then stood up all at once, launching Plicks through the air. The Kolalabat went soaring up out of the Middens and into the Loft.

At the peak of his flight, Plicks reached out and dug the talons of all four paws into a mossy stretch of wood. "Wooooo!" he cried out, triumphant until he saw how narrowly he'd missed a large thicket of brambles. The blood left his face, and his whiskers hung limply.

Tory nodded. "See? Told you."

A cool tingle shot up Plicks' spine and he shook all over. Wincing, he said, "Yeah. Of course."

They said goodbye and Tory started on his way home. Plicks took a moment to get his bearings. Then he plucked a pea-sized black fruit from the

bramble bush that had almost gotten him. He popped it in his mouth and chewed on it to remove the bitter casing. Once he'd removed it all, he dropped it onto his paw to examine his work. It was a disc of swirled brown and orange. Exactly what he needed for his Thread. And with that, he scuttled off toward home.

CHAPTER 3. BUCKLING DOWN



Buckling Down

Barra dashed home, her long tail rippling behind her as her claws chewed bark.

Her family's den was in the Nest area of the Loft with the many other families of Arboreals in the Umberwood. The Nest radiated out from the trunk, with dens spread wide from the center, and also above and below one another. The large area described a shape roughly similar to a squashed pumpkin. There was no hard boundary between the Nest and the rest of the Loft; like the Umberwood, it grew and changed. Barra and her mother lived on the outskirts, closer to the Middens than the older families deep in the Nest. Even so, from where Barra and her friends were playing, she had quite the distance to run. She went fast, maybe faster than ever before, but she was late as she slid inside.

Barra's mother stood at the waterfull flower in the kitchen facing away from the entrance. Two woven satchels were slung low across her hips. She removed a fruit from one satchel, dunked it into the waterfull, washed it

carefully—rubbing it meticulously with both hands—rinsed it, and then placed it in her other satchel.

Brace Swiftspur was considered an imposing presence among other Listlespurs, she carried herself so confidently. Her Thread was a tough, variegated braid wrapped in fine coils over the entire length of her tail. She'd already begun overlapping. Still, standing there methodically washing fruit, she seemed incapable of a harsh thought. Barra knew better. Her mother rarely acted in anger, but she wielded disappointment like a weapon, and she was a master. Barra dreaded seeing that disappointment directed at her. Sometimes she thought she'd prefer her mother to be flat out angry once in a while—seemed easier than guilt.

Signs of aging had appeared prematurely in her mother: thinning fur and fading whiskers that were turning gray at the tips. Barra knew it didn't make sense, but she felt at least partially responsible for the early weathering.

Hoping her mother hadn't noticed the time—even though their dayflower grew right over the waterfull—Barra tried to stealth by unseen. Just when she thought she'd made it past, her mother leaned down and glared at her.

Yep. She was displeased.

Without releasing her daughter from her disapproving gaze, Brace pulled down the drainpetal on the back of the waterfull. Dirty water ran out over the lip and down into a little garden at her feet. "Where have you been, dear?" her mother asked pointedly.

Brace released the thick, waxy drainpetal, and it slowly folded up and back into its neighboring petals. The drainpetal excreted a sticky resin to create a watertight seal, and the deep bowl of the waterfull flower began filling again with fresh water.

Barra looked around like she was going to find an excuse floating in the air. Finally, she stammered, "Well, you know, where I told you I'd be, out playing with Tory and Plicks. The two nicest boys—that's what you always call them. Responsible friends, I think you said? Well, I was with them." She

paused, gaining confidence, and went on, "Right after Coppice, exactly as we agreed. No dawdling or loitering about. Like. I. Promised." Stepping toward her mother, she reached into the clean bag of fruits and selected a blue one, "Indigoblyberries? My favorite!" She held it up to her nose. "Thank you, Mom!" Barra gave her a big hug.

Barra's mom wasn't fooled by her daughter's affectionate misdirection, and she did not return the hug. Instead, she asked, "*Where* were you playing with your nice and responsible friends?"

"Uh, well, we weren't playing in the Reach," Barra offered quickly. "I know you don't like it when—"

"Barra." Her mother's patience was thin.

"Aw, mom." Barra backed away from her attempted hug. She was caught. She managed to look hurt about it too, but her mother only waited for admission.

Barra gave up. As she put the indigoblyberry back in her mother's satchel, she said, "We were in the Middens." Her mother seemed about to

speak, so Barra interjected, “BUT, I was out of the Middens before nightbloom.

There was at least a measure left of Watering. At least!”

Brace knelt down and looked her daughter in the eye, “That’s not the point, Barra. The Middens is unsafe any time of day. Especially this late. You know better.”

A little know-it-all look crept across Barra’s face, and she couldn’t help but utter, “That’s a myth. It’s the same at night as it is during the day—”



“So, *obviously* you’ve been there after Watering, huh?” Her mother stood up, agitated. “Wash up,” she said as she turned away. “We’re eating soon, and then I’m going to watch you do your homework, and then you’re going to bed.”

“Aw, Mom! Come on! I was just..” Barra stopped her plea short when she saw her mother’s expression. There was no room for argument there.

Shoulders sagging, Barra walked toward her nestroom. She pulled aside the doorweave, but before leaving the kitchen, she turned back to her mother and said, “I’m sorry.”

Barra’s nestroom was small, but she had her own waterfull and a nectarsweet too. A weave of rare soft ferns covered the entire floor and grew various different flowers with the passing seasons—as the ring grows. The bedding was comforting, and she loved rolling around on it.

Washing up, Barra prepared herself for what she expected to be a long tense dinner. She knew that she’d gone too far, been late too many times. It was plain that her mother had had enough. Barra took a deep breath, shook herself dry, and then went back out to the kitchen.

Dinner was even more strained than expected. Mother and daughter exchanged pleasantries and said little otherwise. When they finished, they cleaned up together, and it seemed to Barra that her mother was distracted—distracted by more than just her daughter’s disregard for the rules. Barra got up the courage to ask, “What’s the matter?”

Brace scrutinized her daughter’s face carefully, and said thoughtfully, “I visited a dozen of the best gardens today. The fruits were... well, what did you think of dinner?”

Barra wasn’t sure what to say. Dinner was typical, she thought. She thought they’d had better, but she felt bad for even thinking it. She wouldn’t have said dinner was flavorless exactly, but there wasn’t much to it. “It was okay,” she admitted.

Her mother was not offended, and nodded as though she’d expected that answer.

“I’m sure it wasn’t anything you did, Mom,” Barra shrugged and smiled wanly. “Sometimes the berries aren’t any good.”

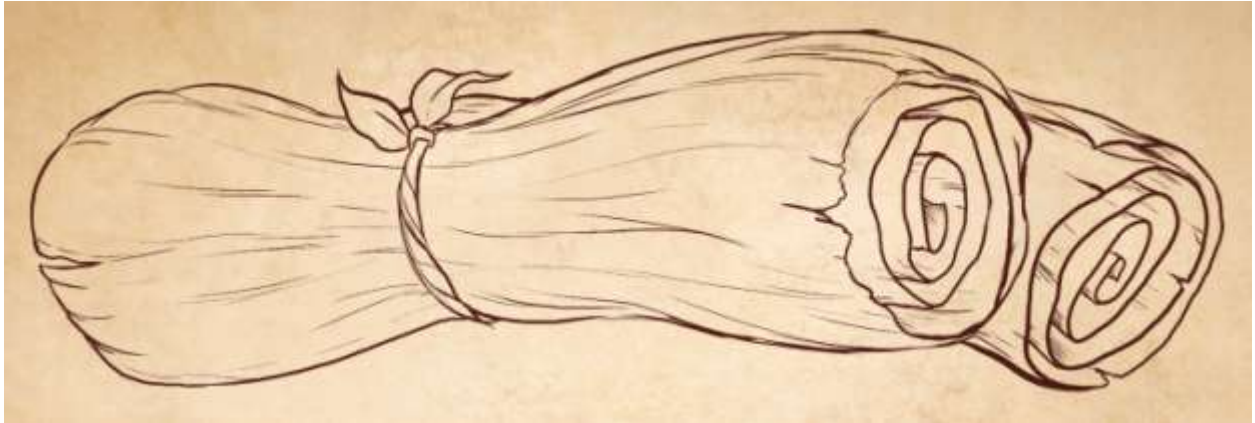
“Yes, yes, you’re probably right,” Brace said, coming back to the conversation. Dismissing her thoughts on the subject, she went on, “Okay, enough chit chat. Homework and bed for you!” She added as though she’d been repeating it for rings, “And bathe properly! For the sake of the Olwones!”

Later that night, Barra didn’t have to do her homework with her mother after all. She thought about bringing it up, but figured it was better to leave it alone and just be grateful. Besides, it gave her a chance to sneak back into her father’s study.

The port in the ceiling of Barra’s nestroom was difficult to reach, especially silently, but Barra was practiced, and knew the quiet holds by heart. She was out of her room and on top of the roof in no time. From there, she made her way back to the study.

Everything was exactly as she’d left it. She crept quietly over to the sheaves and leaves of the journal and sorted through them again. Reverently, she put everything back in order, and excepting the first sheave, she placed the rest in the cubbyhole behind the desk. She read from the beginning,

savoring every word again. The voice behind the words still didn't match up with how she imagined her father, but she read on, hoping to know him better.



Barra lost herself in her father's descriptions of the Middens, and his seemingly random, desperate interstitials. There was no dayflower growing in the study, so she had no idea the day was ending until it was over, until the Buckle began. The low rumble pulsed through the wood up into her bones, and even though it felt the same as it did every night, it took her several moments to comprehend what it meant.

Cerulean was buckling. The Umberwood was floating closer to its neighboring Great Trees, millions of branches intertwining and sliding around

each other, closing the gaps in the canopy. The world was exhaling, the ocean shrinking toward the sun, and so the trees embraced one another.

The Buckle didn't take long to bring everyone closer together, but it also isolated; thoroughfares were closed off, intersections blocked, windows shut, and ports sealed—including those opening into a young Listlespur's nestroom.

Barra palmed the next few leaves from the sheave, rolled them together, and placed the slender bundle in her mouth. She bit in gingerly, and shook her head to check the roll was secure, and it was. Not a moment too soon, she dashed out through the narrowing window.

The rumbling continued. The entire treescape swayed. The wood was becoming un navigable, twisting branches sliding into the open spaces. Barra only had to get back to her nestroom, but the roof was shifting beneath her feet. Her mother's nestroom roof was the fastest way across, and Barra decided to risk it. She snuck over her mother's roof, hoping she was still in the kitchen.

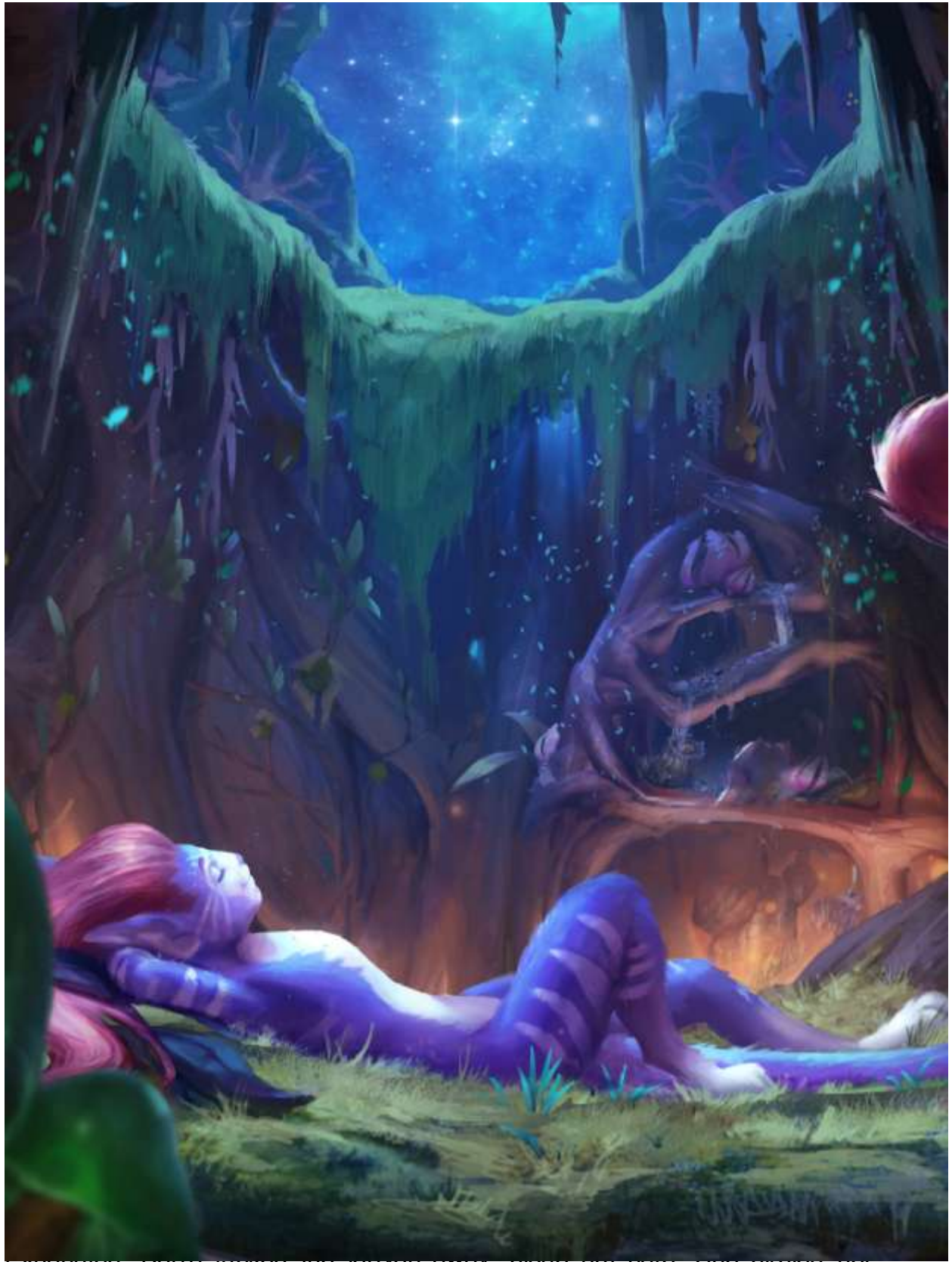
Barra saw her nestroom's port steadily closing. She moved faster, lost her balance, and then tumbled. If her mother hadn't heard that, she wouldn't hear anything, so Barra gave up trying to be quiet, took two leaps, and then dove into her room.

Landing louder than she'd wanted, Barra winced and waited for her mother to come barging in. But her mother didn't appear.

Barra released the leaves from her mouth and stretched her neck to gaze through the almost closed ceiling port. There wasn't much left of the dark purple sky, only patches, but she recognized the patterns of twinkling lights through them. Usually before bed, before the Buckle, she snuck outside to gaze at those twinkling lights, but that night she caught only a glimpse before the small viewport shut completely for sleep.

Her nestroom swayed gently as the Umberwood Tree came to a stop. Several of her flowers were brighter after the buckle, and Barra brushed their petals so they would close for the night, saving one for reading. Only muted ambers and blues escaped the flowers after that.

Cozy in her nestroom, Barra thought about her father. She felt like she'd already read a lot, but she was only in the middle of the first sheave! So much more for her to learn about him. She didn't understand everything in the leaves she'd brought back, and the drawings weren't always helpful either, but she loved how her father described exploring the Middens, the way it seemed to call to him. The old ruins had always called to her, too.



Exhausted, Liana tucked the leaves away, bliss but sure. One circle her

bedding a few times, and then settled into the warmth reflected back by the downy ferns. She thought of adventures she hadn't had yet, and when she slept, she dreamt of a world that was familiar, but that she'd never seen. Its bright flowers dazzled, its colors danced, and she explored with her father.

The world's slow inhale after the Buckle, the expansion of the Cerulean Ocean, was already beginning. Steadily, the trees were moving apart. By morning the Loft would be open again, and the Arboreals would wake up from their dreams to begin another dimly lit day.

CHAPTER 4. THE COPPICE



The Coppice

Confused and groggy, Barra had a hard time getting up that next morning. She'd woken up several times during the night and couldn't remember whether it was from dreams or nightmares. Calming herself had been difficult with her conscious mind spinning up thoughts about her father, and the Middens. She was so discombobulated on her way out of the den that she walked right out, passing her mother without saying a word.

Two steps away from the den, the cool air roused her and she turned around.

Poking her head into the kitchen, Barra said, "Morning, Mom!" She bounded over, stood up, put both arms around her mother's neck, and kissed her on the cheek. And then, grimacing, she asked for both forgiveness and permission to go, "Bye, Mom?"

Brace smiled warmly as she shooed her daughter out the door, "Hurry along now, Burbur. Have a good day."

Wincing at the nickname, Barra said, “Aw, Mom, don’t call me that.” Then she dropped to all fours and made her way back out again.

Following her daughter out the doorway, Brace teased, “Too old for Burbur? Really? Can’t imagine. What with you running around on all fours like a two-ring old?”

Barra stood tall but did not turn around. “Love you, Mom,” she tossed the words over her shoulder.

“Love you too, dear.” Brace watched her leave for Coppice, making sure she was safe for as far as she could see. Even though she tried not to encourage it, she was proud of her daughter’s willful attitude—reminded her of herself as a pup.

Suddenly realizing Barra was almost out of earshot, she yelled, “Be good! And *NO PLAYING IN THE MIDDENS!*”

Barra half-ran, half-walked on her hind legs until she was sure her mother couldn’t see her, and then she gave up the pretense and ran. All fours wasn’t the *civilized* way to travel, but she loved the way the wind felt through her fur,

and the rush of the pulse in her veins. Besides, Barra mainly travelled the unpruned sidewoods, where no one would be offended by her behavior. She liked to avoid the thick foot traffic of the pathwood. The Arboreals bustling this way and that were fun obstacles to dodge, but too many of them knew her mother.

It wasn't long before Barra could see the Coppice ahead of her. The foliage was thinned out from regular pruning unlike the surrounding treescape and the approaching pathwoods were reflection smooth from the number of Arboreals who visited frequently. The Coppice was more than a place to play, it was where experience and youth collided. Aged Arboreals could be found engaged in hobbies and other interests, and often, they were willing to share their thoughts with anyone curious enough to ask a question. Many of the older tree-dwellers even played games, and in the Coppice, bups were included. Barra visited almost every day, but she only stayed around when Venress Starch was there.



The Coppice was large enough even on its fullest day that the Arboreals could spread out easily, so groups stood out. Barra spotted Plicks immediately where he sat among several others. They were chatting and asking questions of an elderly Kolalabat who was tending a small plot of lensleaf plants. Barra scampered over and arrived just as 'oohs' and 'ahhs' went up from the small crowd.

"Hey, Plicks," she announced herself. "What're you lookin' at?"

Startled, Plicks dug his talons deep into the bough beneath them. He released his tense-knuckled grip when he realized who it was, and said, "Barra! Don't sneak up on me like that!" He shook his head and turned his attention back to the old Kolalabat. Eyes full and bright, Plicks said, "Ven Tadafell has been tending this particular plant for more than a ring, and it's been growing leaves truer and larger than ever before! He pulled the first stem this morning, and... well, see for yourself!"

Leaning in, Barra caught a glimpse of the large disc-shaped leaf that Ven Tadafell was holding. Full of fluid, the lensleaf was perfectly clear, thicker at

the center than the edges, and through it, everything was magnified. Ven Tadafell smiled broadly, and though he was eager to use the lensleaf himself, he proudly beckoned his friends closer so they could see too. Plicks and Barra huddled in close, but after only a short time, Barra whispered, "Have fun."

As she started to walk away, Plicks said without looking, "Hunting Venress Starch again?" His voice curled up like his knowing smirk.

Barra raised a skeptical brow. "What about it?"

"She's here. I saw her arrive Nest-side, heading Reachward. Good luck," he said, and then scooted even closer to Ven Tadafell.

Barra whispered, "Thanks!" She bounded away, surveying the wood above for any sign of the sly Haggidon.

Venress Starch's body was covered in the same golden brown scales possessed by other Haggidons though age had stolen most of the iridescent shimmer from hers. Only the scales around her eyes remained vibrant. She was able to blend into her environment, and even with her ample belly, she was unexpectedly agile and silent when she moved. All great reasons for Barra

to enjoy tracking her, but best of the lot was Venress Starch's uncanny skill to avoid detection; Barra loved the challenge.

Surveying the Coppice, Barra made her way carefully to the periphery, to the fuller branches where she could best hide her approach. She passed several other Arboreals including Tory who was working on some kind of binding project. Binding wasn't a skill Barra possessed, but Tory was adept and she stopped to watch him for a moment. Binders created structure from living wood, directing growth so that it was self-reinforcing, stronger with age. Tory was practicing with a group that was debating how to add a flourish to their work. The tight braids of wood looked like a common window to Barra; a hole in a half-finished wall. She listened in, gathering that a spiral of nightblooming irises was to rise out of the window, but she didn't understand how. She moved on. Ascended toward the Reach as Plicks suggested. She saw no sign of Venress Starch.

High up and mostly isolated, Barra slouched down, disappointed. She began to wonder if Plicks had been mistaken. A fern brushed against Barra's

fur, and she swiped at it. When she hit nothing but air, she realized too late that the irritating tickle wasn't from a fern.

Two thick tails tipped with sickle-shaped fangs were draped around either side of the young Listlespur. They coiled around Barra in a flash and she was snatched up into the air. Rolled over and held tight, she was suddenly belly up, face to face, with the fierce Venress Vallor Starch.



Vallor towered over Barra, even though she was small for a Haggidon. Horns grew in pairs along her spine, close together at her bottom, splitting as they went up her back to form a slender V-shape. The twin tails extending

from the top pair were long enough to hold Barra, and still wave their fangs about freely.

Vallor strictly enunciated each word before beginning the next. "So busy looking ahead. No idea what was going on behind you." Vallor hesitated, sniffed at Barra and grimaced. "And you've been chewing grappabark."

Barra huffed a few times toward her own nose, and noticed the sweet dark smell, pungent and thick. Wrinkling her nose, she said, "But that could have been anyone."

Venress Starch raised a brow. "It was you." She smiled, lines of tiny sharp teeth exposed, and said, "Now what are you going to do?"

Abruptly, Barra fought back. She squirmed, pushed, and kicked, but the Haggidon only held her tighter. Barra's fur, slick as it was, couldn't slip her free from Vallor's grip. But then something new happened. The muscles that controlled Barra's fur for stealth were reacting instinctively, pushing against Venress Starch's hold.

Vallor pondered her captive, suspicious. She suddenly felt like she was trying to hold onto a water snake. The tighter she gripped, the more she thought the bup was going to squirt free. But Barra didn't recognize how close she was to escape, and she gave up. Vallor asked, "Well?"

"Please let me go?" Barra asked begrudgingly.

"Humph," Venress Starch grunted, disappointed. She released Barra without warning, and the bup fell a short distance before lashing out with her tail and pulling herself onto a branch below. Vallor dropped down beside her. "Well, at least your reactions have improved."

The two walked and climbed together for hours. Venress Starch identified shrubs and flowers and noted each one's utility. They examined some of the gardens, the plots that were chewed out of the boughs and filled with wood pulp in order to grow and feed special plants. Barra usually enjoyed her walks with Venress Starch, but she was having a hard time paying attention. She couldn't stop thinking about her father's journal.

"What's wrong?" the old Arboreal asked Barra with deep concern.

But Barra dodged the question. “Nothing, I’m just tired I guess.”

Vallor knew there was more to it, but offered another excuse instead of pressing the matter. “Maybe hungry, too? Midday is long past.”

Barra was astonished to hear the time. She hadn’t even noticed the flowers of the Coppice changing over to their afternoon cycles. The middle of each day was marked with an exotic cascade as some plants closed and others opened, colors and shapes metamorphosing throughout the treescape. The display was especially beautiful in the Coppice because of the specialized flora that grew there.

“Why don’t you go? Look for some food, and maybe I’ll look for you, later.”

Vallor blinked slowly, respectfully, at the distraught Listlespur—her way of saying goodbye. Without further hesitation, she lifted herself up into the branches overhead and disappeared.

Barra couldn’t find anything she wanted to eat, but the gurgling in her stomach won out, and she made her way to one of the many food gardens in

the Coppice. Tory was there with another Rugosic named Juddol, and they were arguing about something.

Clearly happy to change subjects, Tory called out, "Barra! Hey, over here. Sit with us."

Barra clambered up to the two bups and sat between them. "Did you eat yet?" Tory offered a handful of spiderfruits. The nuts were gray sacs suspended in cushions of crunchy webbing made from a sweet resin. Barra was happy to take half and popped them into her mouth all at once.

Juddol rolled his eyes. "We were talking?"

"Sounded more like arguing," Barra muttered while chewing.

Without blinking, Juddol stared at Barra with the most emotionless, flat expression he could manage. Barra smiled widely back, making sure to show the contents of her mouth.

"That's attractive," Juddol said, wrinkling his face in disgust. Turning his attention to Tory, he promised, "We'll pick this up again later, Mafic." He stood up gracelessly and loped away.

Tory waved goodbye like he was in the New Ring Parade. Barra swallowed emphatically. "What was *that* all about?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. After a moment, he went on, "He saw me helping Marley—you know, the Bellbottom from the Mangrove Tree? Her family is making a den near mine. Anyway, he saw me helping her with some bindings and—"

"And he's jealous?" Barra interrupted. Her face twisted up like she'd bitten into something rotten.

Tory replied with nonchalance, "I guess. I mean, he does have a point." Tory gestured to himself. He waited for a snarky response, but none came. The despondent Barra seemed to have mentally drifted away.

Tory was a little concerned, but he popped the rest of the spiderfruits into his mouth and waited patiently. When he decided he'd waited long enough, he spoke up, "What've you and Venress Starch been doing today?"

Barra blinked rapidly a few times, and said, "Not much. The usual."

"Are you, uh, okay?" Tory asked, skeptical.

“Oh yeah, definitely. I’m fine. You know, I think I’m still hungry. Where’d you get the spiderfruits?” she said as she stood up.

“I’ll show you. Come on,” Tory said.

As they walked together, Tory described the garden he was taking them to see. A spiderfruit bush required lots of water, and he’d helped create a base that could support one. He was proud of his work. Barra tried to show that she was impressed, but she wasn’t able to muster much enthusiasm. She was too distracted.

At the garden, Barra ate her fill, and then after a short but strained silence, she said, “Tory?”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Do you ever think about your mom?” Hearing her own words out loud, she shook her head immediately. She tried again, “I mean—of course you think about her—but like, how do you imagine—“

“Tory! Barra!” It was Plicks. He came shuffle-running up to the pair with something large in his hands. “I’ve been looking for you all over the place!

Look what Ven Tadafell gave me!" He held up a large lensleaf, not as big around as the one Barra had seen that morning, but huge nonetheless.

Tory responded first. "Wow, that's great, Plicks!" He was genuinely impressed. Tory had a special affinity for bindings, but he had developed an interest in almost everything in the Coppice. Barra leaned in to inspect the lensleaf, and nodded emphatically.

Plicks was so excited he wasn't sure what to do next. He hadn't gotten the reaction he wanted from Barra, so he was frantically thinking of how to impress her. "Here. Here, let me *show* you," he said, and scuttled between his friends into the garden. He held the lensleaf by the edges between his small hands, careful to keep his talons from scratching the surface. Looking at one magnified plant after another, he kept shaking his head as though none of it was good enough.

"Oh, oh! Here! Look at *this!*" he exclaimed, and held the lensleaf steady while standing to the side.

The entire surface of the lensleaf had turned fiery orange. After a moment of confusion, Barra looked around to see the subject regular-sized. Sitting on a broad, green leaf was a fiery orange insect. It had a narrow body and a long neck with an oblong head perpendicular to it. The insect was only slightly larger than Barra's nose!

The bups examined the magnified display closely. They could see every detail of the exoskeleton: its pores, segments, and pigmentation, even the veins in the folded wings.

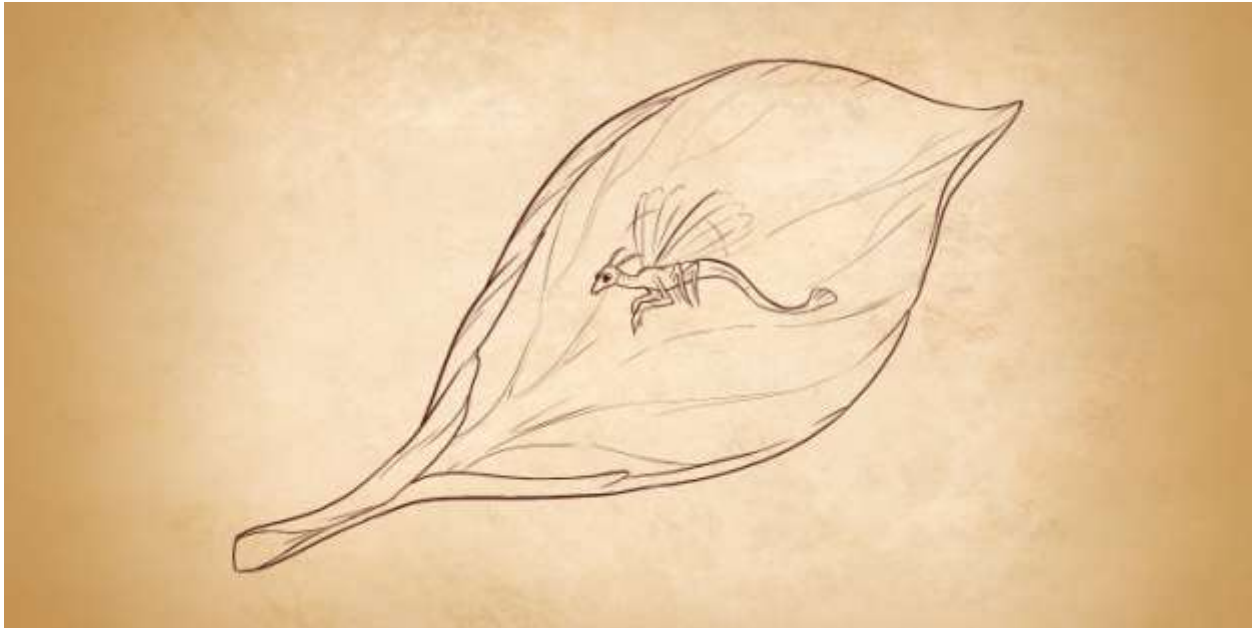
Plicks explained proudly, "You are looking at the rare Aridifolia Tricopterus." Inspecting the subject closely, he nodded and said, "She's female. You can tell by the number of segments in the abdomen." After thinking for a moment, he added, "They're usually found deep in the Middens. Maybe she's here for the spiderfruit? It doesn't grow around here normally, right?"

"No. No, it doesn't," Tory confirmed, still mesmerized.

Barra gazed curiously into the lensleaf. "What's *that?*" she asked, pointing.

There was strange, dark webbing oozing out from beneath the insect's wings. The stuff was difficult to spot, even enlarged. Plicks tried to get a better view and Tory and Barra had to jockey for position to see around his furry head and large ears. "I don't know, I'm not sure." As Plicks spoke, the Aridifolia spread its wings. Threads of black ooze were revealed, gumming the wings to the body of the poor insect, grounding it.

"Barra, you know where the closest bellflower is, don't you?" Vallor had approached the bups from behind, undetected. She startled them all, seeming to appear out of nowhere. She was watching the insect carefully. Barra took only a moment to grasp her request, and she nodded and dashed away without a word.



“Where’d you come from? Uh... where’s she going?” Tory asked of no one in particular, but Barra came back before anyone answered him.

Barra held a large bulb-shaped plant with her tail. The bellflower had thick translucent walls that were shaded peach and lined with thin green veins. The bellflower wasn’t a flower at all, but a segment from the eponymous vine that grew it. Barra had already drained the bitter fluid from it so that it could be used as a container. Holding the bulb next to the insect, she pursed open the narrow stem. Venress Starch guided the insect into the bulb with gentle waves of her hand.

Plicks clutched his lensleaf close to his chest and asked, "Do you know what that sticky oozy stuff is?"

"I don't. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but I'll take her home and see if I can help. She certainly doesn't look well," Venress Starch said. She added confidently, "I know a thing or two about the Aridifolia Tricopterus. I'm sure she'll be fine." As Venress Starch spoke, Barra thought she was hiding something behind the dismissive attitude.

"You'll let us know?" Plicks asked. He rotated the lensleaf in his hands anxiously.

"Definitely. Barra knows how to find me," Vallor said as she pulled herself up with her tails, and then she swung away.

The three friends stood together, somewhat stunned. Tory was the first to speak up, "That was *odd*."

Barra squinted and nodded as she said, "Suspicious, you mean."

"Well, that's not what I meant. But, sure, yeah, suspicious," Tory said. He didn't know what to make of it all, but he could tell Barra had some idea.

Plicks could see the idea taking shape in his friend's mind; he knew her too well. Looking back and forth between Barra and Tory, he hoped he was wrong. Instead, he saw Barra raise her eyebrows to Tory, and the Rugosic smiled back slyly.

"Aw, come on..." Plicks said, but the deal was done. He heaved a sigh.

"Okay, but I've got to stash my new lensleaf at home first."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Vallor stood alone in her den contemplating the bellflower. She held the container carefully with both tails assuring there was no escape for the insect. Shuffling over to her garden plot, she looked over her wrymwood. The thick stump of a plant had a few stubby branches, but was otherwise a leaning cylinder. It had a sheath of rich brown papery bark covered with dark-purple buds. She nudged one. Sluggishly, the petals of the bud unwrapped, revealing they were actually wings. The creature rolled down the side of the wrymwood, and then flew up in a sudden, agitated flash. It was a Rush, furry and round

with a button nose, deep-violet eyes, and ring-shaped ears. It flew around the den in quick, short bursts. Eventually it settled, hovering steadily at eye level with Vallor. Many ribbon-like tails danced beneath it as three sets of rapidly beating wings kept it afloat.

Rushes are fast, their wings galvanized by unique nectars found in distinctive flowers throughout the Great Forest. They have to drink often, so they instinctively keep a perfect map of the flowers they sample. But their favorite and most potent fuel is the cultivated sap of the wrymwood. Most Arboreals keep one well-tended in their dens.

“I have a message for Doctor Fenroar,” Vallor began.

“Fenroar? Fenroar. Yeah. Got it. Know exactly where he is. Exactly. Don’t you worry.” The Rush flitted around the den in a blur.

She held up the bellflower. “Tell him I need this insect tested right away.”

“Yep. Need it tested right away. Got it,” the Rush confirmed, talking fast and blinking even faster. He flew around the bellflower, sizing up the package

from several angles. “Yep, yep. I got it. Totally can do. Yep.” He licked his lips between words with flicks of an extraordinarily long tubular tongue.

“You sure?” Vallor was dubious.

The Rush stopped a paw’s width from her face. He hovered there, perfectly still except for the flashing of his wings. He narrowed his deeply saturated violet eyes. “I got it,” he said, miffed.

The Rush landed on the bellflower and steadied himself expertly as he tested the surface with his glassy, needle-like claws. Satisfied, he buried his claws deep, flexed to secure his grip, and then displayed his wings broadly. They were iridescent underneath and spanned a length greater than the distance from his nose to the bottom of his tails. In an instant they vanished, flapping faster than the eye could see. Vallor released the bellflower, and the Rush floated up, then down, and then back up again, straining.

“I got it, I got it,” he said to the once again dubious Vallor. Righting himself, the Rush licked his lips, and then flew from the den.

Venress Starch shuffled into her kitchen, turning her back to the doorway, and Barra slid down from where she'd been hiding, stealthed. She snuck back out unnoticed. She met up with Plicks and Tory a short distance down the pathwood where they were waiting for her.

"Did you have to go back in there?" Plicks clicked his talons together as he spoke.

"Relax. She didn't see me. Besides, it was worth the risk," Barra hinted.

Plicks waited, but Barra didn't continue, and he finally asked, "Well?"

"She's not keeping the Aridifolia with her tonight," Barra reported, wide-eyed. "She Rushed it to Doctor Fenroar's!"

Plicks considered a moment, and then gave up and asked the obvious, "Why'd she do that?"

"I don't know," Barra said, clear she thought it was a very good question indeed.

"Who's Doctor Fenroar?" Tory asked.

"I don't know." Barra's eyebrows were raised, leading.

“What’re we gonna do?” Plicks was frustrated.

Barra let her excitement out all at once, “Wanna go spy on Doctor Fenroar?!”

Plicks was exasperated. “Why do you always want to get us in trouble? Tory?”

But Tory wasn’t worried. “Sounds fun,” he said with a wink.

“Great!” Barra said, “Let’s go!”

CHAPTER 5. THE RUSH



The Rush

The three bups walked along the pathwood as quickly as they could without drawing unwanted attention. As they went, Barra shared the discovery of her father's journal; there were too many similarities between the descriptions she'd read and the black sticky strands that plagued the Tricopterus for her to hold back any longer. Her friends listened intently while they tried to keep up with the Rush. Luckily, the little messenger was slowed by the weight of the bellflower and stopped frequently for nectar. Whenever they lost sight of him, Barra would raise her nose to the air to find the wrymwood scent that marked his trail, and so they travelled deeper and deeper into the Umberwood Nest.

The oldest dens of the Nest were closest to the trunk. As families aged they often migrated into the homes of their lineage leaving the ever-shifting outer boundary of the Nest for the young. Barra had never met Doctor Fenroar but she could tell he was old; they were deeper into the Nest than she'd ever gone. There were no other bups in sight, no one even close to her age. The trio hurried along with affected purpose trying to look like they belonged.

Tory hung back from the others after hearing about the journal. He wanted to be happy for Barra—he *was* happy for her—but he was also frustrated. It wasn't the first time she'd kept secrets. He wondered if she'd ever trust him. Sure, Barra hadn't said anything to her own mother either, but Tory didn't know what to make of that. He struggled with his feelings in silence.

The quiet blanket of Tory's reticence went unnoticed though as Plicks kicked it off with his excitement. The Kolalabat asked question after question wanting to know every detail. He jumped at the opportunity to share and connect with Barra about her father, a topic he'd deliberately avoided in the past. His relief came out in a flood of words that Barra worked to stay above, pausing more often than necessary to find the Rush's scent.

They were travelling slower than the messenger. Sometimes the Rush crossed paths with another, and choosing the right one to follow was tricky. There were distractions too; sights, sounds, and smells that were different from the rest of the Loft tugging at Barra's nose. She found it difficult to keep up

her part in the conversation and soon the trio was walking in silence. No one spoke a word again until Barra noticed Tory lagging.

She bound over to him and asked, "What? What is it?"

"The bindings used here are so different from anything I know," Tory said. All the experimental bindings in the Coppice and he'd never seen anything quite like these.

Barra rolled her eyes. "Come on, we gotta keep moving."

Tory didn't budge. "Look at that," he pointed at a den with intricate fountains on either side of its entrance. The bases were each made from a single branch which grew in consecutively smaller circles, the end rising up in a flourish from the center. The fountain on the left was a spiraling tower of rings, while the other was dominated by sharp angles with steps and platforms. Colorful cup-shaped flowers and jagged protective thorns grew all over both. Tory recognized the flowers and he explained, "Those spillpetals fill with water every measure, and tip over when they're full. The way they're growing the

cascade must be beautiful. It took a lot of care and time to bind them like that.”

As engrossing as his description was, Barra didn't have the knowledge of bindings to even guess at the mastery on display. She understood it was important to Tory, but didn't think they could stay any longer. She urged him, “Come on, the Rush is getting away.”

Tory stared for another moment trying to absorb it all, and then he started moving again.

Plicks matched his pace and asked, “Think you'll bind like that someday?”

Tory shrugged.

Reminding Plicks of his older siblings when they just wanted to be left alone Plicks took the hint even though he thought the behavior was unusual for Tory. He tried not to worry about it.

Barra pushed them to keep moving, but that didn't stop Tory from taking a look back at the fountains before they passed out of view. An old squat Nectarbadger came outside to prune. He squeezed the claws that grew

between his fingers together several times rapidly to sharpen them. *Thwick thwick thwwwiick*. He clipped at the fountains like he'd done it a thousand times. The jagged thorns didn't bother the Nectarbadger. He just kept trimming without a care.



They rounded a corner, and Tory tuned back into Barra, who was explaining the importance of being sneaky-quiet to Plicks. "It's the only way. We don't want to get caught, right?" She dashed away.

Plicks squinted at Barra's back as she sniffed the air. He tried to bolster himself, saying, "I can be sneaky. Even if I can't *stealth*."

Tory leaned in toward Plicks and whispered, "Just do your thing. You'll be fine." The Kolalabat's stride perked right up.

Slyly, Barra popped up between the two and startled them. Through gritted teeth she whispered, "We're here." She pointed ahead, and the boys looked just in time to see a downy grey Leghund open his den to the Rush.

There were a few Arboreals meandering about, but none were paying any attention to the bups. Barra thought they could act without being noticed.

"Okay," she said with a hushed voice as she leaned in toward her friends. "I'm going to the roof to see if I can find a way inside. You two wanna go around to the windows and see if you can find a good place to listen?"

The boys nodded. Tory was confident, Plicks apprehensive. Then all three ran and jumped from the pathwood.

Barra went lithely from branch to branch until she was positioned above the Fenroar den. Lowering herself down to the roof with her tail, she stealthed, camouflaging her fur to match her surroundings.

Plicks couldn't jump very far with his short legs, but he scurried pretty fast, regardless. He dove around and down to the claw-marked, unkempt underside of the pathwood. Soon he was hugging the bottom support bough of the Fenroar home. He found a ventilation hole and listened in.

Tory could have cleared the distance to the den in two jumps, but he had to move slowly to avoid drawing attention. He found the closest branch large enough to hold him and ran out onto it. The bough flexed down toward one of the Doctor's windows, and Tory swung himself underneath. Hand-over-hand, he moved right up to the window and hoped he hadn't been seen.

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Inside the living room of the Fenroar's cultivated den grew many elegant displays of lighting and watering flowers. Elaborate watershelves lined the walls, and a silky exotic moss covered the floor; rich brown accented by sprouts of bright blue.

Darby Fenroar called out, “Yorg? Yorg!” The Leghund eyed the Rush he’d just let in with suspicion, his marbled nose twitching. Darby’s great size and strength made him an imposing figure despite the downy softness of his light grey coat.

A Muskkat responded to the call, entering through one of the curtains of braided vines that separated the rooms. “Yes, Darby?” Doctor Yorg Fenroar asked. The average-sized Muskkat was slinky-slender and short, so he was dwarfed by Darby. He was covered in glossy, dark brown fur, and had a long snout topped with two large blue eyes, and the wrinkles on his face accentuated his beguiling smile.

Darby explained, “From Vallor. It’s for you.”

Yorg stepped toward the hovering messenger and accepted the delivery.

“Thank you, thank you,” the Rush said, releasing the bellflower. Having lost his ballast, he shot up toward the ceiling, bobbed for a bit, adjusted, and then floated back down. He spotted the wyrmwood across the room and dashed toward it.

Darby cut him off. "Whoa, what about the message?" he demanded. He didn't think the Rush had earned his keep yet.

"Right! Test the sample. That's what she said," the Rush answered, zipping side to side.



Darby moved away from the wynnwood, and the Rush flashed by. He landed, buried his claws, folded his wings, and simple as that became almost indistinguishable from any other pod growing on the stump.

Yorg inspected the contents of the bellflower. He raised a single eyebrow, perplexed. "What do you think it is?"

Darby's response was dry enough to wilt a waterfull. "It's a bellflower containing a female specimen of Aridifolia Tricopterus," he said.

Yorg looked sideways at Darby, switched his raised eyebrow, and said, "Quite."

Darby rolled his eyes. "Well, you asked didn't you?" He shrugged and added with sincerity, "I don't know anything more about it than you do."

Yorg examined the sluggish insect and asked, "Are you still growing fuzzberries?"

"Sure I am. I know how much you like them," Darby said. "Wait. You mean for the bug."

“Yes. It looks hungry doesn’t it?” Yorg held the bellflower up to emphasize the point. Ari dragged herself around in obvious strain.

“Right. I’ll grab some seeds,” Darby said, acquiescing.

Yorg peered in at the Tricopterus. She was drooping, and the tiny hook of her tongue was lolling out of her mouth. Yorg thought maybe she was thirsty, so he crossed over to the waterfull located on the other side of the denroom.

Arriving at the waterfull, a sudden sound of crashing of leaves whooshed in through the window located above it. The noise ended as abruptly as it started. Yorg examined the treescape, but didn’t see anything other than a few swaying branches. Whatever it was, it was gone. The Doctor shrugged, and returned his attention to the Tricopterus. He dunked one hand into the waterfull, and then held it dripping over the bellflower which he pursed open with a gentle squeeze. Droplets fell inside and Ari walked over to one and drank. Pleased, Yorg placed the bottom stem of the bellflower into the waterfull to keep it from drying out as well.

Darby swept back into the room, one paw cupped by the other. Yorg nodded, and tipped the open end of the bellflower toward Darby. The Leghund cast the seeds out over the opening, as many falling out as in. Yorg glared at Darby and sighed. Darby just shrugged and smiled, head cocked comically to one side.

Both of the aged Arboreals watched and waited. The insect's burning orange color had paled since she was captured, but the Fenroars didn't know that. She stretched up toward the seeds, and the black strands that gummed her arms to her body were revealed.

Darby stepped back, befuddled.

"That's... not... good," Yorg said haltingly as he inspected the insect. She tried to fly, but her wings couldn't get free from her body, and even more black threads were revealed.

Darby recovered from his initial shock, and said, "That's Creepervine fungus, isn't it?"

From where Barra was perched eavesdropping, she heard the word as clearly as if Darby had whispered it directly into her ear. The blood ran from her face as she recognized the newly familiar word.

Yorg hesitated, but then he responded gravely, "Vallor was right to send this to us. I'll have to do some tests."

There was another crash through the branches outside, drawing the attention of both Fenroars. They stretched their heads out the window, and although several branches were still swinging, there was nothing to see.

"What was...?" Yorg began, but hushed when he saw Darby holding a finger to his mouth.

Darby rose up and unfurled his ears into two large saucers. He walked softly around the living room, tuned into something that Yorg couldn't hear. Around the middle of the room Darby pointed down as though he found something. Then he looked up, incredulous. Domed like most dens, the ceiling at its center was high, twice as tall as the Leghund. With no warning, Darby leapt into the air. He punched his hands through the ceiling and grabbed onto

something from the other side. He pulled it down with him as he fell in a burst of leaves and debris.

Yorg seemed amused.

“Hey, let me go!” Barra demanded. Even as she wriggled in Darby’s huge hands, the ceiling was growing back together. There would be a thin spot for a few days, but no permanent damage.

“Calm down,” Darby said, exasperated. He placed the tense Listlespur down on the floor gingerly, wrinkling his nose.

Barra eyed the window, the entrance, and the braided curtain separating the living room from the next.

Darby read her face and advised forcefully, “Don’t get any ideas. You’re not going anywhere.”

Unflappable, Yorg asked, “I’m Doctor Yorg Fenroar. You’ve met Darby. And you are?”

Barra had trouble calming down, but she managed after a moment. She resented being a captive, but seeing no way out of it, she said bitingly, “Barra.”

There was a knock on the door frame that sounded like it was apologizing for itself: *Hel-lo, hel-lo?* Darby looked in the direction of the knock in total disbelief. He scowled at Yorg, but the old Muskkat disarmed him with an innocent look. He said, "You can't seriously believe I had anything to do with all this," but his tone suggested he maybe wished he had.

Turning to Barra, Yorg asked, "Friends of yours?" He drew out the words slow and sweet like pouring honey.

Barra winced as she spoke, "Probably?"

Darby answered the door.

"Hi," Tory said. He was standing there with Plicks unsure how much trouble they might be in. "I'm Tory. This is Plicks. We're sorry for the disturbance, but," he spotted Barra and pointed, "we're looking for her."

"Right. Of course. Why else would you be here?" Darby said, breathing in and out of his nose exaggeratedly. Once he'd soothed his mounting frustration, he instructed Tory, "Please explain what exactly is going on."

Tory and Barra responded at once, but Plicks only clicked his talons while chewing his lower lip. The resulting explanation was a jumbled mess of noise. The Fenroars waited for it to be over; Yorg patiently, Darby rolling his eyes in exasperation.

When they stopped to breathe, Yorg asked, “Whose idea was it to spy instead of simply knocking?” Barra looked around the room for a place to hide. Yorg shook his head at her, but he was clearly entertained.

“So, did I gather correctly that you’re all here for the Tricopterus?” Yorg tried to tie the threads together.

Barra spoke up, “We found her in the Coppice. There’s something wrong with her. We just wanted to find out more, that’s all.”

Plicks wanted to jump in with his thoughts on the insect and the black strands that bound it, but he was unsure of himself. Agitated, he shifted his weight from side to side. Tory noticed, and tapped him on the shoulder to tell him to knock it off.

“Uh, huh,” Yorg said, “Wait. Are you Brace’s little girl?”

Barra stood up straight and tall, and poofed herself up. "I'm not little." She wasn't surprised they knew her mother, but she immediately felt the impulse to avoid conversations that could lead to a discussion about the journal.

Her father's journal. *Her* journal.

"Forgive me, not at all little," Yorg said acting impressed and even apologetic. "So, which Coppice was it?"

For a reason Tory couldn't figure, Barra didn't answer. Plicks shrank away as well, so Tory stepped up, "Evergreen. We were near the bottom, Loft-side. More Loft than Nest anyway."

Yorg nodded. "If I remember correctly, the bottom of Evergreen is practically in the Middens, right?" The three bups had never really thought about it, but it was true. The Coppice didn't cross into the ruins proper, but it was close. Yorg thought for a moment and then continued, "Have you seen the sticky stuff on her wings?"

"Yes," Plicks spoke, startling himself a bit.

“Any ideas what it might be?” Yorg was testing them. He wanted to know how much *they* knew before he gave anything away. Darby stood by him, watching their reactions.

Plicks said in a rush, “I don’t know what it is. But she’s already lost more color in her wings and abdomen. I think the stuff is keeping her from capturing food, from eating and drinking.” He added, somewhat embarrassed, “I like insects.”

Darby chuckled, warming for the first time since the bups had disturbed his den. Yorg smiled broadly and then knelt beside the timid Kolalabat, and said, “Excellent observations.” Very seriously, he went on, “You can infer then, that the sticky stuff might be dangerous?”

Darby snorted in disapproval, but Yorg continued regardless, “Darby and I have an idea of what it could be.” Yorg consulted Darby with a look, giving him a chance to stop the conversation. Darby consented with a shrug, paws open to the sky. Yorg then asked, “Can you keep a secret? Each of you?”

“Yes!” they responded in unison.

“Good,” Yorg said, convinced. “Well, the sticky stuff may be a very dangerous fungus. But, *but*, it could also be a variety of innocuous ergot, or something new. We simply don’t know by looking at it. So you have to keep what you know about it to yourselves until we know for sure. Okay?”

Tory shrugged. More secrets. He understood the reasons this time at least.

Plicks, as squished a Kolalabat as ever there was, managed to shrink from the weight of the request, but he nodded at Yorg anyway.

Barra nodded too, but her mind was already far away, an idea taking root.

“Excellent. Now, run along, interlopers!” Yorg directed. “Come back in a few days. We’ll have results by then.”

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The trio left the den with their new secret, unsure if they really knew anything more than they did before busting in on the Fenroars. They travelled in relative silence back to the outer rings of the Nest.

Tory broached the silence as he said, "Well, I guess I'll see you both tomorrow?"

"For sure." Plicks thought it felt like a normal, everyday goodbye, and he found comfort in that until Barra said, "I'll bring some leaves from my father's journal to the Coppice tomorrow, and we can..." she trailed off.

"Ahem, 'we can' what, Barra?" Plicks asked.

"Oh? You can help me read through them. Find out what we can about the Creepervine." Her tail snapped the bark once with playful impatience.

"Okay, I'm off. See you tomorrow," she said before bounding away and out of sight.

Tory turned to Plicks. "Why's she in such a hurry?"

"Probably needs to get home," Plicks offered. Hands open, he added, "She's been in trouble a lot lately."

"Yeah. I guess so..." Tory said, unconvinced. He looked as if he was going to say something more about it, but then shook it off, and instead he said, "Right. Well, see you tomorrow, bud."

Plicks' whole body sagged. Wishing their dens were closer he waved goodbye and headed off on his own. It suddenly occurred to him that Barra could have walked with him at least a little farther. He stopped and scratched his head, and twitched his nose. She'd gone in an odd direction to go home.

CHAPTER 6. ALONE IN THE DARK



Alone in the Dark

Barra let her friends believe she was headed home. After all, she *was* going home, just not yet. No need for them to worry about her travelling to the Middens first. Besides, if they didn't know where she was going, they wouldn't feel the need to back her story if her mother ever found out.

Barra descended through the Middens. She recognized a nearby ancient ramshackle den. The first ruin she'd ever explored. She didn't head toward it. Instead, she shimmied down a thick bough and headed deeper into less familiar woods. The darkness became oppressive, stifling her movements, causing hesitation with each step. Her breathing was labored, the thick, cold air seizing her chest. Barra persisted.

She wondered how close she was to the Fall.

She thought she shouldn't think about it.

The Middens were old, but how old no one really knew. Barra had heard the fables, and though they varied some, they all agreed the dens of the ruins were built by the Olwones when the Middens was young, and the Loft closer

to the Root. From there the stories went their own ways: the Olwones vanished, and the untended Forest grew tall and wild, and tore apart the Middens as it reached for the sky; the Middens was left behind for lesser creatures while the Olwones live on at the Root in a paradise detached from the Trees; the Olwones are a myth and the Middens? The remains of an Arboreal Nest abandoned for the danger of living too close to the Fall.

Barra didn't know what to think of the stories. No one could ever tell her what an Olwone actually was, what one looked like, or where they came from in the first place. They were portrayed as colossal creatures shaping worlds! But the dens of the Middens were sized for creatures like Listlespurs and Rattlebarks, Kolalabats and Rugosics—not giants, Barra thought.

Legends about the Middens, the Olwones, and the Root, Barra had heard a lot of them. The only story Barra had never heard was one of someone returning from the Fall.

The Fall had no branches, no holds, only emptiness. The prospect was frightening enough to keep even the boldest Arboreals away. Barra had a

difficult time imagining a world without boughs, thin and thick, in every direction, and she had to admit the thought of it scared her too. So she tread carefully as she picked her way through the Middens, taking care not to delve too far, but the idea of finding the Creepervine drove her on.

Barra had never had a reason to go deeper with so much unexplored higher up. Looking around now she realized how much she'd been missing. Every branch was new and mysterious, each den strange. The homes were shaped from the boughs of course, but there were minerals, rocks, and metals embedded as well—materials in far too short supply to use in the Loft. She thought of her father, noted everything she saw, and imagined adding her descriptions to his journal.

Farther and farther down, she went. The dens were even more stretched out and gnarled than those above. They'd been worn by time and gravity in a way that was disorienting. Barra felt like she was in another world. There were more distractions, but fewer branches. The odd gaps between boughs startled

her more than once. If she stumbled, if she misjudged a step, she may not be able to catch herself; she could drop into the forever black.



Barra slowed. She stepped from branch to branch only when she was sure of her footing, and continued to scout for the sticky fungal residue of the Creepervine. She'd never seen anything like it in her previous adventures, but she might have missed it, not looking for it then as she was now. She wanted a sample because she was worried about poor Ari—the insect deserved to be free of the fungus—but also, knowing that her father was collecting a sample

when he disappeared, she hoped somehow that she'd learn something about what happened to him.

Time passed without a sighting. Watering was coming soon, when the “evils” were rumored to wander the Middens. Watering wasn't a big deal otherwise. According to Venress Starch, Watering used to refer to a surge of water that would burst from the flowers of the Loft twice a day. As long as Barra had been alive, Watering was a once a day trickle that she sometimes missed. Nevertheless, the disappointing event marked the beginning of the treescape's daily transition into night.

Inverted on a moss covered branch, Barra kneaded the brittle material, and it crunched beneath her paws—not a moss she recognized. Moving on, she hugged her belly to her spine to avoid the scratchy bits. She sniffed the air to gauge her surroundings in the waning light.

Not only was the light meager, but the number of sources was few. No bluebells or lemonlights or indiglows. No sparklenettles or lumenlichens or shimmerpollens. There were some starlights offering pricks of focused light, and

a few radiant mosses softening the dark with a diffuse glow. Barra opened her eyes as wide as she could to gather the light.

There were irregular configurations of boughs making it difficult for Barra to orient herself. The bottoms of the dens looked like their tops, the branches growing with no purpose to shape them.

Barra wandered toward one of the dens. She wasn't entirely sure of finding her way back, but trusted her instinctual sense of up and down to get her there. Still, the unfamiliar treescape was unnerving. Out of habit, she ventured into a small hovel. There were tables and chairs made of wood that had petrified so that they were difficult to distinguish from the rocks used to shape them. Above her was webwork of stone woven into wood, rocks spliced into branches to bend them with their added weight. The bindings were strong, but the kitchen was still crushed side-to-side like everything in the Middens.

Stretching herself out, raking her claws against the floor, Barra wrung the jitters from her body. She stood upright and then sat down at the table in the kitchen as though she was preparing to eat. Imagining the room filled with a

family of Listlespurs, she acted out sipping a teaflower daintily. She thought she could almost see the room come to life with all species of Arboreals talking and laughing, drinking and eating, enjoying themselves. But her moment of pretending didn't last long.

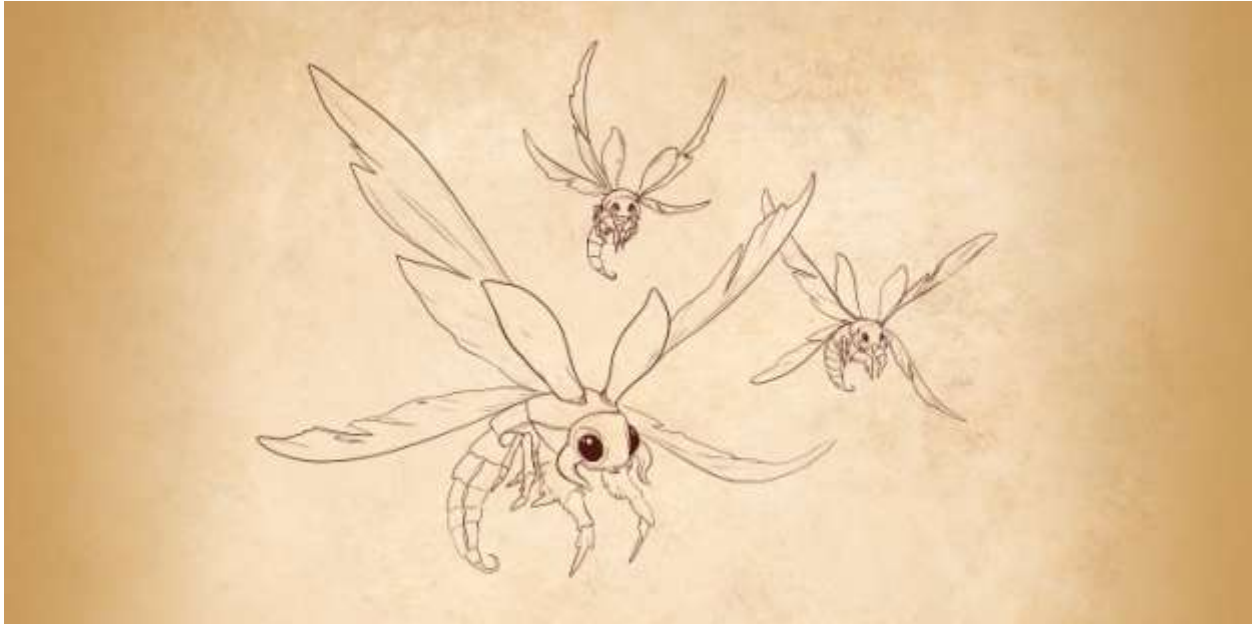
A prickly cold feeling grew like crystals in her blood. She felt the distance home, how far away she was from her mother. She wished she were somewhere else, somewhere safer than an isolated hovel deep in the Middens. Something moved in the corner of the room. Or maybe it was the corner that was moving.

Barra blinked several times to clear her vision. Still, the far wall was writhing. She froze and her heartbeat quickened. She felt blood push into her ears, and all the way to the tip of her tail. She sampled the air with several quick inhales through her nostrils.

The room seemed alive, but it wasn't. There was something else in the room with her.

Along the far wall, a sheet of black undulated like a doorweave waving in a breeze. The sheet grew wider as it moved, spreading outward from the center. It rippled and slid, covering up the wall and continuing up the ceiling, working its way around the room toward Barra.

The low light turned the sheet into a canvas where Barra's imagination painted nightmares. As the sheet grew closer, details resolved out of the darkness; it was a multitude of tiny creatures moving in unison. Barra caught glimpses of legs and antennae as the creatures flowed together and expanded along the wall. It didn't take long for them to cover every surface of the kitchen. She had no idea where they were coming from, or how many there were.



They were almost at her feet.

She stood, and the creatures stopped sharply.

The warped kitchen was trapped in stillness. Barra's heart was drumming the urge to run into her chest. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder to locate the way out, and when she looked back, the tapestry of creatures had closed the distance to her.

Eyes burning because she was afraid to blink, Barra backed up slowly.

The bugs moved. They matched her progress toward the doorway. She took another step backward. They narrowed the gap.

Barra felt her pulse in the quick of her claws. *Adolescent* claws her mother was always reminding her; fragile. Easily broken, easily repaired, Barra had argued. Suddenly, she wished she'd listened to her mother, and just tried to avoid danger. If she made it home, she would hug and kiss her mom, tell her how right she was, and promise to listen better. She had to make it home.

She felt the closeness of the insects, and the closeness of her escape.

She picked her moment. They picked the same.

Hundreds of pinprick lights turned on as the tiny creatures' eyes flashed open. Wings fluttered and clacked ominously. In unison, the insects faced Barra and swarmed like tendrils of smoke reaching for her. They billowed around Barra, a terrifying, rattling cloud. Barra coiled, and then in one swift motion, burst through the cloud and out the doorway. She flew into the open boughs of the Middens with the insects trailing after her.

Barra fled through the woods. The oily collection of insects accelerated. They flew together as one large predator. Barra cut through a thicket of brambles, but the insects were unfettered, flowing like liquid over the sharp

thorns. The chase sent Barra winding around branches, through dense nettles, and over great gaps in the boughs, but she couldn't lose them.

Trying a new tactic, she jumped and spun herself around. She whipped out her tail, lassoed a branch, and pulled. Changing direction mid-flight, she headed up toward the Loft. But the insects were too fast. They swarmed and cut off her ascent.

Her pursuers flowed in and out of each other, eyes appearing and disappearing in a frightening miasma. Barra saw their eyes and felt chills—no warmth in those tiny lights, only predatory instinct. They were focused. They allowed her to turn any way but up, relentlessly driving her toward the Fall.

Barra dashed into a den. She bolted through distorted rooms and passages, found a window, and leapt back out. Her eyes were focused, seeing only the path ahead. She ran, but not at full speed. The shadows and boughs were dangerously interchangeable in the dark. Barra hesitated at turns and stumbled after jumps, all the while colliding with leaves and ferns she couldn't see.

A large clearing in the branches yawned open ahead of her. She couldn't mark the distance across, but all the way to the edge was clear. She went for it, increasing her speed to make the leap of her life... then realization skewered her like a broken branch through her chest. Her blood drained. Her lungs collapsed.

It was too far.



Digging in with all her strength, she tried desperately to stop. Her claws broke and cracked from the stress, but fear kept her fingers braced through the pain. Searching for a hold, her tail thrashed like an angry snake behind her.

Barra stopped. A whisker's breadth from the edge, shaking, she inhaled. She didn't finish her breath before the mass of insects hit her like a tidal wave. They engulfed her and carried her over the edge.

As she struggled viciously against them, Barra realized that she wasn't falling, at least, not falling fast. The cloud of tiny beasts was metamorphosing, becoming thick. Each insect clutched at the next, holding fast with their claws and jaws. Working together, they became a stretchy, writhing net.

Arms and legs frantic, Barra fought through the ever-thickening mesh like she was swimming upstream through sap. Finally, she splashed through the amalgam and burst out. The bough from which she'd just fallen was close. She reached for it. Pain shot through the tips of her shattered claws as she shredded bark before managing a grip.

Barra hauled herself back up onto the bough and was running again before she was even conscious of it. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the disentangling mesh of insects was slow to follow, unable to detach from one another quickly.

Barra went vertical, heading for the Loft while she had the chance. Hot blood in her veins, she ran and climbed like never before. She didn't look back again until she crossed into the Loft. Looking down through the dense branches, she was positive she spied the insects hiding in the shadows. But they didn't follow her. Cautiously, she waited. She stealthed, camouflaging herself with her specialized fur.

"Why'd they stop?" she thought as she paced, ready to run, but curious.

Snap!

It wasn't unusual for branches in the Loft to settle, creak, and crack, and sometimes for no obvious reason they snapped. That's probably all it was, that sound, but Barra was away in a flash.

Halfway home, Barra thought, "*At least I have a good excuse for being late.*"

CHAPTER 7. A MOTHER'S IMPERATIVE



A Mother's Imperative

“Go to your room.”

Barra had never experienced quiet anger before, and certainly not from her mother. The sound of it was potent and enervating, a disappointment strong enough to drain the very will from Barra. Her limbs felt weak and rubbery, and though she fought against it, her lips trembled. Her eyes stung with wet.

When Barra had rushed in through the front doorweave she'd been frantic. Her mother had calmed her down, hugged her and held her until her heart was steady and her mind clear. They'd opened milkweed pods together, and her mother added soothing herbs to the cloudy sweet contents. She'd broken fireseeds into the tonics too, to warm them, and as Barra had watched their tiny bubbles float to the surface, she'd sniffed the familiar aroma and felt safe again.

Barra had told her mother the story of her day, and when she finished, a silence had begun and endured until those words, “Go to your room,” had marched from her mother's mouth. Go to her room?! It wasn't right! Barra sat

there glaring with pools burgeoning in her eyes. Going to her room was the last thing she wanted to do! She *wanted* to stay right there in the kitchen with her mother forever.

Barra didn't budge. After another prolonged silence, her mother said, "You are very selfish, Barra."

Stunned, Barra sank away from her mother and that was enough for the welling tears to finally spill down her cheeks. Barra's eyes also began to shimmer. "Did you think of me when you ran off to the Middens?"

"I did!" Barra erupted, hurt and disbelieving.

The glare from her mother shut her up. "Really? You did? What do you think I would be doing tonight, if you didn't come home? How do you think I would feel with each passing buckle that I couldn't find you? Not knowing what happened?" Her mother paused, choking on her words, "You have your father's sense of adventure... and you have his selfishness." One tear rolled out of her mother's eye, over the gray fur just beneath, trailed quickly down the white of

her cheek, and then fell to the plush grass floor where it landed without a sound.

Barra sat, stunned. She was crying without blinking.

Her mother took a deep breath. "Go to your nestroom, Barra," she said.

There was an implied "please" in her tone as though she was too emotionally exhausted to continue.

Barra stood up, and mind-numb, walked out of the kitchen. She sat alone, and after a while her defiant nature returned. She stood up and roughly wiped away her tears. Pacing her room, she decided to confront her mother. Barra had done nothing wrong! She was exploring to protect their home, to find out what was out there! Her mother should've been proud! Her father *would* have been proud!

The conversation wasn't over. Dipping her paws into the waterfull in her nestroom, Barra carried a handful to her mouth, lapped at it twice, and then splashed the rest over her face. She repeated the ritual. She felt better, cooler, almost ready. She walked to the patch of drymoss she grew beside the

entrance, and nuzzled her cheeks against it. As she finished up, fanning her whiskers, she overheard voices in the kitchen.

Barra listened in.

“... for Jerrun, the head of the Council of Elders.” Her mother.

“He doesn’t like to be disturbed. Nope. Nope.” One of her mother’s Rushes by the broken cadence of his speech. Barra didn’t immediately recognize which one.

“I know my place. He’ll receive a message from me without argument. I need you to be my fastest messenger tonight.” Must be Nevel, Barra thought. Her mother continued, “Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, yes. Ready.” Nevel gave up his doubts, and sounded so eager he bordered impatience.



“Assemble the Council for an emergency meeting. I will address them tomorrow night. No exceptions. Kudmoths attacked my daughter in the Middens today. The Creepervine has finally risen up out of the darkness, and it cannot be ignored any longer. Summon Venress Vallor Starch, and Vens Yorg and Darby Fenroar as well. Thank you, Jerrun.”

“That’s all? That’s it?”

“Yes. And please, return to me when you’ve finished with Jerrun. I need to know that he *heard* me. He knows not to ignore me in these matters, but he may need persuading. Watch him for me, mark his attitude. I want to know how he reacts.”

“Sure, sure. Got it.”

“Go then,” her mother sounded relieved. “And thank you.”

Barra didn't expect more, but she listened for a while longer regardless. As her mother shuffled around the kitchen, Barra was too distracted to remember they were fighting. So much new information was buzzing around in her head, she felt like she couldn't keep track of it all. Another bout with her mother didn't seem relevant anymore.

Barra considered sneaking into her father's study again, but thought better of it as she imagined more quiet anger. Even as she thought about ways she could get in and out without being caught, her body instinctually prepared for sleep. She circled and picked at her bedding ferns, and then lay down. Her mind continued in a million directions, fighting her body's need for rest.

Eventually, her body won.

Throughout the night, Barra's sleep was disturbed by nightmares. Her room became liquid, tarry black, and she woke up drowning in it. She fell asleep again only to run from a darkness that chased her over an endless stretch of

time and trees. When it finally suffocated her dreamscape, she woke gasping for breath.

Awake in the space between dreams, Barra stared into the shadowy corners of her nestroom, her imagination untethered from reality. She was sure the darkness was growing and moving, and morphing into something terrible.



By the time the soft light of morning poured out of the brightlumens around her nestroom, Barra was still tired, but glad the night was over. Barra could hear her mother working in the kitchen as she got up, stretched, and groomed herself. Her mother's words from the night before stayed unwelcome in her

mind, and it was with considerable effort that she threw them out. She was hurt, angry with her mother, but she had to let it go. There were more important matters.

As far as Barra had known, her mother had always been a gardener. Now that Barra had the notion that her mother could assemble the Elder Council at will, her mind was flooded with questions. Also, she wanted to ask about the Creepervine and Kudmoths, but any discussion would be an admission of eavesdropping, and reveal that she'd found her father's journals. Both were trouble.

Finished preening, Barra extended her claws into the wall to sharpen them. Flinching from the soreness, she haltingly tried to put an edge back on the claws that remained. She arched and flexed her back, and cut thin shreds from the bark of the wall. Taking a deep breath, she left her nestroom and entered the kitchen. Her mother was at the opposite door with her back to Barra.

"Wait, from who? Jerrun?" Brace was distraught as she interrupted the odd-looking Rush mid-delivery. "Where's Nevel?" she interrogated the messenger.

He had cataract-cloudy eyes and a twitchy smile. Completely distracted, Brace didn't notice Barra slinking into the room.

"I don't know any Nevel." The Rush rolled his eyes, making it clear for Brace exactly how little he cared. He asked, "Would you like to hear the message or not?"

Something happened to Nevel, Brace thought, and Jerrun knows about it. Why else would he send his own messenger? Suspicious, Brace gestured for the old Rush to continue.

"Where was I? Right. The Elders will convene this evening as you requested, but be advised, Brace, it is exactly this kind of request, if found frivolous, that will result in the loss of your inherited right to audience. See you tonight," the Rush concluded with a lick of his lips, expecting payment.

Brace was careful to say nothing about how she felt about Jerrun's thinly veiled threat. She had no doubt that Jerrun's Rush had the same instructions she'd sent with hers: wait and listen. She waved the Rush away, and said, "Thank you. I'm sorry, was there something else?"

“I’m a little hungry, actually.” The Rush was incredulous.

“Oh, how terrible of me. Honestly, I’m embarrassed by the state of my wyrmwood, especially compared to what you must be used to, being in Jerrun’s care and all. I really have nothing to offer. I’m sure you understand,” Brace dared the messenger to challenge her.

The Rush weighed his response carefully, and then he spoke like the words were acid on his tongue, “I won’t press you then, of course, but you should tend to your tree, Venress Swiftspur. It may be that’s the reason your Nevel has gone missing.” His face twitched as he feigned a smile. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You too,” Brace responded contemptuously.

Barra eased out of the room before her mother turned back in. When Barra came in again, she announced herself with an obnoxious yawn. Her mother had already busied herself in the kitchen as though last night hadn’t happened, as though she hadn’t just confirmed an evening meeting with the

Council. Barra felt awkward, not knowing what to say to broach the morning silence.

Fortunately, Barra didn't have to contemplate her opening words for long. Her mother, in a non-negotiable tone, said, "I'm going to be gone tonight when you get home. Please be here before nightbloom, though. I'll leave dinner on the table."

"Mom, I, uh..." Barra tried to stammer out an apology, but it wouldn't come. She wasn't sure she wanted to apologize.

Her mother stopped what she was doing at the waterfull, and then turned and stared calmly at her daughter. "I don't want to lose you," she said before returning to her work.

"I know, Mom," Barra sighed. She realized her run through the Middens hadn't just disappointed her mother. Barra had scared her. And something more serious had come from it too, maybe not her fault, but something her mother had to deal with. Barra said the only thing she could, "I'm sorry." An apology that came from her core. A sorry for every time she'd disobeyed.

Without looking up from washing fruit, her mother raised an eyebrow and said, "You'll understand someday." She shook her head, and explained, "That's what they used to tell me. But I didn't get it then, and I doubt you'll get it now." After a thoughtful moment, she stopped washing and faced her daughter. She said resolutely, "I *am* proud of you, Barra. You're willful and determined, the best kind of daughter I could ever hope for. Yesterday though? Yesterday, you showed poor judgment. You didn't have to go down there alone."

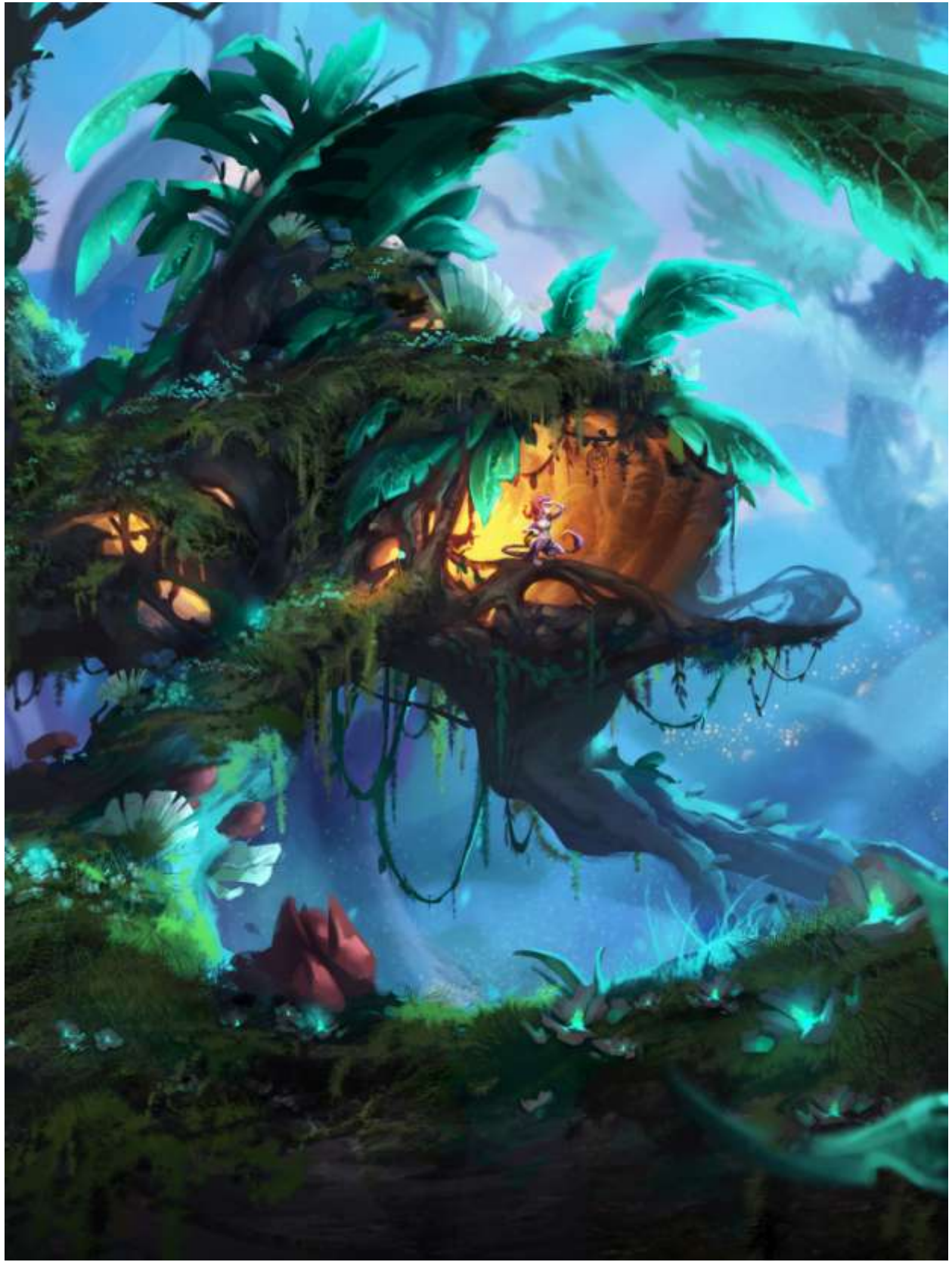
"But, Dad always went alone," Barra argued weakly.

Brace interrupted, one finger pointed sharply at her daughter, "Your father was fiercely, and irrationally, independent! It cost him... it cost us." She took a deep breath, and continued, "You don't have to emulate *everything* about him."

Brace reached out to her daughter. Without hesitation, Barra jumped up into her mother's outstretched arms. The warmth between them glowed, and Barra imagined she could see it.

They held each other a few beats longer than an everyday hug, until they surrendered to it. Brace had a shine in her eyes, as she examined her

daughter. She was judging whether her daughter was presentable and ready to be out in the world. Really though, she wanted a little more time before letting her Burbur go for the day.



Barra wandered alone for a while. The treescape seemed different. Not scary, but not safe either. She was drawn to the Middens again, but not ready to return, she found herself headed to the Coppice. Venress Starch was seldom there two days in a row, and knowing she'd been summoned, Barra thought it unlikely today would be an exception. Still, Plicks and Tory would probably be around and at least she could talk to them. She wished Doctor Fenroar hadn't asked them to keep quiet.

Barra pictured the Elder Council meeting. She envisioned Venress Starch testifying with her mother and the Fenroars, and how strange it would be for them to be on the Dais together. She'd never been to a Council meeting, and thought of the Elders as spectral figures with overgrown claws, and icy, empty eyes. But that was ridiculous. She'd seen Jerrun before. She knew better. Still, she was haunted by the notion.

At last, she spotted her friends walking together. Barra rushed over to them. They were talking about Plicks' latest attempt to fly by his scruffs—he practiced frequently in an open area of the Coppice. She bounced around

impatiently, waiting for them to finish up, and they pretended not to notice her.

Finally, she couldn't hold back any longer. She grabbed them close and whispered, "My mom is going to an Elder Council meeting at the Dais tonight!"

The boys stared back blankly. As they eventually caught up to her words, they exchanged skeptical glances.

"I think she's got some weeds in her brain," Plicks whispered to Tory through the corner of his mouth.

Tory put his hand on her forehead for a quick check, and said, "She's feverish, maybe delusional."

Barra lowered her head and glared. "Yeah. That's right. Weeds in my brain. Delusional. Could be. Maybe? Or maybe, my *mom* is talking to the *Elders* tonight!" Before either of the boys had a chance for a snarky retort, she added knowingly, "About the Creepervine and the Kudmoths."

Tory still thought she was a few seedlings shy of a garden. "I'm lost. The Creepervine again? What's a Kudmoth?"

“I don’t know!” she said, eyes flashing enthusiastically. “But I was chased all the way out of the Middens last night by ‘em!” she spoke in a loud whisper-tone, huddled in tight with her friends.

“You were in the Middens last night?” Plicks asked, taken aback. “I thought your mom banned you for like, well, forever?”

Tory added, “When you left us yesterday, didn’t you tell us you were going home?”

“Aw, come on, Tory. I just didn’t want you to worry. Either of you,” Barra implored. She turned to Plicks hoping he would take her side. “Someone had to see what that stuff was that attacked the Tricopterus. Right?”

“Whoa, don’t bring poor Ari into this,” Plicks didn’t have a lot of practice confronting Barra, but he knew when he was being manipulated, and he didn’t like it.

Tory imposed himself between the two with his hands raised before they could start a real argument, and said, “Let’s just try to figure this out. When you left us yesterday, what happened?”

Barra told the story, ending with how she overheard the message from Jerrun. At the conclusion of her tale there was a lengthy silence. Barra was impatient and prompted her friends, "So what do you think?"

"I think you're planning to crash the Elder Council tonight, so I'll save you the trouble of asking me to join you. I'm in," Tory said, eagerly. Then he asked the nervous Kolalabat, "Plicks?"

Plicks rubbed his face with both of his hands, squeezing and wrinkling the many folds of his skin into strange, inscrutable expressions. When he stopped, he had to blink several times before he could focus again. He was trying to come to terms with his anxiety. "What are the rules regarding the Elder Council?" he asked, hoping for an easy out.

Barra started, "We can just.."

Plicks stopped her short with a look.

Tory answered, "Elder Council is open to everyone." He stopped to think about it a moment longer, "But that doesn't mean they want a bunch of bups around either. We could watch from a distance, try not to draw attention."

Shrugging and nodding his head nonchalantly, he added, “No reason not to try.”

Plicks rubbed his face again, and though his voice was muffled, he said, “Fine.”

They spent the rest of the day together. They didn't have any leaves from the journal to read, like Barra had hoped, but they had plenty to talk about regardless. They worked out the details for getting together later, and went their separate ways.

After dinner, they would meet again in the Reach.

CHAPTER 8. HARBINGERS



Harbingers

The den was cold and unadorned. Jerrun had few friends and no need for creature comforts. Whenever he entertained guests, either from within the Umberwood or abroad, he used the Council's official meeting chambers. The head of the Council wasn't in the habit of inviting Arboreals to his personal quarters, so tonight was unusual in that way.

A Rattlebark hunched over by the weight of the many rings he'd lived, Jerrun had huge, protruding eyes, and long flat fingers and toes. His pale, bald skin hung loose on his bones like a wrinkled sheet. A robe woven from blue-grey moss draped from his sagging shoulders, frayed where it dragged on the floor. The robe was a necessary second skin, his own failing to keep what little warmth he generated from escaping.

A gnarled leg of petrified wood served Jerrun as both a staff and a crutch. The wood had turned pale white over the rings, color drained from it like from its owner. On the top was a knot like a clenched fist worn to almost reflective smoothness. Below that was a band equally worn, and together they marked

the habitual placement of Jerrun's clutching hands. The staff was heavy, and most of the time it was unclear who was carrying whom, but he was never seen without it.

Jerrun sat with his knees crossed in the center of his living room, his staff laid before him. The floor grew no moss, no grass, no fern. Petrified, rigid, and cold, it was about as forgiving as he was. His eyes were closed, but fluttered open to the sound of rapping at his door. Rising without surprise to greet the late visitor, he tapped his way to the entrance and whisked aside the doorweave.

A fluttering, jittering countenance appeared there. Jerrun recognized Brace Swiftspur's Rush immediately. She attracted and employed a quirky, rebellious sort that Jerrun detested. Still, it wasn't the visitor he'd expected. He looked at the hovering creature disdainfully and waited, wringing his staff.

"Message for you, for Jerrun—excuse me—for the Head of the Council of Elders. Sorry for the disturbance, sorry about that." Nevel flitted about anxiously.

Jerrun made a dramatic show of his irritation, tensing his grip on his staff and inhaling loudly. He turned and hobbled back into the center of the room.

“Well?” he said, waving the messenger to follow, “What *is* the message?”

Nevel flew into the den and calmed down. He relayed the details of Brace’s request.

“Interesting,” Jerrun said at the conclusion. He pointed to the back of the room, offering some nectar to the lip-licking Rush. They exchanged a wordless tense regard for one another as Nevel drank. When he was done, Nevel returned to the Elder and waited for his response.

“Tell her that the request is denied. The Council will no longer be moved by requests from her family. If she still seeks my counsel she may see me in private. That is all.” Jerrun rapped his way back to the entrance where he ushered the messenger out the door.

The Rush barely nodded farewell before darting away, but his flight was cut short. As Jerrun stood there watching, Nevel was snapped up mid-flight by the gaping mouth of a shrouded figure.

Jerrun raised an eyebrow, "Tell me you didn't just eat him." The Elder knew reality couldn't be undone, even if he demanded it, but he held to hope anyway.

The shrouded figure was virtually invisible in the darkness of the wood, though he stood in the open. He wore a cowl that hung low, obscuring most of his face and covering the rest in shadow. His lips parted in a smile, exposing bright, glistening teeth that seemed to glow by contrast. A feathery tuft stuck out pointedly from his mouth. The interloper strode forward lightly and let himself into the Elder's den without an invitation. He slid by Jerrun as easily as a shadow sliding on a wall.



Inside, Jerrun asked, "You were listening?" He was uncharacteristically uneasy with the intruder, but doing his best not to show it.

"Yes, I was listening," he said. His words were surrounded by soft whispers, echoes before and after like others were in the room advising him what to say and repeating him after he'd said it. Even in the relatively well-lit room the intruder remained cloaked in darkness, the details of his face obscured.

"Then you know also, that I shut down the request. Why kill the messenger?" Jerrun inquired, perturbed.

"Because you *will* have the meeting. Announce publicly that there is no reason to investigate. Remove curiosity. Nip it in the bud so to speak," the creature seemed satisfied, and nodded to himself.

Jerrun looked away from the creature as he argued, "You don't think that'll incite *more* interest? Brace is a powerful voice in the community. Compassion for her and her daughter since Gammel's untimely fall makes her a poor choice for an adversary. She could become a problem."

The odd Arboreal slowly nodded. "Precisely the point," he said. "This is an opportunity to defuse her completely. Show her to everyone as the *hysterical* mother. Give her sympathy, but eliminate her support."

After some consideration, Jerrun decided the idea had some merit. "And what of the lately dined-on messenger?"

To that, the cowed figure raised his head revealing the mottled, swirling fur on his face. Two bright amber eyes opened, and he said, "Messengers die sometimes."

So that was it, Jerrun thought. If Nevel was brought up, Jerrun would have to deal with it alone. He couldn't plead ignorance, because he was going to send his own Rush in reply. But there were lots of lies, small and large, that could explain why he wouldn't trust Nevel to take his response back to Brace. Not ideal. But really, who would question him? Jerrun stopped considering it with a dismissive shake of his head. "The Kudmoths have been seen in the Middens. Do I have anything to worry about?"

A third eye appeared above and between the other two, and the cloaked Arboreal said, "That's why I'm here."



CHAPTER 9. THE COUNCIL'S REACH



The Council's Reach

The trio met in the canopy of the Great Umberwood, the Reach. Tory was the last to show.

“You weren’t waiting long were you?” Tory asked as he swung up.

“No,” Barra said, “But we have to hurry to get there before the meeting starts.”

From where the bups started the Elder Dais was difficult to see in detail.

The large black platform rose from the trunk of the Umberwood like an enormous dark flower blooming into the purple sky. The Dais was created from ornate, complex bindings and was large enough to hold thirty Arboreals standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Polished with sappy varnish to an almost liquid sheen, the surface mirrored the lilies growing along the rim as well as the raised and gnarled Knot at its center.

The three took up positions close enough to the Dais to hear but not necessarily be seen, and waited. Barra noticed several makeshift vacant seats in the treescape. Seemed they were a little early after all.

They stared into the illumined sky where magenta shifted to purple between the bright points of light called the Wanderers. The young tree-dwellers were disoriented by the branchless expanse, by the seemingly unending depth of the sky, but the strength of the Umberwood Tree beneath made them steady.



“It’s peaceful up here,” whispered Plicks with reverence.

Tory said, “Yeah, it’s nice. I used to come up here with my mom. Since she left the trees though... I don’t know. My dad says the Reach is no place for us. He doesn’t like it.”

Barra never felt like she could relate to Tory’s loss directly—he’d *known* his mother. Still, there was something about the way he talked about his mother that always pulled hard at her chest. Her eyes shimmered. Her mouth opened, but she found no words waiting.

Plicks didn’t know what to say to Tory either. Maybe there was nothing that could be said. He gazed into the distance over the rolling canopy of the Reach, and hoped the undulating leaves said anything that needed to be said, everything that he couldn’t.

There were many flowers lighting the Loft, but few grew in the Reach, and the Wanderers, as bright as they appeared, offered no light to travel by. The canopy itself was radiant but dim, and so the assembling Arboreals saw mainly

by the glow of a magenta cloud billowing from the horizon and filling half the sky.

As time wore on, even the spectacular view wasn't enough to stave off Barra's impatience. She peered out over the Reach, focused only on the Dais, and waited for any indication that the meeting would begin.

"Is that the Starwood?" Plicks pointed far into the distance where one Great Tree's canopy shone brighter than the rest. The surrounding Lofts appeared pitch black by contrast.

Tory's distracted look washed away. "Yeah, that's the Starwood." Tory indicated the Loft between. "See there? Those branches pointing up into the sky instead of arching down? That's the Grove. Beside it—the dense grouping of thin branches and bramble thickets?—that's the Braidwood. So, yeah, that one? That's the Starwood."

There was sudden movement near the Elder Dais, and it stole Plicks' attention. He said, "They're here."

A Bellbottom flew up and around the Dais, and touched down on the far side from the bups. She sat down in one of the lilies on the rim with her tails behind her, up and over her head. One by one, the rest of the Council members arrived and found their respective seats. There were rustlings from the audience gathering beneath the Dais as the Head of the Council arrived.

A wake of quiet and stillness rolled out from him as he climbed onto the platform.

In addition to his usual robe, Jerrun wore the Elder Story loosely thrown around his neck like a scarf. The Elder Story was an intertwined braid of the Threads of the Elders that had passed before him. It was a monumental piece, and heavy with the legacy of the order. His personal Thread was not yet tied to his forebears, but it would be.

Jerrun's staff was with him, of course, and the rapping sound it made against the Dais was clear and sharp. He made his way to the center, and then stood solemnly near the raised Knot.

A young Rugosic, smaller than Tory, made her way onto the Dais and over to the Knot behind the head of the Council. She placed her hands over the top of the Knot, and flashed her fingers in a well-practiced gesture. Once she felt ready, she placed her fingers comfortably, but purposefully into openings in the Knot. A rainbow of light passed through the openings, and the Rugosic used her hands masterfully to block and release the various colors. The attendant rested her hands a moment, and saw patterns in the spectrum that were caused by another attendant just like her, at another Knot, just like hers, far away on the Dais of another Great Tree.

Though the bups couldn't see what the Rugosic was doing, it was clear that Jerrun was waiting respectfully for her before continuing. After a moment, she nodded to Jerrun. He nodded back. He laid the staff down and gracefully sat on the floor of the Dais.

Jerrun greeted the Council, his voice rich and thick with age. He announced the members by name, giving each a deep nod and a few words of praise. There were scholars, poets, archivists, and more. Each brought a

unique talent into the circle. Once he'd introduced them all, Jerrun addressed the Dais as a whole reciting a traditional segment about Aetherials. He concluded by saying, "May you find your Star."

The Elders responded together, "May your Star find you."

After a moment, Jerrun summoned Barra's mother. "Please welcome, Venress Brace Swiftspur to the Dais." The Rugosic attending the Knot went to work transcribing Jerrun's words for the Elder Councils of the other trees.

Barra's mother ascended one of the lead branches to the Dais, facing Jerrun. She walked into the circle, but remained several paws from the Head of the Council. She nodded to Jerrun and to the other Elders. Some nodded back. Barra noticed most did not. She tried to recall the introductions, to attach the names to the faces—Barra didn't like anyone who shunned her mother like that and she planned to remember each one of them.

"And please welcome her witnesses: Venress Vallor Starch, Doctor Yorg Fenroar, and Ven Darby Fenroar," Jerrun's thick voice carried clear and true all

the way to Barra and her friends. Climbing up to the Dais, the witnesses appeared and then walked to Brace, where they stood slightly behind her.

“Please explain the purpose of your summons,” Jerrun said, addressing Brace directly.

“Thank you, Jerrun.” Brace’s voice was full of respect. She composed herself, and then began, “My family, the legacy of the Swiftspurs, is well known on this hallowed Dais. For generations, we were the protectors of the Umberwood. We fought the drooling Maws during the Rot. We defended the Umberwood against the Barblites during Nihil’s Conquest. We hunted the Lifedrinkers until no more could be found.”

Brace paused dramatically. “It has been many generations since those feats of bravery preserved our way of life. Nevertheless, the Swiftspurs remain fiercely loyal to the growth of the Umberwood. Today, we protect the future by keeping the past close at hand.” Brace looked deeply into the eyes of several Elders before continuing. “We left the Root. We left the Root because we were afraid. Afraid of the malignant growth we created. A growth that threatened to

drown us all in darkness if we stayed. We retreated to the Loft. We didn't fight for the Root, we gave it away."

Stopping again for her words to carry the full weight of their meaning across the Dais and out into the audience, Barra's mother stood tall and confident. Barra was overwhelmed with pride as she watched her mother command the attention of her entire world.

"But we were wrong about the appetite of the Creepervine. Not only have we all seen the diminished light, the weakening water, and the softening of the boughs, but we know in our hearts that the Great Trees themselves are faltering. The sickness we left at the Root grows. The Creepervine has breached the Middens!" The attendant at the Knot moved her fingers in sync with Brace's words.

A murmuring wave of unrest radiated out into the audience. The reaction among the Elders was a mix of disbelief, suspicion, and fear.

Brace continued, "Only two buckles ago, a child found an insect in the Evergreen Coppice with Creepervine fungus growing between its wings." A din

rose up from the attending Arboreals, which did not end until Jerrun struck his staff against the Dais.

Brace waved her hand to her witnesses. Venress Starch stepped forward and relayed her story to the Council. The Fenroars followed with their story and observations. At the conclusion of their presentation the attendant at the Knot spoke, "Elder Jerrun, the Starwood Council poses a question."

Jerrun nodded and said, "Please."

The Rugosic addressed the Fenroars, "The Starwood Elder Council would like to know where the afflicted Tricopterus is now?"

Passing each other a worrisome look, the Fenroars took a moment to respond, but eventually Yorg answered, "The specimen burrowed through the bellflower during the evening. She's gone."

Jerrun inquired, "What of your tests?"

"There wasn't enough of a sample from such a small specimen to generate conclusive results," Yorg said matter-of-factly. Then he looked at Darby, and

continued, “We were planning to grow more—in a controlled environment of course—but as I said, the specimen was gone by morning.”

“Are there other fungi that behave as you’ve described?” Jerrun asked, but he already knew the answer.

“Yes, but..”

Jerrun waved off Yorg mid-sentence. The Rugosic indicated there were follow up questions from the other Councils, but Jerrun only raised a hand to her. She removed her hands from the Knot.

“I assume then, that it is your *opinion*,” Jerrun spoke the last word with particular distaste, “that it was the fungus of the Creepervine causing the ailment..”

Yorg, expecting a question, interrupted, “Yes, absolutely.”

But Jerrun continued talking over the Muskkat, “... which is worth almost nothing to this Council.” Jerrun leveled his gaze on Barra’s mother. “I assume, Brace, that you wouldn’t waste our time?”

Brace shot back, "I wouldn't ask for your time if I didn't need it.

Respectfully, Jerrun, it's my job to raise the alarm..."

"*Not* your job, as I recall. You were discharged from that responsibility quite some time ago," Jerrun interjected.

Brace continued, undeterred, "*And* I stand before you as the only authority on the Creeper."



Jerrun flashed a patronizing smile, and said, "An authority? Brace, for the last—what has it been? Ten rings?—for the last ten rings, give or take, you've

tried very hard to establish these theories of yours and failed. Even Gammel's work refutes—“

Brace broke in, “Gammel was in the middle of his research when he was reassigned by *you!*”

Jerrun would not be talked over. “—*refutes* the existence of the Creeper in the Middens. Gammel found nothing down there! His work will not be revisited yet again, nor will your conclusions about it be regarded as fact. He acted without regard for this Council, without regard for you, or his daughter. Who knows what he was doing down in the Middens? I certainly don't claim to know. Gammel fell and his Thread fell with him.” Jerrun paused to collect himself, and then finished his thought out loud, “That was the end of his story.”

The tension on the Dais was palpable. Even the bups felt it. Anger burned in Barra's belly, and the heat swelled through her body and poured out of her eyes.

Plicks saw the uncanny resemblance between mother and daughter in that moment and knew he'd never want to be on the wrong side of either Swiftspur.

Jerrun shook his head, and then sighed heavily. He gestured to the Rugosic at the Knot to begin again. "I sincerely hope you have more, Brace," he said, his compassion a show for the audience, like he was helping an old, wayward friend.

"My daughter was chased from the Middens yesterday by Kudmoths," Brace said, sending another disturbance through the crowd. Again, Jerrun had to strike his staff to quell them.

Unprompted, Brace continued, "Before you ask, I have no proof but my word, and the word of my daughter. Still, the archival record written by the Aetherial, Ren Argus, states that where there are Kudmoths there is Creepervine."

Jerrun seemed amused. He said, "The archives? A valuable resource true, but the archives also say Cerulean was created by an Olwone from the Outervoid. Should we take that literally?" There were pockets of laughter, some stifled, others too loud.

“The Creepervine is here, Jerrun! We should have fought it long ago, but we retreated! We’ve lived in the dark for too long!” Turning to the audience, Brace implored, “We gave the Creepervine our past and it’s taking our future! It’s been strangling the life from us since Argus created it!”

Jerrun returned coldly, “You speak of legends and myths as facts—”

Brace interrupted, “We have the Aetherial’s sheaves and—”

Jerrun spoke over her, “Wrinkled and decaying artifacts of a time lost and forgotten.”

“Not forgotten!” Brace lost her poise, her voice shaking. Jerrun raised an eyebrow, but remained silent for the moment.

Raging, Brace continued with fire on her lips, “You say you want facts, but so few have explored the Middens. We don’t know what’s down there. How are we to grow *up* if we don’t know the nature of what’s beneath us?!”



Jerrun shook his head like a disapproving father. After a moment, he addressed the Council, “I suggest we not waste any more time on this topic. Though I’m certain it was convened with the best intentions, I don’t believe the matter warrants our action.” Moving on, business-like, he said, “Instead, we might discuss other pressing matters, such as the improvement of trade routes—”

“Why are you being so obstinate!?” Brace’s voice was full of vitriol.

An uncomfortable silence overflowed the Dais and reached out into the surrounding boughs. Poised, Jerrun said, “One matter I’ve been meaning to

address is the ancient edict that requires us to respond to a summons from the Swiftspurs. The notion of any family gathering us on a whim..."

As Jerrun went on, Barra's mother remained on the Dais, defiant. Barra saw the shine in her mother's eyes and wanted to do something terrible to Jerrun. She watched as her mother looked to her witnesses for help, and saw they were unwilling to offer more than sympathy. Barra couldn't decide who she hated more in that moment. Clenching her fists, she tried to focus on what she needed to do next.

After an awkward measure on the Dais, Jerrun dismissed Barra's mother and her witnesses with a gesture, and they descended together.

Stunned and confused, Tory and Plicks stayed where they were. When Barra eventually stood, the other two gathered themselves up and they began their walk back home. Seeming to have lost some of its magic, the Reach wasn't much of a distraction from what they'd all just seen.

Barra stopped them short. "I have to ask you both for a huge favor."

The boys nodded.

“Well, you said I should have asked for your help last time, and maybe you were right.” She paused. “I know what we need to do to prove my mom is right about the Creepervine, and make Jerrun choke on his words.”

CHAPTER 10. KUDMOTH TRAPS



Kudmoth Traps

The trio began searching the Middens for Kudmoths the very next day. They found nothing, and it was the same every buckle for weeks.

Barra's mother was busy looking for support among the Arboreals, so it was easy for Barra to disappear for hours at a time and borrow whatever she needed from the abandoned study. She brought entire sheaves to the group, and the three pored over her father's research, learning what they could. They devised a plan for capturing the Kudmoths. Now, they only needed to find some.

As night after night passed without a sighting, Barra worried that Tory and Plicks doubted her story. There were lots of reasons why they hadn't found anything yet. Maybe the Kudmoths heard them coming, or only came out at specific times, and maybe they were in completely the wrong part of the Middens. It was hard to know.

Their plan for capture came from Plicks and Tory. They gathered trapwillow moss and arranged the strands into a net. Setting trapwillow into a mesh

demanded patience and precision because the resin-sticky strands were difficult to manipulate once they were torn from the bunch. If the job was done well, the end result was a dense, almost invisible curtain with a hole in the middle. The hole was big enough for one of them to pass through unfettered, leaving any chasing Kudmoths stuck to the net. The plan was fine for everyone except the bup setting the trapwillow. That bup had to spend hours cleaning his or her fur, and the tacky resin tasted the way rotting bark smelled.

Picks was the unlucky one this time, and he was licking at his fur like it was torture. Barra remembered the last time it was her turn and almost gagged. He looked miserable.



Barra realized it was getting late. She stared through her brushy hiding place to see how Tory was doing. They made eye contact. He was far away, on the other side of Plicks, but the shaking of his head was clear. Disappointed again, Barra started out from her hiding place to call off the hunt. But she saw movement beneath the preening Kolalabat, and froze.

She waited and watched, perfectly still. Plicks didn't notice the growing pool beneath him. Barra wondered if she'd been staring too long into the darkness and was only imagining things. But the shadow continued to grow, and she

knew it was the Kudmoths. They moved like thick liquid spilling over the bark. She turned to signal Tory, but he'd already marked the threat. Plicks was in trouble. Undetected, the Kudmoths had gotten closer than the bups had planned. Tory was already moving and Barra joined, stealthing toward the growing mass of insects, her camouflage rippling as she moved. As scary as the Kudmoths were, Barra was overjoyed that she was no longer the only Arboreal who'd seen them.

The oily, thick pool spread fast, and Barra hastened her pace. She didn't have much of a plan, but she thought that she could at least distract the Kudmoths, maybe get them to chase her. She'd outrun the tiny terrors before and she was confident she could do it again.

Oblivious to the darkening branch below, Plicks was still busy cleaning himself when he saw Barra reveal herself. His face twisted up in confusion as he watched her arch her back, raise her tail, and recoil onto her haunches.

Baring her teeth, Barra hissed, and the slow-flowing Kudmoths became still all at once. Thrashing the nearby foliage with her tail, Barra created a

threatening rush of noise ten times bigger than she was. She whip-snapped the bough twice, announcing a challenge. The Kudmoths clicked back at her in a cascade of flipping wings. Knowing she had their collective attention, she bolted through the hole in the trap and ran. The shadowy pool rapidly sublimated into a dark sentient cloud that followed after her.

Seeing the opening, Tory dropped down near Plicks. He grabbed the Kolalabat in one arm and leapt away. Free hand and feet interchangeable, Tory tore through the treescape like they were falling sideways. When he finally looked back to see if they were being followed, he saw only leaves and branches waving at them.

Barra swept up and down the boughs with fluid grace, a rush in her heart pushing her farther and deeper into the Middens. She started off so fast that she had to lag a bit to make sure the insects stayed on her trail. Confidence built up inside her as she went. Even when she stumbled or misjudged a jump she turned it to her advantage, taking the acceleration with her, racing onward.

Flashing through the treescape, Barra realized the Kudmoths could keep up with her every move. Suddenly fearful, she regretted bringing them in so close. She hoped she'd given Plicks and Tory enough time to escape.

She started back toward the trapwillow net, slinging herself around a branch with her tail. Barra charged headlong into the black cloud. The Kudmoths only had time enough to form a weak mesh, and Barra broke through easily. But the Kudmoths didn't give up. Instead, they were incensed by the closeness of their prey, and they flew even faster than before.

When Barra saw the trap area ahead, the muscles of her arms and legs were burning and tightening up. She'd run farther than she'd thought, and now, she was running rigid. She dashed toward the almost invisible mesh, spotted the hole, and jumped. But fatigue sapped the burst from her legs, and she didn't get the height she needed. She stretched out mid-air, trying to bend herself around the strands. She couldn't avoid them all. A portion of the net was ripped away with her, tangled in her fur. Landing awkwardly, her ankle twisted, and her chest listed forward. The roughness of the bark gripped and

tore away tufts of her fur, but she kept running. Behind her, the cloud was thinner, but still intact and gaining.

Driving hard for a group of dwellings she knew well in the crush of dens, Barra pushed for a second wind. She was scared, and saw no sign of Tory or Plicks as she stole occasional, furtive glances into the treescape. She hoped they were out of harm's way, but still, seeing either would have given her some confidence. Not looking again, she decided she was alone and focused on the maze of dens ahead. A deformed roof porthole marked her usual entrance. The connections among the dens had formed from generations of collapse and regrowth, and Barra figured the Kudmoths couldn't know them as well as she did.

She dove in without hesitation. The Kudmoths followed.

The first den—like the rest in the crush of the Middens—was stretched, and strange, with thick and crooked branches growing up around everything. But Barra didn't stop to look around. Sliding beneath what must've once been a table, she slipped through an obscured hole into the next den. She wove in

and out of the overgrown rooms, from den to den, as fast as she could. Her arms ached, and her legs burned, but she was a needle sewing a unique pattern into the fabric of the treescape. The Kudmoths didn't know the pattern, and she lost them.

Confident she was out of view, Barra reversed and jumped toward a high space over a doorway. Above the doorway was a collapsed portion of wall just large enough to hold her, and she reached for it in desperation. Barely clinging to the top of the frame, she pedaled her legs in the empty air. Fear dumped one last flood of adrenaline into her veins, and she hauled herself up.

Heart pounding in her ears, she tried to focus. Slowing and deepening her breathing, she tested her stealth muscles. There was tightness in the action, but she gritted her teeth against it, and bore down. The Kudmoths were coming.

They entered the room in a flurry of clicks, red eyes flashing on and off. Out of the cloud, one pair of floating red points flew toward her, and as terrified as she was, Barra forced her eyes closed. She listened as the

creature flew around her face. It came close enough that she could feel the breath from its small wings disturb her whiskers. Time stretched and her heart slowed. She didn't breathe. The Kudmoth hovered even closer.

She thought she was spotted for sure, and prepared to make another run for it. But the curious insect delayed only a moment longer, and then returned to the cloud. Barra listened. The entire cloud was moving away. She opened her eyes to slits and watched as the smoky insects were exhausted from the room.

Barra waited, and when no Kudmoths appeared, she waited some more. She was terrified of giving herself away by moving out too soon. Only when she'd waited much longer than her patience normally would have allowed did she crane her neck out to take a better look.

Maybe two measures passed, she wasn't sure. She hoped she was rested enough to make a run straight for the Loft. Sampling the air with a burst of quick inhalations, she detected nothing of the wet, fungal smell the dark bugs exuded. She swung down from her perch gingerly, but didn't let go. There was

a sudden loud noise through the wall, and she retreated to her hiding place and stealthed again. Barra wasn't sure how much more tension she could take. The urge to run was almost irrepressible. A shadow appeared across the doorway—

—and Plicks entered the room.

“Barra!” he exclaimed in an excited whisper.

Tory ran in when he heard, and then followed Plicks' gaze up to Barra.

“Well, that was an adventure,” Tory said. His posture was nonchalant, but he couldn't hide his relief.

Barra let the tension fall out of her body as she jumped down. “I'm so glad to see you! What happened to the Kudmoths? They're gone?”

“Not entirely,” said Plicks as he stepped forward, holding up a bellflower. Inside the container there were several swirling, agitated insects.

Barra inspected the contents. “You caught some!?”

Inside, the amorphous group of bugs congealed in a way, and became a simulacrum of a vicious animal that sneered at Barra. She peered closer,

mesmerized. With her nose almost touching the container, the imitation bit at her and she fell back, startled.

Picks said wryly, "We'll probably need to transfer them to something stronger."

"How'd you get 'em?" Barra asked, astonished as the insects returned to their shapeless, swirling flight.

"As soon as we realized they were following you, we went back to the trap," Tory said, beaming. "We knew you'd come back that way." He added, teasing, "Nice *jump* by the way." He reached out and touched one of the numerous strands that still clung to Barra's fur. He tugged at it, and Barra flinched away.

"Hey! Don't do that!" she said, wrinkling up her nose at him. "It'll take days to remove this stuff." She pulled at another sticky strand.

Picks went on explaining, "As soon as you raced by, Tory and I checked the net, and all of these buggers were just stuck there like we thought they'd

be! We dropped whole strands into the bulb because they were eating through them so fast. I mean, look, there's nothing left of the net in there now."

Tory added, trying to be funny, "Maybe the Kudmoths will clean you off if we ask them nicely."

As though gravity tripled in an instant, Barra felt her limbs become heavy and slow. Breathing was hard. Her stomach felt like it was in her feet. She wasn't strong enough to move.

Worried and confused by Barra's grave expression, Tory apologized, "I was only kidding."

Barra had forgotten his comment if she'd even heard it in the first place. Her tongue was thick and stuck to the roof of her mouth. "You *saw* me?" She rippled her stealth muscles. Looking down at herself, large patches of trapwillow entangled fur were not only visible, but emphasized by the rest of her body fading into the background.

The boys looked at each other, not grasping the situation. But they didn't need to understand to know they were in trouble, because every entrance to the room was outlined in black. They stared in disbelief.

"Run!" Barra commanded.



Plicks was slow to react, but Tory was already in motion. He scooped up the Kolalabat and tossed him through the porthole in the ceiling. Kudmoths swarmed away from the opening, and then billowed out after him. Tory's momentum carried him toward a window, and he jumped through it. A swarm of Kudmoths followed him as well, but there were many more. Insects flew into the room and blocked the exits.

Barra barged through the wall of Kudmoths and out the door. The swarm followed close, and Barra worked hard to stay out of reach. The miasmatic cloud drove her down, forcing her ever deeper into the Middens.

Barra panicked. She made bad choices. She missed her jumps. Instead of redirecting the acceleration like before, she fell haphazardly. Her ankle complained, but the pain was barely noticeable as the alarm in her head screamed for her to ascend. Out of control, Barra ran inexorably toward the big emptiness between the Middens and the Root, toward the Fall.

She saw a blur of purplish gray rolling through the thinning branches of her descent. It was Plicks. Looking up past him, she saw that Tory wasn't far behind. The bups were funneled down together. Barra was desperate to conceive of an escape, as their options disappeared with the branches into the ether.

She made her way closer to her friends. They saw her and tried to close the gap between them. They flowed around each other in a braid as they maneuvered away from the Kudmoths. Barra bellowed, missing a branch. She

was freefalling. Tory lunged at her and the collision sent her flailing toward a hold. She was safe for the moment, but Tory didn't make it to the branches. Quick to react, Barra lassoed the heavy Rugosic with her tail and pulled him over. Her claws dragged from his weight.

Picks was tumbling by and Tory reached out to him. He caught the flailing Kolalabat. Her tail strained from the extra force, and her claws cut deeper into the slender branch. Sharp pain, and her eyes were tear-blind. She squeezed them shut, hard. They clung to each other frantically, trying not to think of what was beneath.



Barra held.

The branch did not.

Barra heard the snap-crack of the wood—not with her ears, but with her heart. Her eyes burst open and she watched the bottom of the Middens fly away.

The bups fell into the void with nothing to hold onto but each other.

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