

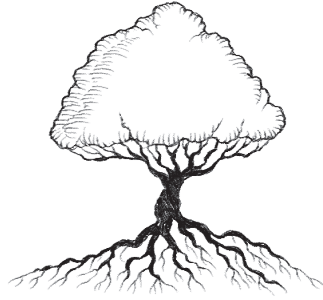
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CHAPTER ONE

AMBUSH

The blue moss of the Rose Garden was slick with blood. Two lines of it trailed behind them like tram tracks, Xavier's life force seeping out through the slashes on his legs. Helia dragged him as best she could toward where she hoped help could be found.

"How much further?" Xavier asked. His words were ragged and weak, as he himself looked, but there was an urgency to them, full of concern, which was unusual for him.

Helia tried to bury the desperation that tore at her insides—the thought of losing him—but failed spectacularly.

Vega, her Orb, sensed her panic. Floating close by, he flashed an anxious message in swirls of green. She frowned at him and shook her head.

Xavier saw the exchange and tried to laugh, but it came out wet and pained. She glanced down to see a splatter of red on his lips.

"That bad, huh?" he said.

"You're going to make it," she replied, hoping it wasn't a lie. She blew her cheeks out under the strain of his weight. It was a weight she had always loved. A reassuring, comforting mass of muscle and good humor that provided a rock in whatever storm she faced. But right now the weight was dragging them both into danger, and she didn't

know what to do. She staggered and almost lost her footing. “I’ll get you to safety.”

He saw right through her forced optimism, as he always did. He was the Sage of Truth, after all. It was his gift and often her curse.

“It was a trap, Helia. Leave me and get back to the Great Library. Or he’s going to find us and burn us both into cinders. That’s what the stories say he does. He hasn’t changed his ways.”

“You don’t know it was him, Xav.”

“It was him.”

Her Orb flashed his agreement.

She glared at Vega as her mind spun, ferociously trying to remember what had happened. But it was impossible. Her memories of the last hour were gone, swathed in fog, a malaise brought on by whatever had caused the gash across her forehead that was now dripping blood into her eyes. Had she fallen? Hit her head somehow?

She couldn’t remember a thing that had happened since the ambush. *That* was still vivid in her mind, at least. The surprise of it, the ferocity. The fact it had come from nowhere, a sudden blight of violence in the one place she had always felt safe and at peace.

She could still taste the cloud of ash that enveloped them as they had stepped from the portal and felt the familiar spongy moss beneath her feet at the periphery of the Rose Garden. There had been no sky welcoming them upon their arrival. None of the usual oranges, pinks, and purples of the light dancing through the drifting clouds, casting the majesty of this otherworldly garden—the deliciously green foliage, the swaying flowers, the rock fountains—in sunset hues. There had only been glowing figures and clawed fingers reaching from the sudden suffocating gloom.

But worse—far worse—was the sense of what lay in the mist beyond.

A presence as dark and evil as any she had felt across all the realms she had ever visited.

Suttaru was his name. Although she knew him by another.

The Ash Man.

It had to have been him. The one from the founding of the Library—a

time long before even Helia's arrival. A figure of menace that was now only whispered about in the quietest corridors and nooks of the Great Library, uttered by students and scholars trying to frighten each other with campfire stories.

It didn't seem possible that it was him. And yet the truth seemed plain, especially to the man who was dying in her arms.

Beautiful Xavier always recognized the truth of things, as was his talent. A seeker and protector of truth. She should have known better than to doubt him.

"Helia," he whispered. A lover's whisper. Her heart collapsed inside itself at the sound.

"It'll be all right, Xav. I promise."

He was almost lost. She had to hurry.

The cloud still at their backs, she continued to pull him toward the center of the Rose Garden. The dragon Perennia would surely save him—wouldn't she?

Helia's head burned in agony at the thought of the dragon, white-hot pain exploding right behind her eyes. It was as if there was something in her mind, some kind of information she needed to know, but was obscured by trauma. All she knew was that she had to move forward. There was nowhere else to go.

That was when she saw it clearly. The truth of what was happening.

"Helia, why are the roses gray?"

She didn't hear Xav's question at first. All her energy was being directed to her limbs as she tried to heave him down the last incline, her arms hooked under his, his feet still trailing behind. But as she finally pulled him onto the emerald path, hoping to feel comfort in the familiar and usually beautiful surroundings, she could no longer ignore it.

The flowers that should have been blooming all around them were gone.

In their place was a mass of curling, dying petals, all of them cinder-gray, as if they had been drained of life by some strange magic, leaving them ghosts of their former selves.

Corrupted.

Beneath the twisted, withering vines were the dead and dying bodies of the Garden's creatures. Pink-tipped humming bees, moon swallows, and tufted jackrabbits lay scattered through the leaf litter. Some still alive rustled as they passed, perhaps sensing salvation, or perhaps reaching out in their final death throes. But most did not move.

Helia's Orb pulsed a long, solemn blackish green—as close to a cry of anguish as he could manage—and drew closer to her.

The horror of their situation spiked, as did her adrenaline. That was enough to give her the strength for one final push.

She crunched her heels into the emerald path as she heaved Xav onward, gritting her teeth, pushing every sinew of her body until she burned from the inside out.

And at last they came to the center of the Rose Garden.

To find nothing.

Perennia was gone.

Helia's legs buckled, and she collapsed, bringing Xav down beside her. He was too far lost now to cry out in agony, but as he struggled through his own pain, he must have sensed the despair that was crashing over her and took her hand.

She stared at his pale face, and with what remained of her strength, she pulled him against her chest and cradled him. His beard was matted with blood. His lips twisted in a grimace as he adjusted himself, trying to dig in the pocket of his long coat to retrieve his Orb.

"What are you doing?" she asked, though she feared she already knew the answer.

"Antares shouldn't leave your side!"

He pressed the ball, now only the size of a marble, into her palm.

"No, Xav. As soon as we get you back to the Great Library, we can get you to a healer, and they will take care of you both and have you back to rights again. *Unite forever*, remember? It means your Orb too."

"We have no choice now, Helia."

He took her fingers and clasped them over his lifeless companion. Little Antares was surprisingly cold to the touch. There was no movement

or color, no pulsing or vibration. Not like there should have been. Helia suddenly wondered whether Orbs could actually die. It wasn't a question she'd ever had to consider before, but in all the centuries she had been in the Library, she'd never known one to shrink like this.

Her own Orb, Vega, drooped mournfully beside her and nudged her hand, trying to wake his friend.

"It'll be okay," she whispered as Antares remained still. She tried to sound calm, confident, as she knew she must. Not just for her Orb, who could already sense her mood, but for Xavier. It wouldn't do to let him hear her voice break. Hope was needed here if he was to survive. Hope was the light that always led people from the darkness.

Dum spiro spero, she thought, trying to calm herself. *While I breathe, I hope.*

As Xavier's chest rose and fell in shallow breaths, she pocketed his Orb in the folds of her cloak and stared at the emptiness around her.

"Perennia's gone," she said, and the pain came again. Her vision blurred, but she blinked it away. "I can't believe it. Why isn't she here, Xav? Where is she?"

His brow creased in a frown. Weakly, he reached up and touched a finger to her forehead. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, placing her hand over his and squeezing. There was something in her memory she knew she needed, but right now it eluded her.

"I hit my head. I think?"

"You don't remember what happened?"

"Only the attack, but after that . . . it's all gone."

"Vega?" he asked the Orb.

Vega swirled a frustrated pattern that confirmed it. Because of the Orb's ties to Helia, he'd lost that part of his memory too.

Xavier was about to say something else, but then they saw the first dark speck of death twist and spin as it fell from the sky.

Ash.

Suddenly, Helia could smell the stink of burning and smoke again, coming closer, fierce enough to burn the back of her throat,

causing her eyes to water. The wind carried the threat of fire on the horizon.

“He’s here,” Xavier said, not bothering to look. “You have to get away. Now!”

Helia twisted to look behind her, seeing the blur of the shadow mist that was cresting the hill.

Fear roiled deep inside, reaching parts of her that she hadn’t felt since her last morning on Earth. A thousand panicked crickets were trapped in her chest, vying to get out.

Yet she still clung to the hope she was known for and the power she had learned to wield. She reached out to the spirit of the Rose Garden and sought any spark of the life it used to hold.

A knot in the fabric.

A thread to pull on.

It was weak, but it was there. And when she found it, pull she did, whipping back her hand and drawing the magic out.

Thorny tendrils suddenly sprouted from the decaying garden, a whole mass of them, writhing across the path and curling around each other as they twisted up into the heavens. She pushed her energy into the wall of foliage, feeding it until the green mass was as high and thick a defensive barrier as she could manage. When she was finished, it circled the entire Garden in a protective embrace.

It wasn’t much, but it was all she could manifest with the little energy she had left. Even with the help of their Orbs, using powers in Paperworld was always draining for a Sage. It was not enough to hold up against such evil, she knew that, but it might buy them some time.

“We leave together,” she said, trying to lift him.

He used what was left of his strength to push her away.

“Call Amare. Do it. She can get you out of here.”

His words were barely audible. Behind her, Helia felt the shudder in the air as the shadow mist met her magic. She glanced back and saw the barrier of foliage begin to blacken.

“I’m not going without you, Xav.”

“You have no choice. Call Amare and ride her back to the Library. Find the others and tell them what’s happened. No time to grieve. In the face of evil, the Sages need to remain united and stand together . . . or we will all fall.”

Helia looked over her shoulder again, unwilling to listen. “Amare is powerful. She can carry us both.”

“No. Only one may wield her magic to travel between the realms.”

“How is it you always know more than I do?”

He gave her a weak smile. “I’m not the most experienced, Helia. But like the botanists of the Great Tree, I’ve always had a nose for such things. Now go. Call Amare. And, Helia, whatever happens, whatever you need to do next, hold on. You are the Sage of Hope, after all. Hope must always endure.”

Helia bent down and brushed the damp strands of hair away from Xavier’s face. She kissed his forehead tenderly.

“There will never be another you, Xav.”

“That is true,” he replied tiredly, laying his head down on the dirt.

Biting back tears, she crawled to her feet again, taking care not to look back at the thick black smoke for too long. It engulfed her wall of vines and thorns, the enemy beginning to pass through it.

She staggered across the clearing, her mind blank. She succeeded in avoiding thoughts of all the times she had spent here with the dragon, conversing through their connection with nature and learning from each other. Neither did she stop to wonder what had happened here. Or where Perennia had been taken, not trying to retrieve the elusive memory that had been knocked out of her head.

Those were thoughts for another day.

Her focus right now was on finding a place to use her power to call Amare, using her abilities to tap into the magic of the realms beyond their own, as the Sages discovered long ago. Helia’s talent was to harness nature, which meant she just needed to find a sign of life to let her cry for help ring out. Was that even possible here, now? Was anything left that hadn’t been burned or corrupted in some way?

There.

Buried beneath the death and decay on the other side of the circular nest, she sensed something. Seemingly small and insignificant, it now felt like a blazing beacon of hope.

A single white rosebud that hadn't blossomed yet. A survivor in this wasteland.

Getting on her hands and knees, she inched her arm through the brambles. Vega was hovering behind her, his anxiety pulsing. He vibrated furiously to tell her to be careful, but she let the thorns scratch through her sleeves and dig into her skin without much care. She was only focused on the bud.

She grasped it in her fingers.

Her mind quickly traveled into the flower, into what roots were left, then out up into the air, through the wind, and around the rings of the sun.

The call for help she unleashed was as primal and instinctive as any that had ever existed.

It was suddenly as if she was everything and nothing at once. Part of the great fabric of existence. The glorious weight of all those sensations bore down on her, causing her to squeeze her eyes shut as she waited for a sign. A response. For Amare to appear and save her.

The intensity was overwhelming, filling her with so many feelings she could barely stay conscious. Her fingers tightened, and her knuckles popped. She dug her free hand into the charred dirt and grasped at it for support.

How long she waited, she didn't know. It was probably only seconds, but in that moment, before she received an answer, it felt like she'd lived a billion years.

A screech tore through the air above her head, and the withered foliage swayed en masse as a colossal and magnificent bird appeared overhead. In a blinding flash, it was upon her, swooping low, its fiercely multicolored feathers rippling and sparkling in the light.

Amare circled once and landed gracefully next to her.

Helia tore her arm out of the foliage and hurried over. She climbed

onto the bird's back. Vega floated after her, and she let him nestle safely in her lap. In her pocket, Antares was still motionless.

She looked over to Xavier and opened her mouth to say something, but he was already waving her off.

“Go. Go!”

The great bird, Amare, had been shifting uneasily on the grass, having noted the absence of the dragon. But with the sound of the crackling wall of vines across the Garden, she understood that danger was upon them.

The bird jolted and lifted them in a steep climb. Up and up and up, at such speed that Helia could barely catch her breath. It was not until they were high above the wall of vines that she saw the writhing sea of monsters below, their fire-ravaged forms now parting to reveal the evil leader in their midst. She gasped involuntarily.

She leaned over the bird's neck and tried to yell down to Xavier, to warn him, but her words were lost on the wind. Vega pulsed against her, unmistakably afraid. She had never known him to do that. She didn't even know Orbs could feel fear. There had never been a reason to be afraid of anything across all the realms of Paperworld.

“Xavier!” she screamed again. Could he hear her still? Could he sense what was coming?

Grasping Amare as tightly as she could, her fingers digging into the bird's thick feathers, she leaned over as far as she dared. Xav was still where she'd left him, watching her.

For an instant, the wildness of the air abated, and she managed to catch one single word.

A parting gift. It was weak, but undeniably him.

“Live!” he shouted.

She knew then that their moment of existence together, as fleeting as the elderly Sages had always said it would be, was over. She had to do as he said. Time had run out.

The shadow smoke had finally eaten through her magic.

From the center of the razed wall of vines, a figure materialized, wrapped in a glowing, burning cloak and shimmering within the rain of ash that fell around him.

The Ash Man barely seemed to notice the injured Sage as he walked past him. The evil being simply waved his hand, causing Xavier's body to convulse, before his entire being turned to cinders and blew away.

Helia screamed. Properly this time. A cry of rage and fear and anger and despair.

The malignant figure tilted his head toward the sound, his featureless white face looking straight up at her.

I am coming for you all, said a voice reverberating through her. My Unwritten will find you. There is nowhere you can run, Sage.

She almost found herself calling out for the bastard to burn her up as well, to rid herself of the agony she knew would haunt her.

But her fate was out of her hands.

Amare opened the fabric of time and space and carried her through the rift. And Helia found herself fleeing from smoke and ash and death for the second time in her life, leaving behind those she loved.