

Passage From an Unformed Story

The morning after the ritual, Astrael rose from unrestful sleep and hiked to the Twinewood.

No Feyu law forbade entrance, but Astrael was unwelcome. Branches clawed and rocks troubled every step. Moss lay like a blanket of green snow over the forest floor, obscuring roots, mud, and trail. Drizzles from patches of white sky gathered at the tips of leaves, then plopped in icy dollops on the back of his neck.

Astrael shuddered and pulled his coat closer. Perhaps he should have asked for permission. Perhaps it would have made no difference. He was twice an outsider, a traveler from the city here at the behest of Heathton townsfolk. Around his neck, tapping his chest with every step, hung the story eye of Saret. Its sway assured him the protection of his faith even as it marked him as an interloper from a foreign god.

Astrael's foot caught with a jerk. He tripped forward, threw out his hands, and smacked palms-first into a tree trunk. He took a moment to catch his breath, grimacing as he kicked futility with his entangled leg. With a sigh, Astrael knelt in the damp to free it by hand. A root's hairy fibers had tangled under the buckle and out again. The shoes were sturdy, with a thick, rough sole that was more than adequate for a day on [city's] streets. They'd need replacing when he returned.

He should have bought boots, or asked to borrow a pair, but his fixation had permitted only the most perfunctory morning ablutions. What little sleep Astrael had managed was infested with nightmares.

Sage-scented smoke. Wool saturated with blood. A massive man silhouetted against a pyre, crowned in antlers with a heart beating in his hand.

He needed to see the altar.

The information the townsfolk had given on the Feyu's rituals was colored by folklore and fear. Some had called the Feyu's wild songs and dances indecent. Others whispered of human sacrifices, cannibalism, and other depravities with a salacious delight that brought a blush to Astrael's cheeks.

The mind of man twists Truth to be its shield and sword. It was one of the first Truths of Saret drilled into Astrael as an initiate of Saret. He'd listened to the townspeople's words, but tucked them away expecting they'd be proved misinterpretations, if not entirely fabrications.

Last night, Astrael had waited until torchlight glimmered from the Twinewood trees. Then he climbed to the highest church tower, pulled out his telescope, and watched.

It was just an animal sacrifice. The cut that slew the sheep was mercifully quick. Nothing to fuss over.

Yet Astrael had clutched his telescope like a lifeline. Drumbeats pounded faster and faster in his ears, driving his heart to beat in time. The bonfire blazed around him, a hellish, all-consuming inferno.

At the altar stood a Feyu priest, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. Blood coated his hands, chest, arms, face. Every booming declaration in his language, every sweep of his hand, sent a convulsion through Astrael, as if his muscles were desperate to flee, but held fast.

The gravity of the earth pulled down until the spire seemed impossibly high, and Astrael fell to his knees from vertigo, telescope abandoned.

No wonder the townsfolk were afraid. This was a deeply present god, worshiped by true devotees. Astrael couldn't remember the last time he'd felt a presence of the divine that powerful.

Fifteen years ago, when Saret first blessed you. Not since.

Astrael clenched his teeth, digging his fingernails into his knee. He took a deep breath, cleared his thoughts, and stood.

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