

# THE FOREST OF TREE

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To my Brother for his support.  
To my unnameable editor for asking the tough  
questions.  
And, of course, to readers like you.



# 1

DONNA “DON” KYLE was exhausted. She and her partner had been on the road for almost two days without stopping, and there were limits to even her superhuman stamina. Their last investigation had been a group of vampires who had grown dangerously brazen after killing an undersized pack of werewolves, leaving little time for support and forcing the pair to confront them directly. Before that had been a string of haunted houses followed by a fiend that was mind-controlling feral dogs. Their next assignment was special as there was a suspected mage involved and the pair had a personal interest in any mage related issues, but mages were quick to go to ground and getting the assignment had been a bone of contention. If agents weren’t so thin on the ground, there was no way their handler would have given

them work across the country, but the times were special. The sudden drop in the werewolf population a couple years back had the Choir's North American division on its heels and agent shuffles were growing much more common.

Allie was sleeping fitfully in the passenger seat. Espers like her needed a great deal of sleep to function properly, so it fell to Don to handle the grunt work of being awake days on end when needed. Recently, Allie had been sleeping poorly for some unknown reason, which made things worse. Being Allie's shield was draining, but caring for the little Esper as Don did made this recent development even harder to cope with.

"Where are we?" Allie yawned without moving much. She was curled into a ball in her seat under a small weighted blanket they had recently obtained to deal with her restlessness. It helped somewhat, but it wasn't a perfect solution. Her wealth of hair, with its signature red streak cutting through like a vein of ruby running through onyx, was twisted into a thick braid that she had pulled under the blanket with her.

"Nebraska," Don said. "We are going to need to stop for gas soon."

Allie grunted and used her telekinetic powers to drag the blanket into the backseat and fold it. "You want me to take over?"

“No. I’m fine.” Don pushed her short, sandy locks back off her forehead. “I’m in the zone at this point. How did you sleep?”

“Like shit.” Allie adjusted her seat to be more upright. “Dreams are getting more vivid. It might be a good idea to head home when we have more time so I can get checked out.”

“Should I be worried?”

Allie was too young for her powers to mutate into the prophetic, but the fear was always in the back of Don’s mind. Espers all become oracles eventually, as the weight of their powers grows too heavy for a sane mind to carry.

Allie waved her off. “What is that smell? It’s really nice. Cozy even.”

Don allowed the dodge. “I don’t smell anything. Maybe it’s those trees?”

Along the road, a thin forest had grown to dominate the view. The trees were all very similar and strange. Each looked like a weeping willow, with thick trunks and wide canopies. Long reddish vines hung from the branches down to the ground, though with the sun setting and the dense foliage of the trees, it was growing harder to see much more detail than that.

“I thought you said we were in Nebraska?” Allie

squinted at the trees.

“They all seem pretty evenly spaced out. Maybe it’s an orchard?”

“Could be. That would explain why they look strange. They smell great, though.” Allie rolled her window down and inhaled deeply. “Like, really great. Kind of familiar. You ever seen these before? The smell reminds me of the Cellar.”

“Under Haven? Really?” Don rolled her own window down. The headquarters of the Choir in North America had a massive, magically reinforced cavern beneath it that hid the Choir’s more clandestine activities as well as their training facilities. It didn’t really have a smell that Don could place that would bring up memories, certainly nothing that these trees were giving off.

“Yeah. You know the woods around the lake? The smell reminds me of that. I loved that lake when I was in the Academy,” Allie said wistfully.

“Don’t get all nostalgic on me.”

“Right, right. Oh, I think the town is coming up.”

The car passed a fairly large billboard, welcoming them to Williamsted. Don secretly hated small towns. They all looked the same. They all felt the same. Piled up secrets and barely restrained darkness bundled into a package of picturesque views and healthy



lawns. The issue was that so many things could and did go wrong in them; she couldn't help but become tense whenever she entered one. This place was no different in triggering her internal alarms, but there was something more, and it started with the trees.

Those trees from outside of town appeared to be eerily prevalent. It was to where they were the only trees Don could see; like no other trees ever existed. She'd never been in a city, town, or forest that only had a single type of tree in it. Not in the American Midwest, at least.

As they pulled into a gas station, Don's internal alarm wouldn't settle down. "Hey, Allie. This place is really giving me a bad feeling."

"You're just wired," Allie said, placing a hand on her arm. It was frustratingly soft and light. "You've been fighting so much, and we haven't had any downtime. Once we get to the next assignment and confirm if it's her or not, we'll try and get a few days' rest. You want a snack?"

"I'll be fine," Don replied as the pair exited the car. She opened the gas cover and took off the cap. Allie has a personal vendetta against a particular mage that, to a degree, Don shared, hence the rush. Allie also wasn't wrong about Don being wired. The more she fought, the more she looked for fights. In the last few days, she'd been in a lot more than usual. Allie

was rested, at least more so than Don was. If Allie wasn't concerned, maybe she could relax.

"Jerky, yeah?"

"Sure." Don let her eyes wander the area. She couldn't relax. She knew better. She was Allie's protector, and nothing would cause her to screw that job up faster than being lax.

The town seemed very well kept, with all the business buildings on the main road looking freshly painted. A few shops had banners celebrating the "Eternal Harvest," whatever that was. The banners were colorful and carried familiar iconography.

Don locked the pump trigger in place and stepped around the car so she could see the banner better. It had what appeared to be Fae drawn on it. It was fairly detailed and showed a cheerful faerie and an uncomfortably accurate goblin. As she stared at the banner, something in her memory swam just beneath the dark. Something she felt in this moment would be extremely important, but her tired mind just couldn't drag it out.

The click of the trigger lock releasing snapped her out of her musing. As she rounded the car to replace the pump, Allie exited the gas station store, waving a friendly goodbye to someone inside.

"Hey, Allie, check out that banner over there." Don

pointed, hopeful that Allie might remember whatever was escaping her at the moment.

“Oh, the clerk told me about that. It’s a local festival. Goes year-round,” Allie said, a tinge of excitement in her voice. “These trees have a fruit that’s supposed to be really amazing. They had a recent breakthrough in the last couple of years, and they are getting ready to bring the stuff to the rest of the country.” Allie held up a bottle of reddish brown liquid and shook it a little. “They gave me a free sample.”

Don gave her a flat look. “I am not drinking that weird-ass juice, from some weird-ass fruit, from those weird-ass trees, in this weird-ass town. And you shouldn’t either.”

“Well, I already had one inside, and it tasted like my childhood.” Allie smirked. “They have a fair on the far edge of town that we are going to check out because I know you need a break.”

Don started to speak, but stopped. She wasn’t sure how, but she knew her partner was compromised. Whatever it was, may have slipped past Allie’s well honed mental armor, but Don’s iron will made her immune to such things. Espers were partnered with a corpus blessed with that ability for just this reason. Allie was the boss and the brains and Don was Allie’s armor—barring that, her rescuer. You always bring

your esper home. So, to do that, she needed to know what she was dealing with. If push came to shove, she could call home. "You know what? You're right. Let's check out this fair."

## 2

THE FAIR WAS in a small park a few minutes away. Strings of lights crisscrossed the streets as Don and Allie got close, acting as a guide to their destination. The dusky reddened sky was almost lost in the light of the fair. Don parked on the street nearby. The area was alive with townfolk, laughing and talking, as a live band added to the atmosphere. At one end, a large open-air tent with a cooking space and large glass barrels filled with the ruddy juice saw a fair amount of mingling traffic. It was almost enough to dispel Don's fears were it not for the tree with its bizarre tendrils dominating the space in the middle of the park. Walking in blind might not be the smartest way to handle this, but Don was immune to whatever

was in Allie's head and she could kill a regular person with a punch of even middling effort, so it was good enough for her.

Allie took a deep breath as she exited the car. She was almost giddy with excitement. The esper's normally tightly controlled personality was nowhere to be seen, instead replaced with a version of her Don hadn't seen for a handful of years. Not since Dom died.

"This is pretty festive, right?" Allie said.

"Yup. That it is." Don tried to inject false cheer into her voice to hide her unease.

"Let's walk around. Take it in." Allie took another deep breath as she marched off toward the gathering.

The fair was, mostly, exactly what one would expect in a small town. A handful of games, booths selling arts and crafts, and a lot of homemade snacks. The chatter of the people didn't betray any abnormalities, as far as Don could tell. Normally, in a situation like this, Allie would skim the minds of everyone she passed, trying to locate the inhuman influence Don knew was present, but this time, practical information gathering would have to do.

"Hey there, newcomers." A cheerful voice grabbed the pair's attention. It belonged to an older man in his fifties if Don had to hazard a guess, though only his

face showed his age. He was slim, with wispy gray hair and bright green eyes. "Welcome to the Eternal Harvest Fair. The name's Charlie. And you are?" He extended his hand.

"Allison Piper." Allie readily took his hand. "This is my partner, Donna Kyle."

Don suppressed a wince at her full name. "A pleasure."

"Partner? Work or..." Charlie trailed off.

Allie laughed. "Work. Her brother got to me first."

"Well, you are a handsome young woman, regardless." Charlie clapped a hand on Don's arm. He was stronger than his build showed.

"Thanks," Don said awkwardly. Allie had brought Dom up so casually. If there was any shred of doubt left that Allie was deeply compromised, it vanished in that instant. She would never bring him up like that. His death was a trauma so deep it had altered her personality. Both of their personalities. Dom wasn't small talk for strangers. She needed to refocus, because Allie was probably not going to be very helpful. "So, are you just our welcome wagon? It almost feels like you're a big shot here."

"Oh no," Charlie said with a chuckle. "No big shots here, but I like to take on the roll of greeter when new folks show up and show a proper interest in what

we've got going on here."

"No big shots? Like, no mayor?" Don asked.

"I know it's unusual, but these days everyone just does what needs doing and the Eternal Harvest provides."

Charlie was using fairly cultish language, but a cult with no leader made little sense. "What exactly is the Eternal Harvest?"

"Ah, yes," Charlie said, his eyes lighting up. "It's a new local tradition, though a way of life might fit better. Follow me. We'll get you some food, and I'll explain."

Charlie led the pair to the large tent and made them each a plate. It was mostly confections filled with red pulp or drizzled with a thick syrup of that same familiar hue. Allie wasted little time devouring the pastries. They had a savory smell to them that irritated Don's nose just being so close.

"I'm not particularly hungry. Thanks, though." Don held up her hand in polite refusal.

Charlie seemed noticeably dejected and set the plate aside. "So, you were asking about the festival. We celebrate the bounty of the tree. It fruits all year round and it's got a real vivifying effect." He thumped his chest solidly a few times. "You might not realize this, but I'm seventy-eight."



“I had you pegged as mid-fifties,” Don said with genuine surprise.

“This stuff is a miracle food. Like those sour melons they have out in Japan, just instead of keeping you young, it just makes you healthy and strong. I’ve not been sick since I started eating it.” Charlie said proudly.

Don paused as the mental fog broke for a moment. “Wait. You also said ‘it fruits.’ Does only one tree make fruit?”

Charlie beamed. “That is a bit of fun trivia. All these trees are connected to the same root system, and they all came from the same mother.” Charlie gestured to the large tree in the middle of the park. “It’s like Pando, out in Utah.”

“Is there a name for this tree?” Don asked. He had failed to answer a fairly direct question, which was telling. Everything was centered on the tree. If it had a name, maybe that would ring a bell.

“Not yet.” Charlie shook his head. “We’ve only been aware of its properties for a couple of years now. One of my neighbors found it originally. Guy by the name of Jake. He helped us figure out how to cultivate it. It takes a very special fertilizer to grow properly, but if you do it right, it grows like a weed. That’s why we have so many in such a short time. We might name it after him. It was my wife’s idea before she

returned to the earth.”

“Oh? I’m sorry to hear that,” Allie said. “It must be hard.”

“Now, don’t go messing up such a pretty face on this old man’s behalf.” Charlie chuckled. “I’ll see her when the time is right. Thanks to the tree, I know I’ll see her again.”

“The tree?” Don asked. The uncomfortable chain of details were clear even to her at this point.

“Yep. Thanks to it, I know she isn’t really that far away.”

Allie gazed at the alien tree turnover she was holding. “Is that why I feel like he’s right next to me?” she muttered.

Don had seen enough, especially from Allie. “Hey, Allie, I hate to cut this short, but I haven’t really slept —”

“Oh yeah! I’m sorry. We should try to find a room.” Allie turned to Charlie. “Can you point us to a motel or something?”

“East side of town, just off the main drag. You can’t miss it. Tell them Charlie sent you, and you’ll get a discount.”

“Thank you, Charlie. See you tomorrow.” Allie waved, and she and Don turned to walk away.

“See you!” Charlie waved back.

“Tomorrow?” Don asked. “We have places to be.”

“Did I say that?” Allie seemed confused for a moment. “Well, I might want to grab a few more snacks before we leave. I bet we’ll see him then. Maybe I should grab one more right now, actually.” She veered toward the table.

“Okay, that’s enough. You’re gonna get sick.” Don tried to ease Allie away from the suspect snacks.

Allie didn’t move. She was holding herself in place, and at that moment, Don was reminded of how powerful her partner really was. Allie’s telekinetic limbs were barely visible to Don, mostly because she was so used to looking for them. A sheen of iridescent light traced the curve of a pair of serpentine arms that grew from her back, each ending on the ground and creating an almost imperceptible imprint on the overly rich looking grass. “Donna,” Allie said, her voice like a knife dipped in honey. “Let me go.”

Don froze, then slowly backed away.

“Thank you.” Allie cheerfully grabbed a pair of reddish tarts and spun on her heel. She extended the tart to Don. “Eat it.”

“I really don’t—”

“Eat. It.” The honeyed knife was back. Every word, a threat.

Don reluctantly took the tart and popped the whole

thing into her mouth. It was sour and sweet, but also savory in a way that felt wrong. She wanted to spit it out, but Allie's gaze was desperately intense, a cobra watching a mongoose. This place was really testing her immunities, however the fact that said immunity wasn't dawning on Allie in her actions was a hint that she wasn't thinking with her normal clarity, or a hint that she wasn't fully herself. Either road was frightening.

"It's good, right?" Allie asked as she took a bite of her tart.

"Yeah," Don said carefully as she swallowed. "It's rich."

"The crust is a bit buttery for my taste." Allie finished her tart. "Now, let's go get that room."