

In This Life

It was like the tree was *mocking* him.

At the edge of a small glade about fifteen minute's walk off the main road, a single, solitary fox stared at the trunk of that tree. The arm that was outstretched toward the tree was covered, much like the rest of him, in cheap travel leathers that were a far cry from his usual attire. His eyes were closed, ears flat and brow furrowed as his fingers twitched.

Unfortunately, they were all that twitched. With a tired sigh, the fox dropped his arm back to his side and opened his eyes again. They narrowed to green slits as he glared at the tree. "It is not as easy as it looks, you know."

"Are you telling *me*, or the tree?"

The fox spun with a cocked eyebrow at the words from behind him. He smiled as his gaze settled on a young otter, clad in the same leathers that he wore with a brown sack hoisted over one shoulder. A teasing smirk was written across his muzzle as he nodded toward the tree. "'Cause I'm pretty sure only one of us can talk back, Deacon."

With a roll of his eyes, Deacon watched the otter settle the sack on the ground beside the fire pit they'd built the night before. "I used to hear Oswell tell me about an *ulurn* magi he once knew," he replied as he started toward the otter. "Magic has many mysteries Bain, but he never could figure out how this other magi could apparently talk to the plants around him."

Bain snorted as he released the sack and moved to meet Deacon in a tight hug. "I don't think they'd have much to say," he said as he squeezed the fox tightly. "Training not going well?"

"Terrible." The urge to pull away from Bain was present, but the fox instead leaned into his partner's embrace and lay his head down on the otter's shoulder. Bain's scent was comforting, and it helped to relax Deacon more than a little as he closed his eyes again. "No matter what I try, I can't manage to access Oswell's *aerun* powers. We know I *can*, but..."

Bain's shoulders rolled as he gave Deacon another squeeze. One webbed paw slipped up to cup the back of the fox's head as he tugged him in tighter. "Maybe you're just tired," the otter suggested. "Have you been sleeping any better?"

Deacon tensed against Bain for a moment before he pulled away with a little shake of his head. He'd been hoping that the otter hadn't noticed his late-night pacing or midnight walks. Sleep was coming less and less frequently. "No... no, not really." He nodded at the sack. "But if you were able to procure some alhiin root, I should be able to brew it into a tea that might do me the world of good."

With a lifted eyebrow, Bain knelt down and plucked from the sack a small jar filled with reddish-brow roots. "My mum always told me that alhiin root was a dangerous thing," he pointed out as he passed the jar to Deacon. "She said it could put you into a death-like sleep from which one would never wake."

The fox nodded as he eyed the jar. "The stories aren't wrong," he explained as he hefted the jar. "If you eat the root itself or fail to treat it properly, then yes, it will lead to your death." He smiled reassuringly at Bain as he placed his other hand on the otter's shoulder. "But don't worry yourself, Bain. Through my magi studies, I learned the basics of the apothecary craft as well. I am not accomplished, but I know enough to safely prepare the alhiin root for consumption."

He set the jar down beside their makeshift camp as he glanced back over at the tree again. Deacon's eyes narrowed again as he looked it up and down. The fox could feel the familiar crackle of his powers in the corner of his mind, eager to be loosed and freed. Unfortunately for them, it wasn't *his* powers he was attempting to conjure.

The feel of gentle paws wrapping around his middle from behind came as a momentary surprise, but that surprise melted away as Bain kissed gently at the back of Deacon's neck. "You know, it is considered dangerous to sneak up on a magi like this."

"It's even more dangerous to go on over a week without tending to the otter you've run away from the world with," Bain countered as he gave Deacon's middle a little squeeze. "A week, Deacon. Since we started running, we've not gone without enjoying one another more than a day."

Deacon had no reply to offer him. Where did he begin to explain it? What could he say? How could he put it, in a way that the non-magi otter could understand? "Something's... coming," he tried.

Bain just nodded. "Yeah, a deprived and overeager otter," he pointed out with a smirk.

"No, I mean... something new is happening in the world. Something is..." Deacon sighed as he leaned into his mate's embrace. "When you are attuned to magic, you can feel its flow in the world around you. You can sense how it shifts. Small things can be felt close-by, and larger things can be felt across great distance. I feel something coming."

Again the otter nodded. His paws rubbed gently against Deacon's leather-clad sides as he touched his forehead to the fox's back. "And that's why you've been having these nightmares?" he asked.

Deacon's head lifted in surprise. He'd thought he'd been hiding that better. "How long have you known?" he asked as he turned to face Bain.

There was only concern in the otter's face as he held Bain's gaze. "For... well, about a week," he replied with the ghost of a smile. "Come on, you silly fox. You really think you can keep this sorta thing from me? You're avoiding what's wrong, and you don't want to talk to me about it. It's like you don't even want to be close to me."

The fox sighed as he leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on the otter's forehead. Oh, how he wished he could explain. Oh, how he wish he understood it all, himself. "I want nothing more, Bain," he said at last. "You know that, don't you? After everything we've been through, all we've done... you know the only thing in the world I want is you, right?"

"You have me," Bain replied with another coy little wink. "You just refuse to take me."

"It's not refusal," Deacon said as he shook his head. He wasn't explaining himself very well. "Just... it's hard when you feel like you're being watched. If we were back at the manor, and I knew we were safe, then I could... *maybe* I could..." He shook his head again as his ears drooped.

It was a thin smile on Bain's muzzle, but it was at least a smile nonetheless. He nodded as he looked past Deacon and to the tree that had so captivated his attention. "What are you trying to do?" he asked.

His arms wrapped back around Deacon's waist as the fox turned back to face the offending tree. "I am trying to conjure Oswald's *aerun* powers," he explained, as Bain's paws began to rub over his stomach. "Since I vanquished him, I have been unable to manifest those abilities again. I have been attempting to discover how to unlock them."

"Perhaps you need the right motivation," suggested Bain as he hugged himself to Deacon's back. "When you used those powers, you did so to save my life. I'm not in any danger right now, am I?"

The gentle stroking of the otter's paws was soothing, but it did nothing to help Deacon focus his mind on the task before him. "Not that I am aware of, and that is the frustrating thing. These techniques could do much to keep us safe, and much of Oswald's

work in the manor was protected behind *aerun*-attuned seals. I cannot make use of his work for our safety if I cannot harness that power myself, and we both know that I can.”

As he felt Bain nod behind him, Deacon reached out his arm toward the tree again. His brow knit itself together as he concentrated on the sense of the tree; of its location and energy. The fox grit his teeth as he closed his eyes and willed the magic to flow.

Nothing happened.

His jaw clenched tighter shut as he took a deep breath. He stiffened his arm as he fell deep within himself, into that place he had been when he had first felt the power flow. Deacon could remember the fear and uncertainty that had plagued him, all mingled with his feelings for Bain. He pushed deep into those memories and forged them into a cohesive bolt of electricity to launch at the tree.

Nothing happened.

Deacon began to growl to himself with frustration. It sharpened his mind, narrowing his focus. The world began to fall away from him. The breeze held no meaning. The glade ceased to exist. Bain’s gentle strokes of his belly were gone. All that existed was Deacon and the tree, and he trembled as he ordered the power to flow.

Nothing happened.

Breath hissed out from between Deacon’s teeth as his ears flattened. He began to-
“Bain! What are-”

“Bored with this,” was the otter’s reply. The rest of reality filtered back into Deacon’s awareness, but the feel of Bain’s paw between his legs was far and away the first. “Bored with this and sick of waiting for you to make the first move. Don’t know why I didn’t do this days ago, really.”

Before he could do anything, Deacon felt his breeches slipped down his legs. It left his lower half bare, sheath exposed to the wind for the brief moment before Bain’s paw closed around it and squeezed gently. “Bain, we-”

“There’s no one around for *miles*, Deacon,” the otter insisted even as his other paw stroked along Deacon’s side. “You’re imagining things. You think we’re gonna be seen because we’re not at home behind some big walls and thick doors, but the nearest village is a whole day away.” He smirked. “I know. You sent me there a couple days ago, remember?”

“But what if-” Deacon started to say before Bain turned him around and pressed their muzzles together. The kiss was warm, the otter eager as he shifted both arms up and around the fox’s shoulders. Deacon squeezed him gently back, the motion more on instinct than out of conscious desire.

“Shut *up*, Deacon,” Bain muttered in between kisses, before he drew back and pressed his forehead against the fox’s. “You’re ignoring me and focusing on magic, and that’s what Oswell did. He only cared about magic. I think it’s time you showed me a little attention.”

Deacon wasn’t given a moment to collect his thoughts or ask him what he meant before the arms at his shoulders pushed him down to his knees. He looked up at Bain to question what the otter meant, before he found himself confronted face first with exactly what Bain had in mind. The moment the otter dropped his own breeches, Deacon knew just what he wanted.

Either the kisses had worked Bain faster than Deacon had ever seen him, or he was already eager to go and more neglected than the fox had expected. He felt a twinge of guilt as he looked upon the already hardened shaft of his mate, and looked up past it into Bain’s eyes. “You know I’ve... I’ve never...” He didn’t dissent, of course; he wasn’t going to argue with Bain when he was being so bold, and the fox had to admit to himself that he’d grown to enjoy the scent of his aroused partner. It caused more of a stir in his sheath as he leaned in to run his nose along the length of the otter’s shaft.

"Now's a good chance to learn," Bain replied. His voice was broken with a little shudder as Deacon curled his tongue out to give the base of the otter's length a little lick. One paw dipped to the top of Deacon's head, the fox's ears flattening under the touch as he was guided back up again. "Start... start with the tip. It's... *oh*, Deacon..."

The words weren't even out of his muzzle before the fox slid back to Bain's tip and engulfed it in his mouth. The taste was nothing like he'd expected, though it conjured to mind the taste of the otter's kiss after their roles were reversed. It wasn't entirely unpleasant to him though, and he let his tongue run up along the underside of the otter's malehood as he pushed forward slightly and gave it a tentative suckle.

That drew all the positive reinforcement that Deacon needed. He began to work himself shallowly, gently back and forth. His lips dragged lightly along that flesh as he teased himself down as far as he dared, only to pull back up again. The fox imitated as best he could the same motions that Bain had used to such positive effect on him.

A glance upward seemed to show that his efforts were at least being well appreciated. Bain's eyes had closed as the otter found himself lost in his own pleased little world, fingertips curling and uncurling with the fox's motions below him. Deacon found himself smiling around Bain's length. Did he look as pleased when the otter worked on him? He only hoped he did.

The satisfaction of seeing Bain's pleasure written so clearly across his face helped drive thoughts of magic and being watched and all the other problems of their life far away. It gave him something new to focus on. New tastes and scents and feelings suffused Deacon as he lifted a paw to close around the base of Bain's length, and he squeezed it gently as he pushed himself down as far as he could go.

The gasp from above was further encouragement, and it melted into a moan of pleasure as Deacon turned his head to the side. His tongue curled around the otter's shaft, as he suckled his way back up toward its tip again, fingertips rubbing around the base of Bain's length even as he teased the head with his tongue. Pre spilled across it, fresh taste tingling on Deacon's tongue. He froze for a moment, unsure of what exactly he was meant to do with the new fluid in his muzzle. Memory of Bain swallowing it all down, along with what was yet to come, answered the question for the fox. He followed the otter's example as he gave Bain's malehood another encouraging squeeze, and Bain's assenting moan told Deacon he'd made the right call.

He began to twist his head from side to side, turning his muzzle around the shaft buried inside it. The feel of Bain's heartbeat became something Deacon grew aware of through the throbbing of the flesh between his lips. Without a trace of magic, he could feel the blood flow through the otter's body. He could feel the otter's heart, and the way it raced as he teased and slurped his way up and down Bain's length.

The paw he wrapped around the base of Bain's malehood began to move, squeezing and rubbing over that spit-slicked skin without a word of protest from above him. Indeed, Deacon couldn't recall another time he'd seen Bain shocked into silence. His motions were slow and awkward, and he knew he had to be doing some of what was going on wrong, but it didn't seem to matter. The fox's own shaft was fully hard, his knot even starting to form as he pleased the otter and wondered if Bain felt so connected to him through the act as he did right then.

It came as a complete surprise and a mild disappointment when Bain pulled his hips back and yanked his malehood free of Deacon's slurping muzzle. It came free just as another spurt of pre left his tip, and it painted the fox's muzzle as he began to pant and look up at Bain's face. It was contorted not in pain but pleasure, as if he were fighting it. "What's wrong?" he asked, fearful for a moment that he'd done something wrong.

Bain shook his head and remained silent for a moment as he held his breath. When finally he exhaled, it was with a wide smile as he met Deacon's gaze. "That was amazing," he panted as he shook his head again. "Too amazing. I... almost had no control. If I didn't stop, I would've..." He shrugged, looking almost bashful as he glanced aside.

The praise almost set Deacon aglow as he perked an ear with a wide grin. "I thought that was the point of this," he replied as he leaned back, one hand dipping down to rub at his own dripping length. "You wanted to."

"Yeah, but not..." Bain began to smile hopefully back as he shook his head once more. "Now you've got me all wet, and, well..." His eyes dropped again.

It took Deacon another moment to understand what Bain was getting at, and he shivered for a moment in a mixture of delight and trepidation. They'd never done *that*, either... at least, not with him on the receiving end of it. "I don't even know if I *can*, Bain," Deacon mumbled.

The otter nodded above him and began to turn away, and Deacon had to reach out quickly to grab him by the thigh and halt his retreat. When Bain looked down again, he was met with the fox's warm smile. "But that doesn't mean I won't try for you," he continued.

The smile that came to Bain's face lit up the fox's heart, and he slowly turned away from Bain and dropped to all fours in front of him. He took a deep, careful breath before he curled his tail up, offering himself before his partner. "I don't ever want you to think that you're not the most important thing in this world to me, Bain," he said, even as the otter sank down to his knees between the fox's legs.

Bain's paws were gentle as they stroked up and down along the fox's rump, kneading and gently spreading those cheeks as he drank in the sights. Even back there, Deacon knew that the otter could smell his own arousal. His tip continued to drool across the grass, soaking into the ground as his mounting need filled the air. The trepidation was still there, of course, but that wasn't going to stop him. Bain needed something from him. Bain needed him.

When he felt the tip of the otter's shaft against his tailhole, Deacon instinctively felt himself clench up against it. Quiet hushing sounds from Bain coupled with the gentle massage the otter's paws were still providing, and helped to slowly relax Deacon. He knew well enough from being in Bain's place that he couldn't be tense if it was going to work, but excitement and concern were conspiring against him. He forced himself to relax as best he could as that slickened tip rubbed against his entrance.

Deacon's legs slid apart as he felt that pre-seed being massaged into his tailring. The feeling was unlike anything he'd expected or felt before; more intimate than any massage mere paws could provide, and with the promise of so much more right behind it. Bain wasn't pushing into him so much as he was rubbing his tip against the fox, working it in slow circles while Deacon squirmed.

The moment came when the tip of Bain's shaft slipped inside Deacon, and it came with such ease that the fox was blown away. He could feel his muscles stretching, shifting to accommodate the intruder that was being so carefully, slowly pushed inside him. His eyes widened as the reality of the situation sank into him. That was Bain behind him. That was Bain's malehood pushing under his tail. He was being mated. Bred. He was experiencing what Bain had been on the receiving end of countless times since they'd fled Oswell's wrath.

Bain never stopped rubbing and stroking with his paws. He kept up every single, soothing, gentle motion that could help ease Deacon back against him, and the fox made sure that Bain knew it was appreciated. His tail twitched, ears flat again as he started to ease himself back a little more eagerly against the otter's shaft, intent on seeing if he could take still more of it into himself.

The otter denied him for a moment. His hips shied back and away, as if he was afraid of giving Deacon what he was looking for. A glance back over his shoulder showed the concern on Bain's face, but a smile was enough to reassure the otter that he was okay with it. Bain smiled right back before he began to ease himself forward again, sinking in faster with Deacon's help.

There was the sting of muscles unused to their exertion, but the pain was nothing that Deacon could not bear. What surprised him was the pleasure of the feeling. There was that strange feeling of fullness that only grew with each new inch of otter that slid beneath his tail. At first it was almost uncomfortable, but as he grew accustomed to it the feeling shifted and became almost pleasant. He tried to sigh, but instead a moan slipped out of his muzzle.

One paw shot up to clap over his muzzle as Bain began to laugh behind him, and he turned back again to watch Bain almost doubled over the fox's back. "Sounds like you don't mind this at all, doesn't it?" he said.

"It's... it's just different, is all," Deacon shot back. He could feel the burning in his ears as he blushed and looked away again. The otter wasn't wrong, of course. It was starting to feel good. He wriggled his hips and pushed back a little harder, and was almost surprised when his rump came into contact with Bain's hips.

Bain just giggled quietly to himself as he ground himself against Deacon's backside. "It *feels* like you don't mind it, either," he added, and he hissed as the muscles wrapped around his malehood suddenly clenched around him. "Ooh... so this is what it feels like from your end... or *in* it, anyway. Heh heh..."

The bad jokes were something Deacon could let slide, as long as the otter didn't go anywhere. He began to open his muzzle to ask what Bain was going to do next when the otter simply showed him. The hips pressed against him began to draw back again, tugging on the shaft lodged in Deacon's squeezing body. He felt himself pull back on it purely by accident as he shuddered, and then he twitched and released an entirely unabashed moan as Bain thrust forward again.

He'd studied biology. He'd studied the body as a student of Oswell's magic, and he knew about that little bundle of nerves and sensation that was located so close to where Bain was. He even remembered quite clearly making use of enchanted gems to amplify those feelings in Bain himself when the pair had first become acquainted. Deacon had never felt that spot stimulated in himself, though.

So he was completely taken aback when he felt Bain's malehood glide across it as he sank back deep into the fox. An almighty surge of pleasure sent his malehood twitching and throbbing in the air, spurting still more pre into the grass as he quaked beneath his partner. "Oh, *gods*," he groaned as his eyes rolled back. "Please... *please* do that again."

There was no word from Bain, but words weren't necessary. Whether or not he'd heard didn't matter so much as the feel of his hips repeating that motion. There was once again that delightful tingle of pleasure, and it raced through Deacon's body even as he clenched down around the otter's shaft. If this was what it felt for Bain ever time the fox had mounted him, no wonder he was so wound up. It *had* been over a week. The length they'd gone without any intimacy suddenly burned in Deacon, and he felt just how pent up he'd become.

With Bain thrusting and grinding against his rump though, Deacon knew that it didn't matter anymore. The otter was intent on making up for the time that they'd lost. Now that he knew what it was like to be the one bred, Deacon was no longer in a position to deny him. All the necessity of his magical study seemed to pale in the moment. Magic could wait. Right now, he needed his otter to take him. He grit his teeth and steeled himself as he waited for Bain to draw back, only to slam himself down onto the otter's length as he pushed forward again.

The pain was nothing he'd not felt before. Pain was nothing new to Deacon, but this pain was mingled with more pleasure than he'd ever expected to feel. It arched his back, helped to guide him back hard against the otter's hips as he ground in there. Their moans rose in the glade together, a harmony of pleasure that echoed between the trees. Even the concern that someone might catch them was gone, in the face of the contentment that flooded Deacon. He was with Bain. He was where he was meant to be. He was happy.

That happiness surged along with his pleasure as Bain took his body's hint. The otter's thrusts lengthened as he shifted his hips instead to the fox's hips, and he began to take Deacon in earnest. The fox's jaw dropped as he lay his head down, rump still eagerly raised as he felt his mate truly start to breed him. Gasps and whimpers slipped out of his muzzle, but the wagging of his tail over his back gave it all away. Deacon was overwhelmed, not hurt.

He had no control. Bain's hips were unyielding. He pushed forward with eager, primal purpose, and Deacon didn't have the muscle control to push him out even if he'd wanted to. Far from it; the fox wanted nothing more than to tug him in deeper. He wanted to feel the otter inside him. He wanted to feel the male he loved buried to the hilt. He'd taken Bain enough. It was Bain's turn to claim him. Deacon tried to say as much, but all that came out was a heady moan and a string of drool that connected his tongue to the grass.

The fox could feel Bain's eagerness with every thrust. The breathy, quiet grunt that came out of the otter's muzzle each time his hips slapped against the fox's backside was proof enough. His grip on Deacon's body was as tight as Deacon's grip on his malehood, and he could feel the way Bain's fingers trembled. Dimly, he could even sense the echo of Bain's pleasure through their shared connection. Three small, enchanted rubies, scattered within the otter's body, were alight with his pleasure.

But when Bain came down, one arm braced against the ground beside Deacon and his full body laid out atop the fox's, Deacon couldn't help but melt back against his lover's touch. The warmth of the otter's body against his own had a magic all its own. It held a heat stronger than the fiercest flames, and Deacon bore back against it as much as he bore back against Bain's shaft. He wanted both inside him.

The warning from Bain came far sooner than Deacon wanted, but it came with an insistence that he'd felt himself several times in the past. It came without words or articulation, but instead a stirring of the otter's hips into a new frenzy. He hugged Deacon tightly as he rammed himself in harder and harder, pummeling the magi's backside with suddenly frenzied thrusts as Deacon steeled himself. He felt his control shredding under the otter's desperate assault, with each thrust grinding against that pleasurable spot deep inside his body. He couldn't bear it even as long as Bain was. One thrust arched his back. The second and third tensed every muscle in his body. The fourth and fifth forced through his squeezing inner walls as the fox cried out in his climax.

Deacon was certain that he blacked out for a single, gloriously pleasurable moment as his peak struck. He lost any lingering control of his body under the weight of Bain's eager pounding away, but one little sensation broke through the waves of intense pleasure that forced spurt after spurt of his seed across the ground. There, pulsing in his backside through the overwhelming sensation of his peak was the otter's, as Bain slammed himself inside the fox one last time to erupt as deep within him as he could.

There was the heat that Deacon had so desperately wanted from the moment he felt the otter's warmth on his back. There was that life-giving essence that his overwhelmed muscles twitched and drew deep into his body, as if it knew where it belonged. His rump tugged on the otter's shaft, making sure it was buried to the hilt as he delivered his seed into his lover, with every spurt of Deacon's spent seed marked by another that filled his tailhole.

Their cries of pleasure receded into muted moans, oversensitive hisses and finally deep, hard pants for breath. Deacon felt his legs shaking, unable to support his weight anymore, and he groaned as he rolled to the side and pulled Bain along with him. The two sprawled out together, the otter at the fox's back as they gasped for breath. "Oh, gods," Deacon muttered as he shook his head. "Gods... oh, *gods*. Bain..."

The otter's arm lazily slipped up and over Deacon's side to wrap around his middle. He hugged himself all the tighter against his partner as he heaved a deep, tired sigh and grinned against the fox's back. "That's... what you're gonna get... every time you make me go so long without."

Both of Deacon's eyebrows lifted as he looked back over his shoulder with a little chuckle. "How's that going to entice me?" he asked. He could only see Bain's eyes over his shoulder, but he could see the otter's smile in them nonetheless. "From here... doesn't seem like a fine lesson to teach."

Bain mirrored Deacon's expression as he wriggled in closer. The motion of their bodies caused his shaft to shift inside the fox's rump, and Deacon groaned as it ground against his still-snug inner walls. "Lesson's not over, *Master* Deacon," Bain growled, as he rolled his hips up against the fox's backside.

"Not even *close* to over."

It hadn't been easy, to watch the two males hard at work rutting one another. The better part of the day had been whittled away by the fox and the otter, engaging in disgustingly obscene displays of physical pleasure with one another. It was almost more than one could bear. *Almost*.

Watching them leave their makeshift campsite had been the most interesting part of the day. The fox had lifted his paws and scorched the entire glade with intense flames before they'd left, perhaps in an attempt to hide the fact that they'd stayed there. A good thing, too. Magi hunters would have been on the lookout for him. *Fraen* magic was often hard to differentiate from more mundane sources of fire, and even if the hunters picked up a trail it was unlikely to lead them back to Deacon.

From atop one of the trees at the edge of the glade, a single, gray-cloaked figure leaped down to the ground. The figure strode around the charred campsite in a long circle, breathing deep of the ashen scent left in the magi's wake. A waste. Necessary, but a waste. The glade wept in the wake of their presence.

The figure moved swiftly across the blackened ground and knelt down in the spot where the two males had first given into their unholy, lustful desires. Beneath the cowl of the hood, a muzzle curled into a disgusted snarl as a black-gloved paw reached out over the space the fox had occupied. How unseemly, to allow one's self to be bred as though he were a female. How disgusting.

A green glow played across the glove as the ground beneath it began to tremble. It cracked and split open under the figure's will to form a small basin of solid rock. There, carefully concealed beneath the very ground that the fox had scorched, was the seed he had spilled there while he'd allowed himself to be violated.

It wasn't a perfect sample, unfortunately. The figure knew that, even as a vial was pulled from within the robes and unstopped. It was hardly fresh, but it was all he had been able to preserve from the fox's firestorm. It was going to be that or nothing at all, and the figure knew that it was better than nothing. The vial was dipped down, swiped through the mess, and quickly stopped up again.

The figure stood up straight and tall again as the vial was tucked back into the robe again. Unseen eyes cast a glare across the forest beyond the glade and to the distant sense of the fox and his otter as the figure began to dissolve into motes of emerald light. They had no idea. Not yet. Soon, though. Soon they would.

A light breeze whipped through the glade and the light, like the figure, was gone.