

IN SEARCH  
OF  
DEVOTION

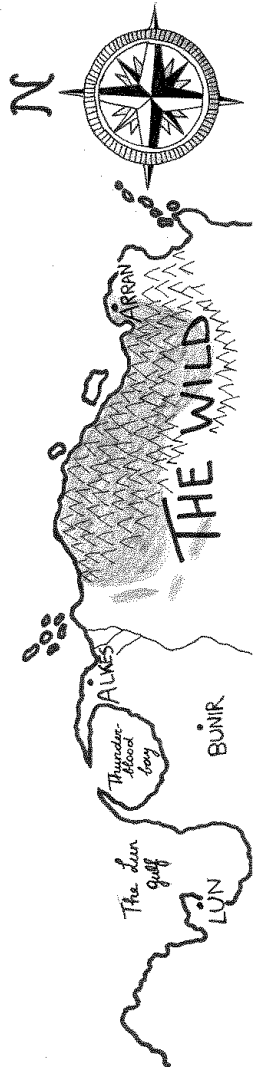
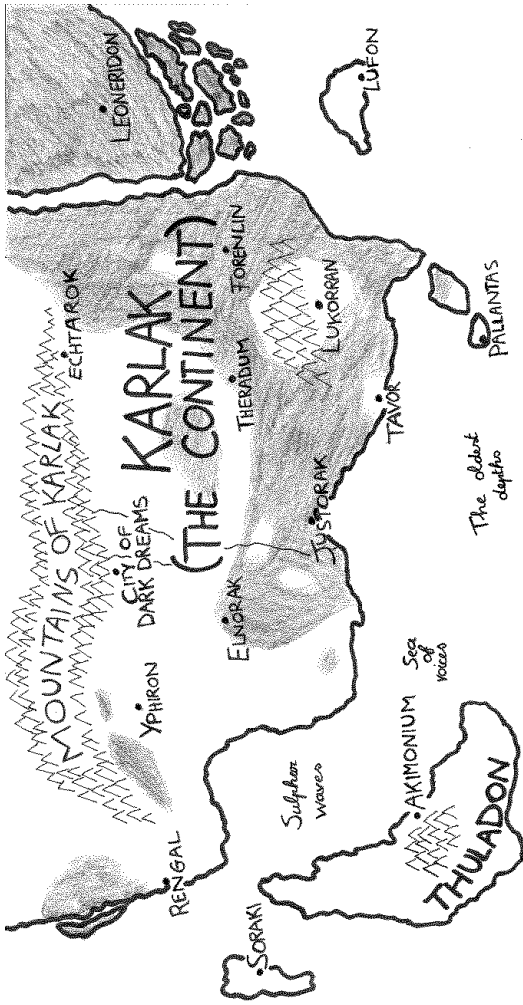


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Akimonium

Year 904 in the calendar of Iolonyr civilisation





## Chapter 1

I touched the sensible branches with my fingertips and felt the coarse bark coming apart. I was sitting on top of Agnassos, the highest tree of Akimonium. Not the oldest, but my favourite nonetheless. The oldest must've been Begnaea, but she was rather dull. She didn't like climbers, and even said to me once: "If they wanted you to go up, they would've given you wings." I never climbed her again. She insulted me. There was nothing I wanted more than wings, nothing I wanted more than to reach the clouds and discover further skies. Even if I didn't have wings because I wasn't meant to go up, that didn't matter to me. Reasons don't matter. Doing what you like is important and hindering someone is sin. So, from the day Bengnaea told me I wasn't meant to climb, I climbed even more and even higher. I thought going up was always magnificent. It bothered me how I wasn't born with wings and I asked Agnassos:

"Why don't I have wings?"

"Anna," he said, "Is it an opinion you're asking for, or truth?"

"A truthful opinion, sir Agnassos."

"Well," he said. I could feel his bark tightening around me as he thought, "If they had chosen to give you wings, you wouldn't be wishing it. You wouldn't be dreaming it. One does not wish for what they

already have. And, perhaps it is more beautiful to desire, because desire is one of the few things nobody can take away from you. Besides, Anna, you spit fire. I have even felt it a few times, unfortunately,” his bark loosened a bit and crunched while he chuckled deep from his roots.

“It is an honourable talent,” he continued, “you simply cannot have it all.”

“It just annoys me,” I said as I sighed.

“What is it that it annoys you?” His branches started to move and a few hit me quite hard. I had to concentrate on keeping my balance. Agnassos was a young and energetic tree, which was why he moved so much. I felt really frustrated and wanted someone to understand why it bothered me. “Just because there are flames coming out of my mouth and hands, that doesn’t mean I’m a dragon. I need wings. I need to fly.” One of his branches glided down from above my head and landed softly on my shoulder. I went on: “I don’t want to be like the sun, burning and staring but not alive. I want to fly, not wait patiently until something happens. The ground is so inanimate, the skies are full of life.”

“You’re wrong, I’m afraid,” he said. “The sun is very alive. In fact, the sun brings life, it’s the source of all life above sea level. Without it, nobody would fly.”

“But it’s a metaphor, Agnassos,” I protested, “I’m not the sun, they’d - ”

“Yes, I know, I know.” He interrupted me. My father had taught me that trees only interrupt you when they know the exact following words, purely to avoid waste of time. I doubted this was true. “What I mean to tell you is, fire is as powerful as wings”, he said, “Remember that those who fly will land, while fire reflects. Whatever you lighten with fire, it will travel and reflect on bodies light-years from here. You create life. Fire lives forever. You fly from this world to another by the flames you create, but you don’t notice because you’re too busy focusing on flying on a smaller scale.”

I didn’t really understand but nodded and wished him goodbye, since the sun was starting to set and I still had to get home. Projection and reflection from one world to another was something I had heard of before but thought was a story rather than truth. I grudgingly contemplated what Agnassos had said while I walked, and realised he probably knew what he was talking about, but I wasn’t looking for platitudes or wisdom, I needed sympathy more than anything. I didn’t have the feeling that he understood how it felt to wish for something impossible.

At the edge of the forest Fennecus was waiting for me. Fennecus is a fly deer who became my pet by coincidence. He ran into me desperate for a home, and never left. His history is a mystery to me, but I thought he was adorable. A fly deer looks like a regular deer but has feathered wings. Its legs are shorter and less powerful than normal deer. They

have two-toed hoofs, a slender neck and no antlers. The wings of fly deer are streamlined and not extraordinarily wide - which is why they move faster on the ground. Fennecus has very large ears for a fly deer and is a bit fat. Unlike other fly deer Fennecus is a deaf-mute, he can't hear or make any kind of noises, I struggled to teach him things in the beginning, but then we discovered a way to communicate through touch. I spent a lot of time teaching him which touch meant what. I wasn't sure he always understood me, but we got along well. After a while I started to be really attached to him and although he came up to me clumsily and confused, after taking time to get to know him, he seemed to enjoy my company as well and we developed a friendship.

I touched the back of his left ear and his wings left the sides of his body. Easily he lifted us in the clouds. There was no better place than the back of Fennecus.

The clouds were deep orange from the light of the descending sun, and they soon hindered my view of the ground below. Even though beautiful mist surrounded me completely, I still noticed we headed the wrong direction. I tried to divide my weight better and pushed his shoulder blade. We had had errors before but I was surprised he couldn't figure out which direction I wanted him to go. Fennecus wasn't blind, and he seemed sure about what he was doing, therefore I trusted him. I simply figured my father must be somewhere else. The sun was sinking in the horizon at my right, and I saw the long travel road

beneath me rapidly getting closer when I started to scream. We were going too fast and hit the top of the High Trees quite aggressively. I guess it bothered them because they started grumbling and complaining. I pressed Fennecus' shoulder blade harder while I got hurt by the branches we were flying through. His behaviour astonished me because he hadn't been acting strange before. Then we hit the ground. I felt a sharp pain in both my knees, and my head hit the bark of a sleeping tree. Fennecus rolled over looking hurt and knackered. The world was spinning. My head radiated pain from the spot where I hit it against the tree, I lay down to rest it in the damp grass and the world blacked out.

I came awake with a bug crawling across my cheek and my back resting against Fennecus. My eyes opened again, and at first I thought I must've been gone for only half a minute. My view was blurred but I thought a silhouette stood beside me.

“Are you okay?” I heard then. “You had better watch out; fly deer are unpredictable creatures. They can be trusted, surely, but sometimes they freak out and you should leave them alone for a while. Riding a fly deer is not very usual”, the woman said.

“Nonsense,” I mumbled.

As I forced my eyes to focus, I realized who she was. She was an Eanticipitae. A warrior, but rather quiet and taciturn. The thing about Eanticipitae is that they

are always ready for war, every second in their lifetime after being trained from a young age. Their power is extraordinary, though when danger shows up they never use more than necessary. They never show the extent of their skill. She wore a shield made of a turtle shell, which must've had symbolic value in the Eanticipitae society, but the folk I belonged to, the Post-Merfolk, hadn't figured it out yet. There was speculation that it had something to do with having a sightless person in their family. This could be their way of identifying her as the family member of this blind person. I wasn't sure whether this was true, it could also just be a fashion trend. I went to Fennecus to check whether he was okay and he appeared to be doing fine, he had no serious injuries and his behaviour seemed no stranger than normal.

“Where were you going? The port I suppose?” she asked curiously.

“No, not really. I was about to go home to my dad, I live just outside the ramparts of Akimonium.” She didn't answer for a while, she just stood there, her eyes stabbing at me curiously.

“You'd better go on foot. Your fly deer doesn't look his best.”

“Oh, he's always like that,” I laughed, but deep down I wondered whether there might've been something seriously wrong with him. He was often unpredictable and sometimes acted clumsy, due to his lack of hearing he easily loses his balance, but he knew how

to fly and yet we fell to the ground. I started to walk together with the Eanticipitae and I heard Fennecus getting up behind us. I looked and he stumbled along a few steps behind us, his head hanging low.

“I’d present you my horse if I were nice, but don’t count on that.” I didn’t know whether to smile or feel uncomfortable, so I did both. When she started to laugh, I understood she meant it as a joke.

“Let me accompany you,” she said, “It’s not that far to Akimonium.”

“Where are you headed?” I asked

“The City of Dark Dreams, concerning the eight-days-duel”, she said while urging her horse forward.

“You have a long journey ahead.”

“Yes. Quite.”

“Have you seen the eight-days-duel?” I asked her. It was all people talked about lately, the fight between Gryllus Meconema, a man of the Spirits, and Achete Caerulescens, a woman of the Spirits. Gryllus was well-set and tireless. He wore a white cloth around his body and had very long wild hair. As for Achete, she is an aggressive feminist without dignity, or so I had been told. Their duel lasted eight complete days, and for those eight days they duelled sword to sword, but they used a lot of magic too, which is typical for the Spirits. It took a strong physical and mental toll on both, but in the end Achete won. However, it was a

pyrrhic victory, because eight days is a long time to do nothing but fight, even for two such strong beings.

“I was there the whole time, and it was breath-taking, I didn’t even dare to blink.”

“I’ve been told it’s dangerous for spectators to stay there too long,” I said. “All the power of their spirits must’ve been hard to handle.” I glanced up to where she was riding beside me but it was clear she wasn’t listening. She had stopped and lowered herself to the ground, and her head was turned to the side. I could see the true length of her eyelashes, and they surprised me in their beauty. I followed her glance and saw a group of weird creatures I had never seen before. These creatures walking down the side of the road looked in many ways like a fish, but it could walk. On the side of the body were two fins and closer to the eyes I think I saw gills.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Who,” she corrected me.

“Who are they?” I repeated.

“Fish,” she said, “Fish with legs. They’re very rare, I didn’t expect to see them here.”

“Why not?”

“Because they balance. In the City of Dark Dreams that’s very necessary and they are needed there in small amounts. The last counting found twenty-four



in the entire city. In the east, there are about hundred. But here... there shouldn't be one of them.”

“What do they balance?”, I asked her.

She looked up to me and asked, “You've never seen one before?”

“No”

“You've never seen an infected one?”

“Infected one? Infected with what?” I asked confused.

“You've never even heard of these creatures?”

“No”

“Good.” She frowned as she mounted back onto her horse.

“Why won't you answer my questions? Why are you surprised to see them here?”

She sighed and looked into my eyes, I could see how calm she was by the way she blinked in a slow and controlled manner. She turned and continued with a purposeful stride down the path.

“Because they keep disturbance and negativity of fate down to balance the future. Here everything is supposed to be fine. I thought it was anyway, now I'm not so sure.”

I nodded and tried to keep up with her pace which was hard because my knees still hurt a lot. “So, the future is in the hands of those fish with legs?”, I asked

sceptically, though not with the intention to mock her theory.

“No, the future is in our hands. And it will stay so, for however long it is balanced.”

“What do you mean balanced?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” she sighed, “What is your name anyway?”

“Anna,” I said, while glancing over my shoulder to ensure that Fennecus was still following us.

“Nice to meet you Anna, I am Noä, from the Eanticipitae folk.” She replied as we arrived at a crossing.

“South or West to Akimonium?” she asked.

“West. What do you mean, balanced?” I repeated, determined to get some answers.

“Don’t worry about it, Anna. I should get back on the traveller’s road now, I don’t want to deviate from the path too much. Goodbye.” She turned onto the path south and didn’t even give me the chance to return her goodbye.

I waited for Fennecus to catch up with me, and then patted him on the head. He went away from the road to relax in the last patch of sunlight. He mustn’t have felt well and I still had that headache from hitting the tree during our fall earlier.

“Maybe we should stay here. We could find a spot where nobody can see us and stay there ‘till

tomorrow. How would you like that?" I spoke to Fennecus pretending he wasn't deaf-mute. I started to caress his fur with my right hand and he moved his head towards my left. Then I made a small cosy place for him in the forest, and when I knew he was alright I climbed the nearest tree. This tree was strangely silent when I started to climb him, it was eerie enough that when I was three meters high I jumped out of the tree not giving the height a second thought. This was a very bad decision considering my knees had known better times. I groaned with pain for a second, then I asked the tree:

"Excuse me, are you ill?"

There came no answer.

"Are you sleeping?"

When there didn't come an answer once again I asked, "Are you dead?"

Dead trees don't just disappear, sometimes they stay for another ten years, not entirely dead but not at all living. Feeling uncomfortable I went to another tree, but before I started to climb him I wanted to make sure he was alive.

"Hello?" There didn't come any words but I could hear the cracking of his wood and that meant he was most likely still alive, probably just not very talkative. I had wanted a sign of communication because it was darkening and I was far from home. The silence in a forest full of trees can be terrifying, but I climbed it

anyway wanting to be off the ground. I admitted to myself that I wasn't feeling very talkative either, so maybe it was for the best. I climbed as high as I could get and found comfort in watching the night sky. Aside from the sky there wasn't a lot to see, only the road and trees, and blurry the mountains far off in the distance. Akimonium on the other hand was not yet in my sight. I saw the stars and the moon appearing, and I was aware of true amazement in that moment. Looking at the stars I knew I wasn't that far from home, and I felt safer. "In fire," I spoke, "I am home."

I was pulled from my reverie when I heard something I didn't want to hear. It were hooves coming down the path. I saw the horse and his rider appear out of the corner of my eye. He wouldn't have seen me high up in that tree, seeing as how people often forget to look up. He wouldn't have, but he did, because I recklessly decided to shout:

"Beware, these stars are my lungs!"

I'm not sure why I did that, perhaps because I felt so alone and in a way this place felt dead and cold. The hooves fell still and cold air hit me like a sword. All sound fled away except for my own heavy breathing. The tension of that moment made me curious. The horse came closer again, uncertain. The rider stopped on the path only a few trees away from me and I heard his voice.

"Aren't you afraid of noraxes?" he asked, not knowing in which tree I hid. Noraxes were human-

like creatures who, from the moment they are born, start to lose the sense of intelligence they naturally possess. They lead solitary lives in forests and hunt by night. They grow to their full form in twenty hours, from then on, they start to die. They lose so much intelligence that after four days they simply die. Although noraxes live short lives they are still able to multiply, because with every killed person or creature a new norax is arisen. Noraxes were often the reason people avoided forests, especially during the night. For a moment, I thought this rider asked this because there was a norax near, but I quickly realized this person would've been running away in fear if that were the case. I realized he must've just said this because he thought I was crazy to be here alone.

"No, I'm not," I said. The sound of my voice guided him into the forest to the tree where I was situated. He looked up and I saw his face in full starlight. I had just shouted 'Beware' to a knight of the Thuladon army.

"Do you often do this kind of things? Sit high up in a tree in the middle of a deserted area and shout at strangers in the dark?"

"Well not really," I admitted, "And you? Do you often wander around in the middle of a deserted area in the late evening and hear people shouting at you about stars being their lungs?"

"Not really, no." he answered wryly. I heard him chuckle and decided descending to the ground wasn't

such a very bad idea. I carefully did, concentrating on not stepping on the wrong branches as I asked:

“So, you’re a knight?”

“Yes. Still in recruiting though.”

“So not really a knight?” I said teasingly.

“Consider me a knight, I am almost a knight.”

“But you’re not.”

“I am a knight,” he said forcefully. Then he cleared his throat and continued somewhat sheepishly, “whose process just isn’t fully complete yet. I am a knight.” I couldn’t help myself from smiling, and while I was amused because of the circumstances I accidentally placed my foot wrong, slipped, and fell painfully with my head against the bark for the second time that day. He burst into incontinent laughter which irked my temper.

“When young ladies fall in proximity of a knight, or almost-knight, they must be helped or caught if possible; anything but laughed at,” I said irritably. He continued to laugh as he gave me a hand up.

“You don’t seem much like a lady,” he chuckled.

“Excuse me?” I replied offended.

“It’s just that proper young ladies don’t climb trees, or go out on their own at night,” He added as an afterthought. “I’ve never seen a lady who behaves like you do.” He carefully minded his words, as he stifled his laughter.

“Just because you’ve never seen one doesn’t mean they don’t exist.” He nodded and ceased his laughter as he turned away with the words:

“I have to get going.” A smile was the only goodbye he granted as he left.

“I’m going to the city of inner beauty.” He called back to me. “Maybe one day I’ll see you there!” The city of inner beauty was how some people liked to call Akimonium. It was very pretty but didn’t seem much prettier than Echartrok to me. He eventually disappeared from my sight as I listened and watched how he galloped down the path. I went to check on Fennecus and found him peacefully asleep. It came to my mind that perhaps he wasn’t that much of a hero as I had thought, this shabby old fly deer. I loved him to bits anyway. I closed my eyes, laying on the ground next to my beloved pet, and tried to ban the thoughts of my father being angry when I saw him tomorrow.

Suddenly I could hear disturbance of the silence, and when I realised it were hooves I jumped up to try and figure out who this new intruder was. The hooves came insanely fast and at certain distance I could see it was the almost-knight.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Wolves!” he screamed, “Get out of there!” then he passed me by. I quickly woke Fennecus and climbed

onto his back. He lifted us into the air and flew further on to pass the wolf pack. I noticed there were dozens of them running at a speed likely to overtake the knight and it was obvious they were aggressive. They would rip apart anything in their way. We landed when I thought they had all past and I tried to get calm again. I got down from Fennecus and sat on the ground facing the direction the wolves had come. I did this in case some, or even just one, got left behind.

Sitting there I soon started thinking thoughts that only cross your mind at night, like how strange everything is. A tree on my left made a crackling sound and Fennecus was nuzzling my shoulder with his snout. In other cases that would've been a sign to me, but it was late and I couldn't distinguish flawed from flawless. I was eventually pulled from my reverie when I heard the approaching wolf pack that had turned back because of my smell. It was too late to flee, Fennecus wasn't fast enough in ascending and I knew that, but I desperately jumped on his back and held tight anyway. He was afraid too, I could feel him shivering beneath my fingers. I tried to call my fire and one moment before the first wolf was nearly upon us my eyesight caught the sparkles of the stars and I did the only thing I was good at. I screamed. And everything lit up. The wolves kept coming but that didn't scare me anymore. What impressed me were the flames they suddenly had to go through. My limits no longer seemed to matter, limitation is inevitable



but at times very negligible. In rare moments  
limitation is in your own hands. I screamed, produced  
fire, made fire, and transformed everything around me  
into fire. I discovered the surprising sphericity of fire,  
felt fire, breathed fire. I was fire. I was hurting  
Fennecus and he flew away to a place where I remet  
the air, the clouds.

## Chapter 2

We reached the First Small Mountains and I decided to land somewhere low because Fennecus wouldn't make it to one of the peaks. As Fennecus and I got lower to the ground, I noticed one of his wings were injured. I slid off Fennecus' back as soon as we landed and then immediately sank to the ground. I felt dizzy and lightheaded, from the expenditure of power, and the burns I had gotten from the fire were almost unbearable. I had never reached the point where everything around me was on fire due to my own abilities. I felt conflicted because I didn't think I ought to feel bad about using my abilities, because I was born to produce fire, and I had used it to save Fennecus and myself. However, it also didn't feel like I had done a good thing because I didn't have the fire under control. If I had, I wouldn't have wounded Fennecus. I would've stopped sooner.

Fennecus slowly walked away in pain. He laid down at a distance where he thought I couldn't see his weakness. I would give him a moment of rest and would tend to his wounds later.

It was dark and terrifyingly silent. The few clouds I could see were sleeping on a bed of dark blue and sprinkled with stars of various brightness. The clouds seemed to be moving in circles. The connection between me and the night sky was a cone, and I was the apex. It was breath-taking. Some abisos crawled