

7. Arboreus

The room was dimmed. The air was damp. Sitting side-by-side were two beds, resplendent with the medical trappings of modern healing priests. Left, blinds open, no occupant, the right bed occupied, blinds closed, a gaggle of weeping people. Central in the bed, and this tableau, a man gasping, unshaven for days, reaching for each breath as if an unknown rescuer attempting to tug him back.

This saviour was failing, the tugging weaker every few breaths, counting down the old man's time in its ancient, well worn way. The figure in the bed, laying in tousled sheets, the remainder of his silver hair slick with the results of his ongoing efforts. His eyes darted amongst the members of those congregated, religious symbols, tears and squares of cloth. He no longer cared for any of it. His body started to loosen, the mattress enveloping him in a warm embrace, the effort of his breath relaxing. His eyes started to glaze, his expression one of an antelope resigned to the predatorial pack.

It were the insistent and incessant alarms that heralded the cessation of the man's breath, his heart following as the rescuer's pulling dissipated and lapsed. The small, mourning group's vocal sorrow reached a crescendo as lights suddenly burned bright and more came to bustle and fuss. For the man, only a deepening darkness, the last sounds of tears and ragged, staccato cries, and the sibilant alarms silencing one-by-one. The man was released from the struggle, his body now limp and weak. His once firm grip on this world disconnects in the silence and depths of inky blackness reflected in the windows to his vacating soul.

The quiet and dark persisted, but there came a slight diminution as the gradual shadow of very faint light spread. Another struggle? Feelings of movement, of growth in a timescale of its own. The tiny green shoots, a pair, gradually emerged in their own time, pushing away the grains of brown soil. Fortunately the gods smiled coincidentally and light drops of rain moistened the dry earth. As the process expanded forward, the sapling gained strength, the two pathfinding leaves spreading to face the sky, in time being joined by more.

The small gaggle of leaves seemed to breathe out and expand in the day, sheltering in the night, conserving heat and protecting more young emerging shoots. Around this intrusion into the world were others, much older and stronger, countless more leaves covering branches and thick bark. They looked down upon this new addition to their fold, seemingly with love and pride, swelling their presence in the wind as if to shield the youngest in their midst.

More cycles of the sun and moon, as the primitive tree emerged further upwards from the brown and green land. It extended and reached out to the sky containing the orb that gave all life. As it stretched itself, others far more advanced continued to stand guard, the occasional one falling in a storm or just of tremendous age. Flowers of many denominations and wavelengths also emerged to colour the floor's carpet, cold and warm blooded bodies of so many varieties, all with purpose, darting across this undergrowth.

As the young tree reached increasing heights, the animals and birds seemed to almost will it to speed up, its tiny branches and foliage to be havens for them and their young. Even more solar and lunar cycles as the tree developed, taller and taller, broadening out, increasingly occupying the space around it. Its toughening bark tickled with all nature of clambering life. The older trees watched on as it raised itself to nearer and nearer their own height.

In the mornings both tree and occupants expanded outwards, others settling for the day, changing roles at the start of their night. And the now strident tree breathed in air, vast free gulps, supporting life in the air, on the ground, and deep into the earth with tuberous roots. It had no need of a rescuer, nor of sadness, no wailing few. Life continues, its soul content.