

SUNBORN RISING

Beneath The Fall

Aaron
Safronoff



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BENEATH THE FALL

by Aaron Safronoff



NEOGLYPHIC ENTERTAINMENT
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Sunborn Rising: Beneath the Fall

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Sample Edition

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CHAPTER 1. THE SECRET REMAINS



The Secret Remains

Barra's mother had never said that Barra *wasn't* allowed in her father's study. Maybe because she'd never asked. She hesitated at the threshold, feeling her mother's disapproving eyes even though she wasn't home yet. But Barra was determined, and she crossed into the dusty room.

The urge to know about her father was overwhelming, and her mother's memories weren't enough anymore. Barra wanted something all her own, a unique connection, and searching the rest of the den had turned up nothing. Even her mother's room with its keepsakes and journals had revealed little Barra didn't already know. She clung to the hope that some missed trinket remained in the old unexplored study. All she had to do to avoid disappointing her mother was not get caught.

Stalking around the study on all fours with her claws retracted and her long tail in the air, Barra was careful to disturb as little as possible. Her efforts were probably unnecessary, as the room had grown wild. The living boughs of wood that composed the floor, curved walls, and domed ceiling had been left

untended for more than ten rings, and time had twisted the room's shape, shifting and obscuring its contents.

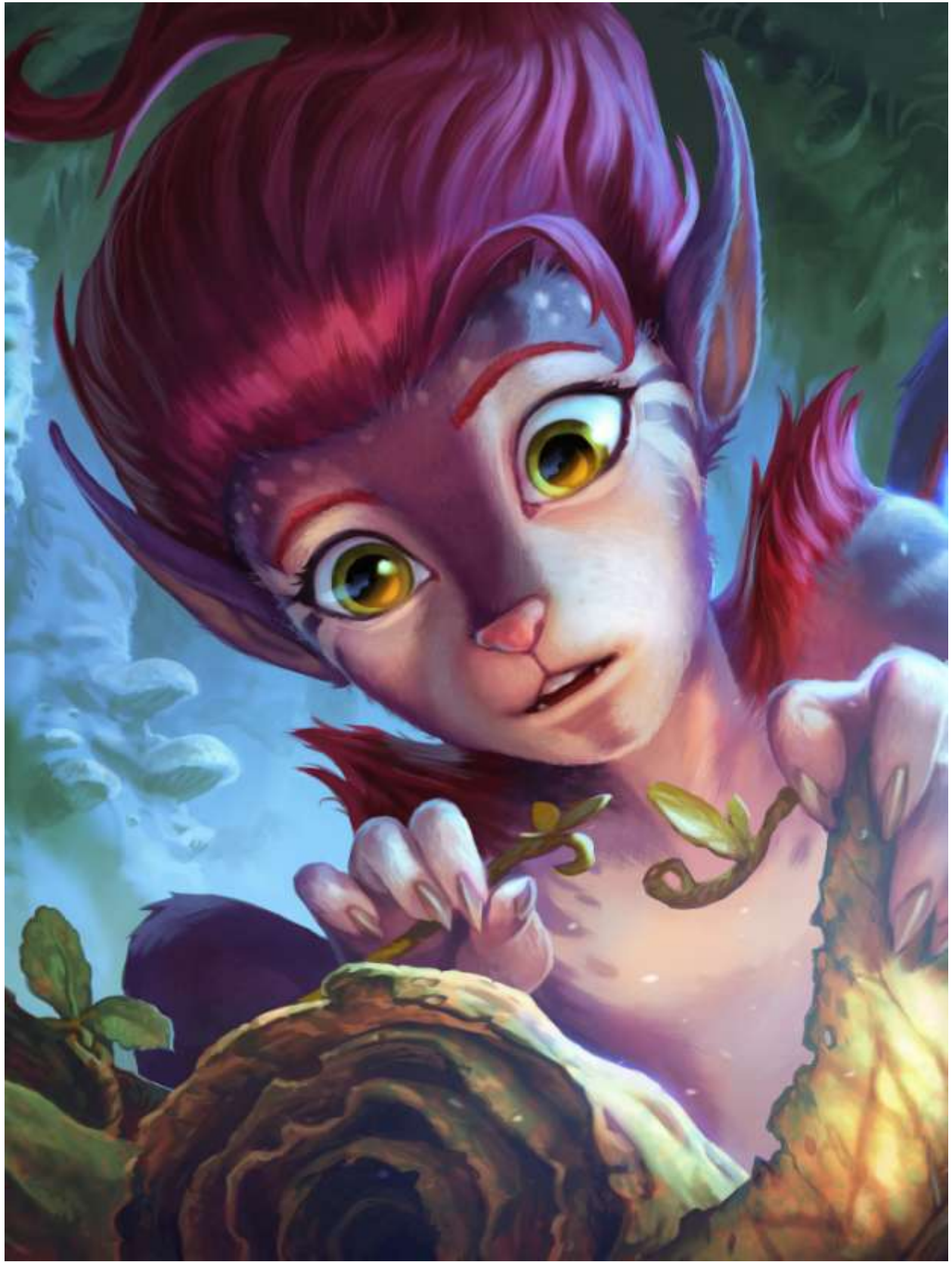
Few of her father's possessions remained. Barra's mother had cleared the room of any personal or important items long ago, preparing the study to be reclaimed by the trees. The lingering knickknacks were not at all what Barra had hoped to find. Still, she felt closer to him simply being in his room. There was a desk, the smoothed surface of a large braid of wood, arching up out of the floor against the far wall, and she was drawn to it. She thought about her father spending hours at that desk, and wondered if he'd ever held her there while working.

Barra spied a curious deformity, a recess, in the wall behind the desk. A withered cover hung to the side, its texture and markings meant to match the wall, concealing itself and the recess behind—and whatever was held within. Barra saw several sheaves of leaves rolled and tied into tight bundles deep within the hidden cubbyhole.

The rhythm of Barra's heart became a brief rapid staccato like an urgent knock at the door. Barra didn't hesitate. She answered. Reaching inside the cubbyhole, she pulled the sheaves out one at a time.

Laying the sheaves down side-by-side on the floor, Barra gathered seven bundles before the cubby was empty. Each was numbered, and she eagerly undid the braided-willow twine that secured the first. She unfurled the wax-thickened outermost page. The inner pages of leaves were old and thin, but treated with resin to prevent them turning brittle. Etched into the middle of the top leaf was a symbol. Barra recognized it from the archives as the symbol for Cerulean: a spiraling ball of fire with a ring around it. The fire represented the sun, the space around it the ocean, and the ring was the canopy of the Great Forest.

Barra knew her father had written many journals, but her mother kept all of those in her room, on display. Her mother used to read aloud from them to help Barra sleep at night. *These* sheaves were something new. Something even her mother didn't know about.



Unfamiliar emotions surged through Barra, pressure building in her head as tears welled in her eyes. Laid out before her were her father's private thoughts, and Barra might be the first to ever know them. As though from a distance, Barra watched her own trembling hand grasp the edge of the top leaf and turn it over. She began reading:

As I sit down to these leaves, I can't help but wonder about what I'm doing, and why. I need an honest record somewhere. I don't feel safe sharing more with Brace. She probably knows too much already, and there's no reason to distract her right now. This is harder to do than I thought...

My recent presentation to the Elders did not tell the whole story of what I discovered in the Middens. I withheld information at Jerrun's request. He said he spoke for the entire Elder Council. Maybe he did, I still don't know for sure. I believed him when he said my early observations of the Creepervine were dangerous, and might cause a

panic. So, I presented my findings with no hint of the threat growing at our feet. I lied.

Watching myself write that out? Feels so strange. I guess I thought I'd feel relief, but instead I feel judged and I'm the only one here.

But in my defense, I was sure my research would continue! I was sure my silence was for the greater good. I mean, I didn't have enough evidence to pass my own scrutiny. I only had my suspicions, a handful of observations, and a few archival anecdotes—but I'm lying to myself. I had seen the Creepervine with my own eyes, and still I allowed the Council to convince me otherwise. There are no excuses. I lied, and now I'm trying to make it right.

The Council has redirected me to taking nectar samples in the Reach for the rest of the ring, and that's no coincidence. It's only been a few days since my presentation. When I asked for an explanation, and stressed that we needed to continue looking to the

Middens, Jerrun pretended like we'd never even talked! He put it back to me that there was, "nothing more to see in the Middens," according to my research. To challenge him openly then would have been to discredit my work and my name forever! He trapped me in my own cowardice. I can't understand his motivations. But he underestimated me. I'm continuing the research alone.

Barra looked up from the loosely scrawled text. Goosebumps turned up the flesh beneath her fur, and she shivered. She felt like she'd summoned the ghost of her father, but it spoke with a voice she didn't recognize. Her father wasn't a liar. The words couldn't be trusted.

She found herself fussing over her tail, nervously tapping the mementos she'd woven into the Thread coiled around it. The Thread held memories, the story of her life told through a collection of baubles. She cared for it meticulously, but had a bad habit of scratching at it whenever she was anxious. Catching herself, she noted—not for the first time—the painful absence of any curios for her father. Other bups had many mementos for both parents,

and Barra felt like her Thread looked empty by comparison, only half what it should be. She shook off the thought, stopped fussing with her Thread, and continued reading:

I wish I could talk to someone instead of just writing all this down.

Brace knows something of my work of course, but I never told her about the conversation with Jerrun or that I altered my presentation.

Better she doesn't know too much in case that old Rattlebark comes sniffing around the den. It bothers me not telling her everything, but

it's not only paranoia about Jerrun that holds my tongue. I can't have

her suspicious, wondering where I'm going at night, if I want to

continue the research. She has to believe everything is normal. I'm

lucky she's so busy preparing for Barra's arrival—whenever she asks

about my strange behavior, I just say I'm anxious about our first.

She'd try to stop me if she knew I was planning to explore the

Middens alone. I have to lie to her. I can't see any other way.

I'm going to prove my theory about the Creepervine, or prove myself wrong, and either way, put an end to this need for secrecy. For now, the burden belongs to me and these pages, and I just have to look forward to the day that I look back on all of this, laughing at my silly paranoia.

The last portion of the leaf was empty. Barra slouched onto her hind legs, thinking. This side of her father was completely unknown to her. She'd never imagined him as anything other than a fearless explorer. Barra couldn't understand why her father would hide from anything or anyone. She sat forward again, flipped the leaf, and read:

To understand this world, our home, Cerulean, we must first understand the basic organization of its parts and how they interact. Having established this understanding, we can then make meaningful assertions about its health, its balms and its banes. We need to be the caretakers of the Great Forest in order to ensure that we

Arboreals can thrive among its boughs. From the archives, Cerulean comprises a star at the center of a vast ocean covered by flotillas of Great Trees woven together by their roots. Those roots carry water and light all the way up the trunks and into everything that lives and grows in our world. All the flowers and berries, all the wood and leaves, everything we see—even us—it's all the result of the relationship of star, sea, and tree. But something is wrong with that relationship. We are in almost perpetual twilight in the Loft, while the archives are full of bright descriptions. I believe that we've been in the dark for so long, and no one questions it..

Barra's tail swept the air as she looked beyond the body of the text. There were notes in the margins, her father annotating the changes he was making to his presentation. This was the original. The words weren't always legible, and often seemed nothing more than rambling anecdotes. Barra flipped ahead, hastily. She was running out of time. Her mother had to be close to home, Barra was sure of it.

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