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Summary: When twelve-year-old Ariel and her friend Zeke find a mysterious artifact the like of which has not been seen in a long time, it proves to be the beginning of a long and arduous journey that will ultimately reveal to them their true identities.

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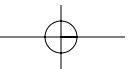
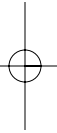
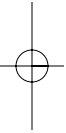
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PART ONE
FINDER



CHAPTER

1

Zeke's tree wouldn't speak to him.

"Are you sure you've got the right tree?" Ariel asked when he told her. "Maybe you've been hearing another nearby that got tired of the confusion and gave up."

Zeke shook his head as the two twelve-year-olds hurried back across the meadow toward afternoon classes. At lunchtime, they'd dashed off to chase pollywogs in the creek. Their catch wiggled in the wood bucket that now dangled between them, and water splashed their legs with each step. Their free hands crammed their mouths with last-minute lunches.

"I think I know my own favorite tree," grumbled Zeke. "She's just stopped paying attention."

Ariel calculated. Today was March 29. "But Namingfest is only three days away!"

"Gee, really?" Zeke rolled his eyes. "I might . . ." He couldn't say he might fail. "I might have to wait until next year."

"What's your father say about it?"

Zeke watched his goat-leather boots squelch in the mud. "Haven't told him."

Ariel shot a sidelong glance at her friend. A Tree-Singer could be the most important person in a village. Hearing the voices of trees and coaxing them to share their great wisdom took special talent, however, and both of Zeke's older brothers had settled for more ordinary trades. Since then, Zeke had vowed that he would claim the Tree-Singer name of his father. But today his narrow face drooped in defeat.

If Ariel had chomped into her meat pie right then, or maybe just bitten her tongue, the next few hours—indeed, her whole life—might have turned out quite different. Instead, she wiped her mouth with her sleeve and said, "Maybe you're not a Tree-Singer after all, huh?"

Zeke's sausage roll dropped from his fingers. Seeing it fall, Ariel could practically hear her mother scolding her for her thoughtless talk. "Even a cart donkey can bray, love," Luna would say. "Take care you aren't mistaken for one."

"Or maybe your tree's sick," Ariel added quickly. "Maybe that's why she's quiet."

"Oh, and I suppose you're going to heal her?"

Ariel stopped. "Sure. Why not?" She was the daughter of Luna Healtouch, after all.

"What do you know about healing a tree?" Zeke demanded. "There's nothing wrong with her, anyway."

"Maybe I'll just go and find out." Ariel released the handle of the bucket, spun, and ran back in the direction they'd come.

"Ariel, wait!" Zeke struggled with the bucket alone.

"Come on," she shouted over her shoulder. "Leave the pollywogs there. We'll come back."

"What about class? I don't want to be punished for showing up late again!"

Not known for the effort she applied to her studies, Ariel

ignored the squirm of her conscience. Excitement propelled her down the path. Zeke's idea that she heal the tree was so good, she wished she'd thought of it first.

Everyone in Canberra Docks assumed she would become Ariel Healtouch in time. The bouncy girl with the apple-round face hadn't shown a talent for anything else. She would turn thirteen later that summer, so at Namingfest in a few days she could apprentice herself to a Fisher or Reaper. But the easiest course would simply be to learn from her mother. Unlike tree-singing and the more mystical trades, most of the healing skills could be taught.

Yet a nagging worry chased at her heels as she sped toward the woods. She didn't feel much like a healer. Ariel liked gathering herbs, but she found illness messy and unpleasant until the ailing person felt better—and paid off the debt with some interesting trade.

Healing a tree, though, would be almost like helping an angel. Some people said trees spoke directly with the Lord of All Things. Maybe Zeke's tree, grateful, would share an old secret, like where to find gemstones or the legendary treasures locked away in the Vault. If so, Ariel was confident that Zeke would understand the tree's message. Of course he would share it with her. He often acted grown-up and thoughtful because he was trying so hard to be a Tree-Singer, but Ariel knew his adventurous side. Together they'd trapped classmates in the outhouse, lowered each other into the village well, and set his family's laundry ablaze trying to send fire through a string as people were said to have done in the old days. They'd both been punished for that, but it hadn't stunted their curiosity or their mutual attraction to mischief.

Sure enough, Zeke's big feet soon pounded behind her. His

long legs easily caught up with Ariel's short ones, and they dashed together along the path, leaping root knuckles and dodging branches. Ahead, a grove of cottonwoods reached toward the sky. Smaller alder, cedar, and other trees shaded the creek below.

Ariel spotted Zeke's tree. They'd often sat in the moss beneath its curved branches, eating lunches of cheese curds and bread. Her legs slowed.

"That one, right?" she asked, pointing. Although much older than Ariel and Zeke, the maple was still young for a tree. Its trunk forked near the height of Ariel's chest. Below, roots humped from the ground, clenched to hold the tree firm against winter winds.

"Yes, that's her." Zeke peered wistfully through his sandy bangs to the flickering leaves overhead.

"I don't see any brown leaves," Ariel said.

"She's not sick, I told you." He crossed his arms and waited for her to concede. Sometimes he acted too much like a brother.

Turning away with a flounce, Ariel slipped closer to the craggy trunk. "Hello, tree," she said. "I'm Ariel. Remember me? I've been here before with Zeke. You know Zeke."

Zeke snorted. "That is *not* how you talk to a tree."

"*Your* way hasn't been working, remember?"

His disdain crumpled and he fixed his eyes on the dirt near his feet. Ariel sighed. It was for his own good, she reminded herself. She couldn't even try to help if he kept making comments like that.

She reached one palm to the rough trunk and circled it. Around back, where less sunlight dripped through the trees, moss draped the bark. Ariel paused in the shadows.

For someone named Ariel, she didn't look very airy. She was sturdy and short-limbed, and her black hair was chopped blunt near her chin. She did have light feet, though, and frequently skipped when she walked. Her eyes, a dark gray indoors, reflected blue from the sky whenever she went outside, which was often. Her mother had given up insisting on skirts, which ripped too easily on branches and stones. Instead, Ariel wore mostly wool trousers and sweaters.

She tipped her head skyward now and tried to remember the questions her mother asked neighbors who weren't feeling well. None of them seemed to apply to a tree. Ariel could see no wounds bleeding sap, no gnawing bugs, no breaks in the sturdy tree bones. The tree's breath smelled of honey, the balsam scent of nearby cottonwood buds. On high, sunshine glowed through the leaves, which flickered in the breeze. To Ariel, it looked as if the tree winked.

With a sudden insight that both her mother and Zeke's father would have recognized from their work, Ariel knew there was nothing wrong with this tree. She wanted to spank it for tormenting Zeke. Instead, she wrapped both arms around the trunk and rested her cheek against it, trying to think what to say or do for him.

"Why are you ignoring my friend?" She peeked around the trunk. Zeke sat on a knuckle of root, his pointy chin slumped in his hands. The dejection on his face rubbed a blister on her heart.

Zeke's tree felt that pain, too. But the kindly maple had known, in the way that trees do, that the boy Zeke by himself would never have done what was needed. So the tree quaked, shouting as loud as she could to this nearly deaf human girl.

And in a corner of Ariel's mind, an idea bloomed. Oblivious

to the rush of sap over her head, she turned the idea in her mind, wondering how to lure Zeke into a sport they both knew was forbidden.

The first time he had ever brought Ariel to his tree for a visit, she had asked, "How can you tell your special tree from the rest?" She'd envied his talent, since she seemed to have none of her own.

"The same way you know your best friends," Zeke had replied. "You recognize one another."

"But you must recognize dozens of trees. We've seen the same ones our whole lives."

"That's not what I mean. It's not what it looks like, branches and bark. It's . . ." He'd frowned, searching for words. "It's more like hearing it whisper in the back of your head. Some trees don't like to be bothered—"

"That big oak by the graveyard."

"Yeah. Anyone can figure that out. He'd get up and move farther away if he could. But some trees like people—one person, at least. They make you feel welcome. Sometimes a leaf will fall right into your hands. You want to curl up at their feet and be cozy."

"So you're basically a pet." Ariel had giggled.

"Probably." Unperturbed, Zeke had stroked the bark of his maple. "They live longer than us. They understand more." At Ariel's snort, he'd added, "Just because they can't walk around doesn't mean they're not wise."

Chastened, Ariel had inspected the woods around them. She could see how one tree differed from the next, but none looked particularly smart. If they were, why did they let their branches and some of their friends end up as tables and boats? Yet Ariel knew that certain trees had given Zeke's father all kinds of

important information, including the locations of lost children and the truth behind quarrels. Some said wise trees knew the future as well as the past.

"I don't get it," she'd sighed.

Zeke had shrugged. "I guess you'd be a Tree-Singer if you did."

"Can I listen while you sing?"

Zeke had always shyly refused. Ariel had even tried to sneak up on him, but he always fell silent as she drew within earshot. Perhaps his tree warned him.

Today, though, either Zeke forgot Ariel's presence or desperation numbed his self-consciousness. As she watched from behind the mossy trunk, he gazed toward the maple's crown, leaf shadows dappling his face. A few lines of song, almost a whisper, slipped from Zeke's lips:

*Hail to leaf and twig and bough,
Towering above me now.
I will listen, graceful tree,
Humbly—won't you speak to me?*

Zeke's eyes closed. Riveted, Ariel strained with him to hear a response. Only the rustle of leaves and the creak of branches reached her ears. Zeke's face fell. He turned his gaze back toward the dirt.

Feeling angry for her friend, Ariel stomped to his side. Still, she smiled inwardly. Zeke had opened a door for the brash idea tickling inside her.

"Maybe she just can't hear you," she said. Drawing a deep breath, Ariel stepped onto a hump of root, braced her hand on the trunk, and boosted herself into the fork.

"What are you doing? Get down!" He jumped to his feet.

With all her weight on her belly, Ariel didn't have breath to answer. Her hands scabbled across the bark. Gaining a hold, she wiggled higher until she could draw one knee into the fork and push herself up.

"Come on up," she said, climbing more easily now. "It's not as hard as it looks."

"It's disrespectful to climb trees!"

"It's disrespectful of her to ignore you, too. Let's get closer to her head. See if that helps."

"You don't—Ariel! Stop!" Zeke came after her. She could hear his grunting as he strained past the fork.

"Come on," she taunted. "Try singing up here, in her ears."

"Trees don't have ears, you goof."

"When trees talk to each other," she said, "it seems to me like they do it up high."

"Maybe they do," Zeke allowed, breathless. He was gaining on her. "But that's different from a tree talking to us. They hear us the same up here as down there."

"Then it can't hurt to try."

"It'll hurt a lot if you fall!"

Ariel looked down. Already she was higher than she'd intended to go. All she had really hoped to do was distract Zeke and perhaps make him laugh. Now she felt the urge to climb higher. In fact, Ariel had the strangest sense that the tree wanted to be climbed. Gazing past Zeke at the earth below, she knew she ought to be scared. The fear wouldn't come. There was too much to hold on to, and the route beckoned.

Reassured, she clambered up past the tops of nearby saplings, past a snarl of dry leaves that had sheltered some squirrel. Zeke's protests grew.

As the branches became slender and frail, he grabbed one of her ankles.

"Ack, don't!" she cried. The space between her and the ground seemed to throb.

"What if a branch breaks? The wind's starting to blow. Come down."

Ariel tightened her grip. While she was here, why not look around? Swiveling west, she could see the meadow and the creek running through it. Beyond that were thatched and tiled roofs, the docks, and the sea.

Zeke exclaimed. Ariel peeked down at her friend. One of his hands flattened against the trunk. His mouth dropped open.

"I hear her!" He turned a huge grin toward Ariel. "It worked! It really— I don't know why, but—" His grin faded. Head cocked, he listened again, brow furrowed. "She wanted us to come up . . . ?"

A hand might almost have tugged on Ariel's ear, twisting her head to the east. Braced for a squirrel or bug to leap into her face, she leaned to peer around the trunk in that direction. Her eyes widened.

"What is it?" Zeke called, climbing once more. "There's something up here, huh?"

Ariel tipped her head from side to side, afraid the bright brass surprise might vanish.

"Come see for yourself!" Heart tripping, she shimmied a few inches farther around. She wanted to reach it before he did.

Ariel had never seen a telling dart, but she had heard plenty of stories. The brass shaft was no larger around than the handle of a carved wooden spoon. Its tail bore three slender blades like the feathered fletches of an arrow. The dart had embedded itself in the underside of an upswept branch. Where the tip pierced

the tree, golden sap bled. A fly struggled in the sticky drip. Although the dart itself must have been old, it could not have been stuck in the tree for very long.




Excitement bubbled into Ariel's throat. She reached up from her perch with one hand. The metal shaft felt cold, but its scored surface faintly buzzed under her fingers. Engraved marks circled the dart. The barrel would be hollow, or so she'd been told. Whoever had sent it might have slipped in nuggets of silver or gold, a ruby or two, or something even more priceless—a secret message.

She tugged. The dart didn't budge.

"It's stuck," she told Zeke as he climbed up beside her.

"Let me try."

Ariel gave way. She hated to admit it, but his hands were stronger than hers. The two shuffled awkwardly, trading places.

It took a few tries, but Zeke yanked the shaft free. Clinging against a sudden strong gust, they inspected it together. Ariel fought an urge to snatch the dart from Zeke's fingers. She marveled at the tiny bright scratches in the metal. Several she recognized as the signs of a trade: the Windmaster's , the Tree-Singer's , and of course the  that marked the home of a Healtouch. Others were strange. But she knew they could speak, the way different flags on a mast could alert other boaters to schooling fish or trouble back home.

"I didn't think you could still find stuff like this anymore," she said. Darts that could talk were only one of the marvels lost after the Blind War and now known only in legend.

"Me either," said Zeke. "I wonder how it got up here. This isn't like finding it in a pile of old garbage. But I didn't think anyone still knew how to send them." They both gazed north-east, from whence the dart seemed to have come. Nothing

interrupted the sea of trees but a passing bird and the distant faces of mountains.

"I thought telling darts were supposed to find the people they were sent to, anyway, not just stick in any old tree," Ariel said. "And why—"

"Shhh." Zeke cocked his head.

Ariel started to protest before she realized what he was doing. Sure enough, he took a breath and softly sang a few words she didn't recognize.

In a moment, he said, "It's been here since just before Thawfest—that night we had the bad storm, remember? It must have gone astray in the wind, or because of the lightning."

"That was only seven or eight weeks ago. How do you know?"

Zeke gestured to the tree.

Jealousy hummed along Ariel's arms. She told herself they were just getting tired of gripping branches. Yet she hesitated to climb down. Once they were back on the ground, some magic spell might wear off and their discovery prove to be only a twig.

"Let me see it a minute."

To her surprise, Zeke handed her the dart without argument. "Let's go down, though," he said. "We can look at it better out of the wind."

Agreeing, she considered her pockets. None seemed deep or trustworthy enough, so she slid the dart, tail first, into her boot. It rested snug against her anklebone.

Ariel led their descent, which proved harder than the trip up. The handholds and footholds seemed farther apart. Gusts shook the branches.

Halfway to the ground, she heard a scrape overhead—the sound of a boot missing its mark. Instinctively she hugged the trunk. Zeke's arms and legs, in a tangle, fell past. Ariel screeched as his flailing limbs struck one branch and slid off another.

Before her eyes, the tree reached to catch him—or tried to. Ariel never would have believed it if she hadn't seen it herself. Not even Tree-Singers claimed that trees could move, except with the wind. Yet as Zeke hurtled toward the earth, a long branch near the ground swept around toward him.

It was wood, though, not an arm. It couldn't bend far enough. The branch tangled with one of Zeke's legs without catching before springing back straight. An instant later, Zeke hit the earth.

His cry of shock and pain felt like a spike through Ariel's skin. As loud as it was, his yelp didn't cover the crack that accompanied it.

"Zeke!" Throwing caution aside, she scrambled down, calling his name and praying his head had not broken like an egg on a rock.

Her feet hit the ground. He was breathing, at least: sobbing gasps rose and fell. Nothing oozed from his head.

"Are you okay?" She jumped the last distance. Pain stabbed in both of her knees. She ignored them and rushed to her friend. He hadn't tried to sit up. "Say something!"

"She tried to catch me. Did you see that?" Zeke's face was screwed tight against pain. Tears leaked from his eyes despite his sturdiest blinking, but Ariel recognized what was meant as a smile.

"Yes! But the branch didn't reach. Does anything hurt?" Her eyes scoured his body. No blood soaked his clothes.

"It slowed me down." He wheezed. "I still hurt my arm,

though. Kinda landed on it." He clutched his right forearm tight to his ribs. A root humped nearby from the dirt. Ariel guessed he'd landed atop it, his bone snapping over the root like kindling across a bent knee.

"I bet you broke it." She resisted the itch to touch his hurt arm. "Can you move it?"

He puffed. "Don't want to find out."

"Okay. Just catch your breath." She thought rapidly. Ariel knew how to help broken bones, but most of the things Zeke needed weren't here in the woods. Unable to keep her helpless hands off him, she carefully petted his shoulder. His ragged breathing relaxed.

"I can run and get help while you wait," she said, "or I can help you walk back."

Though every motion made him wince, he insisted on walking. Ariel tucked herself under his good shoulder. Together they stood, Zeke sucking air between gritted teeth. That evidence of his pain made Ariel's stomach lurch.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked. "It might be better if—"

"I'm okay."

They made their slow way down the path toward the village. To Ariel's relief, the tension she could feel in Zeke's shoulder and ribs eased soon after they'd started.

"It's kinda gone numb," he explained.

As they entered the meadow, he halted. "Wait. You didn't drop it, did you?"

"Oh!" Her fingers poked into her boot, where the forgotten metal dart had grown warm until she could hardly feel it. "I've got it." She eyed her friend hunched in pain. A generous impulse moved her mouth. "You want it? It was in *your* tree."

No fair! insisted a more selfish voice in her head.

"No," Zeke said. "You found it. And I got what I wanted."

"A broken arm?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on." He shuffled on without her aid.

Ashamed of her relief, Ariel caught up. "Was it hurting your tree? Is that why she stopped talking to you?"

Zeke shook his head. "I think she . . . Well, I don't understand everything she tells me. But the dart is for you. You'll take better care of it, or something like that. And, Ariel . . ." He gave her an odd sideways look. Maybe it was just shock and pain, but she had never seen him so somber.

He said, "My tree thinks whatever that dart has to say is important."