

— A HARLEY AND THE GUARDIANS SHORT STORY —

# *The* LANTERNS *of the* GROVE

A SAMHAIN TALE



J. HUNTER BLAKE

# *The* LANTERNS *of the* GROVE

J.Hunter Blake



Rune & Root Press

## **The Lanterns of the Grove**

*A Harley and the Guardians Short Story*

Copyright © 2026 J. Hunter Blake

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, stored, or shared in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in reviews, articles, or other uses permitted by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, businesses, or locations is entirely coincidental.

*The Lanterns of the Grove, Harley and the Guardians*, and all related characters, settings, and story elements are the intellectual property of J. Hunter Blake.

First Edition, 2026

Written by J. Hunter Blake

**Stories told with Mystery, Magic, and Mother Nature.**

## **Artificial Intelligence and Data Mining Rights Reservation**

No part of this publication may be used, copied, reproduced, extracted, scraped, ingested, analyzed, processed, or otherwise utilized, in whole or in part, for the training, development, testing, evaluation, improvement, or operation of artificial intelligence systems, machine-learning systems, large language models, generative artificial intelligence systems, or similar technologies without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

This prohibition includes, but is not limited to, the use of this work for text and data mining; dataset creation or augmentation; pattern, trend, style, linguistic, character, plot, thematic, or semantic analysis; creation of embeddings or vector representations; model training or fine-tuning; retrieval-augmented generation databases; synthetic-data generation; benchmarking; and the development of systems intended to imitate, reproduce, emulate, or generate material based upon the author's works, characters, settings, narrative elements, or distinctive creative expression.

For the avoidance of doubt, the copyright holder expressly reserves all rights relating to text and data mining, including the rights contemplated by Article 4(3) of Directive (EU) 2019/790 and any equivalent or successor legislation in any jurisdiction.

No license or permission for any such use is granted by the purchase, possession, access, lending, distribution, or lawful acquisition of this publication, except to the extent such use cannot lawfully be restricted.

Copyright © 2026 J. Hunter Blake. All rights reserved.

# Table of Contents



Dear Parents,

A Note About Samhain

1 Ramestel's Mistake

2 The Problem with Ancient Rules

3 Detectives of Questionable Qualification

4 Do Not Follow the Lanterns

5 Where the Grove Used to Be

6 The Remembrance Chime

7 Artos, More or Less

8 The Grove Remembers

Thank You!

The Adventure Continues

About the Author

**For Carrie**

You have made me laugh every day since the day we met,  
and I have cherished every one of them.

To the kindest, most caring, funniest woman I know—  
my best friend, my partner, and the love of my life.

This one is for you, Mo Chroi!

Love,  
Hunter

## Dear Parents,

The Lanterns of the Grove is a story for all ages. It is a fun, light romp through the woods that your kids will enjoy, and you will smile along with them. I did not, however, “dumb down” the language and vocabulary for wee ones. I did this for two reasons.

- 1) We should teach our kids the big words and let them wield them with pride and confidence in their lives. A large vocabulary will lead to large things.
- 2) I really wanted this to be a story that I could read to my daughter. When I read stories to her when she was little, she would always ask me what a word meant if she did not understand it. We had amazing conversations because of this. I truly believe that helped her grow into the brilliant young woman that she is today.

This is the story I wanted to write; a tale for you to share with your little ones. Please use my words to create a magical adventure for your family. Nothing would make me happier in this world.



## A Note About Samhain

Samhain is pronounced Sow-Win.

Sow – A female pig

Win – As in you just got first place.

Samhain is an ancient Gaelic festival marking the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter. Traditionally observed from the evening of October 31 into November 1, it was one of the major seasonal turning points of the Celtic year. Folklore surrounding Samhain often describes it as a special time when the boundaries between the human world and the Otherworld are especially thin, with customs centered on bonfires, feasting, divination, disguises, and honoring or protecting oneself from spirits and other supernatural beings.

Over centuries, Samhain traditions blended with Christian observances surrounding All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. The evening before All Saints' Day became known as All Hallows' Eve, eventually shortened to Halloween. Irish and Scottish immigrants later carried many related folk customs to North America, where they mixed with other traditions and gradually developed into the modern Halloween we know today—with costumes, carved lanterns, trick-or-treating, ghost stories, and a lingering fascination with the mysterious night when our world feels just a little less ordinary.

Enjoy the magic, and Happy Samhain,

*Hunter*



# 1

## Ramestel's Mistake

The late afternoon sun filters through the golden leaves. Normally, the Grove is always green and lush except for one evening a year: Samhain. For this special holiday, the great Silver Oak decorates itself and the rest of the forest in oranges, reds, and golds, celebrating the fall season for only a single night.

The Silver Oak, normally silver as the name suggests, towers at the heart of the Grove, its pale bark gleaming like moonlit mercury. Its enormous branches spread overhead like a living canopy. For Samhain, it turns itself into a glorious brown like its smaller brothers and sisters; the usual silver leaves that clink in the breeze like wind chimes have flushed gold, copper, and crimson. They drift down in shafts of amber sunlight. Mushrooms crowd around fallen logs, and the air smells of damp earth and leaves. Autumn has arrived at the Grove—well, for today anyhow.

I move with determination and precision. There is very little time to waste if we are to be ready for the ceremony tonight. Perhaps *ceremony* is too strong a word. Tradition. Yes, that fits much better. My black paws carry carefully selected bundles of herbs that I collected from across the Grove, berries from the deep woods near the Rackwater River, dried flowers that I have been working on for several weeks, and several special wooden ornaments that I had the beaver commission just for tonight.

My notched ear swivels towards an approaching commotion. I knew I should not have let the bear assist me; it sounds like he is dragging half the forest with him. I sigh quietly and beg the Mother for patience. I turn as he lumbers towards me. Sure enough, he has an entire tree clamped in his mouth, dragging it behind him with its roots still bundled inside a great ball of earth.

"I brought decorations," he declares proudly as he drops the trunk in front of me. Yes, I confirm to myself that it was a mistake to ask Artos for help.

“Decorations are things that we place around the tree; they should not be an entire other tree to themselves.” I shake my head and stare at the massive brown bear. “You should go replant that back where you found it since it still has most of its roots.”

The big bear huffs. “Hmph. Just because you are too small to move it doesn't mean it isn't pretty. Look at the leaves, Ramestel.” I move around him to glance at what is left of the leaves from its trek through the forest. He is somewhat right that the leaves are beautiful. I do love this time of year.

“Fine,” I concede. “You may have your...” I refuse to believe I am about to call it this. “...decorative tree.” Artos gives me an enormous, toothy grin.

“I knew you would love it.”

“Love is a strong word. Let's take these to the Oak.” I turn to head into the clearing around the Silver Oak, and flinch at the sound of the tree being dragged further. Yes, mistakes were made.

As we place our ‘decorations,’ I delicately arrange mine around the great Oak's roots. Herbs here, dried flowers there, the carved ornaments spaced precisely between them. It looks good. Artos heaves his tree into the air. It crashes across two enormous roots with a heavy *thunk*. He steps back, tilts his head to one side, and studies his work with the solemn concentration of an artist contemplating his masterpiece.

“Perfect.”

I stare at it. “It is lying on its side.”

“I know.”

“Trees generally don't do that.”

“This one does.”

“Clearly,” I concede the point, and continue making minute adjustments to my offerings.

“Hey, Ram, what are we doing all this for?”

“Samhain is an ancient Grove tradition honoring those who have crossed the veil. As the season turns, the boundary between what is, what was, and what has been forgotten becomes thin.”

“Ooh, that sounds exciting!” he rumbles.

“It is not exciting, per se; it is honoring those who came before us.”

“Can’t it be both?” he asks honestly.

I stop to consider the question. “Yes, my friend, I do believe it can be both.” We step back and admire our work. “One word of warning. Even for someone of your girth–“

“Why, thank you,” he interrupts, and I balk for a second before I restart.

“Even for someone of your size, if you see a Lantern tonight, leave it alone.”

“What type of lantern?” he asks innocently.

“The kind you do not follow.”

“That wasn’t my question.” He harrumphs as he sits on the forest floor in front of me.

“No, I imagine it was not.” I begin. “When the veil thins tonight, lights sometimes appear among the trees. Some remain still. Others wander.” I straighten one of the carved ornaments. “No one remembers exactly what they are anymore. But everyone remembers the rule.”

Artos leans closer.

“Never follow the Lanterns,” I finish.

“Why? What happens if you do?” the bear asks immediately.

“You just do not follow them.” I pause, searching my memory for an explanation I know is not there. “I will admit that I do not have that answer. No one has ever followed them that I am aware of.”

“So, it’s like a quest,” he says happily.

“No. Definitely not a quest.” I point a paw directly at him. “I want to be exceptionally clear about this, Artos. No quests.”

Artos’s grin widens.

Evening slowly settles over the Grove, draining the gold from the sky and replacing it with deep purples and cool blue shadows. The last shafts of sunlight slip between the trees before disappearing altogether, and the forest seems to exhale. Crickets begin their nightly chorus, leaves whisper overhead, and the first stars peek through the canopy. Around the Silver Oak, the colors of Samhain seem to deepen in the fading light, the reds turning darker, the golds warmer.

A light flickers between the trees, pale at first, then growing in color and vibrancy. It floats into the clearing towards us. It is soft gold with a faint green-white center. It moves like a firefly, but much larger. Perhaps the size of a walnut.

I freeze, hoping that it will vanish before the bear gets any ideas. I watch Artos carefully out of the corner of my eye. He sees it too. The Lantern drifts towards us and stops a few feet away. It sways side to side, and the bear raises his paw.

“Do not even think about touching it!” I command.

“Ramestel.”

“No!”

“I think it’s waving.”

“I can assure you it is not!”

Artos waves at the little light. It seems to wave back and then zips away into the trees. The big bear stands and takes a step in that direction. I grab him by the fur to try to stop him, but it is like trying to stop a landslide.

*Gah, why me?*



## 2

### The Problem with Ancient Rules

I am dragged along behind the big lummoX with absolutely no chance of stopping him, so I climb up his haunch, walk along his back, and settle squarely between his shoulders. If I am forced to do this, I might as well ride in style.

“Artos,” I snap to get his attention. He turns his big head towards me but does not slow his walk. “It’s gone. It clearly did not want to be followed.”

“Or is it waiting for us to catch up?” the big bear counters, still walking towards the edge of the clearing.

“Be logical! First, the rule is *NOT* to follow the Lanterns; second, it just vanished. We would not know where to look.”

“How about that one?” Artos asks, pointing toward the forest off to the left. I turn and look in the direction the big paw is indicating, and he is correct; another Lantern has appeared to our side. As we watch, two more blink into existence near the first.

“Four in a single night?” I say in surprise. The legends only tell of one or two a year, if you see any. They drift through the Grove in a meandering line. Three others come out of the woods to join the others. Now there are six floating through the air in lazy patterns, yet every wandering path eventually bends toward the same destination: the Silver Oak.

I find this development deeply inconvenient.

“This is awesome. Now it has friends! Which one should we follow?” The bear is actually *happy* about this. Perplexing.

“None, the rule is—”

“Don’t follow the lights. I know that already. But what happens if they follow us?” he asks. He is correct; a few seem to be heading in our direction.

“I am unsure. They are behaving very strangely...” The admission hangs between us longer than I would like.

My thoughts are interrupted by Tumble, one of the squirrels that lives here in the Grove. He races across the clearing, chattering so loudly that half the Grove probably knows something has gone wrong. We both watch as he clambers across the smaller roots of the great Oak, heading straight towards us. The moment he reaches Artos, Tumble launches himself onto one massive foreleg, scrambles through the bear's fur, and arrives beside me between his shoulders. Clearly, he is more afraid of something behind him than the bear.

“Ramestel, sir.” I have never understood squirrel culture, but I believe he means ‘sir’ as a sign of respect. Usually, Tumble calls me “Ra-Ra” from the safety of a high tree. Something is very wrong.

“I saw a light in the forest. It was floating—” He notices the Lanterns for the first time and grabs Artos’s floppy ear to hide behind. “Like those! It called my name.”

“Lanterns do not speak, so I do not think it actually called your—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“Tuuuummmmmblle...” Tumble shudders. “It sounded just like my gransquirrel! I watched it. It waved to me, and I knew it wanted me to follow it somewhere,” the squirrel explains.

“You did not!” I exclaim.

“See, told you,” Artos rumbles under us.

“Hush!” I thump his broad back with my leg, perplexed by Tumble’s story. “Where did it take you?”

“Suddenly, I wasn’t in the Grove anymore—well, not like it is now. The light led me out to a large chestnut tree where I was nested. But it has not been there since I was a tiny squirrel! Then the light disappeared, and the chestnut tree went with it.”

I go still. The urge to correct Tumble, Artos, or anyone else within earshot suddenly disappears. A Lantern calling an animal by name is troubling enough, but showing him a place that has not existed since he was a kit is something else entirely.

Lanterns wander. Lanterns glow. Animals may occasionally be foolish enough to follow them, I guess. But they do not bring the past with them.

I slide from Artos's back and turn to face Tumble. Even Artos seems to notice the change in me, because for once, the bear says nothing.

"Tumble, look at me."

The squirrel reluctantly peeks around Artos's ear.

"I need you to think carefully. When you saw the chestnut tree, did it *look* real, or were you actually standing beneath it? Could you smell it? Touch it? Feel the ground beneath your paws?"

Tumble's ears flatten. "It was real, sir."

I glance toward the six Lanterns drifting around the Silver Oak.

That is not the answer I was hoping for.

"Ramestel?" a small voice pops up from behind me. I turn and find Pip standing behind me, his little hedgehog nose twitching nervously.

"Not now, Pip. We are having an issue with the Lanterns." I start to turn away from him, but he steps closer.

"I know. I followed one too; I did not mean to," Pip clarifies. "I was walking along the north trail, and I didn't see it above me. I guess I walked with it for a while. I heard a sound, something like a child's whisper. I looked up, and there it was. It whispered, 'Come along!' and then started glowing brighter and brighter. I shielded my eyes from the light, then when it faded, I was back in my burrow, half a mile away."

"That sounds very convenient." Artos chimes in.

"No," I say flatly, dismissing his plans.

"We should get one. It would make traveling back home so much easier," Artos continues unperturbed.

I let him rumble on while I consider the situation. The Lanterns are acting incredibly strange. I have never heard of them whispering or saying an animal's name. This is definitely not normal Samhain behavior, and we still have six floating slowly towards the Silver Oak.

"We will investigate these strange occurrences with the Lanterns," I proclaim. I look at Artos, who seems incredibly pleased by this announcement. "This is not a quest! We are investigating." Artos nods at me, so I repeat, "We are *not* following Lanterns." He nods again, and my eyes narrow at him.

“You understand there is a difference,” I ask the bear as I stare up into his large brown eyes.

“Absolutely,” he responds, still nodding. I turn to Pip and Tumble to assure them that we will find out what is happening with the Lanterns when Artos adds, “What’s the difference?”



### 3

## Detectives of Questionable Qualification

We try to find a trail left by the Lanterns, which proves difficult, given that they float several feet above the ground. Determining where they came from is nearly impossible.

Instead, we decide to visit the areas around the Grove where witnesses have either seen them or watched them pass. While we are questioning a wood duck, it calls Artos “Mr. Bear.”

“That is Assistant Detective Artos,” he corrects the duck.

“You are not an assistant detective,” I state dryly.

“Then why am I assisting a detective?”

I open my mouth and let it close. Unfortunately, he has a point.

The duck in question tells us that it had seen a strange light above the fern-covered streambank to our east. We set out immediately but find no evidence of a Lantern. Foiled by the lack of sentient illumination, we case the area for clues.

“Leave no stone unturned,” I tell Artos. His paw immediately slides beneath a boulder beside the trail.

“Wait. Do not touch the stones.” I rub my temples.

“There could be a clue under there,” he protests.

“I am reasonably certain a floating light did not crawl beneath a boulder to conceal evidence.” He knows the logic is sound, but he stares menacingly at the rock for a few seconds for good measure.

“Check everything. That is what I meant to say.” His paw inches towards the boulder again. “Not there.” He harrumphs and leaves the big stone alone. We search the area where

the wood duck saw the Lantern, but there is no sign of anything that I would call a lead. The mushroom ring beneath the old beech tree holds no secrets that we can uncover, either.

We find our next clue from a family of mice that live in the hollow log by the blackberry thicket. They saw strange light spilling through the cracks of the log. They huddled deep within their home so they could not be seen, but the light sang to them, no words but a lullaby.

“Me ma used to sing us that same melody when I was a wee one. I have taught it to me own kids,” the mother explains. She clears her throat and begins to hum the tune softly. All of the mice in the family lift their voices to join with her in a beautiful weave of tiny harmonies. The song sounds ancient in origin. I make note of the melody. The forest holds its breath as the family sings.

Suddenly, Artos joins the small choir with his voice rough as tree bark and just as grating. Everyone stops immediately and stares at the bear. His eyes are closed, and he rocks his head back and forth to a beat apparently known only to him. He stops suddenly when he realizes he has turned a choir into a solo of the worst kind.

“Wrong key?” he asks.

“Wrong forest,” I tell him and pat his leg. “Thank you all. You have been most helpful to our investigation.” Artos waves goodbye as we leave the blackberry thicket. A few moments later, that dreadful humming starts behind me again. I stop walking.

“Artos.” The humming stops. We continue. Three steps later, it starts again. I beg the Mother for patience as we trudge on.

Near the mossy rock outcropping, we find our next witness, an elderly tortoise named Shanks.

“You saw a tree... walking?” I ask the old one, trying to make certain I heard correctly.

“I... did.” Each syllable appears to require its own breath.

“Did it have roots?” I ask, wondering exactly how it ‘walked.’

“Nat... urally.”

“Branches?”

“It... was... a... tree.” My eye starts to twitch of its own accord. I close it and wipe my eyes.

I hate to ask the next question, given Shanks's relationship with time, but I knew the information might lead us to something useful. "How quickly was it moving?"

"It... is... a... tree," he says matter-of-factly, like that should explain its land speed. On any other night, it might. This is taking far longer than I wanted it to. We thank the old tortoise and turn to leave.

"I... re... mem... ber... that... tree." That stops us cold. We turn back to him as he finishes, "It... fell... years... ago... in... a... storm." Now that is interesting. Tumble saw a chestnut tree that disappeared years ago. The mice heard a lullaby passed down from their mother's childhood. And now Shanks has seen a tree brought down by a storm long ago.

"Everything they're showing us is old," Artos says. I look up at him. He shrugs. "Assistant Detective." Unfortunately, the bear is getting rather good at this.

As we are leaving Shanks's stone pile, we catch a familiar glow coming from behind a tree as we round the trunk; the Lantern floats down to us. For a second, it sits there simply hovering. Then the little light stretches outward, becoming a glowing bear paw in the air before us. It only lasts a heartbeat before it snaps back into a sphere.

"It likes me!" Artos bounces lightly on his paws, clearly thrilled by the Lantern's antics.

"No. It is a coincidence," I say out loud. I am still trying to figure out what it could mean when another Lantern floats in beside the first. The lights flicker on each of them as if they are discussing the weather.

The second Lantern stretches as well; this one takes the shape of... long rabbit ears. I am stunned.

Artos grins wide. "Coincidence?"

"Be silent." It takes a beat, and then I add "please." My mind races through what we have learned. The Lanterns *are* reacting to the animals they see. They just demonstrated that. But everything they show—or say, or sing—comes from somewhere else. Somewhere older. Tumble's chestnut tree. The mice's lullaby. Shanks's fallen tree. Tumble's gransquirrel. Places, sounds, and lives that belong to the Grove's past.

"Something from the Grove's past is somehow appearing here tonight. But why? And why tonight? Samhain explains *why tonight*. The veil is thin." I rub my chin as thoughts continue to spill out. "But it does not explain why there are so many Lanterns this year—or why they have suddenly decided to interact with us."

Artos watches the two lights drift away between the trees. "So how do we find out?"



## 4

### Do Not Follow the Lanterns

I already dislike the direction of this conversation. “We continue investigating.”

“By following them?”

“No.”

One of the Lanterns stops. It floats backward. Waits. Then darts deeper into the woods. Artos looks at me. I look at Artos.

“Do not say it.”

“It wants us to follow it.”

I close my eyes.

Of course it does.

We watch as several Lanterns drift together toward a dense wall of trees, their pale gold light slipping between the trunks like something alive. Each glow catches on wet bark, fern fronds, and low-hanging leaves before stretching into long, crooked shadows that reach across the forest floor. The deeper the Lanterns move, the more the woods seem to close around them. Their light flickers through gaps in the branches, appearing and disappearing in slow pulses, until it looks as though the forest itself is breathing. Even the familiar shapes start to look transformed and far less like our normal Grove.

“We are not following them,” I tell Artos flatly. I cross my arms for emphasis.

“We are not following; we are investigating.” His big head turns to me, using my own logic against me.

“Ugh,” I uncross my arms. “Very well. Let us investigate then.” He turns his head back to the Lanterns, but not before I catch the grin. “No,” I say.

“No what?” He does not look back. Probably so I cannot see just how smug he is.

“This is not a quest.”

“Sure feels like a quest.” His shoulders shake, betraying him trying not to laugh. I let him have the win and move on.

We follow the illuminations deeper. As the Lanterns move, things go from puzzling to downright strange. The Grove seems to respond to them, changing as they pass. A Lantern passes straight through the trunk of an old tree. For an instant, nothing happens. Then a ripple spreads outward from the point of contact—the bark smooths. The trunk narrows. Broken limbs push outward again in sudden bursts of fresh wood, and leaves unfurl along branches that have been bare for years. For a few heartbeats, the tree stands young and whole.

Then the image jumps forward.

The trunk collapses into a moss-covered stump.

Another heartbeat, and it's gone. The old tree stands before us exactly as it did before.

Another Lantern crosses the path in front of us, and the path is suddenly covered in thick, lush grass. It sways in a breeze I cannot feel. Nothing else around it moves.

“These...” I begin as the pieces finally fit together. “These are not illusions. The tree growing young, the grass regrowing where it was years ago. These are memories. These are memories of the Grove itself, I think.”

“The Grove is remembering?”

I have to admit, I am not certain; it does appear to be correct, though. I shrug to him, unsure of how to prove what we are seeing since the visions vanish seconds after the Lantern passes.

We continue up the path. I hesitate to step on the ground where the grass appeared seconds before, but I cautiously extend one paw and touch the path; nothing happens. It is just dirt and stone, as if it never happened. We come to one of the many streams that run through the Grove. I pause and look back, considering everything we have learned.

“I’m going to get a drink while you think,” Artos informs me. I nod and wave him off. Looking back the way we came, everything is familiar. I have walked this path hundreds of times. I know every bend, every root, every tree leaning across the trail. I know where the stream should be.

“STOP!” I yell at Artos and spin. He is in mid-step and stops cold.

“What?” He turns back to me with a look that asks if I have gone crazy.

“Wait. Do not step forward.” I can tell my warning is not weighing much on the big bear. “Please, just wait.” I walk up next to him and put my paw on his front leg. We wait.

Five seconds. Maybe ten. Then the water flickers. The stream collapses into light and vanishes. In its place yawns a ravine nearly thirty feet deep, its sides slick with stone and tangled roots. Artos’s raised paw hangs inches beyond the edge.

I stare into the ravine, my ears twitch in surprise. Suddenly, the old warning does not seem nearly so mysterious. You do not follow the Lanterns because they remember what the Grove was like. Not how it is now. This is why creatures sometimes disappear or become lost in a home they have known for years.

“They are not trying to hurt anyone,” I say slowly. “They simply remember what was here... not what is here now.”

“Ramestel?”

“Yes?”

“I am not thirsty anymore.”

Suddenly, every Lantern winks out, and we are standing in pitch black at the edge of the ravine. For several heartbeats, I can see nothing at all, and the Grove comes back into focus. To our left, a branch snaps like an explosion in the quiet forest: CRACK!

Something moves in the brush; another snap—CRACK! It is moving closer. Artos instinctively places himself between me and the danger. He slams down his front right paw, and the transformation is instantly complete. Gone is the ridiculous bear who has spent the evening arguing about quests. His shoulders rise, his claws dig into the earth, and a growl rolls out of him deep enough that I feel it through my paws.

Artos the Guardian stands between me and the dark.

The bushes shake ahead on the edge of the trail. Artos’s shoulders bunch and his knees bend slightly, lowering him so he is ready to pounce as soon as the danger shows itself. In answer, branches scrape along something slowly as it dares to challenge Artos. I brace for impact. I have seen how this goes before.

Shanks, the old tortoise, steps out of the bushes onto the trail. He turns his long head and looks at the enormous Guardian poised to tear apart whatever emerged and me peeking out from behind him.

“You... two... are... sure... jumpy!” Shanks says as he walks across the path and into the bushes on the other side. The branches scrape along his shell as he goes.

Artos begins a slow, rollicking laugh; he is instantly becoming the ridiculous bear I know again. He turns and looks at me, and his laughter steps up a notch as he sees my surprise and fear.

“We will never speak of this again,” I instruct, which makes the laughter hit an even higher pitch.

With Shanks gone, one light flares between the trees. Then another. Then ten more. Within seconds, the darkness around us fills with pale gold until dozens of Lanterns hover between the trunks like a field of stars suspended beneath the canopy. All of them simultaneously begin to move in the same direction: North.

“I suppose we’re not following them?” Artos asks.

I sigh heavily. “Apparently, we are following them.”

“Nice!” He is way too excited about this. He even starts to hum the song the mice taught us again.



## 5

### Where the Grove Used to Be

As we follow the lights, we walk through a myriad of memories. They shimmer in and out of focus as we walk, each one a fragment of a life within the Grove. As the Lanterns float by, their light illuminates each scene in eerie detail.

A Lantern slips between two ancient roots, and suddenly the darkness there warms with an afternoon sunlight. A den appears where stone and roots stood seconds before, tucked beneath a tree far younger than the one standing there now. Within lies a mother fox with four tiny kits, little more than rust-colored balls of fluff. One yawns and climbs over its sibling in search of a warmer spot next to their mother's white belly. The offended kit yips its disapproval at being used as a stepping stone. The young climber buries himself under his mother's foreleg before settling for a nap. The mother raises her head, and amber eyes settle directly on us. Her ears snap forward, alert but not frightened, and I almost convince myself that she can actually see us.

The Lantern drifts onward, and the den begins to vanish as the light pulls away. The mother's tail is the first to vanish, then the sleeping kits, and finally those watchful eyes. The den shimmers back to roots and moss-covered stone again. Artos stands and stares at the spot for several seconds more than is necessary. Then we both move on without a word. We both know that some of the memories do not require our investigation.

In some choreographed dance, several Lanterns sweep together in a group of large trees, and the forest opens around us. Not physically, not exactly. We can still see the outlines where the trees stood, a shadowy imprint on our vision. Beyond them is a meadow where trees now stand. Moonlight spills across the meadow, turning the grass into rolling silver-green waves. Little white flowers dot the landscape and catch the light like stars in a sky of grass.

Young deer burst from the grass. They are old enough to have lost their spots, but just barely. They are little more than legs and ears as they jump and run through the meadow. The fawns race each other with the reckless confidence of creatures that have yet

to discover how dangerous the world can be. One darts sideways and almost crashes into its brother, sending both skidding through the grass. They recover quickly, and the race is on again. The fawns charge straight at us.

Artos tries to sidestep them, but one of the deer runs right through him. Pale light pours from his fur where the two bodies overlap, and Artos twists around, trying to watch them continue behind him. They race onward through a forest that has not yet arrived. We watch them until the Lanterns move away. The grass fades, the moonlight vanishes, and ancient trees take form again where they stood for centuries. Artos looks through the dense forest where the fawns disappeared.

“There used to be a lot more room around here,” he comments on the changes, and I cannot argue with his assessment.

As we continue down the path, more memories stretch out in front of us. For several steps, snow blankets the path beneath us. Our paws leave perfect tracks in powder that should be freezing, yet I feel no cold. No dampness clings to my fur. The snow looks real enough to touch, but it has no substance beyond the marks we leave behind. Just as quickly as it began, the snow fades.

The next memory stops me and catches in my chest. A warren of rabbits spills forth into the pathway. They jump, hop, and chase each other while an older rabbit sits at the warren opening watching them. There are seven small rabbits in various shades of gray and one that is stark black. He already knows how to use the shadows to hide from his siblings, waiting for them to come before him so he can pounce and spring his trap.

Artos stops beside me. He does not say a word, but silently takes in the scene with me. Too soon, the memory fades and the warren shimmers into darkness. We sit in silence for a bit more. When I look up at him, his eyes are soft and caring as he smiles down at me. I take a breath and nod.

“We should continue.” And we do.

The Lanterns are all converging around a massive elm tree. They circle it, and in their wake, the old tree becomes young again in some spots and remains itself in others. If age alone determined greatness, this elm might rival even the Silver Oak. Its old, gnarled roots create an archway to a hollow below the old tree. From the hollow comes a strange sound: scritch, scritch, scritch. I am prepared for anything the Lanterns want to show us. Artos lowers his massive head near mine, and we both peer into the darkness.

From inside the little cavern, something screams in terror. Artos jumps and screams even louder. I nearly have a heart attack from Artos’s reaction.

“Some battle bear you are,” I give him grief.

“I wasn’t ready!” he protests.

A little mouse pokes her head out of the opening and looks at us both cautiously. “Are you going to eat me?” she asks in a tiny voice. Artos looks offended at the proposition.

“No,” he answers, then adds a quiet “probably.”

“ARTOS!” I scold.

“I’m joking!” The little mouse does not look reassured. Behind her, deeper beneath the roots, something gives a faint clink of wood. Artos and I both stare at the hole containing the curious sound.



## 6

### The Rememberance Chime

The clinking sound comes again from the hollow. Not quite the same this time—higher, thinner. My ears swivel toward it as another hollow note rises from beneath the roots. I turn to ask the mouse what that noise is, but she is already afraid and shivering.

“What is—” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“I didn’t mean to break it and curse the Grove!” She collapses into tears. I blink. We appear to have skipped several steps in the investigation.

“Did not mean to break what?” I ask. I narrow my eyes at her. “What did you do exactly?”

“I was preparing for winter, and I found this nice hollow. No one was using it, and it would make a great place to store food. When I went down there, I saw something strange.” She pauses, as if she hopes to skip the next part.

“Continue,” I encourage her.

“I... Well, there were the old sticks tangled among the roots. Some were hollow, some carved, and several had little wooden pieces perched between them. I tried to clean around them, but they were taking up so much room.” She looks at me and then glances at Artos. That one look at the bear that towers above her causes the trembling to begin in earnest. “I just wanted a safe place to store my food.” She falls to her knees crying.

Between sobs, her story continues. “I pulled on one of the sticks to get it out of the way, but it wouldn’t move. So I got a rock—”

“You did not hit the unknown magical object with a rock... “

“Twice, maybe three times.” She collapses fully, wailing on the ground.

“Sometimes you have to encourage objects with a good tap,” Artos begins. “I get it.”

“Do not encourage her.” I sigh and rub my paw over my face to clear my thoughts. “Neither of you is allowed to investigate again.”

“That’s not the worst part,” she howls. “The rock didn’t make it move, so I chewed through one of the vines holding it, and it fell free. All these lights began floating around the tree staring at me, so I hid in the hollow. Then you two came, and I thought you were going to eat me for cursing the Grove.”

“Okay, enough theatrics, little one. Show us this ‘stick’ you moved.” I say. She seems to take some solace in the fact that Artos did not eat her after her tale. She stands and dries her eyes the best she can, then leads us into the void beneath the old elm.

Artos does not fit, so he can only stick his head in the hole. I take in the strange object. It is a series of seven hollow tubes suspended by thin vines. Roots have grown around several of the vines, swallowing them into the elm as though the tree itself has been holding the instrument in place for generations. The tubes are marked with ancient runes. I know most common runes and even some more advanced ones, but these are wholly unfamiliar. Old, very old indeed.

In front of each tube is a combination of stones and wooden bits also held in place by loose vines. They swing gently as we move around the small area. One of the smaller tubes is on the ground; its vine clearly has been gnawed by our little culprit. Another tube hangs at an odd angle, wedged against the dirt wall.

“This is the one you chewed loose, I presume,” I ask as I point to the tube on the ground. The little mouse nods. “And that one?” I point to the one askew.

“When the other one fell, it hit it and knocked it sideways,” she answers. As she is talking, a faint breeze slips through the hollow. The tubes begin to sway, each giving off a low, breathy hum as the air passes through it. Then the hanging strikers begin to swing—wood and stone tap against hollow timber, adding clear notes over the hum. For a moment, something almost resembling a melody fills the chamber—but there are gaps where notes should be. The song is beautiful, fractured, and unmistakably incomplete.

Artos sticks his large snout in the hole and sniffs, causing the tubes to play in reverse.

“Do not touch anything!” I tell him.

“I wasn’t going to,” he replies.

“You uprooted an entire tree earlier.”

“That was decorating. What is that music I hear?” I describe the tubes and their strikers the best I can. “This appears to be ancient Grove magic, but to what end, I do not know.”

“Music,” he states easily.

“Music what?” I ask.

“You said you didn’t know what they were for. They play music.” I hear him sit and feel the shockwave under the tree. He starts humming the mouse song again as he thinks of music.

“We do not have time for that noise, Artos.” He continues humming anyway. I decide there are more urgent battles to fight and turn back to the mouse. “When did you gnaw through the vine?” I ask.

“Right before sunset. I had spent so much time cleaning. I needed them out of the way, so I gave up and cut it down.”

I consider what we know. Just before sunset on Samhain, it was disturbed. Lanterns have appeared in greater numbers than ever before. They are displaying memories around the Grove.

“They are not wandering,” I say aloud as the pieces lock into place. Louder, I call toward the entrance, “Artos! They are not wandering!”

“I know,” he calls back. “I’m sitting perfectly still.”

I close my eyes.

“Not *you*, you overgrown dust ruffle! The Lanterns! The Lanterns are not wandering. They are coming here.” I stick my head through the opening—and freeze. Lanterns are everywhere; not dozens anymore. Hundreds. “Artos, do not move.”

He opens his eyes and sees all the Lanterns before him. His eyes go wide in shock. “Ram? What do I do?”

“Nothing; sit still and let me think,” I tell him. A breeze blows through the Grove, and I hear the chimes play their partial song again.

“Wait,” Artos begins. “That is the same lullaby the mice taught us.” He starts to hum it again, and the Lanterns draw closer to him. He stops immediately.

“Do it again,” I ask.

“You want me to sing?” He is delighted and almost vibrates with excitement.

“Do not make me regret this.”

“You said I was in the wrong forest,” he reminds me.

“ARTOS!” I snap. He closes his eyes and begins humming the melody again. It is terrible, but unmistakable. The opening matches the Chime note for note. Then Artos reaches the place where the broken instrument falls silent—and keeps going. There it is. The missing part of the song.

I pat his arm to get his attention. “Okay, you can stop. Plus, the Lanterns are a little closer than I would like.” Artos opens his eyes again as a Lantern floats inches from his nose.

“Here is my working theory,” I begin. “On Samhain, when the divide between past and present grows thin, the Grove remembers more strongly. The Lanterns are those memories—or pieces of them, at least.” I glance toward the broken tubes. “And somehow this melody keeps them where they belong. Perhaps one or two slip free each year, but tonight the song was broken. Nothing was guiding them back.” “So... I broke Samhain?” the little mouse squeals.

“Perhaps temporarily,” I answer honestly.

Artos extends his massive knuckles to her, “That’s actually impressive!”

“Stop congratulating her.” I look at the broken tube in my hand and wonder how to fix it. Artos seems to read my thoughts.

“Ramestel?”

“What?”

“Maybe we don't need to fix it.” I stare at him. He hums the missing part of the melody. “We just need to finish the song.”

“The chime is broken, Artos.” I stare at him, not understanding.

“The chime is broken, but the song isn’t.” I pause at his words. That distinction changes everything. We have been focused on repairing the Chime, but the Chime is only the instrument. The melody is what matters. I look at my big friend, and a smile crosses my face. “You are on to something!”



## 7

### Artos, More or Less

I race back into the hollow and study the chime. There are seven tubes of different lengths, which gives each one a distinct sound. The stone and wood strikers hit them in a set order when the wind moves through the roots. We have two issues now. First, the mouse chewed through the vine holding one of the tubes, and we have another that the wind and strikers cannot reach at all. That is why the song has gaps.

“Sing again... from the beginning,” I call up to Artos. He hums, going through the song. I blow carefully across the open end of the first tube. A faint hollow note answers me—one note identified. I move to the next tube, a slightly longer cylinder hanging beside the first.

“Again, but slower, please,” I call out, and he starts over, this time more slowly. I blow on the second tube, but it sounds different than his song.

“Could you try to be less... bear?” I ask from the depths. Artos opens one eye, and he looks at me from outside.

“I don’t know what that means,” he rumbles.

“Neither do I. Just try, please.”

Artos hums again, softer this time, trying valiantly to scrape some of the gravel from his voice. The note wobbles horribly, but the effort is there. I blow across the second tube, and it sings out ever so faintly. That is the third note, I think.

“Can you try to sing it in a higher pitch?” I ask.

Artos stops humming. “Are you teaching me to sing?”

“I am trying to save Samhain.”

“By teaching me to sing,” he states flatly.

“I...” I give in. “You are ridiculous! Please try the melody again.”

We work through four of the chimes that way, and come to the one knocked askew. I lift it ever so gently from the wall and try to brush off as much dirt as possible. I do not know if the dirt would change the tune, but I am not taking that chance. I let it fall gently back into place, and we start again. It holds one of the missing notes, and I smile triumphantly.

Now for the one chewed loose by the mouse. I find the vine in question, but now it is too short to fit through the top of the tube and connect to the other side. As an additional obstacle, my paws are just too big to fit into the gap to really grab the vine. I struggle with it, but cannot seem to grab the end.

“Let me help,” the little mouse demands.

“You are the one that broke it in the first place.”

“I know I broke it; now let me help fix it,” she retorts. I consider her offer. My paws clearly will not accomplish this alone, so I nod in agreement.

“One moment,” she says as she races out of the hollow and disappears beyond my line of sight. I sigh. *I guess right now was not a good time.* But my impatience is thrown back at me as the little mouse runs back in with a vine trailing behind her. She got a replacement. Smart.

She scampers up the dirt wall and carefully traverses the roots to where I am holding the wooden chime. I thread the original vine back through, and she nimbly jumps over to it. She ties her vine around the one through the pipe, and then holds it in place without tying the other end.

“Try the sound,” she says. I call up to Artos to hum the song again, and he begins to hum anew. When I blow, the tube is too high.

“Too high, I think.” She lowers it, and we try again. “Still high.” She begins to lower it, and the vine slips through her tiny hands. There is a wooden CLONK, and the pipe hits the dirt.

“That would be a tad too low,” she says. I glare at her, and she only smiles at her own joke. Great, now I have two of them.

We rethread the pipe and continue adjusting until it is just right. She ties it off, and we step back and admire our work. We wait for a breeze, but none comes to help us out. I look to Artos, and he understands immediately.

“Oh, I can do wind!” I should have been concerned with that sentence faster than I was. It has been a long night.

He positions himself with his snout in the entrance. He inhales an enormous breath. My mistake hits me square in the face as he exhales and the chamber explodes into motion. The little mouse is sent tumbling somewhere to my left. I am forced back against a root and hang on tightly. The chime goes absolutely berserk, and dust fills the chamber.

“GENTLY!” I call out as I pry myself from the root. I am still not sure where the little mouse landed.

“That was gentle.”

“You concern me, bear.”

He tries again and manages a gentle wave of hot bear breath through the hollow. The wind passes through the chimes, and the notes begin. The first, then the second joins in, and on it goes. The lullaby is exactly as the mice sang it, the whole melody. Artos hums along with it. Not loudly, and not even less bear. This time his rough voice belongs within the tune. I am surprised by its beauty.

Outside, the Lanterns still. There are hundreds of floating lights suspended between the trees. Then one begins to move towards the elm; another quickly joins it, and the progression begins. They form a slow stream of gold moving through the tree's roots and branches. Each one adds a quiet note to the song as it dances with the elm.

As they rotate, the lights begin to fade, releasing their memories around us. The mother fox passes with her four kits; she stops for a heartbeat and looks at us. They are replaced by snow falling. Artos tries to catch some on his enormous pink tongue. The memory passes straight through him, briefly bathing his muzzle in icy blue light.

The young deer frolic through, their light shrinking as they fade around the elm. A young black rabbit hops towards me. It looks up and smiles, then moves into the hollow and vanishes. The memory of a large brown bear comes into view; he is Artos's size, if not a little bigger. He stops and looks at Artos; his amber eyes sparkle in the twilight. He bows his head slightly to Artos, then fades into the night.

I believe I understand the power of the chime. It does not contain the memories or exactly summon them. It gives them somewhere to go when the boundary between the veil

grows thin. An old song that reminds them of their time within the Grove. It reminds them not only of their lives, but that their time has passed. It reminds them where they belong.

Only a single Lantern remains. It hovers directly in front of Artos; we stare at it together. Artos hums the lullaby again. Nothing happens.

“Why is this one still here?” I ask. The Lantern stretches into a bear paw, and Artos grins. Then it floats down to me and becomes a pair of rabbit ears. I narrow my eyes. The little light flickers back and forth between us as if it is saying thank you, or maybe goodbye. Then it fades out of view.

“It liked me!” Artos rumbles through a proud smile.

“Do not ruin the moment.”

The Grove is quiet again for a moment before the songs of crickets fill the air. The stars reemerge from their hiding place.

“So...” Artos begins.

“No.” I counter.

“I have not said anything yet,” he protests.

“You are going to remind me that you solved the mystery.” Artos beams.

He plants his paws wide and lifts his head proudly. “Assistant Detective Artos solved the mystery,” he states triumphantly. I try not to buy into it, but I cannot keep the smile from my face.

“You did notice the melody.”

“Yes!”

“And you remembered it, perfectly,” I concede.

“Exactly!” he almost shouts.

“Despite singing it off-key all evening.”

“Was saving myself for the big finale!” he insists. “Plus, it still counts.”

“Yes, my friend, it still counts.”



## 8

### The Grove Remembers

As the sky lightens in the east, we say goodbye to the old elm tree and make our way back to the Silver Oak. The chime works again for now. We may need to find a more permanent solution than two hastily tied vines. I think I can still hear it on the wind as the breeze passes through the Grove.

The last crickets chirp in the final notes of their nightly song, leaves rustle on their journey down to the earth, and we see several small animals emerge from wherever they had hidden from the Lanterns. Everything feels normal again.

I can recognize every tree and path again without needing to wonder if it is real or something from beyond. Beside me, Artos walks proudly, humming the lullaby.

“You know you can stop now, you know,” I remind him.

“I know, but I am good at it now.”

“That’s not exactly what happened.”

“Oh, I know.” He bumps me, and I spin into the clearing around the Silver Oak.

Danu steps from the shimmer of the great tree with the quiet grace of something older than the forest itself. Her gown is woven from living green leaves, while lichen, birch twigs, and thin strands of glowing ivy twist through her hair like a crown grown rather than made. Her eyes are ancient and warm, carrying the strange weight of someone who seems to know your name before you ever speak it.

She stands among the Samhain offerings I had carefully placed; then she looks at the uprooted tree splayed across the Silver Oak’s roots. She reaches up with a dark hand and touches the ‘decoration.’

“She likes it,” Artos beams at me.

“Do not start.”

She turns towards us with her knowing smile; it is a look I know well. My eyes narrow suspiciously at her.

“Good morning, you two. Did you complete your quest?” she asks.

Artos almost giggles with glee. “NO!” I cut off whatever he is about to say next and march up to Danu.

I explain our tromps through the forest and what we found. When I get to the hollow under the elm, she adds to my story. “Ah, you found the Remembrance Chime.” I stop short.

“You knew?”

“I... remembered.” Another smile dances across her lips.

“You could have mentioned there was an ancient magical instrument beneath an elm capable of turning the entire Grove into several hundred years of misplaced history.” I find myself irritated that she knew this whole time.

“Nobody has disturbed the Chime in generations,” she says in the way of an explanation.

“Until tonight,” I add.

“Until tonight,” she concedes, but the smile remains. “Long ago, the Grove’s inhabitants discovered that Samhain allowed memories to rise and take form. The Lanterns have always existed. They are impressions—important moments and pieces of lives that the Grove has held on to dearly. The Remembrance Chime was created so that when those memories wander on Samhain, its melody guides them home again. The Chime does not silence them. It simply reminds them where they belong.”

“We figured it out,” Artos informs her.

“Yes, gruffybear, you certainly did.” She smiles down at the big bear.

Artos looks at me and adds, “We are very good detectives.” I shake my head at the bear’s antics. I spent the night chasing Lanterns from one end of the Grove to the other. I nearly watched Artos walk into a ravine, we questioned Shanks for roughly fourteen years, and I got blasted into a root by bear breath. I need answers.

“If you already knew all this, why did you not intervene?” I ask her.

“Not every mystery needs to be prevented, Ramestel. Some need to be discovered,” she answers calmly.

“Artos nearly walked into a ravine,” I protest.

“I didn’t.”

“That is not the point.”

“Feels important, though,” he adds. I let it go. She does things in her own way and does not need to consult with us. I know she has her reasons even if she does not share them, so I change my questioning.

“Were those memories real?” I ask.

“Every one of them.”

I consider asking about the little black rabbit, or the ancient bear, but decide against it. As she said, some mysteries need to be discovered, and that may be a better place for them anyhow. We watch in silence as the animals of the Grove return to their homes, ready to sleep till another evening. Other creatures are just waking, stretching in their dens and welcoming the day.

A light floats out of the thinning darkness, passes the Silver Oak, and floats into the forest. It does not show memories in its wake; it is harmless. It is what the legends spoke of and what I would expect on Samhain.

“So...” Artos begins. I already know.

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You were going to ask whether we should follow it,” I confirm. The silence stretches, and I look over at him.

“Maybe...”

I give him a tired look. “You are ridiculous!”

Above us, the light of the sun strikes the Silver Oak for the first time today. The deep brown fades from the Silver Oak’s bark until moonlit mercury gleams beneath the rising sun. Above us, gold, copper, and crimson retreat from the leaves, returning them to silver one by one. Soon their familiar chiming fills the branches. Samhain is over for another year. Artos sits beside me, warm and enormous, and somewhere far across the Grove, the Remembrance Chime catches the wind. Its melody carries through the trees.

And the Grove remembers.



## Thank You!

If you have made it this far, thank you.

*The Lanterns of the Grove* is especially meaningful to me because it is the first piece of my writing that I have ever published online. Seeing these characters and this world leave my computer and make their way into the hands of actual readers is exciting, terrifying, and honestly a little surreal.

The Grove has lived in my head for a long time. What began as scattered ideas, little pieces of family memories, my love of nature, and probably an unhealthy fascination with old Celtic stories slowly grew into something much bigger. Ramestel, Artos, and the rest of this strange little family have become incredibly important to me, and I am thrilled that you have now had the chance to meet some of them too.

I chose *The Lanterns of the Grove* as my first published story because I wanted your first visit to the Grove to be a fun one—a little mysterious, a little magical, and hopefully funny enough that Artos caused you to laugh at least once.

This is only the beginning.

Harley's full adventure into the Grove begins in *Harley and the Silver Oak Guardians*, releasing January 12, 2027, and I cannot wait to share the rest of this world with you.

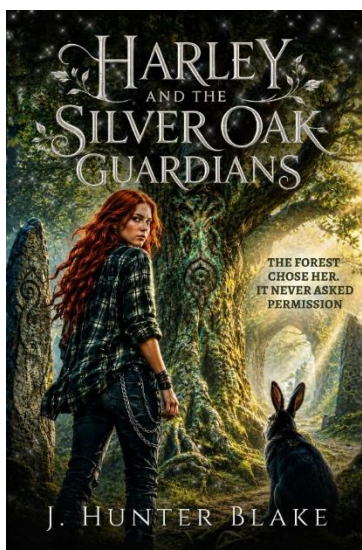
Thank you for taking a chance on a new author, for stepping into the Grove with me, and most of all, for reading my very first published story.

It means more than you know.

*J. Hunter Blake*



## The Adventure Continues



Harley Winterthorn thought her father's disappearance was the strangest thing that would ever happen to her.

Then a black rabbit started correcting the way she walked, as if he knew!

Soon Harley finds herself pulled into a hidden world where nature has secrets, animals are more than they appear, and something ancient is dying.

**On Sale January 12, 2027**

Kindle | Kindle Unlimited | Paperback

[Preorder on Amazon now!](#)

**Read on for a preview.**

## An excerpt from



Slowly, I reach out and touch the bark of the Silver Oak. A zap runs through me, like the static electricity when I'm wearing my big wool sweatshirt in the winter and touch a doorknob. But this is not painful; not at all. It is warm and welcoming. The Oak just gave me its version of a hug, I think. It fills me with pride instantly.

My cheek finds the warm, soft bark as my arms naturally fall around it, hugging it back.

"It knows you," she says softly. "The Silver Oak has been waiting for you for years."

My brain spins. "I don't understand," I whisper.

"I know, dear child," Danu says gently, "It will be a great honor to explain."

I glance nervously back at the bear again. "Why did he call you mother?" I ask. "Are you...a bear too?"

Danu laughs softly. "No, flower. But I am his mother in a way." Her fingers brush the tree's silver trunk, and bluish-green light dances within the bark like fireflies where she touches.

"I am the mother to the forest, the animals, and to the Earth."

My thoughts wobble like a spinning top as I try to place that.

Mother of the forest?

Mother of the animals?

I look around. The creatures stare at her with quiet devotion. It's as if she is their sun and moon combined. She is their world, their gravity, and I know, somehow...she is mine too. It's overwhelming.

Danu's voice is warm. Patient. Grounding. Just like a mother.

Rubbing my fingers back and forth against each other, where they still tingle from touching the tree, my head begins to collect the pieces of the puzzle.

“Perhaps it would help if I told you the name humans give me,” Danu says plainly.

“Among humankind, I am...” she begins gently.

“... the Mother Earth .” I finish for her. I knew it was true before I even spoke the words.

The phrase sounds like something from one of Dad’s books on folklore that he would read to me, but they were no more than fantasies.

Or so I thought.

Standing beside the living soul of the planet, this is not a fairy tale. I can feel the immense power striding beside me, but it is gentle and caring. It is so weird. She is the power of love, the power of a sunrise, of an earthquake, and the sum of every newborn life on Earth. I can feel that she would never use her power to hurt me or any living being.

A thousand questions collide in my head.

What would it feel like to be the mother of every living thing?

Can she feel forests burning?

The surge of rivers swelling during the spawning season?

The death of a species?

Does she feel me right now? My heartbeat? My fear? The hollow space Liam left behind?

She turns and smiles at me, her eyes sad and proud at the same time, “Yes, Harley, all of that and more.”

I almost cry. I cannot fathom that weight, how to deal with all the sadness. Instead, I dig my nails into my palm to center myself on the sting of pain.

*Wait! She read my thoughts! I did not say that out loud!*

She kneels in front of me and pulls me into a gentle embrace. “The world is in a constant flux, always seeking balance. Life and Death. Good versus Evil. Destruction and Growth.”

She pauses and is quiet for a long moment.

The animals wait.

The whole world seems to be holding its breath.

“So...uh...” I say weakly. “Do you make volcanoes too?”

Danu laughs softly.

“I breathe life into many things. Volcanoes. Trees. New beginnings, and sometimes a gentle end.”

That brings my brother flooding back into my mind. The day of his funeral was my saddest day ever. But still, it’s little more than a blur.

People were filling our house to the point it was hard for me to breathe.

There were the casseroles and condolences, awkward handshakes and hugs, many from strangers who seemed so sad for Mom and me.

“I am truly sorry for your loss that night,” the Earth Mother breathes. Again, appearing to read my thoughts so easily. “He loved you dearly.”

A tear escapes and rolls down my cheek, and I bow my head, not wanting to look at her. I squeeze my eyes shut for a second. Then another. When I open them and raise my face to meet hers, there is nothing but compassion in them.

“You’re really her,” I whisper. “You’re really the Earth Mother?”

Danu smiles softly.

“It is one name of many, though I prefer simply Danu. But yes, dear one. I am really her.”

“Wow,” I breathe. “I always felt something when I was in nature... I just never had the words for it.”

She smiles. “You were always exceptionally good at seeing me, even when others chose not to do so. The elephant in Kenya who brought her calf to you when your parents were so scared. You remember touching her skin and sketching it later?”

I do remember that, and my jaw drops open. I would put different leaves under my paper and rub over them time and time again to try to find the right texture for that calf’s soft skin.

“The mornings in the Andes,” she continues, “when the wind smelled like snow and jasmine. You turned your head up and tried to figure out where the jasmine was coming from.” She laughs softly. “That was me saying good morning.”

“But why me?” I ask. “I’m just... me.”

Danu beams. “And that is the best thing to be in this world—yourself. I would expect you to be no one else.”

“So, why did you send Fisher to find me?” I ask.

While still warm, her voice grows more purposeful.

“We have work to do.”



## About the Author

J. Hunter Blake is an independent author from Northwest Arkansas, where he lives in the country with his wife, two kids, two dogs, one cat, and considerably more wildlife than any of them have officially invited onto the property.

A lifelong lover of fantasy, nature, folklore, and all things wonderfully geeky, Hunter has always been drawn to stories where the ordinary world brushes up against something ancient and magical. His Scottish ancestry also sparked a deep fascination with Celtic mythology and traditions—an influence that winds its way through the Grove's forests, creatures, and magic.

The idea for *Harley and the Guardians* began years ago when his daughter, Harley, was born. Like any perfectly reasonable geeky dad, he started wondering what his little girl might be like as the hero of her own magical adventure. Over the years, childhood memories and family moments found their way into the story. Even Ramestel has roots in the real world: when Harley was little, she couldn't quite say “rabbit” and called her stuffed rabbit “Ra-Ra.” Those small memories eventually grew into a much larger world.

*The Lanterns of the Grove* is Hunter's first published work and a small glimpse into that world. His debut novel, *Harley and the Silver Oak Guardians*, releases January 12, 2027.

When he isn't writing, Hunter can usually be found spending time with his family, wandering the woods, playing Overwatch(Shepherd#1180), or thinking about fictional characters who have become far too comfortable occupying space in his head.

Join the conversation and connect with me.

