

# THE WIXLETREE

AN ILLUSTRATED NOVEL BY  
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Lightning streaked across the sky, warm rain hissing down through the leaves of the Tree.

Droplets soon become rivers of rain, sliding down ancient bark to pool at the roots and slowly ooze into the earth below. Thunder rolled, long and low, across the Noadda plain.

A lone figure stood at the base of a huge twisting branch of the Tree, unblinking eyes watching the storm. Sharp, sinewy wings flexed in the rain. One hand rested on the trunk, fingers digging in and slowly peeling away at the sodden bark to reveal the lighter, woody flesh beneath. A howling gust of wind ripped leaves from the branch and the figure turned its head to follow their long, dancing fall until they were lost in the hazy, wet darkness.

Far below, among the leaf-strewn and water logged roots of the Tree, another creature stirred in his sleep as the thunder grew louder, bouncing and crashing through the sky.

*Away from the Tree.*

Iollan opened his eyes with a jolt, his whole body shaking. The words echoed, over and over, deep and booming inside his ears, mind, stomach; he was afraid he might throw up. Lightning illuminated his room in a bright, white flash; his limbs tingled. He sat up and held his head in his hands until that huge voice, those strange words, grew fainter, overwhelmed by the thunder and the heavy sound of his own quick breathing. Fainter, fainter then gone: back into the dream, back into silence. He slumped forward onto his knees with a familiar headache, heartbeat still wildly pounding in his ears.

*That dream again.*

Iollan sighed, wrapped himself in his blanket, trembling hands fumbling with the thick and soft material, and shuffled over to the window. Lightning flared and the room was suddenly full of new and strange shadows. The Root beneath him shuddered with the crack of thunder that followed. He leaned his head against the curved wall of his Nest. The shuddering seemed to continue beneath his feet, echoing the tingling slowly fading from his arms and chest. His fingers began to tap against his thigh.

*Drums*, Iollan thought. *I can hear drums, in the clouds.* He craned his neck out the window and looked straight up into the thick roaring chaos of the Canopy, rain drops battering his eyes. But he didn't need to see – his ears rang as the thunder beat out a riotous rhythm in the sky. He smiled in the rain, eyes still closed. What a wonderful performance. New images danced through his head – colours spun beneath his twitching fingers as he imagined weaving what he had heard and seen this night on a thick, creamy page leaf. His chest tightened and he brought his head back in abruptly, bouncing his head off the shutter as he did so.

*I'd never be allowed to put that in the Book.*

Something damp began to slither down from his hair onto his cheek – he put out a hand and a small, torn leaf landed in his palm. He slowly walked over to the bed and placed it on his pillow, then turned to where his friend slept on the other side of the room.

“Mick,” he whispered. His friend didn't move, still snoring gently. “Mick,” said Iollan, more loudly. Mick snorted slightly and

raised his head. “Hmm?” he answered thickly.

“Do you hear that?”

Mick frowned. “Hear what?”

“The thunder – the drums in the thunder.”

Mick rolled his eyes and yawned. “You woke me up for that? All I can hear is bad flying weather.” He snorted again, half-muffled by the pillow. “Trust you to like thunderstorms – the rest of us aren’t so keen on them anymore. Now go back to sleep, we have a big day tomorrow. The Festival isn’t going to open itself. And I’ll be blaming you if I can’t concentrate.”

Iollan’s lips twisted in a tiny, answering smile. Mick grunted, wrinkled his nose and turned over and aggressively buried his head in the pillows. Iollan sighed, quietly, hearing the pattern of Mick’s breathing slow down - so slow, compared to those drums - and turned once more to the rainy darkness outside his window.

I can still hear them. Iollan sat on his bed, playing with the leaf, tracing the little green veins with his fingers. Words in the wind... The thunder bounced back and forth through the room at a dizzying pace. He felt his head spin, his feet tap – and then he heard a clear word: away.

He blinked and swallowed, mouth suddenly very dry. It’s always been in a dream, before. But the drums beat against him, against the tree – *away from the tree, away, away...* Iollan dropped the leaf, hands suddenly limp, and burrowed under the covers, blanket stuffed in his ears, pillow over his head.

Far above, high in swaying branches, the watching figure shook pieces of bark from its fingers, rain drops scattering as leathery wings sprang open, and dove headlong into the wind – flying east, into the remains of the storm.



Midday sun shone warm and yellow through the leaves of the canopy. Amaranthos slowly slid one foot forward on the smooth bark, paused, looked around, and then flung his arms up in a dramatic, final flourish. Delicate wings dressed in shimmering silver danced in his head. He brought his arms down, watching the shadows of the leaves play over the bright silk of his sleeves.

“I must find a Nib,” he whispered to the chill air outside the door. A passing wisp of cloud wafted through nearby branches; he shivered as the cold scent filled his head. He turned away with a flick of his fingers and went back into his dwelling. Adele was dozing on the couch, dark hair a soft cloud around her pale face, bright cushions scattered everywhere. Gently Amaranthos picked up a fallen leaf from the floor and brushed it across her cheek.

“Yes, my dear?” she said without opening her eyes.

“I go to find a Nib – I have a thought to contain.”

“Very bold of you my dear, but why not inform a Bohk? It is such a long way down. They can do the work so much better. It saves you—” she paused to yawn and rub her eyes “—bother.” She turned over, arranging her hair more comfortably on the cushions.

“I must stretch my legs sometimes, Adele darling. You go back to sleep. But be fresh for tonight. I want you to take in every detail of the beauty I have been planning for all year.”

Adele opened her eyes then, and their deep blue smiled up at him. “Perhaps you can dance your way to the roots?” she laughed. “You are a strange one, my dear. What the others must think...”

Amaranthos shrugged, one graceful arm dismissing the thoughts of others. Adele’s smile grew wider; she reached out to him and their fingertips touched lightly, like a kiss.

“Good luck on your search, love. But next time, do call a Bohk, won’t you? You mustn’t rush about like this.” And she closed her eyes again. Amaranthos gave her sleepy form a low bow as he backed out of the room, stepped out the door and into the canopy. A cool wind swept across his face as he moved carefully, watching his balance each step, to

the pathway that wound its delicate way down and down through the many branches of the Tree. Gold and blue paint sparkled in the shifting sunlight.

“A Nib, a Nib!” Amaranthos chanted as he leapt down the first staircase, tiny wings fluttering in agitation. A slight misstep, he slid and laughed, turning it into a twirl, breathless with the cool air fresh and harsh in his throat. At the bottom of the steps he paused, coughing, just a little – and could hear now, beneath the sound of the wind, which was a constant glorious hum this high in the canopy, was...something else. Something...scratching.

Then it stopped. Amaranthos frowned, then shivered, pulling his jacket tighter against the chill, and strode quickly across the little curved bridge to another set of winding stairs. Only the first few steps could be seen – the rest obscured by drifting cloud, the occasional glint of gold paint a guiding star for the shape of those twisting stairs. Soon, though, it felt like it had been going on for far too long – the strange apprehension when he could not see the path far beyond his own restless feet.

*Adele was right*, he thought. *It is a long way down. Perhaps I will dance, a little. Dance my way out of this cloud.* He smiled – and twirled down a few stairs, hands reaching toward the veiled sun. His feet barely touched the wood as he cavorted down through the cloud, humming to himself, imagining the rain waiting within the cloud dancing alongside him. Then he heard it again: a strange, incessant rasping noise, and closer, this time. Like someone knocking to come in, like a branch on a window. Amaranthos halted and looked up into the Canopy. The cloud was slowly moving now with a new, slightly warmer wind, shafts of sunlight starting to come through. As he watched, something above him shifted – a shadow, a leaf - and the scratching noise stopped. Gradually, like thick, dripping liquid, a dark brown shape unfolded itself from the bark of the Tree, the snap of sharp wings extending sending the remaining wisps of cloud into swirling, chaotic eddies. Amaranthos stood very still; the sunlight began to dim again as a quiet voice spoke from the fading shadows.

“Amaranthos...sir.”

“Who’s there?” Amaranthos replied, backing away slightly.

The shape above him flapped its wings once, then gently floated down into the dappled sunlight, landing accurately on a small branch above Amaranthos’ head. One gloved hand adjusted the tall hat, tweaked the long brown jacket, and the pale, long face smiled.

“Rannver.” Amaranthos nodded courteously.

Rannver tipped his hat, just a little. “You seem to be heading Rootwise, sir. May I inquire as to the why?”

“I am seeking a Nib.”

The pale smile widened. The hands adjusted a red neck-cloth that sat just below the sharp chin. “I could do that for you, sir. Or I could ask one of the other Bohks. No trouble at all...sir.”

Amaranthos waved him away, starting to climb down the stairs, finally clearing the last of the cloud; he felt warmth on his back and smiled, starting to move more quickly. “Oh, I don’t mind. I seek Rina, a student of mine. We have a few things to go over before the performance tonight.”

Rannver’s wings twitched and he glided down to the walkway, matching Amaranthos’ pace. “I know her, sir. I could have fetched her for you. She is close with Iollan. You know him too, I believe, sir.” Black eyes watched him as they stepped down, and turned a sharp corner into another, much thicker cloud. Neither spoke for a moment as the mist swirled around their head, filled their mouths; water dripped down Amaranthos’s face like tears. He rubbed his eyes and peered into the fog.

“Here, sir,” came the mild, disembodied voice beside him. “Let me help you.” A hand reached out and Amaranthos felt his arm taken in a gentle, but firm grip and he was guided through the cold whiteness down to the bottom of the stairway, beyond the cloud. Amaranthos took a deep, relieved breath, as he once again stood in sunlight. Then he politely removed his arm from Rannver’s grasp. The black eyes were still watching him. Amaranthos cleared his throat, shook out his wings. “Thank you, Rannver. I must go now, if I am to reach the Roots before the Moon Dance.”

Rannver tipped his hat again. “I look forward to the Dance

myself. A pleasant journey down, sir.” Spiked wings snapped open and Rannver flew off, back up into the clouds.

Amaranthos stared after him for a moment, then grimaced and dusted futilely at the part of his jacket Rannver had held onto. He shook his head, and started down a long blue pathway shot through with swirls of gold. *I have never liked that Bohk.*

High above in one of the branches of the canopy, Rannver stood, arms folded. A few moments later there was a beating of wings, and Rannver was joined by two more Bohks in beige and black, who came to rest on the branch beside him. The three silently watched Amaranthos’s progress down the pathway until he was lost in the leaves. Then, as one, they spread their wings, and flew upwards, spiraling the trunk, and disappeared into the Tree.



Dark red light shone thinly down through the dense leaves and evening shadows crept across his path as Amaranthos came to the last staircase – a short little walkway through the thick branches that sprouted from the trunk; he had to stoop, wings folded in tight, to avoid scraping himself on the bark. His feet were sore and his back ached – it had been a much longer journey down than he had expected.

“Was it really this long last time?” he puffed to himself continuing his slow limp down. When was the last time I came here...? He scratched his head, unable to remember. “I must be getting old.” His voice echoed in the darkness of the tunnel. He slid his hands along



the branches, feeling his way down, toes prodding gently with every step.

At last he landed, with an ungraceful thump, at the bottom of the path and looked out through the archway. Giant Roots towered above him – rough, graying bark still shining with water from last night’s rain, they curved and dipped over the ground, winding on and on into the dusky distance. His breath left him as he stared at the immensity of the Roots. *I had forgotten how different...how big this place is.*

Then he breathed in deeply. *But it’s looking like a home, again. Almost like it did, before.*

As he stood there, wondering where to go, something blue flashed over to his left – on the Root closest to him sat two Nib homes, pale yellow and rounded, sitting squat where the Root sloped down; red roofs gleamed in blue light.

Amaranthos stepped out onto the slippery Root and made his way over to the first Nib Nest. The strange light came from small blue globes that hung from translucent vines curled around the nest; they pulsed softly, their glow spilling out to illuminate both the Nests and the waving fronds of grass far below.

Amaranthos smiled – the Nibs had such tiny, cozy homes, so different from his own spacious, airy dwelling in the Canopy. There were names carved on each door, leaves intertwined in twirls and patterns with the letters.

*Beautiful. But neither of these are the names I’m looking for.* He raised a long arm to brush a blue globe as he passed by; it warmed his fingers gently. *Where should I go?*

He stood by one of the Nib Nests, looked down and saw, swinging in the wind, a scarlet vine ladder that fell from the door of the first dwelling to the ground. Flexing tired muscles, he balanced cautiously on the Root, wound his fingers around the vine and began to climb down. The vine felt reassuringly strong as he swayed in midair, though his hands were shaking, just a little, when he finally made it to the tall grass.

Amaranthos let go of the vine, adjusted his jacket, and looked up. All across the twisting Roots he saw blue lights spark to life – the homes of the Nibs, glittering as the day darkened.

“Like little stars,” he whispered into the wind. The grass stroked his legs, and he closed his eyes, breathing in the heavy scent of the earth. He stretched his arms out wide, every muscle in his body waking to new life with the awareness of the beauty of this unfamiliar place – and began to dance.

He lost himself and his purpose in each movement – each twirl, each sweep of his fingers through the air, feeling the strange coolness of the grass beneath his feet. Blue lights whirled as he spun through the air – and then a high-pitched shriek sounded somewhere below him. The world swung dizzily as he came to a sudden halt, nearly falling headlong into the grass; he flung out a hand and grabbed at the nearest Root. Gasping, he looked down and saw a tiny Nib child crouched on the ground, staring up at him with wide amber eyes. A wooden toy was clutched tightly in one hand and its wings quivered as Amaranthos smiled breathlessly.

“Hello young Niblet,” he began, “could you tell me—”

The Nib child shrieked again and ran off into the shadows, bright wings flapping. Amaranthos sighed, and watched as a short Nib woman in a flowing red dress swooped down and gathered the frightened child into her arms and flew up to a large, sagging dwelling at the very base of one of the Roots.

“Dear me,” said Amaranthos to himself, shaking out his tired limbs. “I didn’t think my dancing was that terrifying!”

Then a voice floated down through cooling twilight air. “Rosie, a little less noise please—” There was a pause in the dying light. Then, “Mr. Amaranthos?”

Amaranthos craned his neck and saw a tousled dark head sticking out of a small Nest that rested in a bend of one of the bigger Roots.

“Iollan, is that you?”

A hand waved at him, and then blue light flooded down as Iollan pulled the globe over to the window.

“Yes,” Iollan’s voice was full of surprise. “What brings you all the way to the Roots, Master Amar?”

“I wanted to speak to Rina, is she there?”

“She is – I’ll lower the ladder.” Another one of the vine ladders

flopped to the ground and Amaranthos began to climb. As he reached the top of the ladder he said, “I’m so glad I found you, it’s been so long since I’ve been down here – I’d forgotten how long a walk it is, and the sun is beginning to set...”

Iollan reached out and gently helped Amaranthos onto the branch. “This way, sir. Welcome to my humble Root Nest.”

Amaranthos smiled back, trying yet again to catch his breath, and looked at the small, bulbous little home, perched on a downward angle in the curve of the dark branch. Two names were carved on the door in a deep, vibrant blue: Iollan and Mick; leaves curled lovingly around each letter.

“Rina doesn’t live with you?”

“No, sir,” said Iollan, opening the door, and gesturing Amaranthos inside. “But she always visits before a dance.” He gave Amaranthos a shy smile and called into one of the other rooms. “Rina? There’s someone here to see you.”

“I’ll be there in a moment,” a mellow voice answered from behind a half-open, red door.

“Have a seat sir, please.”

Amaranthos looked around the warm room with pleasure. There was colour everywhere – bright blankets and carved, painted chairs; splashes of colour leapt out at him from the drawings scattered on the tables and hanging haphazard from the walls. The place was bathed in yellow light from candles that shone perched in odd places throughout the room.

Such a wonderful home. He chose a sweet little gold and green chair and folded himself into it with a sigh, long legs thrust out like roots. It felt incredibly satisfying to sit down at last.

Then the sweet smell of lolass fruit wafted through the air, a rustle of fabric, and Rina entered the room, layers of silver gauze lifting and wafting with each movement, the practiced grace of a dancer.

Amaranthos started to get to his feet, but she waved him back down with a flourish of silver. He reached out and captured her hand in his own.

“My dear. You look lovely. I am pleased beyond words you

chose to wear my gift for this dance.”

Her green eyes beamed back at him. “I couldn’t wear anything else, not tonight. In this I feel like I’m clothed in moonlight.” Her eyes flicked over to Iollan, who was standing on the other side of the room shuffling some papers, and back to Amaranthos as she released his hand and pulled up a small chair beside him. She seated herself carefully, arranging the delicate cloth around her.

“But why are you here, sir?”

“Apparently he walked all the way down,” said Iollan, leaning against his desk, grinning.

Rina turned wide eyes back to Amaranthos. “You didn’t.”

Amaranthos smiled ruefully. “I’m afraid I did. It was... beautiful, but very tiring!”

Rina laughed. “You shouldn’t have worn yourself out on tonight, of all nights – there is nothing wrong, I hope?” Her brilliant wings rippled, pale forehead creased in sudden worry.

“No, no, my child.” Amaranthos stretched his arms above his head with a yawn. “Just a small adjustment to one of the group sequences. A few more feet to the north so as to catch the moonlight more fully, I think. We want this to be the most glorious beginning to the Summer Festival the Tree has ever seen; I don’t want the shadows to hide my art.”

“Of course not sir,” Rina said in obvious relief, exchanging a fond glance with Iollan, who was still grinning.

“And you, Iollan.”

“Yes, sir?” Iollan stood to attention smartly.

Amaranthos’ mouth twitched. “I have one particular dance sequence I would like immortalized by your capable hands. Will you illuminate it for me?”

Iolla’s dark eyes sparked with interest; his wings fluttered. “Gladly, sir! Do you have any sketches for me to work from?”

Amaranthos waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, yes, in my desk, but I really want you to work primarily from the performance tonight. It will enhance your ability to recreate the subtle play of the light and shadow through the movements of my dancers.” His fingers traced lines through

the air, his mind lost in the moonlight. Then, slowly, he became aware of the silence – Rina’s averted eyes, Iollan’s bowed head.

“What is it?” he asked in alarm.

“I’m sorry sir,” Iollan said lowly, his hands clenched. “I’m not allowed to go to the dance tonight.”

Amaranthos struggled out of the chair. “What? Why not?” Visions of his beauty - silver light, pale limbs, graceful leaps, shimmering wings – crumbled in his head.

“I received a...visit from Arrack, today,” Iollan answered, not looking up.

“Ah,” said Amaranthos, rubbing absently at his arm; he could still feel how those fingers dug into his skin through the cloth. “Rannver’s uncle.”

“Yes, sir.” Iollan’s voice was barely a whisper.

Rina rose and drifted over to Iollan and laid a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t move, still staring at the ground.

“Iollan,” said Amaranthos gently.

Iollan looked up.

“Come here and show me your arm, please.”

Riana’s hand fell away in drifting folds of silver as Iollan reluctantly held out his arm. A dark, swollen purple bruise encircled his left wrist, travelling upward toward his thumb: his drawing hand. Amaranthos felt his stomach drop; his tiny wings trembled.

“And what did Arrack want?” he asked, after a long pause; his chest felt strangely tight.

Iollan merely shook his head and tried to turn away.

“Iollan has been reading the Wixlebooks again,” said Rina softly into the silence. “He works with them so often to illuminate events, but he’s been looking further back into our history. And talking about what he has...found in them.” She looked at Iollan, who was folding further into himself, her wings beginning to shake. “They don’t like him talking about it,” she whispered. Her long fingers brushed at the tangled hair hanging over Iollan’s face. “So they took away something he loves.”

“Oh, Iollan.” Amaranthos rubbed one hand over his face, and stared at the ugly bruise on the Nib’s wrist. “Please. You are one of our best illuminators. Don’t let them take your art away from you as well.

Keep your head down and your wings closed. I don't want to see you any more bruised."

"Thank you sir," Iollan said quietly.

Amaranthos stood silent a moment longer, feeling suddenly cold and drained, watching them – Rina's fair head leaning against Iollan's hunched shoulder, silhouetted against the candlelight. Then he shook himself and tried to smile, though it felt distinctly lopsided.

"My children, I'm afraid I must leave you. Iollan, would you be kind enough to call someone to help me back up to the Canopy? I fear my legs can only take that journey once in a day."

"Certainly," said Iollan, without looking at him. "I'll go and grab Mick," and he strode quickly out of the room. Amaranthos turned to Rina as Iollan's muffled calls floated back to them, and saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes. "Don't be scared my dear," he said, holding out his hand. She took it, her cool fingers wrapping around his as she looked gravely up at him. "I'm not scared," she said. "I'm angry."

Then, "Master Amar!" cried Mick, bouncing into the room. "Come all the way down to visit us! You should have saved your feet the trouble, sir."

Amaranthos laughed, squeezed Riana's hand, and let go. "Yes, I think I have discovered that myself! You look well," he said, approvingly.

Mick tossed his curly dark head and folded his arms. "Well enough to escort you back up in no time," and he flexed his wings and quirked an eyebrow.

Amaranthos chuckled. "Thank you, my boy." Then he turned to Rina. "I will see you soon, my dear." She inclined her head, face slightly flushed, and floated away, over to Iollan's desk. Amaranthos watched her for a moment, and then said, "And Iollan. I'll get Mick to bring those sketches down for you so that you may at least do some work." Iollan jerked his head, eyes still downcast. "And Rina or one of the other illuminators can help you fill in more of the details later."

"Yes, sir. You know I always love drawing the movements you direct." There was a small smile. Amaranthos puffed out his chest in pride and grinned. They all smiled back at him as the candles began to flicker in a light evening breeze. Then his smile faded. "Be guided by

root, branch and light. Wixle keep you safe.” And he took Mick’s  
outstretched arm and stepped out into the dusk.

