

Chapter I

A Strange Encounter

Deep in a valley nestled between misty mountains was a village of alepou. It was peaceful, with well-kept roads, colorful gardens, orchards, a wine-dark river, and houses of polished wood. Denhearth was, like all alepou villages, full of life.

A young alepou named Ikayra stood outside of her house one spring morning enjoying the sunrise. She waved to those strolling down Riverview Street as they prepared for their day's work. Already the village was teeming with energy as the little alepou with their fox-like ears hurried along the road, chatting with exuberance as their eyes twinkled.

A pear tree stood in Ikayra's front garden, its white blossom fluttering in the early morning breeze from the nearby Aithôps River. In Ikayra's garden, the flowers were arranged by size, shape and color—poppies, hyacinths, lilies, gentians, orchids—for alepou loved nature and had an eye for detail. The fir houses lining Riverview had thatched roofs, and each one of them had a red, arched door with a brass knocker to the right. The houses were tiny, for alepou loved all things small.

Ikayra entered the house, and the smell of fresh barley bread wafted through the hall as her mother prepared breakfast. Alepou houses were always filled with the most wonderful smells—basil, oregano, olives, cheese, warm bread, and roasted meat—because they loved to cook, but only because they loved eating good food even more. The floor was paneled with cherry wood, and no ornate artwork or superfluous possessions adorned the walls of this house, for alepou cherished simplicity. Not a crumb or speck for dust could be found about the rooms, either, for they also valued tidiness.

"I'm off to the woods to hunt," Ikayra said as she kissed her mother on the cheek. "I'll be back soon." Ikayra went to her room, grasped her bow, and slung her quiver over her shoulder.

Perhaps you are unfamiliar with alepou since they were creatures from so long ago. No one these days knows much about them, and many humans never did. They were a shy people who liked to keep to themselves in their villages deep in the forests and mountains of bygone days. They were no taller than five feet, but they were slender-limbed and agile—much quicker than any clumsy humans. The men dressed in tunics and pants, while the women wore a robe called a peplos, which was folded over in front and fastened with a cloth belt, like a kimono. Though shy, they were also inexhaustibly curious, as this story shall show.

The fiery red waves of Ikayra's hair caught the sunlight as she walked down the street. The meadow to the north of the village was bursting with lilies and hyacinth in bloom. She made her way east, towards the slopes of the Whispering Mountains and the Deep Forest, which the alepou called *Hulé Betheia*.

Approaching the forest's edge, Ikayra stopped. She detected a peculiar scent. "No, it couldn't be..." she muttered. "That scent belongs to a ..." But before she could finish her sentence, a man stumbled out of the forest, clutching his breast. His tunic was smeared with blood. Ikayra dropped her bow. The man collapsed, gave her a vacant look, and passed out.

For a moment, Ikayra just stared, not moving a muscle. Her nose had not lied: he was indeed a human. The alepou looked around, but no one else was there. *What would people think if I brought a human into the village? No, I can't*, Ikayra thought, shaking her head as she turned away. Then she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists so hard that her knuckles ached. *I could*

never help one of those creatures! But the scent of blood filled her nostrils, and her stomach lurched. Ikayra looked at the wounded human lying on the ground, the grass turning red beneath him. The alepou's eyes filled with pity, and she began picking the man up.

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