

THE HISTORY OF AESANDRE VA'IANA

The Past

Among the seas and between the continents of Orselia lie many hidden places. Islands, caves, and coves alike are swept by the relentless seas, reclaimed nightly by the shifting tides. Maranwe, or the lonely tree, sits upon one such island far off the coast of Azron.

Legends speak of the great druid Va'iana, who travelled many centuries ago through Orselia. On the seas he encountered one such small island, barely large enough for three men to stand upon. The island was barren, more sandy breaker than useful land, but as Va'iana passed he spotted something unusual. There among the dunes a sapling had sprouted, surviving the salty assault of the sea.

Intrigued, Va'iana landed his raft to take a closer look at this remarkable work of nature. Communing with the earth, the sea, and the sky, he reached out in wonder, finding his way down into the roots of the sapling. Down, down, down into darkness he went. Down past wandering sea life and hunting mammals, down past wrecked vessels and skulking bottom feeders, down into the bed of the sea.

It was amazing. This was no sapling, and indeed no island. Far beneath the waters grew a great tree, planted further down into the bed of the sea than could naturally exist. Sand and earth had collected against the trunk, slowly building up into the small island. Calling a passing tern, Va'iana sent out a call to his fellow druids, a call to come and behold this wonder.

That is the tale of how Maranwe was found. Hundreds of years passed as the druids studied, guided, and marvelled at the greatness of Maranwe. With no land and the ever looming threat of the sea, the druids lived at first in boats, and then in the boughs, and then in houses among the branches. Like a tangled web of string, with the sea as an ever present floor and the walls nothing but sky, the druids called this home.

Sheltered by the rough seas and protected by the druids, very few travellers ever came to Maranwe. Stories and rumours spread about an ancient tree on the seas, but they were often dismissed as improbable at best.

Life on Maranwe

While Maranwe is a very large tree, the druids have maintained their usual respect for nature. Great care has been taken in the human adaptations to ensure that the tree isn't harmed or stunted by anything they do. Homes are often small, most little more than a hammock or cradle hung from a bough.

Eighteen druids and elves live on Maranwe, living and sharing their lives as a tight community. Among the non-druids are Rangers, Fighters, and one Mage, but the majority are Druids.

Few people ever come or go from Maranwe, with most of their time spent communing with the tree or on and within the seas. Children are born and raised here, with three generations of elves residing within the branches. Not all children stay, but they all accept the need to keep Maranwe secret from those who would take an unnatural interest in it.

Aesandre's Childhood A branching path chosen

Va'iana was a very solitary man, rarely keeping company other than those he had business with. His eye was finally caught by Tifena, a ranger seeking refuge from a particularly fearsome sea-storm that had wrecked her vessel and cast her adrift.

She had been brought to Maranwe by the waves of the sea, her life spared, the motions of nature deciding her course. Unlike most elves, who sported fair, light features, Tifena was a striking, fiery character. With no vessel to immediately depart upon she stayed on Maranwe for a time, intrigued by the great tree in the middle of the sea.

Va'iana, at first intrigued by the woman spared by nature, and then by her interest in the great tree, soon became infatuated with her. When Va'iana devoted his life to Tifena it was naturally accepted that their child would follow in a great line of druids.

Their daughter, born on Maranwe under the moonlit night sky, was named Aesandre Va'iana. Born of the moon, she was immediately deemed blessed of the lunar sign. Her first gift was a

delicate copper chain with a pendant in the shape of a crescent moon.

While Va'iana continued to devote the majority of his time to the tending of Maranwe, Tifena started to grow restless. She would often depart to the mainland for months at a time, returning with supplies, gifts, and stories.

In her mother's absence, Va'iana took the opportunity to begin instructing Aesandre in the Druidic ways. She learned fast and soon began communing with the great tree, the animals, and the sea. A rift began to form between Va'iana and Tifena, their desired lifestyles slowly causing more and more friction.

Aesandre, under her father's guiding hand, became an adept Druid. She read and learned all about the animals and plants of the world, something supported by her father, but that only fuelled her desire to leave Maranwe. On her tenth birthday, after many years of arguments over her path, Va'iana finally relented and allowed Aesandre to leave Maranwe with her mother for the mainland.

For five years Aesandre finally lived among the world. Tifena taught her the way of the Ranger, of the bow and spear. The instincts of the hunt melded with the insight of the Druid, and she quickly became a fearsome marksman with a longbow.

She rarely returned to Maranwe, preferring to commune with her father through animals and nature. He was pleased that she had begun to flourish on the mainland, but strived to remind her of her duty to nature. A duty that she risked greatly on her fifteenth birthday.

Disgrace Among the Kin

On Aesandre's fifteenth birthday, five years after first leaving Maranwe, Tifena took her daughter, born of the moon, on a night-time hunt. They roamed the silvered glades, seeking a prey worthy of being their quarry; not to kill, but to hunt.

Stalking long into the night, they tracked a fearsome Silver Wolf, a rare and precious beast; keen, dangerous, and difficult to track. At every turn the wolf seemed to stay ahead of them, confusing its tracks, doubling back, moving with incredible lightness and speed. Frustrated, Aesandre began to draw upon her Druidic training to pre-empt the beast's moves.

Eventually they cornered the wolf in a sheltered glade. Thick clumps of thorns formed an impassable wall around the circle, and the

hunters closed in on their prey. Tifena, seeing that their quarry was near, allowed Aesandre to take the lead and the glory of the hunt.

The wolf stood alone, exposed in the middle of the glade, facing its hunters. Its eyes gleamed with a fierce coldness, fangs as yet unborne, a certain determined poise. Longbow in hand, Aesandre slowly drew her arrow, challenging her prey with her stare. She knew that if she could capture this wolf, her mother would be the pride of Rangers everywhere.

Seemingly unmoved, the beast continued to stare Aesandre down. It was tense, waiting. Aesandre began to close the distance, a shot prepared to hamper the beast for the snare. The wolf was unflinching, and in that moment she knew something was wrong, the beast knew something she did not.

As she entered the clearing, the wolf's plan became clear. Everything happened almost instantaneously. First, the creeping vine caught Aesandre's boot, tripping her. Barely controlling the fall, managing to land on one knee, she helplessly watched the Wolf as it snickered and bolted for the thicket.

Desperate, Aesandre took aim and fired the hampering shot. Desperate, Aesandre reached out and touched the Wolf's mind.

The wolf stopped dead and turned to face her, unable to resist the call. The arrow, aimed at a moving target, struck the wolf in the neck. It fell, instantly dead.

Many of the details between leaving the glade and waking in the morning were lost. A trespass against nature had been committed, intentful or not. The elves of the land were indifferent, praising the ability of the huntresses. Tifena, the sole witness of the event, knew better.

Almost in silence, Tifena and Aesandre returned to Maranwe.

A Quest for Redemption

When they arrived, Va'iana was aware of her trespass, as were the other Druids. Life was difficult at first, a sacred trust had been broken. Va'iana bore the blame against Tifena's teachings. Tifena bore the blame against the Va'iana teachings.

Unable to live with the disgrace, Aesandre devoted herself to her Druid roots. Tifena spent more and more time on the mainland.

Va'iana redoubled his efforts to teach his daughter.

Ten years passed. Time heals all wounds, and her disgrace was soon forgiven, though never forgotten. Under her father's tutelage once again, Aesandre learned more and more about the secrets of the Druids. Soon, she knew more than enough to know that something was wrong.

Va'iana seemed to be more and more worried over something, and though he dismissed it casually, she knew that something was brewing on the horizon. As time passed and Aesandre grew closer to nature, there came a point when Aesandre no longer needed her father to answer the question. Maranwe was dying.

A certain darkness was spreading from deep beneath the sea. Coursing up through the unknown depths of its roots, Maranwe was slowly being consumed, corrupted, and killed. Va'iana had no solution. No matter how deeply or how long he looked, the darkness could not be penetrated.

Va'iana was doing what he could to stave off the disease, but it was clear that something would have to be done at the source if there were ever to be a chance at saving the great tree. Though only twenty-five, merely a child in the eyes of elves, Aesandre was uniquely gifted. Born of the moon, a light in the darkness. The instinct of a Ranger and the intuition of a Druid. This was nature's course.

Leaving for the mainland, Aesandre once again returned to the elves. Tifena was waiting for her, seemingly aware of her daughter's mission. In front of her lay an entire outfit. The equipment was clearly Elvish, and clearly magical.

When she had been ship-wrecked that fateful night, Tifena had lost a lot of her prized possessions. That very night she had found them, scattered on the beach still wrapped and sealed in their containers. When Aesandre's boat had landed, she knew the fates had spoken.

Now the spitting image of her mother, Aesandre easily fit into the leather armour. Spear in hand, she was ready to leave when she was halted one last time by her mother. Into her hands was placed Tifena's prized longbow. The look in her mother's eyes betrayed a certainty about the road ahead.

To Commune with Nature

A companion of the moon

On her seventh year of study since returning to Maranwe, Aesandre was tentatively sent back to the mainland. The time had come in her Druidic teachings to decide on a path. An exile into the deepest parts of the wilderness was required to test the knowledge and essence of the Druid. Some returned, changed with animalistic qualities, others with companion animals and guides.

Aesandre spent a little time with her mother before departing back into the deep woods. There she roamed for a week, sleeping among the trees and walking among the animals.

On the seventh night, Aesandre was awoken by a strange sound. Slipping out of the tree she had slept upon she instinctively began to follow the call, the cold night air tugged at her skin through her loose robe. The sound came again, louder, stronger. The moonlight shone down in shafts between the leaves, and then suddenly in full force.

She stepped into a wide, sheltered glade. Thick thorns formed an impenetrable wall all around her. There in the middle of the clearing stood a large marble stone, the symbol of a wolf expertly carved onto the smooth surface. Atop the stone perched a large white owl, staring intently at Aesandre. It called again, its screech penetrating and demanding.

Shedding her robe, Aesandre slowly walked into the clearing, the night air stinging her bare skin. Respecting the presence of the owl, she knelt down by the stone and placed a hand on the marble. A cold resonating energy flowed through the stone. The same chill from that night returned, the shot, the memory, the life that had been taken.

Moving her hand to the earth, she felt down into the soil, feeling the presence of the silver wolf. No trophy had been kept, Tifena had respected nature. A small, sad smile found its way to Aesandre's lips. The screech came again, and looking up Aesandre could see the great Owl staring down at her.

Its white, snowy feathers shone in the moonlight, radiating a lunar aura. Golden eyes stared unendingly into hers. Slowly standing, Aesandre faced the owl. It bobbed its head cautiously, hooting softly. Laid bare before the animal, Aesandre had nothing to offer the creature.

The touch of cold metal tingled Aesandre's neck, and again she found a small smile. Reaching up, she undid the clasp of the copper chain and carefully relinked it. The owl, intrigued, once again bobbed its head and eyed the copper pendant intently. Stepping forward, Aesandre held up the chain to the owl. Her symbol, her birth, her life-long possession.

Hooting softly, the owl ducked its head to get a better look at the crescent moon pendant. Taking the chance, Aesandre slipped the chain over the owl's neck. With a screech, the owl took off into the darkness of the night, silhouetted against the moon. Wrapping herself in her arms, Aesandre stood and simply watched the bird carry away into the night.

She wandered the following day, a certain relief across her mind. A weight had been lifted, and Aesandre knew that nature had chosen to forgive her trespass. That night when she made camp the screeching came again, but before she could look for the owl it came swooping down into the trees where she was camped.

The copper pendant glistened in the light, and the owl once again stared intently at Aesandre. From that night on, Aesandre was accompanied by the Owl. At first at a distance, but after the second week of her travels they were hunting and running at speed.

When she returned from exile, Va'iana simply nodded with approval.