



MAGIC

SHADOWS OF RENEWAL

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE	jmarsh
TWO	Ruth Ann Keller
THREE	Dan Okafor
FOUR	Iris Beddoe
FIVE	Colin McAteer
SIX	Olive Kassen
SEVEN	Sammy Hall
EIGHT	typewriter_tom

Chapter

ONE

written by jmarsh

The orchard had been dying for three generations, though no one who tended it would say so aloud. To speak of the dying was to give it form, and form, in a place where the trees bent according to rules older than root or branch, was a dangerous gift to offer. The Kinloch family had learned this the way all inheritors of cursed land learn such things: through silences that accumulated like frost, through warning glances exchanged across the breakfast table when a child asked why Grandmother always set out seven clay bowls of milk on the eastern wall, though only six trees stood in that quarter of the grove. There had been seven once. Everyone knew this. No one remembered when the seventh had gone, only that its absence was a wound that would not close, that the gap in the canopy let through a quality of moonlight that made the apples on the remaining trees grow strange and small and sweet beyond reason, their flesh marbled with colors that had no names in the common tongue. It was Margot who found the door, though later she would insist, with the peculiar intensity of someone who has seen a truth too large to carry alone, that the door had found her. She had gone into the orchard at the violet hour, that suspension between dog and wolf when shadows cease to be shadows and become instead the true shapes of things, the forms they wear when human eyes are shuttered in sleep. The pruning shears hung heavy at her belt. Three apples wrapped

in waxed paper weighed down her jacket pockets, insurance against the hungers that sometimes rose in the orchard's heart, where the oldest trees grew in a configuration that her father's father had once described, in the month before his death, as geometrically unfortunate. The door stood in the bark of the central tree, the grandmother of the grove, whose trunk required four people linking hands to encircle. It had not been there that morning. Margot was certain of this with the certainty of someone who had walked this path every day since she could walk, who knew each knot and canker, each place where the bark had been rubbed smooth by the passing of bodies both human and otherwise. The door was small, no higher than her knee, its frame grown from the living wood itself, or perhaps the wood had grown around it, accepting its presence the way flesh accepts a splinter driven deep enough to become part of the body's architecture. She knelt. The earth beneath her was soft with the mulch of a thousand seasons, with the remnants of apples that had fallen and been left to rot because to take them, her grandmother had said, was to steal from those who had first claim. Who those claimants were, her grandmother had never specified. There were questions in the Kinloch family that remained unasked not from lack of curiosity but from an abundance of caution. Through the door, she could see a passage descending. The walls were not wood but something that resembled mother-of-pearl, iridescent and faintly luminous, pulsing with a rhythm that matched, she realized with a start that sent ice down her spine, her own heartbeat. From below rose a scent of earth and honey and something else, something that made her think of the dreams she sometimes had in deep winter, dreams of summers that had never occurred in any history she knew, where the trees bore fruit of crystal and bone and the harvesters sang in a language that predated words. The shears at her belt grew warm against her hip. In her pocket, the three apples began, very gently, to hum. Margot, daughter of Ruth, granddaughter of Catherine, inheritor of silences and small magics and the awful weight of choice, put her hand upon the doorframe. The wood was warm. It welcomed her touch as the earth welcomes rain after

drought. She began, breath held against whatever waited below, to descend.

Chapter

TWO

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One must understand that the Kinloch family did not venture into the orchard's depths without preparation, though what constituted adequate preparation for such a descent had never been codified in any record the family kept. There were journals, naturally, bound in leather gone soft with handling and time, but these spoke only in ellipses and careful omissions. One learned, if one learned at all, by observation of ritual rather than explanation. Margot had observed. She had watched her grandmother circle the seven bowls at dawn, moving always in the direction contrary to the sun's passage. She had noted which fingers her mother used when plucking fruit from the westernmost trees, how one never used the thumb or forefinger, for these were the grasping digits, and one did not grasp at what the orchard offered. One received, or one abstained. The passage contracted around her as she descended, though whether the space itself diminished or she grew larger in some fashion beyond physical measurement, she could not determine. The mother-of-pearl walls pressed close enough now that her shoulders brushed them with each step downward, and where they touched her coat, small spots of warmth bloomed and faded, as though the walls were tasting her, assessing her composition. She had gone perhaps twenty steps when the humming of the apples changed pitch. The sound climbed higher, became almost a keening, and Margot understood with

the clarity that comes in dreams that they were afraid. This troubled her more than her own fear, which sat cold and patient in her chest. The apples had no business being afraid. They had been grown in this soil, fed by roots that drew from whatever aquifer of strangeness sustained the orchard. They belonged here in a way she never could. Unless, she thought, and the thought arrived complete and terrible, they had been changed by their removal. By being chosen. By being wrapped in waxed paper and carried in a pocket against a human heart. The stairs ended. She found herself in a chamber whose dimensions refused to remain constant when she was not looking directly at them. Phosphorescence clung to the ceiling in patterns that suggested intention, possibly language, though of a sort that required senses she did not possess. The floor was carpeted in something that resembled moss but gave off a faint heat, as though it were not a plant at all but a colony of small, warm-blooded creatures lying very still. At the chamber's centre stood a table. This, at least, was comprehensible, being made of wood and having four legs and a surface, though the wood was black as obsidian and the grain in it moved, flowing in slow currents beneath the polish. Upon the table sat a cup. It was a simple vessel, earthenware, unglazed, the sort one might use for common purposes in any farmhouse kitchen. Yet Margot found she could not look at it for more than a moment at a time. The cup possessed a quality of thereness that made the rest of the chamber seem somehow provisional by comparison, as though the walls and ceiling and glowing patterns were decorations assembled around the cup's essential reality. She approached. The pruning shears at her belt had gone cold now, cold enough to burn through the fabric of her skirt. The apples had ceased their humming entirely. The cup was empty, though shadows pooled in its depths in defiance of the light source, which came from no direction she could name. As she bent to examine it more closely, she saw that the shadows moved. They rose and fell like something breathing. From behind her came a voice, though whether it originated in the chamber or in her own skull, she could not determine. "One may drink," it said, in a tone that carried neither

welcome nor warning, "or one may pour. But one may not leave the cup as it is found." Margot's hand went to her pocket. The apples there had grown heavy as stones.

Chapter

THREE

written by Dan Okafor

Margot had always prided herself on making sensible decisions, which was why she found herself particularly irritated that both options presented by the disembodied voice sounded equally idiotic. Drink from a cup of living shadows in the orchard basement. Certainly. Very reasonable. Pour what, exactly? The apples? Her blood? The lukewarm tea she'd gulped at breakfast, which was presumably still sloshing around her digestive tract and not available for ritual purposes? She withdrew one of the apples from her pocket. The waxed paper crackled in the silence, an aggressively mundane sound. The apple itself had changed. The skin, which had been the mottled red-green of the eastern trees, now showed veins of silver that pulsed faintly. The pattern matched, she noticed with resignation, the phosphorescence on the ceiling. "Right," she said aloud, because someone ought to say something, and the voice had not volunteered further instructions. "Pour it is." She unwrapped the apple completely. The waxed paper fell to the moss-floor and was immediately absorbed, vanishing into the warm carpet without leaving a trace. That seemed ominous, but then again, everything down here seemed ominous. Even the table legs had an ominous quality, being slightly too thin to support the weight they held, yet supporting it anyway. Margot held the apple over the cup and squeezed. Nothing happened. She squeezed harder, feeling ridiculous.

The apple remained intact, silver veins brightening as though amused by her efforts. The pruning shears burned colder against her hip. Of course. Magic had a cost, her grandmother had said once, her only direct statement on the matter. You never get something for nothing, and anyone who tells you different is selling something worse than nothing. She drew the shears. They had warmed again the moment she touched them, as though pleased to be acknowledged. The blades were sharp enough that she'd once cut through a branch thick as her wrist without noticing until the wood fell away. She pressed the apple to the cup's rim and cut. The apple split with a sound like breaking glass. Liquid poured out, far more than any apple should contain. It was not juice. The substance that flowed into the cup was luminous, thick as honey, and it moved against gravity, climbing the interior walls of the vessel before settling into patterns that hurt to observe directly. The shadows that had been breathing in the cup's depths were drinking it, or being dissolved by it. Margot could not tell which. The apple in her hand had become a husk, paper-thin and weightless. It crumbled to dust between her fingers. The cup was full. "One of seven," the voice said. There was something almost apologetic in its tone now, which Margot found more disturbing than the earlier neutrality. "The debt requires seven." "I have two more apples," Margot said. "The cup requires seven pourings." "Then you have a staffing problem." The silence that followed suggested the voice was not accustomed to being talked back to. Margot used the time to consider her options. Two apples left. Five pourings needed. The shears were hot again, almost burning, and she understood suddenly that they were offering themselves. Her father's father had carried these shears. And his father before him. How many Kinloch hands had gripped these handles? How much of them remained in the steel? She thought of the seventh tree, the one that had left a gap in the canopy. The one no one remembered losing. "The debt," she said slowly, "is older than my grandmother." "The debt is older than trees." "And you expect me to pay it." "Someone must." Margot looked at the shears in her hand, then at the two remaining apples in her pocket. She thought about her

grandmother's careful circuits around the seven bowls. Seven, always seven, though only six trees remained. Insurance, perhaps. Or hope. Or both. She set the shears on the table beside the cup. They rang against the black wood, a clear tone that resonated in her chest. When the sound faded, the phosphorescence on the ceiling had rearranged itself into something that might have been writing, might have been a map. "Show me the other six," she said. The chamber's walls began, with obvious reluctance, to expand.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Iris Beddoe

The walls rearranged themselves with obvious reluctance, as though each stone whispered a complaint to its neighbor before yielding an inch or two. Margot stood in the center of the chamber, her breath visible in the cool air. The table and cup remained static, like guardians unimpressed by her demands. She traced a finger over the table's obsidian surface, feeling the flow beneath the polish, a river of something ancient and insistent. She stepped closer to the cup, its phosphorescence now forming letters that shimmered faintly above it. The words seemed almost alive, pulsing with an inner light. Margot's heart skipped a beat as she read them: The Seven Shadows.

"Seven," she whispered, "not six." Her fingers trembled, tracing the lines of light. They led to six directions, each pointing towards a different part of the orchard. Six trees, she thought. Six apples, six pourings. Six debts. She turned slowly, her gaze settling on the moss floor where the apple husk lay broken. The dust seemed to float in slow, lazy circles, as if aware of her presence and reluctant to settle. She picked up one of the remaining apples, its skin marbled with silver veins that pulsed like tiny stars. Her hand hovered over the cup again. One of seven. The voice echoed faintly, almost lost in the silence that pressed around them. She hesitated, then wrapped her fingers around the apple stem and squeezed. A liquid, thick as honey, spilled out. It moved

against gravity, climbing up the side of the cup before settling into new patterns. Shadows seemed to drink from it, their breathing more deliberate now, like a deep sighing that filled the chamber with an eerie quiet. Margot watched, her mind racing. The seventh tree, she thought, was no longer just a gap in the canopy. It had become a presence, a memory woven into the fabric of the orchard's magic. Seven, not six. She needed to find it. She turned towards the direction indicated by the phosphorescence. The walls closed in slightly as she moved, their edges brushing her skin with a coldness that seemed almost personal. The chamber began to expand once more, revealing the path ahead. Margot stepped forward, her boots crunching on the moss, leaving a trail of apple dust behind. The orchard was dark and quiet, the trees standing like sentinels in the moonlight. She followed the line of phosphorescence, which flickered erratically as if trying to guide her but unsure how far it could stretch. The seventh tree stood at the edge of the grove, its branches twisted and gnarled, a stark contrast to the others that seemed almost asleep under the silver glow. Margot approached, her heart pounding in time with the liquid in the cup. She reached out to touch the bark, feeling the roughness of years and secrets hidden within. The tree's surface pulsed slightly, as though acknowledging her presence. She noticed a small door embedded in the trunk, similar to the one she had found before but different somehow. She knelt beside it, her fingers tracing the pattern around its edges. The wood felt warm beneath her touch, welcoming yet cautious. Inside, the air was thick with something other than the usual orchard scents, something heavier, more complex. She placed the apple in her pocket next to the remaining two and held out her hand. "Show me," she whispered, "what you know."

The door began to glow faintly, its phosphorescence coalescing into a single line that led deeper into the tree's heart. Margot followed it down a winding path lined with glowing lines, each one telling a story of shadows and secrets. She emerged in a small chamber, dimly lit by the remaining phosphorescent lines. The walls were carved with intricate

designs, depicting scenes from the orchard's history, trees planted, apples picked, generations born and gone. At the center stood another table, this one covered with seven cups, each filled to the brim. Margot approached, her hand hovering over the nearest cup. Each one bore a symbol, a different shadow. The Seventh Shadow was written in the liquid of the first two, now half-empty. She picked up the third apple from her pocket and squeezed it into its designated cup. The liquid flowed into the fourth cup, followed by the fifth and sixth. With each pouring, the shadows seemed to coalesce, their breathing growing more deliberate until they formed a single entity at the center of the chamber, a figure that began to take shape. It was a woman, her face obscured but her presence unmistakable. She turned towards Margot, her eyes glowing with an inner light. We have been waiting, she said, her voice resonant and ancient. Margot stepped forward, feeling the weight of the revelation.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Colin McAteer

Margot stepped forward, feeling the weight of the revelation. The woman's presence was undeniable, a force that seemed to emanate not just from her form but from the very walls around them. Margot's heart pounded in her chest as she approached the center of the chamber where the figure now stood fully formed. The woman wore a cloak made of shadows, its folds dancing like a wraith in the dim light. Her voice was soft yet carried a power that resonated deeply within Margot. "We have been waiting," she repeated, her eyes glowing with an ancient wisdom. Margot's breath caught as she noticed the seventh cup, now completely full and pulsing with an inner light. The shadows gathered around it, their breathing more deliberate, like the slow, deep sighs of a weary soul awakening from long slumber. "Who are you?" Margot asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why do I find this place? Why now?"

The woman turned to face Margot fully. Her form was fluid, shifting and changing as if made of liquid shadows. "I am the Keeper," she said, her voice carrying the weight of centuries. "For generations, we have watched over the orchard, guarding its secrets and ensuring the balance of the shadows."

Margot looked around the chamber, taking in the intricate carvings on the walls that depicted scenes from the orchard's history. Each scene told a story of trees planted, apples picked, and generations born and

gone. The weight of the past pressed down upon her. "Seven," she murmured, tracing the line of phosphorescence that led deeper into the tree's heart. "Why seven?"

The Keeper gestured towards the seventh tree, its gnarled branches twisted as if holding a world within themselves. "Each tree represents a piece of our collective memory," she explained. "Six trees represent six generations, six debts. But the seventh... it is not just a tree; it is a part of us, a reflection of what we have become."

Margot's gaze shifted to the small door embedded in the trunk. She knelt beside it, her fingers tracing the pattern around its edges. The wood felt warm beneath her touch, welcoming yet cautious. Inside, the air was thick with something heavier than just orchard scents, something complex and ancient. She placed the last apple in her pocket next to the remaining two and held out her hand. "Show me," she whispered, her fingers trembling slightly as if calling forth a spirit. The door began to glow faintly, its phosphorescence coalescing into a single line that led deeper into the tree's heart. Margot followed it down a winding path lined with glowing lines, each one telling a story of shadows and secrets. She emerged in another small chamber, dimly lit by the remaining phosphorescent lines. The walls were carved with intricate designs, depicting scenes from the orchard's history. At the center stood another table, this one covered with seven cups, each filled to the brim. Margot approached, her hand hovering over the nearest cup. Each one bore a symbol, a different shadow. The first two cups held The Seventh Shadow, now half-empty. She picked up the third apple from her pocket and squeezed it into its designated cup. The liquid flowed into the fourth cup, followed by the fifth and sixth. With each pouring, the shadows seemed to coalesce, their breathing growing more deliberate until they formed a single entity at the center of the chamber, a figure that began to take shape. It was a woman, her face obscured but her presence unmistakable. She turned towards Margot, her eyes glowing with an inner light. "We have been waiting," she repeated softly, her voice resonant and ancient. "You are chosen, Margot Kinloch."

Your journey is not just about paying the debt; it is about understanding what it means to be part of something greater than yourself."

Margot stepped forward, feeling the weight of the revelation. The woman's presence was overwhelming, a force that seemed to fill the chamber with its own light. "What does this mean for me?" she asked, her voice trembling. The Keeper's eyes locked onto Margot's, their gaze deep and penetrating. "It means you are part of a lineage that has kept the balance of the shadows for generations," she said. "Each apple, each pouring, is a step towards understanding what it truly means to be a guardian."

Margot looked down at her hands, still holding the last two apples. She felt the weight of responsibility settle upon her shoulders. "What do I do now?"

The Keeper's form shifted slightly as if gathering its thoughts. "You must walk the path that has been laid before you," she said. "Find the seventh tree and understand what it means to be a keeper."

Chapter

SIX

written by Olive Kassen

Margot stood in the small chamber, her heart heavy with the weight of the revelations. The Keeper's words echoed softly, filling the air with a haunting resonance that seemed to speak directly into her soul. She looked down at her hands, still holding the last two apples, feeling the cool, smooth surfaces under her fingertips. Each apple was a symbol, a tangible link to the ancient magic and the secrets of the orchard. "Find the seventh tree," the Keeper's voice murmured, almost in Margot's ear. "Understand what it means to be a keeper."

Margot took a deep breath, letting out a shaky exhale as she turned towards the exit. The winding path lined with glowing lines seemed to beckon her, its lights pulsing gently like distant stars. She stepped forward, feeling the moss crunch beneath her boots and the dust of the orchard trail behind her. The seventh tree loomed ahead, its gnarled branches twisting into shapes that almost seemed alive. Margot approached slowly, her gaze drawn to the small door embedded in the trunk. The wood felt warm under her fingers as she traced the intricate patterns around it. Inside, the air was thick with an ancient, almost tangible energy. She pushed open the door and stepped inside. The space was dim but filled with a soft, luminescent light that seemed to come from within the walls themselves. The chamber was smaller than the one in the tree's heart, but no less filled with history. Margot noticed

that the carvings here depicted not just generations of people and trees, but also stories of seasons, cycles, and the balance maintained by the Keeper. She knelt beside the door once more, her fingers tracing the patterns on the wood. A warm, almost comforting presence seemed to radiate from it, as if the tree itself was waiting for her to understand its purpose. With a deep breath, she placed one of the remaining apples in her pocket and held out her hand. "Show me," she whispered, feeling the weight of the words as they left her lips. The door began to glow faintly, the phosphorescence coalescing into a single line that led deeper into the tree's heart. Margot followed it, her steps quiet on the moss-covered floor, each step echoing softly in the stillness. The path wound its way through the darkness, leading down what felt like an endless tunnel. The walls around her were lined with more glowing lines, their patterns forming intricate designs that seemed to tell a story of their own. Each line led Margot closer to the center, where she could sense something profound and ancient waiting for her. Finally, she emerged into another small chamber, this one bathed in an eerie, otherworldly light. The walls were carved with more detailed scenes, but these told stories of the Keeper's duties and the balance maintained over centuries. At the center stood yet another table, this one covered with a single cup, now empty. Margot approached it, her fingers hesitating above its surface. She placed the last apple in her pocket and reached out to touch the cup. As she did so, the air around her seemed to shimmer, as if an invisible force was preparing for what was to come. The cup began to fill with a liquid that pulsed like tiny stars, its light growing brighter until it filled the chamber. With each pour, Margot felt the weight of the past and the future pressing upon her. The shadows around the cup seemed to shift, their breathing becoming more deliberate as if they were waking from a long slumber. They formed into a single figure, a woman with a face obscured by shadow but an aura that glowed with an ancient wisdom. The figure turned towards Margot, its eyes glowing softly in the dim light of the chamber. "You have completed your task," it said, its voice

resonant and filled with the weight of centuries. "But the journey does not end here."

Margot stepped forward, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The figure shifted slightly, as if considering its words carefully. "The orchard is not just a place of balance; it is a symbol of the cycles that govern all life," it said. "Each tree represents a piece of our collective memory, but together they form something greater."

Margot looked around the chamber, taking in the intricate carvings and the stories they told. "What do you want me to understand?" she asked, her mind racing with questions. The figure took a step closer, its presence growing more solid as it spoke.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sammy Hall

The figure took a step closer, its presence growing more solid as it spoke. "You have understood the balance," it said, its voice resonant and filled with the weight of centuries. "But there is more to learn. The orchard is not just a place of balance; it is a symbol of the cycles that govern all life."

Margot's heart raced as she looked around the chamber, taking in the intricate carvings and the stories they told. She felt a mixture of fear and determination, as if stepping into uncharted waters. "What do you want me to understand?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The figure shifted slightly, its form flickering like a candle flame in the dim light. "You must learn the importance of cycles," it said, gesturing towards the carvings that depicted seasons and the passage of time. "Each tree represents a piece of our collective memory, but together they form something greater. The orchard is a microcosm of the world outside."

Margot's gaze shifted to the seventh tree. Its gnarled branches twisted into shapes that almost seemed alive, as if holding a world within themselves. She felt a connection, a sense of belonging she had never known before. "So, what do I need to do now?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly. The figure turned towards her fully, its eyes glowing softly in the dim light. "Your first task is to understand the cycle

of life and death," it said. "Each tree represents a generation, a piece of our history. The seventh tree is not just a physical entity; it is a symbol of transformation and renewal."

Margot nodded slowly, her mind racing with questions. "Can you show me how the trees are connected?" she asked, gesturing towards the intricate carvings that depicted scenes from generations past. The figure smiled slightly, its presence radiating warmth and understanding. "Follow this path," it said, pointing to a glowing line that led deeper into the tree's heart. "Each line represents a lineage, a piece of our collective memory."

Margot stepped forward, her fingers tracing the lines as she followed them down the winding path. The walls around her were lined with more glowing lines, their patterns forming intricate designs that seemed to tell a story of their own. Each line led Margot closer to the center, where she could sense something profound and ancient waiting for her. Finally, she emerged into another small chamber, this one bathed in an eerie, otherworldly light. The walls were carved with more detailed scenes, but these told stories of the Keeper's duties and the balance maintained over centuries. At the center stood yet another table, this one covered with a single cup, now empty. Margot approached it, her fingers hesitating above its surface. She placed the last apple in her pocket and reached out to touch the cup. As she did so, the air around her seemed to shimmer, as if an invisible force was preparing for what was to come. The cup began to fill with a liquid that pulsed like tiny stars, its light growing brighter until it filled the chamber. With each pour, Margot felt the weight of the past and the future pressing upon her. The shadows around the cup seemed to shift, their breathing becoming more deliberate as if they were waking from a long slumber. They formed into a single figure, a woman with a face obscured by shadow but an aura that glowed with ancient wisdom. The figure turned towards Margot, its eyes glowing softly in the dim light of the chamber. "You have completed your task," it said, its voice resonant and filled with the weight of centuries. "But the journey does not end here."

Margot's breath caught as she looked at the figure, feeling a mix of awe and apprehension. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The figure shifted slightly, as if considering its words carefully. "The orchard is a microcosm of the world outside," it said. "Each tree represents a piece of our collective memory, but together they form something greater. The cycle of life and death is not just about survival; it is about transformation."

Margot's mind raced with questions as she looked around the chamber. She felt a deep connection to the orchard, as if understanding something profound about her own existence. "How can I apply this knowledge?" she asked, her voice trembling. The figure took a step closer, its presence growing more solid as it spoke. "You must learn to see the cycles of life and death in everything you do," it said. "Each tree represents a piece of our history, but together they form something greater."

Chapter

EIGHT

written by typewriter_tom

Margot's mind raced with questions as she looked around the chamber. She felt a deep connection to the orchard, as if understanding something profound about her own existence. "How can I apply this knowledge?" she asked, her voice trembling. The figure shifted slightly, its presence radiating an unspoken authority. "You must learn to see the cycles of life and death in everything you do," it said firmly. "Each tree represents a piece of our history, but together they form something greater. You are now part of this cycle."

Margot nodded, her resolve hardening. She knew what she had to do next. "What is my first task?" she asked, stepping closer to the table with the empty cup. The figure gestured towards the seventh tree. "Start by understanding the cycle of life and death in the orchard itself," it said. "Each year, when spring arrives, you must perform a ritual that ensures the trees thrive and the balance is maintained."

Margot took a deep breath, her heart pounding with both excitement and anxiety. She knew this was serious business. "When does spring begin?" she asked, looking up at the gnarled branches of the seventh tree. "Spring begins on the day of the vernal equinox," the figure replied. "On that day, you must gather specific elements, water from the oldest well in the village, soil from beneath the oldest tree, and a leaf from each of the seven trees."

Margot nodded, mentally noting these tasks. She turned to the seventh tree again, her eyes scanning its intricate carvings for any clues. "What happens if I fail?" she asked, her voice tinged with fear. The figure's form flickered slightly as it considered her question. "Failure is not an option," it said bluntly. "If the balance of the orchard is disrupted, the consequences can be dire. The cycles will falter, and the world outside may suffer."

Margot felt a surge of determination. She knew she couldn't fail. "Where do I begin?" she asked, stepping closer to the table. The figure pointed towards a small drawer under the table. "Start with this," it said, gesturing towards an ornate box. Margot reached out and opened it to find a set of instructions carefully laid out inside. She skimmed through them quickly, absorbing the details. "Today is October 10th," she said aloud, referring to her notes. "That means I have plenty of time to gather the necessary elements."

The figure nodded approvingly. "Correct," it said. "Now, make a plan for each element you need. The water from the well should be collected early in the morning when the dew is still fresh. The soil must come from beneath the oldest tree at dusk. And the leaves must be plucked during the full moon."

Margot nodded, mentally noting these steps. She turned to the table and picked up a small satchel that contained various tools she would need for her tasks. "How do I know when the full moon will occur?" she asked. "Check your almanac," the figure said, its eyes glowing softly in the dim light. "The full moon is always on the 15th of each month."

Margot took out her small pocket watch and checked the date. October 15th was just three days away. She felt a mix of excitement and relief. At least she had time to prepare. "Alright," she said, her voice steady. "Let's get started then. First, I need to gather the water from the oldest well in the village."

The figure nodded. "Be sure to use a clean container and fill it just before dawn. The dew will ensure the water is pure."

Margot left the small chamber, her steps quiet as she made her way through the orchard's winding paths. She reached the edge of the village and saw an ancient stone well in the distance. The air was crisp and cool, and the first rays of dawn were just beginning to break over the horizon. She filled a clean ceramic jug with water from the well and sealed it tightly. Carrying the jug back towards the orchard, she felt a sense of purpose. As she approached, she noticed the soil underfoot seemed especially rich and fertile. She decided to collect some at dusk when the light was soft and golden. By the time the sun began its descent, Margot had gathered enough soil from beneath the oldest tree. She carefully wrapped it in cloth, ensuring it remained untouched until needed. Next on her list was the leaf collection during the full moon. The night of October 15th arrived, bringing with it a clear and starry sky. Margot found herself standing under the seventh tree as the first slivers of silver light began to paint the branches.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

jmarsh

The full moon casts a gentle glow, guiding the cycle forward.

Ruth Ann Keller

The cycle whispers in the wind, guiding every step.

Iris Beddoe

The cycles whisper secrets in moonlight.

Olive Kassen

The moon's glow whispers secrets to the leaves as they gently fall.

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*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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86ENi](https://relaywriters.com/read/31?t=5FwMQ_Xfk1mf3ZHDFDjyZp_JFNh86ENi)