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LATCHWOOD VALE

BOOK I

a novel by

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LATCHWOOD VALE: BOOK I

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PRELUDE

Across all of Latchwood Vale, the scent of fallen leaves and woodsmoke lingered like a quiet decree, as October's shadowed promise threaded its way into the winding paths and shifting roots.

Early sunlight painted Laylah's slate-blue feathers in gold as she perched with intent upon the limb of an ancient maple. Below her, the trees stretched in sweeping saffron and amber, broken by pockets of cool shadow where the night lingered, as if waiting for something to begin again.

Then the First Chime echoed over the Vale.

A deep hum rolled through branch and burrow, through root and riverstone, steady as the pulse of something vast within the earth. It was the forest's oldest signal, born from Archive Glades, the ancient center of the Vale, where the first roots took hold. From there, each chime traveled outward in widening rings, marking the start of a new Chime Cycle and the turning of another day.

And as always, the Rootshift followed.

It began with a groan from within the soil, then a twisting crack that shook the earth. Roots shuddered and slid, some rising, some sinking, some curling into new arches while others withdrew like waking limbs. Paths bent, hollows moved, and old routes vanished, while fresh ones opened in their place.

The upheaval came with every Chime, four times a day, each one reshaping a different region.

Life in the Vale had adapted to the rhythm long ago. Pause, listen, wait for the roots to settle. Laylah had done exactly that for as long as she could remember.

She had served as Latchwood Vale's Scrollrunner since her first autumn crossing, carrying messages between burrows, hollows, and rootways no matter how the forest reshaped itself.

From the satchel at her side, she retrieved her map and glanced over the day's route. Nestled beneath the map were neatly rolled scroll invites, their copper seals stamped with the Masquerade's mark.

Only a select few will receive them each year, chosen by a tradition older than memory. No one knew who decided the names. No one questioned the custom. On the first of October, the invitations simply appeared in the hollowbox outside Laylah's roost, waiting to be delivered before the Fourth Chime.

A familiar tide was in motion, and with it, change would follow. By dusk, her deliveries would be complete. When she returned home, many of the chosen would already be bound for Fernshade Hollow, where the annual Halloween Masquerade Dinner awaited.

She folded the map along its worn creases and slipped it back into her satchel. Below, the forest rustled as though impatient for the day's journey to get underway.

With a powerful beat of her wings, Laylah launched herself into the crisp morning air. The wind caught her immediately, carrying her out above the waking woodland and toward another year of mystery, magic, and masquerade.

And thus began a new shift of the realm within Latchwood Vale.

THE EPISODIC RELEASE SCHEDULE

Chapters 1 - 4: Saturday, October 3

Chapters 5 - 10: Wednesday, October 7

Chapters 11 -13: Wednesday, October 14

Chapters 14 - 15: Wednesday, October 21

Chapters 16–18 & Book 2 Interlude: Wednesday, October 28