

Book One of *The Arcadian Chronicles*

**Faith Bytes**

**CHAPTER ONE**

I sucked in a breath. And held it.

The curling symbol bloomed and enlarged onto the Notepad, while the others faded into nothing. At last! I'd been trying to find this Site for the last year. This was the greatest day of my life since... since forever. *Nothing* compared to this moment. I struggled to keep calm. Granda always communicated that Facs-mining needed a cool head.

A piclist unfolded. I gawked at the strange words. <Classical> <Youth Cultures> <Popular Cultures> <Devotional> <Ethnic>

What did they *mean*? Surely Music was just a dance tune or song? Crip-wittedly, I jabbed at the first one. Yet another piclist unpeeled onto the mat. Much longer. The alien words tasted strange as I sounded the musicians' names out aloud.

"Beet-have - no - hoven... Mozz-art... Ta-ch - nah, don't have the time to sound *that* one out."

I went for a short name - Bach. What did his Family do, to earn a Name like that?

My eyes slid down the piclist of his tunes, which had roaching peculiar titles. I picced a title about Organs with something about a minor D. Probably a comedy song about bodies. I enjoyed comedy songs best of all, especially *Don't You Pig All the Figs*. Much better than sippy love stuff.

"Play." Waiting for the song to begin, it was hard to sit still. I'd have to check on Granda soon. But it wasn't over. Should've known. Facs-mining the Node is hardly ever straightline. I looked across at the bubbling organi-pacs stacked around the Nodery walls. Wasn't there an easier way to release all the hundreds... thousands... millions... of info-nuggets hidden in their squashy, glowing bodies?

Jerked back to the present by the two-tone, I focused on the latest piclist.

[<Full Concert Performance mode> or <Domestic Residence mode>]

I stared at the options. Why anyone would want to listen to Bach practising his Organ tune at home? Cupert Peaceman's efforts with his squeezebox in his kitchen made enough row to stun a roach.

"Full Concert Performance mode." My hands sweated as the Node whirred.

The sound pealed out. What *was* the instrument? The notes seemed to stop and stack up on each other as they roared around the room, making Mother's flower vases buzz on the stone flooring. It was unlike any music I'd ever heard. Not pretty, or sad, or funny - it was majestic. Torrents of melody attacked. Drowning me in a rush of yearning where everything seemed raw and bright and hurtingly beautiful.

As the final crashing chord faded into silence, tears were trickling down my face. I wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"Again." Nothing else mattered.

I closed my eyes as the monumental sound thundered around me. Tranced by a reverberating climax-

I was half stunned by a heavy blow. And another. My hurt-hot ear rang with the impact; the side of my face felt numb and heavy; my mouth tasted blood.

"Turn it off! Turn it *off!*" Mother shrieked over the music. Her distorted face shivered in my blurred vision for a shock-stalled eternity.

Snatches of her rant filtered through Bach's bone-buzzing crescendo, making her fury seem even worse, "...-icked boy... -ways think you know best... -*dare* to override my passwor..."

The organ tune abruptly stopped just as she screamed, "...ate you! ***I hate you...***" The words echoed horribly in the small room.

I jerked to my feet, trembling. *Yeah - she's finally admitted it.* But the familiar axe-sharp hurt immediately snuffed out the flickering relief that I'd been right all these years. *Why doesn't she love me?*

"You - you just seal it shut! Think I don't know?" My voice swooped girlishly. Tears prickled. Roaching hells, I wasn't going to cry - not a grown man of sixteen. And not in front of *her*.

I spun round, stumbling over a crippling vase, and ran. Out into the hot sunlight. Past the stable, whose sharp smell reminded me I still hadn't mucked out the camel stall or goat pens. I scrabbled at the keycode on the sidegate, my shaking fingers making a hash of it. She ran after me, yelling my name. Wilting hells, she must be *foaming* to shout at me out here. She normally went for controlled calm in public. Her panting echoed between the house and high fence, getting closer. The keycode farted at me as again, I misdialled. Finally my fumbling fingers got the sequence right. The gate snicked open just as she grabbed for my arm. I twisted away, feeling the burn of her nails raking my skin. Skidding through the gate, I slammed it shut in her face.

I sprinted across the front yard, through our gate and past Ajene Stitcher, the first startled Node enquirer of the day, over the village courtyard, heading for Westgate. Heat settled like a greasy coat as I raced down Main Street, dust clotting my nose and throat. I swerved past Rayvon Harvester delivering a wagonload of olives to the Stores. Another task I hadn't yet started.

At Westgate, Cupert Peaceman, the village Security guard, stepped into my path. Then seemed to change his mind, suddenly dodging out of the way. Just as well, because I wasn't stopping for him, or anyone else. I pounded down the road, ignoring several greeting calls. They could complain to Mother about my rudeness. Give her something else to mouthwhack me with.

On the open road, where the verges were widened to discourage hostile wildlife, the sun beat down in a suffocating sheet. I slowed, winded and hurting, and hawked up a gob of muddy spittle.

*Haven't got a sunscreen on... Better find some shade at warp speed, or I'll be sunslagged in no time flat.*

Blowing like a feebo woman, I tottered along on chewed-string legs, coughing up dust. Gulping at the super-heated air left my mouth drier than a bogbox. Mother would say it was my punishment. The thought of her pushed me on.

Turning onto River Road was a relief. The palm tree clumps gave some shade and the water's smell strengthened my legs. I pushed through the shoulder-high reeds. Not so long ago they'd close over my head with a welcoming swish, swallowing me whole. Moist leaves slapped against my sore legs. I broke off a brown-brittled stem, whipping it around whilst stamping noisily to frighten off any jaspers or nemmets sheltering from the sun. River ooze seeped through my sandals, soothing my feet as I paddled in the murky water.

Reaching my sanctuary – a stranded tree-trunk – I sat down and rested my eyes on the river.

**Sunlit water glitters through the swaying stalks. Scents of river ooze and crushed leaves tickle Vrox's nostrils. Wind rocks the reeds with a sighing rattle...**

I used to play pretend games here when I was a boy. A long time since I'd even thought of my imaginary friend, Vrox. Before Grandma died, when life had been happier. If it weren't for this place, I'd have gone star-crazed years ago. But things were getting worse. The odd visions and the sense of not belonging were happening more often. And now this... how could I go back, after what *she* had said? The glinting water smeared through my tears. Too old for such sippy behaviour, I sniffed angrily.

A cargo boat laden with olives throbbed downstream, heading for Reseda, the provincial capital. I could run away. But then I'd forfeit my right to be Brarian and waste Granda's painful effort. Besides, I *wanted* to be Brarian. I was good with the Node. Better than Mother - despite her chants and flower-waving. I splashed water on my face.

I'd have to get back, soon. Not fair to leave Granda so long. I stared hungrily at the peaceful patterning of light and water. *Perhaps if I came here oftener, life would seem worth the roaching effort it took to breathe.*

A crackle of dead leaves warned me, before I heard the voice, "Red?"

I relaxed. It was Larold. "Yeah."

"You braced?"

I tried for a laugh, but it came out more of a sob, "I've been better."

My best friend high-stepped into the small space surrounding the tree-trunk, peering around as he approached. He hated this spot, having been bitten here by a jasper two years ago and nearly dying afterwards. Looking up into his sun-reddened face and anxious eyes, I felt grateful for his loyal kindness.

He carefully sat on the trunk. "Saw you blasting down the road, so I figured you'd be here." Handing me a sunscreen, he added, "Here – you'd better borrow this."

My throat tightened at his thoughtfulness. Typical of Larold to worry about my getting fried to a greasy spot.

"Uh... many-thanks. I'll get it back to you, tomorrow." Putting it on, I fiddled around with the controls to give myself time to lull down.

However, Larold's quiet sympathy still nearly unravelled me. "She on to you, again?"

Grabbing at a reed stem, I rolled it between my fingers.

*I hate you...*

Mother's wrath-reddened face blazed through my mind. Hollowed by what had happened, I turned back to Larold. His freckled forehead was creased in a concerned frown. I opened my mouth to frame the words. And closed it. What could I say? Larold's parents were strict. But I'd watched him bask in their affection with shocked envy ever since I'd been old enough to understand it. Larold knew that Mother and I fought - he regularly tangled with his own father. But he'd never make sense of Mother's loathing for me.

*And if he did, maybe he'd realise I wasn't worth caring about.*

Shrugging my shoulders, I muttered, "I sneaked onto the Node when she wasn't there and finally found that <Music> site."

Larold clicked his tongue. "Bet what had her stench was you breaking through her passwords."

"Yeah." The reed stem mashed to a papery pulp between my fingers.

*I hate you...*

"I don't know what I'm going to do..." My voice squeaked as I leaked hot tears. How could I live alongside her, now? It'd been bad enough before. But now...

Larold stared straight out at the river. "There's talk about restarting an inter-village apprentice network, Da says. A girl drowned herself last month in Pistacia because of her family's beatings."

"And if I could get apprenticed away from here, what happens to Granda? *She* wouldn't take proper care of him." I tore at another reed stem.

He shrugged. "You got to live your own life. He's had his chances."

I shifted. That seemed a godding hard way to treat the old man especially when recalling how much he'd taught me. But it was a sharp-edged situation. If there'd been an easy option, I'd already have taken it.

He stood up. "I've got to get back. I just wanted to make sure you were alright."

*Cripping hells – he figured I might follow that poor girl into the river. So he dropped all his chores and came after me.*

I stood up, patting his shoulder. *Why is it so hard to thank a mate? Girls are always draping themselves over each other with no one thinking anything of it.*

"Thanks for coming." I stared fixedly at a broken reed. "If you're working late tonight, I'll come by and lend a hand."

He laughed. "Yeah, right. And if I'm working late, you'll be slave-slogged even later, crip-wit!"

"I s'pose so." And I shakily joined in the laughter, before he left to face a mouthwhacking by his stench parents, who didn't like me.

About to leave the banks of the Salamander River, I started thinking with more than a single brain cell. Gathering some palm leaves, I plaited a rough basket and instead of heading straight back to Cnicus, made for our fields south of the village. Where I headed for our olive trees, loaded with ripe olives. It didn't take long to fill my basket. Just as well. The worn sunscreen was only just coping with the growing heat and my scratched, bleeding legs would need checking for veinworms, later.

The hot tramp home was miserable. I struggled not to sneeze in the permanent dust pall. My heart thumped at the unwelcome interest I'd created with my earlier, angry sprint.

*Crip-wit – playing straight into her hands...*

I politely answered every long-nosed enquiry into my business with a story about urgently needing some olives to make oil for poor Granda. Mentioning him generally made villagers sidle away.

Cupert Peaceman wasn't so easily satisfied. He kept me standing on the open road in full sun, while I got a mouthwhacking for, "pelting towards me as if every mantivore on Arcadia was in pursuit". Roostering to our audience of interested villagers, he was so stuffed with self-importance his uniform should have split at the seams.

Nodding till my head was ready to roll off my neck, I kept sorrying at him until even Peaceman got bored with me. As if that wasn't enough, while I was crossing the village courtyard, Felina Keeper waddled out of the Storehouse, threatening to serve a Notice on our olive crop if it wasn't harvested by the end of the month. Meaning that the crop would be gathered by the village and instead of getting eighty percent of the profit, we'd only collect forty-five percent, the rest going in wages to the harvesters. Inwardly cursing Mother for refusing to give up her land when becoming Brarian, I again nodded and apologised.

It was pointless to try and creep into the house. Node enquirers in the Waiting Area at the front were looking out for me, doubtless having heard – or seen – my now-famous dash for freedom. Which was now crippling well over...

**Prison door clangs in a desolating echo. Pace... and pace... and pace...**

I blinked, dust-clogged and footsore, clutching at the olives. Mother came to the front door. Her face flickered with something like disgust at the sight of me, before her familiar expression settled back - smooth and hard as glass.

I bared my teeth in what I hoped looked like a smile. "Greetings, Mother. Sorries for taking so long, but I've got enough olives for Granda's oil. After I've changed, I'll get on with my chores."

A tight smile crimped her face, "Thank you, Jessob. Oh – and next time, try to remember to change out of your house tunic before you go rushing off on Granda's account. You've been the talk of the village all morning."

*I'll bet.*

I politely gestured for her to lead the way into the house, conscious of the stares from Node enquirers.

"Good morning, Elders." I bowed politely in the doorway, finally reaching my sleeproom to change. No point in getting clean. I had a long, sweaty day's work ahead of me.

\*

*I'm nine years old, stumbling up the steep steps into the wagon-train. We're off on the monthly visit to Reseda Market. A strong hand behind me steadies me and I try not to get my stiff mourning suit dusty. Mother, ahead of me, doesn't wait but sits down and stares out of the window. She looks sad and angry. Mostly angry. She's been like that since Grandma died. Two whole weeks, now. It makes me want to cry. I miss Grandma. She used to sing to me and hug me and kiss me at bedtime. I try not to think about it.*

*I wriggle onto the seat next to Mother. She pulls her skirt away from me, tutting. I try to sit still. I try not to touch her. I try to please her. Because I have something to say. Something I've wanted to tell her since the day after Grandma died. But she keeps telling me to go away. Not to bother her. Here, on the wagon-train, she can't send me away.*

*The engine rumbles and we're off. Around us, people are chatting and laughing. People like going to Reseda. I've only been twice before. I used to stay at home with Grandma.*

*I start talking to Mother. I tell her that Granda and I can talk. We've got this special code. Granda grunts and taps and I work out the letters. I tell her that Granda says he's sorry and wants to help, now that Grandma's gone. Her face is smooth and she says nothing. Other people go quiet and start to listen. I explain that Granda doesn't have to go away because I can look after him. And we can be a happy family, again. She still says nothing.*

*It is hot. I fall asleep.*

*I wake up as we arrive in Reseda. Bleary-eyed, I line up to get off the wagon-train. Mother's hand trembles as she helps me down the steps.*

*Stall-holders shouting... street musicians playing... dogs barking... the crush of people buying, selling, watching, talking to each other... Reseda Market is a blast of noise and movement. Dazed and scared, I turn to Mother. Who isn't there.*

*It is a long, long time before she appears at my side, holding out a nose-wipe for my tear-streaked face.*

*Kneeling down, she puts her hands on my shoulders, digging in her nails.*

*"If you ever talk about your Granda to me in front of anyone else again, I'll bring you back here. And leave you."*

*I look at her stone-brown eyes and the line of her mouth. She means it.*

I swayed, buffeted by the bleaking memory. Seeing the wagon-train off to Reseda Market occasionally brought on this flashback. I avoided turning out of my warm bed at dawn to wave everyone off if I could, but Mother had, once or twice, given the impression she was going to Reseda and then reappeared unexpectedly later in the morning. Today, I wanted to use the Node in her absence so I had to make sure she left with everyone else.

"Have a profitable time. And don't do anything I wouldn't do." The words tumbled out of my mouth, while I struggled to shovel my escaping memories back where they belonged.

Amid the answering cheers, Mother stood up. "After you've fed all the livestock, Jessob, remember the last of the olives need—"

For once, Mother had miscalculated.

"Shame on you, Mai Brarian. Most of Cnicus is off to Reseda Market for the day and all the left-behinds are sulking or asleep – except young Jessob, here."

I was actually thankful for Ajene Sticher's long-nosed mouthings. "It's bad enough that he has to stay and tend to his grandfather, without you loading him up with a heap of doomy chores. Once he's seen to the old man and the animals, you should give him the day off."

Several shouts confirmed Ajene's remarks.

I tried not to smirk at the colour in Mother's cheeks.

"Of course, Ajene. I know you're right. It's just such a strain keeping everything going with only Jessob's help..." She turned back to me, "Have a good

day. And if everything goes well today, I may have a big surprise for you this evening.”

At her triumphant smile, I felt a trickle of unease. She’d mentioned this surprise several times in the last month. Especially when stenching with me.

The last few days had lurched by in painful politeness between Mother and I. Nothing was said about the scene in the Nodery. Avoiding her was easy enough. I was stacked with plenty of chores, on top of looking after Granda. I was further twitched when several villagers sidled up to me, muttering about the wonderful music they’d heard coming from the Node - could I do it again? I stuttered it was a mistake I couldn’t repeat, while cursing my crip-wittedness for exposing my private Facs-mining to village attention.

The driver eased the joystick forward and the wagon-train started to move. I stepped back, waving at those hanging out of the carriage windows until they disappeared in a dust haze.

Silence draped over Cnicus. Granda and I weren’t the only people left behind. Several other oldsters could no longer make the two hour journey into Reseda; Idaline Ferry, due to give birth to her fourth baby any day soon was spending the day with Beneth Healer; Seth Priest was in the Security Suite for drunkenness – again. Being guarded by Demri Peaceman, Cupert’s vac-brained son. Other than that, everyone else had gone off to Reseda Market, dressed up in their holiday best. Except me.

Mother and I never discussed my last trip to Reseda. She must have known why I didn’t ever go again. But it was more convenient for her to have me stay at home, looking after Granda. I didn’t tell him, either. I was ashamed of what had happened. Other mothers seemed to love their children. It must be my fault. For a long time I tried my hardest to put it right. To make her care for me.

***I hate you...***

What a waste of effort - what a waste of love.