

The Adustum Diaries

A faithful record of the quest of Rhed Viridis

Angela Tempest

| The Adustum Diaries © 2019 Bethany Tolley, Kentstead Media

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the author.

Visit KentsteadMedia.com

| ISBN: 9781696945110

| Illustrator: Chiara Noemi Monaco



Character Pronunciation Guide

Aura: Ah – doo' – rah

Austus: Ah – doost' – ee – oh

Aquila: Ah – kee' – lis

Creta: Cree' – tah

Ceruleus: Seh – roo' – lee – us

Glacies: Glah' – see – ace

Prudentibus: Proo – dent' – ih – bus

Viridis: Veer' – ih – dis

Artifex

A skilled artist, expert craftsman, author, mastermind, and a cunning and creative schemer.

Experience, I acknowledge you
The great teacher of both old and young
Villain and saint
Villain and saint
For you this ode is sung

Experience, I thank you
The giver of both wisdom and tears
Ink and blood
Ink and blood
They burn me through the years

Experience, you have taught me
Your burden and song, me has bitten
Pen and paper
Pen and paper
For you this book is written

Adura Glacies

Contents

<i>The Keeping</i>	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	3
<i>Chapter 2</i>	9
<i>Chapter 3</i>	14

The Keeping

She thumbed through the yellowed pages and saw her own unique handwriting. Words and phrases screamed out at her from the Keeping. Images from her life attacked her psyche like beasts of ink—animated by her own hand. Her heart thumped to the memories. Her mind bent beneath the weight of the happenings she could never change. The future died, locked forever in her hopes and dreams.

She knew she was still young for an Ink Artifex, member of the Atramenta Guild. She knew what she was hoping to accomplish was by all logic impossible—and most certainly forbidden. If the Atramenta had any idea what she was attempting—no, she couldn't think like that. She couldn't care anymore. She knew now that this was the only chance she had—to stop *them*, to stop *him*.

Adura slammed the book shut and threw it on the stack of diaries in front of her. It was time for those words to burn. A long, torturous wait in the searing heat of red coals and grey ash was the only fitting place for her words. It was time for her life to begin the adustum cycle. *He* would be

condemned, eventually. She would show him how to control the afterlife. She would show *them* how to control hell.

These diaries held a record that would never be read. “None of it matters anymore.” She spoke to the smoke and flickering coals. Then, she leaned over, lifted up the stack of diaries and threw them into the fire. “This is the end,” she said, because she hadn’t had the time to figure out a way back from the fire.

“You’re right,” said a familiar voice. Then, masculine hands ripped her ink and quill from her sweating palms. A knife pressed itself to her throat.

She bowed her head. She didn’t want his face to be the last image she saw. She closed her eyes. She knew what was coming. She’d heard him plan her death. She alone knew who he was. She alone had figured out how to stop him.

“This *is* the end, Adura,” he said.

She whispered, “For both of us.”

Then, he threw her ink bottle and quill into the fire and slit her throat.

Chapter 1

As my head drooped toward my chest, the deep blue-black ink of Ceruleus' quill slipped through my fingers. I managed to catch the end before it fell onto the parchment, but the pressure of my thumb flicked the quill upward. Ink splattered all over my pants, tunic, and my subject's shoulder and face.

Artifex Ceruleus waved a hand in front of my eyes. "Wake up, Artifex Viridis. Have you been paying attention at all? You're wasting my ink!"

"Sorry, Ceruleus." I had dozed only for a moment.

"Read it back, man. Read it back. Where did you leave off Keeping?"

I looked down at the now ink-speckled parchment. "I believe your last words were *my ancestor Creta took a second wife...* And that's where I lost it, Sir."

Ceruleus looked at me. "Significant, don't you think?"

“Yes, because no Artifex of any kind ever marries more than once. Why *did* Creta take a second wife, Sir?”

“Well, if you’d been listening, you would have heard.” Ceruleus said.

I nodded and asked the old Atramenta to repeat his dictation of the story.

Creta married one of the most powerful, talented, and legendary Ink Artifexes in all of history. Adura was her name. Born to a rather plain Artifex family, she herself was anything but plain. Her eyes were dark as obsidian with flecks of brown. Her hair was the color of coal. Her skin was fairer than any other in all of Verum and even all of Submittere.

“What made her so powerful?” I asked.

Ceruleus scowled at my interruption. “She mastered the powers of ink unlike any other Atramenta. She was the first to animate ink, you know.”

“Really? She was *the* Animator?”

“Yes, Rhed. Even a newly raised novice should know that.”

I covered a bit under his arched brow.

“And the aged folk who passed to their deaths under the skill of Adura’s Keeping; they passed more peacefully than any other. The transition from this world to the next took place in the blink of an eye. No dream of their life, imprisoned in their minds, held them back. For she could see into their minds and take it from them.”

She was the kindest of women. She was the most intense of listeners. She was Adura Glacies.

“Excuse me, Ceruleus. But, hasn’t this story already been recorded. Why do you need to recount it? Aren’t Creta’s words already in ink since *his* passing...like a hundred years ago or so?”

“I keep calling you a man, Rhed, but ask such a question and I must call you a boy. Surely you know to die peacefully, I must tell what thoughts are in me—told or untold. All Artifexes die. We are human, after all. But we make our passing better than most. We record our lives in our own ink. You, Rhed, record my life with *my own quill*. When I have told my last

and deepest memory, I will go on to the next life—*lucis mundi*—but not before. I tell this story because both Creta and Adura’s death trouble me so. I’m so bothered by it I certainly cannot pass on until I make peace with it.”

Ceruleus mumbled beneath his breath and shook his head. I cleared my throat to regain his attention. I couldn’t admit it out loud, because I was still new to the skill of Keeping, but I hadn’t known old memories could become new if they carried distress with them. I didn’t know Ceruleus would live until his concern with these deaths was solved or he made peace with it. This was only my third Keeping, but only the first Keeping for a fellow Atramenta. But, I knew I must learn. Ceruleus’ future death would be painful or peaceful based upon my Keeping skill.

“Certainly, Sir. Please tell me, how did they die? Tell me about Adura’s death, first, if you’d like.”

“Adura committed suicide.”

There are many ways for mankind to take their lives. Yet, Adura took her life unlike any other. She made her own Keeping. She wrote herself into death. Creta was certain of it and reported so in his own Keeping. She was the first and last Artifex to do so. It was unheard of. But, who better to do it than herself? For none were more skilled at Keeping than Adura.

I nearly dropped Artifex Ceruleus’s quill again. A stray drop of blue ink leaked onto the parchment, making the end of Adura’s name look like it was bleeding. “She wrote herself out of life on purpose? Is that even possible, Sir?”

Ceruleus swooned a bit and then twisted up his face and glared at the wasted ink. “Some have tried since, but failed. Their deaths were torturous and incomplete until finished by the Crystal Artifex Guild. If you’re an Artifex, there’s nothing more excruciating than passing on without a proper Keeping. A piece of you remains in this world.”

“Why did those who tried fail to write themselves into death?”

“They didn’t know how to do it properly, Rhed.”

“Well, if Adura wrote herself into death, it couldn’t have been that hard. Didn’t she leave a record of how she did it? Isn’t that part of a Keeping?”

“No, there’s no instruction for this. But we know she was successful because no Crystal Artifex can locate her spirit. That’s a skill you have yet to learn. Once you master Keeping you will next learn to work with a Crystal Artifex to set to rest those spirits who are having trouble passing on. The Crystal Artifex locates their spirit and communicates with them and you record their last truths...so they can pass. This must be done for many non-Artifexes as well.”

“So the actual record of Adura’s life, her Keeping, and how she wrote herself into death...what happened to it?”

“Rheda, I have searched for such a record of her Keeping my whole life. Yet, The Adustum Diaries have never been found. If they had, we’d know how she did it.”

It all came together in my mind, when Artifex Ceruleus gave Adura’s Keeping the title I’d known since beginning my apprentice work with the Atramenta Guild. *The Adustum Diaries* were the secret desire of every Ink Artifex. All believed those lost diaries held the mysteries to ink skills even the most talented Atramentas had never mastered.

“I can’t believe it. I had no idea your family was so closely tied to The Adustum Diaries.”

Ceruleus took my hand, the one surrounding his quill, and squeezed. “Rheda...I won’t be able to die until I’ve found them. Creta lived on beyond Adura and took another wife. But, his Keeping is foggy at best and ambiguous in so many places.”

Something about the way the Artifex looked into my eyes was disturbing. It forged a fire in my chest. I felt a quest cast upon me. The ancient man was binding my fate to his. I pulled his hand away and looked down at my own. Sure enough, in Ceruleus’s own blue ink, on the back of my hand was a flame.

“Rheda, I bid you join my search. Help me find The Adustum Diaries.” He said.

I could deny the quest. It was within my abilities as an Ink Artifex to remove the ink, symbolizing our bond. I didn't want a quest—not yet. Only eight weeks ago I had been an apprentice. I was the newest Atramenta in the guild—quite a novice. I was hardly the most desirable choice for a quest.

“Why me, Sir?”

“I see something in you, Rhed. You are young, yes. You don't know much, that's certain,” He chuckled. “But, I believe your naiveté will prove more valuable than experience in this particular quest.”

It was hardly a compliment. “But, Sir, the Keeping...you think Creta's record is a lie?”

“Not a lie, per say, that would be quite impossible. You and I both know that. No, I said ambiguous—broad and general. One can speak truth with a different intention behind it if they are vague. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A Keeping was a record of truth. Dying with truth concealed, or hidden, in the mind was said to be the most excruciating death for an Artifex. Why would Creta, a celebrated Atramenta, choose to die with truth still in his mind?

“But, how could Creta pass knowingly into such agony?”

“As you know, Artifex Viridis, Creta's spirit was able to pass on, according to the Guild of Crystal Artifexes. This alone should be evidence his Keeping is true. But, I cannot rest despite it. I cannot pass peacefully until this mystery in my family history has been solved. It's my task. It's why I have bound you to help me. As the one in charge of my Keeping, I believe you are destined to help me.”

“Destined, Sir?”

Ceruleus took my hand again. I felt the fire blaze around my heart. This time it burned, like a warm blanket, up the back of my neck and into my head. The binding of the quest was deeper now. I could still remove it, but it would be more difficult.

I nodded and bowed before Artifex Ceruleus. How could I refuse a quest? Very few Artifexes ever were given one. It was an honor. "I accept the quest, Sir. I will do all in my power to help you find The Adustum Diaries. I will bring to light the truth of Creta and Adura's death that you might rest in peace."

Chapter 2

I left Artifex Ceruleus's Keeping room as soon as I could get away. However, I wrote another six pages in his record before I could work my way out. He looked rather lifeless when I finally left. I wasn't sure why.

Of one thing I was sure. The quest Ceruleus set upon me bound us. It made it harder to feign tiredness or be even the least bit deceiving. He could see inside me. I was certain of it.

I ran down his front steps and made my way to the stables. A servant had my horse saddled and ready. I should have ridden straight home. My aged mother always needed my help. But, instead, I rushed over to the Keeping Library. I went right for the last known Glacies record. I worked my way through it finding the names I needed to work my way back through history to Adura's mother and father.

It didn't take long. There were but few Glacies' Keepings. When I presented the two volumes to the librarian for check out, she eyed me.

“Interesting choice, Rhed. You aren’t the first to pull these out, though. Let me guess, you are going to find the elusive Adustum Diaries.”

My first instinct was to deny it. I was defensive about other’s perception of me. I was new after all. But truth bound me. There was no reason to lie. “Yes. I am.”

The librarian laughed. “Very well, then. I would wish you luck but I don’t see the point. Who set you onto such a silly idea anyway? You haven’t even been a full Artifex for...how many weeks?”

“Eight, Ma’am. Eight weeks.”

“Better to get the disappointment out of the way early, then.” She said. The librarian handed me the volumes wrapped in burlap. “Take care of them. These two Keepings alone have been checked out more than a thousand times. A good three-quarters of those times they’ve been returned late, covered in dust, full of water damage, and some of the pages have been torn out and taped back in. Do be careful with them, Rhed.”

I accepted the Keepings and cradled them in my arms. I offered no parting assurances, but in my heart I knew I would treat the records with utmost care. The binding Ceruleus put on me was infused with the need to protect any information I found. His desires had become my own. I couldn’t escape it even if I wanted to.

I rode home and shrugged off my cloak. I helped my horse shed my riding gear and then pulled up ten buckets of water from our well. Three buckets were to water the horse, five were for the bath I desperately needed, and the last two were for my mother to boil for dinner and hot apple cider.

“How was Keeping today?” my mother asked.

“Artifex Ceruleus put a quest on me.” I said.

My mother choked on a spoon of stew she was sampling for taste. “What?”

“He bound me to a quest, mother. I’m to help him put to rest the ambiguity behind the death of his ancestor Creta Aquilis and the suicide of his first wife Adura Glacies.”

“A fool’s errand that is, Rhed. How could Ceruleus pass on to you his own failings? He’s been after those diaries for years. But, that’s not your job, is it?”

“Technically, it is. Keeping is laying all truth and concern to rest; helping the aged right all wrongs...well, I don’t have to tell you the list.”

Mother stomped her foot and glared. “That Ceruleus wants nothing more than glory before he dies. He doesn’t care about his great-great-grand-whatever’s married life.”

I put a hand up to silence my mother. She saw the blue flame sitting there in deep blue ink. “He does care.”

The anger on my mother’s face did not assuage. But she kept silent. I knew then she would say no more. An Ink Artifex could refuse a quest. It wasn’t against the law. But it was taboo to refuse. Mother wouldn’t want me to decline this quest even if she thought the idea of it was ridiculous. It was family and honor to fulfill it. It was family honor at stake in everything in Domini—for everyone.

Honor. The only problem I had with the quest was that the Aquilis family, Ceruleus’s family, might be subject to dishonor if I actually could find the diaries. Yet, truth was the ultimate goal for all. Even honor was still secondary to truth, or I hoped it was.

“Get off to bed, now.” My mother said. “You ate your dinner while in a daydream and didn’t hear a word I said about Ceruleus, the fool. You’re no good for evening chores either. Quests must come with side effects.”

I knew I should have helped my mother clean up, but I suspected she was right. In a daze, I wandered off to my room and opened the Keeping of Adura’s mother, Silva Glacies. I read, in a continual daze. I’m certain I didn’t commit much of any of it to memory. But I couldn’t read another word once I saw the first picture of Adura. It was animated, so it caught my attention.

There she was. My eyes were glued upon the image. Even in ink, Adura was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. It wasn't because of her features, though they were comely. It was something else. It was her eyes. Unlike any other animated ink, the eyes of this picture of Adura looked *alive*. In this particular picture she was picking flowers in a meadow. But her eyes looked about to places that didn't exist upon the page.

I flipped the pages until I came upon the next portrait. Adura sat next to her grandfather. She was taking down his Keeping—her first one. Her animated face turned to look at me. This was something I'd never seen animated ink-art do. I'd seen art move, but not change positions. Adura's face turned completely toward me and stopped as if she was looking right at me. For a moment, I was sure real eyes looked back at me. Black irises with flecks of brown blinked. Then they were gone.

I picked up the book and ran back into the kitchen. My mother was passed out asleep on the wooden table. She breathed deeply.

"Mother." I whispered. Then louder. "Mother!"

"Hmm?" She didn't lift her head up.

"Mother, you need to see this." I said. "Plus you shouldn't be sleeping here. Look at this...and then it's your turn to get off to bed."

Mother lifted her head and cracked her eyes. "What is it?"

I showed her the Keeping of Silva Glacies and turned the page to the portrayals of Adura. Like before, Adura's figure, and her eyes, moved about unlike any animation I'd ever seen. Her eyes looked right at me—again.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" My mother said. "Looks like a normal Keeping to me. I didn't see anything unusual about the picture."

"You didn't?"

"No."

I wondered if I was seeing things. Maybe I was. Was this another effect of the quest binding?

“Okay Mother. Off to bed.”

I sent my mother to her room and headed back to my own. I opened the record to the next picture of Adura. It showed her from the shoulders up. The ink was in many colors—a rare thing for a Keeping because it meant several family members had donated their different colored inks to the portrayal. In the text under the picture, Silva talked about the unnatural beauty of her daughter, and how she must have gotten it from her grandmother. She talked about how well it matched her confident, kind character.

I was afraid to look too closely at the face. But curiosity drew me to it. I bent down and looked closer at the colors. They began to move—animated. Suddenly, Adura stared right back at me from the page. She smiled. She was so beautiful. I longed to see her in real life. I desired, to my shame, to be near her—to hold her. My hand, neck, and head burned. Her living eyes—they saw inside me.

I slammed the book shut. I was scared. Quest or not, I now wanted to learn more about Adura Glacies. Though it was insane, deep inside, I needed her—even though I didn’t know why. I needed a dead woman. What was happening to me?

Chapter 3

When I walked into Ceruleus's Keeping room I knew I was a different man than from the day before. I felt warm sensations burning me from head to foot. It wasn't unpleasant. It was merely constant and quite distracting. I didn't know what they meant.

"You've seen a picture of Adura." Ceruleus observed the moment he saw me. "Haven't you?"

I nodded. "I pulled her mother and father's records from the library."

"Quite something to look at, wasn't she?"

I was afraid to admit the truth about the absurd obsession I'd developed in only one night. "Sure." I said.

Ceruleus smiled. "It's okay, boy. I haven't met a man, or woman, who hasn't been made speechless by that face."

"Not the face, Sir. The eyes."

Ceruleus cocked his head. “The eyes...really? Tell me what you saw.”

My face reddened. “They weren’t like any animated ink I’ve ever seen. They looked *at* me. They turned and looked off the page.”

“Interesting.”

“Is that your only reply?”

“What else can I say? I’ve never seen animated ink do that. It’s likely the effect of too little sleep; just like all the extra drops of my own ink you splattered everywhere yesterday.” Ceruleus answered. “Now, where shall we start today?”

“I thought, Sir, we should discuss your search for the Adustum Diaries. Where have you looked? What problems kept you from finding them? Anything that will be helpful to me.”

The old Artifex looked right into my eyes. “Do you know where Verum is?”

I nodded.

“It was there I began. That was where Adura grew up.”

Plain family, the Glacies; had neither too little or too much. Middle-class we’d call them here in Fides. But, they had love, the Glacies did. Their lives revolved around each other. Adura was born from love and grew up in love.

“In that hovel-of-a-place, I found clues about Adura’s family life and travels that led me all over the country. I visited the caves on Captum and on the Fragman Insulas.”

Adura played in caves up and down the Captum shore. She understood the workings of the tide and swam to the Fragman Insulas for sport. Her brother, he accompanied her everywhere she went. He was her protector—by his father’s command. The two of them built forts on the isles and carved stories into the caves there. Those adventurous hideaways became the early building blocks for the villages of Occulta and Abditus.

“Are those cave markings still there, Sir?” I asked.

Ceruleus nodded. “Yes, but no sign of Adura’s Keeping.”

“Sir, if no one has ever found her spirit or her Keeping, maybe she didn’t commit suicide. Maybe she left and never came back.”

Ceruleus shook his head. “No record of her Keeping has been found. But, her ink bottle and quill were found.”

A knot formed in my stomach. “Where?”

Ceruleus, who was quite aged and never moved about, rose from his lounge. He wrapped his robes about him and hobbled over to a table full of maps. “Come here, Viridis.”

I set down his ink and quill, careful not to drip on the parchment, and walked over beside him. He didn’t say anything at first, but his crooked right index finger pointed to a small dot on a map. My eyes followed it and focused.

“You see this cave?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“This is where her ink bottle and quill were found. They were hardly recognizable, because they’d been burned in a fire and were buried under at least two feet of sand.”

Shock rippled through me. “Burned? But, Sir, burning ink...isn’t that wrong? Doesn’t that send one’s soul to *mundo obscurro*?”

Ceruleus cleared his throat. “I don’t know for certain. No one does. It’s a belief. An Artifex’s ink is the summation of their soul—it’s who they are. That’s why Keepings are performed with our own ink and not that of the Keeper. If our ink is preserved then we, in essence, are preserved. To destroy one’s own ink in fire is akin to denying the soul life after death. It is to wipe oneself out of existence.”

“She didn’t even want to live in the next life, did she? Maybe that’s why the Crystal Artifexes can’t locate her spirit.”

“It’s a possibility.”

Suddenly, I knew what Ceruleus was asking of me—and I knew it was impossible. “The Adustum Diaries were burned too, weren’t they?”

Ceruleus looked up at me. His eyes saw into mine. I could feel him looking over my soul.

“Sir, it’s impossible to read a Keeping if it doesn’t exist. You are asking me to locate the ashes of Adura’s Keeping. Even if I could find where she burned them, after all this time, the dirt... Is that what you expect of me?”

“I expect you to do whatever it takes to locate any remnant of those diaries.” He shuffled back to his lounge.

“Sir, that’s impossible. You’re sending me on a quest where there is no possible way to succeed. Do you wish me dishonor?”

Ceruleus lifted a finger to his lips and silenced me with a flash of his eyes. “Artifex Rhed Viridis, I have bound you to my quest. Now, I bind you to secrecy.” My stomach added another knot. “I’m going to give you the records of my research—my travels. I’m also going to give you the clues I found and the knowledge I’ve assembled. Your quest is to find The Adustum Diaries in whatever form possible and extract their content. I need them.”

I couldn’t speak. How could I, a novice Keeper, possibly figure out how to reconstruct an ancient, lost Keeping from ashes? That was magic skill beyond even the most powerful Atramentas to ever have lived.

“You can do this, Rhed. You must do it.”

“Sir, it’s impossible. I have hardly any skill with ink yet, let alone the ability to pull nothing from...well, nothing.”

Ceruleus chortled. “You have little skill as yet, but you do have power.” The lack of inflection in his voice didn’t flatter me. I wasn’t sure if he meant what he said. “Listen to me, Rhed. The proof is in the binding on your hand. It took so quickly. No binding has ever sealed itself as quickly and easily as yours did.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t know you watched me, Sir. And I don’t know anything about bindings or quests either. They’re so rare. I mean, I never thought...”

“Of course you don’t. But, from today on, you will change the definition of what both are about. You, Rhed, were meant to help me.”

I was being flattered again. But I still wasn’t sure how true the flattery was. Did Ceruleus really think I was powerful or was he simply trying to convince me to stick with this quest? “You keep saying that. No one can *know* that kind of thing.”

Ceruleus smiled. Then, he pointed across the room. “Over by that shelf of books you will find a leather case. Inside is my research. You’ll also find the maps and the clues I mentioned.”

“Yes, Sir.” I said.

“Now, Rhed. Here’s my last command.” He took a deep breath. “Come back to my home and report anything, anything at all. And, do not tell a single other soul. The Adustum Diaries, or whatever remnant of them you can reconstruct, are sacred to me and to my family line. If you share what you’ve learned or keep anything you learn from me, you will seal the fate of an excruciating death upon me. As such a new Ink Artifex, you certainly wouldn’t want that to happen, now would you?”

I couldn’t believe it. My heart pounded in my chest. Then the pounding reached up to my ears. How could he dare?

“Sir, if you die terribly at my hand, you know I’ll never be able to make another Keeping. I’ll be disrobed. I’ll lose...everything I’ve worked for as an Atramenta.”

Ceruleus tipped his chin down toward the floor while holding eye contact with me. He was too old to glare, but what I saw in his eyes bordered on madness. I’d never noticed it until now. Or maybe the binding between us was telling me things I couldn’t have known before.

“Then, you’d better not fail.” He said. 