

For Preethi

Book One: The Caves

The trees didn't disappear all at once. Losing the forest took generations and even though the Mushroom People knew the foreigners presented a danger, they rarely acted to stop them. Sometimes the foreigners wouldn't even be in the forest. On the occasions when they'd load up their sleds and drag the long corpses down the mountain and across the valley to their ships, the People would indulge in the relief of a silent forest, quickly forgetting that the silence had only returned to them temporarily.

But ultimately the trees did disappear. Unhealthy species of weak, soft trees took their place. Or bushes that barely qualified as trees at all. Or, in places, little more than grass and mud and stink. The Mushroom People relied on the trees for they provided homes for the mushrooms, the trees relied on the mushrooms for they connected the trees in vast networks, and the mushrooms relied on the people for they knew the seasons of the mushrooms and would spread spores to the farthest reaches of the forest at exactly the right times.

As Pazput sat near the edge of the cliff, she surveyed the stumps and the mud from above and pondered her People's present situation. "We can eat little else," she thought, "and even though everyone can survive on vegetables, most of us get sick if we don't have mushrooms every day."

She turned to Nikki. "Do you think we'll have to go to the caves? Will we end up eating shadow mushrooms like in the dark ages?"

Her expression looked more to Nikki like that of a Baduk player, puzzling over her next move, than one of fear. Nikki was a year older – thirteen – but he didn't worry about the world as Pazput did. He was either incapable of imagining an improvement, or indifferent.

"I dunno, Paz?" he offered back. He was more concerned with the beauty of the osprey silently gliding across the blue sky beyond them.

She was tempted to launch into an exploration of available options. The diagnosis was understood. She wanted to find treatments. But she'd known Nikki since they began attending school, when he moved from a neighbouring village. She paused to give him a chance at a more intelligent response.

"How long does it take to get to the caves? Maybe we should just go eat a shadow mushroom and see if it's as bad as People say."

She was shocked by the practicality of the suggestion. The shadow mushrooms were derided by her People but it was universally understood that the shadows were edible.

"I suppose we could, right? It's a one-day journey, so we'd have to wait for the weekend. And... probably invite Trin and Vora."

"Oh. Come. On. Paz." he protested, "Trin and Vora? Are we going to need Vora's magic powers just to sleep in a cave for one night and eat

some garbage?”

Pazput giggled. She knew Nikki struggled with Vora’s religion. She also knew Nikki had a crush on Vora, which complicated things further. “There’s no one else, Nik. The other kids are a risk – they might tell the elders what we’re doing.”

“Just the two of us! We’ve gone weekend camping before.”

“Nikki, we were kids. We haven’t done that in years. You know as well as I do that no one’s letting us go camping alone at this age.”

“Gross, Paz. You’re my sister.”

“Sister from another mother, sure. But we already have to convince Mom and Dad to let us travel north, toward the caves. We don’t need the burden of justifying anything else to them. They think Vora’s responsible. And Trin is just a kid, so they know we won’t do anything too dangerous.”

“Fine,” he trailed off as the osprey cut back across the sky and grabbed his attention away.

Back in the village, Pazput steeled herself against her first challenge: convincing Vora. She knew Trin would want to come along no matter what. Trin loved adventures with her older sister, and Vora didn’t mind that Trin tagged along everywhere. After all, it says in the Scriptures *to Love thy siblings as you will love your own child. Feed her your first mushrooms and best mushrooms.*

Pazput navigated her argument methodically, appealing to the Scriptures with anything she could bring herself to remember about them.

“How can you treat everyone with love and care if there is nothing to eat? If the shadows are as difficult to eat as the stories say, and we don’t find a solution to the deforestation, your children will suffer the lives of ghosts here on Earth!”

“Remember that it is our duty to prepare for adulthood now, early. What better way to prepare than to begin with real problem-solving?”

“Even if we learn nothing, at least we tried! Don’t the scriptures tell us *better to puzzle and puzz than to place the Baduk stone the same way as last time?*” Pazput couldn’t quite remember how this sutra was spoken.

Vora had that look on her face. Quiet consideration, compassion, empathy, and judgment. Pazput found it difficult to believe she was on the receiving end of the first three.

“There isn’t a prophecy. . .” Vora began, slowly. Pazput heard that tone of Vora’s that said “I’m not convinced.” She’d heard it plenty of times before, arguing for reason and research over habit and history.

“Nik will come.” she interrupted. She instantly regretted it. Nikki was already uncomfortable with the situation and now she was offering him up, like crow meat to a dog. She wasn’t even sure if the dog was interested.

But Vora’s eyebrows gave her away. “Nikki thinks this is a good idea?” she inquired in a new tone. Not a tone that belied a crush. Neither was it sing-song or confused and nervous. It was the tone of desperation. Vora’s parents were as religious as she was, perhaps more, and outside of school she rarely interacted with boys. Only with the village tetering on the precipice of famine might her parents actually allow her to go on a foraging trip for the weekend. Since they would eat the shadow mushrooms, the foraging part wasn’t even a lie...right? Maybe this was okay. Her stomach burned and sank, then bounced back up into her throat.

“Sure okay,” she blurted. Vora rarely lost her composure like this and the skin on Pazput’s face revealed its surprise by exposing too much of the whites in her eyes. It was as if Vora was worried the offer would vaporize if she didn’t accept it quickly enough.

“Great, alright! See you Saturday morning at dawn, at Nikki’s hut!” Pazput blurted out, almost as quickly, because she *knew* Vora might come to her senses and back out if she didn’t conclude the transaction quickly. Vora’s honour could be relied on to trump her good senses.

Pazput hated the sound of her name. The alliterative quality of the two “puh” sounds drove her nuts when strangers would call her by her complete name. And seeing it abbreviated to “P.P.” on paper always left her with a feeling in her chest that was the internal sensation equivalent to an eye-roll in the world outside her body.

So bound up was she with her parents. They were conservative. Not like Vora’s parents and their outdated ideas about boys and duty and school. But her parents were politically conservative. When the village council or the district panchayat made plans, they fell in line with the Old Ways: stay put, don’t get involved with the foreigners, don’t try to change things.

She loved them more than anything but she couldn’t understand this. *The world is changing, whether you want to change with it or not.* she would think, as they’d discuss responses to change over dinner that she considered non-responses: hunting for mushrooms more carefully in the old locations, staying home and conserving energy so they didn’t need to eat so much. She didn’t want to venture far, either, but she knew that wrapping herself in the Old Ways like a blanket was suicide.

Perhaps her name was an indication that she was just different from her parents in some fundamental way. They were the only people who refused to shorten her name. And the only people from whom she didn’t hate that “puh-puh” sound.

Dinner was the time for bringing up political issues, and a camping trip north of the village was definitely the realm of politics. Adults generally didn't walk there and they were shocked by her suggestion.

"This is a very unorthodox idea, Pazput. Tell me what you will do when you encounter the Matangos?" her father queried.

"You know as well as I do that the Matangos are harmless, Dad. They might look like mushrooms but they know we mean them no harm. And they don't have any issues with us eating the fruit of the real mycillium under the trees. They aren't family."

Chichioya was taken aback by his daughter's confidence. She was always a rational person, but she normally didn't confront the family with her rationality over a steaming plate of mushroom.

He paused to think but words didn't come. He glanced over at Paz's mother, but Hahaoya's arguments had already been exhausted by her husband. Their cautious nature wasn't backed up by argument, since they rarely had to argue a position the entire village already agreed with.

Kannala, Paz's grandmother, swallowed a small cube of mushroom fried in mustard oil. The foreigners had told her this preparation tasted like fish but she did not know what a fish tasted like and had no intention of finding out.

"Let the child go, Chichi. It's just two days and maybe she'll even find some nice mushrooms to share with us."

Looking at Paz as she said this, Kannala smiled the smile of grandmothers. The smile that all at once conveys infinite love, decades of wisdom, and an authority that no one at the dinner table would dare challenge.

In an instant, the matter was settled and Kannala returned to her simulated fish as if nothing had transpired.

Paz, Nikki, Trin, and Vora walked in a line through the forest. From the osprey's vantage point, they were the tiniest army of ants. Too few in number to survive on their own.

The osprey imagined swooping down and picking them up, like rats or fish. If the People were small enough, would they be best scooped up by the neck? They don't have tails. Or, if they do, their tails seem so small to act as a handle, with which to carry them into the sky. Which is a shame because if you want to smash food on the rocks, it's best to turn it around so the head smashes first. Maybe grab them by the leg? But they have thick legs, for such little People. Oh? The tiny ants vanished into the bush already.

None of them felt small. They felt brave. Trin's bravery came from the company of her older sister. Vora's bravery came from her faith in the Gods. Paz and Nikki's bravery came from their experience. This wasn't their first time deep into the woods – but it was their first time with their parents' permission.

"How long until we see a Matango?" asked Trin for the umpteenth time.

"We might not see any Mantangos," sighed Paz, tired of providing complete answers. She was suddenly glad she was an only child. Nikki was all the sibling she needed.

Trin sagged. Suddenly her older friends began to feel like stand-ins for her parents. Not nearly so religious, but nearly as boring. At least her parents played exciting music during the fire and the sacrifice. She loved the chanting. Mentally, she began one of the mantras she was so accustomed to performing with her family but before she could finish one stanza, the dull feeling Paz left her with had lifted. The mantra hadn't done it. Eyes did.

"Did you see THAT?!" she exclaimed. She flopped to one side of the path to get a better look at the eyes which had peered around a thick and gnarled birch tree. This time it was Vora's turn to throw cold water on Trin. She grabbed her by the collar and yanked her back onto the path.

"Yes, idiot. We saw it. And we'd like to see it again, so please don't terrify the Matango with your shouting?"

Trin pouted for a moment but she was too wired to feign hurt feelings. She'd never seen anything quite like it. The mushroom creature wasn't terrified at all and slid its muffin top head back around the tree again, eyes bulging. One pudgy foot made its way onto the path. Then another. Paz couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed to be a child? Maybe even a toddler.

Two older Matangos appeared behind the small one. The smaller of the three was obviously a child... but the toddling appeared to be a property of all Matangos. They waddled like penguins but Paz guessed these fat

little marshmallows wouldn't compensate for immobility on land with graceful swimming. Despite their waddling, the Matangos managed to surround them. Not a threatening gesture. More like a collective hug. The Matangos smiled and grumbled, pointing toward their village.

Of the four of them, Nikki was the only one who hesitated as they walked deeper into the woods than they had ever gone, toward the caves.

"How can we be sure we can trust these guys? Sure, they're cute... but so is a river otter. Have you ever seen an otter shred a fish with those little triangle razors in its mouth? Terrifying."

But even Nikki couldn't resist the sound of the drums. They'd all heard the stories of the Matangos' incessant music. But as they approached the caves from the south, the drumming was otherworldly, as if the forest itself was drumming. The fast-paced drum beat was everywhere, all at once, even though they could tell they still had hours of walking before they'd reach the village and hear it at full volume.

As they approached the village, the drums welcomed them. Loud, throbbing beats were the soundtrack of the jungle. Paz hadn't been this deep in the jungle before, even on her most irresponsible days. The trees grew taller near the caves, their foliage producing a permanent cloud of darkness across everything. It was a surprise to Paz and Nikki just how many trees were left this far north and this far into the hills... though they both knew these trees would be food for the foreigners' machines next. There were no mushrooms at the feet of the trees yet.

The darkness and the drumming had a symmetry. As the darkness enveloped everything on the forest floor, the drumming hugged their chests. "I can feel this in my heart," whispered Nikki to Vora. She was confused by his meaning, and a butterfly somehow managed to squeeze into her bellybutton, fly around her stomach, and settle in her throat.

The Matangos who led the way toward the village turned around now, their grins widening, their grumbling noises growing louder. Then, to the surprise of all four kids, they waddled toward the village at a speed just out of reach for the young People.

"Should we run after them?" Trin asked.

"We don't want them to think we're chasing them. They were smiling, right? Maybe the little one needed to get home and pee. I dunno. We know the way now. Let's just keep walking." responded Vora authoritatively.

Paz and Nikki saw no reason to contradict her. They looked at each other and shrugged.

Every few hundred feet the landscape shifted beneath them. The forest canopy was so thick it brought both the comfort of indoors and the stifling

of indoors. The jade leaves and ferns of the forest floor saturated until they were nearly black. Trin still strained to look for mushrooms under every tree but it was the turn of the other three to anxiously speedwalk toward the village, dragging her by the collar whenever she became enthralled by another glob-shaped plant that “might be a mushroom.”

Night was beginning to fall and the kids were beginning to feel this was perhaps the reason the Matangos had scurried off toward the village. The noises of dusk harmonized with one another, adding a new layer of sound to the already-unfamiliar drumming. Cicadas buzzed in the trees, lizards beeped in monotones, something hairy shuffled through the grasses along the path, and in the distance a pack of coyotes howled. The whining, desperate sound of the coyotes, that unmistakable brand of sound that declared a thirst for blood, was enough to scare Trin into keeping pace. Glancing over their shoulders into a darkness their eyes could hardly penetrate, already panting for breath, they began to run.

There is a moment of panic, when a Person feels a situation is unsafe, that is calmed – at least in part – by the act of running. Something about running feels productive, like it’s solving an undeclared problem. Without losing sight of one another, this is how the four ran: solve the problem. The problem was darkness and although running didn’t create light, it created space for light to appear, and that was enough. The space had to keep being created. The faster, the better. The sweat, heat, hormones, adrenalin, and oxygen all fed this illusion. Safety came from working hard, and nothing feels more like work than running. God, how Nikki hated it.

The volume of the drumming began to drown out the sound of night. The harmony faded and the percussion had its solo. Vora wanted to tell Nikki that now she felt it in her heart, too, though her butterfly was replaced with a sinking stone of disappointment when this thought rose to the surface of her mind, since she was now confident about what he meant in the first place.

Running slowed to loping and the loping squeezed itself back into a stroll. They could see the Matangos in the distance. The scene of the party they were about to enter almost brought their legs to a complete halt. They walked in a stupor, eyes aglaze, until the young Matango ran up to greet them. She... he? Even identifying the sex of an adult Matango was nearly impossible. Children more so. It looked up at them, smiling, eyes sparkling, before giggling and running back to its parents.

The family that had run off into the distance was now behind them, prodding them into the centre of the drumming circle. Each drum was hoisted by cables made of vine and seaweed the Matangos must have carried in countless loads over the course of weeks. The bottom of each

timpani made of thick, curved slabs of jungle wood rested solidly on a flat, raised granite plateau. The cables stretched taught, up into the thickest branches of the trees above the perimeter of the circle. From each drum protruded a rounded shelf which held a single Matango, arms rippling with as much muscle as could be discerned on a creature which looked for all the world like a sentient mushroom. The arms effortlessly thumping the drums in near-unison, cooperating to deafen the children's ears. The four of them continued to stare upward at the massive drums as they were left in the circle alone. Skilled vibrations penetrated their chests and they would have each found it to be the most magical music they'd ever heard, if it didn't hurt quite so much.

Nikki and Paz shared a look before searching beyond the torches and drums for someone they might speak to. If the terror born of the forest's harmony was a predator, chasing them always from behind their backs where they couldn't see, then the confusion created by the drums was the reverse: staring directly at the sound, they could see nothing, understand nothing.

As they strained their stupefied eyes against the pandemonium around them, the timpanis reached a crescendo and stopped in unison. The sudden silence felt to their bodies like diving into an ice lake after the first thaws of spring, then running out into the sunshine. The drums deepest vibrations still throbbed inside them, turning their torsos into gongs. The thinnest vibrations shook along the surface of their skin. It would take minutes of silence for the effects of the drums to wear off on them but they didn't have that much time, since the chief of the Matangos was already walking toward them through the torch light.

"Welcome!" His voice was deeper and more familiar than Paz expected. Grandfatherly. "You young People sure have traveled a long way from your home. Ronny and Kathy were shocked to see you in the forest... but they only speak Matangu so they had to do their best to encourage you to come here, without scaring you. We were very worried you wouldn't come! The forest is quite safe, especially for a pack of four beings, though it doesn't always feel that way."

"Thank you so much!" Trin was blurting her words, overcome by the new sensations of the day. At 9, she'd never so much as drank a glass of tea, much less surrounded herself with deafening music. She surprised herself by being the first to speak, then felt obligated to continue what she'd began. "We really were freaked out about the forest. We could hear coyotes and it was getting so dark. Thank you for lighting your village and for providing the drums to guide us!"

"Oh... this?" The chief looked around. "This is, eh, an every-night kind of thing. Matango life revolves around music. But we're glad you like it. We actually prepared something else for you... we've heard through the forest that your People are struggling to find food these days. Is that

true?"

"Yes." Trin couldn't look him in the eyes even though her reply was saturated in honesty. She knew where this conversation was headed and no longer wanted to be the one spearheading their side of it.

"We have a wonderful cook. What all things do you People eat?"

Trin grimaced. "We eat... lots of stuff. But. Uhm. Mushrooms, mostly." She clenched up, waiting for a wail of grief or a frown of disappointment.

Instead, the chief winked at her and settled even further into his comforting, elderly figure. "I thought so," he smiled. Lucky, too, since that's what we've fried up for you!

"I know, I know... we look like mushrooms. But we're really not related at all. We're boring old mammals, just like you folks. Granted, not so hairy. Just a biological coincidence. Other than occasionally fighting off some overzealous deer, the similarity doesn't usually affect us."

Four smiling matangos strutted out in line with the chief, presenting each of the kids with a plate of fried mushrooms. Vora and Trin's parents made them say a prayer of gratitude before every meal, followed by a silent waiting period of ten minutes intended to express compassion for those less fortunate, who could not find or afford mushrooms. In actuality, this waiting period was a way of preventing the girls from scalding their lips since, much to their parents' dismay, they tended to resemble carrot-starved horses when they actually did begin to eat. As a result, Vora and Trin managed stoic facial expressions, if only for a minute.

Paz and Nikki did not.

Their eyes bulging, they instantly shifted their gaze questioningly to the chief, who turned his palms up to face them and invite them to eat. They each sat down cross-legged and began to lift steaming, crispy mushrooms to their face.

Trin, not wanting to miss a minute of mushroom consumption, sat down beside them. Vora sighed, shrugged, and fell in line. Her mother wasn't here to witness her and, besides, who's to say that patiently waiting to begin was good manners in the Matango village? It sure seemed like the Matangos wanted them to eat their fill.

"I should warn you," interrupted the chief, "that these are cave mushrooms. There aren't many tree shrooms at this time of year or in this part of the forest. And since the foreigners arrived, they've been harder and harder to find, anyway."

All four mouths hung open, eyes wide, staring up at the chief. "Cave mushrooms?" offered Nikki. "But... they taste like regular mushrooms!"

They're not dirty. They're great!"

"Well, yes." The chief hesitated. "But... your stomachs won't be used to them. Please eat as much as you like... I know your People can eat cave mushrooms... but take your time? Avoid ill effects."

Nikki didn't need further encouragement. He was already focused back on his plate, lifting the hot mushrooms into his mouth, one by one. The girls were less eager. None of them wanted to offend the Matangos by not eating but their appetites had suddenly waned.

Tea was served, and some light vegetables on the sides: carrots, beans, broccoli, sweet potato, and a brightly-coloured cabbage. All healthy plants the Matangos knew the People could eat. Nikki continued to gorge exclusively on the mushrooms.

Until he stopped to sing.

Nikki's singing took everyone off-guard, the Matangos most of all. "Oh! A singer! Drummers: support!" shouted the chief, grinning widely enough to show teeth. The girls all shared a simultaneous thought, surprised to find out the Matangos had teeth, then ashamed for assuming they didn't.

The drums began to roll gently as the drummers picked up on Nikki's harmony. "Sweet, cool caaaaave... how ye brought these shrooms to me. Sweet, cool caaaaave! How ye saved a fool like me!"

Vora was shocked to find Nikki singing in the tune of a hymn. She found herself vacillating between her butterfly and a fear that perhaps what he was singing was blasphemous. Her worries didn't last, as Nikki's performance didn't remain constant. As his rhythm changed, the drums quickly kept pace. *Thump Pa-thump, Thump Pa-thump - Thumpthumthumthump, Pa-thumthump*

13 From *knotweed* to *rockweed*, walk the forest to the beach.
Travel *without* steed, search the caves and find your peace.
Do we *not* bleed? Foreigners decimate every leaf! When will we *be* freed? We're dying for relief! Forests *without* trees are dairy cows without beef. Are flowers without bees. Are babies without teeth. Who bring the 'shroom, who will guide our people? Those with nothing to prove, with canopy for steeple.

With that, he raised his hand with a flourish and bent over softly like a snow-heavy tree in front of the chief. The drums sounded the triumphant end of his rhymes with a rolling crescendo that throbbed to its conclusion with the penetrating sound of war drums. The matangos clapped and cheered, but Paz could see in Nikki's eyes that something had risen up inside him. Maybe... vomit? She was terrified he was going to puke all over the chief. As a result, she struggled to eat anything else while

watching over him to ensure that he didn't. To her relief, the meal concluded peacefully.

After the meal was finished, the matangos had all shaken the kids' hands, and they'd been shown to their room, Paz had a closer look at Nikki.

"Nik, are you okay?"

His eyes were almost glassy with wide pupils and what looked to be a grey fog just behind the lenses. He didn't acknowledge her question directly, but she could hear him still singing and muttering under his breath.

"Come take a look at him... I'm worried he's sick," she pleaded with Vora and Trin.

Vora looked deeply and directly into Nikki's eyes, studying them as she might study the mycelium of a mushroom species in her Biology class.

"The fog is *moving*, Paz. I'm not sure what's going on with him. Is he poisoned? The cave mushrooms aren't supposed to be poisonous."

As Vora observed Nikki, Paz watched Vora. She noticed that Vora's eyes had a hint of the same glassy look. Paz leaned in, and could see tiny swirls of grey smoke in Vora's eyes.

"Vora, I think we're all poisoned. It's in your eyes too. Just not as much."

Vora considered this. "But I feel fine. I feel the best I've felt in a while, actually. I'm just not singing and rapping like a crazy person."

"We didn't eat very much," offered Trin. "We need to go back home tomorrow, and Nikki's the only one of us who really knows what the mushrooms do."

"Indeed, I know." Nikki's sudden vocalization startled Vora, who fell backward onto the dirt floor. "I see so much. I know so much. The mushrooms are not poison. They are medicine."

"Nik, you're scaring me." Paz moved beside Vora, to comfort her and to address him directly. But it was almost as though he couldn't even see her. Those glassy eyes were looking through her, to some far off place outside their cave.

Paz turned to Vora. "I have to eat more, to know what they do."

"Paz, don't... we don't need two crazy, singing weirdos on the long walk back to the village." Vora crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow, her mother's signature warning.

"I won't be - not if I eat them tonight." Paz insisted. "Vora, you have to get us home tomorrow, no matter what condition we're in. But I need to know what Nikki knows."

Paz stood and strode out of the cave without providing a gap for Vora to interject. When she returned, she had two bowls of different sizes between her hands, one upside-down on top of the other, forming a clamshell.

“This doesn’t seem wise, Paz.” Vora protested one final time.

Paz put her hand up. “If you think I’ve had to many, take them away from me. But not until then.”

Paz began to eat the mushrooms, carefully, methodically. She paid attention to the feelings inside her body: her heart, her breathing, the blood flowing in her veins to the extent that she could feel it. One mushroom. Two mushrooms. A third. A fourth. She didn’t pause except to sip tea and take a breath.

After a dozen mushrooms, she began to feel something. But it wasn’t the feeling of being poisoned. She’d eaten plenty of bad mushrooms before: Amanita Muscaria, False Parasols, Little Browns, and even a bite of a Death Cap once. Her lips weren’t numb. She didn’t feel like she needed to vomit. Her muscles weren’t clenching up. She actually felt relaxed, warm, and even a bit cozy.

But as she leaned into that cozy feeling she found herself leaning into her seat. It was as if the chair was swallowing her. She straightened up, tried to settle her nerves by taking a deep breath, then asked Vora in her calmest voice: “Is the chair eating me?” Vora opened her mouth to respond but the sound produced was that of an irritable duck. “What?” asked Paz but the only response was honking and quacking. Still, Vora was at least smiling, which meant things couldn’t be all bad. The chair probably isn’t eating me, she thought. Not even sure if Vora could hear her — or if she was really speaking aloud at all — she looked into Vora’s eyes which were now spinning discs full of colour and light and said, “I’m going to see how far this goes. Nikki had more than twelve mushrooms.”

Paz began to repeat her methodical consumption of cave mushrooms, but she lost track of how many she’d consumed. Her head was foggy and she couldn’t seem to escape the word “twelfth”. Twelve. Twelfth. Twelfth. Twuh. Twelfth. -lfth. -uhlfth. What in the name of spruce tip tea was wrong with that word? Paz put her hands to her lips but the mushroom she’d pinched between her thumb and three foremost fingers like a crab strangling an oyster seemed to have vapourized. She looked up to see Vora taking her mushroom bowl away, though Vora’s arms were now wobbling tentacles. Her head was an arrow pointed to the ceiling, the gelatinous head of a squid. Paz looked over at Trin. Trin was also a bobbling squid.

“I’ve probably had enough anyway” she said to the cave full of squids. Or to herself. She wasn’t sure.

The night was long and restless. With time, Vora, Trin, and Nikki all returned to their normal human forms. But as her companions fell asleep beside her, Paz didn't feel any relief from the effects of the mushroom. She found herself thinking about her mother and father — just how much she loved them, how much she wanted them to be happy. Why don't I tell them how much I love them more often? What if they died tomorrow? Images of death filled her mind. Not the dark and gruesome spectre associated with graveyards and rot. Death as transition, as metamorphosis, as matriculation.

She began to witness the machinery of the universe. Death, it would appear, was little more than a shift change. Maybe you were a fisherman in one life, a princess in the next, a tree in the life that followed that. Put down your net, pick up a sceptre. Put down the sceptre, spent 700 years growing into a network of your peers beneath the ground and ultimately claiming the title of Mother Tree before becoming building material for those tall, pink, and hairy folk who seemed to want nothing more than for every tree to fall to their machines.

The machines of humankind have a lifespan, too. They are cast in iron alloys, tempered, carved, bolted, and welded. An infant machine is born wholesale; it doesn't have a fragile early phase like a baby bird that cannot fly or a sapling that a deer might chomp into oblivion with a single bite. Instead, they are assembled. The parts have phases: rock like tiny mountains, ore separated from the unwanted filth, molten caramel in the crucible, forged into blades and bolts, tempered into invincible tissues and organs for an invincible creature. Or so it would seem.

The death of the machine is far more romantic, far more natural, than its birth. Throughout its life, the owners will replace certain organs, fluids, limbs. But eventually this burden of the beast will outlive its utility. Once a beast is no longer incessantly loved and cared for, the process of decay begins. The fluids dry up. The limbs seize. Connective tissue becomes loose and rattles. The threads of bolts begin to fray, ligaments snap, joints become arthritic and burn. The heat of this friction causing a cascade of countless connections to corrode. The machine seizes completely. The foreigners apply even more heat with blasting torches to loosen the joints. But ultimately, the metal cannot be resurrected. The body dies.

The life of these machines stands between. When they come for the forests, they lumber onto their chosen platform, swaying and clunking in the manner the elderly sometimes take when moving from their homes to important festivals or family events. They are dressed up, smoking, belching, and stinking. Legs carry them forward in an unholy and unnatural way, as though their flawed and fragile design prevents them from finding foundation, fortitude, or finesse. They move in slow motion, as if intervals of time have been removed from their movement or from the length of time available to an observer. They lurch toward the dancefloor in symphony

with their putrid stink, deafening clanking disguised by smoke vomit, and a skin that feels both oily and cold, a multisensory experience for the repulsed onlooker.

And then they begin their dance macabre. One claw reaches for a tree while the blade on the other arm winds up. In seconds, it's spinning faster than eyes can process and the tree is disconnected from the earth. The claw rotates like a firedancer spinning his pole, leveling the tree to the earth. Shark teeth smoothly yank the tree through the claw and obliterate the branches as they come in contact, sending shards of wood rocketing in every direction and the branches spilling to the ground. At a certain length, the same length every time, the saw blade again winds up to speed and slices the length of tree-turned-pole off so it falls neatly down into another vehicle – a truck – whose sole purpose is to carry the corpses away.

It is mesmerizing. Grab. Slice. Twist. Pull, shatter, slice. Pull, shatter, slice. One giant tree fills an entire truck. Another truck pulls ahead to take its place. Grab. Slice. Twist. Pull, shatter, slice.

The rhythm reminds Paz of the drums from their arrival. Were these death drums? Drums signaling the shattering and splintering of the forests where they all lived? Of course, the Matangos lived among the trees just as much as they lived in the caves and they knew the importance of trees to the existence of all other life in the forest, from the fungi to the fawns.

Paz falls asleep, in awe of the Matangos' predictive capacity.

The warm, buttery, syrupy oatmeal reaches Trin's nose long before it finds her lap. The Matango's camp is a subdued bustle of the older generation, swaddled in sweaters and thick wool scarves against the damp morning fog, waddling about preparing and delivering warm bowls of grains to everyone as they wake up with the first rays of sunlight. The sleep is still glueing Trin's eyes half-closed when she lifts the first spoonful into her mouth. Warmth fills her skull, following the steam that fills her sinuses. Everything feels slow. Trin notices the urge to search for an emotion... how is she feeling right now? She doesn't find an emotion or sensation of note, at least not within herself, and instead finds scientific inquiry: how are the matangos feeling? They've been incredibly welcoming to the children so far, welcoming them like a close friend's grandmother might welcome you into her kitchen. So welcoming and so supportive, in fact, that the kids hardly had a moment to stop and ask the Matangos about their own plight. Surely they were hurting, too.

She can see the cookies cooling on the countertop, which she isn't clear at all on, regarding the veracity of the image. Has she ever seen such a countertop? Surely. But is this overwhelming sensation of warmth and comfort, was it brought on by the oatmeal? The oatmeal has mushrooms in it, she notices, and the mushrooms are, oddly, sweet. So sweet, in fact, that they dwarf the syrup as the primary saccharine condiment of the goop. Have they given her the same vision-inducing mushrooms they fed Paz last night... for breakfast?!

"No, child." she hears an elderly Matango behind her, near the door of the cave.

Trin leans forward to rest her bowl down on the ancient stump of wood playing the role of nighttable in front of her but can't help herself from stopping to form an image of the word "cave" in her head, then watch the vee transform into an eff, first by rotating clockwise, shrinking, and growing a tail which reaches down to the floor of the letters, as though a cat perched on a windowsill.

"Yes, I suppose it is like a cafe. We try to take good care of our guests. We want you to feel comfortable, but we also hope the Universe will return the favour when the time comes and we are the ones in need. Every deed is seen. And every cave cafe is appreciated."

As the bowl lands on the surface of the stump with a satisfying and wholesome clunk, Trin turns to see the old woman grinning at her. As she glances around the room, she sees that no one else has looked up from their porridge or, apparently, heard what the woman said. She can feel the woman's warm smile, as though it's coming from her own heart and hands, simultaneously, and realizes she didn't make the comment about letters turning into cats out loud. Now she's looking at this tiny old mushroom woman when she begins to speak without a voice.

"It's only you. The others are too old now to learn this technique easily. They will have to return to it as adults... teenagers are far too deep inside themselves to hear and feel others this way. You can come with me. They won't mind."

Trin's learned obligations get the better of her and she feigns helpfulness. "Can I help you in the kitchen, Ammamma?" She's not sure why she's so confident the old Matango will instantly understand the People's word for "grandmother." She starts to stand but feels the need to ask anyway. "Is it alright if I—"

"Sure, sure." Vora absent-mindedly waves her reply without even looking up from her oatmeal.

"My name is Cedar." the old woman offers. "I'm Trin." comes the reply, at the speed of thought, slowed down only to hear the sound of her own name. "Nice to meet you, Trin. Take my hand and I'll show you the kitchen."

Trin felt a bit strange holding this old woman's hand. She was certainly a comforting figure to have nearby, but Trin was easily three times her height. Even though Trin was only 9 years old, she had the physical presence of an adult in every situation she could remember when she was young enough to have her hand held while making minor journeys throughout the village. Cedar was definitely leading her, though. She could feel Cedar's age, and, although it was foggier, she could even feel Cedar's experience. Cedar had seen a thing or two in her lifetime.

"Hold on, child. I will show you when we get there." Cedar led Trin through the large doors of the kitchen but made no movement to stop, walking with purpose through the fires and giant pots of vegetables already floating in boiling-hot sauce, marinating for a lunch that was still hours away. They squeezed through the back area where men and women of all ages chopped vegetables and mushrooms. She noted that the Matangos didn't eat mushrooms themselves (surely it was like eating an all-too-lifelike gingerbread effigy of a Person) and concluded that they must be preparing another meal of mushrooms for the children. She wasn't sure if they had intended to stay as late as lunch. It was a long walk home.

Finally, they pushed their way through the many busy Matango chefs and sous chefs to arrive at the back door of the kitchen. Trin hesitated as Cedar yanked on her arm to pull her through into the dark hallway, leading deeper into the caves. "I promise it's alright." Cedar comforted her with that warm everything-is-as-it-should-be smile, slowed her gait, and walked slowly down the hall when Trin was ready.

The hallway was not well lit. Trin's eyes strained in the dark, to the point of aching, as they walked the long hallway deep into the mountain. Every few minutes Cedar would light another torch hanging on the wall, just as the previous torch was far enough behind them as to provide nearly no

light at all. Stepping into the pitch black tunnel, step by step, for what seemed like hours, Trin began to second guess the entire process. But Cedar held her hand and repeated her words of comfort, which at this point were becoming a catchphrase: "I promise it's alright."

Finally, in what must have been the deepest portion of the mountain's belly, they stopped at a small, unassuming double door. "We're here." Cedar offered out loud. Trin realized it was the first time she was hearing Cedar's voice and it was at once wholesome and intimidating. Speaking with words was both more serious and more uncouth. After only an hour of communicating through thought alone, she already found speech a drastic and dirty way of interacting. But Cedar wasn't finished.

"Listen, child." she allowed herself to continue verbally. "When you return to your people, everyone will speak like this. You need to be prepared because it will feel very loud at first. . . . overwhelming. You need to master this new skill of yours, and this is the best place for you to practice. I didn't teach you how to listen; the forest did. The trees did. But I can guide you as you take your first steps."

Trin thought about her name. *Cedar* . . . an odd name for a mushroom-woman. But if this was tree magic she possessed, perhaps it made sense.

"Yes, Trin. Now, stay focused. This entire exercise is an exercise in focus. You need to learn to maintain your attention on one of the channels. Don't block anything else out, but don't give it any importance, either. There will be a lot of noise. You need to cut through that noise so you can hear what is most important."

"Channels?" Trin lifted an eyebrow. "Yes, channels. You know back home, if you have a large dinner? Sometimes many people speak at once. Each conversation at a large dinner table is a channel. Now you will hear every conversation between everyone around you. . . . there will be many more channels, much more noise. Later on, you may even learn to hear channels from a wider area, or from far away. But I can't teach you that today."

Trin was excited. At nine, she was more willing to accept the presence of magic in the world than any of her companions would have been. It was particularly easy to accept when it was so obviously true. But the potential for expanding her knowledge, mastering this skill, and becoming a true jaadoogar? This made her almost giddy.

"Greed, child. You'll find this won't help you at all. Also, not 'jaadoogar' . . . I know your people believe in such things, but you didn't walk kilometres into this mountain just to learn some party tricks. What the trees taught you will not make you a wizard. You will be much more powerful than that."

Trin's eyes widened.

"Greed. Greed, child. I won't remind you again. Now, let's go inside. Put

on the robe draped over the seat. Sit down. Close your eyes, and the challenge will begin.”

Trin understood why she was putting on this silly robe the moment she sat down. The stone seat was freezing cold and it didn't seem like she would be moving very much for a few hours.

“Know that what you are about to do is both the test and the training. The challenge will not present itself to you in a way that is impossible to overcome... but this will be the hardest you have worked in your life.” The hardest she'd worked in her life? They were sitting completely still in a freezing cold cave. What did that mean? “Slow your breath. Bring your attention inside. I am going to stop talking now, and I will only speak to you in your mind if you absolutely need me. I am here. It will be alright... even if you fail. I am here. I am here.”

Nothing happened at first. Trin sat, more of her attention focused on the cold of the seat pushing its way through the robe and into her bottom than on her breath or “bringing her attention inside”, whatever that meant. But as her nerves settled, she found her breath both calmer and much louder in the silence of the cave. It began to echo off the walls and bounce directly back into her ears. Fffffffuuuuhhhhhh...vvvvuuuuhhhh. Fffff-fuuuuhhhhhh...vvvvuuuuhhhh. Fffffffuuuuhhhhhh...vvvvuuuuhhhh. At first, her breath slowed and lengthened into something comically slow. She almost found herself giggling at it. But soon her breath was short, short, shorter still... until it was gone. She wasn't sure what to pay attention to now. The cave was so silent and without any sound echoing, there was no sound at all. She wasn't sure if Cedar was still sitting across from her — somehow, she hadn't heard Cedar move since she breathed her last word. No smells. Nothing to see in the pitch black with her eyes closed. Nothing to taste with the last of the sweet mushroom porridge gone from her tongue before they'd even entered this god-forsaken hallway. Just cold and silence. She waited. She listened.

The murmur shifted on the surface of her tranquil awareness, subtly at first, like a flickering ember or a faint breeze. As it was the only thing she could bring her attention to, she did exactly that. Focusing on the slight motion, the tiny distant vibrato in the silence. As she drew her attention toward it, it came to her. Slowly at first, but with patience she found that in every moment it was accelerating, a little faster, a little faster, until — as though it had been there all along — it was suddenly upon her. And she could see what it was.

It was everything all at once. Screaming children and wailing grandfathers, weeping over pains both physical and emotional. It was giggling babies and the wind of the leaves in the trees, a thin breeze winding up in its intensity until it became a gale, swishing the canopy of the forest and

ultimately causing branches to break and finally entire trees to crack loudly and collapse on top of one another. It was the whalesongs echoing across entire continents, as heard by every other whale but also by every sea creature in between. It was ethereal music, played on instruments beyond the reach of her imagination, which was still trapped in the six senses of the physical body. It was the crystalline sound of snow and ice tinkling across a white landscape in a land she'd never seen. It was at once beautiful, horrifying, deafening.

She felt herself wading through the sound, trying to find a single, meaningful channel to listen to. Like bushwhacking through underbrush, her nails peeling back layers of ferns and bush, branches both soft, easy to break like alder, and hard, shattering with all her bodyweight like the oldest skeletal limbs of a long-dead spruce. She could really feel the sound with her hands. Like being lost in the forest, she also felt she was trapped. It would be just as awkward and unpleasant to go back from where she'd come so instead she plowed forward. The branches began to pull at her arms as she found herself too exhausted to break them off and make a path for herself. The ferns tugged at her feet and shins. She tripped. She wanted to cry and she wanted out. She knew all she had to do was open her eyes.

"You don't need me yet, child." came Cedar's voice... seemingly from everywhere all at once, though it didn't drown out the bedlam. Rather, it simply added one more voice to the chaos. But even though the words told her to face the jungle of noise, she found it was the only channel which made any sense to her, and she forced her entire attention upon it. Cedar's voice was fading, so she calmed herself and brought it to her. "You don't need me yet, child." was the composition, the words. But the meaning was something else entirely. With every moment that passed, with every bit of her attention she could bring upon Cedar's faint mantra, the cacophony faded. Suddenly there was silence again.

She didn't need Cedar to say it, but she had begun to understand. "I can make sense of the chaos." she thought to herself and, feeling as though she'd caught an impossible glimpse of Cedar's warm smile in the infinite darkness, quieted herself again and waited for the noise on the horizon.

Again, the sound she could hear in her bones and teeth and legs and stomach screamed and rattled through her body. This time she allowed it to come fully. Wave upon wave of new sensation crashed upon her, not only deafening but blinding and filling her mouth with flavours: divine mushroom, honey, soup, chalk. One passed over the other as quickly as the previous had come. She picked one, not by the flavour itself, but by the timing... she had to reach out and grab for a hold on anything as the river washed her out to sea. It was chalk.

Chalk looks like white and so she was blinded by white. Not a painful white, like that of staring directly into the sun, but a complete and total

white all the same. Chalk sounds like “ffffuuuhhhhhh” and she held onto this channel, even though there was very little to recommend it. It tasted awful, it looked boring, and the sound was obnoxious. But it was singular and again the chaos calmed all around her. She could smell the dust of chalk, the smell which would normally accompany an uncontrollable sneeze. She could feel it not just on her fingertips, but on every piece of skin across her entire body. Drowning in chalk, but not drowning in insanity. “One down,” she thought. She let the chalk go and allowed the waves to crash over her again, returning to the temporary insanity, pulling herself upright so that she might hold onto one feeling, one sound, of her own choosing.

She saw the figures of her parents before her, and she held it. She heard their cooing, the sounds of unbounded love for their second, wonderful daughter. She could feel them holding her. And then, to her horror, she felt them age, year after year, in her arms. Their voices stopped and the warm bodies of her loving parents became bones. Then dust. Her heart sank. She knew her parents would die one day, but she didn’t think today would be that day. She lost control and allowed the waves not only to wash over her, but to sweep her away. “I don’t want any of this,” she cried into the din. “I don’t want to listen to any of you!”

“I am here,” she heard Cedar whisper in her ear. “I am here and it is time for you to hold onto me. But you have to try.”

Trin reached out with her mind and found Cedar waiting, arms open, to comfort her. “Yes, child. It is true. Your parents will die one day and it will feel like this. But that day isn’t today and even when it comes, it isn’t forever. Nothing is forever.” Trin let herself weep into the cap of this peculiar old mushroom woman. Cedar didn’t rush her. “It’s okay to cry. But it’s imperative you keep moving. You need to find the channel you came here to listen to.”

Shaken, Trin forced herself up again. “Okay. I won’t get greedy, I won’t try to win or find comfort. I’ll find the answer. I promise.” For the third time, she let the waves crash over her, this time standing as firmly as she could on this mental plane of existence. She watched and listened, patiently, for what seemed like 18,000 years. She told herself continuously that she wouldn’t give up, that she wouldn’t compromise. After the first 9000 years passed, she stopped reassuring herself at all. She was silent and she waited while every noise, every sight, imaginable crashed into her, repeatedly. She didn’t move.

She witnessed entire lifetimes pass her by, from birth to death, from birth to death. Finally, she saw the one she was waiting for. She didn’t know his name, but she knew he was the one with the message. She picked him up, as a baby, and carried him for years until he was old enough to venture out on his own. Then she followed him, helped him from the shadows, a kind spirit in this man’s world. She watched as he matured,

as he realized for himself that he had some great purpose, as he overcame obstacles, fell in love, had his heart broken, learned many skills, and grew old. Finally, he opened a bookstore in some giant city, and his destiny was fulfilled: he found the book he'd spent his entire life looking for. Trin saw this and presented herself as a customer, curious about the book's message. The shopkeeper she had supervised his entire life read the book to her, a blind old woman who could not read herself. She knew what message she was to take back. She knew the importance of her friends. But still, she waited for this man. As a blind old woman, she would return to his bookshop every day, even once the sacred message had been read to her many times. She would bring the man tea and biscuits. Eventually, she was there when he died in his store. He told her that he understood his life's purpose was to have met her and for them to have shared these books together. But he chuckled that she had outlived him. "How is that even possible?" he asked, a smile on his face, as he moved out of the life of a shopkeeper forever.

Trin opened her eyes. There, sitting across from her, stiff and silent, was Cedar. Cedar's eyes were already open. "Good that you completed the entire story, child. Do not misunderstand. Your friendship was everything to him. Just because his story is not ultimately important in yours does not mean his story does not matter at all." Again, Cedar's mouth didn't move. Her thoughts reached Trin at a speed Trin was unaccustomed to, less like words and more like pure understanding, unadulterated by the vagaries of verbal communication. "Let's return to the village now... they'll surely be ready for lunch by the time we get there."

The return through the hallway felt nothing like their journey into the mountain chamber. The return, the second half of any round trip spent on foot, rarely feels as long as the original adventure. As quickly as everything had begun, they were standing back in the kitchen, watching the final preparations of the midday meal. Steaming piles of fried mushrooms greeted Trin's nose and it occurred to her just how hungry she was. 18,000 years is a very long time.

Cedar motioned gently toward the workers in the kitchen. "We must help them prepare the food. This will be your last meal before you return home."

Trin, with her 18,000 years behind her, moved without speaking. In the millennia she had witnessed between breakfast and lunch, her consciousness had spent time in many bodies. But some of those bodies were kitchen workers and her muscles held no hesitation now. She fell into line with a group of Matangos shuffling their way toward a massive table covered in plates of food to be served, then carrying large trays of steaming mushrooms on both arms. Her unseen years served her well with confidence but her body had only been in the world for nine years

and the weight of these trays pushed her arms to to their limit.

As she marched out into the dining area, Cedar at her side, unencumbered, she saw Vora, Nikki, and Paz off to her left-hand side. The chief was there to greet her, collect one of her two plates, and direct her to place the other in front of her friends. She smiled at them. A sort of smile that tried to speak of thousand-year journeys, motherhood, hundreds of deaths experienced first-hand, the spectrum of the taste of rice as the grain's very genetic strains warped over ages, the feeling of being born a giant cat, a tiny bird, or a fish, the pain of having lost thousands of one's loved ones over dozens and dozens of lifetimes, and the relief washing over her upon returning to her own body in this life so that she might see her family and friends one more time. She set the plate down on the table and let her smile shine down on them. She felt as though she was radiating light.

The table smiled back at her but Nikki couldn't help himself. "What on earth has gotten into you? Is it really that much fun working in the kitchen?"

Trin didn't have time to process Nikki's question, much less respond. It hadn't occurred to her that the 18,000 years had passed in the blink of an eye for her friends.

"You know, child," interrupted Cedar, "there are corners of that kitchen which are much heavier work than you might find yourself capable of handling. Trin was marvelous. We're very grateful to her — and so should you be." Although she lowered her eyes to the plate of mushrooms between Nikki and Vora, Nikki wondered why she sounded as though she spoke for the entire tribe. "Come child," she offered to Trin, "there is still more food to serve."

Nikki and Vora's mouths hung open. They weren't prepared to hear that Trin was expected back in the kitchen. Especially not when Paz had so much to explain to them about her experience. They needed to leave soon and the notion that Trin was expected to continue performing manual labour, regardless of how much they owed the Matangos, seemed absurd to them. Paz held up her hand, as though she heard their protests.

"Hold my hand, please, Trin... this old woman isn't so steady on her knees anymore." Just as quickly as they had appeared, Trin and Cedar made their way back to the kitchen.

Once they arrived, Cedar turned to Trin. "You must understand, child. Your friends will not understand what you have been through. The next skill you'll need to master is patience of a different kind."

"Especially when it comes to that boy."

Trin walked into the kitchen to movement in rhythm. From the doorway, the flow of matangos looked like waves of ants throbbing in and out of their hill. Each one's eyes obscured by the tray he was carrying, they resembled toddlers carrying too many toys while trying to peak overtop. And yet, they moved gracefully between each other in flowing curves across the floor, more like water than waiters.

An iron cauldron of fruit splashed and popped at its surface, a tub of magma squirting hot purple syrup into the air with every popping bubble. A fat matango yanked on the chain, rolling the cauldron over so it tipped its thick, sweet juices down into the bowl held by a smaller matango who scurried over to arrive just in time to execute the catch. This rhythm continued. The chain was pulled and as the previous bowl was whisked away, a new scurrying matango would push his bowl under the waterfall of syrup seemingly just in time. Trin wondered for how many years they had been producing breakfast this way.

She looked to the other side of the kitchen and saw pancakes larger than a matango's armspan poured out, one after another, unflinchingly, onto giant cast iron pans. Each pan was grasped at the handle by two hands. A single matango, in charge of a pan larger than herself, slid it under the viscous flow of batter the colour of crimini mushrooms under a bright morning sun. She then dragged her pan across a long, winding counter until it met a circle of wooden fires. As she lifted the pan, counterbalanced by her own bodyweight leaning in such a way that Trin was confident she'd fall backward, another matango would slide her own pan off the fire to make room for the newest raw pancake.

"You will have to explain on the walk back to your village, Trin. Not here. Feed your friends a large breakfast. Eat one yourself. Make sure everyone is comfortable and then start the journey back. It will take them some time to understand and you will need to convince them without telling them the entire story."

"Is it true?" asked Trin.

"Oh, of course. Everything you experienced was real. You are well over 18,000 years old now but it would be hard for them to believe that. You still look 12 years old."

"I'm 9."

"Yes, whatever the case with you People. So hard to tell your bodies apart, you know. So do not say it. Paz had a vision similar to yours when she ate the mushroom. Even though you understand everything, you cannot become a Messiah."

"A what now?"

"You know. A saint. A sage. It is dangerous to publicize what you know, so don't do that. Let Paz feel she is in charge and she will learn to hear

you in time. For now, it is more important that she explains to your village not what she saw but how she saw it.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by that.”

“I know, dear. Let me explain it this way. You saw an entire world. You saw this world. And you saw it as though it were just a story in a book in another dimension. Now, will anyone believe you if you tell them that? A nine-year-old? Or will they think it’s some silly fantasy or a dream?”

“A dream, I suppose.”

“That’s right. And so what would happen if Paz tells your families what she saw? She saw the same thing but she saw it in a different way. The entire world. Our world, all at once. How could she possibly explain that?”

“I suppose that would freak people out a little.”

“A little. But between the two of you, who has the better chance of explaining to your parents the truth of this situation? And how should that person explain, since they can’t tell the story as a story and they can’t quite tell the truth?”

“Hmm.” Trin paused for a minute. “I suppose the truth is that we have seen the world, the entire world, but for Paz it was a hallucination, a kind of dream. They will be more concerned for her, because she’s older. Little kids don’t go crazy, but teenagers do, sometimes. And she almost is. So, like, they’ll take her more seriously. Both because she’s older but also because it’s scarier?”

“Correct.” Cedar smiled, anticipating Trin’s next realization.

“Oh. Oh no. She has to make the mushrooms scary, even though they are the thing which helped Paz see our entire world?”

“Also correct.” Cedar leaned back and let the concept sink in.

“So we don’t have to lie, exactly. We tell the truth. We just tell the truth for the wrong reasons, kinda.”

“Now you’re getting it, child. Come. Let’s bring these pancakes to your friends.”

If there was any overwhelming input in the kitchen, it was smell. The air clung to nostrils as though the syrupy texture was itself the scent, thick and drooping. Moist, hot air lingered on the skin where the two joined one another as a continuum between the body and the atmosphere. Sweet to the nose, that air wasn't cloying but it held the same confusing message experienced at a beach, at daybreak, or in the thick of the swamp. The sweetness was somehow representative of the physical elements: the taste of the floor, the cast iron, the skin of another being. A smell like that tells you where you are and gathers your attention to your other senses. Humidity, pressure, and ambient sound fill the space of your consciousness, pushing out distracting thoughts, anxieties, and the sadness that is born of fear. A kitchen is a most wholesome assault on the senses. It is the opposite of sensory deprivation. And the smell is at the centre, manipulating all other reality around it.

The children were about to take the first steps on a quest that would lead them through an infinite number of such smells, grounding their awareness in their environment. Few environments are as wholesome as a kitchen. Most, much less so.

Halfway Brook felt unimaginatively named. It was exactly halfway between the matangos and the Peoples' village. And, as it happened, it was only just as they were reaching Halfway Brook that Trin and Paz began to meet Nikki and Vora's understanding. Paz had been convinced over breakfast. It wasn't hard. She could see almost as much of the future as Trin could.

It had taken Trin almost the entire journey to express what Cedar had implored her to. They wouldn't lie, she implored, but they would need to explain to the adults in a term they understood: fear. They would also need to lean into the image of their village religion. Their parents (certainly her parents) would not accept that she had some experience of universal singularity based on attention alone. Their God would need to be a part of that picture.

"Okay, sit down," commanded Paz. "Let's see which of us sees the next event first." Demonstrating this to their parents would be hard. It would require just enough prediction of the future to demonstrate the children were to be trusted. . . but not so much that they appeared possessed or evil.

Part of the difficulty was in recognizing "events." It wasn't obvious to the young Clairvoyants how to differentiate between their ability to see the future and, well, random imagination. The sense that an event was known to them was subtle. Timespans were also a problem. Perhaps an image of someone being attacked with a sword is real but the time horizon is ten years out. Scales were also a problem. Perhaps an image of a flood is real but the image is rain on the forest floor.

So Paz and Trin had their work cut out for them.

"Close your eyes," instructed Paz. "Let's wait and see."

The children waited in silence. Nikki shifted which leg was crossed in front of the other. Vora scratched an itch on her back. Paz and Trin were motionless, listening carefully. "Come on, Paz. You can do it," thought Trin to herself. She could feel the animal approaching.

The animal was almost too close. If it were upwind, they might have smelled or heard it already. Trin directed her attention on Paz, rather than the animal. Paz gasped.

"A deer."

Trin tried not to smile. Paz was learning and she was now seeing events of the right scale and timespan. Trin was grateful to have played the part of silent mentor. She opened her eyes and saw Vora looking around. She gently waved her hand in a downward motion to indicate to Vora that she was to close her eyes again.

Eyes closed, attention withdrawn, the four children sat in a circle beside

Halfway Brook, motionless, as the deer walked past them toward the water. She didn't seem to notice them at all and closed her own eyes as she lapped up the water of the babbling brook.

It felt to the children like weeks were passing while she drank quietly from the tiny river. They didn't mind. When she drank her fill, she loped away and the kids opened their eyes, smiling at one another. They knew how they would convince the village to let them go on another adventure: they could see the future.

