

Chapter 1. Home

Sheesa's favorite flowers were the Spoonwood bushes. From the back door, the flower bush reminded her of a mass of white and red bubbles, but when she watered it every morning, each flower looked like a little red bowl dusted with sugar. The Spoonwoods she liked most of all, but she was always looking for a flower to take up the mantle. Before that it had been the Firefly Heather that grew up with yellow stalks darkening to purple-pink tips, like wildfire in the garden. For a little while, it had been an especially strange hybrid of Bee Balm that The Gardener had concocted. The giant flowers looked like wilted crowns, growing both purple and red on the same bush. Sheesa could remember their smell, the crushed pulp, lemony, like wet hay. She had smelled them so often she came to be sick of it. The first flowers of the Garden she remembered loving were the grand bushes of fat white roses that grew out front. They had the slightest tinge of purple at the base of each petal, and in summer when they bloomed below her window, the smell cast a spell on her every night, as it drifted in on the warm night breeze.

The house where she lived was as quiet as the forest that encircled it. The woods on all sides mingled with the yard and garden, only the front had a grassy field with a rough stone wall. In the wall, there was a small opening with an encarved archway entangled with ivy. The yard (if one could really call it so) was wild, with springing growths that had blown in and taken seed. The grass was tall. No trees stood in the yard but a stump of a massive oak that had fallen and had been rotting away since before Sheesa was born.

Sheesa remembered searching the mound for mushrooms when she was small, and the Gardener would speak sorrowfully of the memory of the tree. They would speak of the shade it once cast in the glade, and its far reaching roots. They would point, far over to the edge of the wood where the roots of *this tree* seized a clutch of exposed stone.

The Gardener chose to build their house here, long before Sheesa, because of the tree, and the building outlasted it.

"Things fall sometimes," they would tell her, and move on to happier histories.

The house they built was sized for The Gardener, as they were part Giant. They were the tallest of everyone Sheesa had met, they were eight feet tall, and so the house doors and windows and ceiling were tall as well. She lived her whole life in their cottage in the woods, and didn't know it to be strange at all.

The center of the home they shared was the hearth, a fireplace ringed with fixed stone and a chimney that let the smoke out. The soot amassed like a thick black paint on the masonry, and was never to be cleaned.

One day Sheesa asked them why, and they spoke in their slow speech-like way, "Every time you work a potion, the magic you put into it comes off of you and into everything. It rises in

the smoke, cracks with the smoldering wood, and soaks the brew you stir.” At this they scratch their nose, and said, “I don’t see why any good magic should go to waste.”

Sheesa looked at it with new eyes, and imagined it like a wise creature in the home. The two of them would commune with it, sitting on stools and working in the heat. Above it always hung a pot or cauldron, water coming to boil for tea or a stew or something more *wondrous*.

The rest of the room was littered with books, a mass of journals bound with twine and catalogues, illustrations, fresh ink drawings and diagrams. Some books held pressings, others were books of recipes, crammed with bookmarks, or encyclopedias of ingredients and their uses. Racks around the room held jars of all shapes and sizes, glass tubes, apparatuses, and *potions*.

The art of potion-making was the primary topic on Sheesa’s thoughts, morning and night. The Gardener was a Potionmaker, and had been collecting ingredients and recipes for decades before they had found Sheesa as a baby. The Gardener told her that they had found her alone in the mountains, not a baby, but a young child. They wandered the wood for days trying to find her family. The Gardener was perplexed at her appearance, and told her plainly that they suspected some magic in her arrival. The woods where they lived were old, uninhabited, and quiet. The Gardener knew them well, and never found a sign of her parents.

They confessed to her that they had always felt a gnawing empty feeling, knowing they would never have a child, and that they saw her as a gift the forest gave them. And when it became apparent that Sheesa could craft potions, The Gardener felt their fantasy validated. They made her their apprentice, and taught her the fundamentals of Herbalism, and watched her passion and aptitude soar.

In a world full of different people, magic manifested in a multitude of ways. Herbalism was an uncommon skill, and The Gardener knew it well.

The recipes lining the walls were countless, some in books written by others, many, crafted and illustrated by The Gardener themselves. There were recipes for brews to dissuade ground beetles and earthen things (or perhaps attract them), tonics for anything from sore knees to hypothermia, slushy distillations that could grow a conifer tree overnight, and endless lists more. Sheesa studied them all, and planted each recipe like a seed in her mind.

As much time as Sheesa spent brewing potions, she spent equal time outside in the Garden. The outside of the house was host to flowers and vines. White rose bushes on either side of the front steps grew untrimmed and beautiful. Sunflowers crowded the window out back, bobbing and nodding in the breeze. On each side more vines crept up the sides of the house, lacing into a mesh of buds and waving leaves. At night, the buds would bloom into white waxy flowers like slow, unfurling butterfly wings.

Sheesa knew each tiny tree planted in a row, and every raised bed sitting between the old growth trees. In their garden, they nurtured vegetables and berries together, fruit trees and beds of melons and squashes, but of all the plants in the garden, Sheesa took particular care of the flowers. She nurtured each bloom like a prodigy.

Beyond their tame garden, The Gardener had groves and beds throughout the wood. Sometimes, while wandering, Sheesa would stumble into a row of fruit bearing trees all lined up in the forest, or a great nest of unnatural berries she had never seen before. Sheesa watched out for them eagerly, as she plodded along in the valley she grew up in, all by herself. She explored and made maps, and blazed trails through the ancient wood.

The Gardener left her to explore alone. They knew about the Great Beasts of the forests of the world, and imagined sheer cliffs or poisoned fruits, but Sheesa had been given to them by the woods, and she deserved to spend as much time as she wished there. It was her home.

Chapter 2. What Was

Sheesa woke before the sun rose, and dressed to the sounds of birds waking. She went down into the garden, fetched two pails from the well, and watered the rows she was tending. She drained water over the various yellow and orange and pink Violets, then Yellow Bearded Toadflax, followed by the Fetid Nightshade, Deadly Hemlock, Datura Metel, Fire Pink, Smoking Ghostpipe, the Spoonwood bushes, then finally the herb garden, and bushes of ripening blue and purple berries that would come to fruit by the end of Summer.

The heat was rising with the sun. The dewey morning was giving way to a humid day. The Gardener came down and was watering their beds as well, things Sheesa didn't know of, experiments in progress.

Sheesa was always happy to water the flowers first thing in the morning. As soon as she woke up, she wanted to step outside and feel the dirt under her feet.

With her ritual complete, Sheesa set aside her tools and waved to The Gardener.

From under their wide brimmed sun hat, they returned the wave with a gentle smile and nod.

Sheesa smiled and decided then to go out into the woods. She was always exploring, further and further into the mountainside. She grabbed her bag and set off.

As she wandered from the garden into the woods, the trees grew thicker, vines sagged between branches, and flora crowded the forest floor. Sheesa had wandered this same trail countless times, she debated which direction to head, carefree. If she peeled off the path to the right, it would take her up an incline towards a wood of Haraday trees, Coalbark Larch, and some ancient Cyprus. There, she loved to walk along the creek running from a spring that trickled quietly from a crack in the stone. There were tiny fish to see, salamanders to uncover, and sometimes a wild creature lapping from a pool.

If she were to head to the left, there was more to see in the valley, berry bushes to visit, strange blooms to press and sketch, Qiwi Bee hives to watch.

All of this she knew well, but on this day, Sheesa saw something she did not recognize. From a pillar of stone she had clambered up on, Sheesa saw a structure through the midmorning haze.

Far North of The Gardener's cottage there was a lonely stack of stones in a thin line, just peeking above the grove of trees. Sheesa did not know if this was the work of some new homesteaders, or perhaps it had been there out of sight and she had grown this year, or maybe a great tree had fallen to reveal the view. Whatever it was, the thought of something new in her valley set her heart racing.

Sheesa's progress to the structure in the woods was slow going. She had to cut a path through the thick underbrush, as she knew none of the trails would lead her there. She pushed through in a straight line as best she could manage.

She was nervous. She had generally met people in good faith: she'd talked with the residents of the nearby settlement Alumroot and folks that had visited the garden, but she had always been introduced in one way or another by The Gardener. She decided to be optimistic, she imagined a child playing out front with a black-haired pig. She imagined two nice mothers, one in a garden with wild cucumbers, the other still building the house.

On her way there she saw a number of bushes she did not recognize as native. There were hedges, overgrown, but recognizably deliberate, as well as groves of trees arranged and once pruned. She took the fruit from one of the bushes, much of it had already been poached by birds, but the lower branches still held some that was ripe. It was a little orange berry with a soft outer meat that grew in twisting bunches.

With a bag full, she continued on carefully. Her image of the homestead was wilting, but she carried on. It was a silly notion, but Sheesa longed for a new family to meet. She had grown up seeing the same children of Alumroot once and again; none were her age, and they were never much like herself. Older children, that were too tall to crawl in the caves below the berry bush branches, and too boring to talk with about the flowers or plants or anything Sheesa cared for. There were younger children as well, and Sheesa could laugh and play with them a little, but she could have any fun of her own.

The first thing she saw was the well. It was open, a well with no cover. Sheesa let out a sigh, she knew it must be abandoned. She walked with all senses alert. The afternoon heat had her sweating, and she knew a creature with a keen sense of smell would be aware of her presence. The well was made in an old manner, squat, with squared stone piled into a sort of mound, then the missing lid would have been placed over the hole. The stones were fitted with precision. The maw leaked cool air.

Sheesa, picked up a small stone and dropped it in.

There was no sound.

From here she could see the ruins. The tower she spotted earlier that day was what remained of a tall chimney. A young tree grew in the main room of the house in full bloom. She stood taking in the scene to press into her memory.

She wanted to linger, to search for some artifacts to bring home to The Gardener, but the light was leaving, and though she rarely was one to get lost in the woods, she had only traveled this way once, and caution still gripped her.

What's nagging at my senses? She asked herself. She was on edge. The hairs on her arms were standing up. She could feel the tension in her temples. Like a deer lurking timidly out of the treeline, she crept over to the building. She couldn't bring her mind back into what she was doing. She kicked some rocks over, poked at a mound with a stick, then left in a rush, glad to be gone.

She made it home early, quickly. It had felt like such a long trek, plowing through the woods. Going somewhere new, she took every step carefully, expanding each second. Coming home, it was a bit of a dash, running from something, but she didn't have anything to run from.

The Gardener was at the hearth when she walked in. They were sitting by as something cooked.

"Hello, I've returned," Sheesa announced, formally.

"Welcome home, little one," The Gardener offered. Sheesa was through the main room and almost to the stairs when they called, "Did you find anything interesting growing wild today?"

"Oh," she muttered as she dropped out of her daydream. "Yes, actually I found something interesting. I was hoping to talk to you about it, if you have the time?"

"Please," The Gardener motioned to her stool by the hearth.

Sheesa sat by them. She pulled out the small sack of berries which she had picked, as well as two leaves of the bush which she was hoping The Gardener could use to identify it.

They inspected it carefully for a moment. "This is not a plant I recognize from this region." Picking up the berry and squishing it, they smelled the fruit and shook their head. "And not one of my breeds either. In fact, I have never seen this plant in all my time here. More interesting, it doesn't proximally resemble some sort of hybrid. I wouldn't be able to guess at what sort of bush this species was derived from. Likely, it was many species, over several generations of crossbreeding." Rubbing their forefingers together to remove the juice, they leaned back in their chair. "So where did you find this specimen my apprentice?"

"In a place I've never been before. Nearby a ruined building North of here. Do you know of it?"

The Gardener gazed lazily into space for a moment, then slowly formed the words, "Not that I can recall." Looking at Sheesa they asked, "Was it quite old, or rather new?"

Sheesa knew "*quite old*" to The Gardener was much older than how she may perceive it. They were well over three hundred and still young for someone who was part Giant. She told them it was older than this building, but long abandoned.

The Gardener hummed a long deep hum. "Interesting. I will have to go and see this place."

"You're interested too then?"

“Indeed, little one. Of all I have read of this valley there has never been an established town or community in this glade, however the properties of the place have been well known for eons. If I were to guess, this place was home to someone much like us: an Herbalist.”

It was almost what Sheesa had hoped for, in a way. She shared the meal The Gardener had prepared, thinking of the trove of ingredients, new fruits, flowers, and more to dig up at the ruins. She imagined ancient script, languages she didn't recognize, torn parchment with half-recipes on them.

As night approached, it became more and more clear to Sheesa that she wouldn't sleep. She was going back.

Possessed, she rifled through a chest of vials at the foot of her bed. From it she drew a potion, mostly clear, with sediment of ground white and green. It was a potion of Dark Sight. The key ingredient was the White Snake-Eye Flower, used in many potions dealing with vision. Included were leaves of the herb Calpis for balancing and binding, as well as ground *Ellisia Nyctelea* greens for a prolonged activation time upon ingestion. She gave the vial two firm shakes and set the sediment spinning. Uncorking it, she drank it down.

The Gardener was in their study. They would see her leaving out the back door, but she wasn't sneaking out. They had never stopped her from coming and going as she pleased. That freedom empowered Sheesa, and she respected The Gardener for it.

Tonight she brought her whole sack, filled with empty vials and containers. She planned on returning with loot in hand.

The potion lasted at least an hour before it faded. She felt the effects rising behind her wide eyes. She watched the candlelight nova in the room, then peeled down the stairs and into the bright night.

The Dark Sight potion lit the world in hues of blue. The mice on the trail caught her eye before they darted off the path. The moon itself was less than half full, but banded in the sky with a pale white cloud encircling it, too bright to look into.

Deep in the woods, Sheesa's adrenaline morphed into sleepless attention. Like a nocturnal animal, her head spun to each noise in the brush. Her breath was loud in her ears. Insects chirped and buzzed above her. Nothing was out of place.

As she wound carefully down the trail she blazed earlier that day, there was a great crack in the trees beside her, then two more. She stopped, hunched, and panned her gaze across the treeline. She could see the trees and branches clearly, and there was no animal there.

It wasn't unusual to find a great beast in the wood. The forest was old, and this portion had laid untouched for many years, until today.

Ending her hesitation, she continued on. She walked with her ears wide open.

Coming upon the building in the night, it seemed contently alone, and quiet. It had a certain obstinate serenity. The chimney had stones askew, and the rubble of the house had been blown out all over the area. The tree in the center of the building was beautiful. Sheesa walked

over to it, a Dogwood of some variety. Large white blooms perfumed lazily. She cupped one and pulled it to her nose for a moment, closing her eyes, living in the smell of the flower.

The light of the moon radiated off the white flowers. She teared up, and the afterimage traced the ghost bloom around as she turned. Blinking fast, she rubbed her eyes to dash it away.

As she lifted her foot, she felt it catch. Looking down, she saw a sort of wood handle fitted over her boot. She pulled up hard, the earth flexed and crumbled away loose. She reached down and pulled the thing from her shoe. It was a teapot. Brushing away the dirt, the white ceramic looked just like the bloom in the moonlight. There was some design around the body of the pot, but she couldn't make it out. She rubbed but couldn't see the pattern. Hoping to find a clue about the ruins or the old herbalist, she went over to the well. She would wash the pot.

The pail and rope laid nearby, still bound as one, covered in ages of dead grass and dried forest vine. Breaking them from their stiff rest, she tossed the pail down the open well.

The rope went shooting down into the dark. Even the Dark Sight couldn't show her the bottom of the well. After a moment, it clanged down there, banging against the rock walls.

The noise hushed the forest.

Empty? She thought to herself.

She looked around and a chill sent every hair standing.

There was something behind the tree, at the edge of the woods. She could see its eyes, its huge eyes in the light. She couldn't stop looking at it. The head was above her eye level, it was looking down at her. She was frozen in its gaze.

It moved.

Stepping forward into the full light of the moon, Sheesa saw it in its full.

It was bear-like, with enormous hunched shoulders, but with narrow cheeks and a long maw, and long black fur that fell like water running over its body. It paced gracefully into view as she eyed it.

Her lips were pursed, brow tense. The teapot lay on the ground beside her foot. She moved to pick it up and the creature stopped.

It was still some yards away. She bent over and grabbed the pot with both hands, awkwardly. Still watching the thing, it had not moved, she began to vault backwards away from it. She stumbled and turned to run, but craned her neck over her shoulder.

The creature walked forward into the foundation of the ruined building. It stood like a stone, hair blowing like grass on its mountain form.

She ran hard all the way into the door. She still had Dark Sight, and could hardly look up. The fire burning sent alarming yellow and orange kaleidoscoping mad across her eyes. Shielding them, she crawled the stairs up into the loft and shut herself in her room.

She was awake, sitting up in her bed in the candleless night. The Dark Sight wouldn't let her sleep. Behind her eyelids she watched bright networks and flashes of color flexing and moving until they faded, and sleep took her.

The next morning Sheesa woke tired. The Gardener was already on their way down the stairs. She rolled out of bed, still brushing away the last of sleep's hazy pull. She tugged on her boots and avalanched down the stairs after them.

She caught them as they headed out the door. As they walked together to the well, The Gardener asked her how her night had been. She began to recall the story of the teapot and the beast excitedly as they pulled water from the well. As Sheesa came to mention the monster in the woods The Gardener paused, holding the empty bucket midair for a moment, staring into space.

Sheesa was trained for these moments, a glimmer of their insight would usually follow. She stopped speaking and waited for their response.

Instead, The Gardener went back to retrieving water.

Puzzled, Sheesa asked, "Do you not know of a creature such as I have described?"

"There is certainly no beast of this land, nor any I have been that fits the description. I have heard of such things far to the South, where the sun rarely sets and your breath freezes in the air, but not here. Nothing so large nor with the features you described. I find it hard to believe such a thing could survive here right under our noses."

Sheesa felt her cheeks get hot. She didn't want to seem foolish, and hoped she hadn't exaggerated only to find it to be some great Mountain Bear.

The Gardener, sensing they may have misspoken, quickly turned to her with a smile. "Not that I don't believe you child, the things of this world are many and changing. I am no expert on great beasts. I will meditate on what you have told me. I respect your word and take it with great care." Smiling again, they handed her the filled pail.

She took it with a slight bow, returning the smile.

They took to their garden beds under the early yellow sky, dowsing each bush and vine and sapling, wetting the ground until water welled up like a spring and rolled across the dirt, then returning to the well to refill their pails.

When Sheesa's work was done she could hardly hold a thought in hand for a moment before it peeled away. She walked without being. Her bed called to her, and she napped the afternoon away.

The light was low in the West. Sheesa woke in the slim moments after sunset where the cool blue light still glowed on the horizon, when the air felt chilled, and firebugs danced in all colors at the treeline. She woke up disoriented. She had been laying on her arm and it had gone entirely numb, like dead weight. Rolling over, she felt a displaced urgency, like she may have missed something. She pulled on something to wear, her boots still walking towards the bed, then went slowly downstairs.

The house was empty. From the middle stair she glanced up at The Gardener's room, but the light was out.

The fire was bright in the hearth. It made the outside look dark already. There were potatoes and carrots, a large yellow and green striped gourd, and a pile of mushrooms on the table.

Sheesa walked to the back window. Through the glare of the room behind her she could see the tall form of The Gardener struggling with something heavy in the twilight. Sheesa went to the back door and opened it. The evening air was cold. She saw them twisting something, a stone.

They looked up and waved. From the other side of the garden they called, "*Birdbath!*" Sheesa smiled.

She watched them as they finished up. The Gardener had been daydreaming about using a large bowl-like stone they had unearthed for a birdbath. They had been talking about it for a month and Sheesa was glad to see it done.

The Gardener walked up to the door where Sheesa stood with something on their tongue. They pointed to her and said, "You know, while you were asleep today, I had an idea."

Sheesa moved from the tall, open door to let them in. Together they took a seat by the fire.

"It occurred to me today while I was pruning the little Wych Elm, I believe the creature you saw could be our neighbor the herbalist."

Sheesa hadn't had the time to think it through, but it did make some sort of sense. The ruins were old. She pictured a creature that was almost human, beastly but intelligent, and over time it grew into a larger, more animal thing. Or maybe there was an accident, and it was transformed somehow.

The Gardener saw her mind racing. "The teapot, child, do you have it? Perhaps we can divine something of the relic."

Sheesa looked up and nodded, ran upstairs and returned with it in hand. She eyed it warily now. She could see the thing behind the white tree, and remembered meeting its gaze, and this was *its teapot*. And who knew what sort of enchantment was present on it. There was no way to know by looking at the thing, it had to be *divined*.

The Gardener took the pot and brought it to the wash bin. Holding it by the wood wrapped handle, they dipped it under the water.

Divining a property of a thing was trial and error. One could only cover the basics, if it didn't show a property, then you hoped for the best. If you poured out the water and it was poisonous then you had your answer.

When The Gardener lifted the pot and poured out the water, it ran clear.

They washed the side of the pot and the bottom, running their large graceful hands over the twisting design in the ceramic. The pot was sturdy but light. Now clean, they filled the pot once again with water and put it on the fire to boil. Thumping into their chair, they dried their hands on their apron. "Now we'll see if the heat has an effect."

"Do you think it's actually cursed?" Sheesa asked.

“I think only a fool or a menace would poison a teapot, however that does not mean it doesn’t have some sort of beneficial quality, something like the residue of Essence of Vigor or a similar potion.”

Sheesa huffed quietly. There were some potions in this world that seemed to her to only be *belief* as she liked to say. She had drank a potion of *Essence of Vigor* that she had made herself and didn’t feel a thing. The Gardener had a much more gentle way of explaining such things, saying something like, “*Who is to say what another person experiences is folly*” or “*Perhaps they have an ingredient that you lack.*”

While the pot came to boil, The Gardener set out a slew of cups with various powders and leaves, each acted to signal a property. There was a cup for each family of Harm: Toxin, Burn, Paralysis, and Weakness. If the water would inflict any of these, the indicators in the cup would show.

As they poured out water from each one, they sat just as hot water does, still and steaming.

“To me, it seems this is just a teapot. Not a fruitless exercise, you’ll likely need the skill yourself out in the world someday, but really, one can never be sure about such things.” The Gardener set aside another cup and filled it. “I surmise it won’t cause you harm, if you’re brave enough to drink from it.” They offered her the cup daringly.

“Are you sure?”

“As sure as one can be with such things. If it does have a menacing quality, I’d rather know now. And if you are adversely affected by it, I’m here to come to your aid.” The Gardener said this all rather coolly. They were not the kind to let a puzzle lie unsolved, they had no space in their home for a *possibly* poisonous teapot, and they didn’t feel uneasy about proposing Sheesa be the one to test it.

She accepted the cup, energized by the dare. She smelled it, light and grassy, green tea. She blew the tea cool and sipped.

Putting down the cup, she swallowed deliberately and waited a moment, quiet.

The fire went crackling on.

The Gardener smiled and rose, “All this over a silly teapot. One can’t be too careful though. Let me know if you do end up feeling funny, but don’t think about it too much. You’d give yourself a stomach ache then blame it on the poor ceramic.” They went to work cubing potatoes and chopping the carrots.

Sheesa sat for a little while looking at the fire. She was trying to decide if she felt strangely. She was groggy, fuzzy from the nap she guessed. Her nature was to be quiet, but she felt especially so. *Contemplative* jumped into her head. She felt a faux-wisdom, like she had suddenly engaged with a part of herself she hadn’t been in a long time. None of this, in her mind, was really due to the teapot. She was in an odd mood, and spent the rest of the evening quietly.

She was slow to sleep, her head was busy with things that made no sense to her. She was dreaming of planting tea leaves, watering the garden with tea-water, catching a hint of some calligraphy in the twisting design of the body, like a shadow fleeing candlelight in a room.

Chapter 3. Being and Doing

The night passed. The stars spun overhead and revealed the morning light.

Ritual played itself out. Sheesa watered what must always be watered. The day was cool and clear, with a crisp breeze. Some small clouds flirted at the very highest point in the sky.

Sheesa and The Gardener exchanged few words. They asked her if she was well. She said she was.

But there was some unease that still lingered in her heart. She had thought the nagging feeling would be gone with the next day, yet it remained. There was a longing, a pull.

Something The Gardener had said last night stuck in her head. They said she would have to divine a things nature herself one day, and now all the sudden, Sheesa felt as if she could see that day, there on the hill, on the horizon. What was between her and then?

And she felt shame, a sort of laziness, the feeling that she had taken this person for granted. The Gardener had always been so kind and gentle with her. Thinking of it as she walked back to the house, she began to shed a tear.

The Gardener was standing by their Pearly Sea-Lavender bush. The white tips of the tiny buds whipped and straightened up in the wind.

She knew things wouldn't be the same again. Sheesa felt a fear inside her, as if she was afraid of missing her chance at something. She knew she had to leave, she knew she needed change. Once she expressed her feelings to The Gardener there would be no stopping, they didn't like to leave things to wait. They would make a plan. They would recommend a new mentor. They would discuss the routes she could take. The air would change, everything would be a *last*. A last harvest, a last thunderstorm, a last morning. Everything from the perspective of the end of their time together.

But she couldn't pretend. Sheesa felt engaged, she had found something she didn't know she was looking for. She had a hunger for the world, for something wholly new.

She went to The Gardener's room and took the three maps of the land they had in scrolls by their door. She unrolled them each, top and bottom, and one to their left, on the floor of her bedroom and weighed the edges down with books from her shelf.

Their valley she marked with a smooth stone from a stream, it was unlabeled on the bottom map. East over the mountain was the sea-edge, to the west was the plains before the Ayumu Mountain spine. Towns and cities pocked the map, but the world was flat before her.

A book she had read came to mind, *Mariel's Drive*. The story began in the city of Izar, it was described with rolling streets, bright lights at night, a million people.

Sheesa had to loom over the maps to find the place, the distance was unimaginable. It was across the parchment edge, on the North Island, the city sat by the sea.

She sat down looking over the world. She had read about flocks of the forty foot tall Rostrum Deer that sprung about in the Ayumu highlands, the hollow Silverwood Trees that held whole town's-worth of people in Beimarr, The Tower of Hyphantria. All of those places were happy living in books until now.

Sheesa wanted to be in the world, but she didn't know where to begin. *Maybe I'll just run off, leave a note and return before too long*. The guilt would cripple her, she resigned. She didn't want to confront The Gardener, the idea of breaking the peace of the house set her on edge. *They love me, they'll understand*.

She set their usual teapot to boil at the hearth. The wind whipped through the drafty house and pushed around the loose dust and bits of dried flora. The window rattled in its frame. Sheesa sat under a thin blanket and watched the fire fidget in the breeze.

The Gardener came in, their thin hair windblown, hat hanging on their back. "It's really kicking up out there." They sat and took their tea, which Sheesa had placed by their chair.

"The Alzirr family will be here today or tomorrow, for the topical cream for their littlest one. I'll be happy to see him at his best again. He reminded me a little of you when I first met him. You both have the same reddish-brown hair." The Gardener chuckled to themselves. Sheesa kept hers short, sheared and messy.

"My friend," Sheesa began, "I've got something in my head that I can't seem to shake."

The Gardener sobered.

"I feel like it's time for me to do something more," she said it, almost lamenting. "I feel like I've come to a stand still. There's so much left for me to learn, but I never see a thing here that I don't know." The contradiction weighed heavy on her, and she couldn't keep anything from The Gardener. "But I'm so, so grateful and happy to live and learn here. I don't know what-"

The Gardener interrupted her with a knowing sigh and came to sit by her chair. They reached out both arms and encircled her.

She let loose the strain. The turmoil flooded out as she cried into their steady arms.

"I understand my little one, and it's going to be alright."

Time passed quickly. The thing looming on the horizon came into focus.

The Gardener thought it best she go to the nearby port town Bay at Four Hills. They assured her there would be an herbalist master in town, and instructed her to find the place and petition for an apprenticeship.

The Gardener assured Sheesa that she would impress any master. She had a keen mind for potion crafting that they praised as her "*Eminent skill*". She had a gift for inception, Sheesa

could imagine a potion and find the ingredients to make it. She could see the threads between ingredients and their *quality* in a brew, what they added and how they acted.

If there was an issue in the garden and they didn't have a solution, they would find her racking her brain to find a natural parallel. A new species of resilient mites would spring up and their repellant wouldn't be effective, but out in the woods on her own, Sheesa would discover some type of tree worm that the mites couldn't stand. She collected dozens of these worms and dried them, working them into the old repellant, and the mites would flee. It would turn out that the dried tree worm skin also bleached the leaves in the garden, so it had to be counteracted with a salve of Stypantra sap, but with a little tweaking, they had a new repellant in the garden.

The Gardener knew she would succeed at Bay at Four Hills, and felt like their plan was safe and suitable, but Sheesa was immune to their assurances. She didn't know what she wanted. An apprenticeship in the city felt like a baby-step. Sheesa wanted to see mountains. She would ask The Gardener about their journeys, and The Gardener would share honestly, knowing that they were stoking her curiosity.

"Gardener, have you visited the city Izar?" Sheesa asked from her low stool by the fire.

"Many times," they replied, "but not since Dsiban closed his father's Seed Store."

"Is it beautiful?"

"It changed every year I visited, and I am sure it has changed much since. That's the nature of such places. Beauty can be found in change, but some beauty only arises from time."

Over another meal, Sheesa asked, "When you lived in Parako, did you cross the Northern Neck or go by boat to reach our valley?"

Sheesa had been away from the garden before. She had walked to Alumroot, the nearby settlement of five families that one could call a village, and as far as the township of Yain, but no farther. Her remoteness had not kept her from folks of all types however. Their cottage had played host to some travelers in the past, experienced herbalist interested in the water of their valley. Sheesa had met people of all types. There was a person who was tall like The Gardener, with the same pale whitish-grey complexion. They were particularly interested in smoke and fires, and burned incense with them at all times. Another was a woman who stayed with them for some time when Sheesa was a small girl. She was beautiful and mysterious, waiting to talk about her work until Sheesa had left the room, but never failing to entertain her in the garden, or take her on walks through the forest.

These people were friends or colleagues of The Gardener, and they seemed to be kind and intelligent people. Sheesa admired them all in some way or another, and knew that this was not the way of the world. She had something lovely here, and she was throwing it away.

She was to leave before the end of Summer. Sheesa prepared books and ingredients to take with her, as well as the most important potions one could have. She had potions of Sleep, Satiation to stave off hunger and thirst, NonToxic for cleaning water, Arson for fire starting, loose tea she

loved for calming her stomach, and Dark Sight. The Gardener had volunteered to give her some of their own field guides, and to let her keep the mortar and pestle she had been using. She packed a razor thin knife and a larger one.

Other than these, Sheesa didn't have much else to bring. She spent more time working on a gift she had planned for The Gardener, a farewell.

She had stumbled into the idea when working with the berries from the bush near the ruined house. The little orange berries had fruited no use to her. She had juiced a few, mashed some, set some to dry, and could find no obvious value in any. Dumping the pile on the compost, Sheesa assumed she was done with them. Later, however, she saw from across the garden, a flurry of Red-Chested Motmots picking through the garbage. She realized they were after the berries. Sheesa had never seen the incredibly vibrant bird before, with bright green and blue under their wings. The only reason she knew what the bird was called was because The Gardener happened to be peeking over her shoulder and classified them out loud, saying briefly how much they loved the bird's color. They said, "It's lovely to see them in the garden, I think they match the bushes of Heather wonderfully."

Sheesa decided to make a potion from the essence of the berries and pour it out in the birdbath, in hope that they would stick around. She experimented with some variations on a potion of attraction out in the forest.

She would prepare a couple samples and wander to a rocky part of a stream where pools of water would stand in the rocks. Sheesa would pour them out in different holes and wait and watch to see if the birds would come. She sat there, misty morning through dim afternoon for days in a row before she got it right.

The key was strangely enough, in the kind of lure potion Sheesa chose. She started with one for tiny birds like the Budgies or Finches, which didn't work. She tried one for larger insectivorous birds like the Woodpeckers and Long Billed Batis. Both lured various birds to the pools, but not the kind she wanted.

She was running low on the berries, and was dreading the thought of returning to *The Old Herbalist's House*, as she had begun calling it. Sheesa and The Gardener had not spoken much about the place, but had decided for the time being to let it be, partly out of respect, partly out of fear. The teapot she had stolen had come to mind, but she didn't think it would do much good to *return it*.

On this day, she had variations on lures for snakes and salamanders, which she had been reluctant to try, but she had a suspicion it may work. She had heard of birds hunting for frogs and lizards, and mused that Mot Mots were omnivorous. The closest lure she could find was a snakes lure The Gardener had crafted, so she replicated it, incorporating her berries.

She poured the stuff in a natural basin. It smelled foul. One of the ingredients was frog's blood, luckily they still had it in a vial in the house.

She retreated to a stone overhanging the dribbling water. The thought of snakes approaching from every direction kept her senses taut. She would fidget and crane around making sure they weren't lurking.

Before any snakes, however, a Mot Mot arrived. A much bigger one than The Gardener and Sheesa had seen together in the garden. A moment later, its mate appeared. They took to the water immediately. Sheesa was stumped as to why it worked, but pleased to have found the solution so early in the day. She watched the two birds get at the water for a while before sneaking away, as not to disturb them.

On the way home, she mulled on how she could possibly mask the awful scent, let alone the fact that it was supposed to go in the *bird bath*. In a garden of flowers, covering one scent with another wasn't so challenging, but the eerie color, muddled brown and orange, was horribly complicated to correct.

She ended up reducing the blood, which had Sheesa gagging, into a small concentrated powder. She knew the smell was likely vital to attracting the birds, so she just offset it with a strong punch of Jasmine. At this, she had a sort-of-lure for the pretty birds after only a couple weeks work.

The overexertion wasn't lost on Sheesa. She liked to take a tiny moment and make it mean something. She knew The Gardener would remember that moment, and would know implicitly the work she must have done, and hopefully that would translate to how much she cared for them. Hopefully they'd remember after she was gone.

On the day of her departure, Sheesa woke up early and couldn't get back to bed. The night air was hot. The day stood above her in the dark, she stared up at it.

Gazing at the framing of the roof, Sheesa drifted around in daydream and memory. She thought of the first potion The Gardener had shown her.

They had planted a sapling together in the garden. A sour cherry tree The Gardener had found and dug up. They picked a spot and dug a hole, placed the sapling and patted the soil down. Sheesa had been working in the garden for years already, she must have been seven or so then, she decided. She had asked about the potions The Gardener used, they all seemed so natural then. It seemed no different from composting the leftover cuts of greenery and having it turn to soil. The Gardener would bring out a jar full of swirling brown muck and dump it over the graft wound of the tree. The tree would stitch together, slowly, slower than slugs moving beneath the bark, until the flesh closed, and that was how the world was.

When they planted the cherry tree sapling, The Gardener let Sheesa know that together they were going to be making a *potion*. She remembered the rush thinking of it. They concocted an Expedient Growth potion for the sapling tree. Sheesa knew all the variations of that potion now, for conifer and ground moss alike, but back then, it was magic. She remembered laying out the ingredients: sugar, well water, sap from their tree, tea leaves, a bit of soil from the compost, and a mushroom Sheesa didn't recognize at the time. It was Huitlacoche, the key ingredient, a

wild fungus used in almost every Expedient Growth potion. She remembered assembling and stirring the thick goo, heating and combining the sugar and water with sap, mashing the mushroom, and finally mixing the ingredients together.

Together they poured the oozing stuff on the fresh loose dirt. Dark and fertile, the dirt rose and sucked the potion down. The Gardener wasn't done with her yet though, Sheesa smiled, in her bed in the dark, they had a lesson to teach her. She recalled the next morning when she woke up, The Gardener had her come outside to look at the tree. It had sprung up a whole foot in the night. Sheesa was so excited she leapt up and down, but The Gardener stopped her short.

They said, "Now, little one, look here at the soil."

Sheesa followed the pointing finger to the dusty ragged soil beneath the trunk.

"The potion *will* make the tree grow. It opens the roots up like a widening chanel, but one must always be aware of *how* the tree grows. What the tree *takes*. It will take, and of no fault of its own, now it will wither, without a little help."

The very next thing they set to was crafting a particular bomb of nutrients to revitalize the soil, and the cycle continued.

Sheesa sat up in bed and looked at her packed bag by the door. She had to leave early, but she planned to water her beds one last time. Leaving her bag, she snuck downstairs to linger in the garden for a while.

Sheesa brought water from the well, and gave each bush and bed a long and thorough soaking. She took time to smell the Spoonwoods, and the Chrysanthemums that had just come to bloom. She pruned at some of the herbs that grew by the back door, although she admitted they didn't really need it. She was biding her time.

In the peeking light of morning, Sheesa saw a light glowing inside the house. She went in and found The Gardener, making tea for the two of them.

"I decided I could do with a change of pace this morning. One day won't kill the Azaleas," they said, a little sleepily. "It is, after all, a very important day."

Sheesa couldn't find anything to say, but smiled to them. Her heart was in her throat.

They had breakfast together quietly. They talked about the Sarda Melons that were growing in the garden, Sheesa had seen there were several ripe. The Gardener went out and got two, and they cut them into slices. Dripping and sweet smelling, the two of them ate on the porch as the blue light illuminated the forest before them.

Sheesa saw the yard with a child's eyes. She gazed over to the spot where their cherry tree stood. Her eyes stung and clouded. She took a bite of the Sarda and blinked the tears away.

When the time came, Sheesa felt she had not said enough. She looked up at the ever-smiling person she had known and relied on, and knew she could never say enough to them.

They stood at the foot of the porch. Sheesa was wearing her pack, The Gardener in their comfortable loose garb, wide hat hung by a strap around their neck. Both of them had sweat slipping down their necks. The heat was rising, a timer winding down.

Sheesa inhaled, and knew it was time to walk. She looked up at their gentle face, their green eyes poured over her, a shade of concern, maybe sorrow over them.

“Be safe my little one,” they said down to her.

Sheesa couldn’t push away the grimace that welled up inside her. She stepped up to them and held them. Brow furrowed and frowning, tears moving to her eyes again. This time she let them slide.

From the hug she said, “I love you. I’m sorry to leave you alone. I’m sorry, my friend.”

Their hand ruffled through her hair. “My little one,” they pulled her back to look her in the eyes, “I will see you again, and in good tidings. I love you. Now you must go. I will be here when you return, as will our garden.” They put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll see you before long then.” Sheesa said hopeful, taking a step back.

The Gardener smiled. “May the road rise up to meet you.”

Sheesa smiled, turned, and walked on. Passing through the gap in the stone wall, she peered back. The Gardener still stood, like a tree of their own. She stepped into the wood and glanced back once more, but couldn’t see the place. She stood still. She heard a Chantbug whizz in the leaves overhead. She heard a warbler call, twice, then twice again. She stepped on, empty, and open.

Chapter 4. Roadside

Her first day on the long hike to the Bay at Four Hills was a quiet one. By the end, tired and foot-sore, Sheesa had walked well after sunset, only thinking to stop and prepare her meal when she could barely see the sky through the knit tree canopy above.

She dropped her bag and went to making the fire with her Arson powder in hand. Gathering small sticks and stuff like what rabbits use for hiding under, she then took a pinch of the purple and orange powder and flicked it over the arrangement. The jewel-like stuff spit and sparked, taking hold in the center of the fire pit. As the fire grew, she fed it. When it had risen to some height she plopped two larger sticks on and let it be.

After this, Sheesa went to the stream that ran beside the road to fill the pot with water. Leaning over the shore of tiny pebbles she scooped it full and hefted it up the bank and back into the light. She set it above the heat with the three prongs she carried with her and hung it to boil. She took out two potatoes and cut them into the water. She worked with the larger of the two knives she carried. The small razor-sharp one tucked into her folded shirt was for extraction and herb processing, and stayed as clean and as sharp as an herbalist could manage.

As the fire and food went, she let her mind go where it would. She slumped back on her elbows, looking at shadows the fire batted at in the dark. She thought of what The Gardener was getting to, she knew almost precisely what they would be doing at this time. Well past dinner, they would be reading or updating their catalogues, drawing flowers brilliantly from memory, annotating with fine script the details of the plant, pointing with lines as fine as spiders web to critical sectors of the bulb or cross section of the seed pod.

She missed their clocklike nature, but their memory was enough to set her at ease. Her dinner was done and she spooned the brew slowly into her bowl.

Almost immediately she broke into a sweat over the steam and ceased trying to eat. The heat of the soup plus the temperature outside was too much. Leaving the kettle and fire, she stood in the road. The Summer heat was unrelenting, still, after dark. Wiping her face, Sheesa walked a short way up the path and saw a small opening in the brush, a deer trail perhaps. She was drawn to it, instinctively. She figured her food would cool while she was gone, and she could explore a new place for the first time in ages. She crawled right in.

Hunched over doubly, Sheesa bumped through the dark, blind.

Without her noticing, a cloud moved in the sky above and revealed the moon three-quarters full. Like a hand retracting from her gaze, the wood was revealed to her. The daggers of light ran through high branches onto tall bushes and down in flecks to the brush around her feet. Facing the ground, she saw an herb and recognized it immediately. It was in the *Lamia* family. It was common in her wood, the pulp of the greens was used in a potion to mend sun-bleached leaves.

She drew her razor knife and cut three stalks, leaving the plant no worse than she found it.

With a moonlit vigor, she raced to her bag to process the herb. Mashing it and setting it aside, she opened the pot, condensation dripping from the lip, and added some ladles of her stew into the mortar. The solution *exhaled* in a fizzing sort of manner, just as she recalled. The smell was bitter, complex, and peaty.

Proud of herself, she scraped the seasoning into the pot and stirred it in. Small bubbles settled on the rim of the stew.

Sweat unnoticed on her brow, she proudly ate her meal, and enjoyed it. She was confident; she had spotted an herb, identified it, and used it in the wild. Sheesa could make herself happy, she was capable of more than settling with what she had, she could carve her own way.

The next morning arrived early, with fair light and heat just as the day before. She pinched the ashes of last night's fire and pocketed them. One of the ingredients in Arson powder was soot or charcoal, Sheesa added a bit each time she used it to keep her batch going.

The road was dry dirt, clinging like a waterline on her trousers. Her trek so far had been almost entirely solitary, populated by her mindspace and the dancing songs of birds. The only

blips that dragged her back into her body were a small shaky carriage pulled by a mule, that rumbled past her loudly, and a person with two children who was headed the other way.

They exchanged greetings, Sheesa told them her name and pronouns.

The woman called herself Gil, she had a young daughter and son. Her hair was back in one long braid, she wore traveling clothes, as did the two children. Gil asked, “Sheesa, do you have an offering for the shrine?”

Sheesa didn’t know if they were asking her for a donation, she had nothing to give. Her confusion must have shown on her face.

“We have plenty to share. Honey, can you hand them a navel?”

The smaller of the two children held a basket behind her back. She looked up and reached around in the basket. The little girl pulled out a fruit and handed it to Sheesa.

“Thank you very much for the navel, Gil.” Sheesa wasn’t accustomed to this tradition, but it seemed innocent enough.

Meanwhile, the boy threw a rock into the woods behind them.

Gil called him by name. He quit and walked over to her. The three departed, wishing her a safe journey.

Sheesa peeled the fruit and ate it while she walked, juice dripping down her hands.

At the end of the day Sheesa repeated her ritual.

As the potatoes came to a boil, she got up excitedly. She planned to forage for seasoning again, and pushed her way back into the woods.

Tonight the moon was bright, and the air was quiet, unmoving. Sheesa, driven by her ingenuity, scoured the ground growth for an herb she recognized, an ingredient to pull from. Tonight the moon lit the floor clearly, all things standing still, holding their breath.

Sheesa traced the edge of the tree line, pinching leaves to smell them, rubbing the oil between her fingers, identifying herbs in the moonlight.

After searching for some time, what felt longer than the previous night, she came upon a plant she knew.

It was called *Tyde’s Borough*. She recognized its sweet smelling aroma from a small jar of powder in The Gardener’s kitchen. She removed her razor and took it sparingly. She could not remember the plant’s family name, but knew it was potable, and rode the confidence she had from the previous night.

She plucked the leaves of the plant, discarded the stem and flower, and crushed the greenery into a mash. Peeking into the stew pot, she found dinner half cold. Indignant, she scooped the herbs out of her mashing bowl and into the soup.

The smell changed completely. It was sweet, overly sweet, with a fennel hue that wasn’t appealing. Sheesa, however, had made this meal and was determined to eat it. Taking her spoon, she tasted the soup.

It was an odd flavor. *Too odd* her mouth and stomach told her. She talked herself down in her head. *It's just nerves*, she responded, trying to overpower her reflexes. She motioned as if she were to take another bite, but her body protested.

A rolling feeling in her stomach turned into a knot.

All the sudden, the smell of the soup was poison. She couldn't help but fall backwards onto her bedding. Her eyes were closing. The hard ball at the top of her stomach was so heavy.

When she opened her eyes, her mouth was full of spit. The fire had gone down into embers. She had only moments to turn over before she threw up. Warm bile peeled up through her throat onto the ground just off her bedding.

In the dark she could see it there foaming. Only the moonlight lit scene, painting it in icy whites.

Sheesa flinched at the stuff on the ground, and saw it for what it was.

It was a potion.

It was a potion inside her, a living and changing entity. She added ingredients like potatoes, carrots, mushrooms and it churned out energy and life.

She'd given it something strange and it gave her something strange.

Like a living thing, it jumped out of her gut and landed there in the dirt, all foamy and primordial. She lamented what she'd done to herself as another acrid heave rocked her.

She spit up again.

And once more, but less.

Sheesa felt like a withered stem. She rolled onto her side shivering and fell again into clammy dark.

She dreamed she was bound in chains, face down on her stomach. She struggled to let a vial of *Expedient Growth* flow out of her pocket all over the grass. She saw it flow glowing blue all over her clothes. Weeds sprouted from the dirt all around her. The growing stalks snuck into the locks and chain links and sprung them. She rose freed, but the knotting vines entangled her. She started to tear free when she felt her skin tug.

She looked more closely.

The growths had rooted in her veins.

She reached out to touch the green stem in her wrist and was awakened with a start.

"The fool awakens!" A scratchy voice said from across the fire.

Sheesa tried to rise but felt faint, and rested on her elbows. She glanced across the fire, she saw the small figure cross legged paging through her field guide. She recognized them as one of the Wildfolk. The people who lived in the woods, in trees and burrows. Sheesa had read of them but never met one in person, she always thought they seemed kindly. They were farmers and gardeners much like herself, but the descriptions she had read set them apart as more animal than other folk.

Beside them, Sheesa saw a stack of pages torn from her book. "What're-" she started.

“You should be thanking me,” They said matter-of-factly. “Not many would try to cook with wild herb here. You should head back to where you’re from, clearly some place where the dirt still feeds you.” She rocked up onto her feet. She was short and plump, with tiny spectacles high on the bridge of her nose. “You can call me Auntie. Drink more of this.”

Sheesa took the steaming cup and drank it hot. The heat felt loose in her stomach, but soothing. She could taste the Ginger Root, and she thought it smelled a bit like Mouse-Ear Chickweed flowers, but there was another flavor she couldn’t place.

Sheesa looked down at the earth around her. “What’s wrong with the dirt?”

“Not something I’d know, always been this way.” Auntie was gathering her stack of pages. “I love these recipes, such nice drawings. Bye now, I’ve left some more tea if you need it. Get back to bed.”

Before Sheesa could protest Auntie slipped away into the dark with one last grinning look over her shoulder, eyes animal in the firelight. Sheesa sighed.

Sheesa understood mistakes had a price. She just hoped she could remember the illustrations, The Gardener had drawn them for her. The recipes she knew by heart, each one, like a mantra.

Then why had she been so foolish? It’s risky to eat anything in a strange place, how was she supposed to know there was something wrong with the soil?

Something wrong with the soil.

The idea had never crossed her mind, she thought back to The Garden. She could smell the raw earth. Taking a clump of roadside dust in her hands, she looked at it and couldn’t see a thing wrong.

She had always been taught to consider what gives a thing life, the water, the dirt, the sunlight. She knew some soil was richer than others, but to think it could turn on her. To think that the dirt could poison her in this way left Sheesa feeling wary. She wanted to ask The Gardener. She just wanted to have them tell her what was going on.

She felt low. She saw book of their recipes tossed aside and tears welled in her eyes. She curled up facing away from the fire and sobbed to herself in the dark. *What would they think?* Sheesa chided herself. She imagined a disappointed face. She had lost something they’d made for her, something they drew and put love into, and it hurt her heart.

Sheesa woke late. The sun was past midday. She rose and re-filled her bag, which Auntie had sifted through in its entirety. She discovered the remains of a potato, half-eaten raw, which she pitched into the woods.

She picked up her field guide last and turned through the torn pages. She could remember at least four of the missing recipes: Potion of Vigor, a cream which relieved burns, a powder used to repel animals, and a rare potion which Sheesa had never made that required a particular variant of mountain-top orchid petal. It was used to “Lighten one’s feet” as she recalled.

She assumed she would visit them again soon, and made a note to apologize and ask them if they would redraw them for her. She set it away in her bag.

As she left, she turned and looked back at the campsite, she was happy to be away from it. Dizzy hours feverishly looking at the same canopy and treeline were passed. The heat was bearable today, and the sky was clear.

The setback would make it two days before she reached Bay at Four Hills.

That day on the road, she passed by an ancient shrine. Stone pillars with carved lettering, faded smooth, framed the little stone house. The doorway to the miniature was a circular opening. At the foot of the door there was a navel fruit left as an offering, with two different berries on either side, all fresh and untouched. Sheesa paused for a moment, alone on the trail.

She then continued on.

She relished her bland potatoes early that night, her stomach having been emptied unnaturally.

The next days passed safely. As she came closer to the town, the number of people and carts increased. Sheesa saw animals she didn't recognize, groups of half-sized goats that jumped about like rabbits being driven into town, a set of bison with curly shaking white hair. She found herself walking among them almost all day as she approached her destination. Here people spoke with one another through the crowd, but no one bothered to speak to Sheesa.

Chapter 5. Bay at Four Hills

Sheesa smelled the salt air first. As she crossed through the pass of the eastern-most hill that surrounded the city she saw her first glance of Bay at Four Hills.

Sheesa always found herself looking downwards on long walks. She had been walking behind a wobbling cart, pulled by a muscular Stump-Badger. When the six foot long creature had walked up behind her, she didn't recognize the animal, they weren't usually so huge. It's wiry fur was black and grey, with a white beard forming on its snout. It lumbered close to the ground, like a lizard, as it's rolling shoulders heaved the cart. In a seat at the front of the cart, a wrinkled person held the reins limply with a young child by their side. It was the child who saw the city, and called out, "There mama! There!"

Sheesa looked the way the little arm pointed, she could see the glitter through the leaves. Tossing light-green tree branches in the light, yellow buildings and walls rising, and the wide *sea*. She had never seen the ocean. She kept her eyes locked on the spot where the city stood, the road turned, and the open city gate was before her.

The two passing lanes of carts and travelers dissolved into the city clamor. Sheesa saw countless stands and market stalls. One touting fish and sealife, some still wriggling with life as

it blackened over the enormous grill. Another counter was attended by a figure hunched with age selling infused teas for ailments or as pick-me-ups. She saw one stand selling unnaturally large root vegetables, another with tiny cages rattling with bugs of all kinds. The smells mingled and ran over one another, the chatter of voices was like a fog.

The crowd wound on.

Sheesa looked up from the stands to the open markets behind them. She couldn't see far ahead, but saw a store full of instruments, drums, strings, horns, and things to shake. Beside it, a darkly lit store with paper scrolls, bound volumes, blank parchment, and inks. Above each store hung wooden signs or flags waving in the salt breeze.

At the center of the town, a fountain rained down too-blue water. The spray hung in the air and drifted in the breeze, it gently fell on Sheesa through the sunshine. She ran from the crowd and hopped onto the edge of the fountain for a better view. Between structures lining the main road, past the docks there lay the grey-blue-green ocean. The sea cut the horizon like the edge of a table, flat against the bright sky.

Above the mass of people, Sheesa saw them all, cloaked, masked, flowing bright dresses and sparse traveling garb. People mingled, dark, mixed, light, maybe a giant, some waterfolk too. There were kids cutting between slow moving folk, people carrying bags and boxes with oddities hanging out. Sheesa watched it all for a minute, and the scene was a whole new one, new people, a band of folks all dressed in the same red robes stepping in unison. She heard a crack of glass from way down the street, and saw a sizzling sound as purple smoke rose into the air, followed by a deep, "Agh!" and the sound of laughter from that direction.

Every moment was a new thing Sheesa had never set eyes on. She lingered, grinning, eyes darting around in the crowd until her gaze spun. She looked at the two roads she could continue on, she wanted to see *ingredients*. One headed downwards, towards the sea and docks, the other curved up into the city. She didn't know where she'd find Potion Making supplies, she decided to head up town on a whim.

She took out a bag of nuts and popped them in her mouth as she walked. On her way, most of the shops did not interest her. Many were restaurants or taverns, some inns, residences, general stores and other businesses for those without a taste for potion making. They all looked similar, brown or beige stone, some nice colored roofs or stained glass in the windows, but the town was mostly plain, and she was worried if she turned she may get lost in the repeating buildings.

The first building she passed that interested her was an arcane looking place, fronted with monolithic black stone. The windows were framed in glimmering deep green, the glass was tinted razor black and reflected the street eerily. It was the sign that caught Sheesa's attention. It was a painted image of a fang dripping into solution. It looked maniacal. The name "*Momiji*" curled along the bottom.

A venom shop, or a poison vendor; she wondered. She had not yet entered a single store on the street, and didn't know the customs. She couldn't afford to buy anything, but she had to go in.

Walking up, she touched the cold knob and turned. It spun a quarter and popped outwards, cold air flooding by her. She stepped in and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dark. The air was sterile, it didn't smell like a thing. The front window let in no light, it was blocked from the floor to the ceiling with bookcases holding dozens of tomes, all in the same dark binding. The only light was a tiny flitting candle from a floor lamp.

"How are you today?" A voice came from behind the corner.

Sheesa straightened up. "I'm well. I'm just peeking in, is that alright?" Sheesa spoke quickly.

"Well yes, that's fine. You won't find much on display here."

Sheesa heard a chair screech on the floor.

A person, average height for a human, with thin hair on top, paced into the main room where she stood. They were thin, wearing fitted clothing. They pulled cloth from over a second lamp that cast light on the rest of the store.

"What kind of shop is this?" Sheesa asked.

"This is Momiji's, a Poison shop. I deal in cures, antivenoms, sedatives, anesthetics, and their counterparts. Poisons have a bad reputation, but I assure you they're not merely for enemies. Are you new to the Bay?"

"It's true. I arrived just today. Your shop- I couldn't not come in," Sheesa bumbled. She was intimidated, but couldn't help but like the place. It was as dissimilar to The Gardener's cottage as a place could be. The dark and dangerous aesthetic permeated the place, but Momiji spoke kindly enough to set Sheesa at ease.

Sheesa walked into the main room and realized the candles flickering in the lamps were not candles at all. They were birds; birds that flitted around inside glass bottles, appearing as firelight. She stepped closer to the glass bulb, raising her hand to feel the heat, but there was none.

"There are worlds and worlds for you to see my dear," they said, seeing her interest. They returned to the chair by the wall, settled, then re-opened a book that lay by their side.

Sheesa turned away from the silent, flickering bird and walked about the room. The books on the front wall were bound and labeled by year and month. *Journals*, she guessed. On the far wall were shelves, three long wooden shelves that held sealed beakers and vials. Sheesa peered at the bottom shelf, at her eye level. Here were some minor cures, like Lucid, for clarity of thought; Tack, to close wounds on the skin; topical numbing agents, and more. On the shelf above these, Sheesa couldn't make out all the labels, they were coiled and peeling. She could just read a few that listed the names of some venomous snakes she knew, Cascabel's Bane, and the Amaro Viper. She wanted to assume these were antivenoms, but Sheesa couldn't convince herself they weren't the venom itself. Above this, there was a high dusty shelf. The tiny vials that

rested on it had no labels, some appeared to glow faintly in the dark. In the last corner of the room, she saw a wide stone basin carved in marble, waist high. Flasks and bottles stood on shelves above, various colors, but not a smell.

She wondered how it could be that nothing here gave off a scent. In the garden, there was a cacophony of smells, vibrant, arguing, vying for one's attention. The air in this room was a dry chill, the cold had settled into her clothes and sweat.

Sheesa wanted to wander closer to the stone pool, but it was too near the Poison Master. She couldn't muster the bravery to intrude further. She felt as if she had lingered just a moment too long.

"Thank you for your hospitality," she said, as she walked to the doorway and nodded a bow.

"Oh, have a nice day now-," they offered, but Sheesa was already out of sight, through the door.

The hot, humid salt air stuck to her skin like a film. The street was bright and busy. She stepped quickly away from Momiji's, but stopped a little ways away and watched for a moment. None walked too close to the doorway of his shop. As Sheesa waited, she saw no one dared to even look up as they passed the place.

She merged back into the crowd and continued up Brew Street. She had left the shop in haste, leaving a bit of herself in the room. She was drawn to it, she couldn't deny that Poisons seemed like a wholly new and exciting adventure. Sheesa convinced herself, of course, that she wasn't interested because of the danger involved, not that at all. She was interested in the uses of various *poisons* and *toxins*. She wanted to know what sort of people she might see coming in and out. Most of all, she wanted to know about the potions the Poison Master would be making, and what she could learn from them.

As Sheesa wondered, she came upon another section of shops. She saw a toadstool shaped sign for mushrooms, a brightly colored sign with painted feathers, and at the end of the block she saw the flower shop. She wandered along the storefronts, peering in. The mushroom shop had sprouts in red, purple, orange, spotted fungus, and cones shooting out of loamy soil in bunches. The feather shop was like a forest of color. She saw feathers in patterns and shades she never imagined, feathers so big she wondered about the massive beasts they sprung from. Inside the feather shop she saw a friendly older person arranging them on hanging braids. They caught her eye and giggled a little, waving a kind hello.

Sheesa couldn't help but smile back, laughing herself. Waving goodbye, she headed to the final shop on the street.

Here the crowd had lessened, so Sheesa could see the flower and herb shop as she approached it. What she saw did not impress her.

She had a background in the subject, and all the city life and lovely shops on the street may have set her expectations a bit high, but from even from a distance, Sheesa could identify

every plant in the window on sight. There was almost nothing that took more than a novice's experience to grow. There were plain colored tulips, roses, peonies, a set sickly looking orchids, and some bunches of Tritonia Plants mislabeled as Orange Poppies.

Sheesa stopped outside the window.

She couldn't go any farther. She just couldn't make her legs take the steps.

It was an unfamiliar thing to her: pride. Not just her own, but the pride of The Gardener who had raised her and taught her everything she knew. Would she ever learn a new grafting pattern here? Would she learn a thing she couldn't learn better at home?

In the reflection she saw herself standing there, hair lopsided, pack hiked up on her back. She liked her strong look, she felt like herself, and decided to trust her instincts.

She turned and walked back down the street, waving again in the window of the feather shop, whizzing by the mushrooms on the corner. Sheesa headed right back to the Poison shop, and opened the door.

"Hello?" A more exasperated voice called out to her this time.

Sheesa figured this shop didn't usually get so many visitors. "Hello," Sheesa replied apologetically as she rounded the corner.

With eyebrows raised, they sat eyeing her, thumbs saving the place in their book.

"My name is Sheesa." She extended her hand to shake.

"Momiji. He-him," he replied. He stood and approached her, gave her hand a quick nod, then asked, "Now, what exactly are you after?"

"I'll be plain," Sheesa started, "I've come to Bay at Four Hills for an apprenticeship. I'm a fine herbalist, I've been studying and brewing all my life, and I know it may not be the most applicable background, but I've got the drive to learn anything you'd have me do," She paused for a moment, looking down, then looking at Momiji again intensely, "If you'll have me."

The speech washed over him in a mass. He took one step to the center of the room.

"I suppose you've been to Madam Krema's herb shop then."

She gave him a grim sort of nod.

"What about Georgio's? The toadstool place," Momiji offered.

"For what it's worth sir, I want to reach beyond soil and earth. I love plants and planting, but I know there's much I don't understand about this world." Sheesa's mind went to the forest of Yain, the great beast by the ruined house in the valley.

"I can empathize," said Momiji. "Things aren't so simple, however. There's not much benefit for me. I can't make you my apprentice, there's just not enough work. I get by fine on my own."

Sheesa heard the "no" and let the excuses roll by her. She was preparing an apology when she heard Momiji's tone change.

"Though, you've got timing on your side. You may be in luck." He nodded to himself for a moment. He eyed her, "Now, don't think of this as me sticking my neck out for you. This isn't

an assignment as my *apprentice* either. If you choose to do this, you do it alone.” He went to the back of the building, around a corner, and picked up a parchment and pen. He jotted something down.

“Really, I’m doing this,” he double checked the page and walked it over to her, “Because I think you might enjoy it.” He smiled a little smile, lips tucked in.

Sheesa took the page, her eyes bugged a bit at the sloppy stylized handwriting.

Momiji continued, “I’ve got some friends who run little errands for me, I’ve instructed them to go fetch something for me. I’ve written a description of the boat, you won’t miss it. Talk to the captain, she’s the one you need to win over. I want you to go with them.”

Sheesa looked up at him, resolute, but overwhelmed behind her facade. The Gardener’s plan was simple, she was to get settled and write them back. She could even visit if she wanted. Now everything was on the table, the world was in front of her.

“I know it’s not much notice, the boat leaves tomorrow morning, early,” Momiji took a deep breath in. “I hope you do decide to go,” he concluded.

Sheesa had entirely forgotten this was voluntary. The way he had been talking it was as if she was already on her way. *Have I just gone from following The Gardener’s instructions to following Momiji’s*, Sheesa questioned herself. *No*, she decided. She wanted adventure, she wanted to learn more than she could learn at home. When given an opportunity, she decided she wanted to be the kind who took it.

“I’ll see you then, upon my return.”

“Oh good! Yes, I do hope you find some of what you’re looking for out there, Sheesa.” Momiji said heartily.

Sheesa had her parchment, brief directions to the dock, the description of the ship, and the name of the captain, *Sri*. Sheesa was pleased, the excitement of the adventure was gripping her. She was proud of herself for chasing what she wanted, and decided to stay in the mood as long as she could manage.

She made her way back up town towards the feather shop she had passed earlier. Sheesa recalled using a feather in a potion once, but couldn’t bring into memory what it had been *for*. She would ask about it, maybe the person she had seen would help bring it to mind.

When Sheesa walked in, saw three younger children by the front looking through a selection of small feathers that were standing up in trays of sand. Another person stood at the far counter, dictating a list of feathers to the person Sheesa had seen earlier. They called out names of birds and locations of feathers, “Ten Green Jay wing-feathers, a female Gleaming Queenbird tail-feather, two Bobolink feathers, the head or neck if you can manage it...”

Seeing the owner was preoccupied, Sheesa meandered through the store at her own pace. She stood nearby the children, and watched them as they picked up and inspected each feather in the lot. They were each dressed in the same cobalt colored cloaks, Sheesa wondered if it was a uniform. She found her daydreams kickoff and take flight, imagining what sort of lives these

children would lead. She imagined them all sitting together in a building with blank walls. Sheesa imagined schools for Potion Making, arcane studies, but all she could see was The Gardener's library, books piled upon books.

The three children each picked a feather and went to the counter, they lined up and paid, thanking the clerk.

As someone left the store, the breeze trailed gently in and set all the feathers hanging from the ceiling waving back and forth. Sheesa saw thick feathers, some wide on one side and thin on the other, long drooping ones, and feathers that changed color as she moved beneath them.

"Hello there!" The owner came over to her, as the young ones left the shop. "Welcome! I saw you earlier, I think! My name is Hye, I prefer they-them pronouns, this is my *Gallery*," they turned and motioned to the feathers around them.

"My name is Sheesa, she-her," Sheesa couldn't help but smile wide.

Hye had night-dark skin, and had their head shaved smooth. They were short and thin, and wore very beautiful green and purple cloth draped across their right shoulder and tied around their waist.

They asked her, "Is there something particular you're looking for?" Hye was looking at Sheesa's backpack; a giveaway, it was outfitted for an herbalist with dried sprigs hanging off the back.

She wasn't, but said, "I'm not exactly sure what feathers are used for in potions, I came in because I thought they all look so beautiful."

Hye laughed, "Yes, I'm not sure feathers are *for* anything. I don't know a thing about Potion Making myself," they looked up at the feathers along the ceiling. "I'm merely an admirer."

"Which is your favorite?" Sheesa asked them.

"Well," Hye started, clearly preparing an oration, "I think an admirer of feathers is an admirer of birds. I collect my feathers humanely, you see. I find the *most interesting* feathers just floating down out of the sky, fledgling feathers beneath nests and so on. I love so many, the glimmering Kiekikoo feathers from Sinaloa, the Ink-Black Night Crane tail-feathers are a *loud* choice ..."

"Here, I like this one," they went behind the counter and pulled a feather from a sand box similar to the one in the front. "I found it the day before yesterday."

They handed it to her delicately, it was the length of her index finger. The feather was mainly white, with metallic green stripes shooting out in v's down the length. "It's enchanting," she said. Sheesa spun between two fingers. "What kind of bird does this come from?"

"I'm not sure! I was out walking about, and found it lying in the dust. Generally, if I find a feather I can't identify, I put it with the Penny Feathers," they motioned to the boxes in the front. "The young ones love that."

Sheesa was taken off guard. She would've thought that would make it *rare*, thus *expensive*.

"You keep that one," they said. "And here, if I may," they took the feather and fastened a loop on the end, and hung it on a string.

"There you are," Hye handed it back to her. "A gift."

"You're quite sure?"

"Yes, of course. Giving a gift is worth more than a penny, to me," they said, assuredly.

Behind her, the shop bell rang and a couple strode in. "Hye! I was wondering, could we have an arrangement on short notice?"

Sheesa felt like this might be the moment to bow out of the shop. She didn't want to take more of their time, she was happy to see the place so busy.

Backing away to let the two who had walked in, Sheesa waved and smiled, attaching the feather to a loop on her bag. "I'll see you again," she said, confidently.

Hye bowed their head, smiling, and gestured as she walked out.

She made a mental note to look for beautiful feathers from now on, and collect them when she could. The thought of going through them with Hye made Bay at Four Hills feel less like a stop on her adventure, and more like a place she wanted to visit again.

Sheesa's throat was dry, she couldn't think of the last time she did this much talking. She was still glowing from the nice talk with Hye, but the city had begun to wear on her. She wandered begrudgingly with the crowd, she couldn't walk as quickly as she liked. Sheesa had seen a thousand faces today. She felt *passed by* here, and it left her a little hollow.

A bell somewhere in town chimed, loud and distant. Sheesa left the crowd by another fountain, taking a seat on the lip. She lumped her bag down beside her and let out a long exhale. The crowd milled by. She watched, thinking about what she would tell The Gardener. She decided to send mail, to let them know she had arrived. She wrote,

Dearest Gardener,

Bay at Four Hills has found me well. On the road, a kind Wildfolk person helped me when I was ill. Do you know why the plants that grow in Yain are toxic? The city is beautiful, I visited a feather shop owned by a lovely Non-Binary person. Remind me of the potion we made two springs ago that used feathers, if you can!

In searching for an apprenticeship, I've found myself on a journey. I don't know where I am headed yet, but I will send for you again upon my return.

I've already learned so much. I miss our mornings together, each day away, it becomes more precious to me.

*With love,
Sheesa*

She took the note to a post, where mail runners stood in an animated group.

"Hello!" Sheesa called out. "I'd like to have this run to Alumroot."

Two of the runners looked away when she said where the letter was headed.

"I'll take it," a light voice came from the shade of the building. Sheesa saw a figure wearing two cuts of tight green cloth. They were panting hard, but rose and approached her. They had a wide angular face, lean and bony. "It'll be 60 pieces."

A steep price for Sheesa, nearly a quarter of the money she had set off with.

"Who's it to?"

"To the Alzirr family in Alumroot" Sheesa said. They would be able to get it the rest of the way to The Gardener. Sheesa handed the runner one of her four bright wide coins, they gave her a handful of tiny coins as change.

The runner stretched, and set off at a fast, steady pace.

The light was low as she made her way toward the docks. She had wandered the day away, peeking in shops, but mostly watching the city move.

At the water's edge, all varieties of people were unloading boats, enormous folk carrying crates and barrels, people shouting and exchanging jeers. Sheesa was bumped into and crowded. There wasn't anywhere that wasn't in the way. Even in the dying light of evening, the place was bustling. Lamps were lit before the dark came.

Sheesa retreated and sat up on a tall wall to survey the scene from a more quiet spot. She watched the hum simmer down to a steady churn. She ate dried fruit. The stars came out.

There were ferrying vessels going until well after nightfall. Sheesa didn't know where they were headed. Small fishing vessels would go, only one or two sailors aboard, returning with a few fish slung over their shoulders.

Sheesa watched it all, and decided it was good. She liked the way these people lived with the water. They had respect for it, as far as she could tell. No one seemed to be taking too much. Most of the ships were not great sailboats as she imagined, they were private vessels. They sat before her in their docks, wobbling, swaddled.

Chapter 6. Passage

Before the morning light, Sheesa woke to lanterns moving through the fog. She had camped out on the dock, bundled up where she could see the boat Momiji had described. It was slightly larger than the fishing boats. It had one mast, and an enclosed quarters at the rear of the ship. The railings that circled the deck were green, the body of the boat was painted a bright orange that glowed in the meager light of the hanging lanterns. Along the sides, white rune-like symbols were scrawled in white paint, spiraling and spiking in every empty space.

On the front of the boat, there was a cat carved out of wood, tracing its way along the right side railing. It was a rough sculpture, Sheesa thought it was a good sign. The boat was *not* normal, and if they didn't fit in, they wouldn't mind if she didn't either.

The two lights passed right in front of her, headed straight to the boat. The first was a sturdy figure wearing high boots and long gloves, their thick hair tied up. The second, pale, bald, and shirtless in the cold, had tattoos running from the base of their skull down their arms and back in sweeping patterns. They had lanky arms and legs, wide hands, and muscular shoulders.

She watched as they deftly climbed aboard. Sheesa heard them talk but couldn't make it out, they laughed together on the deck. They hung their lanterns and began tossing things about, tying and untying ropes. The orange light glimmered in a hazy mound over the deck.

Now or never, Sheesa told herself. She rose, squishing her tired eyes. There was still no light, but Sheesa could hear the first birds of morning singing as she walked along the bobbing, wooden dock towards the boat.

She had prepared something to say while falling asleep last night, but in the moment it felt all wrong, so she just went with the first thing that came to her.

"Good morning!" Sheesa's voice was morning-hoarse. They both looked at her, then at one another, and walked to the edge of the vessel.

"Are one of you two Sri?" Sheesa asked, clearly.

"That's me," came down from the first figure she had seen this morning. The other figure turned away, back to their work. "Do you need something?"

Sheesa couldn't see her, her face was backlit by the lamplight. "Momiji told me about your voyage. I'm here to offer my skills as an herbalist. And if that isn't useful, I'm stronger than I look. I'm not foreign to hard work." Sheesa didn't want to get on board by name dropping Momiji, she wanted to make a name for herself with her own hands.

"First a short notice request, then a tagalong. He didn't say anything to me," Sri replied.

Sheesa was about to respond when she saw a new figure approaching through the morning fog. She turned and saw eyes that shifted like abalone in the light of the lanterns.

“Hello Sri, how was your time off the boat?” They asked, flashing a grin. Without looking for an answer, they turned to Sheesa. “Who’s this?” Casting their gaze back at Sri, then back to Sheesa, they said “I’m Gwyn, she-her.”

“Sheesa,” she said. “She-her.”

Her eyes had a quality Sheesa had never seen before, the reflectivity in the light was eerie. It made it hard for Sheesa to look at her. *I wonder if that’s her magic*, Sheesa wondered.

Gwyn was older than Sheesa, her face had lost the roundness that Sheesa’s still had. She was shorter than Sheesa, and had long, wavy dark-brown hair.

Sri hopped down from the deck to stand beside Gwyn.

She focused on Sheesa, and said, “I’m Sri, captain of the *Lumere*. She-her. I’ll be plain, if Momiji pointed you this way, it wasn’t just a favor. He thinks he’s going to end up getting something back in return. So, Sheesa, why are you here?”

Sheesa didn’t like being singled out. Momiji didn’t seem like he had a plot to her, but she took the warning to heart, but she wasn’t about to let Sri tell her what to think. Momiji said himself that he didn’t have space for her as an apprentice, and whatever he expected in return, she didn’t care. She wanted to go on an adventure, and it didn’t matter where or what it cost.

Sheesa looked right at Sri, “I’m doing this because I want to. This is the beginning of the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Gwyn looked at Sri and smiled.

Sri didn’t look back.

“Well that sounds nice for you,” Sri said. “We’ll be at sea for two days headed for a sea stack on the southern peninsula. At the top, we’ll find an abandoned sacred site where we’ll collect some flowers and then deliver them back here. Still sound exciting?”

“Absolutely. What’s a sea stack?” Sheesa asked sincerely.

Gwyn spoke up, “You’ll know them when you see them.”

“Fine, fine. Welcome aboard,” Sri said, dismissively. She grabbed the railing and heaved herself up.

Gwyn followed, and nimbly vaulted the rail. Sheesa clambered after her, but before Sheesa could get on deck, Gwyn asked, “Aren’t you a little young to be an herbalist?”

Sheesa kicked her leg over the rail and swung onto the boat. She was thinking of how she wanted to answer that question when the feather Hye had given her yesterday swung over her shoulder..

“Ooh that’s nice,” Gwyn whispered. “Did someone give that to you?”

Sheesa wasn’t sure if she was implying something, “No! Well, yes, but it’s not like that. Hye gave it to me, the person who owns the Feather Shop?”

Gwyn chuckled, “Yeah I know it, never been. I love the color, never thought of styling one.... Have you been to Bay at Four Hills before?”

“No, I’ve never seen a place like it,” Sheesa felt like Gwyn expected her to talk about how great the city had been, but the truth was it had worn on her horribly. There was no shade

anywhere, and she felt like she was always in the way of someone. The few trees that were planted here seemed to be stuck growing in plots too small for a Meadowsweet bush. Sheesa felt the whole place could do with more flowers in the windows. In the end, "It's much different than home," is what she settled on.

Gwyn nodded her head, gazing downward. "I remember, I had been so excited to leave home," Gwyn said. "I felt like everyone where I grew up was only concerned with the dirt in front of their doorsteps. I got here, and I felt like nobody cared about anything at all. I liked the shops and the street fair, but I felt like it was all just trying to make me buy something. I passed people on the street and they all just looked so... normal."

Sheesa understood what she was saying, but couldn't totally agree. She didn't think that Hye was dull at all. They were sweet, and Sheesa got the feeling that they really cared about their feathers. She decided Gwyn was talking about a different sort of thing. Looking at her gleaming eyes, Sheesa figured it was a scene she wasn't clued in to. Gwyn was looking for something *else*, Sheesa decided.

She looked over Gwyn's shoulder at the other crew members. Sri had gone into the cabin below deck, but the person with the tattoos was still toiling. Sheesa hadn't been introduced, she wondered if they'd ever talk, or if she would just have to call them *The Tattooed Person* in her head for a few days. They looked to her like a Waterfolk person, Sheesa could see how pale their skin was, and it looked like their hands had the webbing. She didn't want to gawk, she'd never met a Waterfolk person before.

"So, where are you from?" Gwyn asked her, seeing Sheesa space out.

"I grew up in a cottage with a beautiful garden, tended by my *friend*." She was about to say that the house was small, but compared to the buildings she'd seen lately, it seemed a lot *taller* at least. "We lived in a valley past the mountain range east of Bay at Four Hills." If the valley had a name Sheesa did not know it, and neither, she thought, would Gwyn.

"And you?" Sheesa asked.

"Ah, same as the rest of them," Gwyn motioned to the boat. "An island south of here, the whole place is called Zumpango, we're from a little town.

"Speaking of," Gwyn turned to look at Tattoos. "Is Kirin below deck? There's no way he beat me, I saw him at Cross Hare last night, *late*."

Tattoos looked over to her, "Not here."

"Knew it. So, the question is, when do we leave without him?" Gwyn cackled.

"If we don't leave by sunrise, we could be late," Tattoos said in a deep, even voice. They walked over to Gwyn and Sheesa.

"I'm Anko, he-him." He put out his hand to Sheesa. He was a head taller than her.

She took it and squeezed it, but couldn't get a real grip. She felt a little silly.

Anko turned to Gwyn, "What do you expect, giving him a stack of coins and setting him loose in the city?" He smiled.

"If Kirin misses the boat, he misses it," Sri said, as she walked out onto the deck.

“He wasn’t doing anything he shouldn’t! He was playing that game he likes. *That’s* where all his money’s going.”

“Totally ridiculous. This is what happens when you grow up in the middle of nowhere, as soon as you set foot in a city you get swindled. Spending all that money on little painted tiles...” Sri said, dismayed.

Sheesa craved a game all of the sudden. She didn’t know what they were talking about, but wanted so badly to play. She thought of the little strategy games The Gardener and her would play together, tiny stone figured with long faded paint. She figured those games were as antiquated as the sets they played with, she wondered what Kirin played.

A bell rang somewhere in Bay at Four Hills, loud and lonesome. Gwyn leaned her back against the rail. Sri put her elbows on it and looked out over the dark dock.

A while later, Sri said, “I think that’s him,” seeing a figure way at the entrance to the dock.

The group of them all watched the person take their time, turning down the row of boats, stepping towards the light.

“Kirin, did you hear that bell?” Sri called down.

The figure climbed onto the boat. “I’m not even that late,” they complained.

Kirin was about Sheesa’s height, with a round face, long eyelashes, and short wild hair. He looked strong, but his face was still young. *He could be my age*, Sheesa thought. From his bag dangled a big spiral shaped horn, the instrument looked like it had been made from a giant snail shell.

“What would you do if we had left without you?” Sri chided.

“I’d be sleeping. I’d go back to sleep,” Kirin said, as he stumbled into the cabin, away from Sri’s lecture.

Sheesa smirked and suppressed a giggle.

Sri stomped up the stairs to the raised deck at the rear of the boat, waving to the rest of them. “Let’s hurry up and leave already, please! I’m sick of dock-smell.”

Sheesa stood out of the way as Anko and Gwyn raised the sail. It caught in the morning air and the boat lurched in the water. Sri spun the wheel at the helm and the boat peeled out of the dock. Sheesa almost lost her balance, she took a seat at the front of the boat. It still wasn’t light yet. Her skin was thick and sticky with salt air, the wind whipped her face, she squinted through it, watching the lights of the docks face. She watched the town lights shrink and diminish behind them. Sheesa looked forward, she felt light and airy like the wind. She was free, flying through the dark, listening to the sound of parting water.

The East glowed to her left, a quiet light stretched from muddy orange to banging pink and yellow. It reached groggily across the sky.

She gazed up and saw Teers, big birds with thick yellow feathered bellies and black hoods. They were squabbling along the beams above her. One flew off and left two sitting, they turned to look at the morning light too.

Sheesa saw Gwyn walking away from Anko, smiling. They caught each other's eyes and she came over.

In the light Sheesa couldn't really notice the shifting hues in her eyes, as if they had settled on a color in the sun.

Gwyn flicked her eyes at the sunrise smiling.

"Exciting thing, I think." Sheesa replied.

"The sunrise?" Gwyn replied.

"I've never seen it over the ocean before. It starts so small." Sheesa looked back over her shoulder. Turning back to Gwyn, she asked, "What makes your eyes look that way?"

"Oh, yeah. You've probably never met someone with brushed eyes before," Gwyn opened her eyes wide at her, smiling. "They're for seeing in the dark, kinda makes days on deck a pain, but I don't spend much time under the sun if I can help it."

"Is it permanent?" Sheesa asked, a little timidly.

"Yeah, you can reverse it, I think, but it won't fade or anything. I remember when they did it, I had all sorts of visuals. The doctor took a dropper and put this stuff in my eyes. I had to have them open, you know, so I kinda watched it happen." Gwyn looked out over the sunrise, "The lights in the room stayed pretty much the same level, but the color changed a lot. Like the depth of the color all throughout the room *expanded*. I could see the color of the wood in the dark corner of the room, and the tree outside in the dark, all of the sudden I could see all the leaves sharpening into focus."

It frightened Sheesa, the idea of changing one's self permanently like that. She still didn't know *why* she had done it, "So, do you prefer the night time?"

Gwyn laughed out loud, "Always have, I like the quiet." She motioned to the cabin, "I'm going to grab a wink, I've been up all night." She gave a sort of wave, smirking. "Until later," then headed into the quarters beneath the raised deck.

Sheesa looked back towards the sunrise but it was too bright to see. It surprised her how quickly the sunrise passed: it started, then there were mere minutes before it was daylight.

There wasn't a thing to do once the ship got going. Sheesa sat and watched the shoreline scroll by. The day was hot, she had tied up her pant legs and sleeves, but the breeze kept them moving. She had pulled out her journal and jotted some notes down about the journey, the crew was after a flower, something about a sea stack. She wanted to remember to draw everything she saw that excited her, she hadn't sketched anything at Bay at Four Hills, but a good herbalist always made sure to draw the plants they worked with, and she planned to.

At midday Anko set up a tiny stool and cast out two lines from the ship's rail. He sat and watched them trail along behind the boat. The bare wood of the deck glowed bright yellow in the beating sun.

Sheesa was thirsty. She figured she could ask someone aboard for a drink, but decided to try an experiment before she did. Taking a bucket, she reached down from the rail and dipped it

in the water. It filled immediately and yanked her arm back, but she muscled it back onto the boat. She wanted to try and see if her Non-Toxic potion would have an effect on salt water. She had used it on nasty looking water in the past, muddy discolored stuff even, and was very fond of it. She had it in a dropper in her bag.

She got the dripper from her bag and brought it over to the bucket. The liquid in the little vial was clear. She dropped three drops into the bucket and stirred it around with her finger.

Usually when she did this, clumps of gunk would form, foamy and discolored, then she'd skim them from the top, or strain them out. The ocean water, however seemed totally inert. She figured she'd give it a sip, cupping a bit to her mouth, but found it to be the same salt-lick briney water it was before she fiddled with it. She spat and gagged a bit, but tried not to show it.

She considered trying to add a bit more of the potion, but decided it likely wouldn't do much good.

Sighing, she got up to put her vial away.

Anko watched her, elbows propped up on the railing.

As Sheesa dropped the vial back into its place in her bag, she heard a quick whistle from his direction. She looked up to see Anko walking over, a tiny pouch dangling from his hand.

"You're stuff didn't work, eh?"

"No," Sheesa replied, ready to explain.

"Thought not. Try this, it's for salt water," he stated. "De-sal-in-a-shun Powder." Anko spoke a little lazily, sounding out the word for her. He dropped the bag in her hand.

She loosened the drawstring and opened the pouch, inside there was a coarse powder that looked like a bunch of cabbage seeds. They were all tiny and round.

"Do you know what's in it?" Sheesa asked him.

"Eh," Anko paused. "It's a nut or something, I think. I didn't make it, but I could get you the recipe." He smiled, "I know the *herbalist*."

He began to walk away and turned back, "You'll only need to use a pinch for that," he pointed to the bucket.

Sheesa went straight back to the bucket. She took a few and dropped them in. In a moment, they swelled, then sank to the bottom of the bucket. She had to add two pinches more before she could drink it, avoiding the little bubbles on the bottom. She figured his fingers were bigger.

A little while after, Anko pulled a fish aboard. It was the length of Sheesa's arm, lean and angry looking. He gutted it on the deck, blood running off the ship into the water. He descaled the two major sections and pitched the head and tail over the side.

Sheesa watched the Teers from earlier crowd rigging above Anko, squabbling at the edge. He had saved the cuttings and guts to give them. As he moved to let them at it, Sheesa caught sight of another creature approaching.

From the cabin beneath the deck crept a cat, with a long, low-hanging tail and fur that went between an almost red and an almost blue. It was a muscular looking thing, bigger than the street cats Sheesa had seen in the city. It had a high claw on its leg, and moved with a predatory swagger.

It lurked in the shadow of the stairway, hunting, but the birds saw it first. Running playfully over, it chased them all off in a scattering of wings and *kaws*. The cat stood triumphantly over the meal and lapped up the fish that remained on the deck. Anko watched it play out like a dance, unsurprised.

After it had slurped up the fish, the cat tongued at its cheek, fat and lazy. It stared right at Sheesa with an un-animal look. She met its gaze. It huffed, and padded to a sunny place on the deck where it flopped down and licked its paws.

Before sunset, they ate the fish together. Anko sliced it into pieces and all of them ate it raw with purple tangy leaves to pick up each piece. He carried a tray out and set it on the ground in the middle of the deck. He called up to Sri at the helm, and went into the cabin to wake Gwyn and Kirin. When he emerged he called over to Sheesa too. Sri and Gwyn came and saw around the platter. Anko flopped down and ate a piece right away.

“Try it, come on,” he held out a wrapped fish to her.

She took a seat between Gwyn and Anko and accepted the wrapped bit of meat. The platter was a presentation, there was a bowl of leaves Anko called *Crispa*, and the cuts of fish all lined up.

Sheesa ate the wrap, and she liked it. It was squishy but tough, like an under-cooked squash. She tasted the salt, but the leaf offset it well, it reminded her of the herb she’d used on the road before Yain, she guessed *Crispa* was in the *Lamia* family too.

The cat lurked over, and sat in Sri’s lap. She fed it bits of fish like it expected her to.

Sheesa wondered if Kirin would join them, he’d been in the cabin all day. There wasn’t much fish left either. She watched the cat stretch in Sri’s lap, spilling over the sides of her crossed legs.

“What’s its name?” Sheesa asked her.

Sri answered with a mouthful, “Gara.”

Gwyn continued, “She’s a *Queulat* Cat, we originally poached her for a job, but couldn’t bear to give her away. We tried releasing her, but I think she likes us,” Gwyn motioned to Sri feeding the cat another fillet.

Sri smiled coyly. “Who knows what they’d do to you,” she whispered down to the cat.

Sheesa didn’t know what a *Koo-ey-oo-lat* Cat was, but the idea of the crew collecting animals for money gave Sheesa a bad impression of them. There wasn’t anything pleasant she could imagine a potion maker doing with a *living thing*. Sheesa wondered if that request had been from Momiji too.

Kirin yawned as he emerged from the cabin. “Is there any left? I fell back to sleep.”

“We gave your cut to Gara,” called Gwyn, mockingly.

Kirin stumbled over to sit in the circle, he plopped down between Gwyn and Sheesa, she had to scooch over to make room.

As he did, the cat sprung up and lept across the platter, rubbing on Kirin's bent knee.

"Ah, well that's okay I guess." He smiled at the cat as it purred under his hand. "I'm Kirin by the way," he glanced up at Sheesa. "He-him."

"My name's Sheesa, she-her."

Kirin took one of the last three pieces of fish and chewed it quietly. A little glum, he said, "You know Sri, when you said you'd need to hire a hand to pick up the slack, I kind of thought you were joking..."

"You little Bluebird, I didn't *hire her*. She's an herbalist, she's just here for this request."

"Oh, you're an herbalist? I always wondered about those Color potions people use to dye their hair, have you ever seen those before? Are they safe? I remember once my friend's older brother managed to get some when we were little, and their mom always said he was never the same after he started dying his hair."

Sheesa laughed, she remembered being obsessed with the potion when she was eight or so. The Gardener had showed her how to make it, and she went through so many hair colors her hands stained to an off purple color for months. She wondered if they'd ever go back to normal.

"That sounds like superstition to me. I've used that potion dozens of times." She said confidently.

"Yeah, but what's *in it*?" Kirin asked, squinting at her.

Anko rolled up onto his feet and stood. Sri got up as well, and thanked Anko for the meal.

Kirin watched Anko turn and head into the cabin.

Sri went back up onto the high deck.

"It's different for each color," Sheesa said. "You need something really odd for white hair though, I forget what it is..."

Gwyn sank back onto her hands. Kirin wasn't thinking about hair-color potions anymore, Sheesa thought.

He got up and followed Anko into the cabin. Sheesa caught herself wanting to talk more, she hadn't been able to chat about potions for *days*, she realized.

"He's got a crush on Anko," Gwyn said, just above a whisper. "I think it's cute. Anko's too sweet to ruin it for him." She smiled.

The light dimmed as the sun sank lower in the sky. Kirin came out a little while later with the horn he had strung on his bag. He sat back down with Sheesa and Gwyn.

"So, what does that thing say about your chances with Anko?" Gwyn prodded at Kirin's side where a golden circle hung.

Instead of acting coy, Kirin smiled back at her, "Every time I ask it I get a different answer. I'm getting mixed signals." They laughed together. Kirin lifted the gold disk and spun one side, it shifted and revealed some writing, he twisted it back the other direction and lifted it

up for them to see. “I already asked today, it said to *Try a new approach*. Apparently inviting him to listen to some soothing tsubuphone doesn’t count as a new approach...”

Gwyn giggled, “Good try.”

“I didn’t want to assume, I would’ve guessed Anko and Sri...” Sheesa said, openly.

“Noo,” Kirin dragged out. “Sri’s always been a loner. Dad said she used to have somebody tagging along after her, but that was when I was really little. She’s my sister,” he explained.

“Maybe they’re the one who gave her that *big* ring,” Gwyn said, raising her eyebrows.

Kirin shrugged, bringing the horn to his lips. The sun was down, the sky was still a dark blue. As Kirin began to play, Sheesa settled back against the mast.

The noise that came out of the tsubuphone was surprisingly mellow. Kirin played, totally relaxed, wavering back and forth. The song was sad, it took Sheesa’s attention at once. She was surprised to hear Kirin play something so melancholy, he seemed too silly to take it seriously. She shut her eyes and listened to the humming buzz.

“Sheesa.” Gwyn shook her awake. “Go sleep in the cabin.”

Sheesa looked around on the deck, Kirin had put away the horn. The lanterns were lit, Gwyn’s eyes were shifting. She had fallen asleep, “Oh, that’s funny. Okay, goodnight.”

“Night, Sheesa,” they said.

She wobbled towards the door leading below the raised deck at the back of the boat. She noticed the knob, it was a false jewel with gold casing. She tried to open the door quietly, in case someone was asleep, but saw candles lit through the crack.

The cabin was split into two sections, a few crates, nets, and such things on one side, and beds on the other. A double bunk and a cot in the back, with a hammock hanging against the front wall.

Sri was reclining on the cot, sipping from a small glass

Anko laid in the hammock with a book. He had curled the cover into a roll against the back.

Sheesa gave a little wave in their direction that merited a glance from Sri. She claimed a space to make up her bed roll on the floor and lay down.

After a while, Sri got up and refilled her glass. She pulled two jugs from the trunk at the end of her bed and mixed them, then took a little dropper and added a squirt of a third liquid.

“Anko?” She offered.

“No thanks,” he said, eyes still on his book.

She sighed, then went to each of the lanterns and put out the lights.

Anko lit his own candle and stuck it in a gap between the wall and the rafters. He picked his book back up and kept reading. Sheesa could just make out his eyes scanning the page in the dim light.

Sheesa's stomach turned and vocalized. She worried that the dinner wasn't sitting well. It wasn't the raw fish that disagreed with her, she thought, it was that she wasn't used to eating meat at all. At home she never had animal flesh, except when it happened to arrive as a gift. The Gardener had kept no beasts, and neither of them wanted for anything but what their garden provided.

She rolled onto her side and her stomach shifted.

She tried to relax. She wondered where the cat had gone, if it slept with Sri. She listened to the water, sigh and inhale, and sigh.

Chapter 7. A Greater Arcana

Sheesa slept in, the sun was up when she roused. The cabin was dark, white light glowed from under the door. Sheesa stood up. She heard sleeping breath, things waved with the rocking of the boat. There was a window on the back wall of the room, an orangey-brown tinted circle. It shined a stained light onto Sri's empty cot. Sheesa could make out Anko's swinging hammock.

Sheesa didn't see the cat anywhere, she wondered if it slept with Sri or Kirin.

She bent over to pull on her boots. She fumbled one and dropped it, wincing. She didn't know who was still asleep.

She froze for a second, listening for someone woken up. The boat rose, and fell.

Carefully, she reached down to grab her boot, eye level with the bed, and heard the gurgling purr of the cat in front of her. She looked up and saw Gara appear on the bed, stretching in the light. It yawned, and looked right at her. The cat's eyes were huge and yellow, with the tiniest slits down the center. It thumped off the bed and trotted out the door. Sheesa followed it out into the sunlight.

A wind from offshore blew chill air over the deck. Looking to shore, Sheesa saw the treeline had changed. Yesterday there were common trees like oaks and cedars, but now they had passed into an isle of rocky crags. Where yesterday there had been a beach, now there were sheer stones rising from the water. The waves crashed against walls of rocks that rose above the sea. When she looked ahead, she thought she could see the faintest inclination of forms on the horizon. She focused and refocused her eyes, wondering if maybe those were the sea stacks Sri had mentioned.

Sheesa turned and saw her at the wheel, Gara rubbing on her leg. Sri's long curly brown hair was down and blowing in the wind.

Sheesa walked up to the upper deck to ask Sri.

Sri could see her coming. "Morning sleepy," Sri said, as if she had been up for hours already.

“Are we close now?” Sheesa asked. “I wasn’t sure, but I thought maybe I could see something off in the distance.”

“We’ll reach it by midday. You might see it now if you’ve got a keen eye.” Sri’s breath smelled herbal, earthy, and wine-sweet. “They’re giant pillars of stone, like columns.”

Sheesa looked back that way at the horizon.

“Did you have any dreams last night, Sheesa?” Sri asked.

When she looked back, Sri was bent over, rubbing the cat. She didn’t remember any dreams, if there was one, it was quiet, like sitting by the fireplace.

Sri spoke before she could respond. “I had a dream,” she said. “You were in it.”

“Me?”

“That’s right, it wasn’t a bad dream.” Sri looked up at her, still stroking the cat. “Cats dream,” Sri said in a teaching sort of voice, looking down at Gara.

“When this one dreams, she disappears.” Sri continued, kneeling down to be with the cat, “I think that’s why they wanted her, this woman named Vireo. Took us ages to notice your little trick though,” she laughed to herself. “I like to think in the wild they learn to do it on purpose, but she never figured it out. Never had to.”

Sheesa looked at the cat, she had never heard of something like that. *Cats like to hide when they sleep*, Sheesa thought, but she couldn’t unsee Gara’s eyes looking at her.

Sheesa changed the subject, “What sort of thing are we collecting there? I know it’s a flower, but do you know about the color? The number of petals? I can’t help but worry he’s sent you to find something quite rare.”

“It’s this or that really,” Sri interjected. “I remember once, he asked us to go grab a couple stones from a pool on this island in the Uko Gap. It was a tropical paradise, easiest hundred pieces I’ve made in my life,” Sri half smiled. “But you’re more than welcome to read the written request if you’d like.”

Sri rooted around in her pockets, pulled out a piece of paper, opened it, put it away, “I thought I had it on me.” She switched hands on the steering wheel. “Ah, right,” and pulled out a piece of dark brown parchment with a broken seal.

“You can keep that, I don’t need it.”

“Thanks,” Sheesa said, taking the paper.

She left Sri there and went to the same spot on the deck as yesterday to read the request. She unfolded the parchment and recognized Momiji’s writing. He had included a decent drawing, and a list of requirements. There was a bush that looked like any other. It had thick low branches with a sort of cypressy-cedar leaf, and cones of tiny flowers at the end of each stalk. There was a note on the flowers, “*Green to Purple petal color, unknown fragrance.*”

The requirements detailed the acquisition and delivery of the flowers:

From the Columns of Mertine:

Minimum three sprigs

*Picked in the light of a full moon
Best if transported in water, do not dry or press*

It was brief. Sheesa didn't have any idea why picking the flowers at night was explicitly part of the gathering requirements. It shocked her how vague it was. The directions to the location must have been talked out in person, she didn't recognize the name, "*Columns of Mertine*", that Momiji had used.

She supposed Sri and her crew were used to this kind of uncertainty. Sheesa felt like everyone was going about this so casually. *Maybe this will be simple*, Sheesa told herself.

Sheesa glanced again at the horizon. She noticed her shoulders had gotten sun yesterday. Today the quick breeze was blowing thin clouds about in the sky, dimming the sun for a moment every now and again.

She looked forward, to watch the sea stacks roll into view.

They were tall, fantastically tall. The rocky shoreline had risen to a cliffside, the natural stone spires towered to the same height. The three colossal hunks of stone stood in a row just off the coast of the mainland. The sea stacks each had a sort of building at the precipice, stone and square, Sheesa could just make them out in the sunlight.

Kirin ran and leaned over the rail as they passed by. The waves crashed and muddled between the rocks, Kirin whooped loudly, laughing and turning to Sheesa and Sri. Sheesa couldn't help but laugh in amazement, she'd never seen anything like it. A big wave reached up over the side and sprayed him, the boat bucked and jerked. The rest of the crew may have been through rough waters before, but Sheesa found at least one hand clinging to the rail the entire time.

Sri brought the ship around the southern tip and back up along the rocks. This side was more calm, free of the beating tide. Sri dropped the sail and threw the anchor in the placid sound of the towering spire.

"Tether us there," she called to Kirin, pointing to the tower of rock. He shook his head and ran over to the railing, picking up the end of a bundle of rope and quickly tying a loop. He cast it out over the edge, missed, and reeled it back in quickly.

Sheesa saw what he had been aiming for, a tiny remnant of a dock. She also saw, camouflaged with the rock face above, a set of stairs carved into the bare stone.

Anko came out of the cabin and saw Kirin struggling. He had managed to catch the rope, but was trying to pull the boat toward the dock alone. Anko smiled at Sri and she gave him a look back. Anko walked over to Kirin and took up the rope behind him, patting him on the back. Kirin gave him a tough face back. Together they muscled the boat snugly up against the dock.

The boat settled close by the pillar. There was a brief landing of stone next to which a lone pole still stood. It had a sort of ornamentation on top, a rusted blue-green cap with a rounded ball at the tip. The sun beat down, Kirin heaved, doubled over.

Sri waved to Anko, thanking him for the help. She passed by Sheesa and said, “We’re going to go ashore. I wanted to say, I know this was your idea and all, but you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. These sort of things can sometimes turn out,” Sri turned and looked at Kirin, “*weedy*.”

Sri had a way of making Sheesa uneasy, but she was ready. “Let’s go,” she said. She left Sri standing and went to grab her bag.

Anko put his leg over the railing and spun over the edge. He leaped across the gap, shaking the boat a little, landing on both feet.

Sheesa followed suit, she slipped both legs over the rail, then pushed off, landing a little top heavy, but safely on the sea stack. She moved quickly to give Kirin and Sri a place to land, Anko was already headed up the stair.

She began to climb. The stone steps were deep and wide. Sheesa almost had to climb them like a child, sometimes doubling up, taking two steps on the same stair. The steps looped back around and criss-crossed up the side, Sheesa watched the boat get smaller and smaller below. The polished stairs reflected her in the marble, she saw the clouds move.

Kirin bounded up the stairs behind her, so Sheesa stepped quickly.

She was light headed when she reached the top, but the scene stole her breath. The top of the pillar was an expanse of green grass and white stone. It was almost the size of her garden, but instead of flowers and growth, it was spartan. Long grass whipped in the blizzing wind, hardy bushes grew between outcroppings of white stone and pathways of shaped brick. Sheesa saw ruins, lonely columns, and archways. Far on one edge she saw a building with an open doorway.

Kirin popped up behind her and exclaimed, “I think this thing is three hundred feet tall!”

“Taller, I think,” Anko responded, evenly. He stood just a few steps in front of Sheesa.

Sri blew by them and walked ahead.

Sheesa looked around for artifacts. She followed a stone path, scanning the ground, but all she saw were ruins. She wished for statues in the courtyard, some mosaic, or art. She stood in the wind imagining who had built this place, how many eons ago it was stolen from raw rock and transformed.

She turned back to the crew and saw Kirin running across to the other side. He jumped up on a rock by the edge and peeked down at the water below.

“Is this it?” Sri was hunched over a bush. Her voice didn’t carry well, the wind blew it away.

Sheesa glanced in her direction, she tried shouting back, “I think so,” she started to jog over, “one moment!”

Sheesa could tell it was the one from the drawing. She saw the same bushes lining the edge of the sea stack. They encircled it, the whole summit was ringed with them, like a fence. The bush Sri stood by was in the center of the courtyard garden. The *garden* was merely a withered bed, with only the bush and some long dead shrubs remaining. A square pool lay empty

at one end with a stain of silt in the lowest corner. A tiny obelisk, like a tall pyramid, stood on the other side.

Sheesa took out her knife and inspected the bush.

Sri interjected, chiding, "We're supposed to wait until nightfall, did you read the note?"

"You wanted to know what we're dealing with. I'm going to figure out what we need to do *before* we do it in the dark." Sheesa stated it clearly, it came out a little more bold than she had intended.

"Suit yourself," Sri retorted, stepping off.

Sheesa focused on the specimen. She wanted to take every precaution, this was going to a Poison Master after all. She had thick work-gloves she used to pick through the bush. When she found a decent sized cone of flowers, she took it by the stem and cut it cleanly. She wiped the blade on a rag and made a mental note to clean it thoroughly later.

Next she went about a very similar process to the one she had conducted with The Gardener so many nights ago. She had to pound the herb into a mash and then make it into a potion. Thankfully Momiji had said he wanted it preserved in water, not dried, so all she needed was the raw pulp. She set to it, careful not to touch the mash as she worked it, nor when scraping it out of the mortar. Sheesa put it in a larger bottle with a little bit of fresh water to let her pour it smoothly. She shook it, then poured it into vials she had prepared with the herbs that signaled the major families of Harm.

The major families of Harm were: Toxin, Burn, Paralysis, and Weakness. All varieties of pain one could experience from a poison were represented in those four groups.

Sheesa had a vial for each. She poured the mash into each and corked them.

Looking up for the first time in a while, she saw both Anko and Sri had left. Kirin sat in a plot of grass stretching his legs, he had his eyes closed in the sun.

Sheesa stood and stretched. She could let the indicators rest for a moment, she decided to wander.

She looked immediately to the structure at the edge of the cliff. It stood alone, at the closest point to the next pillar in the row. The structure was made from white stone blocks. The square doorway stood open, dark, facing her. The surface of the building reflected the stunning light as a cloud moved out from in front of the sun.

She approached the building and saw the next sea stack in the set looming behind it. The second sea stack had a more intricate building than the one before her. Sheesa stood in the doorway. It was grand, exceedingly tall and wide. The room inside was unlit, but from the door Sheesa could make out a circular pit in the center, and a door on the opposite wall.

She stepped lightly in.

The sound of the sea vanished. It was almost silent. She saw dust float in the sunlight from the door. Sheesa stepped up to the pit and saw ash, burn marks on stone. It occurred to her for the first time, that the place may not have been abandoned. She skirted the fire pit and moved to the closed door on the other side of the room. The walls were bare except for a design along

the crown where they met the ceiling. Sheesa couldn't see it in the darkness, it was too far overhead.

Sheesa had a quiet lonely feeling. She felt like everywhere she'd go, the world was covered in ruins like this. As if every incredible place had already been found and *claimed* and lost. They were just unknowable dead things, silent and aging. She wanted to understand what this place was, what it meant, but it was gone to time.

She meandered to the far door, the loose wood boards showed the outside light between them. Sheesa pulled it open on ancient hinges.

The sound of water and crashing waves filled the room.

Outside the door was a short brick path, then a sheer drop.

Sheesa stepped out, and saw the same structure beckoning from the far spire. Poles like the one at the dock stood on both precipices. She started to wonder what had connected the two, but couldn't think. The wind careened into the alcove where she stood, and the waves crashed so loudly the words in her head drowned. She stood for a moment, jostled in the fierce air. She waved on steady footing in the chaos, then stepped back inside, and closed the door.

Windblown, she decided she was done exploring, and walked slowly back to the indicator vials. Sheesa didn't see Kirin anymore, she supposed he'd gone back to the boat too.

All the vials shone clear, bits of green mush in freshwater. The *Toxin* vial had gone a little cloudy, but it was far from the burned red they should have shown if they were dangerous.

Sheesa picked them up and shook them. She questioned if they worked at all, but knew they must.

As far as she could tell, this plant was Harmless.

A little disappointed, Sheesa began packing up her divinations, pouring out each vial in the grass beside the path. *At least collecting the stalks we need tonight would be simple*, she thought, but couldn't help but feel an itch. The fact that they had to cut them under the light of the Full Moon was too specific to let slide. Sheesa was generally sceptical, it seemed like mysticism to her, but the people she was with and Momiji seemed a lot less gullible than the average person buying a *Potion of Vigor*.

Sheesa decided she'd camp out up here until tonight, she'd seen enough of the ship. She walked around briefly, looking for artifacts or unique plants but found nothing out of place. There were toppled columns, some err bricks, but the scene was almost tidy.

Sheesa laid in the grass and watched the sky. It had been a while since she'd been on firm ground. If she closed her eyes, the sea stack bobbed beneath her. If the wind hadn't been so strong she would have made tea.

Before long, Kirin came back up the stairs. His short curly hair reminded her of Sri's a little, they didn't look much alike besides maybe their eyebrows, but that was a stretch. *I guess I assumed they're related by blood*, Sheesa realized. She thought of what she called The Gardener, if she would've called them her *parent* if they had told her to when she was young.

Kirin walked through the courtyard to Sheesa, he walked in a straight line, ignoring the stone paths. “Hey you missed food, Anko caught an octopus!”

Sheesa smiled back, “I’ve spent too much time on a boat, I was enjoying the grass.”

“Yeah, it’s funny, we’ve sailed past this spot before. I had no idea you could walk right up here...” He looked out at the open sea. “She’s always on me about messing around at *sacred sites*.” He bent down and picked up a chunk of rock. He flipped it around in his hand and threw it hard over the side. It floated there for a moment over the edge, plummeting. It shrunk and shrunk and then disappeared.

The two of them scanned the water, eyes just over the edge of the cliff, looking for the splash. Neither said anything, Sheesa didn’t see it hit the water.

Kirin shrugged to her. “I think she’s been taking more safe requests since I came aboard.”

Sheesa thought getting a free ride around on ingredient request missions sounded *enlightening*. She couldn’t relate to someone trying to keep your nose out of something, she tried to picture The Gardener getting on her about which books she could read or what ingredients she could use, and smiled to herself. It had been too long since she thought of them, and took a moment to wish them well in her head.

“So, Sri said you were messing with the shrub, anything freaky happen?” Kirin asked.

“No,” Sheesa replied, dismissively. “Seems perfectly safe. I suppose I wouldn’t eat it, but it should be simple to collect the cuttings.”

“Ha, well she told me I’ll be with Anko down at the boat when you’re doing it.”

Sheesa mustered a pitiful smile.

Kirin laughed. As he rolled up his sleeve, Sheesa caught sight of a tiny, blotchy tattoo just below his elbow.

“What’s that?” Sheesa asked, with a lift in her voice.

“Oh this, it’s a Calbera. Same kind as Anko’s, but his are real.”

“What does that mean? Is a Calbera a kind of tattoo?”

“Oh yeah, I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it. It’s a tattoo with potion-ink. You can get different kinds. I’m not sure about Anko’s, but the pattern is a full body flow. Mine’s just a blotch, but the ink is for Memory. My friend smuggled some and we gave them to one another.”

Sheesa hadn’t heard of tattoo-potions, but the idea seemed exciting. It was like the most slow-release potion you could imagine, the effects of a potion lingering for years. It was almost like Gwyn’s eyes, she realized.

“What other kinds are there?” Sheesa asked, wondering if it was more of a *Potion of Vigor* thing.

“Oh, there’s Bravery and Strength and all that macho stuff. There’s Joy and Calm, those are pretty popular. Some Calbera are really specific though, I’ve heard of people getting them to build up immunities to poison, or people with getting them in specific places to relieve pain.”

It sounded like there was some truth to it, she decided. She pictured herself tattooed, wondering what potion she would want to try.

In time, the sun set, and light began to fade. Sri joined them on the summit, and Kirin got up obediently, “I’m going to go see what Anko’s up to...”

Sri and Sheesa gathered little twigs to light a fire, but couldn’t keep it burning. Sheesa’s Fire Starter flew off and sparked in mid-air as it drifted up into the breeze. Kirin sent Gwyn up, and the three of them sat around the pile of sticks. The sunset sunk low in the West, the moon was high and bright.

Sri wanted to wait until the sun was totally down and the moon was shining directly on the bush. Sri and Gwyn told stories while they waited. They talked of nights like this one, about legends, and stories from this part of the world. Sri told a story from an island in the South. She told them of an island where a behemoth Kurra lived. The Kurra were giant sightless eels, some rumored to be more than a hundred feet long. This one was great, and it had a name, Naga-Lorei. It was a beast of the deep sea, usually living in the muddy depths, but this one had emerged to fill the volcanic tunnels beneath an island.

“The island had a drop off, and if you swam off the coast too far, it would *notice* you. They’re blind, but it can sense you fidgeting in the water. It would shoot out from an underwater tunnel and grab you. They said sometimes you could see it from the lip of the volcano, the empty bulb had filled with water, and you could see it swimming down there, in the flooded belly of the mountain. A knot of white, curling.”

“What’s the name of the island?” Gwyn asked, almost sceptically.

“Loka.”

“Never heard of it. Was this one of Nana’s stories?”

“No, a traveler told it to me, when I was younger.”

Sheesa hadn’t heard of the island either, but there were hundreds of islands south on the coast. She had read some stories of great ancient creatures, but they all seemed so far away when she read them in her room. She was cold, and felt far from home.

Sheesa told them the story about the *Old Herbalist*. She found herself unable to look Gwyn in the eye while telling it, her shimmering eyes looked so much like the beast’s, it made her feel strange.

“It’s not a great monster story,” Sheesa admitted. “I don’t know enough to say for sure what it was, but it didn’t seem like an animal, you know? It didn’t seem dumb.”

Sri responded with a lofty quip, “Probably a cursed fool. The worst curses don’t just kill you, they turn you into stuff. Could just be one of the Wildfolk though, an ancient one.”

Gwyn looked at Sri and said, “Hey, do you remember the time Momiji asked us to bring him the set of eyes from a Lesong Boar?”

“Yes,” Sri was slow to respond. “I remember.”

Gwyn told the story like a drama, “I always think about the endless hike, it took us days through the jungle to get up to that peak, and the forrest was full of these little frogs. Tiny, tiny ones. They were like a carpet in some places, but you wouldn’t end up stepping on them! They’d always jump right out from under your bootsole, but they’d end up in your shoes and in your clothes. It was so wild, they were like bugs, roaches or something, right Sri?”

“Yeah, I remember how that poor thing wouldn’t *die*,” Sri moaned. “It looked terrible by the end of it, as if it wasn’t enough to kill the thing.”

“We made a fortune on it though,” Gwyn turned to Sheesa, “That’s how Anko got the boat!”

Sheesa forgot they were pirates, for a moment. Maybe it was best Sri had started taking on less dangerous missions now that Kirin was aboard.

The chill got under her shirt and Sheesa hugged herself tighter.

The light in the West had fallen into darkness. Some stars shone between fast moving clouds. The moon was bright, the white stone radiant.

Sri got up, “Now will do.”

They three of them moved to the bush, Sheesa took out her razor knife.

“You two start cutting sprigs, I’ll tell you when.” Sri looked up to the moon, gauging the upcoming clouds.

Gwyn squatted low, gripping a cone on the inside of the bush.

Sheesa waited, shivering, still thinking about the boar and the mountainside. She was trying not to picture its eyes.

“Now-”

The moonlight landed on the bush, the two of them slit the flower stems.

Shesa looked down at the bush and saw something she didn’t predict. It was *draining*. There was a liquid pouring from the open wound she’d cut. It was black in the moonlight. It streamed out like a little faucet. She didn’t understand, this wasn’t at all what had happened earlier that day. The cold wind whipped up, and Sheesa knew something *else* was happening, this was more than just a flower picking.

Gwyn let out a hoarse shriek, “It got on me. It got on me.” she muttered, tense. She wiped her right hand on her pants in blurred haste. “It hurts, it’s burning me!”

A drop of water fell from the stars and hit Sheesa on a bare part of her scalp. The pittering of rain on stone rose into hissing fuzz, a downpour.

Sri shouted to Sheesa.

Sheesa was rooted to the spot. She was staring at the bush, taking in a sight she had never witnessed. It was withering, like the dying season sped up, the plant shrank and crumpled inwards, the ooze rolled over the mulchy soil into the empty pool.

“Sheesa!”

She turned to Sri, clutching the little flower in the cold rain.

Sri was holding Gwyn, “One more stalk!”

The rain kicked up. Hard drops hammered through Sheesa's clothes.

The moon was still out. The outer branches had wilted and fallen limp on the ground. Sheesa picked at the bush from as far away as she could, a moat of the liquid had formed around the base. She saw a tiny cone of flowers and pinched the stem, she could feel the plant dying in her hands, the firm sprig losing its stiffness. Sheesa cut it.

She stuffed her knife away. They threw the sprigs in a bag and tied it. Sri stowed it in her shirt as they headed to the stairs to the dock below.

They were all soaked through. The wind was cold and the moonlight was cold.

Sheesa looked up to the night sky; despite the rain, there were no storm clouds overhead. The moonlight lit the cascading droplets like falling stars.

Sheesa felt like she'd slipped into the dream world again. She had cut the plant meer hours ago, it was as neutral as a common weed. *Moonlight cannot change the quality of a plant*, Sheesa reassured herself, but she felt her hairs standing up. There's more to this world than earth and soil, she thought.

Sheesa followed Gwyn and Sri in the hard rain. The rock steps were a creek of falling water. She stepped down carefully, water sloshing in her boots.

At the dock, the boat pitched wildly.

Anko helped them each aboard, grabbing a rain soaked arm and hauling them aboard one by one.

Sri lead Gwyn to the cabin. She laid her down and set to washing Gwyn's hand. Gwyn wasn't saying anything, her teeth were clenched, and the tone of her muscles showed along her arm.

Sheesa walked up slow, the lanterns in the room were rocking with the ship.

Sheesa saw the prepared vase for the flowers by the bed.

Sri was scrubbing hard. She looked at Sheesa, in her eyes Sheesa could see she was asking if there was an *Herbalist's* cure to fix this.

Sheesa hadn't seen Gwyn's hand yet. She was still shaking, she straightened up her back, and took a deep breath.

Gwyn's hand had gone from dark tan to white-yellow, as if bleached. The stain dripped from her last two fingers all over her palm and down her wrist. She had expected a burn, but there was no sign of it: the skin was undamaged. Sheesa had no idea what had happened to her, it looked like a birthmark. There was no simple tincture for this, if it had been a burn, or a cut, or even some acid corrosion Sheesa could have begun to mend the wound, but this was none of those things.

"Does it still hurt?" Sheesa's voice was lost in the noise. She caught Gwyn's lined stare.

"It's bad. I'll survive, but It feels raw, like the skin's peeled back. It's so sensitive the draft stings," her eyes darted back and forth between them. "It's like a drift of ice I can't pull away from."

“Wrap her hand,” Sheesa said to Sri. Sheesa began running through her bag. She was searching for a potion she had prepared what seemed like ages ago, before she ever left home.

Gwyn began to strain away as Sri dressed her mark. She gripped the bed with her free arm.

The wind rattled the window behind the bed. The crashing waves peeked in, splashing against the glass.

Anko came through the cabin door. “We’re away from the rockface,” he announced to the room. He turned to Sri, “The storm-” she cut him off.

“Yep, it was a Ritual ingredient. As soon as we cut it the rain came, plus the plant had a trap waiting for us...” Sri dropped the rag she had been using in the bucket. “It’s not a *natural* wound.”

“Well,” Anko paused for too long. There was something on his tongue. “Should we go see Nana?”

Sri interjected again, “We don’t have time, they’re fresh flowers.” She pulled them out and put them in the vase, almost for effect.

Anko held up both palms to assuage her. “I was asking Gwyn too. I think we should go, I’d rather be on the safe side.”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” Gwyn said, just above a whisper. “But I’m afraid.” She turned to Sri, “I don’t want to be cursed.”

A quiet settled on the room, the wind moaned. Sheesa found the vial she had been looking for in her bag, a tiny bottle of *Sleep*.

Sheesa spoke up from her spot on the floor, “There’s a potion for it, the flowers. It keeps them fresh as the day they were cut.”

Sri exhaled, “Okay, we’ll go. We can afford a day or two.” She lumbered to a chair and fell into it.

Anko nodded to Sri, then to Gwyn.

More to see, Sheesa mused. She wasn’t going back to Bay at Four Hills yet, she was sure they’d end up there eventually, Sri would never let her bounty go, but Sheesa would see more of the world before they were done with her. She had seen enough to feel humbled. She had spent all day laying about and exploring on that sea stack, unaware of what *lurked* there.

Sheesa got up and brought the half sized vial to Gwyn. Sheesa spoke softly, but with certainty, “I may not have a cure for you, but you’ll need rest, and you probably won’t get any on your own.” She uncorked the vial, “This is Sleep, if you want it.”

Gwyn tried to smile, her cheeks rose, but her eyes showed the discomfort. She nodded, receptive.

Sheesa took Gwyn’s head in her hand, and brought the potion to her. The dark swirling potion slipped out of the vial through her parted lips.

Gwyn swallowed. Fidgeted her mouth around, and swallowed again. She blinked and looked at Sheesa. Gwyn’s eyes lost their focus, her brow relaxed, lids lowered, and closed.

Sri skidded her chair to the trunk by the bed and went through it.

Sheesa felt entirely used up. She went to the wall and sat on the floor. “I’m- I’m sorry I couldn’t do more,” Sheesa started to apologize.

“Save it,” said Sri. “This business is cursed, girl. Gwyn’s not the first to get the bad end of it. This is what we do.”

Sheesa felt small again. She knew countless plants, she’d seen plants perform tricks that seemed like *magic* before, but there was always a natural purpose, a biological rationale. *This*, however, was outside of the garden, this was some entirely Other thing.

She had tried to prepare, but she had no idea what would happen, what *could* happen. Sri tried to warn her, but how could you warn someone of something they can’t imagine.

Kirin came in through the door. Sheesa looked up at him, dripping hair hanging low. He saw her looking and looked back, he was serious, eyes wider than before.

Sheesa pictured Anko, alone in the rain above her.

Kirin put out the lights, Sheesa heard him leap into the bunk at the end of the room. She closed her eyes, and thought of the cold moon on the hardy cliff-top flowers. She imagined them full-to-bursting.

Chapter 8. Old, Still

Sheesa woke. Kirin’s silhouette exited through the bright light in the doorway, then the cabin was dark again.

Sheesa’s neck ached, she had slept sitting up. She rolled her shoulders and stood.

Through the light of the window she saw Gwyn breathing slow breaths. She stepped lightly over and peeked at the wrap on her hand. She thought she could see the white stain beneath the edge of the bandage, but dared not touch it.

She heard Kirin call to Anko on the deck.

Sheesa stepped outside into the sharp white light and gawked at the island before her, a looming mountainside covered in tangled forests, a bright sand beach, and clear water.

Anko had already set the ship to dock. Kirin sat on the rail, half watching Anko, half watching the island view.

Sheesa waved to the two of them, groggily. Kirin returned the wave with the fruit he was eating, Anko bobbed his head in acknowledgement.

“What is this place?” Sheesa asked.

“Lumere Bay,” Anko said. “Zumpango.”

Sheesa knew that name, it was the name Sri had called the ship. She wondered if Anko had named it that, Sheesa had never seen a place like it before.

Anko turned to shore. “We’re waiting for the tide to go back out, then we’ll go to the village.”

Sheesa wanted to see the village. Anko had talked before about knowing an *herbalist*, the one who had made the Desalination Powder, and Sheesa figured they might be here. Plus, Sheesa wanted to see *Zumpango*, she wanted to see the jungle trees and the animals and the people. “I’ll come as well. I’ll be able to gather the ingredients for a potion of *Stasis*.”

“Well, I’m going to go for a swim,” Anko said, to both Kirin and Sheesa. It didn’t seem like an invitation.

Kirin watched as Anko dove off the boat edge. He swam frog-like below the clear water, only coming up for air way at the other end of the cove.

“So, what actually happened to Gwyn last night?” Kirin said, looking side-eyed at Sheesa.

Sheesa could feel it hovering above her, like a cloud, waiting for her to look up. “It was... not what we expected,” Sheesa said. “When we cut the plant, liquid started pouring out. Some got on her hand.” It sounded anticlimactic when Sheesa said it plainly. “We didn’t think that would happen.”

“Sri’s told me stories of stuff going wrong on missions before, I’m sure nobody expected something weird to happen.”

“I guess this time you were better off on the boat,” Sheesa said solemnly. “Do you think the person here will be able to heal her? I’ve never seen a wound like that before, not that I’m one to talk, but it seems *strange* to me.”

“Nana’s got magic cures,” Kirin said. “She’s brought people back from the dead, my mother said that she helped deliver *her* and *me*.” Kirin smiled at Sheesa, “Nana’s a mother to all of us, especially Anko, she raised him. She’ll take care of Gwyn.”

Sheesa didn’t want to take Kirin’s word for it, when he said *magic cures* she was sceptical, but she could no longer ignore that there was magic in the world she didn’t understand. What Kirin called magic could just be a natural remedy, but what Sheesa had seen yesterday was magic to her. Maybe that was as natural as her Arson powder to her.

Thinking of Anko being nurtured under the care of a Potion Master too made her wonder what made the two of them different. She liked Anko, maybe most out of the crew, but he seemed content to live a quiet life, fishing and cooking and sailing. She didn’t know what made him happy. *Maybe the water*, she thought, looking out at him floating. Then again, he left home too, maybe he was hungry for the world once, just like her.

“Are you excited to be home?” Sheesa asked.

“Yeah,” Kirin said confidently. “This is the longest I’ve ever been away. I kind of thought I would be gone longer... Wait here one sec.”

Kirin jogged into the cabin, and emerged a moment later with his bag. “Have you ever played Pazcel?”

The two of them sat down on the deck, and Kirin spread out the ceramic tiles with painted signs, grouped by color. Kirin had tiles for them both to play. Sheesa had her back to the sun, she felt it's heat in her hair. The tiles were elegant, the designs were painted with sweeping brush strokes. Each one represented a *class* or *role*, which Kirin would decipher for her. The game was complicated, he was playing for the both of them, but Sheesa learned the basics enough to limp along in a real match. It was a strategy game, and she liked it. Playing it out on the deck, she dreaded Anko coming back aboard to tell them the tide was out, or Sri to come out of the cabin with her disapproving look. She wanted *this* right now.

But before long, Anko scaled the railing, dripping. Kirin swept the tiles away into the little cloth pouch, and Sheesa wondered if she'd ever play the game again.

Anko walked into the cabin to wake Gwyn. He touched Gwyn's shoulder, but she didn't stir. He nudged her a little harder.

She woke, murmuring, "Are we there already?"

Gwyn sat up and gazed slowly around the room, putting the present back together. She pressed her bandaged hand down on the bed and winced. She took a breath, and got up.

Gwyn took off the heavy shirt she'd worn last night and grabbed a mask hanging on the wall. It was a single stone slab, with tiny dot eye holes and another hole for the mouth. She pulled on the headpiece, and a, "Let's go," came muffled from beneath the eerie disguise.

They headed out the cabin and towards the edge of the boat. Sheesa followed, grabbing her pack. She patted her bag to feel the spot where the ingredient vials should be, then again at her waist where her razor knife-

She remembered, at once, she had never cleaned the blade.

A flurry of thoughts raced back into her head. Foremost, what had gotten on Gwyn, it had gotten on the blade, could it have *imparted* a property from the toxic liquid? The idea wasn't absurd. She decided to pack the knife away until she could properly investigate. She stowed it in a small compartment, all its own.

Anko and Kirin were already in the water, Gwyn climbed down the ladder one-handed behind them. Sheesa turned to see if Sri was following, but saw no one.

Sheesa took off her boots and dropped in. In the water, Sheesa realized she could see all the way to the seafloor. She held her bag above her head, and kept her eyes on the water the whole time. The wobbling silver reflection of the sun danced on the ripples in front of her.

Sheesa looked back and saw Sri watching them go. Sri gave a high wave as the cat jumped on the rail in front of her.

Sheesa wobbled through the spilling breakers that lapped at the shore like a gentle reaching hand. The other three had already started down the beach. As Sheesa emerged from the water she saw the dense jungle at the edge of the beach. Sheesa jogged to catch up to them, barefoot in the steaming sand.

Sheesa watched the treeline as she went, she saw thin swirling trees with long leaves curling into braids in the canopy. She saw thick bulbous trees with roots that sprawled around the

trunk, sometimes even coming back up out of the ground like a totally separate tree. She decided she would try to draw each one for The Gardener. She was giddy about the stories she'd tell them when they saw one another again.

When she'd caught up, Kirin said, "I'm going to run ahead, I'll be at Sousa's house if you need me." He dashed off ahead. Sheesa wanted to play more, to go with Kirin and meet another friend, but it was just an impulse, she knew she cared more about seeing what was in store for them at this Herbalist's house.

Sheesa walked side by side with Gwyn for some time. She couldn't help but eye the mask she wore, Sheesa figured she couldn't see her peeking. She looked Gwyn up and down, she seemed in perfect health besides the bandaged hand hanging stiff. "Gwyn, why isn't Sri coming ashore?" Sheesa asked tentatively.

From behind the mask, Gwyn said, "She doesn't visit. I think she'd be happy to never see the place again."

Sheesa decided it was personal, and wouldn't pry. She wasn't interested in Sri, she didn't feel like she had anything to learn from her besides how not to grow up.

The three of them turned wandering corners along the jungle edge, seeing the tip of a far shore appear in the distance, then turn out of view. After walking a while longer, the group of them came to a set of two curved stone walls that sat in a hollow in the treeline. Between the two walls a trail went into darkness, Anko and Gwyn filed in instinctively.

Sheesa watched the trees. The sunlight filtered down in golden columns here and there between the fat leaves and tangled wood. Sheesa saw a cloud of pink butterflies whirling around the browning fruit from a tiny bowed sapling. She heard calls from animals she couldn't have guessed the type of, let alone the species.

Sheesa knew better than to vocalize how distracted she was. She knew why they were here. She felt a pang of remorse, as if it was disrespectful to marvel with Gwyn injured, but couldn't help it. Sheesa wanted to take in as much as Zumpango had to offer.

She looked back to the canopy. She saw birds high above. The trees reached so high in search of the sun. Their roots were ancient, and tall themselves, bulging out of the dirt in all directions from the trunk, making little hollows for skittering things to jump into and hide in as Sheesa passed. She wondered why the roots were so large, *Maybe there's poor nutrition in the soil, or the sandy loose dirt requires that they have strong roots to steady themselves.* She analyzed all the way to the village entrance.

They came out of the woods onto a natural flat slab of land. The village was up the mountain, and looked down on a cove. A high peak still loomed above them. The buildings of the town were painted every bright tint Sheesa could imagine, like a garden in bloom. Most houses were one storey, Sheesa saw people up and about on the roofs, drying things in the sun. Children ran in the street chasing Curly-Horned Capybaras.

Instead of walking right into town, Anko cut around the edge. He stepped between tightly packed buildings, over long discarded things that heap in such places.

Sheesa and Gwyn followed. She heard people talking on the main road and wondered if they were *sneaking around*. She wondered why Sri wouldn't come too. Sheesa was relieved, all the sudden, to have a home to return to freely, a warm hearth waiting.

Anko turned sharply and then again, Sheesa only knew where he'd gone by the flapping red curtain at the front of the house he'd gone in to. It was tall, with signs in a script Sheesa couldn't read. The front wall was painted yellow. Sheesa realized every building on the block was painted a different color.

She entered and found herself in a small room. She saw Anko right in front of her, with Gwyn slumped against the wall on a small step that elevated the house from ground level.

"We wait here. She'll greet us when she's done." Anko whispered to Sheesa. He took a seat by Gwyn and wrapped his arms around himself.

Sheesa looked past them, she could see someone moving in the back room. She smelled the fire going, and something brewing. She saw things hanging in the hall and entryway, a painting at eye level across from her caught her eye. The colors were vivid: light blue and yellow and orange in sharp vertical lines in front of gradual fading indigo background. Sheesa couldn't tell what it was meant to be, but she loved the way it looked. It made her think of trees at sunset in front of an already night sky.

Sheesa noticed the brewing smell change in quality. It set the air tingling and spicy. Sheesa felt like her ears were muffled, she had to correct her stance.

Gwyn fought a sneeze, rearing back twice until it overwhelmed her with a blast.

Sheesa heard the sound of metal on metal: a lid going on a pot. Down the hall she saw a set of doors slide open. Sheesa made eye contact with the person first, they squinted at her, but Anko rose between them.

"Ah, my Anko, welcome back," Her voice crackled beyond her age, she looked young, and smiled a wide thankful smile at him.

Anko stepped up into the house and hugged her.

"Are these your friends?"

Sheesa raised her eyebrows, she didn't want to be the one to answer.

Ascella had a black blouse tucked in to a rolling thick gold skirt. Her hair was braided, and fell down her back and over her shoulders with cracks of gray spinning through it. Her complexion was the same as Gwyn and Sri's, bright coppery skin, her eyes were yellow-green.

Anko moved to help Gwyn to her feet, gripping her good hand.

"Nana, it's Gwyn, something's happened," he started, but she cut him off.

"I could've guessed, I didn't even recognize her. Poor thing, her glow's all gone." She opened the door to their right, "Go ahead and set her down in the big room, Anko."

She turned to Sheesa, stating clearly and precisely, "You may call me Ascella. I use she-her. Now, how shall I address you?"

"My name is Sheesa," she started, then added, "I use she-her as well."

“Very good, very nice to meet you,” Ascella said as she followed Anko. “Shoes off in this house, Sheesa,” she called without seeing.

Sheesa left her boots in the hall and filed in. There was one large window in the back, a thin purple curtain billowed in the room. The walls were painted yellow, with hanging art like Sheesa saw when she entered. A wreath of gold and red feathers hung above the fireplace.

Gwyn reclined on a long couch.

“This is a funny ailment,” Ascella said, gingerly touching her arm. She squeezed it with her thumbs, Gwyn’s eyes bugged out of her head, but Ascella didn’t seem to notice.

She got up at once and went to a cabinet at the front of the room, she reached in and tried removing something, simultaneously juggling a tiny avalanche of other leaking jars toppling out. She plucked a wood box and brought it back over to the couch.

“This looks like a Neyba bite,” Ascella said, sticking a finger into the box, mixing the goo inside, “but if that were the case, you’d be dead.”

“It’s a curse, Nana. It’s from a Ritual Ingredient,” Gwyn said.

She clawed a hunk of it and globbed it onto Gwyn’s hand. “Still, this won’t hurt.”

“It hurts plenty,” Gwyn scoffed.

Ascella laughed at her, a beautiful song-like laugh, and plopped another glob onto her wrist. Ascella finished spreading the rub on Gwyn’s mark. She was silent, working on one thing at a time. “I can try something.” Ascella looked at Gwyn, “The best thing we can do right now it make sure it won’t spread.”

“What so there’s no healing it? There’s nothing else you can do?”

“I’d never say there’s *nothing* I can do,” Ascella looked from Gwyn to Anko, “I need to go out.”

“First things first,” Anko said. “We’re delivering perishables, we need a potion to keep them fresh. Sheesa said she can make it if-”

“Pft, childspay. I’ll whip something up,” Ascella waved at the air between them. She turned to face Sheesa, “You’re a potion-maker then? Why don’t you come along, I might need a hand.”

Anko turned to Sheesa, “What’s in the potion, maybe Nana has the ingredients-”

“Stop *dictating*, child!” Ascella called, mockingly.

“Nana, all I’m saying is, why don’t I come while Sheesa works on the potion,” Anko pleaded.

“I can see the bags under your eyes, and your brow has been wrinkled this whole time. You need a nap, and this one couldn’t hurt for rest either,” motioning to Gwyn.

Anko opened his mouth, froze, then exhaled.

“We’ll be back in just a moment,” Ascella said, leading Sheesa out the back door.

Sheesa felt like a horse being led around, but she was happy to go with Ascella. She was ready for a change in company, and she hadn’t talked to a Potion Maker in what felt like eons.

Together, they set off walking on a trail right out the back door of her house. The only thing they brought along was the lantern hanging by the back door.

“I smelled the sleep potion on her, was that your work?”

“Yes! I brewed it,” Sheesa said with a glimmer of pride.

“I hate the stuff, have you ever taken it yourself? It gives me terrible dreams, long ones that keep going after they seem like they should’ve ended. It’s the *Ocoee* that does it, spooky stuff.”

Sheesa assumed she meant the *key ingredient*, she didn’t know it by that name. “The *Passiflora*?”

“One and the same,” Ascella said over her shoulder. “You know it’s a sacred ingredient for the Acamarachi Temple Acolytes? The potion they make has the *Ocoee* flower, as well as a grain that makes you viciously alert. The two offset, you understand, and the result is the pure *Ocoee*. The drinker experiences a strong trance, walking arwy and talking to figures unseen,” Ascella turned and raised her eyebrows, smiling to Sheesa. “Always wanted to try it.”

Sheesa had no idea she’d sent Gwyn into an intoxicated dreamland. She remembered the year that Dsiban, The Gardener’s friend had brought the seeds to them. He told them a story about a temple too, she could just barely tug the memory into recollection.

“These days,” Ascella continued, “I don’t reach for something so *obtrusive*. But I could never much take a potion straight, I much prefer them cut with a bit of Yuzu juice.”

Sheesa had to struggle to keep up with her as they scaled the dirt path zig-zagging through the dense woods. The afternoon light diffused in the flora, the leaves and vines and branches all painted yellow like Ascella’s house.

Ascella talked enough for the both of them. At first, Sheesa felt like she had to respond, or reply in some way, but from behind she couldn’t get a word in. Once she settled in to stepping and let Ascella speak, it was almost like listening to a book read aloud. Sheesa tried not to breathe too loudly so she could hear what she was saying, each word an ingredient to fascinate, history to enthrall.

She talked about the forest. She talked about the way the island smelled and what it was that they were smelling: the too-ripe Tacna fruit rotting and the *Frasera* flowers blooming high in the canopy.

Ascella paused on the trail and said, “Oh, do you hear that? That’s my friend.”

Sheesa fought against the burn in her lungs to quiet her breath and listened. She heard a call in the trees above them, and looked up. Something silvery was among the high branches, it squaked down at them from tangled limbs above.

“She’s a Xion Cric,” Ascella said proudly. “Bet you’ve never seen one of those before. One of the only wingless birds in the world.”

It moved and shone like a mirror fumbling through the trees. She couldn't see it properly, but imagined it like a long feathered lizard. She thought of Hye, and wondered what they would say about one of its feathers.

Momentarily, Sheesa's stomach betrayed the silence and moaned.

Ascella laughed, "Hungry? I've got something you might like. Try this," she tossed Sheesa a bag.

Loosening the tie, the dark sweet flavor wafted out. It was filled with dense nutty clusters, Sheesa popped one in her mouth, it was chewy, melting deliciously as she sucked on it.

"So glad to see the kids again, I'd like to see Sri but she's been in a rut. Anko and her used to get in the biggest trouble, climbing up to Teuhtli, once they got stuck there overnight and I had to climb all the way up there myself. And there was the time they stirred up a nest of Vittata," turning, she explained, "like little treehoppers, they suck on sap. A whole plague of them came through the village in clouds. They passed in a day or two, but then people started coming to *me* with the little larvae in their sugar! What should I do? Go cut down a fresh cane for yourself, the forest's full of them. Oh! Speak of the herb," Ascella pointed to a stalk growing, "we'll need some for the Stasis potion. Why don't you pull that one up, looks healthy enough."

Sheesa recognized the plant as a stalk of sweetcane. It came up easily, but Sheesa had to carry it as they walked. She shook the bag of clusters into her mouth generously.

She felt great. The forest seemed bright and teeming with life, the light was fading, it was dark at the forest floor where they walked, but up in the trees Sheesa could still see the sun shining. Her pack and the cane didn't weigh on her, she was listening to Ascella's stories, gleeful.

"And that Gwyn was born too late, she's a match for them."

"What was she like when she was little?" Sheesa's mouth didn't ask her brain for permission to speak.

Ascella thought for a moment, "She's always been very pretty, and cried and cried when the older ones left. She grew up fast after that. And Kirin's acting the same way. He's still just a boy, you two are about the same age, isn't that right? He's a nice boy, an honest child."

Sheesa tucked the mostly eaten bag away. The forest was dark, she noticed, but she could still *see*. She recognized the blue hues on the leaves, the light in the dark, it was Dark Sight. She hadn't taken anything, but realized at once that it must have been in the food, baked in.

Sheesa opened her mouth to ask Ascella when she sang, "Here we are!"

They had walked up beneath a slab of stone sticking out of a wall in the mountain. A cave lay between two gargantuan leaning stones.

"Can you see alright?" Ascella asked, almost as if she anticipated Sheesa's question.

"Yes, thank you," Sheesa said, a little nervous. She wasn't sure what else had been in the mix. She hadn't thought to put *potions* in her *food*. It seemed dangerous, but the effect was undeniably pleasant. Instead of the piercing haze her own Dark Sight had cast the world in, she

hadn't even noticed it, even in the daylight. She pictured Ascella saying, *What's the difference between cooking and brewing anyways?*

"It's elegant," Sheesa said to Ascella. "The Dark Sight feels just like a part of me."

"Yes, it's a blend of sorts. Nutrients, essentials, some bonus side-effects that I like to keep up. They walked up to the cave between the stones. "You can leave that," she said, pointing to the sweetcane. "Follow me, watch your step."

They entered. The cave twisted around fallen rubble and stones, some sitting so precariously Sheesa couldn't fathom standing on them safely, yet they crawled and clambered through. Light shone in bright blue rays through the rubble above.

Sheesa felt humble, the place seemed mystical, and so quiet. Sheesa realized Ascella was silent. She wondered what sort of ingredient they would find in the cave, she pictured a ghostly mushroom, or an eyeless fish.

Between shifting steps, Sheesa could hear something echoing in the cave. It sounded like a tiny bird call, or chirping bats. Passing by a gap between stones, the sound grew louder. Sheesa stooped, and through the gap saw a platform of stone stretching out above a ravine. Light fell on the flat stone, and showed the gash in the body of the mountain. The opening before her was big enough to crawl through, she wanted to slip in, like a cat after a bird. She wanted to look down into the dark, to lean over the edge.

Ascella saw her linger, and spoke just above a whisper, "Can you hear it?"

Sheesa shifted her eyes to the woman in the dim light. She could hear it, the noise was a song. Sheesa's ears fumbled with words. Her mind gripped at lyrics and meaning only for it to fall frustratingly through her fingers into cavernous mist. She didn't expect a choir in the cave, she didn't expect anything.

As they coiled lower and lower into the earth, the sound grew. At last they emerged into a chamber of stars. Ascella stepped aside as Sheesa walked to the center of the room, her eyes on the lights. All around her hung luminescent worms, *caterpillars* she thought, as she noticed the little glowing horns at the head of one spinning right before her nose. The noise grew and shrank in the echoing space. *Are they speaking...*, Sheesa moved her ear close to one and it shot up on it's string. She sorted through the high chirping noises until she caught hold of a line,

The Lun bite

Stalled sun

Shy night

Old still

It continued, formless, in chorus, dipping in and out of human speech. It was pricklingly high pitched, almost shrill, but it was quiet. Sheesa hung on the words. She looked to Ascella.

She played with two of the glowing bugs. “These will do,” she said gently, picking them from her skirt. Her deeper voice braided into the song. She beckoned Sheesa with a nod of her head.

They walked up and out of the chamber. Ascella had the caterpillars cupped in her hand, Sheesa was not speaking.

“Have I frightened you, my child?”

Sheesa was afraid, but that wasn’t what she would call it. “Is this real?” she asked, longing for it to be true.

“Oh yes, it is very real. You don’t have any idea what you could become, what you are capable of?”

Sheesa’s dark sight was fading. The cave was slipping into blackness. She felt like she was going to cry, she stopped stepping.

“I cannot see,” She said, frustrated.

The amber scarlet light of the lantern spilled over them. Ascella’s hand found Sheesa’s cheek, it was warm. It smelled like the brew from her home, spiced and gingery.

Sheesa waited for wisdom as a reflex. She looked into Ascella’s eyes and saw them concerned, searching in her own. Sheesa realized at once that she was not The Gardener, and there would be no kind words, no easy way out, no answers unless she found them herself. She was *acting* like a child, she thought. This was why she was here, to be humbled.

“What other songs of the world have I been deaf to?” Sheesa said, pushing through the trembling in her chest. “What words do the birds call to one another in the canopy? Does even the breeze have a voice?”

Ascella’s concerned face caught a spark of excitement. A grin cracked across her lips, “What a beautiful thought, I wonder how you’d brew it.” She looked at Sheesa with some approval, “The birds, though, we can make in no time. Let me show you.”

Chapter 9. Ritual

They walked out of the cave by lamplight, Sheesa followed Ascella as she lead their way down the winding path home. There was still blue in the sky above them. The air outside was sharp to the nose, crisp, heavy with wild fragrance. The sound of the canopy played and replayed, just as it had before they entered the cave.

Nearly to Ascella’s, Sheesa’s mind raced with what to ask her next. She had shared something incredible with her, Sheesa wasn’t sure what she had heard, if it really had been the voice of the little caterpillars or if it had just been some strange hallucination. Regardless, Sheesa felt like she was walking with someone who could give her answers. She couldn’t help but feel a

connection between what had happened on the sea stack and what she had heard in the cave, they were both *magic* to her. Sheesa still didn't have the whole picture.

She looked ahead and saw the little tassels dancing on Ascella's skirt. *Maybe, she's how I'll be when I'm older*, she thought. Ascella seemed *excited* to be alive, to touch things, and Sheesa wanted to hear anything she would have to say.

"Doesn't that boy know how to rest?" Ascella sighed.

From up on the hill, Sheesa looked and saw Anko leaning over the fire.

They trotted down the path and through the back door, taking off their shoes in the little space behind the kitchen. Instead of joining Gwyn and Anko, they went right into the back room Ascella had been working in earlier. "Come, come," she said, as she beckoned Sheesa through the sliding doors.

The smell of smoke and the mash of herbal scents set Sheesa at ease, it reminded her of home. A low fire crackled beneath a large cauldron in the center of the room. It gave off just enough dim light for Sheesa to see. Ascella moved around the edge of the room, picking up sealed jars and flipping them on their heads. Sheesa saw each jar of silt and thick ooze began producing a white gleam, and came to light.

Ascella said to her, "Do you know how to break that down? You can use the rolling pestle over there."

"Sure thing." Sheesa knew sweetcane was to be crushed to release the juice, so she set to work.

The ceiling had a circular design painted in blue against yellow. The four corners of the room had a cabinet facing the center, giving the impression the room was circular. The contents of the cabinets were in disarray, much like in the other room, but Ascella flew between one and another picking out jars with intention. Ascella placed them all on a high bench and began combining the contents, measuring by eye. Behind the bench hung a wall length mirror, speckled with dark spots, where Sheesa watched Ascella's eyes focus as she portioned each ingredient.

"Ascella," Sheesa said over her grinding, "I wonder if I could ask you just one more question?"

She finished tapping out powder from a little spatula. "Ask away, I'm not keeping track."

Sheesa began to retell the events of the previous day, "When we were gathering the flowers, the ones that got Gwyn hurt, something happened I couldn't explain. I had cut the flower earlier that day, nothing out of the ordinary happened, but when it was cut under the light of the full moon, it started to... *leak* this *goo*, and at the same moment, it started to rain without a cloud in the sky. Sri called it a Ritual Ingredient, do you know what that is?"

"Mmm." Ascella pondered.

For a while, the only sound was Sheesa working the long plant into a paste. "Is this done?" Sheesa asked, quietly.

"Give it some more," Ascella said with a wave.

After another long pause, Ascella spoke. “There’s something different about a meal prepared by a lover,” she said, matter-of-factly.

This caught Sheesa off guard, but she remained quiet.

“There’s a magic in an anniversary, it’s undeniable. But just as those things may bring comfort or joy, a flower cut under some circumstance might bring out the worst in it.” She paused, looking at Sheesa to see if she was following. “In my time, I regret to say that most things that stick around in this world are neither sweet nor kind. The past *haunts* the present.” Ascella gazed through Sheesa, eyes unfocused. “It’s easy to forget a good day, I guess,” she concluded, and shrugged.

Ascella had spoken with sorrowful wisdom. She looked at the sweetcane, and said “That’ll do,” and took the trough and filtered the juice into the jar she had prepared. Sealing it, she shook it vigorously, then handed it to Sheesa.

“Your Stasis potion,” Ascella looked satisfied.

Sheesa wasn’t sure what she’d put in it, her own recipe had been fairly simple, but Ascella had added at least six or seven ingredients. It also occurred to her, that she had missed what Ascella had done with the caterpillars.

“Best to get it onto the flowers as soon as you can, you know...” Ascella said. “How about you go give it to Sri? I’d like to have both of these two alone for a moment if you don’t mind.” Ascella winked.

Sheesa had plenty to think about. She wished she could press Ascella for more, but decided to think on what she had told her. “I can do that,” she resigned.

“Good. When you return, we’ll start working on something *really* fun. Take a light. Don’t wander too long, or Anko will get it in his mind to come find you. Oh, and tell Sri there’s supper here, and that she’s always welcome!”

Sheesa was shuffled out into the front room with the potion.

As she left, she heard Anko behind her speaking to Ascella, “I used the rest of the Bazhra, I hope that’s okay-”

Sheesa took the heavy lantern hung by the door and walked towards the trail they had taken that morning. She walked straight through town on the packed earth road. Sheesa wanted to see the village properly, but in the dark she couldn’t catch the houses in all the color she had seen earlier. She found one she liked, with peach-pink walls and dark blue curtains and painted veranda. Another she saw was two or three storeys, painted burnt red with a tile roof, and every window she could see was circular.

She hadn’t begun to think about what Ascella had said about the Ritual Ingredient. She still didn’t feel like she understood, it all sounded so personal, so *sentimental*.

She walked past a loud, open street with hanging lights dangling from archways. Sheesa saw people sharing meals on long tables, the smoke rising from a few busy shopfronts, children shrieking and playing wildly. Above the lights, Sheesa caught glimpses of bats, diving like

falling black cloth, spinning around one another in the air. The main road was quiet, Sheesa took her time. The smell of meat and seafood, sweet fruits cooking over fire, and wood smoke lingered all the way to the forest edge.

Bugs whirled around the lamp in front of her. Sheesa wandered through the woods, the trail turned and turned. Night croaks and buzzes went off above her, but Sheesa was calm. She was imagining the world full of the sort of things Ascella had described.

How many magical places could there be in the world, Sheesa wondered. Based on what Ascella said, they would be everywhere. For every significant event, every *anniversary* or legend, there would be some *artifact*.

Sheesa wondered how Momiji had known to send them to the sea stack, The Columns of Mertine. She wondered with dread what the ritual could have to do with the original event. It felt strange to dig up that old ritual, she thought, like picking at a scar. She decided to ask Momiji to tell her the legend, she wanted to hear the origin.

Sheesa noticed she was stepping in a rhythm, and realized it was the cave song playing in her head. She mused about how the hearing potion worked, but couldn't muster a guess. She didn't know what was possible. She had just enough of a taste to dream about it, to think of hearing an ancient thing speak, like a tree or a whale, or even, she imagined, hearing the *Old Herbalist's* voice.

She emerged from the forest onto the blue moonlit beach. The waves crashed. The ocean was ink black, only rippling to reflect the low moon. Sheesa couldn't see where the horizon met the sky, it was one great, dark curtain.

She left the lamp burning at the trailhead, and walked along the shore. Around a bend she saw the boat anchored, and as she approached, she saw someone sitting just above the running spill of the waves.

It was Sri. She was just sitting there, elbows slung over her knees, looking out at the dark sea. Sheesa didn't care what kept Sri from home. Sheesa *liked* Zumpango, she liked Ascella. Not to assume Sri didn't have her reasons, but Sheesa was enjoying herself, and it seemed to her that Sri was determined not to.

Sheesa figured Sri could hear the hissing squish of sand as she walked up. She turned, alert.

"Hi Sri," Sheesa said softly.

Turning back to the sea, she relaxed. "Gara likes to get out," Sri said. "Can't imagine being cooped up on the boat all the time. She's always giddy to get on land when we dock," Sri paused, looking down the beach. "She always comes back."

Sheesa saw a little figure down the shore in a sneaking hunch, hunting little ghost crabs or moon bathing lizards.

"I've got the Stasis, for the flowers," Sheesa said, swishing the bottle.

"Oh, the tides up. I'll take care of it when I go back to the boat. Do I just dump it in the water?"

“That’s fine.” Sheesa moved to leave, but Sri stopped her.

“Hey, I was wondering if you could give me some advice.” Her tone had gone soft, “I’ve been having trouble getting this plant to bloom.”

Sheesa couldn’t believe what she was hearing, she pictured Sri in a secret garden in the woods.

“It grows like a weed, it’s sprawling all over, but it won’t grow any flowers. I’m not sure if more light, or water, or if it’s the soil...” She trailed off. She spun the fat ring she wore on her index finger around with her thumb.

It wasn’t enough to go on, Sheesa needed to know the species, “Do you know what it’s called?”

Sri hesitated. She rubbed her eye. “It’s called Jorum.”

Jorum. The name was oddly short, definitely not something Sheesa had heard of, she would’ve remembered. “If you could tell me the Family perhaps?”

“Well, I’m not sure about that, but it’s a pitcher plant.”

“Oh!” Sheesa knew some about carnivorous plants, most lived in swampy areas where they could snatch meals of gnats and flies. There were some larger varieties that lived in tropical areas, *maybe like Zumpango*, Sheesa realized, that would open high in the canopy and ensnare birds.

“One thing I can say for sure is that it’ll want as much water as you can give it. They’re native to bogs I think,” Sheesa offered. It was funny to her that Sri had this plant she was nurturing, go figure it was carnivorous.

“Oh good,” Sri said.

“Any extra nutrients are going to help it along. You could even feed it a dead cricket if it has any mouths open.”

Sri nodded, then looked up to Sheesa from her spot on the sand. “Thanks.”

Sheesa melted a little. “Okay,” Sheesa said, containing her accomplishment. “Well, I think everyone will be sleeping at Ascella’s house tonight, not sure about Kirin though. Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow.” She placed the bottle of Stasis down beside her in the sand.

“Oh, and she told me to tell you that there’s always a place for you there, as well as dinner.”

Sri smiled, “Goodnight Sheesa.”

Sheesa thought of the stories Ascella had told about them as she walked back to the lantern. She imagined her and Anko as raucous children. As she traced through the forest, Sheesa thought of Sri’s garden of thick skinned, carnivorous plants. She imagined a garden for all of them, *what would be in Anko’s garden, or Gwyn’s?* She thought of plants and flowers for their personalities, plenty of herbs for Anko, maybe something basic for Gwyn like Tulips, or a Moon Lily so it blooms at night....

When Sheesa arrived back at Ascella's, she found Anko alone, laying on the long couch under a rough purple blanket. Sheesa couldn't tell if Anko had been sleeping before she came in, his eyes were strained and red.

She didn't want to bother him, but when he saw she had returned, he waved her in, "Sheesa, come here."

She went in to the big room quietly, and sat down by the fire.

Anko said, in a low tone, "I should've warned you, but Nana's food, it's got other things slipped in."

Sheesa nodded, and smiled to him. She had already figured that out herself.

Anko inhaled, rolling his eyes up, then sighed. "Well, then a word of caution, I suppose. The food's great when you're eating it. It's got every beneficial ingredient and brew you can list, but as soon as you're *not* eating it, you'll have a headache and cramps and snot running like you wouldn't believe."

He laid back down on the couch, looking at the ceiling. "When I first left, I thought it was my head trying to drag me back home, like I belonged here."

Withdrawal, Sheesa thought. Sheesa pictured Ascella living this way forever, it didn't sound so awful as long as you could keep it up, but something about living that way didn't seem right to her. She heard The Gardener speaking in her head, lecturing about taking too much from the ground, talking about balance, sustainability, but nothing seemed to persuade her. Sheesa couldn't convince herself it was wrong, it seemed like the benefits outweighed the risks.

"Anko," Sheesa said. "What's in the stuff Sri drinks every night?"

He glanced at her, then back at the ceiling, his lids low. "It's mostly liquor, but that's just washing down the *Dream Slug*." His eyes drooped closed, "It's a potion that muddles your dreams, but dreams are important. You can't just ignore stuff like this- trying not to look at it just makes it worse. You can try to block it out, or mix it up, all you're doing is making a knot. A big nest for it to live in." Anko's eyes moved behind his lids, he breathed a deep breath.

Sheesa wasn't sure if he was asleep. *Is he delirious?* she wondered, she hadn't heard Anko talk so freely before. It was interesting, Sri wasn't just hiding from Sheesa, she was hiding from everybody.

She saw the blanket over him rise and fall. She stood to leave, and whispered *goodnight*, as she went.

The hall was dark, the white light showed behind the sliding doors to the Potion Room. Sheesa padded over to it, feet bare, and knocked.

Ascella laughed, "Come in, Sheesa."

Ascella had pulled out a dozen jars, tins, pouches, the work bench was crowded with them. Sheesa even saw a loose egg rolling on the table. "It has been *too long*, since I've had someone to brew with!" She handed Sheesa a glass of orange liquid.

"That's Insomnia." Ascella said, drinking her own. "We'll be up late, I know I need the pick-me-up, I'm sure you do too."

“So this potion going to keep me awake?”

“That’s the idea. The hunger can be terrible though, so we’ll stop to eat a snack in a few hours.”

Sheesa was happy to drink it. She knew people needed sleep, and that no one should go for more than a day or two without it, but this was a special occasion. She didn’t know how long they’d be in Zumpango, and she wanted to spend as much time with Ascella as she could. She drained it, and set the glass down. It *was* Yuzu flavored, Sheesa realized, laughing to herself, as the lemony acid taste stuck to the back of her mouth.

“Alright, let’s begin,” Ascella said, putting her hands out over the jars and receptacles. “The potion we’re going to craft is named *Ear*. Ear is a base that you can flavor with any sort of *spirit* or *essence* to tune your ear to a new voice. Let’s start with this...”

Ascella picked up a jar with large chunks floating in a thick solution. “This, you may have met before. It is called, Modi, but also sometimes known as Cochlinkara.” Seeing Sheesa did not recognize the name, she explained, “It tunes the sense of hearing. It is used in potions of dampening, deafening, Shout, and others. It grows on the foggy western shores of Sinaloa and Athebyne.” She popped open the jar and fished out a chunk with her finger.

Handing the slimy root to Sheesa, Ascella said, “Grate it,” and Sheesa did. They added the shavings to a small pot set to boil on the counter.

When this was done, Ascella picked up a flat folder and began unwinding the string binding. “Next, we have the first *key ingredient*, a feather, from a valley near the great city Izar. It’s a common species, nevertheless, beautiful.”

Ascella picked a feather out of the envelope and held it out to Sheesa. It was marbled, moss-green with blue and red spots, undeniably beautiful.

“It’s a Painted Waxwing feather. These ones are all from a very special place, where the birds have a magic history.” Taking out a feather of her own, Ascella said, “It is said that, long ago, a traveling singer sang as they walked through a particular glade of the valley. Upon hearing the song, the Waxwings there mimicked it. This is not *so* uncommon among birds, but the singer found that the birds would repeat the lines, and so the singer could sing with them, harmonizing and improvising. It is said that the singer returned to the valley again and again, and that they built a home within the wood where they sang to the Waxwings all their long life.”

Smiling at Sheesa, Ascella took back the feather and placed two more on the table. “They’re called, Bix’s Waxwing. The way you know if you’ve walked up on one is by their call. Bix’s Waxwings call when they see you. The beginning of a song, some think. A greeting Bix would’ve responded to maybe. Pity, that it’s their death sentence. I can’t imagine the feathers are taken from the bird while it’s alive, but who knows.”

A pang echoed in Sheesa’s chest. The story seemed simple and sweet at first. Ascella always made sure to include the sad parts, Sheesa decided. It bothered her, however to think that Ascella had bought the feathers if she cared enough to feel bad about the birds. This potion seemed like a *toy* to Sheesa, it didn’t seem like it had any real use, *why kill the birds for it?*

Regardless, Sheesa felt like she needed to see the potion work. She needed to understand, then she would decide how she felt.

“Do we crush the feathers, or add them whole?” Sheesa asked.

“Whole works. Peek into the pot while you add them, you can see the arcana *take hold*.”

Sheesa picked up one of the feathers and dropped it over the murmuring water. The feather twisted and fell on the surface, and dissolved as a swirl of color turned the slightly yellow water into a vibrant green. She took the other two and added them: the color darkened, the liquid was opaque.

“Excellent,” Ascella whispered, her nose over the pot. “Last major ingredient,” she said, taking a vial of powder. “So, this is the powder of a seashell from the southernmost isle, Riparia. The creature that lives in the shell is unknown, but these shells sometimes wash up whole on the beach. They’re shaped like a cone, a little smaller than your head. They’re called Ines’ Voice. The legend says, long ago, a child was born to a family in Riparia. As the baby grew, the family found that the child could not hear. The baby became a child, as they tend to. One day, on the beach, the mother saw her child pick up a shell, and put it to their ear. The child called to their mother, shouting that they could hear a sound in the shell. By the time the mother made it over to the child, they were pointing to the sea. They could hear the sound of the ocean waves breaking.”

“This town had a wise woman- thankfully- and so the family took the child to her, along with the shell. The wise woman listened to the shell and heard the ocean sound. She was cunning, as most of us are, and had the thought to speak into the shell, and listen. Beckoning the child, she spoke into the shell and held it to their ear. The child heard the word which she had spoken, and could hear her voice. Hence the name, Ines’ Voice.”

Sheesa could see the potion in her head: an arcane ingredient for hearing a song, an arcane ingredient for *creating* hearing where there was none.

“Does every voice you hear with *Ear* sound like a song?” Sheesa asked.

Ascella smiled at her, “You’re on to something. Yes, why do you think that is?”

“Bix’s Waxwing. It makes sense that it’d help with hearing another species, like bird to human, but the legend only ever mentioned songs.” Sheesa was just thinking out loud.

“Wonderful.” Ascella clasped her hands.

“It struck me as strange,” Sheesa said, smiling, “that the caterpillars in the cave would have been *singing*.”

“Oh, yes,” Ascella admitted. “Well, I like to think there’s a song to hear in most voices.”

Ascella leaned in to add the vial of *Ines’ Voice* into the pot. “For this one,” she warned, “you’ll want to stand back. It gives off a foul plume.”

“It’s a powder?” Sheesa questioned. “In the fable, the shell had echoed, and that’s what made the child hear, correct?”

“Yes, but it is no ordinary shell. There is something about the way the shell *holds* the sound. That is a part of it *not* its shape.”

Sheesa held her breath, and watched Ascella gracefully add the powder and stir it into the green gurgling liquid. The white powder sat on top, clumping and floating in little islands until it dissolved, and turned the green potion a lighter shade. Adding the last ingredient changed the consistency. The potion went from a liquid to a thick stew sort of appearance, the bubbles that formed burst in a low toned *pop*.

“There, we have our base,” Ascella said. She opened a drawer and pulled out a crooked ladle, grabbing two jars, she dribbled a bit of the potion in each. “So, now we add our *spirit*.” Ascella reached for a small brown speckled egg sitting on the counter. “This is an egg from the Perdita nest in the neighbor’s rafters. I know a bird egg will work, so I’ll make this batch of *Perdita’s Ear* for us to try.” She dropped the egg into the jar whole, then twisted on the lid and beat it back and forth vigorously.

On the first shake, Sheesa could hear the egg knock against the glass jar, but by the third all that she heard was the potion sloshing around.

“The egg shell makes a big difference,” Ascella said, breathing a little heavily as she placed the foaming jar back on the bench. “We’ll let that sit, but while we do, have you thought about what *you’d* like to have an Ear to? You mentioned the wind, I’m open to giving a wild guess a whirl if you can imagine a way to add it’s spirit. You can see why bugs and tiny creatures are easy choices.... You can add them whole,” she said laughing.

The wind. Sheesa cleared her mind and pictured it. She could smell it clearly: on the boat before sunrise, up on the sea stack whipping through her short hair, but that wasn’t something you could bottle. She pictured holding something that smelled the way the breeze smelled. Sheesa sifted through old memories, senses, textures, leaves moving in the wind, clouds crossing the sky.

She saw her blanket, the blanket she had on top of her sheets her whole life, a tight woven gray and black blanket with a big embroidered circle, one side a moon, one side a sun. It was hanging on the drying line, in bright light. She brought it to herself, pulling it in fists to her face. It was soft, cold, but she was warming it in her hands. It smelled like the air.

“The only thing I can picture,” she said, opening her eyes, “is hung laundry. Like a blanket that’s soaked up the smell of the breeze on the clothesline.”

Ascella looked up at the roof, and back at Sheesa, “I’ve got clothes hung upstairs?”

Sheesa felt a little silly as they climbed the stairs at the back of the house. She felt like Ascella was entertaining Sheesa’s idea without being critical. Sheesa figured she’d be more likely to hear the sheep or alpaca or whatever wool the thing was made of rather than the breeze, but she wasn’t going to say anything. She still hoped it would work, somehow.

As they mounted the roof, Sheesa saw the town had gone to sleep. From here she could see the street she had walked past earlier that night, now unlit. She could see the cove below them, the forest on all sides, and the bright moon above in the hazy warm night.

Sheesa and Ascella walked across the roof to the line. There hung a few loose shirts similar to the ones Ascella was wearing, some ragged cloth strips, and a long embroidered cloth that could be tied like a skirt or shall perhaps.

“These, I think, might work,” Ascella said, taking the tiny cloth in her hand and inhaling. “What do you think?”

Sheesa took the brown, coarse cloth. She smelled it, and didn’t smell anything at all. She breathed through it, heavily, sucking it to her nose, but there wasn’t a scent. Sheesa stood up straight and inhaled the air around her. There was a breeze, and a distinct smell in the air, it just hadn’t latched on to the cloth.

“I don’t think this will work, Ascella,” Sheesa said, handing her back the rag.

“Well, how about this?” She motioned to the nice cloth on the end.

“Oh, no, please don’t.” Sheesa begged, but Ascella had already pulled it off the line. “It’s beautiful Ascella I don’t want to ruin it.”

“Hush, child. The man who gave me this has been dead for thirty years. I use it in the washroom, think nothing of it.” She gently inhaled the cloth. “I think this will work,” Ascella said, surprised. “I can smell the Fräsera blooms!”

Sheesa had chills, but accepted the cloth as Ascella pushed it on her. She took the cloth in her hands just like in her daydream. It was soft, and rolled over her knuckles, catching ever so slightly on her nails. It was thin, but sturdy. She brought it to her nose, and smelled the air through it, just like she remembered.

“How exciting!” Ascella said, almost skipping down the steps back into the house.

Sheesa lingered, the cloth balled up around her hand, and looked at quiet Zumpango. She could see the neighbor’s house, their clothes hung up. A tiny shirt next to wide, billowing trousers. She glanced at the forest behind Ascella’s house and saw a high branch move. A dog barked three times.

Ascella ripped a stripe from the cloth ruthlessly.

Sheesa watched as she took the ribbon and mushed it into the jar with the base.

“It’s incorporating! That’s a good sign,” Ascella said, beaming.

Sheesa wasn’t so sure. The Perdita potion they had prepared had settled into a nice, beige brown color, like the eggshell. The potion with the cloth strip, however, was slowly changing from the original greenish to a red-brown clay color. Ascella mixed and spun the cloth around in the tiny jar with the back end of the ladle, it sloshed and squelched. It looked like a mess.

“Alright,” Ascella said, “this seems good enough.” She sealed the Ear and slid both jars back on the bench. “I’m famished. I know it’s still early, but maybe we can just whip up a snack.”

“That sounds nice,” Sheesa agreed. If she couldn’t take the potion now, she wanted to be busy with something else.

Sheesa could hear Anko snore in the big room as they passed through the hall. She followed Ascella's light as they crept into the kitchen at the rear of the house. She watched the shadow stretch from a mask almost like Gwyn's hung on the wall.

Ascella set the candle to burn on the counter, she brought out a bowl, three twisted blue-carrots, and a bundle of crisp celery-sort of vegetables. She chopped it all in three short *whacks*, then gathered it and placed it on a smooth, wooden tray. Next, she took out a bowl of beans soaking. "*Kiku beans*" she whispered to Sheesa, smiling. She scooped them out and mashed them, placing the mash beside the chopped vegetables.

Ascella had the same expertise with cooking that she did with potions, Sheesa realized. She spun about in the same way, the same swift strokes, even the same presentation. It made sense that she'd mix the two practices in such a care-free way.

"Let's lounge, I can't digest while standing." Ascella handed the platter to Sheesa as she grabbed the candle and led the way back into the potion room.

Ascella put out the candle and dragged two stools to the bench. She took the plate from Sheesa, "If you don't mind."

To Sheesa's surprise, Ascella lifted the lid to the massive cauldron in the center of the room. Sheesa leaned in to see the contents, it was a black gurgling mass. It was thick, some places were liquidy, some silty, chunks and oily parts, every texture Sheesa had seen. Her jaw dropped open, *is this a potion?*

Ascella took a fistful of the food they'd prepared and scraped a heap of the mash into the pot, then threw in the handful. She glanced at Sheesa and snickered. "I do this so often, I forget it must seem strange." She took a carrot, dipped it, and ate it.

Sheesa tried the mash, it was salty, like the beans had been soaking in a broth.

"Thank you for entertaining my storytelling, Sheesa. This has been a very nice time, it reminds me of brewing with my Nana. She showed me Ear when I was younger than you."

Ascella looked at the low embers spitting below the cauldron. "Every potion has its cost. It's all about what it's worth to you though. For all my sweet Nana taught me, I've been taught many times over from the world itself. I've listened to what eons of nature have to say and learned incredible things..."

Sheesa knew that well. The Gardener had instilled that in her. She thought of Expedient Growth, and the toll it took on the soil, but for these potions, the *ingredients* were the cost. Harvesting them put a toll on nature.

"Years ago, when I first had access to such things, I took a very famous potion called *Truth*. I've never made it myself, I understand it's quite complex. It has many arcane ingredients and extensive reducing and steeping, so it takes time to make, but it induces a very unique effect. When one takes it, things are presented to you that you can no longer avoid. It can be frightening, to be confronted in that way, but if you submit, and face your conflict, you may just discover something *more*... I had a vision. I saw *this potion*," Ascella said, motioning to the

large pot in the center of the room. “The ingredient list was so long I couldn’t write it, but I knew it. It was especially mine.”

Ascella pointed with a bite of carrot while she spoke, “And every ingredient was from Zumpango, I could see them all, growing in one place or another on this island. I think, maybe, it’s nature’s way of telling me where I’m supposed to be.”

Sheesa had eaten more than half already and was restraining herself.

“That was fifty years ago.” Ascella said nonchalantly, chewing.

Sheesa’s brow furrowed. Ascella had some gray hairs, but didn’t look like she could have any stories from *fifty years ago*. At best that timeline would place her in her late sixties. *Maybe she has naturally long life?* She didn’t know her heritage, she could have some Giant ancestry.

“When I first made the potion, after I returned to my family’s home, after sold my shop, I realized what I had discovered. It was a potion called *Diadem*: an ancient arcane myth. A potion you feed, a potion which shares your every meal, which you drink once a day to stay the ceaseless turn of age.”

Sheesa recalled the look of the potion. She imagined it like a stomach, churning and digesting in there.

“I celebrated my one hundred and ninth birthday this year.” Ascella smiled at Sheesa, her eyes almost tempting her. As if for affect, a fit of coughing gripped Ascella. She patted her chest, eyes watering. She laughed to herself, “My voice is going! I must’ve been lecturing all this time.”

“Ascella,” Sheesa asked, “will you live forever? If you keep drinking the Diadem?”

“No, surely not. Death finds us all. I can feel it in my bones. I don’t think humans were meant to live as long as I have. I’ll stop drinking my potion someday, but for now I’ve still got so much to learn.”

Sheesa felt strange, maybe it was the night winding on, she felt like time was passing strangely. She was fourteen, Ascella was almost a hundred years older than her, and The Gardener was twice her age. How much older was the ruin in the valley, or the curse on the sea stack? It was all the same *old* to her, it was past.

“Sheesa,” Ascella said warmly, “why don’t you try drinking the Wind Ear you made. It’s steeped now, if you drink that whole batch it should come on *quite strong*.”

Sheesa nodded, she didn’t feel like talking anymore. She looked over at the jar on the bench, “It looks pretty disgusting, doesn’t it,” Sheesa grinned. Pulling it to herself, she spun the jar in her hands. There was no sign of the cloth they’d added, the potion was dark red, like fired clay. She went to remove the lid and Ascella stopped her, with a hand on her hand.

“Drink it on the roof, with the breeze.”

Chapter 10. Wind Song

Sheesa was alone in the timeless night. Weariless, she stepped from the back door to the clay stairway, one bare foot at a time. She held the potion jar in her right hand, her palm sweat slick against the glass. The outside air was just colder than her skin. The branches of the trees high above her moved in slow sweeping waves.

Sheesa sat down and crossed her legs. She took a big breath in and out, she wiggled her toes and rolled her head in circles on her shoulders. She faced the direction of the moving wind, and popped the jar open with a *thunk*. The smell of wet soil reached her nose. Sheesa brought it to her lips and drank as much as she could fit in a gulp. She tried to let it roll past her tongue, potions rarely tasted *appetizing*, but as the flavor settled in her mouth she found it complex, but not all that bad. It was burnt-buttery, almost like the smell of broth dripping into the fire. She finished the potion and placed the jar out of the way.

Sheesa's eyes were closed. She was listening for anything, the tiniest murmur. If the potion worked at all, she assumed it would take effect as soon as she drank it.

The wind's whistle had a tone, a far off moan, up on the mountain maybe. Sheesa cocked her head, but didn't catch a word. She tried to sit as still as she could. She shifted and heard pebbles grinding against the roof. The wind was off somewhere else, Sheesa was listening to the still air. The house below her was totally quiet, Zumpango was totally quiet.

The air filled her nose with the same tickling sweetness she had smelled all day. She loved the air here, Sheesa wanted to breathe in as much as she could. She had come to love it, and the thought of leaving in the morning felt *hard*. She could hear Ascella speaking in her head: the way she would speed through a few words then hang on one, dragging it out. She could hear the way Ascella's pitch changed, dipping and rising in the sentences of the stories she told her. But that was all in her head, and she knew it. From the wind, she heard nothing.

Sheesa imagined *having* Ascella, being raised near her. She thought of how much *fun* it would have been, to let loose here with other children, to play on the mountain and learn about ancient and elaborate potions. She knew it was silly, but Sheesa felt like she would've cherished Ascella more than Gwyn or Sri.

Her face felt hot. The Gardener had given her a home, Sheesa felt selfish to want more. *Maybe everyone feels this way, maybe that's why I'm here now. I want more.*

Behind her closed eyes, she started to see little bending shapes appear, like before sleep. They were almost dreams. She saw a figure walking ahead of her, like Ascella had earlier that day, then the figure was Ascella. They were in a different kind of woods, it wasn't mountainous like Zumpango, it looked like home. The path appeared in front of them. As they entered an open glade, Ascella motioned to a tree above them. Sheesa looked up and saw a wide old tree, with

titan branches arching bowl-like to the air above them. Ascella pointed to a section of new growth.

Sheesa rose through the branches in her dream and saw the fresh sprigs closely.

There were three branches. Two of the branches wound around the base of the third, Sheesa watched them coil, twisting tighter. The strangled branch wavered, and fell, pinched off by the other two.

Sheesa opened her eyes.

She had been leaning on her left side, her back twinged. If someone had asked her, she might have said she fell asleep, but it didn't matter. She was here to listen and hadn't heard anything.

She had tried, she'd kept an open mind, but the potion wasn't working. It was nice to sit alone like this, Sheesa felt like she needed silence. There was time alone, then there was everything else. This, she felt, was where her good ideas came from. The dream, however, didn't feel like it was *her's*, it appeared in front of her, but Sheesa couldn't deny, it sounded like a magic ingredient. Her head was spinning with legends, she'd been listening to them all night. She was already seeing the world differently, in place of an ancient abandoned shrine there was a forgotten story.

And maybe, Sheesa's thoughts cracked like a whip, instead of an old poisoned wood, there was lore to be found, a curse to be un-done.

She wouldn't have ever thought that power was within grasp. When Sheesa thought of the limits of an *Herbalist's* power, it seemed to be *local*. An Herbalist could grow a garden, or a grove, but to change a forest, to alter the landscape took years, there was no short-cut, everything was still just a potion or a powder.

Sheesa realized she could do more than work in the *earth*, she could bring rains. Now that she knew more about the nature of magic, it seemed possible to purify the place. She found her thoughts coming back to Yain again and again. She still had no idea how to do it, but the idea took root inside her. It had been that way for ages, a broken thing, still broken and harmful.

Sheesa wanted to see what Ascella had to say. She got up, and stretched straight, high on her tip-toes, arms up above her.

Sheesa's feet pittered down the steps and through the back door. The house was dark. She swept the pebbles and dust off her soles, then snuck through the house looking for Ascella.

The lights in the potion room had dimmed, the fire in the big room was red and lazy. Ascella wasn't home.

False started, Sheesa stood in the hallway. She tried to think of her plan to cleanse the forest, she'd plan out what to say to Ascella. She started describing Yain in her head, but she didn't know anything about it.

Sheesa decided to go back to the roof. Her thoughts had been on her side there.

The night was just like she left it. She sat down, but her knees weren't happy to be back in their cramped position. Sheesa relaxed, but she could tell the mood was gone. She didn't want

to think about the plan, she'd gone as far as she could on her own and she knew it. She needed to talk to someone, she needed to do research, she needed to go back to Yain, and none of that was something she could do *now*.

Right now, she was stuck awake, she couldn't go to sleep if she tried. Sheesa uncurled onto her back and looked up at the sky. The stars were everywhere in the sky. She thought of her garden, wondered how the Spoonwood bush looked, if it still had some blooms left. This time of year the Mimosa trees were still flowering, she could perfectly imagine the smell, sweet like perfectly ripe fruit.

After a while, Sheesa heard a door open down below, she turned over to look at the stairs.

Ascella's hair was weighed down, wet. "How are you, Sheesa? Did your little experiment work?"

Sheesa had let go of the Wind Ear a long time ago, "Oh, it didn't work. I didn't hear anything."

Ascella nodded, knowingly.

"But, Ascella," Sheesa started, sitting up, "I had an idea, I was wondering if you know anything about a curse that could poison a whole forest? I passed through a forest, a place named Yain, and I realized that maybe there's a legend behind it like the ones you told me."

Ascella leaned back, "Ah, that sounds very exciting."

Sheesa couldn't tell if she understood. "What if I could help?"

"You've been up here in the quiet all night, did you come up with this just now?" Ascella smiled, "You see what I mean, then, the world is an incredible tutor."

Sheesa wanted to take credit for her idea. She felt defensive for a moment, then remembered the feeling she had earlier. She couldn't really say the idea was hers.

"I'm happy you had a world-idea, whether our Ear worked or not. It's a grand task, I've heard plenty of people say similar things, *big plans*. I wish you the best, I don't practice arcana because of other people or things. I think you're young and kind. Me, I had a calling to the water, I went for a swim and it was lovely."

Sheesa smiled at Ascella. It sounded nice. She was enjoying her time alone, "Where do you swim?"

Ascella continued, her eyes sweet and playful, "If you go *that way*," she pointed the same way Sheesa had walked earlier, "you walk past the market street. Turn and walk until you reach the end of the road. There's a path to the left that leads down to the water."

Sheesa walked in the dark. The loose dirt on the market street was stirred up with footprints from bare feet, boot soles, hooves, and paws. Sheesa stepped up onto the long bench attached to the tables lining the center of the road. The wood was smooth like a stone washed by the river. Between benches, Sheesa leapt down into the chilly dirt, then back up onto the next bench. She felt light on her feet like a tiny hopping bird.

The road ended at the forest edge. Here, there were houses like Ascella's along the street, little alleys, and wooden chairs and tables out front. The last house on the road stood a few steps separate from the rest, abandoned, with the roof caved in. The open door showed the roof-rubble inside the main room.

Sheesa saw bunches of greenery springing from a window box, untended. It was Pixie Phlox. They were not yet blooming, the petals sat in wait, little spirals like twisting sea shells.

Beside the house there was a hand painted sign, *ISLAZUL*. The path through the forest was short, a steep descent. The trees were thin and wild. Beside her, up on the hill, she could see a plant had taken over the entire bank. Thin tangling leaves jittered around in the breeze, she didn't need to see it to identify it, the aroma was powerful: a cooking herb called *Corona*. This patch had probably been growing un-stunted for years. As Sheesa walked by, the smell snuck up into her brain and held her.

The path bottomed out onto the beach. The sand was cool like the dirt. The moonlight cast weak shadows from the treeline in front of her.

Sheesa walked right to the water, it was so much warmer than she expected. She stripped out of her overcoat and pants to her shorts and undershirt. She walked out into the calm sea. When she put her head under, the world went away. The water went in her ears and all she heard was a vacuous inhale. Little crackles in each eardrum sounded off. She rose out of the water and the white noise canceled with a gentle *plop* as the sea drained off her. She fell backwards into the water's arms, kicked her legs up and floated.

The Gardener would be excited to talk about Yain, she thought. She was excited to see them again. She felt like she'd stored up enough to talk about for days on end. Sheesa pictured them both sitting at the fireplace chatting vigorously about a topic night after night.

That's a fantasy, she thought to herself. The cottage was quiet most nights. Sometimes they talked seriously, but it wasn't like it had been with Ascella. It wasn't electric. But, Sheesa knew they could help her. The Gardener always had answers, or at least insight.

While she laid, the sun began to rise. She watched invisible clouds appear and glow pink above her. The sky went from black to a midnight-blue, and as the light cranked up, the color looked more and more like the sky she knew. The birds announced it, the sun rose.

The Gardener's watering right now, I bet, Sheesa thought. She wondered if she would think that every sunrise. *Who knows, maybe they're out doing something.*

The Gardener left their garden on occasion. At least once a year, The Gardener would go to a bookseller in the town past Alumroot to read and purchase new tomes, as well as the parchment and notebooks they used, and the *fiction*, which the two of them read. They made this journey alone, leaving Sheesa time alone in the house.

The first time they went, Sheesa made one enormous batch of corn stew with chillies and beans and ate it for three days. It was her favorite meal at the time, and one of the few she knew how to make herself. *I must've been ten?*

She recalled the first night, when she stood before The Gardener's massive bookshelves scanning each title, letting her eyes linger without care, picking up a book, reading a page, putting it back. When she had looked at every book on the lower shelves, she brought in her stool and peeked at the top shelf. The books were pushed all the way against the back. She reached in and coaxed one out. The cover was black. The page edges were raven purple. The title page read *Azura's History of Sou Pal*, it was a series, she had pulled out a random volume. She remembered, it sounded dull to her then. *Makes sense to keep the boring books up out of the way*, she rationalized, but the more she thought about magic ingredients, the more she was forced to think about *History*. She wondered if that's what that book was really *for*. They had to know about arcane potions like Ear, they were ancient, and a talented potion maker. Sheesa got a nervous feeling, she wondered if they had kept it from her deliberately. It didn't matter, she supposed. *Maybe they only care for growing things*. The Gardener was a gardener after all, she couldn't hold it against them.

The morning breeze stuck to her wet skin, but it wasn't too chilly in the sunlight. She got out of the water and plopped down in the sand. The light was right in her face, she closed her eyes and faced the sun, soaking it in like a bath. She imagined saving up the light, her skin staying warm for days.

A sound behind her cracked through the sound of the water's gentle play. Sheesa heard voices and saw a group of people come out of the woods. They climbed down a rock face on the other end of the cove. Sheesa thought she recognized Kirin, there was another person about his height, and a smaller child with them. All three had scaled the rocks barefoot, each wore three of the same pairs of yellow shorts.

Sheesa raised her hand to them and waved.

"*Ha!*" Kirin's laugh came from across the quiet water. He said something to the two he was with, then ran her way along the line the waves left in the sand.

"Funny seeing you here," he called, bounding over, with a wide open smile.

"Hey, Kirin," Sheesa said back, grinning.

"How's everybody at the house?"

"I'm not sure really, I haven't talked to Gwyn. I've been up all night brewing with Ascella."

"Oh, really?" Kirin gawked, "I've never been in her potion room, she never let any of the kids in..."

"She's been friendly. I think we've got a lot in common, I can't even begin to thank her for what she's shown me."

"She likes you," Kirin admitted. "Well, Cor and I were going to go swimming at one of our old spots, you're welcome to come if you'd like. No pressure though, if you don't want to come, I'll see you for breakfast at Ascella's place. I'm sure she'll be making a banquet."

"Oh, I'd love to go," Sheesa agreed instantly.

She got up immediately, flinging sand from her loose hanging shirt and shorts. She was worried that when the *Insomnia* wore off she'd be too exhausted to do anything, but right now, all she felt was *excited*. The sun was up, the new blue sky was bright in her eyes, and she felt fresh.

Sheesa and Kirin jogged together at an easy pace. Around the bend, a rock rose out of the water above a secluded cove. The ocean water was calm, just barely rising and falling against the little cliff.

As they walked up, the younger kid leapt from the rock, and landed right on top of the other in the water below. They squealed together and tangled into the water.

Laughing, they both lumbered out of the water raining droplets.

Cor waved to Sheesa and Kirin. "I'm Cor, I use they-them," they said in a bubbly voice. "This is my brother Sui, he-him" they motioned to the little one rocking back and forth on their heels. He looked like he was six or so to Sheesa, he looked like the Alzirr family's six year old.

"Hi Sui," Sheesa said to the boy.

Sui smiled back at Sheesa, but looked down to say, "Hi," to the ground.

Sheesa stood up straight and said to both of them, "I'm Sheesa, she-her. I'm only visiting for today, I'm Kirin's friend."

Cor looked older than Kirin. Sheesa wondered if it was common for kids from Zumpango to leave home, or if most of them stayed there forever.

The four of them wandered up the side path behind the rock. Sheesa followed up behind the rest, she stood and watched Sui go, then Kirin. Before they jumped, Cor looked at Sheesa and asked, "Are you a smuggler?"

"No," Sheesa said plainly.

Cor raised their eyebrows like a shrug.

"I'm an Herbalist. I care for plants, and use them for potions."

They smiled. "I don't see the appeal in having a garden, it's too slow for me."

"You should see the things that grow in my garden," Sheesa said, haughtily. "You wouldn't believe the dangerous and beautiful stuff. Not to mention the potions for growing a plant overnight."

"Do you live a long ways away?"

"It's a pretty long way, I guess."

Cor breathed in, then turned and jumped over the water.

She decided Cor was easy to get along with.

It was Sheesa's turn to jump, and she did so without hesitation. From the high rock, she took two steps, curled her toes on the edge, and flung herself into the air. She fell for a long time, and when she hit the water, she sank down into the dark, chilly depths of the pool. Rising, she felt her lungs beg, until she hit air and gasped, smiling.

The four of them took turns jumping into the water. Sui was the most wild among them. He ran and flipped chaotically off the rock, whipping his gangly body around madly. Sheesa was happy just leaping into the water. Kirin and Cor tried to out-show each other, attempting the same tricks over and over. *Are they even having fun doing that*, Sheesa wondered, as they flopped frustratingly again and again. She cheered them on all the same, and when she tried a new trick, they cheered, even if she botched it. Sheesa felt like they were all there *together*.

After rounds of jumping, all four of them dried in the sun, breathing heavy.

There was a nest of roots at the edge of the water where Sheesa let her feet dangle in. When she was still for long enough, little fish came out from the tangle and inspected her toes. They were silvery, with a bright blue fin on their backs that dangled in the water like a flag. When Kirin let out a loud laugh, the little fish fled back into the root-nest, and Sheesa turned back to the rest of them.

Sheesa liked everything about Zumpango so far. The food she'd had, the plants she'd seen, the creatures in the trees, underground, and the *people*. There were so many people here, and they all felt real. Not like in Bay at Four Hills, here it felt like everyone was *alive*, moving around, like the fish in the root-nest, and the Xion Cric in the canopy.

Together, they walked back up into the village. Zumpango had come back to life, the empty chairs Sheesa had seen this morning were filled. Old couples talked over tea, dogs barked, long-legged goats chewed on weeds. Cor and Kirin walked side by side down market street laughing. Sheesa tried to read into the two of them, Kirin had said they had been friends when they were little. Together now, they played and had fun without a hitch.

Sheesa walked with Sui a little ways behind. Sometimes he was right beside her, but when he stopped to pet a dog tied out in front of a house, Sheesa lingered with him to kneel down with it too. The dog was little, up to Sheesa's knee, but when she leaned down with it, it licked at her mouth in a frenzy.

She looked up and saw an adult looking out at them through thin curtains, smiling. Sheesa smiled back and stood. They were far behind the other two, but they were in no rush.

Sheesa led the way to Ascella's. When they stepped in the front door, the house was quiet, but she heard Ascella's voice riding the breeze from out back.

"Let's try the back," Sheesa whispered as much to herself as Sui.

He followed her around the side alley. Behind the house, near the open kitchen door, Ascella had turned a few tables into a long buffet. The set of tables were covered with two tablecloths, one red and one yellow. The bright light made Sheesa squint. Ascella had placed colorful bowls and plates down, fluffy eggs with diced green onion, charred flatbread, kiwi-mango-parui fruit salad, another salad with corn and chopped greens, and some blackened goat meat with mint.

Ascella was going into the house as they rounded the corner, she smiled and waved at Sheesa as she glided into the kitchen. At the table Anko and Kirin sat next to one another, with

Cor across from Kirin. Sui went to sit by Cor. As Sheesa sat down, Ascella brought out a pitcher of reddish lemonade. She sat down with it at the head of the table.

Across from Anko a seat lay empty, *Gwyn, maybe*. Sheesa didn't know how she was doing, Ascella's cure was supposed to be the reason they came, but here they were eating a pleasant breakfast without her. It felt like days since Gwyn got hurt. All the shock had drained out of Sheesa long ago.

"Sheesa, can you spoon Sui some," Ascella called to Sheesa from the other end of the table.

Kirin was holding the bowl of fruits out to her. She took it, and dished some for the both of them. Sui smiled at her.

Sheesa smiled back.

The sun was high, the breeze was just strong enough to toss Sheesa's short hair. She ate, had another helping, and ate again. As she finished her lemonade, she heard a beautiful bright voice curl in the air. Sheesa was shocked at first, but understood almost instantly.

Light's up!
Lovely pretty,
Hello
Warm touch!

The bird song was intertwined with *churrr*'s and *breeep*'s. Sheesa liked the Perdita song, *Ascella must've put the potion in something at the table*.

Sheesa turned smiling to Ascella and saw Cor's eyes wide, gawking. Kirin and Ascella joined Sheesa in a laughing fit as they saw.

"What is it?" Anko said, all too plainly, as the other's giggled over the bird song ringing in their ears.

"Darling, did you try the lemonade, it's *enchanted*."

The laughter peaked a second time, Cor joining in.

"Jeeze, Nana, did you give them *Lunacy*?"

"*Accuser!*" Ascella heckled. "We're having *honest* fun Anko, why don't you give it a chance."

"Ahhg." Anko leaned back in his chair.

Ascella poured him some lemonade and he drank it.

The wind
It's wrapping me
so completely!

Anko cracked a smile, and looked down.

Ascella clapped a hard slap across his back and laughed.

“Ascella, should I leave some for Gwyn?” Kirin said.

“She’s already back on your boat, dear,” Ascella responded calmly.

Anko propped himself up on the chairs back legs. “Let’s all get packed and go.” Anko flopped back down with a thump and got up. He walked behind Ascella and hugged her like a blanket. “Love you, Nana.”

She patted his shoulder without seeing. “Sheesa, I’ve got a souvenir for you. I’ve packed you a little bag.”

Sheesa felt the glow for a moment. “I’m happy to have met you Cor, Sui.” She smiled at both of them.

“Next time we’ll show you the summit,” Cor said casually. Sui smiled a big-cheeked smile at her.

Sheesa smiled back and waved as Ascella guided her inside.

“You’re sweet on the little one?” Ascella asked coyly. “I love him too. I think he’s trans like the big one, not that I’m one to speculate. I love them both, the Ayumu family is always welcome here. They both strike me as *balanced*, you know? Do you have siblings at home?”

“Oh, no. It’s just me and my parent. They’re non-binary too, actually.”

“I’d love to meet the person who raised you to be so sweet and *wise*.” Ascella nodded as she said it, each word a fact.

Sheesa could feel herself blush. She followed Ascella into the big room where the two sat down.

Ascella continued, “Most of all, I liked seeing you laugh earlier. I like you very much, my Sheesa.”

“Here,” Ascella handed her an oblong canvas bag. “It’s got a few things I whipped together in it. Some ingredients I thought you might put to good use, and something I had a minute to sew this morning.”

Sheesa peered into the bag and saw the same cloth they had cannibalized last night. She pulled it out and set the bag down. Holding up the cloth, she could see it was a shirt cut to her size. The cloth in the front crossed in a bunch over the chest, and had open holes for the arms. The color of the fabric showed beautifully in the daylight.

“Something to remember me by, call me sentimental,” Ascella laughed.

“It’s like a magic ingredient,” Sheesa smiled back, a glitter of tears in her eyes.

Ascella smiled back, and looked up at the ceiling with her eyes closed. “I’d like to see you again someday Sheesa. Make the trip, if you can.”

“Until next time,” Ascella said, strongly from the doorstep. She gathered her skirt about her, her other hand waving back and forth vigorously.

Anko, Kirin, and Sheesa waved as they walked away, turned, and kept going. The day was hot, and the potion was beginning to wear off. Sheesa could feel it. She was blinking too

much, and the heat felt like it was dulling the world. She struggled to the shore and through the breakers, holding her bag above her head, walking towards *a bed*.

She unfurled her mat in the cabin, set her pack down, and passed out, saltwater-soaked.

“Sheesa, there’s food if you want,” Anko said quietly as he moved her shoulder.

Sheesa turned over. “I’ll come,” she said.

She felt used up. Her head was spinning and her eyes hurt, she couldn’t focus. Sheesa got up, and filed out of the cabin and onto the deck.

Before her she saw an assemblage of plates, bowls, and some lids on the deck. Each person had some fish (cooked this time), as well as the remainder of the salad from breakfast at Ascella’s. Everyone was already sitting down, there was a seat beside Anko and Sheesa smiled as she sat.

The sun was low, and the light had just started to dim. The shadow of the mast was long across the group of them.

Sheesa pinched at the fish with her fingers and pushed it into her mouth. It splintered into bits. It was good but she could just barely taste it.

“So, how’s Hara?” Sri asked Kirin from across the table.

“Cor said she’s good, she was out dancing when I was over there.” Kirin chewed. “Dad misses you,” Kirin said.

“Yeah?” Sri responded a little surprised, but smiling. “What makes you say that?”

“He said so,” Kirin responded, as if he was stating the obvious.

“That doesn’t mean he really misses me, Kirin. He’s just being nice.” Sri responded kindly, without snapping or discrediting Kirin. Like she was really trying to teach him, but it made Sheesa even more sad to hear it put that way.

Anko finished his food and put his plate down.

For the first time, Sheesa’s eyes settled on Gwyn. She had set the bowl in her lap and was eating *slowly*. Sheesa saw her wrapping had changed, it didn’t cover the mark at all, it was only around her wrist.

Sheesa realized they *weren’t* talking about Gwyn. The fact that they left so quickly without her saying, “*Ascella fixed my cursed scar*,” seemed like a bad sign.

Gwyn saw Sheesa looking and gripped her elbow. Sheesa looked down at her food and poured some into her mouth.

“I’m glad we went home.” Gwyn said.

Sri stooped and cocked her head, “So, it was worth it?” She had care in her voice, a gentle spur in her voice.

Gwyn started quickly, “Sort of. Nana can’t fix this. She said it’s only going to her worse. I can barely move my fingers now, it feels like it’s soaking into my bones.” Gwyn caught herself, and relaxed her grip on her arm.

“It’s not hopeless though. There’s a place she mentioned to me, a hot lake up in the mountains called *Yu-vee-ra*.” Gwyn looked up at Anko. “If it’s not too much trouble, you can help me get there. If you let me off early at Gujo, it’s only a couple of days hike from there.”

“Of course we’ll drop you off Gwyn,” Anko said flatly.

“And you’re entitled to your cut, whenever you want it. It’s yours.” Sri said.

Kirin was quiet. He just stared down at his bowl.

Sheesa felt like she was intruding on their moment, like this wasn’t her business. Lluvera interested her, but she knew better than to press Gwyn for details.

She finished her food shortly after. Sheesa remembered their first night on the boat, when Gwyn and Kirin and her talked and Kirin played music. As Anko and Kirin and Gwyn and Sri got up and went back to work, Sheesa felt her heart call out. She’d never had this sort of friendship before and it had been taken from her too quickly.

She stayed sitting. She sat against the mast as the sun set. Her eyes stung, but she didn’t feel like sleeping any more. The shadow of the mast was chilly.

After dark, Sheesa saw a light high on the horizon. As it came closer, it began to rain, and Sheesa understood.

They were passing by the Columns of Mertine, again, but now, there was a fire lit on the peak.

Maybe they can help Gwyn!

Sheesa bolted up and ran to Sri at the helm. “Sri! Steer towards the sea stacks!” Sheesa shouted.

“Whaat?” Sri whined back, loud, with a scoffing face.

Gwyn ran out of the cabin below them and came up on deck, summoned from the commotion.

“There’s a light! What if they can help Gwyn?” Sheesa pleaded.

Sri sighed hard. Rain droplets flicked off her lip. “I don’t think you get this job.”

Gwyn chimed in, “Sheesa, we steal this stuff. And those people *know* someone stole it too. That’s why they’re there.”

Sheesa looked up to the sea stack. The light of the little building she had stood in flickered through falling droplets. It seemed silly to her to think they *stole* the flowers. *They’re just growing in the dirt like anything else*, she thought.

“We’d be turning ourselves in. Just forget it.” Sri stomped it out.

Sheesa submitted, but it all felt wrong to her. She went below deck and sat beside her bag. She thought of going through the things Ascella had packed, but she couldn’t quit brooding.

She felt like she was swirling in negative energy. She didn’t think Gwyn was a bad person or a good person. She didn’t care about the way they perceived themselves, as pirates or bandits or whatever. They weren’t perfect, but nobody could say if you were *good* or not. The thing Sheesa did know, on the other hand, was that Gwyn didn’t deserve to *suffer and die*. That seemed simple to her.

That was when she realized what she wanted to do.

Anko was in his hammock, Kirin sat up fiddling with his fortune toy.

Gwyn came through the door and came up to Sheesa. She sat on the floor cross-legged.

“Thanks for thinking of me, Sheesa,” she said.

“Gwyn, I want to help you. I want to help you get to Lluvera.”

It was like lifting the curse on Yain. Sheesa didn’t want to purify it for the foliage, it was because it would help people, and if she turned away and let Gwyn go on her own, she wouldn’t feel right. If she could help her in any way, Sheesa wanted to.

Sheesa could see Kirin watching them talk, it wasn’t like it was private.

Gwyn leaned back before answering. She looked down at the floor, then at Sheesa. “I don’t want you to do this for the wrong reason, you don’t owe me this.”

“To me, it’s more important to make sure you arrive than anything else right now. Plus it sounds like a valuable trip for an aspiring potion master to make,” Sheesa said, smiling.

Anko had almost made it to the port by the time Sheesa woke the next day. She slept deeply, and woke exhilarated. She was happy to travel by land, to see plants up close and smell the world and dirt again. If she could manage, she decided, she’d avoid sailing unless necessary. It was fast, but nothing could compare to the little adventures that happened along *the road*.

Before sleep last night, Sheesa had made sure her pack was in order. She’d gone through what Ascella had given her. To her delight, beyond the new shirt, she’d packaged the ingredients to *Ear*, a jar of Modi root, Bix’s Waxwing feathers, and a paper envelope of ground Ines’ Voice.

Sheesa was excited for the day they’d meet again. Maybe she’d have some stories to tell her.

Chapter 11. Bent Like Dancers

Sheesa stood on the deck facing the shoreline of rocks and cliffs, the trees and shrubs were harsh and scraggly. Watching them, Sheesa realized she had totally forgotten to sketch the trees in Zumpango while she was there. She took out her notebook and tried to draw some from memory, but they all looked cartoonish. They were missing the natural *strangeness* of the real thing.

She sighed, and doodled the trees she could see on the shoreline. They were bland. She wanted to feel disappointed that she hadn’t sketched the exotic plants, but couldn’t. Shaking her head, she realized, *I found something more fun to do than make a Catalog*. She laughed to herself.

By the wheel, Gwyn, Anko, and Sri talked. Sheesa gave them space for their goodbyes. She was happy to be jumping ship early, she felt like she had taken control of her heading.

The day was dreary, the sun didn't quite shine through the layers of clouds overhead.

Sheesa saw the lantern of the port, it stood on an offshoot of rock sticking out from the shore. Behind it, a tiny opening revealed itself. The port was only big enough for a few ships, but none were moored there as Anko steered the boat into a spot.

As Sheesa walked on deck, she congratulated him, watching the boat drift naturally up to the dock. "Wow, nicely done."

Anko smiled quietly to himself.

Sheesa set down her bag and leaned against the rail with the three of them, ready to say farewell.

"Well, you've got all our luck with you Gwyn," Sri said, patting her shoulder. "It's been good to meet you Sheesa," Sri stumbled, "I hope to see you again someday."

Anko smiled at her, "Have fun."

Sri turned, hands on hips, "I guess Kirin's sulking, *Kirin!*"

"Don't push him too hard while I'm gone Sri," Gwyn said, winking.

"*Kirin, you're being bad-mannered!*" Sri called.

No response came from the cabin.

"*Bye Kirin!*" Gwyn called, skyward. "Let's go," she whispered to Sheesa.

She was glad Gwyn was in such good spirits. Sheesa would've liked to have said bye to Kirin, but she didn't want to press too hard.

The two of them clambered off the boat, and onto the water logged dock. Gwyn had her mask hanging on her neck behind her, and carried a drawstring pack much smaller than Sheesa's Herbalist Bag.

The dock connected to an earth road that led up the hill towards the treeline. Rock ledges surrounded the port on every side.

The two of them exchanged looks, and set off side by side on the creaking dock. It swayed in the water as they went.

The road was mud, and it sucked at their shoes. Sheesa asked, "Have you been here before?"

"Nah," Gwyn responded, but she was cut off.

Behind them all of the sudden, Sheesa could hear Sri shout angrily. Both Gwyn and Sheesa turned to see Kirin bounding after them, with pack, horn, and Gara leaping at his heels.

"I'm coming with you two!" He said, high stepping through the mud.

"Hahaha!" Gwyn laughed, loud and true. She grappled her good arm over Kirin's shoulder and weighed on him. "Welcome! Welcome!"

"Let's pick up the pace. Sri might still come and try to keep me from leaving," Kirin said seriously.

Gara ran up and rubbed her head and shoulder along Sheesa's knee. She reached down and really scratched the Queulat cat's head, rubbing the thick skin around.

Sheesa thought of what Sri had said on the beach at Zumpango. It made her sad to think she was losing her pet, but it was probably best for Gara, and Sri and Kirin knew it.

"I'm really glad you came," Sheesa said to Kirin, grinning. "I couldn't believe you'd be such a jerk about it."

"I'm an actor when I want to be," Kirin said haughtily. "I knew Sri would never've let me go. Every step was *vital*, I needed to fool all of you." He giggled, "I just told her I'd meet her at Four Hills."

Sheesa was surprised Kirin hadn't thought out a more concrete plan for himself. *I wonder if he just assumes we'll all end up there together.* Sheesa wasn't so sure. She was ready to trek back to Bay at Four Hills alone, she was comfortable foraging, and she was excited to cross country. Sheesa wondered if Kirin felt the same way.

"So," Sheesa said, "what's this town called again?"

"Gujo," Gwyn said. "Anko told me a little about it. He said it was a port for shipping goods from off the plains. It's the sort of place that only exists for one reason, they're good with cloth and fabric from the wooly Whie Deer. Before we leave, we need to find some cold-weather clothes. Nana said Lluvera is cold all year round."

The town was small, with one road cutting through. To one side, fences and empty enclosed areas held turned up mud. On the other, there were several buildings, all of a similar design. They were one storey, with square foundation and pointed wood-tile roofs. The marbled-reddish walls of each building jittered in the breeze like curtains. As Sheesa approached, she saw that they *were curtains*. Each house had thick cloth, totally opaque, and thicker than any hide Sheesa had seen. The closest building had embroidery along the bottom. In black thread, there were animals jumping and running, they looked like deer. Sheesa guessed they were the Whie Gwyn had mentioned.

Past this house, Sheesa could see an area with trees and vines growing. *Maybe a community garden*, she hoped.

"I'll meet back up with you later. It'll be easier for me to haggle alone." Gwyn put on a serious face and went up to a porch to ask a stranger.

"Let's have a look around," Kirin said, his eyes eager for fun.

The two of them were on the edge of town. It wasn't clear if the buildings were storefronts or houses. One had a sign hanging, a slab of wood painted a bright shade of green, hanging in the wind.

"This is a strange place," Sheesa said, matter of factly.

The house they stood before had its curtains *raised*. They were rolled half-way up, and revealed the inside of the house. The floor was open, with a fire going on the inside.

On the wooden porch outside the house, an elderly person sat on a small pillow. They sat up straight and tall beneath a blanket. When Sheesa greeted them, they waved back, and nodded.

"It's not a cool place," Kirin said, all too loudly for Sheesa. She didn't want to offend anyone.

She dragged Kirin along behind her. Sheesa wanted to see the garden the people here had made. The soil was naturally sandy, anything growing in the earth would need to be fertilized, she guessed.

As they came up on the garden, Sheesa wasn't surprised to find it entirely made up of fruits and vegetables. Along either side were trees, some Joure Trees, a few Ringo. In the middle there were beds with rows of melons, fat Boeplant dragging down vines. There were bushy cabbages and greens. It looked lush. *It wouldn't hurt to take just a little*, she decided.

She looked around, "I'm starving, have you ever had a Joure before?"

"You're going to take one?" Kirin said, laughing. He didn't think it was in her.

"I'll pay them back," Sheesa explained, "in my own way." She had a plan.

She walked into the garden and up to the Joure Tree. It had long spear-point leaves that folded down the middle. The trees were all taller than fifteen feet, and had plenty of fruit. Ideally, she'd have a ladder, but Sheesa was ready to climb.

She put her foot in a knot low on the tree, and leaped up to grab a fork in the tree trunk. From there she hung and grabbed a fruit.

"Catch," tossing the fruit to Kirin, who watched her. He caught it obediently. While she was up there, she caught sight of another house's embroidery.

The curtains had a sort of creature on them, a lean, leggy animal jumping into the air dramatically. Its legs were splayed out enormously over the tiny grass below them. Sheesa couldn't help but stare, maybe it was the way the animal was oriented, but she liked it. It looked mystical.

She grabbed another two Joure and dropped down, not bothering to mention the embroidery.

Sheesa took a wide-mouthed bite and the juice soaked her chin. It was perfect. "*Mmmmm. C'mon Kirin, try it.*"

Kirin took his bite more sheepishly, but took his second right away.

Sheesa chewed around the pit of the fruit and licked it clean. "I'm going to plant the pit. There's a spare spot there," she reached into her bag, "and this should help it along a bit." Sheesa drew out her draft of Expedient Growth.

"*Po-shuns!*" Kirin called, raising his eyebrows.

Sheesa pulled out a spade and dug out a hole. In it, she sprinkled three generous pinches of Enriched Earth and seated the Joure pit in the fuzzy stuff.

"Enriched Earth is like catch-all fertilizer, ideally with a fruit tree you'd want to give special nutrients, but this should work fine. Next, just a few drops of Expedient Growth," Sheesa

unplugged the jug, and delicately tipped it over the dirt hole. She let out the goo in a gob over the pit. "Come tomorrow, this'll have sprouted. Maybe next year it'll fruit."

"Oh, so nothing's going to happen right away?"

"No, maybe if I dumped this whole jug on it, and had a creek flowing right over the pit to water it." Sheesa laughed to herself.

Kirin giggled a little at the herbalist-joke.

The two of them left the garden with a few fruits. They looked left and right through town but didn't see Gwyn. It was a small place, they agreed she could find them if she wanted to, so they continued to wander.

As they passed more cloth-walled houses, a voice called to them from inside. The curtains were up.

"Hey, you two," the voice said. "Did the ship come in?"

Kirin answered, "Not the one you're looking for."

Sheesa was just glad it wasn't someone upset about the garden.

"Agh." They slapped their thigh. They sat cross legged on a mat surrounded by wrapped jars and boxes.

"Hey, well, while I have you, are you interested in purchase or trade?" They unrolled a coil of wares, and whipped jars and bags out from the boxes beside them. "My name is Plum, she-her."

Sheesa saw some things she recognized. Generic potion ingredients, for basic potions like Tack and Seal and Ink. There were teeth, canines, molars, bone shards separated into two stacks (Sheesa wasn't sure what differentiated them), dried flower petals sorted by color, bug wings, and a few specimen insects wholly intact. There was an assortment of unique jars, hand formed clay or smoky glass. Sheesa saw an amulet with a colorless stone, a few bags of powders, and some dried bulbs Sheesa couldn't name by sight, they looked like Hyacinth or Greater Oreas bulbs.

Gara leaped up onto the porch behind them and walked to the mat with interest. Plum eyed her with interest. Gara was wary of the mat she had rolled out, and sniffed at an object without touching the edge.

Sheesa saw some flicker of insight in her. Maybe it was dumb, but Gara was not an average cat.

"Are these potions?" Sheesa asked, motioning to sets of hand-sized glass ornaments filled with liquid.

"They are," Plum picked up the fist sized sphere and shook it. "This is Pop. The other stack is Putrid. They're Throw Jars. They're made for one use, you toss it, and the potion reacts when the glass breaks."

"Oh, cool," Kirin said, blithely.

Sheesa wasn't so easily taken, it sounded weaponized to her. She wondered what happened to all the broken shards when it shattered. "What do the potions inside do?"

“Ah, I hadn’t heard of them until I happened into this part of the world. Just happened upon them, same way I ended up here. I didn’t know Gujo was a dead end, I’m waiting for the next shipping vessel to hitch a ride. The people here are nice enough to let me stay in wait. I happened to have a few things that they wanted their hands on, thankfully.”

She cut to the point, as if she realized she had been rambling, “Both are crafted for encounters with the giant raptors on the plains, the Ahk. Pop scares them off, and Putrid brings them around.”

“Giant raptors? Like falcons? What is anyone luring them out for?”

Kirin asked, but Sheesa already knew. She pictured a satchell full of Bix’s Waxwing feathers. “It’s probably a rare ingredient,” Sheesa sighed. “What’s the box for?”

There was a square wooden box with rounded sides, just about two feet wide. On the top there was a small door, as well as a lid that opened the entire top. Along the sides, black engravings snaked like burned gouges, patternless.

“This is a Terminus. This size works best with bugs, mice maybe.” Plum bobbed her head side to side as she spoke.

“Sheesa, what’s a Terminus?” Kirin had decided to trust Sheesa’s word over Plum’s.

“It’s for killing creatures,” Sheesa replied bluntly. “You pit them against each other, hoping to have one in the end that you use for a potion. I’ve never seen one before, they always struck me as,” she paused to pick a word, “*macabre*.”

“Inhumane,” chimed Kirin.

“Not for you then,” Plum moved on. “The two of you have a certain chemistry, you know these were quite popular when I was your age.” She lifted the amulet towards Kirin.

Kirin laughed, “No it’s not like that!”

“Oy,” a voice came from behind them. They both recognized it as Gwyn and turned. “Let’s get going.”

“Bye Plum, best of luck getting where you’re going,” Kirin said politely.

Sheesa hopped down from the raised porch. Kirin thumped beside her. She was sad that she couldn’t hear what was in the funky jars, she told herself she didn’t *need* it, as she walked to catch up with Gwyn.

“I got three, two from a nice older person, and the last one from a young woman on the edge of town. She seemed like she wanted to get rid of it in secret... It’s the lighter one.”

All three were the same dark red as the curtain-walls, but one had flecks of other colors mixed in. Sheesa liked that one.

Gwyn was holding them all, rolled into bundles. Her bag clearly wouldn’t fit them. Neither Kirin nor Gwyn had a backpack like Sheesa did. The Herbalist Bag was huge, with compartments and stiff framing to keep *delicate* things intact.

“Gwyn, I’ll carry those if you want. They’ll fit in my bag,” Sheesa offered, swinging her bag off her back.

“Oh nice,” Gwyn handed them to her.

Sheesa began to pack them in when she saw the fruit she had picked with Kirin, “Oh! Hey, we got these, have one!” She tossed the Joure fruit to Gwyn.

Gwyn raised her bad hand instinctively and her elbow swayed limp. Sheesa’s eyes bulged. *Oh no.*

But Gwyn was faster than Sheesa gave her credit. She craned her other hand around, and grasped it. She smiled at Sheesa and giggled sneakily, “Close one.”

Gwyn hopped up to walk with Kirin, taking a bite of the fruit.

Sheesa tried to relax, but it came on slowly. She tried to think of something else. *Where’s Gara I wonder*, she turned, and saw her lurking far behind them. She was mingling with the tall grass off the side of the worn way through the flatlands.

Sheesa decided it would be fun to forage while they hiked. She figured she’d be able to pick up some materials for a spare Tack potion or a Satiare. Both shared the ingredient Phfal Salt, which she had with her, and were made up of mostly generic, easy to happen-upon ingredients.

Tack could be made from Phfal, any Lamia leaf, a mushroom from the Myco family (fairly common, non-poisonous mushrooms), spider’s web, and some *saliva*. Sheesa had read that, when crafting the potion, it’s best to use the saliva of the person who is to be healed, so she wouldn’t *combine* the ingredients until she needed to. She could quickly whip it together in a time of need. Tack closed wounds. For something small it would stitch up almost immediately, that was all Sheesa had ever seen it performed on.

Satiare was an easier brew, it was made from Phfal Salt, Cress (any leaf in the family), ground bone powder, and something *spicy*, ideally lots of it, or a variety of heat. Satiare was a potion of *deception*. It didn’t satiate hunger, it merely staved off the feeling, but in a time of starvation it would at least ease the mind.

Foraging was a game for Sheesa to play on a walk, *Keep an eye out for spiders and mushrooms and leafy things*. Sheesa was happy to scour the earth again, it reminded her so much of the forest, and the idea of finding something you’d never expect. It was always like a game of chance, and for all her life Sheesa was one with *luck*. The Gardener used to say it was because she was closer to the ground, but she always found the best things growing and hiding in secret places.

Before training her eyes on the ground, she took in the landscape as the town faded away behind them. The four of them were walking in a flatland. She could see far ahead of them, acres of whipping waist high grass that had gone to seed. In clusters all around, scraggly trees twisted their way up, each one leveling off with a flat canopy like a shelf. Past that there was a low blue band along the horizon. *Lluvera*, Sheesa guessed, or the mountain range that it sat on.

“Such strange trees,” Sheesa said aloud, casually. “I wonder if they’re Frisa Trees. I heard they’ve got a unique sap, I’d tap one if we got the chance...” Strangely enough, Sheesa also knew it was an ingredient for the potion *Still*. If made properly it was an anesthetic, when made it *too potently* it acted as paralysis agent.

Kirin turned and responded to her, “They are funny looking, they all grow in huddles.”

“They’re families!” Sheesa responded.

Kirin laughed, thinking she was joking, but she was serious.

“They are! Those trees all communicate with one another. They signal if the soil is dry over *here* or if there’s better sun on this side.”

“I don’t know if you’re kidding...”

“No it’s true! If you mess with one, the rest respond, they experience it all together. I don’t know how it works.” *Maybe it’s magic*, almost came out of her mouth. She had been talking from her Herbalist side, but she had learned something since The Garden. Maybe there was some magic in the way trees spoke to one another.

They broke for camp under a cluster of Frisa trees. The trees had cracking thin bark, and rose into the sky at a sharp angle, it wasn’t shelter, but Sheesa was glad to get a chance to drain one. She pulled the spout out of her bag, and punched the end into the tree’s flesh. She took a rock and whacked it in, *Pang Pang Pang*. There was no flow before she left it, Sheesa put a jar out to let it sit overnight. *I wonder if it’ll tell it’s family what I’ve done*, she thought to herself jokingly, but with the slightest twinge of sadness.

From their campsite, Sheesa could tell the terrain was changing. They were on a small hill, below which a wide, uninterrupted plain sprawled. There were few trees past the trees above them. The curved moon lit the dry grass white.

Over the course of the day, Sheesa had grabbed three generous cuts from a Basilicum bush (a potent member of the Lamia family, also great for cooking), so when she set to work making their food, she added some to the finished product. It was a simple stew, but the fresh herbs made all the difference.

Maybe they were all hungry, but when the food was done, they ate it in quiet. Sheesa watched them both. Gwyn looked out at the plains while she chewed. Kirin finished quickly, and poked at the fire, Gara wrapped around it like the crescent moon.

As soon as the food filled her stomach, the warm feeling crept into her head and her lids were heavy. Sheesa’s neck jerked, *I’m falling asleep sitting up*.

Sheesa moved to lay down in her bed. She felt the need to say something, to break the silence before just going to sleep. “I know it’s not about me Gwyn, but I had such a nice time today. I missed the dirt, and the wind in the grass. I’m really glad I could come with you.”

Sheesa wasn’t looking for a response, she felt loose, like she could speak her mind. *These are my friends*.

“I’m nodding off, so I’m going to sleep.”

“G’night, Sheesa.”

“See you in the morning.”

Sheesa’s feet aches, glad to be free of her boots. She went to sleep thinking of tomorrow. *Maybe I can soak some of the beans I’ve got at the bottom of my bag. I’d mash them with the Basilicum, that’d probably be good. I wonder if I’ll get any syrup from those Frisa’s.*

When Sheesa opened her eyes, the light had just started to rise. It carried a warm wind, like rain.

Gwyn was awake, facing away from the rest of them.

“Hi Gwyn,” Sheesa said, her voice morning-quiet.

Gwyn only turned and smiled.

Sheesa curled her legs and her knees popped. She took a deep breath and the day filled her up, she was ready to get moving. If she was alone, she’d forgo breakfast in favor of snacking on the road. *Maybe I should mention it.* She stood and saw over Gwyn’s shoulder, she saw her pale white skin. She was wrapping her hand.

“If you want,” Sheesa started, “I could wrap that for you.” She edged over to her, waiting for Gwyn to stop her.

Gwyn’s eyes watched her approach. “Okay, it’s not pretty.” She turned over her hand and Sheesa saw what she was shielding. “I was just looking at it, but I couldn’t get the bandage back on right.”

On the underside of her wrist there was a pin sticking there, in her skin. It was blue like the color of freshwater. “Nana *pinned* the curse. It’s a Holdoff Charm, is what she said.”

Sheesa felt blood rush to her head. The pin sticking out of her wrist was a tough sight to take in. *I guess this was what the singing caterpillar was for. A story for another time,* she decided. Sheesa bucked up, and kneeled down next to her. She started winding the bandage around her arm just like it was normal. The bleached skin had spread up into her sleeve, it reminded Sheesa of a cat with a white paw.

“Thank you, again.” Gwyn muttered.

Sheesa wanted to change the subject to anything else, “You know, I’ve got enough dry food for us to snack on today. We don’t have to do a *breakfast*, we’ll make better time if we get up and go. Tonight I was even thinking I could prep a breakfast.”

Gwyn nodded and turned to Kirin. “I was thinking the same thing. I’ll get Kirin up and we can get walking.”

“I’ll be right back, let me check on my sap.” She got up and let her gaze fall over the road ahead. She felt her cheeks rise naturally into a wide smile, “It’s a beautiful day.”

She went to check on the Frisa spout. Rounding the tree trunk, she saw the jar overturned, with a pool of the amber ooze soaked into the ground. *Sprouts*, she cursed in her head. Sheesa hadn’t thought to cover it, *Makes sense an animal would get into it.*

She picked up the jar and put the lid on. It was enough for maybe a half portion.

When she returned, Kirin was up, his hair flat on one side. Gwyn stood, packed.

“I’m tired of everyone treating me like I’m lazy because I’m sleepy in the morning, you’re stereotyping me.”

“You were up early that day at Islazul!” Sheesa said, playfully.

“I’m just inconsistent,” Kirin said, agreeing with her.

“We still love you, Kirin.” Gwyn’s eyes deepened. It was strange to see her faking *compassion* so perfectly.

The sun had just started to show orange, and Gwyn’s eyes began to change. Gwyn looked past Sheesa at the sunrise, her pupils looked like blank mirrors. “Looks like a mask day.”

Sheesa got a good look at it before they set off. It was *cool*, Sheesa wasn’t sure what to say about it. Gwyn let her try and put it on. It didn’t fit Sheesa’s head, so she just held it up to her face. The eye-holes were small, coin sized.

“Does everyone with an eye-job like yours have a mask?” Kirin asked her.

Gwyn said, “Naah. I once knew this person, they lived in some caves, way down underground. They looked for natural ore deposits.”

“Very practical,” Kirin said, brow furrowed in mocking seriousness.

“Hey, everybody’s got a job.”

They started walking early, with the light on their backs. The morning light in her two friend’s hair made their brown look amber. The grass was wet with dew. Looming now, was the mountain range they walked towards. Although there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, a white bulge hung low at the summit of the peaks ahead of them.

Sheesa couldn’t see any birds, but heard them calling out. She guessed they had little nests in the tall grass. She saw one, bright yellow, tiny, gripping a tall reed. It chirped right at her when she looked. *Imagine hearing what birds say all the time*, Sheesa thought to herself.

The plains made for easy walking. The ground was sloping gently downwards.

Before midday, Sheesa heard the sound of pounding earth. Over the plains, way in the distance, something enormous moved. A group of creatures leaped and bounded into the air in a way Sheesa *knew*. *Ah, the embroidery. The curtains in Gujo*. But there was something wrong with the scale. *At this distance, they must be forty feet tall*.

The creatures flung themselves forwards athletically on angular stretching legs. They waited in the air, then returned to the ground, leaning into the motion, and bent like dancers before leaping again. They were all enormous. Each had short rugged hair,

Sheesa kept walking towards them, past Kirin and Gwyn.

“What.. are.. they...” Kirin’s voice had less character than usual. He was between fear and wonder.

Sheesa spoke, “I think they’re Mew-Peco. I’ve always imagined seeing them like this.” Sheesa had read about them when she was a little girl. They were well known, but a rare sight. They didn’t linger. They moved so quickly there wasn’t a manner that one could keep up with them. There was little known about them, but they were notoriously well traveled, appearing at mountain peaks, warm-sea lagoons, every terrain in Sola.

Seeing an animal move was beyond the words the page had given it. There was something with a beating heart *there*. Seeing the Mew-Peco *fly* like that gave her something. It put something in her heart that she couldn’t describe.

“I’m so happy.”

“I thought maybe *that* was what those people in Gujo herded.”

“No,” Gwyn said. “These are Great Beasts of the world.”

The trail of animals ended abruptly. Their herd was a tight unit, they vanished past the horizon like a bucket falling into a dark well.

Sheesa wanted more. They were *missing* now. “Let’s go,” Sheesa said, turning to them.

“What?”

“The tracks! Their tracks cross our path! Let’s go look at them!”

Chapter 12. Glass Trees

Sheesa led them on in a rushed walk to the worn path of the Mew-Peco.

Distances on the plains lands were hard to guess. It looked like the mountain loomed right over them, but there were still miles and miles to go. It took them some time before Sheesa, Gwyn, and Kirin and Gara made it to the first of the imprints.

It was a crescent shaped trench. It dug in at an angle and unhinged the topsoil and grass from the earth. It was longer than Sheesa was tall. Gara peered into the deep gash inquisitively, eyes wide.

Sheesa gawked, totally taken by the prints.

“Hey,” Gwyn called. She wasn’t standing by Sheesa next to the tracks. “There’s something over there.”

Sheesa straightened up slowly, she had doubled over for some time. She gazed in the direction that Gwyn pointed. Something disturbed the placid horizon. Whatever it was, must have *noticed* them *noticing*, because it changed its shape.

“Well, they’re waving,” Gwyn said, half resigned, half complaining.

“Should we wait around to meet them?” Kirin asked from inside a hoof print. “If they’re following the Mew-Peco trail, they might not be so bad.”

“Or they could be hunting them,” Gwyn called back.

Gwyn seems like she’s in a bad mood, Sheesa thought. She looked at her and saw her tight stance.

Gwyn was favoring her left side, almost leaning. *I wonder if her arm hurts right now.*

The figure approaching was almost upon them. It was one person, and a tall fluffy creature that walked beside them. It was a pack animal, it carried some bags, it wasn’t meant to be ridden.

“Well,” Sheesa offered, as the other two hadn’t decided anything on their own, “let’s be honest. We’ll say we can’t linger, but it’s worth meeting I think.” Sheesa hoped to learn more about the beasts who’s tracks they stood in. There was always more to learn.

“Fair.” Gwyn sat on the edge of a hoof print like a seat.

Kirin sat beside her as she panted in the sunlight. “She’s not meant for cross-country walking,” Kirin said, mildly concerned, but just as a note to fill the time between now and the figure arriving. She was *just* too big to carry comfortably, and she was constantly running about. She was up the path, way North of the trail digging up a Risu-Mole, or lazing in the path almost out of sight behind them.

Sheesa was the first to offer a greeting. “Hello traveler!”

“What a nice day. Hello, kind passerby, my name is Poet Junrei, he-him.” He was a clean, wrinkled, but not aged man. His ears laid flat against his shaved head, and rose comically when he smiled at them. He had very proper posture, and stood tall despite being only a little taller than Sheesa.

“I’m Sheesa, I use she-her.”

“Gwyn, same.”

“Kirin! He-him for me.”

Junrei looked to each of them in turn as they addressed him. He didn’t bat an eye at Gwyn’s mask, merely smiled at each of them. His long yellow shirt moved in pieces, like leaves behind other leaves in the breeze. He led his animal companion to them, and it eyed Gara with prey-like awareness.

Junrei saw the cat crouching and said, startled, “Oh, that is a Queulat Cat.” He spoke deliberately. “Be still Pebble,” he cupped the tall creature’s chin and rubbed.

“Is that a llama?” Kirin asked, putting himself between Gara and Junrei. Sheesa wondered if he was protecting Gara or if he was really curious about Junrei’s beast.

“A near miss, she is a Vicuna. Years ago I found her among a flock of Moorit Sheep I was shepherding, just a small thing so she blended in. The flock was rearing her, I believe. There was a group of motherly sheep that kept her a secret from me, but once I found her I experienced a little act of providence.”

“You’re right about Gara, but she’s kind. She’s still just a kitten.”

“Yes, I have seen their fur unfavorably hung in the *Dangai* of the world.”

Dangai was a word Sheesa had heard before. She didn’t know what it meant, but knew it from her days talking with The Gardener and their visitors. From what she could tell it was just a market, but the way Junrei said it made it seem like it wasn’t like the street-side stands at Bay at Four Hills.

Junrei opened his arms to the group and said, “I saw you moving West, here I am headed South. Very slim chance we would come together like this.” Junrei looked at the upturned gashes in the ground that they stood in. “Aren’t these startling...” he said to all of them. “I’m lingering behind the herd, did you happen to see them pass?”

Gwyn and Kirin looked to Sheesa to talk about it, she *had* been the excited one. “It was like nothing else in Sola.”

Junrei’s whole face rose with a grin. He raised his eyebrows, stretching his eyes open, “Did you happen to see a fawn among them? I’ve been following them drawing it. A little red one with a yellow back patch?”

“No, I was barely able to take it in before they had all gone by.”

“Well said. That’s how it always is, they’re almost shy in that way.” He smiled at each of them in sequence, giving each person a moment of measured eye contact. “Are you three headed to Lluvera? If so, we’re headed the same way. The closest trailhead is *that* way,” he pointed at an angle, between the Mew-Peco tracks and the mountain range.

I wonder if we can trust him. Sheesa shot a glance at Gwyn. Gwyn met her eyes and shrugged casually.

Gwyn spoke, “Well, we can share a meal at least.”

“I’m grateful. I have some food to share.”

And so they set off together in the direction of the mountain trailhead.

It wasn’t until they began to walk together that Sheesa noticed Junrei didn’t wear anything on his feet, he walked barefoot through the low grass.

He hummed while he walked, a rumbling slow melody. His Vicuna, Pebble would bleat now and again, and he would pat it’s long neck. It craned around like a frightened thing constantly, looking from Sheesa to Gwyn to Kirin to the horizon, and it unnerved Sheesa. She wondered if it sensed something. The *Awks* the merchant Plum mentioned swooped into her imagination, diving at them and carrying them away.

Sheesa found nothing on their hike, but when they ended the day Junrei unpacked his bag and revealed some lovely ingredients for a soup.

“These were given to me in Poruselle. There was a small community of Wildfolk, they had a bushel growing wild, it was crowding their garden. The carrots, I found wild.” Junrei revealed a massive head of Cyma, a curd-looking bushy vegetable, and some gangly, wicked carrots.

Junrei took a wide mouthed pot from Pebble’s saddle pack, and started a fire much faster than Sheesa could have. She left him to it, but offered the fresh herbs she’d picked up the previous day, as well as the two potatoes she would have made if he hadn’t come along.

He set the pot up to cook and seated himself in the crook of his Vicuna’s legs. Sheesa thought they looked like a perfect pair together there, both sitting up straight as pines. Pebble never stopped twitching it’s ears, head tall, while Junrei sat gazing at the fire blankly.

He spoke suddenly, as if he and Sheesa had been speaking the entire day. “How do you plan to climb the stairs?”

Sheesa almost answered, but questioned herself for a moment. *What do you mean...*

Gwyn spoke in Sheesa’s pause, “We bought Ponchos in Gujo.”

“Ah,” Junrei said, looking grim. “There is something you must know, then.”

The fire spat. Kirin raised his attention from the Teller in his hands.

“The *stairs* to Lluvera are not merely a winter journey. This region,” his hands passed in a wide circle around them, “is not cold enough for great snow, even at the peaks of the mountain range. *This* is the treachery of the journey.... The mountain is not cold enough for snow, but from the steam of the hot lake spills like a fog onto the hillside. It freezes on the mountain in a sheet of clear, wet ice.” Junrei stopped for three long breaths.

Sheesa’s heart beat hard. She felt anxious.

“It is dangerous. *Im-pos-si-ble* to climb without a plan.” He emphasised each syllable emphatically

“I have never been to Lluvera. I will go before I cease, but not yet. I can just imagine the clouds parting for a moment and seeing everything shine, as if it were encased in glass. It sounds like a dream.”

He leaned forward and removed the dripping lid.

Sheesa felt dreadful. There was no way Gwyn had a plan for the mountain. Her stomach *moaned*. She was too tired to think about it. Later it would come to her, she’d think of something.

The food had come together in a sort of mash. The Cyma was stiff and still held a nice bite. The carrots were sweet. He put the fresh herbs on top as a garnish.

Sheesa ate it ravenously. *I want to cook like this*, she thought to herself over and over.

She could picture Ascella cooking in her open kitchen. *All herbalists are cooks*, she’d say, matter-of-factly. *I should’ve asked for more cooking tips while I was there*. Ascella was good for more than just potion advice.

I wonder if I can write to her at Zumpango. Maybe someday I’ll have a nice home where I could send and receive mail, or have people come and stay. A home all my own.

The smell of the food lingered pleasantly. There was more than enough to heat up in the morning.

“Thank you, Junrei,” Gwyn said, forwardly.

“I’m thankful too. People think my work is worth feeding me for, and I’m grateful. All of this was given to me by the land or the hands of a kind soul.”

Hearing it that way made an impression on Sheesa. She felt like what she was doing was *temporary* in a way. Ascella had been kind enough to feed her, so had Anko, but she had *no* expectation that would continue. She imagined it as a stroke of luck. To live your whole life that way sounded *pleasant*.

“Kirin,” Junrei said, politely. “I saw your horn, would you please play something? It would make me so glad.”

Kirin was lying on his stomach, he looked up, surprised. “Oh, yeah, sure,” he sort of mumbled.

He’s not used to requests, Sheesa joked to herself.

He got up slowly and took a few moments to settle down with his spiral shaped horn, but Kirin played well. The horn whined and rang out over the plains. The song Kirin played seemed like a story, it went back and forth like a conversation. In the story, Sheesa imagined one person saying the same thing over and over, the same melancholy line. The other voice seemed excited, but as the song went on, they seemed to be growing weary, like the other person was wearing them down.

Junrei listened intently for some time. He watched Kirin as he swayed. Then, carefully, he removed a block, ink, brush, and paper from Pebble's pack. He arranged his station silently, and began to write.

Each page was only big enough for a few lines, little half-sized pieces of parchment. He put one down and wrote something quickly. He set the paper aside and painted another poem. Junrei paused, and looked into the fire between lines. His hand moved across the line like a falling leaf, twisting in the wind.

I wonder where Kirin learned all these songs, Sheesa wondered. She wanted to ask him, but when he finished the mood wasn't right, she had started thinking of something else. She was thinking of a potion, something far away she was trying to remember.

Everyone seemed out of it when the music ended. It was like a spell.

"I love your playing Kirin," Sheesa said, gazing into the fire.

"Aw thanks," he replied, quietly.

Gwyn looked at her, and Sheesa felt a little embarrassed. She didn't think about it *that way*.

Junrei finished another poem, and set it aside. He stretched his arms above his head, leaning way over to the left. He had all his poems arranged in a grid beside him on the ground. "That was fun," he said, groaning, returning to center. "It's been a long time since I've heard anyone play any music at all."

They all found rest soon after. The dark and the breeze wound around them and sent them each to sleep.

Junrei was asleep first. He slept against Pebble, the Vicuna's fur looked like the most comfortable bed.

Sheesa didn't remember dozing off, but realized she had when she awoke.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." Gwyn was leaning over the fire, speaking in a low gentle voice. "A log dropped."

Sheesa leaned up. The moon had moved in the sky. It wasn't even near a full moon anymore, *it had been a while since the sea cliffs*. Junrei was in the same place Sheesa had last seen him, Kirin was asleep facing the stars.

"Hi Gwyn," Sheesa said in a throaty murmur. "Are you still up?"

Gwyn sighed. "I can't sleep."

"Is it your arm? Can you get cortable?"

Gwyn moved from her squatting pose by the fire to her bed. “No, it’s not that.”

“So the ice problem then,” Sheesa said, feeling bad for bringing up all the bad news in a row.

Gwyn’s eyes bugged out. “Haven’t even processed that yet.” She was holding something back.

Sheesa didn’t know what to say to help it come out, but she could see it, right there, behind Gwyn’s stiff face.

“You know,” Gwyn started. “It started when Junrei was talking about people giving him food and stuff.” Gwyn looked right at Sheesa. “When I left home, I really felt like I didn’t have an option besides joining Anko and Sri. It was what I thought I wanted, maybe I convinced myself of that. The Lumere wasn’t what I needed.”

Sheesa felt weight fall on her shoulders.

“The idea of liking something and just doing *that* sounds so freeing. *Junrei just writes poetry*. If I had known, I would’ve done what I wanted all along.”

Sheesa had done that. The Gardener had asked her what she was interested in her whole life. “What would you rather do?”

Gwyn was silent, she stared down at her bedspread. “I don’t even know. I feel like I’m too late. I could die, and I’ve never even figured out who I want to be.”

Sheesa looked out at the plains like she was looking for an answer. She didn’t have one. She didn’t find one. *I wonder what she’ll do if it all works out.*

“Nothing is over yet,” Sheesa said pragmatically. “You should think about it. Don’t stress, really think about what you want to do after you’re better.” Sheesa was worried Gwyn would shoot her down. She was sugar coating it, she didn’t know what else to do.

Gwyn looked at her through tear-shined eyes. “Okay.”

The fire Junrei had started was still bright when they went to sleep. Sheesa didn’t know if Gwyn was faking when she layed down, but she figured she’d done everything she could. For what it was worth, Sheesa didn’t think Gwyn deserved this. Sheesa wasn’t tagging along out of *pity*, but because it was what seemed *right*.

She thought about Sri and Anko as she fell asleep. *They’d made it back to Bay at Four Hills by now. I wonder if they’ll keep running jobs alone. I guess they always did before, but wait, didn’t Kirin say Sri used to be in love with somebody? I wonder if they were on the crew once too.*

Sheesa couldn’t remember her dreams when she woke up. Dew had settled on her blanket and in her hair. The morning was still, breezeless. The sun wasn’t up, but Junrei and Pebble were gone.

Next to her head was a marbled stone sitting on a gently folded piece of parchment. *One of the poems from last night*. Sheesa read it in the bluish morning light.

*A giant stone hand uncurls
in a green shadowed space,
cauldron in palm flows ferns
like flames seeking something.
They snake across the forest floor
animated by a whistle only they hear.*

Hmm. This is a nice story. She rolled it into a tiny scroll to stow away, she opened the pocket with her old razor knife. *Agh.* She took out the blade and held it delicately in the light.

It looked the same as it always had. She gripped the handle, and brought the knife to a blade of grass. She slit it, and inspected the cut for a sign of festering. It cut the grass like a knife would. *Who's to say the curse applies in the same way to grass.* There was no way to figure out if the knife was safe to use, *it may as well be broken.*

Sheesa stowed it again, frustrated. She got up and started working the fire back into a strong burn.

Junrei had left yesterday's meal for them. Sheesa reheated it as the others awoke to the daylight.

While they roused, Sheesa planned. She didn't have an answer for the ice on the stairs to Lluvera. She figured they could try a torch, but knew that would be too slow, too laborious. They could try and crack it, *all the way up the mountain.* Gwyn wouldn't be much help either with her arm getting worse.

She didn't have an answer by the time the mash started to sizzle. She dished out three bowls and sat down without a word.

Gwyn and Kirin looked at one another, then Kirin said, "So, Junrei's gone. He was a nice surprise, all things considered."

Sheesa inhaled, *I've been taking this on all by myself.* She breathed out.

"I don't know what we're going to do about the stairs."

Gwyn spoke up immediately, "I knew that's what you were thinking about, we'll think of something. We might get there and think of something."

"I know it's kinda obvious," Kirin started, "but for my benefit, what sort of potions could help us out with de-icing."

Sheesa had two potions in her head that she could *imagine* being useful, but neither were a solution.

"I don't have a sure fire solution. There are potions for *de-icing*, like you said, but I think we'd be better off trying to melt the ice. There's one I've made that we used in the winter to keep the garden beds warm," Sheesa recollected. "It's made from the same thing as my Arson Powder, *Calcine Silene*. The trouble is, I've already turned all of my Calcine Silene buds into Arson."

"Any chance we could find a bush here?" Kirin suggested.

Sheesa looked around at the flat plains around them, "I can't imagine it, but maybe."

“Alright, well then tell us what it looks like!” He said, animated. “We’ll all forage together.”

Gwyn grinned to Kirin, then faced Sheesa.

“Okay,” Sheesa tried out a smile. “Well, Calcine Silene is a flower. The buds are used for fire or sparks in potions. The leaves are fat, coming to sharp points, with barbs on the edge. The flowers are usually red, but I wouldn’t be surprised to find them in any shade from white to pink or purple. Each flower has five spiky petals, like flames.”

Sheesa rattled off the description from memory. She could see it clearly in her head, growing there in the garden. The Gardener had planted it off on its own, as Calcine Silene could rub on nearby shrubs and scorch them. Sheesa always thought it was a pretty plant, it wasn’t just an ingredient to be taken from. The Gardener kept it neatly pruned. Sheesa remembered pruning it too. She remembered using their oversized gloves so the sparking bulbs didn’t burn her while she clipped them.

“Oh yeah, and if you see it, don’t touch it, it would burn you.”

Kirin laughed, “I guess that makes sense.”

“Sounds good.” Gwyn said, calm.

I guess we’ll see, Sheesa thought. She wished they were foraging under better circumstances. The idea of hunting for ingredients with friends was something she would have loved a few years ago, but here it was too stressful to enjoy.

The mountain loomed over them now. Junrei had pointed them in the path to a trailhead to Lluvera. He said it was only a simple sign, but if they continued to walk towards, “*That tallest spruce there*,” on the horizon, they would find it without a problem.

They approached the mountain and left the plains behind. Thickets and dried out bushes stood in their way as they plowed towards the hillside.

Sheesa led the pack, she felt purpose driven. She scanned the horizon now and again for any sign of the flowers, but didn’t see a thing.

Gwyn was behind her, quiet. When Sheesa glanced back, Gwyn looked like she was struggling to keep up, and she was keeping it to herself. That worried her. Sheesa didn’t know what was going on, the only thing she could do now was get up the mountain.

“I’ve got an idea,” Kirin said to Sheesa with a pop. They had been walking in silence for a while beforehand. Sheesa had been crunching and mashing plans together. “What if we split up, I’ll walk *that way* a bit, then we’ll head the same direction? That way we can cover more ground looking for the Calcine.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Sheesa said, affirmingly. “Sorry I didn’t think of it earlier.”

“No big deal! I’ll just shout if I see something. I’ll stay in sight.” Kirin patted her shoulder before waving to Gwyn. He smiled just like usual, then bounded over shrubs and foliage to put a space between himself and the rest of them.

Sheesa spied Gara cutting through the brush behind him, like a color-shifting shadow.

They walked with Kirin at a distance for what felt like ages. Sheesa had some misgivings about *the team* being split up, it worried her for them to be apart for some reason.

When Kirin shouted, she looked up *fast*.

“Oy!” he shouted from cupped hands.

“*Did you find something?*”

“*Yeah, come tell me if I’m wrong.*”

They hustled over to where Kirin waved. He stood with his hands on his hips, “That’s it, right?”

Kirin stood next to a bush almost as tall as himself. A few thick woody stems shot out of the dirt and rose up without leaves. At the end of each branch, the stem fanned into green sprouts, and sharp leaves unfolded. Between leaves, hung *dark red* flowers. They almost looked black.

“This does not look like the Calcine Silene bush from my garden.”

“The leaves seemed right,” Kirin said, scratching his head. “I kinda pictured it smaller....”

“Yeah, me too,” Sheesa said.

Gwyn spoke up, “Well, did you try touching the flower?”

“She told me not to!”

At that moment, the breeze kicked up behind them. The wind whipped across the plain and battered against the mountain. The trees ahead of them fumbled back and forth in the wind.

When the air hit them, the bush shuddered and came to light. Sparks shot out like birds taking flight. They climbed in the air and fizzled out.

As Sheesa watched them, she had an epiphany.

“I just had a great idea.”

Chapter 13. Be Brave

The trailhead seemed like a side entrance. It was marked by a signet emblazoned on a single piece of wood sticking out of the ground. It looked like a lightning bolt coming up from a black dot.

“I don’t know what else it could be. Must be the way up,” Sheesa decided for them.

Where they stood they were just entering the tree line. The mountain rise had bulged, they had been walking uphill for the whole afternoon. The sun hadn’t yet set, but it fell behind the looming mountain in front of them. In the shadow, the three of them put on the cloaks Gwyn had bought them in town. Sheesa deliberately took her cloak out last. They were all red, but her’s

had little multicolored tufts on each strand of yarn. She was happy to have the one she liked, it was simple, but it brought some comfort to the cold.

They were hooded ponchos. On Sheesa, it was long enough for her to wrap herself up. The hood was big and hung low over her eyes, so she wore it down.

Sheesa could tell Gwyn was fading, she didn't know from what or why but it was evident. She was like a body without a mind. Sheesa figured if the curse spread to her heart or her head, it was over. *If it was up her sleeve yesterday, we don't have much time.*

"I think," Sheesa said to the group, "we should try and make it up the mountain tonight."

Gwyn didn't protest. She looked at Sheesa as if she were following orders.

Sheesa looked to Kirin, he gave her a nod back in agreement.

They started up the path. Sheesa walked in the back of the group now. She was carrying something *volatile* on her pack. She had ruthlessly harvested the Calcine Silene bush that Kirin had found earlier. Normally, she'd never take a whole plant and mince it up so aggressively, but this wasn't the time to put her values first. She'd taken every stem from the plant and hung them off her pack. They were all about five feet long. The only *fiery* part was the bottoms, near Sheesa's feet, she had bundled and bound them to her pack by the woody base of the stem.

Before she had seen the plant, she didn't have a plan. Sheesa could *maybe* recall the warming potion she had made years ago, but she doubted they'd be able to scrounge the ingredients. She didn't think that far ahead. Finding Calcine Silene so easily shocked Sheesa, and when she saw it blowing in the wind, she knew what to do about the ice, but that was for later.

The group made their way out of the woods and onto a stable stone path. It was *official*. More managed than Sheesa had imagined. Kirin led them out onto the wide path. It was more than big enough for them to walk side-by-side. Unlit stone lanterns stood in measured gaps on either side, they had pointy circular roofs over a little hollow where a flame would be.

"This is fancy," Kirin said, looking around impressed.

But before long the steps showed the different signs of age. The grey stone suddenly swapped to different materials, a pearly white tile made up a glob of the road, a wooden bridge over a gap in the bricks.

As they rounded a corner, the stone changed entirely to a scuffed, orange, reflective tile. Portions were destroyed and forgotten, but Sheesa thought it was much more impressive than the stone from before.

Even through the deep gouges and cracks in the tile, Sheesa could see the steamy clouds reflected above them as they walked.

I wonder if this was the original paving.

The sloping road washed out, a landslide maybe, had washed over the path. From there on, the stairs continued as dirt. Between levels, long shelves of rock held the step in place.

They made progress up the mountain quickly. Before long, the fog had settled in, and it was growing darker. Soon after, they saw the first of the ice. The tree branches were heavy with it, like a fruit tree with ripe weight.

Kirin was the one who slipped. He fell hard on his back with a yelp, but sprung back up instantly. "I'm good," he stopped Sheesa before she moved. "Just surprised me."

Sheesa slipped in another step. Her foot moved too far forward and she braced. Her pack pushed her off balance and she swung her arms wide to steady herself.

The ice was like air below her when she stepped. It slid from under her foot like the breeze.

Her back tensed and her knees hardened.

"Okay, I think it's time to begin." Sheesa took off her pack and unbound one of the branches of the Calcine Silene. "We'll walk in single file." *I hope this works.*

The branch was just long enough for Sheesa to hold like a broom. She took the stick side and waved the leaves and flowers. Lines traced in the foggy air before them.

Sheesa took the branch and dragged it along the ground, scrapping the head against the stone.

Fssstt! It popped like water on a hot skillet. Fiery bits of plant smoldered and drifted away in smoke.

Sheesa took a step forward, and instead of ice, only a wet puddle remained.

"*This is it,*" Sheesa said triumphantly, from her guts. The work was set out for her, and it was a relief. She had all the answers, now the only thing left to do was work.

Sheesa swept her way up the mountain, one step at a time. *It's more like raking,* she decided. It reminded her of the few times her and The Gardener had done *hard* labor, like when they built their new raised beds, shoveling dirt for hours started like something she could do, but eventually it was something her body did without her.

She paused, breathing heavily.

"Do you want me to take a turn?" Kirin called from behind her.

Sheesa turned, smiling, sweat mixed with the accumulating dew dripped from her nose. "Maybe in a bit, I'm on a roll." Sheesa was in a good mood, the hard work didn't put her down.

She put up her hood. Her breath came out the maw of the cloak like a great creature.

The first branch she had started with was giving out. It took more than one sweep across the ground in front of her to thaw the way. It was their only light, they didn't have a lantern, and as the Calcine Silene grew more baren, so did their light.

When it gave in, Sheesa tossed it aside into the dark.

"One sec," she huffed, as she pulled out the other. Reaching around on her pack made her tight muscles shake. She loosened it and held it out to Kirin, shaking it a bit to cast a light.

As the dark retook them, Sheesa saw him grab the branch.

"Got it."

"It's pretty straight forward," Sheesa said, with relief. She let her arms sink down to her sides, muscles melting.

"I've swept a few decks in my time," Kirin said, his tone was short in the cold, but still joking.

Sheesa expected Gwyn to chime in, but she didn't. Sheesa checked to make sure she was still there, and she was, like a ghost huddled in her cloak behind them.

As Kirin began sweeping, Sheesa saw him swing the flaming branch and was taken aback. *It looks incredible*, she thought to herself in surprise. She felt *proud*, maybe even a little cool to have come up with it.

Kirin was lit from below. The fog haloed him mysteriously with each strike. As he raked the ground ahead, a flash of tumbling flares kicked up off the side of the path. *Right. Left. Right. Left....*

It was something Sheesa had never seen before, and it was beautiful.

The mountain around them lit up strangely from the Calcine Light. *Junrei was right, it's definitely a sight worth a poem*. In the dark, Sheesa just caught shifting glimpses of the light in the ice clinging to every surface. She saw pine branches with every needle frozen in place. The rocks and ground and tree trunks and rubble beside the path came together under the same blanket of smooth glass, and the fire danced in it. The light appeared and transformed and shrunk and twisted in the icy reflections around them.

Gara walked beside Sheesa while Kirin was in front. The fur on her chest and tail was puffed out, specs of water clung to the tiny hairs.

They switched again when the Calcine Silene grew dim, all too soon for Sheesa. Her arms and back bemoaned the return to work. She was slower this round. Her strokes were loose, and lumbering, like she was swinging a weight.

It was a long hard walk.

Before the branch was dead, Kirin stopped her. "I'll take a turn if you want?" He was holding Gara over his shoulder.

Darkness fell when Sheesa stopped beating the branch, but strangely, light still hung above them. She could see the outline of Kirin's hair standing up, the cat ears over his shoulder, and Gwyn's shadow behind them. All of them looked up the mountain at the same time.

A warm orange light filled the air above them.

It's got to be Lluvera. Sheesa was ready to collapse, she didn't know what she'd find at the top of the mountain, but light like that meant *something*.

"I'll finish this up," Kirin assured them. He put down Gara with a gentle plop. She made a little noise as she leapt from his hands.

Kirin took the Calcine Silene from Sheesa and they plowed ahead up the last two bends in the path.

The road turned, the ice thinned. In the hazy light, they saw the facade of an expansive building. Wide columns stretched between the ground and the sloping, pointed roof. Bright red paint glowed from the light of the orange paper lanterns that hung from the building. The forest around them was cast in a moody red light. The rest of the building snuck away into the red fog, behind the trees and darkness. There was no telling how big the building was.

They didn't linger.

Kirin headed straight for the entry. It was a tall, white parchment double door. It swung open when he pushed.

Inside, the air was warm. The wood floor was shiny, all three of them were dripping little drops from their ponchos. As they stepped, their boots squeaked and echoed through the long hall. The building was silent aside from their noise, but the lanterns were all lit. Corridors branched out from the hall. Each looked the exact same to Sheesa.

“HELLO,” Kirin shouted suddenly, making Sheesa jump.

It surprised her, for some reason she had the feeling they were sneaking in. She called out too, “Is there anyone here?”

There was no response.

They stepped down the main hall towards the far end. Sheesa could see it was open to the air. A thick wood railing stood against more of the Lluvera fog they had just escaped from.

Out of nowhere, Sheesa heard buffeting wings behind her.

“AH!” Gwyn yelped.

Sheesa spun and saw a big bird hovering over Gwyn as she batted it away. It flapped deliberately above her. The bird had a beak as long as its body, the top was sky-blue, the bottom was black, it curved gently to a rounded point. Its belly shone brilliantly in the bright red room. It had jewel-like aqua and fresh-sprouts green on its stomach, with bands of yellow around its neck and tail feathers.

Gwyn ceased beating the bird away, and it stayed above her, beating its wings. As she looked to Sheesa and Kirin, it dropped back onto her shoulder, balancing clumsily with its wings wide.

As Gwyn hunched with another yell and Kirin scolded her, “Hey! Easy,” he said, walking up to the bird. He approached it gently, “Maybe it’s here to greet us?”

Sheesa looked to see if Gara was stalking the pretty bird, but she was nowhere to be seen. *Did she make it inside?*

At that moment, Sheesa saw a paw push between the big front doors. Gara smushed her face through and wriggled her long body in as the door shut. She sauntered in *poised*, uninterested in the bird perched on Gwyn’s shoulder. *Animals.*

The bird let out a short, instructive *Kaww*, and took off from Gwyn’s shoulder down a nearby passage.

“I’m with Kirin,” Sheesa said. “Let’s follow the toucan.”

They walked briskly down the hall together in a tight group. Sheesa didn’t like the feeling of the empty mansion, she had never seen such an elaborate building. It seemed *too big*. There was no reason in her mind for such a huge place to exist.

The bird waited for them at each turn. When it saw them round the corner, it cocked its long face, and took off down another hall.

This is a maze, Sheesa worried.

Before long, the toucan stopped guiding them. The last hallway they passed through had doors all along one side, on the other, a single green curtain moving gently in a threshold.

The toucan led them to the curtain, a see-through sheet of green cloth, and stood unmoving as they approached.

Sheesa could see the moss below the edge of the fabric, the doorway before them led outside.

“It’s like a bathhouse,” Gwyn said, heading through the curtain.

Sheesa followed. Through the green fabric, Sheesa saw the lake for the first time. The lanterns barely illuminated the water before it sank back into darkness. Wisps of steam collected and spun off the surface of the water. There were small privacy partitions of stacked stone in the water.

Leading down to the water there was a tiny fence on either side of a pebble path. It split up and led to each bath. Outside of the tiny fence, a miniature garden of moss grew. Sheesa liked the way it looked. It reminded her of a place beneath a little waterfall in the valley, but here the moss stretched like unbroken hillside.

Sheesa could feel the heat and humidity here, it was hard to bear. *This is where all that ice comes from.* The fog drifted down from here over the whole mountain. She wondered how much lake there was out there in the dark.

Gwyn walked up to the water, tugged off her boot and stuck her toe in. “It’s really warm.”

“I could use a bath,” Kirin said, stretching.

“I could use a bed,” Sheesa countered. She felt like if she sat in hot water she’d pass out. She wandered back into the Red Building without another word.

Their toucan had gone.

Across the hall, Sheesa tried a door and it opened. Inside, the floor had massive pillows laid out, bulging, with big tassels on each corner.

It was dark, but that was how Sheesa wanted it. Bag, boots, cloak. She pulled two of the pillows underneath her, and fell on them. The thick, soft fabric rubbed on her cheek like a comforting hand. Sleep fell on her like a blanket.

When she awoke, dim light fell from the skylight in the ceiling. *Everything is gray here.* Sheesa could see the midday-fog. It was like a void in the ceiling where the sky should be.

Kirin slept on his back across the room with Gara’s big head on his chest. Her head nodded up and down as he breathed.

Gwyn wasn’t in the room with them.

Sheesa saw clues from last night. There were towels on the floor, some folded, some not. They had big orange and white patterns. Beside them, a tray was set out with three ceramic cups.

Maybe someone showed up to greet us, Sheesa guessed. *Now Gwyn’s with some healer, and everything will be OK.* She wasn’t going to fret about her, they had made it to Lluvera.

It felt like morning, and Sheesa didn't want to sit around in this building anymore. Lluvera had a strange energy, Sheesa could feel it, and she wanted to be out *in it*.

She scrawled a note for Kirin in case he woke up alone. She ripped out a corner from a notebook page and wrote, "*Going out for a walk in the fog -Sheesa*"

She giggled under her breath as she imagined Kirin reading it.

She pulled on her boots, trying not to squeak them on the polished wood floor. When she reached for her cloak, she found it still wet from the night before. Sheesa wanted to wear it, even if it wasn't cold. When she lifted it up, she found the inside dry, and happily slipped into it.

She picked up her Herbalist's bag *again*, and slung it over her shoulders. She wanted to at least take a decent sample of the lake water, and didn't want to carry a jug of water around on her walk. It weighed on her just like it had been for days. She was ready for a break.

She opened the sliding door, and Gara looked up at her.

Bye Gara, she whispered, and closed the door.

Now, for the exit, Sheesa thought to herself. She started off in the direction they had come, but instantly knew she was lost. Every corridor had the same red walls and thick wood beams on the ceiling.

The people who made this place must know it's a maze. Plus it's huge, like it was built to hold hundreds of people. There were countless doors like the one her and her friends had slept in.

I'll just keep heading in the same direction, she decided, but she only found dead ends and new paintings hanging on the walls.

She turned and turned, growing more hopeless.

Eventually, Sheesa found a wall of windows, revealing the dense, dripping forest outside. Sheesa hustled down the hall with her hand dragging along the endless window sill.

She rounded the corner and smelled the outside air. She could hear the tiny sounds of the outside, an ambient buzz, the sound of dropping water. Sheesa picked up her pace. She ran in the big empty house like she owned it, her bag jangling behind her. She could see a way out ahead and bolted for it. *Finally*.

The opening was a tiny porch, like a covered step out into the woods. This side of the building was lined with them, each one had a red fence keeping the wild at bay. Outside, the trees and bushes pushed up against the building like a crowd. Sheesa flung herself over the barrier and through the brush into the green.

A branch tugged back her hood and the wet leaves licked her face and Sheesa was *happy*.

The air was warm, heavy, and alive. Sheesa slowed down, taking forest steps, careful, long strides over fallen branches, quiet.

She was more than comfortable navigating in the woods. *I'll remember that tree, with the knots like a sideways face. Then, left from there, around the murky pool covered in huge orange leaves....*

The trees were wild and untouched, there wasn't much on the forest floor to keep her from walking, no brambles to plow through like in her valley. Wild ferns grew in hulking masses, but Sheesa could just step right through their big drooping leaves.

Before long, Sheesa could see the lake between the trees. *Forest walker's intuition*, Sheesa thought proudly to herself.

She walked towards the lake, picking through trees, until she caught sight of something else moving.

It was tall, as tall as she was. She froze, and craned to see it.

It stepped high, and gracefully. It was a bird, a long necked heron. It had long feathers drooping off its tail. It was brown and black all over. It had a beak like a blade, long and pointed.

Sheesa could see it was carrying something. She watched, intrigued. The bird was picking its way along the forest floor, looking at the ground. After peeking around the knotted roots of a tree, it dropped what it had been holding deliberately.

Maybe it's food for a nest, Sheesa mused, but she had a feeling it wasn't.

The heron stood up, alert, then stepped away towards the lake.

Sheesa watched it go. She waited for five long breaths. *Okay, let's have a look.*

She retraced the heron's steps and saw the hollow between two thick roots. She saw a pool of water that had collected there, in that pool of water, Sheesa saw things swirling.

Could it be, Sheesa thought, daring to be charmed.

Before she had the chance to think, she heard the sound of beating wings, and knew the bird had returned.

Sheesa fled, as quietly as she could, leaping lightly from tree-root to stone. She dove behind a thick tree trunk and waited, squatting low, hoping to catch a glimpse and understand more.

She couldn't see the heron walk up, but heard it step, *one...two...three*. Then, there was a *plop*.

Sheesa moved like a snail, edging her eye around the tree.

When she saw the heron's face, she saw the heron looking back at her, with one *wide* side-eye.

They both stayed perfectly still. Sheesa's heart was thumping so hard it made her fidget. *Agh, please don't be scared*, Sheesa wished.

Defiantly, the heron dipped its long beak into the pool, and swung its head up, letting the water slide down its throat.

The sudden move spooked Sheesa, sending her backwards onto the wet forest floor.

She watched the heron gulp. As it swallowed, the bird changed. The heron, from head to tail, paled from brown to unstained white. Smoke-like vapor emanated from its wingtips as it settled into its new color. It rolled its shoulders, unfurled its wings, and fluffed up its long feathers, each one sticking up like a cactus needle.

The bird moved with new grace. It's long neck curved slowly back down, it's eye returned to Sheesa.

Sheesa saw it blink once. That was the only acknowledgement it gave her.

It spun its head around, and headed back from where it came. Only a few steps away, it mingled with the mist, and totally disappeared.

The heron turned into fog, she thought. She scanned the woods for a chance to see it again, but only heard the sound of its wings beating, farther and farther away.

Lluvera is a magic place, Sheesa thought, awestruck. *It made a potion.*

Sheesa recalled a salamander that would rub on poisonous leaves or something, but this was something *intelligent*.

She walked up to the hollow in the roots and looked into the water. There was a fat black beetle, a few nuts shaped like teardrops, a whole mangled flower with bright purple blooms, and a pile of shiny greenish stones that huddled at the bottom of the pool.

The first thing that popped into her head surprised Sheesa. It was Ascella's voice, but it wasn't something she had said. It went like, *The difference between an Herbalist and a Potion Master, is all in the guts. An Herbalist will figure out what a potion will do, a Potion Master has to be brave enough to try it themselves.*

Sheesa thought of the *Sleep* potion she had given Gwyn, the *nightmare* potion according to Ascella. *If I had tried it myself I would've known. Only one thing to do.*

At that moment, Sheesa got out a big jar with a screw off top. She dipped it in the pool of water, and drained as much as she could into the container. She shoved in all of the ingredients, the rocks hit the glass bottom with a high pitched *CHUNK*.

Here we go, Sheesa said to herself, as she took a swig of the heron potion.

Immediately, Sheesa was in a cold sweat. She looked down and saw the steam rolling off her. *If this works, I'll name it Heron's Step*. She felt light, as if she was detached from the ground. *My gosh*, Sheesa made a connection. *"A particular variant of mountain-top orchid petal used to 'Lighten one's feet'."* *From the Gardener's journal. I wonder if they've ever actually used it. Well, another note to ask them when I get home. In the meantime, I'm calling it Heron's Step.*

She felt good, almost like she was in the sea, like her feet might float out from under her.

Sheesa took a step but it felt like she leapt. She passed through a gap between trees that she couldn't possibly have squeezed through. Sheesa moved through the woods sideways, one arm outstretched forward, one trailing behind, like she was dancing. She laughed out loud, bubbly and amused. It was like a beautiful dream.

She skipped from stone to stone, swung from a tree branch, and slid below hanging boughs.

Sheesa came upon a scene that lifted her from the dreamlike forest run.

Before her, a tablet of slate descended like a plateau from the rooted water edge into the depths of the Lake. Next to the landing, stood a tiny wooden housing with a little door, open on it's hinge.

Sheesa drifted across the stone slab. She sat on her heels, bent over in front of the open door. Inside there was a single fat, perfectly round acorn.

Hm, cute, Sheesa thought. She dropped it in her bag, which she was happy to find was still on her back.

She looked out at the water from the landing, and decided to get in. It felt like the right thing to do, everything felt natural, she wanted to feel the heat from the bath.

She left her things behind the acorn hut, and walked slowly down the incline into the hot water. The heat made her feet feel stretched thin, her leg hairs stood up, and her brow dotted with sweat. She went down to her nose in the water. It smelled like the potion, but in the lake, she felt *grounded*.

She stared out at the water for what felt like a long time. She could see the layers of mist rolling around, closeby puffs blowing off quickly, and high up clouds lazily strolling by.

She turned around to look at the shore and jumped.

On the plateau where she had stood, a great beast lurched, rising and falling with huge breaths. It was a tiger, dangerous red with stripes painting its face. It was enormous, Sheesa had never seen a tiger before, but this was colossal. From where she was to the shore, she could see it's huge mouth open as it licked its nose.

In its expression Sheesa saw something that reminded her of the beast she had seen in the valley, but this was different. This face held malice, predatory intensity that shrunk Sheesa into *prey*.

She was tense, and still. She was only peeking out of the water, but she was right in front of the beast. It could surely see her, *The Heron's Step. Thank Herons*.

She dared to move, *Maybe it can't see me at all*. She lurked sideways, off the stone plateau. The turf underfoot became smoothed pebbles that clacked under her steps.

The wide face of the tiger panned directly towards Sheesa. It let out a noise she didn't expect. It sounded like a grumble, a yowl but much deeper than Gara's voice could muster.

In a moment, the steam blew off the surface of the lake before them behind a forceful wind that came, and went. Sheesa could just see the other side, much too far to swim, but in sight. The surface of the water looked bone-white under the cloud filled sky.

The tiger mumbled something to itself, vocalizing inside its huge chest like a deep underground spring gurgling. It slunk into the lake and snaked away into the deep water. It passed Sheesa by, and she felt the tightness in her body vaporize like the mist.