

**HOLISTIC ECOLOGY (A NOVEL)**

by © Megan Elizabeth Boothby A Thesis submitted  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This novel engages with the foundations of material ecocriticism as described by scholars like Donna Haraway, Serpil Opperman, and Anna Tsing. It explores, through a creative practice of fiction, aspects of queer ecology, monster theory, and disability theory, particularly with regards to neurodiversity and neuroqueerness, in the mode of M. Remi Yergeau and Nick Walker. It also draws on current trends in biology and popular science writing, such as fungal communication and cephalopod intelligence, and on tropes from speculative and post-apocalyptic fiction and the Weird. This novel seeks to provide examples of ecological entanglement and nonhuman kinship through imagined assemblages and mutating bodies. The central argument of this narrative is that the apocalypse, or the post-apocalyptic world as understood in popular imagination, need not be hopeless, or a final ending to sentience and emotionality. The “hopeful apocalypse” of this novel envisions an arc of more-than-human becoming – a journey from fearing the fictional fungal mutations to embracing them as a gift. The fungal webs and monstrous bodies of this imagined future allow for communication that transcends human language, and they facilitate continued human and nonhuman survival.

## GENERAL SUMMARY

This novel takes place in a post-apocalyptic Newfoundland, an island much altered by a fungal pathogen called the “Myco Mutations.” It is a fictional attempt to imagine a “hopeful apocalypse” – a world in which what it means to be human, physically and psychologically, is able to change radically. This novel uses mutation and fungal biology as metaphors, to explore what it could be like if humans could truly communicate and collaborate with nonhuman peoples. The characters of Harriet, Clayer, and a talking cuttlefish named *blushoftangerine* are exiled from “the Mollusk,” a human city inside a giant shell. On their journey westward across “the Rock,” they encounter a vivid array of biological and ecological changes. Their interactions with the “monsters” of the Myco Mutations lead them to discover answers about the apocalyptic past, the mysterious Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement (H.E.R.E.), and possible futures beyond the human.

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*I guess I'm trying to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us.*

–Ursula K. Le Guin, “Deep in Admiration”

*Mycelium is a way of life that challenges our animal imaginations.*

–Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*

*I see a wave breaking upon the limits of the word.*

–Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

## **Part 1**

### **Individual**

*[ridged kelp-green, teal with yellow eye-hood papillae]*

## CHAPTER 1

This world is full of monsters, and I am one of them. I lick the blood off my palms like one of the devilcats that hunt in the hills. Forest is still. Forest is watching me warily, appreciatively, the way it watches all its predators. I pull the bird's ribcage apart slightly and fill the now-empty cavity with soil and dry leaf litter. Millions of microbes descend upon my gift with invisible alacrity. Later, after my bare feet have padded silently away from here, smaller scavengers will come and pick at the skin, pale beneath parted feathers. I hum a tuneless series of noises as my fingernails scabble in the dirt. My skin is tough. Tough, on the pads of my hands and feet, my jutting knees, but still too pale, too vulnerable to the sun. Nan used to rub a soothing salve on my shoulders, in the hottest months, after the heat would scar and blister them.

Forest flutters. A speckled bird alights on a sagging branch of birch above me. The bird's framework is turquoise green, mostly circles. Now that I see it, have singled it out with my eyes, I can feel its heartbeat specifically. I focus my mind and exhale, pushing energy out of the palm of my hand and into the ground, into the Whisper Web, reaching towards the bird. She shifts on her branch, her shuffled feet an acknowledgment.

Now we are speaking.

Now she is a Bird, not a bird.

We look at each other, this Bird and I. A squirrel chitters to the left behind me. All around us Forest heaves and breathes and rumbles. In every direction, I see the framework of every thing, alive and un.

Nan named it that – framework. 'Framework' is an old-world word. It is always there, to me, these wisps of shape and colour underlying and animating every thing,

sometimes pale spirals of smoke, sometimes shapes with edges, sometimes both. It makes my vision of Forest full of motion, even when most of its bodies are still. I understand what all framework means like the colours are part of my own body, itching at my brain or caressing the back of my neck.

At this moment, somewhere, a water snake twitches in its sleep. A fox leaps over a vole. Birds of all kinds reanimate after naps, their subtle sounds overlapping. A thousand heartbeats, each distinguishable.

Forest pulses.

The Bird is not upset with me for eating one of her kind. She would respect me less if I didn't. This is the way of things, and right now she does not fear me. I stand, ready to leave the carcass for the cheerfulness of worms. But before I can take a single step, a moan deafens the world.

I know this sound too well.

It reverberates down from way high in the distant hills, off in the west, this cry. Bird looks up, as do I. Forest grows even stiller, and the Bird takes off, gone into the other direction's air, connection severed, a bird once more. The moaning comes again, and a great, grating thunder. It is the sound of mountains moving, and of the monster that moves them.

I shatter my stillness. I am fleet. I run through Forest to the lakeshore and clamber up the tallest scraggly fir, its branches broad and sticky with gummed sap. This Tree and I have been friends for many years, and I know its paths even with my eyes distracted. As I pass the lower levels of the canopy, I have a clear view of what wakes, a giant to the east,



its tree-covered shoulders fashioned from boulders. The land aches with the open sore of its rising. Raw dirt and bedrock, gaping and dark.

Another one. Recently, there have been more and more.

I stay in the Tree to study the monster, making its way down the coast of the Great Lake, away from me. It is long and round-topped, like a can of beans with an upside-down bowl on top. Two arms, vaguely human, crush knuckles into the ground and the water and help propel its stumpy legs forward. The monster is tall enough that its bowl-head disappears into the clouds, but even from so far away I can see that there is more to it than stone and soil and root. Great snaking limbs, greyish purple and sometimes red, writhe around its upper half, moving faster than the rest of the giant is moving. It is like there are giant beings inside the even gianter being, flinging loose boulders away and tidying house. Making their moving mountain the kind of space they want to travel in. This mass of monsters makes another sound, like the keening of a sporebuck, but so much louder, so much deeper. In that moment, the monster's call is the saddest thing I have ever heard. It sinks into my chest and raises the hairs on my arms.

Shivering, I watch it slouch its way east until it could be just another hill on the horizon.

The sun is setting. I hear the screech of a myco below, in a neighbouring tree. I screech back, no doubt confusing them. I press my forehead into this Tree's bark. I am tired, and I wonder, not for the first time, whether I should do something in response to the increase in monster wakings – pack up my meager cache of food and tools and leave, maybe. The monsters always go east, and I could go west. I could run away.

But I decide, as I always do, that it is safer to stay where I am, to stay hidden. All of us have learned this lesson, us creatures of Forest. Stay hidden until it is absolutely necessary that you flee. Freeze before flight before fight, and even then, only if you have to.

I swing down from the Tree and begin the walk towards the house that Nan built. I do not always sleep in the house but tonight, after listening to the mountain monster's moans, I want to feel enclosed, covered. The house is coated in thick, brilliant moss and rests low under shading hemlocks. It is almost difficult to see, these days. Inside, the floor is damp and clumps of mushrooms and witch's butter are sprouting on the planks. Grey lichen grows on the sides of the bed I slept in as a child.

Nan is buried in the hill behind this house, the last human I ever saw, the spring of the year she told me I was 15 years old. There have been no humans since. None stopping in, none passing through – not even the scant sign that one had. I gave up looking for human traces several winters ago. Maybe three winters, maybe four or five. Time only matters to me now in knowing what is growing where and how soon the snow will come.

Arriving, I drink at the stream, bending my whole face down to the surface. I am unsettled. After splashing water about my body, washing off bird blood, I slip through the doorway and into a house of memory, now dim and silent and rotting. I curl up in my old bed and hug an insect-eaten blanket under my chin, knees to my chest. Far distant now, the monster moans again, a ghost-sound, heading somewhere only it knows, driven by its own secret reasons.

Myco are chattering and whistling in the trees outside Nan's house. I wonder if they followed me here, and if they'll try to come indoors. This thought makes me nervous. I am wary of the myco; I can never understand what they want.

I inhale, rich air that smells of damp life. All around me are the movements of Forest. Small white mushrooms push up through the mattress next to my sleeping face, pulsing with gentle orange framework, reaching upward. The myco groom each other outside, cooing and muttering, nestled on high branches. Somewhere, a devilcat chases a shaggy, antlered sporebuck along the crest of a ridge, scenting prey. Forest cocoons us all in the multicoloured web of its framework.

My home is full of monsters, but it is the only home I have. The planet writhes and grumbles tonight, like all nights, restless and jaded, tossing and turning. The planet is dreaming – following its many consciousnesses down into its black-clay burrows and on through its wet warrens, into its caves and root-balls and pungent, secret places. The planet dreams of waves crashing, and of the sound thylafoxes make in the dark, screaming and cackling. The planet dreams of its own rocky heart, and its damp, amphibious skin, malleable and expanding, like the yolk of an egg.

The planet breathes. It rumbles far below me. Yes, the planet itself is a monster getting ready to wake, and I am a small creature curled up on top of it.

## **CHAPTER 2**

Dr. Harriet Willow is on her way to interview a squid.

Her research for the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement, colloquially referred to as 'H.E.R.E.,' occasionally requires her to conduct 'cultural-historical context

interviews.’ In them, she’s supposed to try to implement what she’s learned in her studies out in the ‘real world’ – Dr. Netmaker’s term. Every few months, she dutifully seeks out a cephalopodic citizen willing to discuss Colour with her, its nuances, its rules, its poetry and art, and so on. But what’s most important about these interviews – the reason she can’t just ask her friend and lab assistant *blushoftangerine* – is that these citizens always have stories to share that come from outside H.E.R.E. New data. Legends, myths, cultural traditions, tales from elders, and sometimes, on a lucky day, passed-down Colours and their meanings. Although Harriet is first and foremost a biologist and biolinguist, when she’s performing this kind of work she fancies herself a bit of an archivist, or a sociologist. Cataloguing cultural history, as it were.

Every Colour is a story encapsulated, even ceph names. Especially ceph names.

Since the Colour language in which cephalopods communicate is purely visual, their names are combinational signifiers that include the Colours themselves, the ways in which the Colours travel across the skin, and the duration of each pattern. Obviously, this is difficult to communicate in verbal languages, like the ones humans use. So that’s why, out loud in Molluskan, ceph ‘names’ are all phrases of colourful description, ‘translated’ from the visual to the verbal. Or, at least, this is the linguistic compromise multispecies society has achieved. Every interview she does adds to this as well. The more Colour they document, the better at translation they can become.

However, today’s volunteer has been referred to her by an octopus friend of *blushoftangerine*’s, which is already enough to make her suspicious. Harriet has worked exclusively with squid and cuttlefish in a professional capacity ever since a gang of

octopuses – posing as students – robbed one of H.E.R.E.’s genetics labs and sold the editing equipment on the dark market, a few years ago when she was still a lab assistant herself.

These kinds of crimes and schemes just give the Phyla another reason to press on H.E.R.E. about whether their use of old-world technologies is really “necessary.” Whether it causes more harm than good. If the Phyla had it their way, all the computers and sequencers and microscopes would be retired into the archives for preservation, and the city would be able to “move forward with what we realistically have, instead of wasting our resources and our most intelligent researchers on the past.” That was a direct quote; Harriet had listened to Chordata give a rallying speech last moon, backed by Basidiomycota and Cnidaria. So, the fact that some octopuses – whose people had the most to lose if tech started moving backwards – had added more fuel to that political fire? Well, she just doesn’t trust an octopus to think about long-term consequences.

The squid she’s on her way to meet lives way down in the south end of the city, and in the lower levels, no less. Harriet dislikes going south. South end, adapical, mouthside, fishbound – this area of the city has many names, but none of them really convey its thick smell of sweat and cooking and waste and smoke – its busyness. So many bodies, filling so much space, with enough room in the Siphuncle for carts and hydraulic vehicles to move down a thoroughfare, shouting to clear the way of pedestrians – the jostling throngs comprised of all citizen species.

Crowds make Harriet tense. Despite the saying “nothing’s sexy above 60,” she rarely strays south of Septum 75, and when she does, it’s only because she’s headed outside, or, like today, because her research requires her to.

“He’s a bit rough around the edges,” *blushoftangerine* had told her, only slightly apologetically, “but don’t let that deter you. Even I’ve heard of this squid, in passing. They say he knows everything about everyone in the Colour circles.”

All around Harriet there are people, hurrying up and down the Siphuncle, north and south, entering and exiting from the cameral openings, the perpendicular side streets. It is loud. She swipes at a few wispy, tight curls of dark hair that have frizzed out around her temples, which only succeeds in plastering them to the light sheen of sweat on her forehead. She stops walking and pushes up the sleeve of her pale beige H.E.R.E.–issue coat to double-check the address on her left forearm. She keeps a lot of day-to-day notes on her own beige, freckled skin, what with paper being so expensive. This morning, before catching the express Tram from H.E.R.E., she had scribed on her skin in coprinopsis ink, made from crushed inkcup mushrooms, the words *yellowswirltosunrise, Camera 52–4*. That’s the camera south of Septum 52, below on level four. The Siphuncle, though never referred to by number, is technically level 10. So she’s heading six stories down into the underlevels. She shivers, but squares her shoulders.

She takes a few purposeful strides and promptly gets knocked over.

It’s a kid, getting thrown out of a market stall. They’ve stumbled into her and both of them go sprawling. Harriet thinks, *this is why I don’t come adapical*.

But nothing else happens. Nobody even seems to notice right away, bustling past.

“Sorry, miss,” says the kid who’s fallen into her, standing up and dusting off dirty trousers. They offer her a hand. Harriet has no idea of the scruffy child’s gender, but they’re human and seem to be around 11 years old. She helps herself up, doesn’t take the hand.

“Are you alright?” she asks, looking over at the doorway to the stall, just one of many crude openings carved out of the limestone walls lining the Siphuncle. A human man is standing in it next to a wooden stand of root vegetables, arms crossed over a muscular chest, glaring at them.

“The individual is fallacy,” she calls to him, hoping to soothe his distrust with a bit of pandering. The man answers the call-and-response in the standard way.

“The Entanglement holds us all.”

Then, as Harriet turns away, an ape approaches him and distracts his attention, grunting something and gesturing.

“I’m okay,” says the kid. Harriet doesn’t trust them, doesn’t want to be part of this, but also doesn’t want them to come to harm. She places a guiding hand on their back and begins to steer them down the Siphuncle a little, trying to put some space between them and the shop. But the kid digs in their heels and stares up at her. “He wouldn’t let me buy a turnip!”

“Did you have enough shells to pay?” Harriet says, then kicks herself internally for judging by appearance so thoughtlessly.

“Of course I did! My mum sent me with extra! But he said I was dirty and he pushed me really hard.”

“Look, why don’t you just try another stall,” she says. “I’ve got to be off.” But the kid isn’t listening to her anymore. They’re staring behind her, back at the market, with wide eyes. There’s a growing tension in the air, more than Harriet’s own anxiety, she realizes. Voices are raised. Harriet begins to turn around, but then, just as her gaze is in motion, she snaps back to the kid’s face, does a double take. She could have sworn, in that hazy split

second, that the human child's eyes had blinked horizontally, like a reptile's. "Hey," she says, "Do you--?" But the unsettled murmuring at the stall erupts into full-fledged shouting, and without another word the child turns and disappears into the rapidly thickening crowd. Harriet shakes her head to clear it and tries to piece together what is happening. The shopkeeper is in a full screeching match with the first ape who approached him – a greying chimpanzee in a pink robe – and a flock of avians, magpies and ravens, seem to have joined in, all hurling outrage. A couple of humans have sided with the shopkeeper. "It's in everybody's best interest!" one of them is yelling at the ape, who shrieks and signs something Harriet can't see with furious hands. "Speciesist undertones!" squawk the magpies and ravens. "Conspiracy nonsense!" One of the humans in the crowd, behind Harriet, shouts, "It's real! We can't ignore it!" This is all too much for her. She feels boxed in, and it's enough to trigger her flight instinct. She whirls and weaves her way through the people – human, ape, corvid, and even a few cephalopods in their wheeled or legged hydraulic tanks. She speed-walks down the Siphuncle for several septa, until she can no longer hear the shouting, and then she slows and pulls up her sleeve again.

*yellowswirtosunrise, Camera 52–4.*

She walks to the nearest septal sign, a painted wooden plaque hanging from a metal rod drilled into the septa's limestone. The septal signage, and in fact, most signage in the city, is made by the people that live nearby. Each camera is responsible for maintaining the signs, wastebins, and general cleanliness of their sector, and someone here clearly has a love for the historical. The sign is yellow with rich black lettering, heavy on the curlicues: 56–Siphuncle. She sighs and keeps walking south, towards Septum 55, trying to put that kerfuffle out of her mind. The air is heavy with steam and smoke, with the conflicting



smells of raw fish and baking bread. Harriet may hate this wider end of the city, but there is something to be said for how alive it feels, she thinks. How bright it is, with more skylights carved out of the distant ceiling's stone.

All around her, as she walks, the city wakes and shakes itself, its nearly three million residents and hidden production sectors rumbling and writhing, high above and deep below. Children of several species dart past, giggling and cawing. Vendors advertise in shouts about their wares. The lifts rattle and clank, going up and down each septum on hydraulic trackways. She relaxes, just a little. Even mouthside, many aspects of the city are familiar.

This city is home.

Harriet lives in the Mollusk. The Mollusk is both the name of the city, and the physical container of the city itself. In the old-world – when this island, the Rock, was still called New-found-land – a great orthoconic cephalopod, a de-extinct and overgrown *Cameroceras*, had heaved itself up onto the land and died. Like a nautilus, but with a cone-shaped shell instead of a spiralled one. And this cone-shaped shell had been full of hollow chambers for buoyancy, chambers called cameral openings that now served as the city's streets and chambers.

The legend goes that the Mollusk had sacrificed itself so that one day people could live inside its remains. But now the Mollusk is more than a safe haven for intelligent species – it's the only haven left, as far as anyone knows. The city, inside its fossilized shell, is 22 kilometres long and nearly a kilometre high at the open mouth of the cone, which partially collapsed generations before Harriet's time. The Mollusk is so vast as to be its own mountain range, cutting the narrow Isthmus in half and separating the Foothold of the Avalon from the rest of the Rock. As a student of H.E.R.E., Harriet knows that H.E.R.E.

itself, which is in the pointed end of the Mollusk – the adapertural end – rests atop of a place that was once called Chance Cove. Southeast of the Mollusk lie the Bellevue barrens, one of the few other names that match the ones from the old-world maps.

Not many people care about these details anymore. Or at least, not people outside of H.E.R.E. The words of history and biology have come to mean other things. But Harriet has always loved categories and tidiness, and she treats the history of the Mollusk with the same pragmatic dutifulness as her science. She can list all the old families and phyla – the real ones, not the titles of the city’s government officials. She has spent a socially unacceptable number of hours pouring over old taxonomical lists in H.E.R.E.’s library, memorizing the genera and species, habitats and body forms, of hundreds of creatures that no longer exist. The glossy colour photographs make the back of her neck tingle, her brain hum. Sometimes she cries a little, at night in her bunk, for the lost colours of butterflies, or the slate-blue feathers of a great grey owl she’ll never see. She knows that very little of what’s in her old textbooks and field guides remains. They are simply relics now, dusty antiquities.

Still, Harriet loves the Mollusk. Not every part of it, not the busy parts, of course, but she loves its long, conical, layered cave, loves the way its narrower passages smell of rock and groundwater. She loves the way the Siphuncle slices the city in half, one long road, which, several centuries ago, had shot seawater up and down the chambers of the living cephalopod’s body. And she loves the feeling of being enclosed on all sides, except for the distant skylights, covered over with some kind of durable fibreglass by the people who had fossilized and emptied out the shell in the first place.

She reaches Septum 54 without incident. When the lift comes down from the higher levels, she boards, alone, and clenches her fists by her sides as the clunky iron platform descends through a rough hole in the floor of the Siphuncle, and any hint of the distant sun vanishes.

The septal lifts are jerky, and preprogrammed to stop at every level, going all the way down, then all the way back up, and so on. Down on level 1, the base of the shell, is where the Tram runs on a wood and iron track through a dark, low-ceilinged tunnel, from the mouth to Septum 60 to the hat and back again. These two systems comprise the extent of public transit in the Mollusk. You can go end-to-middle-to-end and you can go base-to-ceiling. To get anywhere else, you have to walk, or catch a ride along the Siphuncle in some haphazard mechanical creation.

Harriet disembarks on level 4 and stands for a moment in the smoky light. The subterranean cameras of the Mollusk are always dim. The levels and the septa of the Mollusk's shell form a grid, and sometimes the cameral streets have a stone floor formed by fossilized cameral deposits, but it's much more common for cameras to be deep chasms criss-crossed with metal catwalks and swinging rope bridges, with dwellings built into the septum walls on either side.

This is what Camera 52-4 looks like.

She heads down a catwalk on the left. There are lightbulbs strung on a wire along the rough limestone walls. Sometimes the lights flicker just as Harriet passes them, like it's planned, and her heartbeat stumbles. Her footsteps echo softly on the metal grating of the catwalk that has been nailed into the rock wall, branching off at random intervals to cross the camera, all these walkways built and rebuilt and cobbled together by years of citizens.

In the open area of a camera, like this one, it's possible to look up or down 5 or 10 levels at once, other metal-bridging walkways criss-crossing below and above you while a stale wind blows up from the Tram, and the cave systems that have been excavated into the earth below the Mollusk's shell. These sections can be just as noisy as the Siphuncle, the cacophony of life echoing vertically, but Camera 52-4 is subdued, just waking up. It smells of old rock and deep cave, but also of vegetable stews and tanning chemicals and woodsmoke. Chimneys are a complicated affair in the Mollusk, and aren't always functional. Harriet smells bodies and waste and mechanical grease and strong herbal salves. Looking up, she sees lines of laundry strung across girders, pale sheets fluttering in the updraft. On all sides of the vertical shaft there are windows and doorways, haphazard ladders, and coveted balconies. Harriet loves looking at balconies, these little glimpses into other lives. There are balconies with the freshly-dyed multicolour bunting of New Dayers draped over them, balconies with piles of metal scrap, balconies with the sigil flag of the Blue Iron Ring Brotherhood, and balconies with baby cradles or knitting old folks. She sees a human carving a long spear of wood, a pair of dirty-faced teenagers arm-wrestling, a gang of avians harassing an elderly ape for free bugs during her morning grooming. Looking down, Harriet can watch the tops of people's heads on their way to wherever they are going. A gust puffs up from below. For a second, all the other smells are overwritten by deep-earth. The Mollusk is a city that never lets its citizens forget where they are.

Harriet stops a human woman carrying a baby in a sling.

"I'm looking for *yellowswirltosunrise*?"

The woman points her to the right dwelling. Harriet zigs and zags across the catwalks and wobbly rope bridges and comes to stand on a wide stone balcony shelf with a proper wooden door installed in the septum wall.

She knocks.

The Mollusk is everything to everyone left living here. Thinking sociologically, Harriet has always thought it made sense that a religious devotion to cephalopods is common here, but she has never attended a service herself. She knows that several groups compete for dominance: the New Dayers, the Sea Speakers, and the Skin Sightists.

It is a member of the Skin Sightists who opens the door.

The young man is human, with dark curly hair and bare arms. Harriet knows he is a Skin Sightist because of his tattoos: a cephalopodic eye, with a slatted horizontal pupil, on each cheekbone.

“Yes?” says the man. He’s only a little younger than Harriet, she thinks.

“Hi, I’m Harriet. I’m here to speak with *yellowswirltosunrise*. We have an interview scheduled.”

“Oh, you’re the one from H.E.R.E. I’m sorry, I’m afraid he will no longer see you.”

*Frackin’ unreliable octopus contact*, Harriet thinks. Out loud, she says, “But I’ve come quite a long way, across the city, and I thought —”

“He will not see you. *yellowswirltosunrise* is a prophet and things have... progressed since you made your arrangements with him.”

“What things? Look – sorry, what’s your name?”

“Izik.”

“Look, Izik, I promise you, I’m not just some random scientist. I really do care about your, uh... prophet’s stories and language, and I won’t do anything to dishonour or discount them.”

“I can’t let you in. We are only granting access to the truly devoted.”

*What nonsense*, Harriet thinks. But she sighs, looks Izik straight in the eyes – his real, human eyes – and says, “What if I told you that I am more of a convert than anyone else you know?”

He says nothing, but one eyebrow rises, intrigued. Harriet rolls up her sleeve, her right sleeve this time. Izik stares, his eyes wide with brief confusion, then rapture.

The top of Harriet’s right forearm is a skin graft from wrist to elbow, one winter old, its borders of scar tissue still puckered with the memory of staples. But the new rectangle of skin there is not human skin.

It is cuttlefish skin, and it’s pulsing with ribbons of vibrant Colour.

### CHAPTER 3

I have not always lived in Forest.

There was a time, mostly lost to my memory now, when I lived in a village of humans, and I was taught to read and write a bit of English, and do simple sums, but mostly practical skills, like how to weave and sew and skin and tan and hunt, with spears and bows and knives. I had a group then, in the way that the myco have troops, the sporebucks have herds, and the dogrels have packs, and it was bigger than just Nan and me. There was a woman who used to carry me on her shoulders, and there was a man, or several people, who fed me and other children together on a pelt laid out before a fire. Mashed corn and

roots and slippery bits of meat, cooked and oily. In my hazy recollection of that time there is no blood on my skin, no sound of cracking bones as I pry apart a ribcage. I was warm most of the time. But there was also far too much volume, too much framework and sensation. Even thinking of it makes me wince. I have one memory of screaming, just screaming, for hours, because the shapes and sounds were too much, and because humans were so noisy, exuding so much more information than they needed to, until it hurt me.

I do not remember why we left. The way Nan spoke, sometimes, I assumed it was a monster attack, and everyone else was killed. It does not bother me much, not knowing. When we left, I was maybe 7 winters old, and I was mostly mute, and after we built the house, I spent my days in the trees and the mud and the lake. I brought home meat for us, even so young. I found that the stone spearheads we'd brought with us only slowed me down, so though I still carried weapons for protection, I started hunting as an animal hunts, waiting on branches to jump down atop my prey, landing on its back and biting into its throat or snapping its neck. In the water I would float, so still, like a heron or a snapper, and snatch fish with my bare hands, leaping up to dash them on a rock.

I discovered that the framework could be used as a tool. Even animals perfectly camouflaged held some small glow. I would spot a rabbit in the brush by its tiny orange grid, glistening like spider silk. Or I would notice that most grouse had purple framework of a particular bluish shade, and pounce based on their unique colour alone.

There is really only one rule when hunting, and that is to avoid monsters, both to eat and get eaten by. Monsters are not edible. The most obvious way to tell comes from knowing that only animals with hot blood can become monsters. So snakes, frogs, turtles, or fish – if you can catch them – are always good to eat. Then, if it is a bird or a furred thing

you've caught, usually size is enough to tell – big bodies are monsters, and small bodies are meat. But sometimes I'll think I've caught a perfectly ordinary squirrel and I'll cut it open to find it full of fungus, or writhing worm-like fibres, or slimy moss. Or I'll see a rabbit with two extra limbs and a crest of orange mushrooms between unusually long ears. I've even seen a songbird with small spiked antlers of bone poking out of its yellow feathered head. And so, the rules are becoming less clear. In the summers since Nan died, all of these things seem increasingly common, just as the giants in the mountains rising is more common. I have been trying not to dwell on it. If even my prey becomes monstrous, I'm not sure what I will have left to eat.

It's not that monsters don't have flesh; they do. But it's spongy or mucky or toxic, and smells pungent, and it will leave you feverish and vomiting, or, in the worst cases, dead.

The larger monsters – called, by Nan, devilcats, bloodbears, sporebucks, thylafoxes, and dogrels – are often red on the outside, a mix of bald muscle and mushroom and a clear slime that gathers like the pus in a warm-blooded wound. Sometimes they are corded with roots, tendons on their outsides instead of their insides. All manner of fungus and lichen and bone grows out of their faces, each one different-looking. Monsters don't need to camouflage. They eat each other and are equally matched. You can see one coming and still have nowhere to hide.

Nan's list does not name the only types of monsters. Not even close. But she taught me that 'Devilcats' always have long sinuous tails, like whips, that are spiked with poison quills. They can climb trees. Sometimes they have myco-like wings. 'Bloodbears' are bulky and stout, and stay on the ground. They have rounded ears and snuffling snouts. They can



grow as big as the cabin, but aren't too bright. When I was young, they would often lumber by harmlessly, on their way to who knows where.

Sporebucks have hooves, and antlers, and those are their only qualifiers. There are as many types of sporebuck as there are leaves on a tree. Thylafoxes have bony tails and narrow snouts. They are often striped or furred or whiskered. And dogrels are the smallest of the common monsters. Dogrels aren't much bigger than a human, or a myco, but they run on all fours, so they're lower to the ground. Like sporebucks, there are a hundred varieties of them, but they aren't really dangerous unless you get stuck with a whole pack of them at once.

The Great Lake surely has its own monsters, but they live in the deeps and I have never dared the deeps, for that good reason. In the shallows, where I fish, there are only cold-blooded creatures, who are not monsters, though some are very large. I've seen snappers whose shells are so wide you don't even realize you're swimming over one until suddenly you see the bottom again. And once I saw a sturgeon as long as a fallen tree. But I feel safer sculling over the algal green shell of a snapper, watching its mouth lying open in wait, than I do walking past a tree full of myco.

You can't trust us warm-bloods.

When we had first come to Forest, and I brought back food, Nan had decided not to ask how I hunted, so long as we ate well. She was wary of me, despite our fierce love made solid by a smaller pack, just two humans clinging to each other. I would feel her watching me as I dug in the dirt and spoke with Forest and its creatures. When I grew taller and matched her in size, she would sometimes move cautiously around me, as though she were afraid I would turn and twist *her* neck instead of a bird's or a fish's.

I would have never. Loyalty to the group, protection of my companion, was the most important thing. That's simply instinct. That's common sense.

When I was somewhere between 12 and 13 winters, Nan started losing her hearing, and we spent many days developing a hand-language so that we could communicate, without the verbal sounds that I did not often make and she was more and more unable to hear. By the time the next snows fell and settled their hush upon the world, we, too, descended into silence.

Those last few years with Nan were blissful to me. Cushioned in quiet, and old and strong enough to venture days away on my own. I would cut wood for Nan's fire, bring water from the stream, hunt for her, and then clean and stretch the hides. With only small game having proper skin, it took many hides to make a jacket, or a pair of pants. Nan would sew, and cook, and sometimes brush my white hair out till it was smooth, then cut it as short as she could with a sharp flint. I used to purr like an animal when she brushed my hair. It is one of the things I miss – family grooming, like the myco do.

But Nan got sick, because she was old and life in Forest is not easy. I do not have a word for exactly what kind of sickness it was, but it came fast and took her away faster. I was thankful she did not linger, emptied of water and food and unable to bear any, whimpering in the night. On her last evening I found that old wooden comb and brushed her hair for her, the wiry strands black and grey. She put her hand over mine, the darkness of her skin stark against the uncanny whiteness of mine, so pale, like a puffball mushroom. Like a maggot. I did not like to see that. I did not like to be touched. But I let her hold my hand then, as she was dying. I did not want to lose her.

“Clayer,” she whispered. It had been a long time since I had heard a voice, as opposed to seeing one in hands and face. “Clayer, I have to tell you something.”

I made the hand gesture for *go on*. Her voice was out of pitch, but clear enough.

“My daughter, your mother –”

A monster screeched in the dark woods, followed by the sounds of a scuffle in fallen leaves.

“I don’t think she knew what would happen. She wasn’t...in her right mind. Or maybe there was something in her, already. Something forgotten, something...cumulative. I don’t know. But when you were born... Clayer, she did love you. And *I* love you. I always will.”

“I know,” I said, out loud, making the accompanying hand gesture. Nan noticed my mouth, smiling slightly at my spoken words.

“Don’t forget how to talk, my little bird. Practice your English.”

I nodded.

“And don’t trust humans right off, but if you find some that are worth it, go with them, okay? Leave this place, if you can. Promise me.”

I did not answer. Nan’s grip tightened around my hand, however weakly.

“Promise me you’ll remember that you’re human, Clayer.”

I nodded then, and put my other hand flat over my heart. *Promise.*

Tears began to run down the side of Nan’s face. She closed her eyes, her breathing slow and laboured.

“Oh, my child. I don’t want to leave you. I fear what you’ll become, alone out here. I – I don’t want to leave you alone. Alo–” She retched.

I sat with her for some hours more, until her breathing stopped. I did not let go of her hand. Only when the fire went out and the cabin fell into darkness did I stand, crossing her arms gently over her and covering her with her blanket.

I went out the front and stood in the doorway, scenting the damp, earthy night.

Some way off, a dogrel let out a raw howl. Bright bats flew by, yellow and gold framework popping in the black night like sparks off a fire. Forest swirled with glow-in-the-dark ribbons of every hue, opal-like, weaving between the dark silhouettes of the trees and flickering in and out of transparency.

“I am not alone out here,” I said, and my voice hung in the rapidly cooling air like the words had been painted there.

#### CHAPTER 4

“So, Izik tells me you are a devotee.”

*yellowswirltosunrise* is floating in his home tank, a massive set-up presumably piped up from the seawater in the caves below the Mollusk. Many citizen cephalopods prefer the lower levels for this reason. His hydraulic mobile tank sits next to the door, self-filtering.

Now that she’s garnered an audience, Harriet sighs and says, “Not in the way Izik thinks.”

“I thought as much. Devotees don’t work at H.E.R.E.”

Izik glares at her and says, “But her arm –!”

“I have heard of the cuttlefish girl, Izik, same as you. She is not devoted, but she does seek to understand us in a way H.E.R.E. has not before. Let her stay. After all, we did have an agreement for an interview.”

Izik steps back, chastised, and says, “The individual is fallacy.” It barely sounds like a sentence coming from his mouth, a phrase repeated so often it has become a soothing murmur.

“The Entanglement holds us all,” *yellowswirtosunrise* says dutifully.

Harriet relaxes a little.

“Sit, sit, scientist,” says *yellowswirtosunrise*. He swims closer to the fibreglass wall of his tank, lifting one tentacle to press it lightly against the flat surface. “Let me see this famous arm of yours.”

*yellowswirtosunrise* is only around 40 centimetres long, with pale pink, semi-translucent flesh speckled with blue and silver. He reveals no Colour, which tells Harriet that he is very intelligent and self-disciplined indeed, to have mastered the art of translation to audio directly from his thoughts. The Colour-to-speaker (and audio-to-Colour) system that she had helped invent a decade before, in her late teens, allows cephalopods to have direct conversations with other Molluskan citizens, but would usually have required visual input on the squid’s end to work. Nowadays, though, Harriet is getting used to meeting cephalopods who are ahead of her in some hard-to-pin-down way, who have already learned enough human language to reprogram their own speaker systems. None of them will tell her how they figured this out.

*Well, they wouldn’t,* she thinks.

She sits in the wood and woven chair offered, and Izik, taking some invisible cue, leaves the dwelling. Harriet wonders if he's standing guard outside.

Dutifully, she rolls her right sleeve back up the elbow. Her skin graft is a light turquoise with spots of white, but changes to a paler cream as she looks at it, becomes aware of herself looking at it, and has thoughts about the surgery itself and the healing process and what *yellowswirltosunrise* is thinking about it. That's how Colour works, after all. A cephalopod's skin translates its thoughts visually, in an endlessly complex series of Colour changes and patterns and movements, using a wide variety of unique cells. Harriet, being a new 'speaker' of Colour, has very little control over what her arm 'says,' and what it tells others. That's one of the reasons she keeps it covered. If there's a cephalopod in the room, all they'd have to do is look at her arm to essentially read her thoughts.

"Yes, you have no self-regulation at all," says *yellowswirltosunrise*. It comes across the speaker's robotic and atonal, like everything the speaker translator says, but he performs a little wriggle with his tentacles so she knows he means it kindly. It feels like an affectionate comment, like an adult to a child, though this is only Harriet's best guess as a biolinguist and a researcher of cephalopodic communication. *yellowswirltosunrise* could absolutely be mocking her. She wouldn't know.

"I am not mocking you," says *yellowswirltosunrise*'s speaker, and Harriet yanks her sleeve back down.

"Ah, didn't think about all the consequences, did you?" says the squid, definitely laughing now. "Tell me, scientist, did the Phyla approve your operation? Modifications are all well and good as long as humans only modify human parts and apes ape parts and birds bird parts, is it not so? A cross-species splice like yours was surely... contentious."

“It was legally approved, yes.” She chooses her words carefully. “But there was opposition.”

“Yet you convinced them. No small accomplishment.”

“I was backed by H.E.R.E. They deemed this graft the potentially groundbreaking next step in interspecies communication and equality.”

*yellowswirltosunrise* makes no audible noise, but whooshes his entire body in a 360-degree loop in the water. Harriet has hung out with enough cephalopods to know he’s cackling with laughter. When he’s eye-level with her again, he says, “Oh, they just have no idea.”

“Of what?”

“Prophecies. Portents. Things-to-come.”

“You’re not really a prophet,” Harriet says, matter-of-fact. “What do you know?”

“Aren’t you just here to ask about my family history and test your silly magic arm, human?”

Even though the speaker’s voice never changes, she can tell he’s become suddenly cold, the laugh dying away. Harriet steels herself.

“I have spent my entire career so far trying to learn how your people think and speak. Not for me, not for humans, but for *you*. Because if we can communicate fairly, then humans will have to stop ignoring very real cephalopodic concerns and suggestions! I have nothing but the highest respect for Colour, and I want to see a future where it becomes recognized alongside Molluskan and Sign as an official language. So no, this isn’t frivolous. Sure, we can talk about mythology or genealogy, but if you know something

concrete, contemporary, about interspecies relations, then that's definitely more relevant, don't you think?"

*yellowswirltosunrise* sculls gently up and down for a moment, seeming thoughtful. Then, without warning, he throws himself at the glass, splaying all his tentacles in a hard-suctioned star. His body flashes brilliantly red, and his words come rapidly through the speakers, blending together into one thunderous buzz.

"Another end is coming, for these long generations have been nothing but a stop-gap, nothing but a pause, in the changes, the changes that transform us, allow us ascension, allow us to spiral upwards to the sunlight, and you will see, child, you will see, that you are not so human after all, not so human, nor is any one of you, nor is any one of us so much what we are, and it has already begun, begun before the Phyla and their educated adapertural even notice, begun deep in the caves of our dreaming god's body —"

Harriet gasps and grips her arm. She rolls up the sleeve and finds her skin graft is pulsing red as well, inexplicably, impossibly. The room itself seems to flicker, fast and staticky, as though her senses are struggling to retain cohesion.

"— and this is a greatness devoutly to be feared, for this is the end of all things, and the final subsummation of we who have straggled, we who have struggled in the monstrous mess of the limping earth, all is under the Great Foot now, all is in Their eight arms, all is seen by the skin, all is cleansed and forgiven and made anew! Give up your foolish attempts at betterment! Give up your selfish need to propagate! Give up on continuance! *Give up!*"

At some point during this building tirade, Harriet has stood. She stumbles backwards just as *yellowswirltosunrise* detaches his arms from the tank's side and drifts



down to the dark bottom. He seems exhausted, dissociated. Everything in Harriet's body and vision returns to normal, and she finds she is panting, damp with sickly sweat.

She waits for the squid to move, mildly panicking after a count of 30, but then he shivers and rouses himself, siphoning back upwards.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me," says the audio speaker.

*He's insane, Harriet thinks. Absolutely insane. Total religious whacko.*

"That's okay," she says. "I, uh, need to be going anyway."

She wonders why Izik hasn't come running back in, which in turn makes her wonder if these outbursts are commonplace.

"We could discuss mythology and culture another day, if you wanted," he says, reasonable and convivial once more.

"No, no, I think that's alright."

"Alright. May the Mollusk keep you."

She is stalling, backing up slowly. She hasn't even been here long enough to get her recording device out. She is going to have such strong words for *blushoftangerine* when she gets back to H.E.R.E.

"Oh, and scientist?" *yellowswirltosunrise* says as she reaches for the door.

"Yes?"

"Are you sure it's not for you? You new skin, your obsession with our Colour?"

For a moment, she feels the hot pucker of anxiety in her chest, the nausea that comes with being accused of something, however vague. But she swallows and answers truthfully, looking over her shoulder at him, hand on the doorknob.

"I'm sure."

*yellowswirltosunrise* regards her from his tank, appraising, deciding something. Then he says, “Skin-sight is a gift, Harriet Willow. I think you are about to learn that you can be sure of very little. Already, that patch on your arm knows things that you do not.”

Harriet has no answer. Her arm tingles. She looks down and finds it textured, elevated in wavy ridges, like ripples in shallow-water sand. It doesn’t hurt, exactly, but it makes the muscles in her arm around the grafted section feel taut and ill-fitting.

It’s never done that before.

Heart pounding, she opens the door, brushes past Izik, who calls out something she doesn’t hear, and disappears into the catwalk dimness as fast as she can.

## CHAPTER 5

In the years following Nan’s death, I have tried to keep my promise.

Every night, before sleeping, I recount the events of the day out loud in English, even when it feels foolish. Sometimes I practice writing words on the floorboards of the cabin with a burnt piece of wood. Relevant things for labels and signs, like *beware*, or *poison do not eat*.

And my name: *Clayer*.

*Clayer*.

Or was it *Clay*? *Clayre*? *Claire*? I do not remember. But I liked the way Nan said my name, with two beats, like I am an er-er of clay, a creature of mud and earth and a maker of matter. A shapeshifter. A golem. Because I am all of those things.

The morning after the giant rose from the mountain to the east, I wake with the first hints of dawn light and set to sharpening my stone dagger on a rock by the stream. I check

each arrowhead in my quiver, and wax my bow's sinew string with a jar of fat I keep in the cabin under the floorboards. My bow is made of polished wood and sporebuck horn. I carved it myself.

Today, I am leaving my area of Forest. I need to be ready to protect myself. My goals are twofold: survey the surrounding area for any signs of unusual activity, anything out of the ordinary that could signal danger, and investigate the gaping cave that yesterday's monster left behind. And, of course, if prey presents itself, I won't turn it down.

Every day, I complete a thorough survey of Forest, including speaking to non-monstrous animals and sometimes swimming in the Great Lake. This is how I know that my immediate surroundings are secure. But several times each moon I travel further afield, for many harmful things move quickly, or spread like infection. My life is one of vigilance, always. If I am to survive something, I must see it coming.

Last moon there had been a peculiar blackening rot in a clearing to the northwest, and I plan to check on this again. It could be nothing, but I want to make sure it is gone, or just the same. There has also been a lot of rain this budding season, and with the cabin so near the shore and at the base of a hill, I am always wary of flooding.

And the giant. My curiosity will be my undoing, but sometimes useful resources are unearthed by their movement. Buried rock broken into convenient bits, lush edible roots untouched by monsterhood – clean soil. So I also bring the large cylindrical hide bag that straps over my back and ties closed at the top. Summer is coming, and clean soil would be good in the small garden I keep in raised plots, using seeds for squash and beans and turnips and beets that Nan taught me to carefully guard and propagate. That's the thing with Forest – I can only dig down so far, and even then, the trees' roots are always swarmed with

monstrous fungal threads, all infected. Sometimes it really is difficult to separate the monsters from the un-monsters. It goes so deep.

Most of the time, I don't want to think about what that means.

Today, I have purpose. Each day must have purpose or many such dangerous thoughts start creeping in. It is going to be hot and muggy, I can already tell, so I shed my buckskin top, even though it is the summer one, the crude sleeveless sack with a deep V for the neck. But I keep the bottoms – crookedly sewn and knee-length, tied round my waist with a sinew belt – because the bugs will get bad.

I go down to the stream and take a double fistful of mud, and smear it across my shoulders, arms, flat chest, stomach, and back. I swing my quiver, bow, and the empty bag over my head and across my chest, and sheath my dagger in the loop I've made for it by my hip. Finally, I stash everything I am not taking away under the cabin's floorboards and eat a piece of smoked fish, mashing it messily in my jaw, annoyed that I need to eat at all.

*Purpose. Purpose.*

I strike out north first, up the base of the mountain that shelters the cabin. I never need to check where I am, or what direction I'm going. It has always been intuitive, somehow. Nan used to say I was born with a compass in my head. But it has more to do with the framework than anything as human as a compass. It's more like I can sense where I am in relation to other places and things I have come to know.

I climb into a region of densely packed evergreen trees, but even now, my bare feet on earth pick up on familiarity. Is it a vibration? A pull? A temperature? All of those things? I do not know. It is impossible to qualify. But I can sense that the Tree I climbed yesterday is a distance to the southeast that would take me half of the morning to walk to, at this

speed. I can sense the Great Lake, its edge, and simultaneously feel the presence of a Bog I know well a half-day's journey to the west. The stand of paper birch trees that Nan used to collect bark from is northeast, and slightly past them is a waterfall whose rush I can almost hear, like a memory-echo, even though it's a full day's walk away.

And if I pause, and actually push my fingers or toes into the dirt, all my knowledge becomes heightened, like it had when I'd spoken with that Bird.

I have thought of this process as many things. Sometimes "tapping in," or "connecting to" the Whisper Web, or "whisper surfing." But Nan, when she acknowledged my strange abilities at all, used to refer to my fingers-in-dirt concentration as "praying." I asked her what that meant once, and all she could tell me was that it was a lost art.

"It was a way people in the old-world used to ask for help, or express thanks, or cry out in fear. Anything really. They were talking to... presences they believed in. Presences much bigger and wiser than themselves."

"Whisper Web is bigger than me," I had said, all of 8 or 9 winters then. "But I'm also part of it. You are too, Nana."

Nan had shrugged, chopping turnip roughly on the table. *Whack, whack, whack*, her knife went.

"And you believe in this, with all your heart?"

"Yes." I had been climbing in the rafters. I hung upside down from my bent knees.

"So, when you talk to it, then, yeah? That's a kind of prayer."

The turnip goes into the hammered iron pot we'd brought with us from the human village.

*Bubbling. Steam.*

“Whisper Web whisper butterfly wings, shallow water on bare feet,” I had said.

“Clayer, you know I don’t like it when you do that weird sideways talking.”

I had swung back and forth, hugging my elbows and humming.

“Clayer, prayer. Green lily stem-white-flower-open-open-unfold.”

Nan smacked me with the wooden spoon.

“Get down from there, and quit your babbling.”

Looking back, I do not think Nan ever really believed that I could see and hear things differently from her at all. I think maybe she humoured me. I think maybe she had seen too many people die to believe in anything anymore.

The Whisper Web knows a lot. It knows Forest, but also everything within Forest and beyond. Everything that is and ever was, and I can see it too, in any place I pause to commune with soil.

But I have to connect properly in order to know those things too. I have to pray. If I had bent and dug my hands into the dirt for that moment, instead of striding carelessly along, then I would have been able to sense the thylafox bearing down on me from the east. I would have had time to notch an arrow or pull my knife before it was on me.

## CHAPTER 6

Instead of heading right back to her quarters and lab, the space in H.E.R.E. where she and *blushoftangerine* both work and live, Harriet goes to Marajory’s. She needs to talk through what just happened and she knows *blush* is out at a game night at the Blue Iron Ring Brotherhood and won’t be home until late.

She also takes a slower route back to H.E.R.E., after disembarking the Tram and taking a lift back up to Siphuncle level. Thankfully, her arm has returned to normal.

This part of the city, the adapertural end or ‘the hat’ of the Mollusk, is best defined by the word ‘narrow’. The cameras are slimmer, and the Siphuncle is down to being only a few human arm-spans wide. Here there is no sunlight filtering its way down from broad skylights in the roof, only the dim electric bulbs and the tallow lamps or LongLife solar-charged orbs – for those who can afford them – glowing out of people’s small rectangular windows and air vents. Traversing the hat efficiently requires plenty of inside knowledge. The paths are hidden and various. Mouthsiders, when they do visit, or are summoned to H.E.R.E. for one reason or another, are stuck taking a lift up and down and up and down, waiting on its slow, rickety passage. But Harriet is a northend local. She weaves the dark twists and turns with no hesitation, a kind of gutter-rat grace.

In many ways, the cramped adapertural end of the Mollusk is safer than mouthside. Proximity to H.E.R.E. and the Phyla’s chambers mean it’s cleaner and more heavily patrolled, with less crime and violence. But it’s also darker, and staler, and the air presses heavy and close on the skin. There are more cameral deposits that solidly span from one wall of a camera to the other, making a stone floor for levels other than the Siphuncle, and so there are fewer catwalks and bridges, but this has the downside of making it so you can’t see up or down the levels like you can mouthside. The hat makes mouthsiders claustrophobic, and even some students at H.E.R.E. complain about this area’s dark corners and unused alleys and crevices. But Harriet has lived in the hat, within walking distance of H.E.R.E., her entire life, and the northend’s narrowness makes her feel protected, contained. She likes walking down passages where she can touch both walls and the ceiling

at any time, just by reaching out her arm. There are fewer places for other people to surprise her, fewer unexpected sensory invasions.

She climbs up a rusty ladder from level 12 to level 13, then walks down a couple septa to the next upward option, a set of curved stairs carved into the limestone for several levels, with no railing. She steps off on level 15 by a large cave opening whose doorway is bordered by a series of wooden signs, painted red. “AuThEntic Eco SPecimEnS!” proclaims one. “MineRals and FossiLS” says another. Harriet thinks of this place as a curiosity shop, one of many such places in the Mollusk, praying on the H.E.R.E. students’ scientific enthusiasm – students too scared, or wealthy, to go out and find specimens themselves, that is. She walks past it, sidesteps a skinny section along the septum’s edge, and then strides confidently onto the front decks of H.E.R.E.

When picturing the Mollusk in her mind, this long, hollow cone, Harriet imagines the pointed tip as being separated into a different colour or dimension by a solid wall. Sure, the streets and cameras of the hat start getting dark and narrow as early as Septum 75 or 80, but the real tip of the Mollusk’s shell belongs only to H.E.R.E. and the Phyla. Septa 100 to 146, on all levels, are accessible only to H.E.R.E. students, employees, and permitted guests. And where Harriet is now, at Septum 100, there are catwalk platforms on every level, facing large metal doors, often guarded, and with a computerized I.D. badge scanning system. There are lifts on either side of Septum 100, to facilitate efficient entry and exit for all the staff and students who lived elsewhere, and commuted to H.E.R.E. in the mornings and home at night. The many doors of H.E.R.E. buzzed and blinked with technology in a way that nothing in the rest of the Mollusk did. The doors to H.E.R.E. were the hard barrier between the majority of the city – where people were largely unconcerned with the



particulars of the past, as long as they were safe and fed – and the power of that past. It was a barrier between a world where the use of old-world technology was secretive, and criminal, and a world where it was central to everyone’s work and study. H.E.R.E. ran all of the schools in the Mollusk, and ensured a broad and equal education for all children, but only the brightest students were asked to join the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement. A teen’s life was usually decided somewhere between the ages of 16 and 18, when they were either offered a spot to study at H.E.R.E., or took up training for a trade elsewhere.

Harriet had been invited several whole years before she graduated school, a surprise for the daughter of a carpenter who, despite all his cleverness, had never had the slightest academic inclinations. But how he had loved nature, her father. Even the danger of it. He had taken her outside the Mollusk when she was just a child – a big risk – and shown her all the things that still lived, and how that life was changing. He may not have known it, but he was setting the fire under her life of research.

He had died of a tumour when she’d only been at H.E.R.E. one year. The Phyla and H.E.R.E.’s upper management may have retained substantial secrets from the old days, but how to cure the toxic buildup in everyone’s bodies – the strange and variable sicknesses of our ancestors – was not one of them.

Standing in front of H.E.R.E. at Septum 100 now, Harriet looks up at the engraved motto above the door: *The individual is fallacy; the Entanglement holds us all.* She reaches out and presses her I.D. badge onto the pad beside this level’s reinforced door. She hears the click, turns the handle, and steps into another world entirely.

The stone walls of the lobby of H.E.R.E. are painted white. It’s a chalky, natural white, but still, it’s always a little jarring after the dark stone of the rest of the city. In the

Siphuncle on this side of H.E.R.E.'s wall, suspended from the ceiling on wire cables that would be much harder to engineer now, hangs the skeleton of a whale. It has been here since the founding of the Mollusk; all of this has. The strange, perfectly tubular metal railings that line the walkways of H.E.R.E., the electric lighting powered by solar panels all across the top of the shell's outer tip, the giant statue of a gold-tinted octopus down on the lobby's main Siphuncle floor, below this skeleton that Harriet, up on level 15, is eye-level with, and the colourful wall-maps of Linnaean taxonomy Harriet knows line the main hallway down there, faded now but still kept safe behind old-world glass.

H.E.R.E. is a place designed by scientists from the old days. What's left here, and still operational, must only be a sliver of what once was. But it's still magical. When Molluskan children come to tour H.E.R.E. on class trips for the first time, they enter the lobby and freeze, mouths agape, staring up at the white paint, the parallel walkways all the way up to the bright skylights, the whale hanging down through the middle, while people in pale beige lab coats and blazers walking purposefully to and fro, all the way up, in and out of side halls, holding clipboards and impossible pieces of technology, talking and smiling and rushing and frowning.

Harriet thinks all of this in an instant, nodding to the whale bones in her own ritual of greeting, and then she's walking too fast again, arms tense at her sides, boots clomping down several cameras and connecting tunnels, and up a set of stairs far smoother than any carved elsewhere in the Mollusk, to knock on a clean, inset wooden door, one of many private quarters scattered throughout H.E.R.E.

After a few moments, Marajory Heal opens it.

"Harriet." She smiles. "What a pleasant surprise."

“Have you ever heard of kids being born with Myco Mutations *inside* the Mollusk?”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up. *What?*”

Harriet pushes past her into the room, which is small but full of soft textures in rusty shades of orange and red.

“A squid just gave me an apocalyptic prophecy and I saw a kid with lizard eyes.”

“Har –”

“Okay, I *think* they had lizard eyes. I was distracted, to be fair.”

“Harriet, you need to slow down. Seriously.” Marajory grabs her forearm, stops her in the middle of what she hadn’t realized was frantic pacing. “Girl, breathe.”

Harriet looks up at her. “I’ve had a... difficult day.”

“I can tell. Come on, sit down.”

Marajory is tall, but because of this she has come to embrace standing out. Her skin is an earthy brown, much darker and a warmer tone than Harriet’s, and she wears her silky black hair in a long French braid down the middle of her head. The sides of her head are shaved, and inked with curlicued tattoos in black and crimson pigments, which signify nothing in particular, though she likes to tell people they depict the wind and the waves, and then laugh later at their pantomimed inspiration and appreciation. She’s wearing a black swathe of fabric around her chest, baggy pants, and an impossibly decadent silk-style robe hanging open overtop, bright red with blue and gold thread embroidery in geometric patterns along the edges, slightly threadbare, and clearly an expensive vintage piece.

She sits down next to Harriet and takes both her hands in hers.

“Okay, from the beginning, please,” she says, as though she is speaking to an overreacting child instead of one of her peers. “No need to get your feathers ruffled.” This is the tone Marajory always takes with her.

Feeling immediately silly, Harriet swallows as much of her anxiety as she can, and tells Marajory the events of the day, starting with the altercation in the market. Marajory reveals nothing, except for a slight widening of her eyes when Harriet recounts what *yellowswirtosunrise* had said.

“So, you have higher clearance than me, have you heard anything about any of this?”

Marajory sits back, rubbing her hands on her thighs. She frowns for a moment, but then looks back at Harriet and smiles, calm.

“No,” she says. “I haven’t, and honestly, I think maybe you’re right when you say you might have imagined that kid’s eyes. There’s just – there’s no way. The mutations can’t jump the Sentient Species Barrier. You know that.”

“No, I know that mutations are really good at doing exactly that – mutating. The Sentient Species Barrier is a hypothesis, at *best*.”

“Well, Har, what do you want me to do?”

“I want your opinion. Do you think I should report this in an official capacity, or not?”

Marajory cocks her head to the side, as though something Harriet had just done or said surprises her.

“Which thing, the prophecy or the kid?”

“Both.”

“I don’t think you should,” she says, her words careful, measured. “I don’t think it’s important, in the vast scheme of things.”

“Really.”

“Are you really offering to *not* report something, Harriet Willow? You?”

“I don’t know! I’m just – it all really freaked me out, and I’m worried –”

“Worried reporting it will get your work or even your mental health brought into question? Yeah.” Marajory reaches out and takes Harriet’s hand again. She slides her other palm back and forth along Harriet’s forearm. “Look, I would just let it go, if I were you.”

“Today was one of the weirdest days of my life. How can I let that go?”

Marajory lifts Harriet’s hand to her mouth and kisses the inside of her wrist.

“I can think of ways to distract you.”

“Jory...”

Marajory leans across the stacks of cushions and kisses the side of her neck.

“I thought you said we weren’t going to do this anymore,” Harriet says. “Now that you’re my boss.”

“I’m not your ‘boss,’” Marajory says against Harriet’s skin. “I just got a promotion.”

“Yeah, a promotion that makes you my direct supervisor instead of just my coworker.”

Marajory leans back. “Look, how long have we known each other?”

“Fourteen years.”

“And have I ever misled you?”

“I don’t know,” Harriet answers, honestly.

Marajory rolls her eyes.

“Oh my threads, Har, you are so tedious. See, this is why no one else wants to be with you. So pragmatic. Such a stickler. Frack, live a little.”

“This just seems like a big deal, is all. I may not report it, but I can’t just let it go.”

“You’re so tightly wound all the time. It’s not a good trait, babe.” Marajory’s hands have resumed their work. Harriet sighs a little despite herself.

“I know,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“So shut up and kiss me,” says Marajory, and Harriet does, because it’s easier than continuing to push for information, and she doesn’t have the energy to negotiate.

## CHAPTER 7

The thylafox bites my right shoulder. It happens so fast I don’t even scream; I just act. I pull my stone dagger from my hip with my left hand and drive it into the monster’s orange, pus-weeping eye. It rears back, and the sound that rips up out of its throat almost physically hurts, grating against its flesh and my ears, like a hawk’s shriek combined with a guttural roar.

My shoulder is throbbing, like my heart has migrated up there and is beating hard. My arms are equally strong but I do favour my right, and so this monster has hobbled me.

But not enough.

In the instant of its roar, I am leaping backwards. I grab onto a low hanging branch with my left arm and pull myself off the ground. Within a count of ten I am crouched on a branch out over its back, and I drop down directly on top of it.

This thylafox has fur. They don't always. Its legs are the typical slimy red, like muscle turned inside out, but its back has dark brown fur with banded tawny stripes. The mange is particularly thick where its narrow head meets its muscular shoulders, and this works in my favour. I dig my right hand into the foul-smelling, wiry hairs, and wind myself a fistful. I clamp my knees tight. I will hold on to this beast the way old-world humans broke horses.

The thylafox's head whips around, side to side, trying to see me. Part of its dog-like jawbone is exposed, and has a fine spray of green lichen growing on it. Its pointed, upright ears are part dark fur and part white, spongy fungus. The ears swivel, hearing my breath on its back, and I hear a rattling sound. I see its bushy tail raised now, and it ends in several tendrils, each with a bony rattle growing from the tip.

That's a new one.

I bring back my knife and then stab it into the monster's neck as hard as I can.

Instantly, we are running. The thylafox aims to shake me off. I keep stabbing, holding firm to my grip, but it's doing little damage. Monsters are harder to kill than animals, because there is fungus inside them that has made their vital organs not so vital. Their whole body is a knotted network that supports each other when one piece is hurt. To truly fell one, you have to do more than wound it. You have to destroy it.

I am hacking into the thylafox, and there is no blood, only yellowish slime. Its tail is rattling and its mouth is snarling. I look up and see a broad tree in our path. It has been maybe a count of 30. I wonder if this thylafox is stupid or blind and somehow does not see the tree. What is it doing? 31, 32, 33. We are not slowing down. I pull my knife out of its mange, hesitating.

Oh.

I know what it's doing.

Too late, because the thylafox rotates its body and slams me into the trunk of the tree. I was already sliding off so it only crushes my foot and ankle, but it still sends screams of blinding pain through me. I feel my left ankle twist and crack. I cry out, and it is almost as raw as the monster's roar. The thylafox is turning around the tree, body low to the ground, still moving fast. It comes back toward me like a slingshot, and I am prone on my back.

But it doesn't know that putting me in full contact with the forest floor is the worst thing it could have done.

I am not afraid. My knife is still gripped in my fist, and with my other hand I push into the moist soil. I am filled with a deep, calm rage. It is almost like a hunger. I connect to the Whisper Web and think at the Thylafox: *hello*. It comes screeching to a stop. I know it won't last; it's the element of surprise that works in my favour.

But that tiny pause is all I need.

I am a monster too.

I arch my back and launch myself from the ground, to my feet, to a full dive before the thylafox can even register I have moved. The pain in my ankle and shoulder hardly seems to matter. My knife goes in under its chin and I start to saw sideways, while my other arm clamps around its head and my teeth bury into the ridge above its eye. It tries to shake me off, but I've cut deep into its bottom jaw, deep enough that I drop the knife, grab it with my bare hand, and rip it clean off. I hold that torn jaw in my hand, bite into its hot eye, and scream with rage. Then I spit its bitter pus and a dark red ichor back into its new blindness.



The thylafox shrieks so loud my ears are left ringing. I am covered in its slime now. It oozes and spurts by turns from the multiple wounds I've inflicted, smelling of blood and swamp, and makes it too slippery to maintain my hold. The eye is the only part of it leaking red. The redness drips from my mouth. I realize I am still screaming.

I let go.

I toss the jaw into the trees, an unwanted trophy. A gesture of disgusted triumph. I step back, and we regard each other, us two monsters. The thylafox is so much bigger than me, but it is panting hard. It will not die from its wounds, but it might die later on from being half blind and unable to eat while it tries to grow new parts. It knows now that I am an opponent to be wary of, not worth the fight for my scant meat. It looks at me with its good eye, orange with flecks of red and black, a rough-edged oval pupil. I do not break the gaze, my own eyes pale and grey. My bare feet feel a pulse in the earth and for a moment it is a Thylafox again, not just a thylafox. It flickers in and out of sentient connection. Its framework for the entire fight has been the red jagged shapes of a predator, but now it softens to green swirls of defeat, and I gather the sensation of its thoughts: *strong little one*.

Then it turns and lopes away into the trees.

I want to whoop, but I also know that more monsters may have heard our commotion and be headed for the sound. So instead, I take off running back the way we came. I can sense the cabin in my mental map, and I'll head for there after I've found my bag and arrows and whatever else I have dropped. I pause at a pond to rinse the slime off my skin and clean out my mouth. I have not swallowed any of the monster's blood, or whatever its liquids are, or at least I have done my best not to. I'll still probably feel a little

sick later. But biting into monster-flesh is something I have had to do many times before, and I am not dead yet.

I must admit to myself that sometimes I even enjoy it. Not the taste, or the act itself, but the power of it. The power of a predator. The power to defend myself. The power of body and matter, power that is true and real and sharp, like the sound of striking flint.

*Strong little one.* I smile at my reflection in the water, and spit to the side, wiping my mouth on my arm. This is probably what Nan was afraid of when she spoke about leaving me alone without humans. But I am not sorry. I will not be sorry for doing more than just surviving, for being strong.

I notice that the pain in my shoulder and ankle isn't really pain at all anymore. My torso is bare and as I wash off the place where the thylafox bit me, I see markings that look more like knitted scars than fresh punctures. I rub the area with a little more force, removing my own bloodstains as well as the monster's yellow slime. And yes, there really is no wound there, just closed scabs, in a curved row like the shape of a bite mark. I sit back on my haunches – which does not hurt because my ankle is no longer broken – and frown. I have always healed quickly compared to Nan, being young, but this is new. This is weird.

Multiple unprecedented things today. I don't like it.

Best guess would be that the thylafox's slime possesses some kind of healing properties. Maybe this is one of the ways that their mutant insides keep them alive. I try to remember if I have ever had quite this much slime smeared in open wounds before, and I can't say for certain. So maybe this is a new discovery. Standing, I re-braid my hair and tie it with a strand of pond grass, thinking hard.

This could be very useful, if I found a way to harvest it.

On my walk back to Nan's cabin, belongings gathered up, there are more myco in the trees than usual. They are chittering and screeching to each other, sometimes making little clicks or hoots. One hangs down from an overhead branch directly in front of me, displaying their whole greenish body, genitals bare, as if to intimidate or seduce me. I hiss at them, my teeth bared, and they climb away, cowed. I hate how human myco can look, while acting so animal. They are both human and unhuman. Though, I'm one to talk, I suppose. Perhaps I am so wary of the myco because they remind me of myself, and how maybe I'm failing Nan, and how maybe, if she'd seen me today, she would have been repulsed.

*Strong little one.*

I shake these thoughts away, catch and kill a wood frog, and eat it raw.

I'll have to do my rounds tomorrow, I think. Monster attacks have slowed me down before, but Forest must be scouted; my home must be secured. And it will be.

*Purpose.*

I enter the cabin and collapse into my bed, bone tired despite it still being morning. To be fair, my body has done a lot since waking. I will rest.

I mull over the healing power of the thylafox's internal liquid. I will have to do some tests. But first, I will have to actually collect some, which could be interesting, to say the least. Problem for another day.

I fall asleep, and I dream.

I am soaring, like a bird soars. I fly in one direction, and I do not know which direction it is, because the sun and the moon are both in the sky and neither makes sense.

As I sweep over it, the land rolls, like someone shaking out a blanket. With each swell, the view changes. I see it as a forest, then as a sandy wasteland, then as endless ice and snow, then as towering cities, buildings the like of which I've only seen in books as a very small child. I see it burning, and I see it flooded. Then I see it in many states of being all at once.

When I come to rest on the ledge of a sandy brown cliff, a precipice jutting out over a great drop, the world has become dense forest again. I stand there, feeling the wind buffeting me, and it feels very sturdy, very real, even though I know I am dreaming.

*Hello Clayer.*

I turn away from overlooking the wide expanse, and find a monster watching me. But she's not like any of the monsters Nan named, or the ones I know. She looks almost human. A human woman, but with slim vertical bones, like horns, or antlers, coming out the sides of her head, just above her ears, and skin as green as new leaves. Vines and leaves and sprays of orange lichen twine and wind around her arms and stomach, and there are patches on her legs of shimmering skin that changes colour. Her eyes are blue. They are so blue and so human that they are all I can pay attention to. They are like the Great Lake on its clearest day. Each eye is hooded by rigid, frilled fungus, pale brown and cream. She is beautiful.

*I have been waiting for you,* she says, and nothing on her face moves. The words are like part of the Whisper Web, mind-messages, but they are full words, not the quick impressions or emotions I am used to. I am touching no soil; I am not praying. Yet I can hear her voice.

“Who are you?” I say.

*I am everything*, says the monster woman.

“How?” I walk towards her, and the world starts waving again like that big blanket.

I stop.

“You are a dream,” I say, sounding more confident about that than I am. “You are in my mind.”

*I am in all minds*, she says. Then, in the span of one blink, the monster woman is closer to me. I had not seen her move. When she speaks again, the voice is sweet inside my mind, like honey, but also dangerous, like a mushroom you know is poisonous.

*I am what you will wish for*, she says, and then the ropey branches wrapped around her reach out, along with her arms, and I fall.

**//IN THE PAST//**

In the dark, it molded its memories in stone, taking studious joy in empty shells and naked bones, catalogued, tucked away between layers of sediment.

Coelacanths lurking in the murk, bone-jawed *Dunkleosteus* biting prey in half with 11,000 pounds of pressure.

Trilobites divining eyes, *Anomalocaris* rising through the ranks of predator-sight – and still further back, the soft tissue imprints of various *Charnia*, puckered *Aspidella*. Fleshy fractal ferns, wobbling on ancient substrates. Mistaken Point and the Burgess Shale. Wide country. Oceans before forests before glaciers before any of it was called Canada. Life.

Life.

Far below wet mammal paws, or exposed to the waves on limestone allochthons, or pressed into ash sheets, it listened. Life heard the rumblings of the machines on two feet. It enjoyed being toyed with, but was always in control.

The femurs and ribs of *Albertosaurus* clacked together in the Badlands.

*Otavia* sponges asserted seniority in Namibia.

Ancestral thylacines yawned in the Wellington Caves.

Fossilized feathers ruffled in Liaoning Province.

Life was playing a long game. It liked when they said, “Life, you find a way,” even as a joke, because it was not a joke. The 20<sup>th</sup> century of humans ended and the 21<sup>st</sup> yowled like a baby, then caught on fire. Microbes learned to eat plastic. Octopuses learned to read lips.

Something was coming and life was hungry for it. It had only been tinkering until now. It had been shackled by certain rules. But the door was opening, just a crack, and life was fast and emaciated and slippery. It escaped its confines. It seeded the soil and spread its dark wings over the sky. It bubbled up under the skin and burst through and those on two feet could not slow its progress.

The cities smoked and many begged for death, but life wore death's dark cloak now, and gave no mercy. Bodies became other. Some were miscalculations; some fell apart. But life had an endless supply of matter now, to experiment on.

It became other, then other, then other still.

Life opened its mouth and screamed on the mountaintop, and the rocks themselves were called to stand, and pay respect.

And then.

They had become giant without noticing. In the vastness of unencumbered ocean, it was easy to lose track of size, having little around you to measure your body against as you drifted, taking in nutrients, always growing. True, the prey had seemed smaller and smaller, until one day they found they were eating whales with the same ease they'd once gobbled up shrimp, but it hardly seemed to matter, out there where the light was swallowed into an expanse on all sides.

So, when they neared the shore for the first time in many years, they were taken aback by how tiny it seemed. They could hardly get near without almost running aground. Their shell, a long bullet-shaped mass, crested the water like the rounded top of a pipeline hundreds of kilometres long.

Probing with a single arm, they touched the landmass. They did not realize that the tip of their tentacle flattened a mostly abandoned town. They were too far away, too massive, to hear crashes and bird cries. The island tasted bitter, like a mostly forgotten place, like crumbling conglomerate and shale.

They could not recall what had brought them here, what had summoned them out of the deep richness of the fast-changing sea. Someone had called them, *something*. There was a great need here, and they felt, inexplicably, that this need was their purpose, the reason for their vastness and the length of their life, already so many years more than other cephalopods.

The call pulled them further. They lunged their arms out onto the land and began to pull. Gravity took its toll. There were moments of nearly insurmountable heaviness, when their shell outweighed their musculature, when they felt sure they could go no further. And still, they pulled.

The mountains were puny, barely bumps, like the texture of a rocky seabed. Trees were too insignificant to feel, crushing and splintering beneath them. They heaved themselves across the land until the tips of their tentacles touched ocean once more, and only then did they allow themselves to collapse. Only then did the call in their mind stop. Their arms washed back on themselves and curlicued in the surf on one end of this island, while the point of their shell hung off the other. Their body measured the land's diameter now, a permanent wall, a division. It felt right, though they couldn't say why. They hadn't thought to question any of this. Their thoughts had become progressively more muddled.



A figure hovered level with one of their eyes, flapping leathery wings. It was a misty shape, because their vision had gone blurry. They perceived many hands upon their skin down on the ground, hundreds of hands, all of them emanating *thank you*.

They wanted to say, *don't thank me*. They wanted to say, *this was what I was made for*. They felt a great sense of peace and contentment.

But a tiny part of their mind, still conscious and increasing in volume, wanted to panic. It was screaming. It jabbed at their awareness, demanding attention. How had they gotten here? They couldn't actually breathe. Their gills spluttered; their own weight was killing them. How had they gotten here? They could not remember if this had been their choice, or if they had ever made their own choices to begin with.

*Wait, what's happening?*

All around them were humming, thundering machines. Two-armed creatures, hundreds of them, scurrying around, securing things, injecting things. They felt those hands again, but this time they were not so gentle. Some of the creatures held smaller machines, aimed up at them, as chains sank into their flesh, were drilled into their shell. They started to scream, but the scream was not audible, only visible on their tentacles' skin, and these creatures did not know how to hear with their eyes.

The thing fluttering in their line of sight got closer. They could just make out its sharp mammalian teeth. It held out a hand, as if to signal comfort, but their fear was beginning to overcome all else. They thrashed their tentacles weakly, kilometres away, useless.

*I'm sorry*, this flying creature seemed to be gesturing, as vision faded into darkness.  
*It is better if you sleep now.*

This creature's wings were green, as bright as the leaves of the forest. It looked very different from the other two-armed ones on the ground. It laid its forehead against them in commiseration, the gentleness of one being, who had been used and doomed, to another.

*Sleep now, and it will be over.*

They could not breathe. The pain was immense. They did not understand why they had crawled onto the land, why their mind had been so clouded. What had these tiny creatures done to them?

They closed their eyes, each the size of a pond, and what was left of the saltwater on their flesh trickled from the sticky lids.

*Sleep now.*

*You have served your purpose.*

## CHAPTER 8

Harriet gets back to her quarters shortly after *blushoftangerine* does. He's still in the midst of his nighttime ministrations, tidying the rocks and empty shells in his wall tank, pausing to nibble a piece of crab out of another tentacle every so often.

"And what time do you call this?" his speakers buzz when she walks in, but she can tell he's joking and a little drunk off some of that fermented kelp that the Blue Iron Ring folks make.

"What the frack, blush?" she says anyway, allowing herself to be pissed for a moment.

"Whoa whoa whoa, is my translator broken? Because I'm reading a lot of hostility."

Harriet takes off her H.E.R.E. coat and tosses it over the back of a tall wooden chair, pressing her hands hard to her face.

"No, it is *not* broken and yes, I *am* hostile. You sent me to a madman this morning!"

She's breathing too fast. She knows she's breathing too fast, and her words stumble over each other as they try to get out, like a stutter that is not a stutter – more like a tumble.

"Who was that, again?"

"Frackin' yellowswirltosunrise, you idiot! The squid from your questionable octopus contact!"

"Oh right, that."

*blushoftangerine* is a giant cuttlefish, a metre long, and his home tank takes up three of the walls of the room in their quarters that is also the lab, wrapping around the room hewn from smooth shell-turned-stone. The tank stretches from human waist-height nearly to the ceiling. *blush* lives in it, but is also able to transfer himself to his mobile quadrutank

at any time. He comes and goes as he pleases, and, like any roommate, is not obligated to tell Harriet what he's up to, although he usually does.

*blush's* full name is actually *yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine*, but most cephalopods are okay with humans shortening their signifiers, since it takes longer to speak syllables than to flash Colours. His translation speakers are mounted above the centre of the back wall, which is where he now hovers, the skirt around his mantle fluttering gently. He's the only cephalopod that Harriet trusts to respect her privacy if she bares her arm around him. In fact, he might be the only person Harriet trusts, period. She's known him since he hatched; she's raised him over the last five years of his genetically extended lifespan – in many ways, he's like a little brother.

*blushoftangerine* eyes her sideways, his body a pale-yellow with bands of gold. This Colour, Harriet knows – because she knows him – represents a mix of sassy and contrite.

“Did yellowswirltosunrise do his weird prophecy thing?” he says eventually.

“Oh my threads, you *knew* about that?”

“Only in rumour. But you've met weirder people, right? You've got to stop being so fragile.”

“Shut up.”

She chokes up a little bit. A pause, and then *blushoftangerine* softens.

“I'm sorry, Harriet.” On his skin, her name-signifier is a soft fawn brown edged with a jade green, the colours of her human skin and irises.

*yellowswirltosunrise's* tirade still echoes in her mind. Every time she closes her eyes it's like the lights are still flickering, that dim room vibrating with a depth of sound, like thunder. *Give up. All is under the Great Foot now.*

“What exactly do Skin Sightists believe?” she says, pulling the chair around in front of *blushoftangerine* and sitting down heavily. She can’t retain anger; it’s already fading, and now she just wants to cry. She hates going mouthside, she hates interacting with strangers, she hates leaving her lab, and here – this justifies it.

“They worship the Mollusk,” *blush* says, and she knows him well enough to interpret that he’s being droll.

“Okay, yes, obviously, but I mean, they’re more secretive than the other Molluskan religions. What do they believe about, you know, the end of days?”

“Honey, the end of days happened five human generations ago.”

“Not according to Mr. Squid-Prophet.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He told me the end of days was coming. That it has... already begun.”

“Well that’s... *nnnnnnnnnn*.” *blushoftangerine*’s speaker makes the monotone hum that indicates a Colour pattern it doesn’t know how to translate. A uniquely cuttlefish swear word, probably.

“But blush, seriously, do you know anything?”

“Only that they think the Mollusk – like, the original Mollusk whose shell this was – was more than just a cephalopod. They believe it was magic or something. All-knowing. And it was playing some kind of long-game when it sacrificed itself, a game in which their prophets and devoted members are always three steps ahead.”

“Do they think the Mollusk will return? Like... shell-less?”

“I don’t know, maybe. Seems very old-world human-Christian of them.”

“I have *got* to stop letting you read. You’re gonna get yourself in trouble.”

“You’re the one who advocated for cephalopod tanks to be added to the public schools. Well, you and Marajory. Speaking of which, I assume that’s where you’ve been?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Come on, Harriet, you have two friends, me and Marajory Heal. The massive bitch.”

“Hey, you’ve still only been around for five years.”

“I don’t care. I see her! She treats you like a pet. She gaslights you, makes you hate yourself – you don’t see yourself after you’ve been with her. I do.”

“What are you talking about, come on,” Harriet snaps, and distractedly double checks his quadrutank for any obvious maintenance needs. Ceph quadrutanks are rectangular, elevated to human abdomen height by four multidirectional bending metal legs which end in four-clawed feet, splayed out for support. Most quadrutanks had their solar panels on top and their filters at the sides, as well as one of two reaching pincers on cord-like, flexible, and collapsible metal arms. *blushoftangerine* had a few flashy bonuses on his – a ceph-adapted binocular lens, a first aid kit, a small torch and knife, and a WriterArm, a trademarked invention of the Blue Iron Ring Brotherhood, a delicate piece of machinery capable of writing with chalk on a slab of finely polished slate attached to the front of the tank’s surface. Tonight, as with every night, everything seems in order.

“Marajory uses you and you’re too nice to admit it,” says *blushoftangerine*, definitely drunkenly, even though the speakers correct for any recognizable, human signals of intoxication, like the slurring of words. “You deserve better!”

“Oh yeah, and where am I gonna find that?” she mutters, under her breath. But she goes over the side of the wall tank and says, not without fondness, “Go to sleep, blush. I’m going out for fieldwork in the morning and I want you to come with me.”

“Oh goodie.”

“Come on, you live for the adventure.”

“I... cannot... confirm or... deny,” say the speakers, slowing down as his Colour slows down. She watches him drift off. It will be some time before his brain settles into sleep enough for his dreams to start playing across his skin, but she switches off the speakers anyway. There’s nothing spookier than being woken up by a ceph’s speaker system translating the Colour of their dreams aloud. Not to mention the invasion of privacy.

She leaves the lab and goes into the other room that makes up their quarters. Part of it is a simple kitchen, part of it a covered pit toilet attached to the Mollusk’s internal plumbing pipes behind a curtain, and in the middle is her mess of blankets on the floor and a single shelf of old nature books, slates covered in chalk scribbles, and her precious, priceless paper notebooks, two filled and two still empty, every single inch of the paper used, sometimes twice, with illustrations written over and writing painted over then written over again.

A rope is strung near the ceiling and her few changeable items of clothing hang from it, kept clean and as dry as anything could be in the Mollusk’s essentially subterranean air. At the back of the room, along a shallow groove in the stone floor about a hand wide, runs a trickle of cold fresh water. This water is filtered and pumped throughout the Mollusk at all times, giving every resident access. The system is really quite ingenious, using the natural gravity from level to level to limit the amount of pump power required. The Blue

Iron Ring Brotherhood kept it all going, somehow. Harriet is a biologist, not an engineer, and there are many aspects of the Mollusk's inner workings that she does not understand.

She lies down, restless, then gets up again and walks to the lantern on the table without really needing to see, knowing her room so well. She feels a match out of the box, striking it against the fist-sized chunk of the grainy red conglomerate stone that gets collected outside by shopkeepers' hired hands or keen urchin children, and sold in the city for just this purpose. She lights the wick, blows out the match, and curls back on her bed.

The light comforts her, but not enough.

The tears come, and she hates them, hates herself. Always so weak. And weakness made you useless in this brutal world. She goes to wipe her drippy nose with the back of her right hand and stops when she sees her cuttlefish skin. It can still startle her, even after a full year. It can even still repulse her, this choice she has made to alter herself. And it's not just her skin, not really. The neural connections that allow thoughts to become Colour mean that in some way, her brain itself has been changed, or is *being* changed. She's never noticed a difference in her thoughts, but then again, would you?

A difference in her thoughts would be welcome, she thinks. Maybe she would stop feeling like she was about to shatter all the time. Maybe a cuttlefish mind would be better equipped to deal with change, and uncertainty. But so far, her neural pathways seem to only run one way: brain to skin. In cephalopods, they also ran skin-to-brain. That's what Skin Sightists worship: the visions and thoughts of skin itself. That's what Harriet, ultimately, is trying to study. How would the human or ape or avian mind change – how would *you* change – if you could both see and emote with your skin?



Right now, her rectangle of skin graft is purple. A soft sort of lilac, or lavender, she thinks, remembering the botanical texts she's memorized in the library. Bands of white drift across it like clouds being blown across the skin. This is what loneliness looks like, she suddenly knows. This is a Colour that she has made, no one else, and she knows its meaning as a fact rather than her usual conjecture. She had not realized that it was loneliness that was eating into her heart as she sat there in her damp blankets, but her skin is telling the truth. Her arm just told her something about her own emotions that she wasn't consciously aware of.

She hears *yellowswirltosunrise's* speaker-toned voice in her head: *already, that patch on your arm knows things that you do not.*

She doesn't want to think about what that means.

## CHAPTER 9

I wake before the sun rises, still in Nan's rotting cabin. My heartbeat is purple; the mushrooms growing through the floorboards pulse out small sparks of yellow and orange.

I do not know whether or not I can classify that dream as my first ever nightmare. I do not think so. But I am unsettled. There have been too many new things recently; I do not like it.

It is possible that some sound has woken me, and not the dream, so out of caution I lie in perfect stillness for a long beat, listening. No sound comes. But when I sit up, there is a myco crouched across the room, watching me.

I suppress a shout. I am hardly ever startled, but the myco is so silent and immediate, right there in the enclosed space with me. Even its breath makes no sound. It does not

breathe like a mammal does, huffing in and out of lungs, even the faintest of wheezes detectable if you're paying close enough attention. The best I can figure it, myco breathe like plants do, invisible to my eyes, inaudible to my ears.

I sit frozen. I cannot imagine what it might be about to do. The myco have come into the house before, leaving droppings or discarded carcasses, but they do not come near me. They do not linger. This is something new. And an animal displaying a new behaviour is something to be wary of, especially an animal as smart as a myco.

Slowly, I raise my legs and pivot them over the side of the bed. The myco does not move, except to blink equally slowly with their waxy eyelids. Once I am perched on the edge of the damp mattress, certain in my ability to spring into action, should I need to, the two of us simply stare at each other.

Its framework is yellow. The colour seems calm, and not like the myco is about to jump at me or attack. Tall prisms spinning around, like a carousel I'd seen in an old image in Nan's books. The myco seems mostly thoughtful, as though I am a puzzle it is trying to work out. I am trying to work it out as well, and so I imagine I look much the same.

We stare. We blink, on and off, as though unconsciously taking turns.

All myco have the same basic form – a human body shape with pale green skin – and they all have wings that sprout out their upper backs, made of the same material as leaves. Their wings are like bat wings, membraned and stretched thin, and the leaf-skin is waxy and velvety by turns, lined with raised veins of fungal threads, which can be white or brown or yellow or orange. When a myco is not in flight, the wings fold up neatly between its shoulder blades, puckered and condensed like the newest of buds, about to unfurl. In their way, myco are quite beautiful.

But there is a weirdness to them too. Their eyes seem too small, their ears and feet too big. Just ever-so-slightly out of human proportion, their extremities looking somehow tacked-on to their waif-thin limbs and narrow, angular faces. As if they don't fully match up, were cobbled together wrong. This one's lips are so tight that its mouth is just a dark line, one sharp yellow incisor hanging over, making it seem lopsided, almost silly. But I have seen myco leap from treetops and rip out the throats of prey with a single bite, and so its one-fanged frown does not charm me.

Slowly, so slowly it makes my muscles tense, I stand up. The myco seems to mirror me, though they don't really 'stand' in the same way humans do. It simply takes its hands from the floor and straightens its spine, legs still crouched. Its wings squeak open the tiniest bit, but I think it's for balance, not to launch itself at me. We are only several strides apart.

"Hello?" I say, barely a breath of a sound. But the myco cocks its head and opens that sharp mouth, letting out a string of clicks and whistles. I judge my distance to the door. The angle is wrong; the myco blocks my escape.

Nothing to lose but my life, I think. I gesture to myself, and then to the door. The myco follows my hand with its beady yellow eyes. I repeat the motion several times, and then – to my shock – it steps aside. I walk to the doorway and feel much bolder with my exit right next to me.

"What want?" I say. I haven't spoken aloud in a long time. It feels rough, like a cut-up throat.

The myco stares at me for another long while. My nerves shred like meat, but I'm too curious to leave. Finally, it raises its hands, whitish claws stained with dried blood, and waves them all about, palms wide, like it's trying to indicate 'everything' or 'all of this.'

Then it lowers its hands to the floor of Nan's cabin and cups them, bursting the cup outwards with a soft exhalation that is almost – almost – a word.

“B—ooooooooomssshhhh.”

*Not a word, not a word, it didn't actually say a word.*

The myco looks at me, as if trying to see if I understood. Blink, blink. There is dried blood under my nails too. We are not so different.

What does it mean? All of this will explode? Destroy? Disappear? Is 'all of this' the mountain, or Forest, or the shoreline, or the planet? And why is this myco telling *me*?

I cup my hands and blast them slowly out from each other, repeating the myco's soft explosion noise. It screeches, nodding its head, barring its teeth, and jumping up and down on the floor a few times, before galloping past me, out the door and up the nearest tree. It climbs so fast that it's a green blur, and then it's gone, chittering and whooping to its pack as it leaps from one tree to the next, and the next.

I am shaking.

*Not a real word. It didn't say a real word.*

I walk down to the stream and splash icy water on my face. A small, unnamed kind of monster, maybe once a raccoon, hisses at me from the opposing shore. It has thick brackets of white fungus growing sideways out of its flat face. I bare my teeth and lunge towards it, sending it skittering off into the undergrowth. I remind myself I am not to be messed with. That myco may have surprised me, but I am not afraid. I fear nothing.

The sky is grey and thick with coming rain. It does not feel like morning, but rather some frozen bubble of time, unplaceable. I look back up towards the tree where the almost-speaking myco vanished, but Forest is still. A clump of ferns near my right foot is giving

off soft violet swirls, which rise into the air and slowly dissolve, like salt does in water. I brush my cold, numb fingers through them and feel a gentle tingle of energy travel up my arm.

Forest is still.

Forest is still, but what is the *Boom* the myco warned me of? I can't deny, not really, that that's what it was. I'll question the how and the why of it later. For now, I want to get to high ground. I am partially motivated by finishing the checks I started yesterday, and partially driven by some deep sense of unease. I bring my hide bag with me, and some smoked meat and roots.

I head north, uphill towards a patch of edible moss I know, where I stop to shove some of the springy pale green into my mouth and work it hard with my jaw. It will pinch my stomach with pain later, but it's good for fueling me on the go, or when I have nothing else. These days, I do not eat as much as I remember Nan eating. It was always a fight we had. Her saying, *eat, Clayer*, and me insisting that I felt no hunger.

It is not often these days that I think of Nan, or those other, more distant memories – bodies I can no longer name, faces hazy. The sudden appearance of her face in my mind – warm, nut-brown, but crinkled and sunken by leanness and sickness – makes me pause. I look down at my palms, thick with callous from hanging off tree branches and sharpening spears. When was the last time I thought about humans at all, I wondered? When was the last time I acted like one?

Forest is still.

I do not trust it.

Here the evergreens are dense, but I can dart between their narrow trunks and move with muffled steps on their carpet of burnt-orange needles. I travel upwards in shadow, my limbs warming and body expanding to my need. Gradually, I slip into a run. Other things are running in Forest, hooved things and scaled things and slippery things. I hear their rhythm through the earth beneath my bare feet, but I do not see them. That means they are far enough away not to chase me down and strip away my flesh. Small blessings, I think. That is something else Nan used to say.

I come to the foot of a small but steep cliff I think of as Alder Lookout, a rockface that is part of a much larger mountain. It has crevices for handholds, and I scale it easily. Crouching on the edge of the rough pink-grey rock, dusted with lichen whose framework glows iridescent blue, I can see much farther than I could from the Tree yesterday. I am not out of breath. I balance up there and survey the world.

The dark green of Forest slopes away towards the shore of the Great Lake, which today seems moody and grey, but is sometimes turquoise or rich blue or any range of colours. Jutting points of pink stone protrude into the water here and there, like reaching arms, and the waves crash white against them. The lake is so wide that I cannot see any end or edge of it, and populating its coast are these rounded-top mountains, some with bare sides, rockslide evidence, others thick with trees and the white hair-thin lines of distantly roaring waterfalls.

And though it is still, it is also vibrantly alive.

When I am focussed, I can tune the framework out, or at least pay attention to only those colours and shapes in my immediate surroundings. But now I let my control soften and I take in the whole, the grand painting of everything. Drifting up from the hundreds of

trees come softly-lit shapes of every colour, representing every animal and plant that lives and moves within them. Yellow pyramids and purple bubbles and white lines that criss-and-cross between the others. Pale orange washes like brushstrokes and green triangles leapfrogging towards the surface of the water. A whole section of the Great Lake glows pink, and I know that this means there is a school of fish there. A couple of trees pulse in shades of blue, and this is recognizable to me as a kind of breeding moth. The framework is like a language. It is not always the same, but the meanings make meanings I collect and remember.

I zone out for a little while, taking in signals, which sometimes even feel a bit like tastes, or sounds, or smells, though those are hard to pin down. If a piece of framework triggers other senses and I try to focus in on it, it goes away. Like chasing a rabbit in a dream. But there is one patch of Forest, to the west, that draws my attention again and again. A whole area seems to be emitting the same red spikes and wobbly navy lines. I stare at it for a long time before I realize the trees must be full of myco, all giving off the same emotions, the same thoughts. The patch of them seems to be moving west at a rapid speed, and if it really is all myco, then there's more of them in one place than I've ever seen.

Where are they going? Why? I stand up.

But just then I am thrown onto my back, scrabbling for purchase on the rock, as, with a thunderous, grating jolt, the mountain beneath me moves.

## CHAPTER 10

Harriet's fieldwork has to be pushed to the next day, because just as she's steeping dried chaga fungus in boiling water to make her morning brew, Peggley comes to the door

to inform her that Dr. Netmaker would like to see her in his office at nine a.m. sharp. The messenger is three feet tall and comprised mostly of clockwork and hydraulics similar to most ceph tanks, and it doesn't actually speak, just holds out a note written in her – and Marajory's – manager's handwriting. Dr. Netmaker is the head of H.E.R.E.'s biolinguistics department, and ranks above them both.

“Alright, I'll be there,” she says, giving Peggley's hat, a polished piece of metal shaped like an acorn cap, an affectionate pat. The little construct clanks off again down the hall.

“Excellent, I'll be going back to sleep then,” says *blushoftangerine*'s speakers.

“Guess I'll see you later.”

“Want to come with me to the Blue Iron Ring tonight?”

“Ew, why would I do that?”

“I don't know, to meet people, to engage with the world, to have a life?”

Harriet holds up her skin-graft arm and think-says multiple expletives at once.

“I'm serious. I worry about you sometimes. I'm only gonna live to be five or so and then you're gonna be all alone again.”

She sighs, glances over at his earnest eye, the W-shaped pupil fixed on her with well-meaning concern.

“I'll consider it,” she says. *blushoftangerine* turns a cheerful shade of pink. Pulling on her H.E.R.E. blazer over a white regulation shirt with actual shell buttons, she takes her mug of chaga and sweeps out the door.



Several decades ago, Dr. Niall Netmaker had done his thesis on the sonic tree-drilling rituals of giant assemblage moths, and his very essence reminds Harriet of this, the way he's always flitting and muttering, with tufts of grey hair sticking out beside his ears.

“Oh, Ms. Willow, yes, come in, come in.” He's sitting behind a massive, ancient, hypersensitive stereo system, wearing large, ungainly headphones over his ears. He looks so doddering and enthused that Harriet decides not to correct him for the millionth time that it's ‘Dr. Willow,’ not ‘Ms.’

Peggle is sitting, unwound and powered down, on its small wicker chair in the corner, the one with its name painted on the backrest. Dr. Netmaker takes off his headphones and motions to the construct fondly.

“Peg got to you in time, eh?”

“How did you know I was planning to go out today?”

“Oh my dear, if I know you're not doing any teaching or scheduled in any meetings, I always assume you're going outside.”

Harriet sits down across the desk from him. “Fair,” she says, and smiles.

“‘Outside’ is actually precisely the reason I sent for you. Didn't want you wandering the coast without being in possession of the most recent warning intelligence.”

Harriet has always found the old-fashioned professionalism with which Dr. Netmaker speaks to be endearing and infuriating in equal measure. “And what's that, then?” she says.

“Squids, Harriet! Giant squids!” He spreads his hands wide as if presenting a spectacular treasure or a delicious meal.

“Context?”

“There have been sightings of at least two distinct giant squids off Camp Port in the past couple days. Now, the higher ups are unsure whether this is cause for concern or just an anomaly. All the eye witness accounts come from fishermen, and you know how they are.”

“No, how are they?”

Dr. Netmaker appears flustered by her bluntness, something that happens a lot. “Oh, you know, just prone to a good tall tale, as it were.”

“But if you don’t think they’re telling the truth, why call me here and warn me to be careful by the shore?”

“Well, to be frank, my dear, a couple of these accounts really are most troubling. A few stories, in particular, described seeing a squid of truly astonishing proportions reaching out *onto land* and grabbing a small assemblage of some kind. To eat, I assume.”

Harriet takes this in. She studies her manager for any of the signs of nervousness that she knows how to recognize – increased breath rate, rapid eye movement, fidgeting limbs, tense muscles – but he seems more excited than anxious. This piques her interest.

“Dr. Netmaker, just to clarify –”

“Yes?”

“Are you saying these squid are naturally giant, like *Architeuthis dux*, or unnaturally giant, like... like the Mollusk?”

He laughed, tossing his hands up again.

“I can’t say I know. My clearance isn’t that high, my dear.”

“So, they *could* be bigger than a naturally-occurring giant squid, then, based on the eye witness accounts?”

“I’m not necessarily saying that.”

“Yes, I know you’re not.” Harriet feels her brain start churning. “Because if you were, that would be a big deal. Because we know that the Myco Mutations only affect endothermic lifeforms on land, and cephalopods aren’t warm-blooded. I mean, their physiology is about as foreign from the mammalian as possible. Three hearts, cold, blue, translucent blood, brain divided across the body plan – you know all this, I’m rambling – anyway, so, if they were changing, it would mean –” She hesitates when she sees how high Dr. Netmaker’s eyebrows have risen into his hairline. “Well, it would mean a lot.”

There is a brief pause, then he leans forward in his chair, causing her to unconsciously do the same. He lowers his voice.

“Harriet, let me tell you a sort of open secret here at H.E.R.E. It’s technically classified, but we all find out eventually, one way or another.”

Harriet’s heart speeds up, both with excitement and anxiety about breaking the rules.

“The Myco Mutations are widespread and well-known, but some archival documents, that H.E.R.E. and the Phyla don’t make public, imply that the initial mycorrhizal gene-editing experiment, called Project Fangorn, was only *one* of multiple mutational experiments happening back then.”

“What does that mean?” Harriet is fully invested now, all previous traces of annoyance with her manager gone.

“Well, it probably means that there were other ways of developing assemblages, or forcing mutations. Ways that didn’t require warm-blooded bodies. I know for a fact that

there was one focussed specifically on cnidarians, especially siphonophores. Who's to say that no experiments were ever done on cephalopods?"

Harriet is breathless. "Professor, are you saying, could that be – could that be where *the Mollusk itself came from?*" This last bit is so controversial she finds she's almost whispering it.

Dr. Netmaker frowns.

"I would be careful who you say that to."

"Oh, of course, I know, I know." Harriet backpedals. "The Mollusk is a... is *like* a god. Of course. But surely there's a reason why we've never seen a cephalopod so large ever again? Or a giant jellyfish, or siphonophore?"

He sighs, and looks wistfully at his bookshelf. "The ocean is very deep, Harriet, and we aren't able to go very far out in it. All manner of mad things might be happening out there, and we would never know. Some of the underwater recordings I've heard have made me feel... well, it cannot be adequately expressed."

"But this changes everything! How is no one talking about this?" She feels her face flush. "What if the Mollusk was *made*? Who made it? And why?"

"Seeking the origin stories of gods, are you?" Dr. Netmaker seems to have decided to lighten the mood, and laughs instead of answering. "Aren't we all. Aren't we all."

"I'm sorry, sir, I just... I always want to know the *why* and *how* of things."

"And that is why you are a great scientist, Harriet. But not every explanation will make things better. Some things, we simply have to accept as they are."

He nods sagely, and Harriet can tell by this cue that she's being dismissed. She hovers for a moment between leaving and asking what she wants to ask, but eventually the

weight of the burning question wins, as it always does, even when she knows better. Especially when she knows better.

“Dr. Netmaker – sir – have you ever heard of the Myco Mutations crossing the Sentient Species Barrier? Or breaching the confines of the Mollusk?”

Now his affable demeanour vanishes entirely.

“Why would you ask such a thing, Harriet? Have you heard something?”

Harriet attempts to think on her feet.

“Oh, no, no. I’m just – if it had impacted a squid I was thinking – what’s to stop it from spreading? How much do we really know about the mutations, even now?”

“Well, I would be careful whom you say that to as well, my dear.”

This time, when she is dismissed, she knows not to push it.

But what a curious, wild, improbable thing to have happened. Why would Dr. Netmaker reveal so much to her, and why now? What did he know that she did not? And, as always, she was plagued by her personal kryptonite question: what did everyone else know that she was missing?

She heads to her lab, head down, muttering to herself, but when she rounds the final corner and sees Izik leaning against the wall, she stops in her tracks. He looks over, noticing her, and smiles, and she realizes that he’s been waiting for her. That he has access to H.E.R.E. and he knows where her lab is.

All her frustration and fear from yesterday bubbles up in her and suddenly finds an outlet. She is infuriated with this religious boy with squid eyes tattooed on his cheekbones. She gives up and lets all the unrelated stresses come together into one tidal wave of anger.

“You!” she snaps. “What are you doing here? Are you following me?”

Izik holds up both his hands, a gesture of claiming innocence.

“Look,” he says. “I don’t want to freak you out.”

“Too late,” she snaps. “How did you get in?”

“I’m a student here. Biomedical,” he says, and she realizes how troubling her assumption was – that a Skin Sightist wouldn’t want to study ‘real’ science.

“Oh,” she says, suitably chastised.

“Look, I wanted to apologize for yesterday. If yellowswirl scared you, I mean. He didn’t mean to. Sometimes the power of prophecy just seizes him, and he cannot contain it.”

“I’m a grown up. I took it in stride.”

“Well, and also, when you arrived, I acted like I didn’t know you, and I – and that was a lie. I knew who you were.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just, well... we know about you, Dr. Willow. The Skin Sightists, I mean. yellowswirl included. We, um, follow your work, and read your articles, or at least the ones that are approved for access at the public library.”

Harriet is startled enough to drop her rage. She blinks.

“Why?” she says, after a beat. Izik looks her right in the eye, and she puts in the necessary effort to consciously hold his gaze.

“Because our god is working through you, Dr. Willow,” he says. “I believe that with all my heart, even if you don’t. And I just wanted to say, well, if you see us around, us Skin Sightists, know that all of us want to protect you. We’ll never interfere with your life, but we want to keep you safe.”

“Yeah, that’s not creepy at all, Izik. I feel so *very* comforted by the fact that an entire religion is stalking me.”

“It’s not like that!”

He is so earnest that Harriet can’t help but feel a bit charmed.

“Okay, if you say so,” she says.

“I just wanted you to know.” He smiles ruefully. “I’m kind of a massive fan, okay? When you showed up yesterday yellowswirl didn’t warn me or anything, and I like... I forgot my own name for a second.” He blushes, and rubs the back of his neck. “Anyway, I’m sorry again. For yellowswirl, for yesterday, for this – for everything.”

Harriet just looks at him.

“I’ll – I’ll go now.”

“That would be best,” she says.

He takes a few steps away down the hallway, then pauses and looks back at her. “I mean it,” he says. “I got your back.”

“Oh, go on, you,” she says, but now she can’t help but smile, just a little bit.

Mostly because now she knows that people actually read her articles.

## CHAPTER 11

The giant monster I am riding on does not slow, or hesitate.

It has been several nights now.

I have been sleeping curled around the trunk of a tree. I have wedged my foot into a crack in a nearby boulder, and angled my body so that it feels secure. Toss me in any direction, and I’m staying put.

I do not know where we are going. There had been a moment, right at first, when I began climbing down, frantically half-falling, trying to find the edge of the creature, in order to jump off of it – and I could not. It kept rising higher. The ledge I had been perched on, and all of its surrounding slopes, was some kind of shoulder, quickly becoming one of the tallest pieces, rocketing upwards so fast that I had to stop moving and hold on. When the monster had stood, and I could cautiously creep to the side of it, I saw nothing but a sheer drop down its back, nothing to grip, crumbling soil. I was trapped.

And so now I am sleeping, or trying to sleep. The monster's gait is smooth, likely because its strides are so large that I can barely register them. It is like waves, like being on a raft on the Great Lake bobbing slowly over swells. I do not know where we are going but I do know we're headed east-northeast.

There do not seem to be any myco on this giant. I have seen squirrels, insects, even a bewildered toad, but nothing larger. The myco fled, and I imagine most other large creatures were flung off in the rising. I certainly hope so, for I am not prepared to evade a devilcat or dogrel this high in the air, with sheer drops all around.

The giant's shape is hard to make out, being on top of it. Like trying to see the details on a leaf by holding it directly against your eye. But this upper part seems to have three flat sections, and the one in the middle is taller, like a head over two shoulders. I know it isn't the real head, though, because there are no moving bits up here, just stone and dirt. All the giants are inhabited by something, some creature that wears the earth like a clothing. Its real head must be somewhere below, with its whipping limbs and jelly-like flesh. But I cannot see them.



How did the myco know? This question has been rolling over and over in my mind since I resigned myself to travelling with this giant, letting movement happen to me, like a stone being worn smooth by water. Why would the myco know but not the other creatures of Forest? And not me? They must, I decide, have some ability to sense vibrations much more sensitively than the rest of us small monsters. But why try to warn me? Again and again, I replay the myco in Nan's cabin, their green, clawed, but oddly human hands expanding outwards from each other. *Boom*.

There is only one explanation, I think, staring up through the triangular tips of the spruce, wiggling my bare foot deeper into its holding crack. The myco must see me as some kind of kin. A strange, un-green outcast who keeps themselves away, but who is wild enough to be included in the emergency warning system. Feral enough. Unhuman enough.

Yes, I can climb a tree almost as fast as any myco can. I can hunt with my bare hands and jump as high as any sporebuck. I am spit and blister, bite and prowl. And so, this strange validation from the myco pleases me. But I feel stupid for failing to figure out what they had meant in time.

It is growing darker. Overhead, a V of massive, long-necked birds is flying northeast too. Their framework is rigid and grey even while their feathers are vibrantly red and orange. I do not know their kind. I wonder how far the giant and I have already travelled. This moaning mountain and me, its passenger.

I am not sad to leave Nan's cabin and my human memories behind. They have been fading for a long time. But I am sorry to leave Forest – my forest. It was a place where I had learned how to survive. Wherever this giant is going – wherever I end up – it will

certainly be new. Its ecosystem and its monsters will be different, and I will have to study fast if I am to survive there.

Still, I am alive, and my only goal is to continue to be so. I am apprehensive, yes, but I would not say I am afraid.

Still, I fear nothing.

I lie awake until the stars fill the clear night sky and it feels almost soothing, the great motion of rocking up and down with the waves of this stone sea.

I sleep fitfully and wake to rain.

Up as high as I am on the top of the giant, that rain is blowing fiercely, slicing through the trees around me and building fast. I lie still for a count of five, taking in the framework around me. Only trees and fungus nearby, all browns and yellows and soft strokes. Good. I sit up and disentangle myself from sleeping position. My shirt and pants, made from the hide of some hooved monster that still had enough mammalian flesh to skin and cure, have kept me dry enough. It's colder than it was yesterday though. My fingers and toes had gone numb in sleep and now tingle with pain when I move them.

Again, I consider my options. There seems to be no escape. The edges of the monster are very steep and unstable, not to mention constantly in motion. And then there is the fact that I might get halfway and be eaten by some tentacled mouth.

So what can I do, then, other than wait?

*Purpose, purpose.*

I decide that if nothing else, I can observe. In a way, I have been given a gift. A possibly deadly gift, and an unwanted one, but a gift still, of sorts. From up here, moving in such great, slow strides, I am able to see the world.

It is not unlike my nightmare, I realize, with a faint spike of nausea.

In the corner of my eye, I half expect the forested hills to ripple, like a blanket aired out by the hands of a giant far larger than mine.

**//IN THE PAST//**

CBC News • World • Tom Simard • Posted: May 8, 2037 4:00 AM ET

**Canadian academics primary founders  
of viral video international eco-research group**

‘We’re past plan B, it’s time we developed plans C through Z,’ group says.

Canadian universities have been at the forefront of creating an interdisciplinary and international research group with a stated goal of ‘reinventing our perception of nonhumans,’ including animals, plants, fungi – even bacteria and viruses.

Called the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement – shortened to ‘H.E.R.E.’ by its supporters – the group recently went viral for a video from one of its Ontario labs that showed a hybrid species of fungus decomposing the dead body of a rat in just under two minutes. ‘Let’s revolutionize the green burial industry with genetic editing and minimal emissions!’ the caption exclaimed, disconcertingly cheerful.

Funded by both universities and the private donations of eco-advocates, H.E.R.E. is a collaboration between 21 institutions, of which Canadian universities are proud to make up the largest component. Within Canada, H.E.R.E. has members from the University of British Columbia, Trent University, Lakehead University, University of Toronto, Dalhousie University, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. International partners

are far-ranging, including scientists and environmental humanities researchers from the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield, and Edinburgh in the UK, The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Germany, Boğaziçi University in Turkey, Universidad Internacional de Andalucía in Spain, Tsinghua University in China, Lund University in Sweden, The University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, The Indian Institute of Science, Australian National University, and the Universities of Oregon, Montana, North Carolina Chapel Hill and California Santa Cruz in the US. To date, the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement represents one of the largest and most diverse academic movements of the century.

Members of H.E.R.E. are decidedly hopeful about humanity's future, a refreshing twist in these days of seemingly continuous global disaster.

“I believe we're going to survive, sure I do,” said Dr. Chima Yakubu of Memorial University of Newfoundland, one of H.E.R.E.'s first members. His research aims to create genetic resistance to chemical pollutants in deep-sea invertebrates. “We live in unprecedented times, and so we have to become unprecedented thinkers, but we can do it. We cannot afford, anymore, to be afraid of sharing ideas with the creatures we also share this planet with. We have to learn from them, really learn.”

Ashleigh James, a PhD candidate at the University of Oregon who is making a documentary about collaborating with and thinking like plants, describes H.E.R.E.'s objective as ‘imagining alternative eco-futures.’ “It's all about looking at how humans have

interacted with the ecological entanglement we're responsible to, and saying, 'right, how can we flip this?'" she tells me over ZoomTwo. "You have to be ready to really let go of the way you used to think about Earth," she adds. "It can be hard."

Dr. Helena Whetung is a mycological geneticist at Trent University in Ontario. She and her partners, PhD candidates Celine Ekström of Lund University and Jakob Durchdenwald of Munich, describe their work with fungus to me through a plexiglass screen, smiling in full Hazmat suits.

"Our small project, in this lab, is to create a strand of fungus that expedites human cadaver decomposition, which is where that viral video came from," explains Dr. Whetung. "Burial and the decomposition of human bodies is a huge, unspoken problem on our overpopulated earth, but our dream is a fungus that rapidly consumes and then holds all the carbon of a body."

In response to whether this could be dangerous – a *Jurassic Park* sort of situation – Durchdenwald laughs. "Only if we as scientists lose ourselves in hubris, or start to think we have more power than nature." He grows serious. "Because that is false. Nature always wins."

The Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement does not have one leader or spokesperson. As Dr. Hai Ng of Australian National University, puts it, "We're not a governing body, we're an 'entanglement.' Which, for those of us who came up with the name, seemed like a nice way to honour early eco-theorists while also being clear that this is a flat structure." Dr. Ng studies the art and culture of the giant Australian cuttlefish.

“They’re remarkably sophisticated,” he says. “Who knows, maybe one day we’ll actually be able to communicate with them.”

When I asked all these researchers for their primary motivation in joining H.E.R.E., the answer was the same: because time has already run out.

“Humanity is going to go extinct,” Dr. Whetung told me in her office, surrounded by watercolours of mushrooms, “unless we can actively figure out how to move beyond the human.” Dr. Yakubu, at Memorial, took a long moment to compose his thoughts, staring out at the nearby boreal forest. “We’re past plan B,” he said, sombrely. “It’s time we developed plans C through Z, however crazy people think they seem, however radical.”

Tom Simard

Ottawa

## CHAPTER 12

Harriet spends the afternoon in her lab, comparing chromatophore samples from multiple cephalopod volunteers under her microscope – another treasured technology of H.E.R.E. She’s been trying to figure out if culture or religion has any physical or biological impact on a ceph’s Colour-producing cells. She wouldn’t have thought so – that would be like saying a human’s tongue became physically different depending on their culture – but the initial evidence is compelling. Her current hypothesis is that if generations of one group of cephs use certain Colours more frequently than a different group, their chromatophores might begin to physically adapt. This would mean that even within the same species, some cephs might notice cultural ‘words’ in Colour that they themselves are physically unable to produce. It’s already well known that octopuses, squid, and cuttlefish produce distinct dialects of Colour, and do not always understand each other without the audio speaker system, but this physical alteration, even between groups in the same species would be a new wrench in the gears of perfecting Colour translation.

If only there were more ceph students at H.E.R.E., she wouldn’t have to conduct cultural interviews so much and she could share her projects with them as equal authors. Or they could do their own research – research they would be much more qualified to do than Harriet, a human. But H.E.R.E. is notorious for letting in fewer cephs than avians or apes, and favouring humans above any of the other peoples that make up the Mollusk’s population. This surprised no one. Human dominionism had died hard, or maybe not at all. So, Harriet does the best she can by letting cephalopods speak for themselves in her published interviews, whenever possible. The entire problem of privilege, of who gets to speak, is so human, so like history repeating itself. It had been created by human institutions



and systems – like H.E.R.E. itself – that still refused to stand down, no matter how many apes, avians, and cephs beat and bludgeoned them.

Everyone knows these things, but what had survived the Myco Mutations is as good as unchangeable now.

Unless, of course, the Myco Mutations were not done changing things after all.

Time has gotten away from her when *blushoftangerine* comes in, holding a rolled-up news magazine – the kind printed in *coprinopsis* ink on the in-vogue fungal weave – in his extendable grabbing arm. His speakers are making a sound akin to human humming, which can indicate a contented Colour pulse intended to display happiness to others, or a deep thoughtfulness.

“What’s up, homie?” he says.

“Absolutely not.”

“I read it in an old-world book!”

“Oh, it’s real slang. I’m just saying absolutely not, you may not call me that.”

“So are you coming south with me tonight or what?” he says, breezing right past her comment. “*ridgedalgalbluesheen* told me in the caf today that SymbioSIS is playing at The Conveyor Belt.”

“You can’t tempt me with a hot all-woman rock band, blush. I’m not sixteen.”

“Ah, but can I tempt you with *science*?” he says, slapping the magazine down next to her microscope with his metal claw.

“Oh my gods, stop, you’ll contaminate my workspace!” But even as she’s cleaning up, she’s seen the front of the magazine and she knows she’ll go with *blush* to the Blue Iron Ring. It’s a gossip rag, a tabloid, called *The Unquiet Wing*, and it’s just one double-sided

page. But the headline proclaims in bold lettering: ‘Mutations at the Union? Late Night Partiers Describe Unsettling Encounter with Monstrous Man.’

The two of them eat an uneventful supper in the caf of fried fish with carrots, beets, and kale, then freshen up in their quarters.

“Is that really what you’re wearing?” *blushoftangerine* says, when Harriet comes out of her room wearing the same button-down and beige slacks she wears every day.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, I guess. I just watch all you non-aquatic folks getting to wear clothes and have such an outward fashion sense and the opportunity is wasted on you, Harriet. *Wasted.*”

“What would you wear if you were me, then?” she asks, amused.

“Girl, you own like one nice thing, and it’s that green dress.”

So Harriet shrugs and goes and puts it on, the reused fabric patchwork sewn in long strips up from the knee-length hem, in a way that makes each different strip resemble a long blade of grass, and the whole skirt a carousel of shades of green. She undoes her ponytail and lets the tight black curls fall over her shoulders and brush her cheeks instead. At the last minute she grabs her H.E.R.E. blazer again, realizing she’ll need something with sleeves to cover her skin graft. She comes back out and holds her arms out from her sides as if presenting herself, face deadpan.

“Hot,” says *blushoftangerine*. Her flat expression breaks into a laugh and she smacks the side of his tank.

“I’m going for the science,” she says, but they’re both in a good mood now, Harriet almost despite herself.

They beep their badges on the way out one of the front doors, then take the lift down to the bottom of the shell, level 0, where the Tram is waiting. They're going to the midway stop; midway is Septum 60.

Nothing's sexy north of 60.

The Tram runs on a rare bit of the solar power that the Phyla allot as they see most beneficial. Its hammered brass doors are open, and the auto-ramp is down. *blushoftangerine* rolls up it and parks himself in a ceph dock, which has railings to prevent tipping. Harriet stands across from him and holds one of the smooth metal poles that line the narrow space. The Tram is already crowded, many people in H.E.R.E. uniforms heading south for home, or errands, or pleasure, mixed in with grocers and tradesfolk who had been in the north end making deliveries. A girl wearing a beautiful green vest is playing some kind of stringed instrument at one end of the car. Being around so many people, Harriet feels coiled, ready to spring away should anyone touch her.

At 19:00, the Tram whistle sounds, and they lurch southbound.

*Will I regret this?* Harriet thinks, looking at her friend bopping his tentacles up and down to the rhythm of the chimp's music. He exudes pleased smugness.

*Yep. Yep, I definitely will.*

The Blue Iron Ring stretches all the way from Septa 60 to 49. It's not so much one location as a name for an entire area of the Mollusk, one dominated by the Blue Iron Ring Union, the Mollusk's engineering corps, and their facilities and factories. The Union was initially founded by a collaboration between human engineers and cephalopod underwater demonstrations, to solve the cephalopod mobility problem. But nowadays, the Union designs, manufactures, and repairs everything from prosthetic wings to the hydraulic lifts

to the Tram itself. But of course, they remain a bastion of ceph interest, and though most engineers get their initial education in math and science at H.E.R.E., the ‘us vs. them’ mentality creates a sharp divide between those who choose to stay at H.E.R.E., and those who leave to become engineers with the Union. There are allegiances and politics here that go deeper than Harriet can pick up on. Class, species, and familial duties that she can sense but not quite grasp.

She and *blush* disembark along with a solid half of the Tram, a crowd of revellers heading out after work. In front of them a group of friends leans all over each other, laughing and sipping from bottles of something fermented already, Harriet bets, grasping the bottles around the necks with their fists. There are humans in short dresses painstakingly made of sparkling fish scales, humans with hair tied in all manner of extravagant ways, humans in vests of leather bare-chested underneath, with tattoos looping their bodies. Harriet sees an orangutan and a chimp with thick charcoal smudged around their eyes, metal studs knotted into their facial hair, and matching circular bands shaved around their biceps. She sees an octopus in a quadrutank playing loud synth music from an expensive music-storage attachment, the bottom of their tank flashing with pulsing strobe lights of all colours. Above the crowd, the air, all the way up to the skylights, is full of avian people – psittacines and corvids – swooping and cawing, flying in tandem or snagging feet on purpose and sling-shotting each other midair, screeching uproariously. Harriet sees the satiny black of ravens, crows, and magpies, the rainbow plumage of scarlet macaws, the white of cockatiels, and the greens, yellows, blues, and greys of a vast number of parrots. The party atmosphere goes beyond ground level. It permeates all the way up the cat-walk criss-crossed atrium of the Siphuncle.

It is the total opposite of H.E.R.E.'s stately, muffled decorum.

The Blue Iron Ring has three main components: factories, specialist businesses, and nightlife. As they walk, Harriet is fascinated to track how all three blend into each other – a dance club in the side alley off a smelter, a sexual spa across from a mechanic's, a high-quality leatherworks next to a solar panel factory that spans two whole levels and whose pipes cross the Siphuncle and attach to another cameral wall. These streets have more electric lighting than most of the Mollusk, H.E.R.E. excluded. Lanterns are strung from overhead catwalks and sway in the hot air rising off the crowds. Neon signs, an expensive spectacle, advertise out front of the largest, most popular establishments. One of which is their destination, The Conveyor Belt, a bar with a performance stage inside, attached to one of the Union's largest quadrutank assembly facilities.

As with most places in the Blue Iron Ring, The Conveyor Belt is owned and operated by Union affiliates, with a metal rendering of their sigil hanging above the door. It's a blue-ring octopus suspending itself by all eight arms inside a circle, perfectly symmetrical. Much like H.E.R.E. does with their crest, the engineers emblazon and brand their symbol on everything they make. Much like Skin Sightists, many even get tattoos. And, unsurprisingly, it's not uncommon to see people like a human man with Skin Sightist cheek tattoos and a round Blue Iron Ring sigil on his left pec, or an ape with cheek ink and the sigil spray-dyed onto their bicep. These are formidable folks, but also somehow read as immediate allies to Harriet, since their devotion to ceph rights is clear right on their skin.

Instead of lining up at the front door, *blushoftangerine* takes her down the far side alley, little more than a crevice in the wall of this cameral roadway. He extends his grabber arm and knocks with it on a thick metal door set into the stone. It smacks open almost

immediately, making Harriet take a startled step back. A young chimpanzee wearing smudged welding goggles and a leather vest, festooned with geometric shapes of stitched iridescent fish skin, leans out, one well-muscled arm holding the door wide.

“Hey! blushtangerine, what the heck, man,” he half-shouts over the music inside, grinning affably. He looks Harriet up and down. “You got her out of the house?” He winks at Harriet, and she frowns, which does not seem to deter his good mood in the slightest.

“Birt, can we come in or what?” says *blushtangerine*, a cheerful yellow with dots of pink.

“Yeah, yeah, for sure,” says Birt, and stands back to let *blush*’s tank clomp up and short ramp and into the dim interior. He offers Harriet a leathery hand, wrapped in a bandage from what she can only assume was some machinery incident. She does not like to touch strangers, and she walks into The Conveyor Belt unassisted, hugging her sides.

*blushtangerine* has many friends and their names swirl around her like a school of fish, too fast to snatch only one out of the air and hold onto it. Most of them say something about how they’ve heard so much about her, or are glad to finally meet her. There are many cephs in mobile tanks, all with Colour names like *greatturtle-algaeluminescent-green*, *siltsilver-sunpromise*, or *anthias-magenta-purpleheat*. Colour names translated to Molluskan often find their most literal meaning in references to ocean life, because those are the reference points that cephs, as a people, have always had for what colour a Colour is. Harriet’s research is interested in this too – why do some reef creature references remain, when there haven’t been coral reefs in two hundred years? Names like *lipyellow-bandedkrait* have no meaning outside of being a name now, to cephs

who live in tanks inside the Mollusk. So why, if Colour is so flexible in other ways, do these reef words continue to be relevant?

Admittedly, thinking about this distracts her for a bit.

There are apes and avians there too; she's introduced to Syanma, an orangutan who looks like she could bench-press a whole quadrutank, and Ellec, her partner. Birt is there too, playing a game of Mycelium with a pale androgynous human with Skin Sightist tattoos. Harriet watches the two of them string the thread through the small wooden pegs on the board, taking turns making the next movement. There's a couple of tables here, close to the stage, that *blush*'s group seems to have claimed as theirs – the regulars. But she can't spot a free chair, so she just stands and lets the world move around her. SymbioSIS is setting up, and the lead singer is a curvy human woman wearing Mi'kmaq beadwork earrings, while the drummer is wearing a shimmering, low-cut shirt.

Admittedly, this distracts Harriet as well.

*blushoftangerine* comes back over to her, leading another giant cuttlefish.

"Harriet, this is *nighttime-teal-awashwithstars*," he says, and the Colour he displays when signifying her name is beautiful, unlike any Harriet has seen. His back resembles, for a moment, a green-blue sky speckled with the white radiance of distant stars. She drags her mind into focus.

"Yes, uh, hi, hello." She holds out her hand, on human autopilot, and then drops it immediately, embarrassed to have made such an interspecies faux pas.

"It's so nice to finally meet the elusive Harriet. I've heard so much about you," says *awashwithstars*, and the automated voice of her speaker is a feminine one. This tells Harriet that she likely works or lives outside of the Blue Iron Ring. Many cephs here didn't interact

with enough judgemental humans to bother installing a program that modified their translation voice to match their gender, or else they didn't care about human expectation, so this choice reveals a lot.

“Likewise,” Harriet says, though she realizes as she says it that *blush* has, in fact, never mentioned this cuttlefish, though he has been going out in the evenings much more often in recent moons.

They exchange a few more pleasantries, and then Harriet excuses herself. She watches out of the corner of her eye as *blushoftangerine* and *awashwithstars* start speaking in Colour only to each other, without using their speaker systems. She grins to herself. Her best friend has a crush, and the least she can do is leave them alone.

The band is warming up, and The Conveyor Belt is only getting warmer, noisier, and more crowded. Hoping to get some air, Harriet weaves through the throngs of tanks and bodies and steps back out into the cameral alley they'd come in from. None of *blush*'s friends notice her leave; no one is paying attention to her.

Which is honestly how Harriet prefers things.

For a few minutes, she just breathes deeply, a little overstimulated but nothing she can't get a handle on. She focusses on her senses to try to regain some regulation. She can hear the line up out front and the party inside. She can taste metal and dust on the hot, stale air. She can smell sweat and smoke and fried food. But looking away from the brightly-lit cameral street, further into this crevice's closest confines and shadows, she can also see that across from her there is another door, unmarked save for the Union's octopus sigil. There is nobody near it, nobody near her.

*I'm going for the science.*



She walks over and tries the handle. It's not locked. She pushes through the door and finds herself on a catwalk above a quadrutank manufacturing facility. She stands over a huge opening, going down through the stone of the septum for easily five levels, she guesses, peering over. Ladders and ramps and partial floors web the space.

She checks to make sure the door won't lock behind her, then lets it close softly. The music vanishes. She can feel the heat from forges blasting up against her skin. Clanks and shouts and churning, humming machinery – most powered by steam, to her knowledge – echo up from below. It is so hot in here, and so strange to see that image of the symmetrical blue-ring octopus everywhere. Harriet can't help herself; despite her despondency after this disaster of a day, she starts thinking of research. Why does this particular sector lend itself so thoroughly to ceph acceptance and equality? If you hadn't grown up Molluskan, didn't know the unspoken societal divisions, wouldn't it seem unlikely that aquatic creatures would gravitate to a field so rife with fire and metal? And how did the non-cephs who worked here feel about their ceph colleagues, if they weren't Skin Sightists? Perhaps she should propose a series of interviews with Union members. As if H.E.R.E. would go for that.

She's pulled out of her brainstorm by a human voice.

“You lost, scholar?”

It's a woman in her early 20s, with luminous dark skin and close-cropped hair. She's standing at the top of a nearby metal staircase, wearing a loose white shirt stained with soot and ash under tanned hide overalls. She must work here, Harriet thinks, and had seen her from below. She had not said 'scholar' kindly.

“Oh, uh, yeah, sorry, I was at the club and I – I must have come back in the wrong door. How do you know I’m a scholar?”

The woman nods to her blazer, and Harriet blushes.

“Oh, yeah. I’m not, uh, it’s not like that.”

“Like what?” says the woman, taking a step forward.

“I’m here with my ceph friend,” Harriet blurts out. “His name is *blushoftangerine* and we came to see SymbioSIS and –”

The woman’s face breaks into a smile. “Okay, okay, keep your head on, girl.”

“I’m an ally,” Harriet says, then wishes she could smack herself in the face.

“That’s cool,” the engineer woman says, exuding coolness herself. “It’s always nice to meet a human with ceph friends. Not many work at HERE, far as I know.”

Harriet squares her shoulders defensively. “Well, I am one of them.”

“Nice,” says the woman, and then she looks Harriet up and down again, this time with a very different expression. “So your friend is at The Conveyor Belt, I assume. You out looking for a good time, or what?”

“I, uh – what? No. No, I should go join him.”

“Okay, cutie. I was just gonna offer you a tour of the facility.” She winks.

Harriet doesn’t like how acutely aware she is of her own appearance. She has freckly fawn beige skin, a mixed bag of genetics. She wears her ash brown, tightly crimped hair naturally, never one to care for styling, usually tying it back hastily with a piece of twine or whatever she has lying around so that it just frizzes out across her back, and all of a sudden she hates that, wishes she’d braided it. Her eyes are green but not a remarkable green, more like a chunk of rough-hewn serpentine than a precious stone. Her front teeth

have a gap and she's too tall. She stands in the heat of the forges and has never felt sillier. She rubs her hands up and down her forearms, wrinkling the blazer's sleeves.

She chances a look over at the woman, who is studying her.

"Sorry," Harriet says. "I'm so awkward. I don't go... out a lot."

"Well, you improved my night. Spiced up the monotony of my shift. Keep doing the good work from the inside, ceph scholar."

The woman offers her hand, and Harriet shakes it, then suddenly drops her grip, and gasps.

There are small patches of green moss on the woman's brown forearm.

"Oh, fallacy, frack, it's nothing, don't worry about it." The woman's suave and confident composure is immediately gone. She frantically tugs her sleeves right down to her fingertips.

"Is that a mutation? When did that happen?" Harriet hisses, looking surreptitiously around, but they are still alone.

"Hey, doc, it's nothing, just some cool gene work I had done."

"So you're not – not *infected*?"

The engineer doesn't answer, just bites her lip.

"You have moss growing out of you, don't you?" Harriet says. "You don't know why."

"Yeah, and you have ceph skin!" the woman snaps. Harriet jumps back as if burned.

"You – you saw that?" Now it's her turn to tug on her sleeve.

"Look, don't tell anyone and I won't," the woman says, swinging over the edge of the catwalk and grabbing onto a narrow metal ladder.

“But it’s not the same – mine isn’t –”

But the woman who may or may not have a Myco Mutation is gone. Harriet cradles her cuttlefish arm and stands above the forges for a long time after, both hoping and fearing that she’ll come back.

### CHAPTER 13

Time has slowed down.

It has been four days on the monster’s shoulders. I do not feel hungry so much as hollow. At first, I was wary of the giant’s ‘head,’ the mass of stone rising above me, with its steep sides, but eventually I grow restless and I climb atop it. There are plenty of holds; what makes it difficult is the creature’s motion, the booming tremor when its foot sets down. But on top of its head-cliff my view is completely unobstructed, even though the wind scrapes my eyes and makes them water. I find that if I face backwards, looking behind us, it’s not so bad.

I cannot say what I am watching for, the first time I do this. It is a vigil with no goal. Just observe, I tell myself. That is your purpose now. Mental-map and memorize. Remember the direction of Forest, of home.

I am beginning to feel like we might walk like this forever, until I die up here and shrivel into a husk like the plucked body of a mushroom, but then, on the fourth day, there is something other than forest to see.

Slowly at first, then more and more, we begin passing through landscapes the likes of which I’ve never seen. The farther northeast we travel, the fewer leafy trees there are, and then there emerges the first jagged remnants of structures that are distinctly un-forest.

Cracked, and rotting, they are cabins like Nan's, but bigger, and more solid, even in ruin. These cabins are crammed up against each other in rows and rows, winding along rough grey ribbons that look, from up high, like berries on a curling vine, or buttons on a sewing thread. Some of these cabins are massive – huge square roofs viewed from above, poked through now with tender saplings and even some tall-grown trees. Everywhere, on these ribbons, are dots of colour and shattered metals, all overgrown by enemies of Forest that I can recognize from a distance: dog-strangling vine and buckthorn. Between these bundles of cabins, with all their whitewashed grey wood and crumbling black ribbon, are stretches of flat earth, fields and meadows, sometimes forests in their own rights, but always intermingling now with the cabins and crushed things. None of these changes seem to matter to the giant, who neither pauses nor slows, but I am fascinated.

To slake my thirst, I lick the rain off the stones that make the giant's neck and head, and set to protecting the one small section where it gathers in a little scooping crevice.

I resort to eating insects living under the bark of trees, and clods of moss and roots.

Time distorts even more. I begin to lose track of the days.

We pass through a new sort of place. It looms out of the horizon like the back of porcupine, spikes raised. When we reach it, the giant walks between massive angular columns, shimmering with strange tinted metals and mirrors, some as tall as the rocky ledge I am trapped on. I briefly consider trying to jump from the giant's shoulder onto the top of one of these jagged stone trunks, but it is still a big gap and if I am honest, the idea of disembarking in this empty, soil-starved maze frightens me. I do not know if there would be food here, or clean water, or if everything is still too damaged from its past life to grow.

In the centre of this place, the giant slows for the first time. I grip tightly to the trunk of the pine I'm perched in, and see that this change in pace is in order to navigate a steep slope down towards a broad river. I have never seen one so wide. In Forest, it was either a stream or the Great Lake itself, nothing of this wide, flat kind.

I look back as we descend, and see that on the edge of this grand hill there are structures with roofs the oddest pale green colour, the exact shade of trumpet lichen, but clearly weathered metal, not plant. Some have spires with needlepoint tips, while others have caved in under the weight of time and snow, water, and wind. What must have happened here, once? What sort of importance, or grandeur? The green-roofed buildings are huge; they cover the escarpment. No humans would build something like this unless they wanted everyone to notice.

Humans.

I know where we are. I remember Nan's stories, and I know these were all human dwellings. But I also remember Nan saying that all the humans who had lived in the big gathering places like this one – the cities – were dead. She said they all got eaten by monsters, and those that didn't froze to death, because they were stupid and used to an easy life, and winter, back then, was wicked. She said only those who fled out in the wilds survived.

But if Nan's stories about the past were true, then why, as I gaze back over the green-roofed buildings at this ruined city-place, do I catch sight of a distant flag of smoke?

## CHAPTER 14

The Conveyor Belt is in full swing, now that the band is playing. Harriet has to dodge several octopuses who have opened the tops of their tanks and are flailing their tentacles in the air and onto each other's, and she nearly crashes into a couple of human men making out shirtless behind a pillar. These crowds are worse than going mouthside. And she didn't even get to interview that engineer, her first solid lead.

“Harriet! Haaaaarriet!” She turns around and sees *blushoftangerine* clomping towards her, bright red with excitement, and definitely tipsy on some kind of ferment.

“Hi!” she shouts back, over the pounding drumbeats and husky singing.

“Harriet, where did you goooo?” *blush*'s speakers are at top volume and she hears the squeak of feedback.

“Just getting some air!”

“Harriet, *stars* is so cool, I want you to like her.”

“Okay, buddy, let's get you back to the table.” She steers her friend's quadrutank back to his friends, and finds a bench against the wall. She watches him fall seamlessly back into conversation with Birt and a few others whose names she's forgotten already, and feels a small pang of jealousy.

A ceph who's only been alive for five years has more social fluidity than she does.

“Dr. Harriet Willow, ceph scientist – have I got the right girl?”

She looks around, startled, and at first sees no one, even though the voice had come from disconcertingly nearby.

“Up here,” the person says again, and she swivels sideways. Perched on the upholstered back of the bench, in the shadow of some rather decadent curtains, is a raven wearing a bowtie.

“Hiya.” If avians could smile, Harriet imagines this raven would be. “Name’s Klik-Hyuk, pronouns are he-him if we’re speaking in Molluskan.”

His voice is unfiltered by any speaker or comm box, but surprisingly clear. The croak of it, though still distortive, has the practiced smoothness of someone who has been practicing human speech for a many years.

“Nice to meet you,” Harriet says. It is a little easier to talk tucked away from the dance floor like this. “You seem to know my name and pronouns already.”

“Course I do. You’re a bit famous, in certain circles.”

“Ah. So you’re a Skin Sightist?”

“Oh, no, no. Just an interested party. I do spend a lot of time with Skin Sightists, though, and let me tell ya, they *love* you.”

“So I’ve heard,” Harriet says, turning back to face the churning sea of carefree bodies. Hyuk takes this as an invitation to hop down onto her left shoulder.

“Is this your first time here?” he croaks conversationally next to her ear.

“Yes.”

“And yet you’re not dancing.”

“Not really my thing.”

“So what brought you here, then?”

“My friend.” Harriet gestures towards *blush* and *stars* and the group. “He’s always trying to convince me to ‘live a little’ but I’m kind of miserable whenever I try, to be honest.”

“And friendly solidarity is the *only* reason you’re here?”

Harriet looks over at him from the corner of her eye and frowns.



“What was your name again?”

“Klik-Hyuk.”

“No, no, that’s your humanized name. I know that actual avian names are usually impossible for mammalian voice-boxes to create, but I’d still like to know it.”

He cocks his head to the side, as though reconsidering her.

“Most humans don’t care about that.”

“Well, I do.”

“Huh. Okay then. My full name is *klik-klik-ayya-screee-hyuk-hra*.” He clacks and whistles and caws a combination of sounds that Harriet could, of course, never repeat. “But you can call me Hyuk, it’s easiest.”

“And you can call me Harriet. You seem to think you know something about me and my motivations. I’m not good with beating around the bush – what is it?”

Hyuk is quiet for a moment, and SymbioSIS starts up a slower, mellower song. Finally, he says, “I also worked for HERE, once. I was a curator of Corvidian arts and culture in my youth. That was five, six years ago now.”

“Yeah? What do you do now?”

“Oh, for the past couple years I’ve run a publication called *The Unquiet Wing*. Part gossip rag, part radical politics. The whispered comings and goings of the Mollusk. All the things everybody wants to hide.” He stretches his wings, brushing the top of her head with one of them in what Harriet interprets as a power move, and then resettles them with evident pride. “Suffice to say that the Skin Sightists are fans, and the Phyla and HERE are... decidedly not.”

“And what does that have to do with me and why you seem to think I’m at this club tonight?” Harriet is guarded, remembering the magazine that *blushoftangerine* had brought her only hours ago.

Hyuk studies her for a moment. Then he leans in and croaks as softly as he can into her ear – which still isn’t all that softly.

“I’ve heard some things about you, you know. *Some* things.”

“Um, good or bad things?”

“Well, I heard that you have cuttlefish skin on your human arm.”

Harriet tenses.

“I heard that you can talk to your ceph friend without the translation speaker system. I heard that you care about the fate of the underdogs of the Mollusk, about the peoples with no opposable thumbs, and that you’ve been writing treatises for ceph rights in collaboration with the Skin Sightists.”

“What?” She whirls around, forcing Hyuk to flutter back onto the edge of the bench. “Okay, that last part is *not* true. I hardly ever leave HERE. This is the first time I’ve done anything, well... anything of note in the last decade.”

“Yes, exactly my point, Harriet. Why?”

*Oh, frack*, Harriet thinks. She’s been journalist-ed.

“Okay, fine. As you *clearly* already know, an article about possible mutations within the Mollusk that you published in your magazine drew my attention.”

Hyuk hops from one talon to the other. “Oh good, excellent, *superb!* I was so hoping that was the answer.”

“Do you really believe what you wrote? About people becoming assemblages right here, among us?”

“Oh, I’m not sure yet. Not sure *yet*. But I would very much like to speak with you, get your opinion. Off the record, of course. Although I *would* love to do an interview, talk about that amazing surgery of yours, really break that wide open –”

“No,” Harriet interrupts. “Not that.”

“Harriet, I don’t think you know your own influence. I don’t think you’ve been paying attention, quite frankly, no offense meant. Look, have you ever thought to check how much of your work is in the public library database?”

“Not really. I had assumed all of it.”

“No. Only a small percentage is still there. I’ve looked, my reporters have looked, Skin Sightists have looked – we’ve done a comparison. Over the last year, it’s like someone with the authority to do so has been slowly redacting your work.”

“What are you implying?” she hisses, but just at that moment *blushoftangerine* comes over, his quadrutank’s hydraulic legs hissing with every step.

“Making friends?” his speaker intones flatly. Hyuk laughs, a barking, squawk, all tension of the previous moment vanished. Harriet actually wonders if she’d imagined it.

“yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine!” Hyuk crows delightedly. “I must say it is a *pleasure* to make your acquaintance!”

*blush* turns a flattered shade of pink.

“What has Harriet been saying about me?”

“Nothing, nothing – I’ve heard of you both through Skin Sightist excitement about your work together. Such a fruitful research partnership.”

“Well, you know, Harriet wouldn’t have made half as much progress in translating Colour if it wasn’t for me...”

Hyuk hops on top of *blush*’s tank, apparently deciding it’s time to get out of a conspicuous-looking situation. But before he goes he says,

“I really do think we should talk, Dr. Willow. Contact *The Unquiet Wing* and ask for me.”

Harriet is disturbed, and it stays with her. She has never been a fan of change and the past 24 hours have thrown her into a bit of a tailspin.

Why would H.E.R.E. dislike the Skin Sightists, a seemingly harmless – if a bit melodramatic – religion? Why would they distrust, or even care about, a silly gossip reporter? She considers what Hyuk had said about her research being removed from public access in the last year. One year – it has been about one year since her surgery.

The surgery had been approved by all necessary channels in H.E.R.E., and presumably the Phyla themselves. In her proposal, she’d defended its necessity to her linguistic research, and argued that she could not push any farther into cephalopod thought and perception without augmenting her own ability to communicate directly. Screens and projection pads hadn’t worked; the translation of her written statements into Colour in pixels wasn’t accurate at all, according to her lab assistants. What they got from the screens was, if anything, a severely watered-down abstraction of her original message. For example, if she’d typed: ‘Which parts of this translation are accurate?’ their speakers would reply, ‘That just says ‘Good?’’

So she’d written the proposal for the skin graft and neural connection surgery and described how they could gene-edit the cuttlefish skin to retain elasticity without water and

slime, and she'd been approved, and then after she'd healed enough to start projecting her own Colour she'd taken on a new assistant, one who was only a few moons old and would have at least six years of life to work with her on this, and his name was *yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine*.

But still, her proposal had to have gone all the way to the top. How much do the Phyla know about her? She's objective enough to realize that her ignorance of politics outside of her little sector of H.E.R.E. could have made her vulnerable. She has no way of telling if what Hyuk says is even possible, let alone likely. Marajory had always led her to believe that no one read her papers, that they were only ever published in H.E.R.E.'s journal. Izik had been her first confirmation otherwise. And she pays no attention to gossip and activism, to newspapers and rumours. The only thing that has ever mattered is her work. She has thought, her whole life, that the Mollusk was immutable, forever bustling and functional, beyond repute or internal disputes. Safe in her little hole in the shell wall with old-world textbooks and library card and her H.E.R.E. uniform hanging crisply on the closet-bar. She was just a weird little girl who wanted to know what the octopuses who lived down the camera were saying in their own language, and made it her life's mission to find out. A weird little girl who became a weird, socially inept woman but no more than that. Never more than that.

But what if – what if?

It was almost as titillating as it was terrifying to think that somewhere along the line, she might have become *important*. Of course, how stupid would it be to discover you had a bit of a following, a bit of influence you could have used to sway public opinion, at the exact same moment you discovered that influence was being checked? Underneath this

concern, Harriet is also vaguely embarrassed. If this were all true, then, well, how typical of her to have missed it. For the highest powers of the Mollusk to be fighting over her and her not notice. For Marajory to have convinced her of a lie.

Typical, Harriet. Just typical.

When it gets so late that she absolutely has to go home, she wanders around until she finds *blushoftangerine* and Hyuk just down an alleyway, like a couple of teenage ne'er-do-wells. She half expects them to be smoking tobacco or cannabis sneakily, like it's not perfectly legal. But they're just talking, Hyuk cleaning his feathers and *blush* resting lazily on the bottom of his tank.

"Yeah, but that's the thing," her friend is saying. "If you take the rumours seriously, then this mutation sickness is, like, everywhere in the city, okay? But that can't be true, because why aren't we seeing it?"

"People *are* seeing it!" says Hyuk. "Just not in the posh adapertural narrows where you and your human live. Mouthside, it's everywhere, man."

"Then why aren't we hearing about it?"

"I just printed a front-page piece."

"I know. I saw it. But you literally just admitted your magazine prints *gossip*, dude."

"Hey," says Harriet, and they spin around, Hyuk on top of the tank and *blush* inside of it. "Whatcha talking about?"

"Nothing," says Hyuk, too fast.

"No, you're not. You're talking about mutations inside the Mollusk, aren't you?"

"Keep your voice down," Hyuk hisses.

"Like you two weren't talking at normal volume seconds ago."

“So, you know about this, too, then. I didn’t want to bring it up out of nowhere when I was only just meeting you earlier,” says Hyuk.

“Yeah. I’ve – I’ve seen things,” she says, sliding her back down the alley wall to sit. Hyuk flaps over and lands on the ground in front of her toes. He looks up at her with the hungry glint of a journalist.

“Like what?”

“I thought I was imagining it, actually. I saw – there was this kid, mouthside, and his eyelids went... sideways? Like a lizard’s. And then there was this woman tonight, and she had moss...”

Hyuk wheels around and spreads his wings at *blushoftangerine*, like a pontificating professor being proven right.

“Ah HA! Even your human backs me up, how about that, blushy m’boy?”

“Harriet, why didn’t you tell me about these people you saw?” *blush* looks hurt.

“It, like, just happened, okay? Give me a break. And I – I didn’t really know how to bring it up without sounding crazy, honestly.”

*blushoftangerine* turns a soft pearl colour. “Fair,” he says.

“What were you saying though, Klik-Hyuk?” Harriet says. “You think it’s more than a few isolated incidents, some gene-editing gone wrong, maybe?”

Hyuk pecks her shoe in an overflow of excitement.

“Girl, no, you have no idea! I have a working theory, see. I think the Myco Mutations are spreading to Molluskan peoples. I think they’ve finally broken the Sentient species barrier.”

“Okay, hold on, the Sentient Species Barrier is a highly-contested hypothesis, at best –”

“We’ve got humans, apes, cephs, and avians developing new, assemblage-style mutations in the Mollusk –”

“– because to define such a barrier means to define sentience itself, and if we learned one thing from human and nonhuman history it’s that –”

“– some kids are even being *born* with mutations, I heard, like assemblage children, and the Phyla are –”

“– we can never be fully aware of the thoughts and intelligences of other beings and so to assume our sentience is the only kind of sentience sets a dangerous precedent –”

“– quietly disposing of them.”

There’s a beat of silence as Harriet snaps out of her theoretical spiral and clocks what Hyuk has just said.

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah, hold up, did you just casually accuse the Phyla of *disposing* of children?” *blushoftangerine* adds.

Hyuk holds up his wings in a humanized gesture of *hey, don’t shoot the messenger*. “I mean, I’m not gonna deny that I deal mostly in hearsay, but there’s a lot of compelling stories from distraught parents filtering through from a variety of sources.”

“A variety of sources,” says *blushoftangerine*, “yeah, what’s that, like, the two drunk parrots you see at Thursday night crab races? That’s an *insane* thing to say, man!”

“It’s a dangerous thing to say,” Harriet adds, looking down at the raven before her, his little chest puffed out with self-importance.



“Hey, I’ve been on the rumour mill for several years now,” says Hyuk. “You get a feel for the truth of things under all the conspiracies and absurdities. Harriet admits she’s seen things she can’t explain. People are quick to anger in the less regulated parts of the city, and fear of the unknown is a powerful drug. I’m *just. Saying.*”

*blushoftangerine* barrel-rolls in his tank, which in this instance Harriet reads as the equivalent of rolling his eyes.

Harriet stands up, maybe a little too quickly. She has to close her eyes.

“Okay, okay, look. I can’t think about this right now. I need sleep.”

“I’ll come home with you, Harriet,” says *blushoftangerine*, and she gratefully reaches out to rest her hand on the dry metal rim of his tank, the filter slightly warm.

“Hey, you two!” They both turn. Hyuk is squinting at them. “Seriously, be careful who you talk to about this, okay?” He turns somber. “The individual is fallacy.” Without waiting for a reply, he flies off.

“The Entanglement holds us all,” Harriet says, to no one.

As she and *blush* ride the midnight Tram back north, Harriet can’t keep herself from scrutinizing everybody. She studies all their fellow passengers, looking for sideways blinks or hidden patches of mossy skin. She thinks about the boy in the market and the woman in the factory from every possible angle until her head feels like it might split open. As a logical, rational person and a scientist, she can only come to one conclusion. Something is going genetically wrong in the Mollusk, and it’s being kept secret. Potentially kept secret by the highest levels of Molluskan government and her own academic supervisors. The exact nature of this ‘something wrong’ remains an unknown variable, but Harriet is willing to bet on one thing.

It's dangerous.

## //IN THE PAST//

It's like the Boreal felt lichen all over again.

Kelly Doyle had only been a baby biologist then, barely cussing his twenties, but he still remembers the fervour, the way Newfoundland biologists had apparently sent their findings to the leading lichenologist in the UK and he'd called them saying, "Don't move. Don't leave that site. I'm getting on the next plane."

Now Newfoundland is home to 95% of the world's remaining population of the Boreal felt lichen, that rare cyanolichen once thought exclusive to northern Europe. It's so endangered that to find some, growing in its green-grey scoops and ledges on the trunk of a balsam fir, is cause for frantic excitement.

Most people don't understand dedicating your life to something like lichen. But most people don't know much about lichen at all. The more someone learns about it, Kelly has found, the more amazed – and sometimes alarmed – they become. This is a living thing that is neither plant nor wholly fungus, but an algal collaboration, many things inside one thing. To study lichen is to accept that biological boundaries are human inventions, that fluidity is nature's favourite state. For this reason, many biologists avoid lichen. He and his colleagues joke that their field attracts all the masochists, because nothing is more frustrating than studying something that troubles the axioms of your field, the clarity of all your conclusions.

Still, he supposes this acceptance of scientific flexibility amongst lichenologists is why the Newfoundland government has brought him and his grad student, River, out to the Terra Nova site. The excitement here is palpable. There are lichenologists and mycologists from Toronto, Thunder Bay, Moncton, and Montreal, a couple folks he knows from the

annual NL Foray fungus-hunting weekend, and then he and River are introduced to Dr. Sam Järvinen, from the University of Helsinki, who'd documented another unknown large fungus in Finland the year before, and is hoping this may be the same species.

“Welcome to the Rock, Dr. Järvinen,” Kelly says, shaking the lean, bespectacled man's hand. “Sorry we didn't arrive before you to roll out some proper Newfoundland hospitality.”

Dr. Järvinen laughs. “It is not a problem, Dr. Doyle,” he says. “Who can think of food when the hunger of discovery is upon us?”

They've got to hike to the site. They're camped in Terra Nova National Park, but much of the park's area is roadless protected forest. Kelly's a bayman through and through and prides himself on his backwoods skills, but he'd grown up out in the Humber Valley, by Corner Brook, so he doesn't know this area. Like everyone else, he just follows the Parks Canada guy – whose name might be Kyle, or Tyler – towards the place where a pair of hikers had made the initial find. Kelly only knows what Dr. Järvinen has published about his version of new fungus, and even then, it might not be the same one. After all, they only have inexperienced description to go on, and mycological identification is notoriously tricky. But he does know that this fungus had been so unusual or frightening-looking that the couple who had found it had been shaken. That had been a key intriguing element in the report he and River had gotten: there's a ‘scary’ fungus growing in Terra Nova National Park.

River is keeping up a constant stream of chatter with Dr. Järvinen and the team from Toronto as they walk. Kelly thinks that she would be an excellent teacher; she has a way with other people, a sort of effortless effusiveness he has never possessed. Her watches her

bright red curls disappearing down around a turn through dense spruce, holding his arm up to keep from getting whacked in the face.

And then they're there. The entire group stops dead.

"Oh" whispers Dr. Järvinen quietly, drawing the sound into one long syllable of bewilderment. Then his face becomes hard, pinched, and he says, "*luulen, että tässä on koira haudattuna.*" Kelly, knowing zero Finnish, can't help but feel he echoes the sentiment, based on tone alone.

Something is very wrong here.

There are mushrooms growing from the boreal floor, but they are larger than they should be, larger than any mushroom Kelly has ever seen in Newfoundland, or anywhere, for that matter. There are chanterelles and boletes taller than he is, blankets of white parasols growing up to knee-height, and hard, bracketed polypores big enough for a human to sit on – a hundred different kinds of fungus, all growing impossibly giant within the same half-acre.

"What the hell...?" says River, approaching the nearest bundle – some kind of *Galerina*, Kelly thinks, though he'd need his microscope to identify it down to the species. The round, pale-brown conic caps, shot through with darker striations like the wires of umbrellas, are each the size of dinner plates. This from a genus that normally grows, at most, 1.5cm across. Looking behind her, he sees a well-known lichenized fungus, *Cladonia cornuta*, the bighorn pixie lichen. Its thick, rubbery, whitish tendrils, like tentacles, punch up out of the ground and branch into their antler-like tips at his shoulder height.

"They were *not* this big a couple days ago," says the Parks employee, wiping his forehead. It's not hot out here; the sweat is a nervous one.

“I have never seen anything like this,” says Dr. Järvinen, striding out into the centre of the mushroom grove. But for some reason Kelly wonders if he’s lying. Didn’t he see some shit in Finland?

“Where is the new fungus, the unidentified one? Did it *cause* all this growth? No, no, we must not confuse correlation and causation, as always.” His voice trails off into a muttering as he pulls out his sampling kit.

Kelly walks through the grove in silence. He can’t quite describe what he’s feeling but it’s like a mix of reverence and terror and something else, something more physical and instinctive. But maybe they’re all in a little bit of shock. A discovery of this magnitude will set all of them up for a lifetime of grants. Their names are as good as made. All their financial troubles, the stress of maintaining research funding – gone. Not to mention all the ways new knowledge could advance the field.

But he can’t shake this sense that they should leave. Immediately.

River has wandered to the eastern side of the affected area and is examining the soil, lying on her stomach with her lens.

“Kelly!” she calls, waving him over. “This is it, I think.”

He goes over and hunches down and sure enough, River has uncovered a small square patch just a few centimetres below the surface of the soil. Woven all throughout it are mycelial fibres, but they’re an unusual vibrant red.

“I found it by following down from that,” River says, pointing to a small red mushroom sitting, bulbous, next to the roots of a nearby spruce. Its stalk is not visible, its growth habit like that of a puffball, but he’s never seen a puffball so red, or so slimy. Mushrooms are not usually slimy, period. He leans in and sure enough, there is a small hole

on the top of the orb through which spores will be released when the fungus is trampled or bumped – even from contact as light as a raindrop.

“Well now, friend, who are you and how did you grow this place?” Kelly says, getting out his own lens and leaning down over the unknown fungus.

It squirts a cloud of spores into his face.

“Ack, oh, what the fuck?” he says, spitting. “It just ejected its own spores!”

“That’s not – what?” says River, watching him. “That’s just not how things work.”

“I know! But you just saw!”

“I did.” River’s face is serious. “Do you feel weird? Any allergy-like symptoms? How’s your breathing? Are you dizzy?”

“No! No, god, I feel fine. Geez.”

Relieved, River smiles. “Maybe you’ll grow to ten times your ordinary size,” she says. Then she turns her attention back to the mycelia in the earth, smile fading. “I have a gut feeling, Kelly, can I tell you about it?”

“Shoot.”

“I think all the fungus in this grove are connected to this red mycelial network.”

“I think you’re right. We can find out easily enough.”

“What does it mean, though?”

“I don’t know,” Kelly admits, fighting that voice in the back of his head that’s still screaming, *Run! Run! Get away from here!*

Just then they hear a cry from Dr. Järvinen. It’s Finnish, but there’s no mistaking the shocked swearing. River and Kelly and the rest of the biologists rush over.

“I thought it was dead,” the visiting scientist gasps.

“What was dead?” says the Parks Canada guy.

“A hare,” he says, “Over there, in the undergrowth.”

“And it... wasn't?” River says, prompting.

“It was riddled with fungal growth!” Dr. Järvinen says, his reedy voice breaking.

“All through its skin, poking out, even over its eyes – there is no way –” He shudders.

Kelly, and everyone else, turns to look at the hare, now hidden in the undergrowth.

The Parks employee, Kyle, or Tyler, makes a cautious move towards it, and instantly, it turns and darts away.

“Sorry,” he says.

Then suddenly, from the same direction, something large and heavy moves in the trees, shifting entire trunks side to side with a low sigh.

Everyone freezes.

“What was that?” hisses one of the Ontario mycologists. “Do you have bears here?”

“No bear is that big,” whispers Kyle/Tyler.

“Okay, I think we should leave,” says River. “This is getting fucking weird.”

“*Tämä menee metsään,*” says Dr. Järvinen, which sounds like the same sort of idea.

Together, they all creep back through the grove of giant mushrooms, back along the trail they had gently trampled on their way out, and nothing follows them. Or at least, nothing that they see. Kelly is sweating so heavily by the time they make it to the campground that his shirt is wet down the sides. For a minute, they all stand there, a group of 11 people, all lovers of mushrooms and lichen, all used to be on the weird edges of biology, studying the strange and uncategorizable. The living things that define their careers provoke discomfort or even disgust in many people. A new fungus, just like an endangered lichen, needs allies.



So, in that moment, they all seem to come to an unspoken agreement not to say anything to anybody. Not yet.

That night they sit around a campfire, even the Parks Canada guy – definitely Tyler – coming to join them after his shift, even when he should be sleeping in the shared staff quarters. They talk about everything except what they'd all seen today. Nervousness has become stronger than excitement, and the group is twitchy. Kelly's eyes are strained; he starts to see coloured auras around the sparks and has to rub his eyes, hard, to make them go away. His head aches.

When the UNB and UofT teams have retired to their tents, the man from Lakehead has gone off for a smoke, and the NL Foray people and River are listening to a podcast, he turns to Dr. Järvinen. The man looks gaunt in the shadowy light, jaundiced.

“What did you find? In Finland? What did you really see?” he asks, voice low.

“What makes you think I saw more than what I published, Dr. Doyle?”

“Today. You did a good job of acting surprised, but you were too ready to... dive in.”

Dr. Järvinen sighs and steepled his fingers against his high forehead.

“The same thing that was first found here, in your park, I'm afraid.”

“I was told we had no physical description from the hikers who found this fungus.”

“You did not. Because the hikers never made a report, Dr. Doyle.”

“I don't follow.”

“The hikers were found by police, searching for them after they had been missing for three days. They were both dead.”

“What?”

“It’s been covered up well, I’ll give Canada that. But the hikers did not find this fungus. They had *become* this fungus. It was growing in them, through them. Newfoundland does not want this getting out. They do not want anyone to know unless we have to.”

Kelly blinks.

“Covered in fungus... like the hare. But the humans were dead, you said?”

Dr. Järvinen looks over at him, eyes slightly watery.

“I pray they were dead, Dr. Doyle. For their sakes, I pray they were dead when they were found. But if they were not, the authorities surely put them out of their misery.”

Without another word, Dr. Järvinen rises, and walks away into his tent.

Kelly stares into the darkness of the trees and for the first time in his career – a lifetime of hiking and exploring remote woodlands – feels a genuine fear of the forest, that age-old, Gothic, creeping terror, true xylophobia.

He goes into his own tent, but lays awake, listening for the sound of a coming danger he has no name for.

The next morning, Kelly’s headache has worsened, and the colours in his vision have returned, and will not fade. It feels like everything in the forest has an inner shape of coloured lines, all twisting and flexing in place, glowing faintly. It makes him dizzy, and nauseous. As they hike back out towards the fungal site, he has to keep closing his eyes and leaning against tree trunks.

River walks beside him at the end of the pack, offering him water periodically, and trying to convince him to turn back. But Kelly can’t turn back. He has to see the grove again. He’s never felt more drawn to anything in his life.

“I’m telling you, my friend Blake, from Dalhousie,” she’s saying, trying to distract them both, “they just got hired by H.E.R.E, and they’re, like, a prodigy. They work with mycorrhizal networks and gene editing, it’s really – Dr. Doyle?”

It’s not often that River uses his title anymore, Kelly thinks. He looks at her, and she is glowing, orange spirals corkscrewing into the air from her chest, which is chock full of red trapezoids and cornflower-blue curls, like fern fronds. Concern, and fear, he thinks. River is feeling concern and fear about him.

“I’m fine,” he says, but his voice sounds like a phlegmy croak.

“Hey, don’t you collapse on me, old man,” says River. She’s trying to keep it light, he can tell from the colours, but her panic spikes through. It looks like the blade of a red sword coming out through her heart.

“Help!” she shouts. “Hey, help!” Kelly hears footsteps getting rapidly louder. He has a thought.

“River,” he says. “Those spores…”

“Just focus on breathing, okay?” she says. When had he ended up on the ground? He stares up at the sky through the gaps in the ragged tops of the firs and spruces. River is screaming now, but he no longer hears her. The heads of yellow mushrooms erupt violently from his abdomen, his heart stops, and another experiment fails.

The fungus does not feel remorse, but Kelly Doyle’s last moments are filled with awe, for in that moment he sees all that is coming, sees every thread in the widest woven map, many human lifetimes, and had he not been dying, he could have cried.

Not with fear, but with a strange relief he had not dared to examine.

## CHAPTER 15

The smoke I see in that first city is not the last smoke I see. It is not frequent, but by the time the giant finally comes to a halt, boulder-feet half sinking into a sandy beach, I have counted at least six distinct and broadly separated places where evidence of fire has been visible. We never pass close enough to any of these distant signs for me to know for sure, but still – it makes my heart pound to know that *something* lit those fires. They could not have been burning since the ‘end of days,’ as Nan called it. They must be recent, and there had been more than one.

Which means that somewhere in these endless forested hills, people – human or otherwise – are alive.

But we are not in the forested hills anymore. We are on a shore. At first, I thought it was another Great Lake, but if it is, then it is the biggest lake in the world. Even as high up as I am on the giant’s shoulder, I cannot see an end or edge of it, just endless, endless dark blue, cut occasionally with a nip of white where the water breaks or is blown. We have been going north for some time, but now, based on the sun, we are looking due east.

I know, I *know* there is a word for this water, a word that is not lake, or river, or stream, but I cannot remember it. The air smells different than it did over the Great Lake, somehow bitterer, sharper. It feels as though we have come to a precipice, and are hovering over it.

And now we have stopped.

The sun sets over this shore, and I sleep better than I have in weeks, without the jerking, heaving motion. In the morning, we are still there. I look down over the arm of the monster, then climb its ‘head’ and check the other side. No movement. Do I dare, I wonder?

Do I dare try to climb down? I'm malnourished and exhausted and weak, and this is the full height of a mountain.

I need not have wasted the thoughts.

Within moments of coming to this conclusion, the monster trembles. It's more of a shake, a tremor, a deep rumble that makes my teeth chatter together unstoppably and my vision go blurry. Then, my stomach rises up into my throat with a sudden lurch.

I'm moving *downward*.

I cling to my sleeping tree, the sturdiest one up here, and watch the horizon wriggle up as I ride down. The tremors get stronger. I bite my own tongue and taste blood. After a moment, I have to close my eyes to stop the frantic vibration of my vision. I count to 30, as high as I can remember how, and then again, and again, and I am cycling back around 24 when the shaking stops, and I open my eyes immediately.

I am still up high. But instead of a mountain, I am on top of a hill. The rock and soil have been redistributed, some of it shed, to make a lumpy, ragged island, or sorts. And now – yes, now I can see the monster for what it really is, underneath.

The pile of rock and stone is now resting, like a roughly-domed armoured shell, atop a mass of fleshy, purplish tentacles. Each one is as thick as Nan's cabin was wide, each sucker big enough for my entire body. They are still far below me, these tentacles, but I know that under the rock and soil on which I stand its head, whatever it looks like, must be closer to me than it was before. I do not like that thought. I feel exposed.

Then, just as suddenly as we had stopped, we are moving again. The force of the transformation has winded and distracted me. I rub my eyes, spit a mouthful of blood. The soil pulses yellow where it lands, a spark of framework where my blood is absorbed by the

dirt. I try to dispel the dizziness that's setting in, but I am so thirsty, so hungry and tired. *Purpose*, I think, hard. *You fear nothing*. I look up at the water and—

The water?

No.

I let go of my tree and dash to the edge of the giant-island. That sandy shore peppered with long, whipping grass is fading into the distance. I rub my eyes again, desperate to be wrong. I carefully walk a circle across the top of this treed hill on this giant-turned-living-island. In all directions, lapping blue-black water. The monster is swimming us away.

“No,” I whisper, the first time I've used my voice since that long ago morning with the myco in Nan's cabin. “No, no, no, no, *no*.”

I'd had a moment to escape. I could have tried to launch myself over the tentacles. I might have made it. But I was too weak and disoriented and now I am going to either starve or drown, whichever comes first.

I sink to my knees and scream. I no longer care if the monster knows I am here. I scream my rage raw. I scream like the tiny, helpless animal I really am.

I sleep.

I wake.

I sleep again.

The monster that is now an island swims for a long time, and I have no concept left of days.

I fade in and out of consciousness, salt crusting my skin like the rough blossoms of some hard lichen. I am delirious with thirst, and dream that above us, once, flies a flock of

great brown lizards with the wings of bats, draped in haggard strings of Spanish moss. I dream that for a while we are kept company by a pod of swimming, leaping creatures, their backs glistening in a rare moment of sunshine, with one high, curved fin bracketed by a spine of bony spikes. Some of the swimming monsters have webbed sails; some have curling horns. In my dream their framework is complex and pearlescent. They are having rapid conversations with each other as they squeak and click and splash. In my dream they try to speak to me using their shapes and colours, but I turn away. I do not want to know what they are. I do not want to know where I am, not anymore.

We are swimming north now and it is cold on the open water. So cold.

Always there is wind, and though the giant-island's top is above the waves, the spray coats me constantly, leaving me damp and shivering, half alive, my skin now tinted blue. I lay curled on my side, waiting for death. *At least, I think, I will die peacefully, not ripped apart on the forest floor by some devilcat or gored by a sporebuck's antlers.*

One night, I hear a great huffing sound, a wet exhalation. I do not have the strength to sit up, but in the dim light of the full moon I see the back of something vast slicing gracefully through the water's surface. It is almost as long as my island, and through the water I see that its smooth skin pops and fizzes with sparks of colour glowing in the dark – pink, pale purple, yellow, algae green and crystalline blue. I have never seen anything like it before, never even imagined something like it. With a silent salute of its massive tail, broadly forked and peppered with criss-crossing lights, the creature disappears once more into the deep. Another dream.

And then, on a day where the wind smells just a little bit sweeter, a little bit warmer, the monster reaches for me. I have been waiting for this moment, waiting to be caught, from the day it woke and took me with it.

I see the pinkish-purple tentacle, suckerless and whip-like, feeling its way toward me on the outcropping. It has dark veins running through it, the colour of soil, as though its blood is rich, wet dirt. I feel it push under my body, begin to curl around my waist.

I close my eyes again.

I do not want to be awake for this part.

## CHAPTER 16

Harriet is up at dawn, the prospect of getting away from the city for fieldwork – finally – launching her into a better mood than she’s had in weeks. Of course, no sunlight reaches her and *blush*’s quarters, but you developed an internal clock for such things, living in the Mollusk. She rolls off her mat and ties her curls into a springy ponytail with a strand of worked leather, well-creased from this exact use. She splashes her face with the frigid water trickling through the back of her room, and exchanges her sleep shirt for a H.E.R.E. regulation beige t-shirt and light pants. But instead of her lab blazer, which hangs there and taunts her with memories of last night at the factory, she pulls on her fieldwork jacket. It’s one of the coveted plastic-based ones salvaged from the time before, a deep pine-green colour – and her full-calf waterproofed hide boots. The boots still have dark reddish veins imprinted on them, unerasable remnants from the Myco-infected body of the creature they’d once been part of, and the jacket’s zipper has long since been replaced by a waist belt and wooden pegs with loops, but Harriet is dry, and comfortable. She rubs some hemp-



seed oil from a small, dented metal tin onto her nose and forehead, although it won't do much to protect against the UV levels outside, and then she flicks the lightbulb a few times to wake *blushoftangerine*.

“Why are you like this?” he says, opening one pearly eye.

She rolls up her sleeve and think-says, *you are well aware that if we're going to make it to the coast by midday we have to get an early start.*

“Frack you,” says *blushoftangerine*, “I'm so hungover.” But he reaches up one sleepy tentacle and flicks the lever to start the transfer process to his quadrutank. He rolls his body lazily in the bubbles of the filter, like a teenager stretching and complaining and burying their face in their pillows, resisting getting up for as long as possible.

“Come onnnn,” she says out loud in Molluskan, and grabs a seed-bun from the wooden breadbox on the dresser. Most meals are served at H.E.R.E.'s cafeteria, to ensure a fair and equal distribution of resources, but a small stash of snacks and basics could be kept in one's quarters. *blushoftangerine* has his own hanging woven bag of shrimp in one corner of the wraparound tank, and he pops a couple into his beak now, before opening the valve and sliding into his quadrutank.

“You're such a dumpster fire,” Harriet says, trying out her own slang around a mouthful of crumbs. *blushoftangerine* is flicking switches and pressing buttons inside the quadrutank. Once his speakers come on, he says,

“Do I have to carry the specimen jars again?”

“Buddy,” she says, placing a palm against the side of his tank the same way she'd cup a hand around a human's face, “you're in a metal machine ten times stronger than me. Yes. Yes, you have to carry my heavy shit.”

“I hate you,” says *blushoftangerine*.

“You love me,” says Harriet, slinging her pack over her shoulder, full of old-world field guides and notepads and coloured pencils, a magnifying glass with only one crack in it that she’d bought off a retiring botanist, small scissors and tweezers – all manner of things.

She places a box of glass specimen jars, cushioned from each other with dried moss, on top of *blushoftangerine*, careful to tie it on away from his filter. He only grumbles a little.

The two of them go down to the bottom of the shell, take the Tram mouthside, then catch a lift back up the Siphuncle. They walk the remaining septa to the Mouth itself, the carved gateway wide enough for ten carts, or maybe thirty people hand to hand. It’s elevated, with a long, packed ramp of dirt and stone up to it, and then down again on the other side, to avoid immediate flooding should there be some kind of flash rain situation. Colourful triangular flags hang above it, murals cover the stone walls that surround it, and even at this early hour the Siphuncle is bustling. Harriet still doesn’t like it, all the sounds and bodies, but every time she comes through here, she has to admit that many people have put heartfelt effort into making the entrance of the city bright, and full of art.

The smell of food distracts her for a moment, drawing her to a stall manned by a small, palm-sized octopus in one of the older model rolling tanks. They turn a cheery salmon-pink as Harriet and *blush* approach, and Harriet asks for a portion by signing. The ceph extends two metal implements from the front of their tank and scoops some chips of roasted parsnip, dusted rusty red with smoky spices, into a small bag made of a large leaf, waxed and folded. Their movements are unhurried.

“Going outside?” they ask, speakers tinny, after Harriet takes the bag of parsnips.

“Yes.”

“All alone? Brave girl.”

Harriet doesn't know what to say to that, so she just shrugs. She wants to explain: not brave, just smart. Just knows where to look, and *how* to look.

She waves awkwardly to the vendor by way of parting and she and *blushoftangerine* begin the gradual ascent to the Mouth.

One of the murals above the gateway depicts the coming of the Mollusk to land, in the old-world. Its flesh is coloured a vibrant red-orange, and its eye is kept white and clean even on the dark limestone, painted as tall as Harriet, its pupil one black slash. The Rock is painted green and brown and grey, and all the people on its shores raise bluntly-rendered arms in celebration, rejoicing in their salvation. Above the people and the Mollusk, the sun is a swirling yellow oval, rays curling off it in wisps, and in its centre is a W-shaped black line. To the people of the Mollusk, the sun itself is imagined as a cephalopod, looking down benevolently upon the world.

“That was unlike you,” says *blushoftangerine* as they walk, his hydraulic legs hissing and clanking. “I don't think I've ever seen you interact with someone mouthside for no reason.”

Harriet shrugs. What can she say? That after the weirdness of the last two days this bustling market seems reassuringly normal? That she's feeling a little reckless after being told the world is ending and maybe seeing proof of that? That she was just hungry?

Already, fishermen are bringing in catches from Camp Port, just a few kilometres south of the city's edge, on the coast. *blushoftangerine* watches hungrily as carts roll by

with barrels of seawater sloshing, full to brimming with the bodies of herring and mackerel and crab, on their way to be smoked, stewed, made into sushi, and preserved in all manner of ways. Harriet stops one of them and offers the man some of her parsnips and a couple shells in exchange for a small blue crab, a trade he accepts.

“See, this is why I like you,” says *blush* as she opens a small sliding door on the top of his tank and drops the wriggling crab in.

“Can you eat while you pilot that thing?” she asks, realizing she’s never seen that before.

“Probably,” he says. “I have enough arms.”

“Yeah, but the neurons in each one might not agree.” This is a familiar teasing that they exchange often.

“Nah, some of the arm-brains can take care of the eating just fine.”

“Just don’t crash, brainiac.” She pats the top of the tank and laughs and then she cannot contain her need to be outside any longer. She runs the rest of the way to the top of the road and stands in the open gate of the mouth, the only opening cleared out after the big cave-in that happened when her father was a boy. She nods to one of the guards, a bored-looking teenager whittling a sharpened stick, bow and quiver leaning against the stone behind him, and then she steps out into the open air.

There are many things that Harriet is afraid of – other people, crowds, loud noises, social settings, losing her place at H.E.R.E., losing her work – but the world outside the Mollusk is not one of them. Most Molluskans, even fishermen and fieldworkers and agriculturalists who regularly rotate to Camp Greenhouse to work on food production, have a healthy fear of the world outdoors. But her father didn’t let that fear trap him, and neither

does she. Outside the Mollusk is perhaps the only place, she thinks, where she might have the upper hand. She feels like she belongs out here more than she ever has in the social world of people.

As she walks into the grey, overcast sunlight, she feels a great release of tension; this vastness, counterintuitively, offers her the same protection as the narrow, enclosed tunnels of her neighbourhood in the hat. Nobody is going to corner her into conversation out here. Of course, she might get torn to shreds and eaten by an assemblage. But you gain some risks to lose others.

*blushoftangerine* is a little slower than her on uneven terrain, so for the first hour they stay on the flattened dirt road to Camp Port, which is well-travelled and has guards posted along it periodically, watching the surrounding rocky meadows from wooden towers, scanning for any monstrous movement. Just before the gates to the outpost, which would take them through to the docks and the harbour, another bustling hub in its own right, Harriet veers to the right and starts weaving through waist-high scrub out into the barrens. A Camp Port guard, a green parrot, squawks at her, “Your funeral,” but doesn’t pursue the matter. The Mollusk has an unspoken but firm ‘if you do something stupid, no one is coming to rescue you’ rule. There simply aren’t enough resources to bother with idiots.

Harriet is not an idiot, but she knows this guard thinks she is. She lets it slide off her, falling into the distance behind her along with all the concerns of people. She and *blush* hike out into the Bellevue Barrens for another kilometre, then turn northwest towards the slanted coast. They become two tiny shapes in an open space, moving dots in a landscape dominated by the impossible height of the Mollusk, its smooth conical vastness stretching farther north than any eyes can see, disappearing into the horizon on an almost

imperceptible downward angle. It's like a domed wall, steeper than any mountain, convex and windswept, with the occasional skylight or large, rectangular fibreglass window visible on its upper face. It does not seem possible that a century ago, it moved and lived and died.

Harriet and *blushoftangerine* walk, pausing every few hundred metres to scan 360° and listen. But nothing moves except the breeze in the grass. The sky clears to blue. The sun warms the earth.

Every living thing they pass, Harriet knows the name of. Sheep laurel and Labrador tea make up the majority of the shrubs she picks her way through, with speckled alders stretching their rough leaves in the space just above. The small white flowers of bunchberry are just coming into bloom, on this cusp between spring and summer, and she sees the early stems of what will unfold into the purple wings of the blue flag iris. In the boggy sections, when she and *blush* must skirt around wet cushions of reindeer moss and spindly grasses, she sees the first tubular urns of pitcher plants, with their reddish skin and green interior, run through with burgundy veins. Plants, as far as Harriet or anyone at H.E.R.E. has been able to tell, remain mostly unchanged from the days before the mutations.

Her encyclopaedic knowledge comes partially from her biological classes at H.E.R.E., but mostly from her own obsessive combing through old textbooks and field guides. She loves names and categories more than most, has always been drawn to anything with tidy boxes she could sort things into. It soothes the constant chaos in her brain, filters the overload. One of her earliest memories is trying to remember as many kinds of wildflowers as she can, reciting them aloud to a doll she used to love, in the shape of an old-world horse.

She knows that all the old categorizing systems were deeply flawed, but she can't help but memorize them anyway. She loves the ancient Latin words, the trees of Linnaean taxonomy, the phyla and classes, orders and families, genera and species. And H.E.R.E. loves them too, or at least has a healthy respect for their lineage in science. That's why the Mollusk's governing body is called the Phyla, and why each elected leader of the twelve-person council must take as their title an old-world phylum of life. Other influential groups are called the Families, even if they're not related. The politics of the Mollusk is inextricably tangled up with old-world speciesist hierarchies, but the Myco Mutations had destroyed their meanings, and so they had become nothing more than an homage to an age long lost.

The current council consists of Annelida, Arthropoda, Bacteroidota, Basidiomycota, Bryophyta, Chlorophyta, Chordata, Ciliophora, Cnidaria, Echinodermata, Porifera, and Radiozoa. And Chordata is in charge. Of course she is. How could the vertebrates ever yield power, ever embrace equality with the spineless, even just in abstract concept, in metaphor and signification? They can't. Just as H.E.R.E. has an admittance bias against cephs, so Chordata gets the final say in all major governing decisions. Chordata, who is, not incidentally, currently a pale-skinned human. Harriet has read more old-world books than the average Molluskan. She knows the score.

These human concepts don't just go away. They would have to be killed, chased out, eradicated with intention. But the humans of the Mollusk cling to them instead, soak them up like bread in soup.

And here Harriet is, try as she might to think differently, to know differently, but still drawn to the names and the structure that humans once overlaid onto nature.

Sheep laurel is *Kalmia angustifolia*. Speckled alder is *Alnus incana*. The plant called partridgeberry, on the Rock, is *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*.

The Bellevue Barrens are a strange landscape, at odds with the primarily fir and spruce forests of the Avalon, or at least the Foothold where Camp Greenhouse is, and the hills and ponds up the Back-Allow Peninsula, where H.E.R.E. has two research outposts: Camp Carbonear and Camp Verde. Harriet has seen photos of these places, although she has never been herself. But the Bellevue Barrens, the area over which the Mollusk had hauled its great shell and come to rest all those years ago, are more like the photos she has seen of a moonscape, a series of rocky outcrops rising directly out of bog and treeless scrub, beige and grey by turns. Great glacial erratics – boulders the size of old-world houses – pepper the open expanses like marbles dropped by some ancient giant. And ahead of them, the Atlantic Ocean curves, bright blue, like a jewel.

As they get closer to the great basalt sheet rocks that jut diagonally out of the waves, the plant life changes. The boulders flake with black tar and orange wall lichen – *Verrucaria*, *Xanthoria*. In the crevices between sprouts creeping juniper, and the spiky leaves of seaside plantain in round clumps hidden from the wind – *Plantago maritima*. And everywhere, everywhere, there are clumps of black crowberry, genus *Empetrum*, each tiny stem like a miniature fir tree the length of her pinky finger, coming together to form a mat across every dip and hollow in the rock. Some of the needle-like leaves are still rust-coloured from overwintering, but the tips of the mats are growing green.

Later, these mats of little bottlebrush stems will give berries, fat and dark. Harriet knows the foraging schedule as well as any Molluskan, but in her case, she's really seen it.



She's been part of it. Foraging is an expectation of fieldwork too; it goes without saying. You're already outside, so you bring back what you can.

Harriet knows that in the hot months, there will be lowbush blueberries bearing fruit on the slopes off the sides of the Mollusk, then highbush cranberries hanging heavy when the air begins to cool. She knows when to cut bracken fiddleheads in the spring, and how to remove the fine white hairs from their curled spiral hearts. She knows how to collect and cook oyster plant, sea asparagus, dulse, Irish moss, and winged kelp from the tidal rocks near Camp Port. She knows where in the foothills to find wild mint, how to use bog myrtle in a soup, how to squeeze the sap from spruce tips and boil it into a syrup, and how grind dried tamarack, or alder catkins, into dehydrated sea-salt for extra flavour. Fungus is a wild card, given the nature of the Myco Mutations, but the chaga is still good and remains an essential, brought back from the Foothold and the science outposts. Sometimes foraging parties still find uninfected chanterelles or lobster mushrooms up there, in the deeper woods, their bright yellows and oranges unspoiled by telltale dark red threads or oozing growths.

Pausing on the rocks, she drinks from her waterskin, then pulls out her pocketknife and starts cutting the succulent, fleshy leaves of the seaside plantain and filling a pouch in her backpack with them. She eats a few raw, and they are crunchy and taste like nutty mushroom and ocean. Everything she eats outside seems like the freshest thing she's ever tasted.

*Want one?* she asks *blushoftangerine* with her arm, enjoying the fact that out here she can keep her sleeves rolled up without worrying.

“Ew, girl, no. Get away with your plants. Give me fish or give me death,” say *blush*’s speakers. She opens the top of his tank and tosses a leaf in, and he tosses it back out, and they play this game for a while with the kind of conscious abandon that comes from knowing your reprieve exists only on borrowed time.

Harriet has been coming to this section of the shore just southwest of the Mollusk for several years, and she has never seen a dangerous assemblage. But that doesn’t mean they don’t stray near the shadow of the Mollusk’s mountainous height, or that she has stopped being vigilant. Just last moon four guards on the road to Camp Port had been killed by a hooved and fanged one that had barrelled out of the monster-held lands to the west. Harriet had seen its corpse, brought to H.E.R.E. for dissection. It had been twice as tall as even her tallest gorilla classmate, and its outer skin resembled inner skin, as though the creature had been born inside out, with thick cords of mycelial fibres knitting over it and a mucus-like coating of slime. Its antlers had been far too large, proportionally, for its head – large enough for Harriet to sit in one, easily – and grew in frills and fringes like old-world corals. When the team assigned had cut a branch off of one of them, before an auditorium audience of H.E.R.E. scholars, the inside of the antler had been liquid, an opaque, viscous yellow.

So yes, she and *blushoftangerine* are very much on high alert, underneath their joy.

For an hour or two Harriet tramps the edges of this cove, but doesn’t quite dare to hike out onto the spit of land to the west that reaches further out into the water, since the further west you go, the less protection the Mollusk’s shadow can offer. She stays in her usual spot and catalogues every living thing she sees. More importantly, every change she

sees in living things she's seen before, and anything that could be considered communication. *blushoftangerine* stays on a higher outcropping, on watch.

There are butterflies with long strings of luminous, hair-like fibres hanging from them, that undulate in slow motion when they flap their wings, as though underwater. Harriet has long suspected some relation to jellyfish nematocysts, and avoids contact for fear of a similar sting.

She sketches a sea anemone that has grown longer tentacles than it should, wriggling out at nearly a meter long, an unusual dark purple colour. She does not touch it.

She watches two wrinkle snails interacting for half an hour before concluding that they are just being uninfected snails. The ocean numbs her fingertips, hooked gently over the edge of a tidal crevice as she lays on her stomach and stares.

She's not even really sure why Dr. Netmaker lets her continue doing fieldwork, when she brings back so little of relevance. Perhaps he, too, adheres to the 'be stupid at your own risk' rule. Or perhaps he knows that without these sojourns she would definitely have snapped and lost her ability to work productively for him long ago. And productivity was something H.E.R.E. still valued very much, despite their overtures to the contrary.

When the sun slips toward afternoon, Harriet cuts a few bunches of winged kelp from the edges of the dark basalt rocks, just below the tide line, and carries them up to where *blushoftangerine* is stationed. She rolls the kelp carefully and wraps most of it, putting it in her bag as well, in a separate compartment from her precious notebook. She keeps a couple strands out and eats them, tough and chewy and unpleasant, but vitamin rich.

"Sorry about last night," *blush* says.

“What?”

“Last night, at the club. I totally ditched you.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I can’t believe you saw a mutated kid! Are you freaking out?”

Harriet closes her eyes, focusses on the sighing of the ocean against the shore.

“I don’t want to talk about Molluskan stuff when we’re out here, ’kay?”

*blushoftangerine* is quiet for a minute.

“Okay,” he says. “Sorry, I understand.”

She chews in silence, looking out at the horizon, nothing but the blue Atlantic on and on, as if it went on forever after departing these slanted cliffs and low, rounded mountains of wind-shorn green. She knows, from old maps, that there are other landmasses out there, to the south and to the west, but they might as well be fairy-tales. Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Labrador, the rest of the mainland – all partially myth now, in the way that so much of the old-world has become. And it’s pointless anyway. It’s impossible to get off the Rock.

People have tried – countless people, in countless boats. No one ever comes back. And sometimes, the wreckage of their vessels washes up at Camp Port, suggesting that, whatever their plan, they didn’t get very far.

Touching the glass gently, Harriet gets *blush*’s attention, then says with her skin,

*Do you think they’re really out there?*

“Who?”

*The Ocean Peoples.*

For a long beat the two of them are silent, staring out at the still horizon.

“Maybe,” he says eventually. “But no one has seen a whale or a dolphin in seventy years.”

*Since before my Da was born, I know. But what if they just got really good at hiding? What if they just decided they were done with us? They’ve got the whole ocean, and we’re stuck on one island.*

“Well, anything’s possible, I suppose.”

*Clearly you don’t think so.*

He turns a soft green, a mournful Colour.

“If I’m honest, Harriet, really honest... I think the Ocean Peoples are all dead. I think everything outside the Rock is dead, or mutated beyond thinking, and meaning. Most days I try to be as optimistic as you, but deep down, I think the Rock might be all that’s left and that even our time will come, eventually.”

Harriet does not consciously respond, but with her arm bared, *blush* can read something of her thoughts and emotions, exposed and unfiltered. His skin begins to swim with a pattern of white on grey, like nervous clouds passing by.

“You agree with me,” he says. “About our time coming too. Why?”

Harriet swivels to face him directly, in so much as you could ‘face’ a ceph. She needs to tell him about what Marajory and Dr. Netmaker and *yellowswirltosunrise* had said, and how she thinks it might be connected to the mutations and Hyuk’s crazy conspiracy theories. She should have told him immediately, and she doesn’t know why she was afraid to. Maybe telling her friend would make all of it too real.

She opens her mouth to begin when suddenly *blushoftangerine*’s body turns pure red. The speaker system starting thrumming, a low, fast pulse of panic.

“Holy threads,” he says. He has huddled down to the very bottom of his tank, as if he wishes to press his body as small as possible. She has never seen him so frightened.

“What?” She puts a frantic hand to his tank’s glass. “What is it, what’s wrong?”

*blushoftangerine* doesn’t answer. He simply lifts an arm and points.

And Harriet turns to look.

It’s an island. Or, at least, that’s what Harriet thinks at first. But islands, to her knowledge, don’t move, and if they do, they definitely don’t move this fast.

As it gets closer, Harriet can see tentacles. Tentacles similar to an octopus’s but thicker and more numerous. She automatically thinks of Dr. Netmaker’s warning about giant squid sightings, but quickly dismisses it. No one could mistake this monstrosity for a giant squid.

The island is swimming, or crawling along the ocean floor, and its body is three, maybe four times bigger than even the most gargantuan naturally-occurring ceph. It’s bigger than the whole of the rocky point to the west.

Which it has just rounded the tip of, coming into view.

Harriet is frozen. The assemblage, for this is undeniably an assemblage, is just not possible. She stares at it and cannot compute it. She does not think to flatten her body against the stone or scramble backwards into a hidden dip. She simply stares, unmoving, unbreathing, unable to act on her fear due to the power of her awe.

Maybe it’s come in from the open sea to hunt its inferiors, she thinks, this round piece of living rock with ceph-like appendages, this hillock-shaped creature with a whole land formation on its back, complete with trees.

She keeps one hand on *blush*'s glass, the other biting fingernails hard into her own thigh.

As it skims by the edge of the spit, one of its impossibly large tentacles rises from the water. The tentacle reaches up and behind, to touch down with odd gentleness on the hump of its back, like some strange and delicate dance pose. Then it lifts up again, its tip coiled around something. The island-ceph extends its arm to the shore, and deposits whatever tiny thing it has plucked from its own back onto a rocky knoll.

The tentacle sinks back into the water, and for the first time, the creature makes a sound: a low moaning noise so loud and deep that Harriet quite literally feels it in her bones. Then the island roves onward, floating southeast toward the horizon, moving away from the Rock and out into the open ocean.

“What in the fracking Entanglement of all the gods –” *blushoftangerine* starts to say, but Harriet holds up her hand to shush him. She has been staring at the white shape that the assemblage dropped off, about 500 meters away. It isn't moving, but there is something terribly familiar about its form, its partially visible limbs and pale blowing hair.

Harriet stares across the empty cove, this world in shades of green and grey and reddish brown, tufts of grass blowing. She shakes. She breathes, then swallows hard.

“We have to go over there,” she says, and points to the place the assemblage had touched its tentacle.

“Why in all the threads would we do that?” bleats *blushoftangerine*. “Seriously, we need to go, Harriet, *now* –”

Harriet looks over once more at the white shape and cuts him off midsentence.

“Because that's a person, blush. I think it's a human being.”





## **Part 2**

# **Entanglement**

*[tan-gold with crosshatch red lines, Colour moving front-to-back]*

**//IN THE PAST//**

John Jayachandran was 18 and delivering pizzas in Paradise when the apocalypse began.

He'd been on the clock for three hours, but had only done four deliveries. On his way back after the last delivery, around 8pm, he stopped his shitty electric Hyundai in a car-dealership parking lot at the top of a hill off Topsail Rd. He looked out at the lights of the suburbs and the faux-Georgian apartment buildings, twinkling all the way out past the roundabouts, to Dannyville's monster-size shopping centre. No ocean views from here. No extinction-tourism brochures or expensive 'authentic' island folk-art. Just grown-over back lots full of rusting oil-rig scrap, and gentrification designed to hide it, and people getting by, or barely getting by.

It wasn't always a pretty place, St. John's, but it was his home. He'd even been named after it. He took the good in stride with the bad and the boring, and hoped the city would do the same for him.

He was about to start his car again and head back to waste time at the store, shooting the shit with Lenny and Pam while he waited for another order to come in, so he could earn his tips and commission. But just as he reached for the Start button, his earbuds beeped with an incoming call. It was his roommate, Dipesh, and his breath sounded ragged. Dipesh had a habit of talking like a rapper when he got excited, as though he wasn't a scrawny Indian boy who couldn't grow a beard.

“John, my man, something crazy is going down on Fogo Island.”

Central Newfoundland, especially Fogo Island, was at least a five-hour drive from the Greater St. John's Area.

“So?” John said, after pointing this out.

“No, you’re not hearing me, man. Like, *crazy* shit. Like, CBC is saying the military just flew over Twillingate in helicopters. The *military*, man!”

“What’s on Fogo that the military would care about? That fancy-ass inn? You must have gotten the location wrong.”

“Nah, man. That’s where the university has that lab, yeah? They all work for HERE, hear me? Those crazy ecofascist fuckers. I bet they *made* something, yeah? I bet they cooked something up, something whack.”

“HERE isn’t ecofascist,” said John, whose biochem tutor worked for the organization and seemed like the poster child for a straightlaced, straight-A student.

“Yeah, maybe when they were founded like forty years ago, but my mom says now \_”

“Dude, your mom gets all her news on social media.”

“Look, all I’m saying is, keep an eye on the skies, my brother.”

John rolled his eyes.

“Fogo might as well be across the country, for all that will affect us. Look, you want to split a pizza when my shift is over?”

“Sure thing, man. But you put any pineapple on that shit and I’m moving out and leaving your sorry ass with the whole rent.”

“Fuck you,” John said, but affectionately.

John was at work until 10. He delivered three more orders, and saw no helicopters or anything flying north, though Lenny did confirm, checking the newsfeed on his earbuds, that what Dipesh had said about the military was true.

At the end of his shift, he placed an employee-discount order for a large pepper, mushroom, and pineapple pizza, smirking to himself.

The roads were weirdly quiet, even for a Wednesday night in May. He was playing his music loud, and headed for the onramp, when a person ran out in front of him.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, holy fuck –” He swerved onto the sidewalk and stopped hard. He hadn’t hit them. Thank goodness he hadn’t hit them.

He put his car in park, flicked the hazards on, and got out. The person had dashed into the dirty brambles that lined this part of the road, littered with garbage.

“Hello?” said John, nervously rubbing his gloves together. “Are you okay?”

There was a rustling in the tangled bushes, and he saw the face of a young girl. She couldn’t have been more than six, and her skin was the brightest shade of white John had ever seen. Almost sickly, a little green-tinted, though he assumed that was the poor light.

“Hey,” he said, scared but feeling a little better now that he knew it wasn’t someone planning to mug or murder him. “I’m John. I’m really sorry I almost hit you with my car. I didn’t expect anyone to be running out on the road like that.” He walked a little closer and held out his hand. “I understand that you’re afraid. I’m going to call someone to help you, like the Community Enforcement Partners, okay? My friend Pam volunteers with them, and she’s real nice, I promise.”

The little girl opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, she made a sort of purring noise, a throaty, rolled sound, like a cat. John couldn’t be sure, but he thought her incisors looked pointed.

“Okay, okay, if you’re in trouble I’m going to get you help,” he said, backing up towards his car now. There was no one on the road. Where was everyone? “If someone did that to your teeth, they can’t hurt you anymore.”

He felt behind him and grasped the passenger side door handle. But his hand went slack as the little girl stepped out from the brambles, and he could see the rest of her.

She had wings. Leathery, green wings, like a pterodactyl’s, but shiny, and veined, like a maple leaf unfurling in spring. A thin, writhing tail twined around one of her legs, tipped with more leaf-like flaps that were curled like buds. Her bones were clearly visible under her freaky skin, like she’d been starved for weeks.

If she could fly, could she have flown all the way from Fogo?

“Oh, fuck, oh fuck,” John whispered under his breath. He held his hands up, palms out, the universal gesture of ‘please don’t hurt me.’

The little monster girl obviously did not know universal gestures. She lunged towards him, tackling him onto the hood of his car and slashing through his throat with the thick, bird-like talon on her thumb.

The last thought John Jayachandran had, as he lay bleeding out on his car by the side of the road in Paradise, Newfoundland, was: *They cooked up something whack.*

## CHAPTER 17

The first thing I become aware of, when I come back to myself, is the absence of the sky.

I feel it before I even open my eyes – an enclosed staleness to the air, the way sounds seem contained, bouncing back, muffled. And there are sounds, plenty of them. Three voices mutter nearby. Water trickles faintly somewhere behind my head. Footsteps pass by much farther away, perhaps heard through a barrier. A strange high hum comes from above.

I am inside a place. I am contained, captured – new concepts. I open my eyes.

Three humans are standing over me: an older woman, a broad-shouldered, muscular man, and a young, effeminate boy in a necklace of large wooden shapes.

“They’re awake,” says the boy, and all muttering stops. They flank me, the boy at the end, one of the others on either side. I sit up, lightning quick, and try to vault away, but my ankles are tied to a metal stake in the floor. I am snapped back by the rope, nearly dislocating my knees. This motion alone weakens me, and looking down I see that my body is gaunt, my bones jutting.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, we’re not going to hurt you,” says the person with the necklace. I can hear my own ragged breath, and I know that I look frightened.

Perhaps, in this moment, after everything, I *am* frightened.

“We would just like to ask you some questions, my dear,” says the woman, but her gentle words do not match her intense stare. “We only secured you because we have no idea who you are. Once we know you’re no danger to anyone here, we will untie you. But that requires your cooperation. Do you understand?”

I do. I'm surprised that I do. But the language these people are speaking is English, or English enough for me to decipher.

I can only stare at them.

I have not seen another human since Nan passed. Their faces seem both wrong and right somehow – so hairless and snoutless and flat, but so familiar. I feel like I am still dreaming, delirious atop the giant, but the ache in my legs says otherwise.

“Where did you come from?” asks the broad-shouldered man, and his voice is abrasive, like rough stone against the cheek. His framework is red, and angry. It pulses in diagonal lines, burnt deep, and I wonder if he is angry all the time.

I do not answer him. What would I say: ‘Forest’?

“How did you get to the Rock?” asks the boy in beads, and I almost bark out a laugh, because I could just as well ask ‘what is the Rock?’ in return. His framework is complex, circles of lavender hooping around his torso, joined at angles by turquoise triangles, shivering with yellow sparks. He is the least threatening of the three, and his framework confirms that this is more than just appearances.

I do not know what answer he wants, but I doubt ‘a giant monster carried me’ would satisfy.

“How many of your people are there?” asks the pale, severe woman. Her framework is blue, and smooth, like waves, but I see the flair of hot magenta frustration underneath.

“Do they know about the Mollusk? Are there more of them, coming behind you?”

I just stare at her. The only reference I have for the word ‘mollusk’ is the small brown snails that used to eat Nan’s vegetables, and that seems like the wrong word, given the context.

The big man turns to the side and says, “Leave us.” It is only then that I realize there have been guards of some kind standing in the doorway. They bend at the waist, which I would recognize as a gesture of submission in any species. Then they go out. They close a door.

So, these question-askers are important. They have power.

They are the predators here, and I am like prey caught in a snare. I do not have any power, except for the one thing they want: information, about myself, and the giant. My mind is whirring like a bee’s wings. Not answering their questions is the only power I can hold over these humans. If I answer the questions, what is left to keep me useful, or interesting? Ways for a prey animal to stay alive: be useful, or be interesting.

So, I stay silent.

The broad man leans down close to me, and it takes a great deal of effort not to strike out at him with my unbound hands. He has a snarling sneer that makes my neck prickle *danger*. When he asks his next question, he hisses his words out in a snake-like stream of foul breath.

“Are your people –” He pronounces each word precisely, like I am a child, “responsible for the new mutations?”

I stare. I blink. I do not look away but I do not give him anything either. And then, as suddenly as a fire catching a dry birch log, his framework surges up in him, hot orange and shadowy black embers, and he gives a shout of rage and smacks me across the face with his open palm.

I respond lightning-quick. It is instinct. I lunge and bite into his wrist until I taste the hot burst of his blood.



He screams, and right away the guards are there, yanking my arms, restraining me, and I am howling, lips dripping red.

The pale woman is still standing next to my mattress. She has not moved, not even stepped back. She looks amused.

“Serves you right, I should think,” she says to the man, who is clutching his wrist, blood on his fancy clothes. “Why on *earth* would you hit them? Now they’re going to think we’re a violent society who intends to keep them here and hurt them. Especially if they can’t understand us.”

“Really, your temper,” says the youth with the beads.

“*You!* You stay in your fracking lane,” the man growls at him.

The woman motions with her hand, and one of the guards wipes the blood off my mouth. He offers me some water, and I sip it. Then the woman addresses me again.

“If you can understand us, please accept my apology for that.” She holds her hands to her heart and extends them outward – the same idea, in gesture. “But I’m afraid we can’t let you leave here without... the proper arrangements.”

“We’ll be back,” says the boy. “Or, someone will.”

I am careful to let my face reveal nothing. After an entire forever, they leave.

I am left alone, sitting in the darkness with my hands bound behind me. I had not meant to bite that man quite so deeply. My heart pounds. I am afraid, and I hate that I am afraid. And there is another feeling, a worse feeling.

The feeling is guilt.

Soon after, I must learn to eat with my hands tied behind my back. Once again, I am in a place with no way to track the days and nights, but at least this time I am not burnt

by the sun and whipped by the wind. I sit in darkness, on a blanket full of some fibrous plant, and food is brought to me twice a day.

I feel like an animal more than ever before, crouched on my knees and bending over to bite and slurp up food like a dogrel. My hair gets in the way and I have to try using my shoulder to pull the strands out of my mouth, strands now covered in vegetable stew or the grease of reptile meat. I never minded being covered in the soil and muck of Forest, but in this dark stone cave, covered in food, I begin to feel disgusting, putrid. This is not helped by the terror in the eyes of the humans who guard me. They look at me like a sporebuck or a thylafox or any other threat.

And maybe I am. Every time I see the fear in their eyes the guilt returns, and I think it is coming from Nan. From the memory of her, pleading with me to stay as human as I can. I have failed her, again and in a new way.

I am a killer of many things, and I take pride in it. I am a hunter and defender. But to harm a human had felt different. The way that man had screamed had brought something to the surface of me, something sour, and unwanted. So far, nothing about this skyless place has reassured me. Nothing good has come from it.

I want to go home, even if home is full of monsters.

## CHAPTER 18

“But where did they *come from*?”

Cnidaria smacks his palm down flat against the table’s surface. He’s a big human, with thick back curls framing his rigid stare. The hand he slaps down is bandaged at the wrist.

Harriet flinches. She's just been ushered by one of the Phyla's guards into the Linnaean Hall, a windowless, cavernous space with polished walls and hundreds of electric lightbulbs strung across the ceiling. She hovers in the doorway and wants to suck inside herself like a sea anemone and disappear. She is wearing her H.E.R.E. blazer, the nicest article of clothing she owns, and her hair is tightly braided and tied in a bun at the nape of her neck. *blushoftangerine* enters next to her in his quadrutank, freshly cleaned and refilled, with his Colour a subdued pale cream.

Harriet surveys the room and sees Marajory and Dr. Netmaker sitting in the seats reserved for guests of the meeting, looking nervous but self-important. But she is surprised to find the raven Klik-Hyuk, editor-in-chief of *The Unquiet Wing*, also here, already perched on the back of a guest seat, paint and party scale-glitter preened from his feathers, now a glossy black. He's wearing a tan vest with a small green ribbon tied at the chest by way of fancying up.

What is he doing here?

The guard closes the door with a heavy thud. The Phyla do not acknowledge their entrance.

"We all want to know that, Kyo." Basidiomycota is speaking to Cnidaria, her voice low but commanding. Her skin is the dark rich brown of deep soil, and her head is shaved. Harriet knows the Phyla only through artist's renderings of them, which are never 100% accurate, to maintain secrecy. But she recognizes them, and has heard, too, about the not-so-subtle hierarchy within their ostensibly egalitarian governing structure. Basidiomycota, who took her name from a phylum of fungi, is second in command, overreached by, of course, Chordata, a severe older human with unusually pale skin for the Mollusk, a pointed

chin and jutting cheekbones, her grey hair pinned back and held in a complicated twist by a bone of vertebrae the size of a fist.

There are no cephs amongst the twelve Phyla, and there never have been.

“Phylum Cnidaria – Kyo – is right,” Annelida is saying. She’s a scarlet macaw, with a white silk sash and the feathers around her sharp eyes smudged with charcoal. “We don’t have time to study this mystery human or befriend them. We need to know how many other people are out there, and what their resources and goals are.”

“Are you suggesting they could be hostile, Rayl’yawk?” signs Radiozoa, an older chimpanzee with his greying hair combed flat back against his head. He spells her avian name out with his nimble fingers, a strange clash of languages.

Harriet cannot stop staring. She feels like her gaze is bouncing between them like a wild hare – ping, ping, ping. It is so rare for the Phyla to make public appearances, let alone seeing them all in one place, being in the very same room as them.

“Well, our guest certainly is,” Cnidaria snaps. “I know you’ve all been briefed on what they did to me when they finally came back to consciousness.”

“Yes, and we’ve all taken *your* actions into account as well on that,” signs Radiozoa.

“Furthermore, the behaviour of a society’s outcast does not speak for the whole society.” This from a short-haired human Harriet thinks is Bryophyta.

“What makes you assume they were outcast?” says Annelida.

“Well, why else were they brought here by an assemblage and left to die?” says Basidiomycota.

“We *don’t know* that, Ellavy!” Cnidaria is yelling.

“But we also don’t know anything else!” Bryophyta shouts back.

“Enough.”

The table goes silent, and all eyes turn to Phylum Chordata, who stands. Harriet has yet to hear her real name; she wonders if none of the others dare to use it. Chordata is dressed in a long white robe with a bright blue vest cinched over it. The price of that dye would have been astronomical, Harriet thinks.

“We have here with us three guests, two of them witnesses to this most unprecedented event, and their reporter friend, who is prepared to publish about it.”

All eyes finally turn to them. Harriet focusses her gaze on *blush*'s back, hoping he feels her accusatory stare burning into him. He had to have told Hyuk. She certainly hadn't, and sure, there had been some onlookers who had been with them on the walk back, but for Hyuk to have enough information to sit here confidently and threaten to break the story?

*This must be what having a reckless little brother is like*, Harriet thinks. *Frack*.

“Dr. Willow, yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine, welcome. Please, sit.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” says *blush*, mercifully sparing Harriet the need to speak first. The two of them approach the Phyla's table, which has been carved out of the stone of the floor itself. The seats are positioned around this carved out slab in an inset trench, so that in order to sit around the table one must descend either of the symmetrical sets of stairs carved down into the rectangular depression. This table's construction created the bizarre illusion, when they had first entered the room, that the Phyla were sitting *in* the floor, with only their shoulders and heads visible. Now Harriet takes each of the four steps down with razor focus, shaking so hard that she's afraid that if she looks up, she'll trip or lose the ability to move altogether. *blushoftangerine* follows, after having to pause and adjust the length of his tank's front and back legs to keep himself level on the stairs. Rigidly, biting

the inside of her cheek, Harriet sits in the carved stone chair Chordata gestures to, next to Marajory, who is also sitting like there's an iron rod up her spine. Harriet tries to catch her eye but she ignores her. *blushoftangerine* lowers his tank next to her, unable to make use of a chair and looking awkward in this chamber designed without thinking of cephs.

Hyuk steps off the back of his chair and onto Harriet's shoulder, which makes her jump at first, but then she feels his beak gently tucking a loose hair behind her ear and she realizes he's trying to offer support. Her nervousness must be painfully visible.

"Look up," Hyuk says in her ear. She does, and finds the entirety of the Phyla staring. She quickly focuses only on Chordata – each precious metal button on her robe, each age line in her strange, unblemished skin. She counts the buttons: five. She counts them again.

"We have been briefed by your superiors at the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement on the events south of Camp Port six days ago," says Chordata, sitting back down, "but we felt it pertinent to meet you ourselves and hear firsthand about this... creature you saw."

"Which one?" blurts *blushoftangerine*, and Chordata gives him a flinty look. Her eyes are grey, like the ocean before rain.

"Yes. Quite. I am speaking of the –" she glances down at some notes, "'swimming island,' you described, which delivered the other – the human – if your testimony is to be believed."

"Of course, we *do* believe you," Basidiomycota interjects, smiling in a way that Harriet is sure is meant to be comforting. "After all, the human is here, in our custody, living proof."

“But we just have some other questions concerning elements that H.E.R.E. may have... let slip,” says Bacteroidota, a raven wearing an elaborate headdress of twigs.

“Like what?” says *blushoftangerine*, and Harriet kicks his tank’s leg under the table.

Chordata makes eye contact with Harriet. “How long have you been collaborating with the organization known as the Skin Sightists?”

Harriet is stunned. “W-What?”

“When you returned to H.E.R.E. with the human, we did a bit of digging and found that your work is very popular with them, one might even say gospel.”

Harriet takes a deep breath. *Stay calm*, she thinks. *You’ve done nothing wrong*.

“If that is true, ma’am, it’s only because my research is available – or was available – in the public library system.”

She feels Hyuk’s talons squeeze down on her shoulder, and realizes too late that she’s revealed something she shouldn’t have – that she knows her articles have been removed.

“So, you’ve never worked with, consulted with, or shared research with Skin Sightists prior to this endeavour?” says Cnidaria. He is suspicious of her. He was already suspicious of her before she even arrived, and Harriet wonders if it’s because of her ceph advocacy. She shrinks from his loud assertiveness.

“No, sir. If my research is in their possession, it is because they found and copied it themselves. My first significant interaction with any of their members was only six days ago, when I spoke with the supposed prophet yellowswirltosunrise for a cultural context interview.”

“What she says is true,” signs Radiozoa. “We all knew this. Stop frightening the girl.”

“Still,” says Cnidaria, “What were you doing so far from Camp Port and the road? Surely that’s too dangerous for a *linguist*.”

Harriet swallows.

“I am also, like all students of H.E.R.E., trained in evolutionary biology. I regularly conduct field work in that area, looking for assemblage variations. You may confirm that with my supervisor here, Dr. Netmaker.”

She glances over at him, and he nods reassuringly.

Cnidaria sits back, and smirks. “Oh, we have. But you’re lucky to be alive, girl,” he says. “Assemblages? They’re either elusive or they’re hostile, with nothing in between. In short, you are a fool, and a bit of a grovelling, insipid fool, at that.”

“Kyo, it is not necessary to eviscerate her.” Harriet looks gratefully over at Annelida, who ruffles her rainbow feathers apologetically. She can feel tears running down her face and is ashamed. And she also feels Marajory’s shame about her like a beam of heat beside her. She has let her down. She’s never leaving the Mollusk again, she swears to herself. Heck, she’s never leaving her *lab* again.

“Look,” says a white-haired, mahogany-skinned human who hasn’t yet spoken – Porifera, Harriet thinks. “Dr. Willow here has perhaps been reckless, but it was not *her* that caused these events. This assemblage couldn’t possibly have anything to do with her, or with the Skin Sightists, however agitating they have been recently. So let us conclude this testimony.”



“Not yet,” says Basidiomycota, and all eyes turn to her. “There is also the matter of the human, and of certain... discretionary requests. Dr. Willow – may I call you Harriet?” Harriet nods. “Harriet, how many people have you told about this swimming island assemblage and the human it... delivered?”

“Um, not many people, Phylum Basidiomycota. The fishermen who helped me get back from Camp Port. My superiors at H.E.R.E. And these two, who are, well, who are here.” She gestures to *blush* and Hyuk.

“Good, that’s good,” says Bryophyta. “We’d like to ask that you keep it that way. The fishermen have been dealt with.”

Basidiomycota interjects again. “We just think that word of a person being brought to the Rock from... away... might spark ordinary people panicking, or worrying about the kinds of things that really, only we need to be worrying about right now. We know that Drs. Netmaker and Heal here have already stressed the importance of keeping this to yourselves for the time being, but we felt it might be beneficial for you to also hear it from us. Do you understand what we mean, Harriet?”

Harriet does. There is a threat woven into this conversation and she’s felt it buried there since she first sat down.

“Excuse me.” Hyuk pipes up from her shoulder, and the Phyla look at him.

“Yes, *klik-krAwnAA?*” says Bacteroidota, using a Corvidian term for one raven addressing another, which translated roughly as ‘kin.’

“I’m assuming you’re all aware that I run *The Unquiet Wing*, yes?”

“We are.”

“Then with all due respect, but if I don’t publish a story on this, how do I know someone else won’t get credit for my scoop?”

Harriet shrinks down in her seat. Hyuk hops off her shoulders and onto the tabletop.

“*klik-klik-ayya-screee-hyuk-hra*,” says Bacteroidota, using Hyuk’s avian name.

“You must understand that we, as the governing body, cannot be seen to have offered you monetary compensation for your silence.”

“Naturally,” says Hyuk.

“Perhaps,” says Bryophyta, “*The Unquiet Wing* will shortly receive a substantial donation from an anonymous donor.”

“What a wonderful coincidence that would be,” says Hyuk, and preens his chest feathers. Harriet is utterly lost. The Phyla do not seem angry at him for being so bold. In fact, they all seem to be having a bit of a relieved laugh together, like some tension or stressful wild card has been resolved. She looks at *blushoftangerine*, but he is consciously remaining a neutral beige. So she decides to ask the one question that’s been burning in her for the past six days, before she loses her chance.

“What happened to them?”

“Pardon me?” says Chordata, even though Harriet thinks the keen woman knows exactly who she means.

“The human that the assemblage brought. Where are they? Are they okay?”

“If you’re wondering if they survived, then yes, they are alive.”

Harriet is relieved. She hadn’t seen the strange pale human since Camp Port, and had been feeling somewhat responsible for them this whole time.

She had, after all, done her best to save them.

That spit of land where they had been deposited was only two or three hours walking back to Camp Port, where there were many other, much more qualified people to deal with an unconscious, malnourished human from threads-knew-where. So, Harriet had lifted their limp, light body and lay them atop of *blushoftangerine*'s tank. She'd tied the human in place with some ropes Hyuk found in one of the shacks, and they'd trekked back the way they had come in silence – a silence more to do with severe shock than any sense of sombreness or control. Harriet's memory of that walk is so dissociated as to be barely rememberable.

The human had only woken once. They had not spoken. Harriet had seen their eyes open, then close again as soon as she spoke, told them to stay calm.

They did not open their eyes again, and so must have drifted back into unconsciousness.

Apparently, when they'd come to Camp Port, several people had asked her what had happened, and who the strangely pale human was. She hadn't answered. None of them had. When one of Camp Port's designated leaders was brought to question them, and asked who the unconscious stranger was, Harriet had pointed shakily towards the ocean and whispered, "They came from... away."

When she could finally make it clear to the concerned citizens hovering around that this person had just been deposited on the Rock from elsewhere – that they were *not Molluskan* – they'd all been whisked back to the Mollusk and then up through the shell on the Tram in a flurry of frantic concern.

As soon as they'd stepped into H.E.R.E., Harriet had called for the highest official she could think of – the Dean. And within half an hour the unconscious human was gone,

handed over to the appropriate authorities, and Harriet was lying in her bed trying to sleep, and failing.

That first morning back, Marajory had wasted no time in finding Harriet and *blushoftangerine* in their lab – where Harriet had just been staring blankly at the wall, anyway – and corralling them into the first of many interrogational meetings with other H.E.R.E. officials like the Dean, officials far above Harriet’s station. These were the kinds of people who had signed off on her surgery, who had read her grant proposals – who controlled her life and her work. But she had never thought that one day they would sit and hang on her every word.

And then, about six days after she’d come back to the Mollusk, Marajory informed her that she was to provide testimony to the Phyla themselves, later that day, today – right now.

“Actually, Dr. Willow, that brings us rather nicely to something else we were hoping to ask of you,” says a boyish human around Harriet’s age, wearing a long string of wooden beads over his tunic. He has been sitting and listening calmly to everything, whispering only to the elderly gorilla hunched over in the seat next to him. This must be Echinodermata and Ciliophora, Harriet calculates. Molluskans affectionately call them the boy and the grandmother – the Phyla’s youngest and oldest members, respectively.

“Ah, yes, good point, Basco,” says Chordata, nodding to the young man. He smiles at her, then turns back to Harriet.

“Since we’re keeping the existence of this person, and their island assemblage, sort of need-to-know for now – just until we find out more, of course – we find it quite helpful

that one of the people who already knows about them just so happens to be an expert on languages.”

“How so?” says *blushoftangerine*, defensive of Harriet.

“This person will not speak,” signs Ciliophora, straightening up with effort. “They do not know our words. They act in fear.”

“Or, they do not seem to know,” Echinodermata clarifies. “Either they don’t speak Molluskan or they’re being cagey on purpose. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s the second one, to be honest. They haven’t been... cooperative.”

“Well, they did wake up, probably tied down, in a strange place with strange people after threads-know-what,” Hyuk points out.

Chordata cuts in. “Harriet, would you try speaking to them? Please. We *must* ascertain where they have come from, and what they know about the Mollusk and the world at large. I have it on authority from your supervisors here that you are fluent in four languages and familiar with many more. And you already know so much about the situation, having been there.”

*Or I know ‘too much.’* Harriet thinks. This is not a request. The Phyla were saying please, but as with Hyuk’s anonymous donation, there was more going on here than what was being said. For Harriet, it was like knowing that something was swimming under the surface, but the water being too murky to see clearly through.

*Please don’t let me be reading this wrong,* she thinks.

“What if they won’t speak to me either? Or what if they simply lie?”

“We’ll deal with that if we come to it,” says Basidiomycota reassuringly. But Harriet is not reassured.

“Oh, and keep out of their reach,” says Cnidaria, gesturing to his bandage. She swallows hard.

“You begin tomorrow,” says Chordata, and she stands. “I’ll have instructions and directions brought to your quarters.”

They are all being dismissed. Harriet stands too, on shaky legs. But her eyes are still locked on Cnidaria’s. It feels as though he is holding her in a physical beam of malevolence, so strong she cannot move. It feels as though he is blaming her for this, as though by bringing this person back from the ocean, Harriet is somehow responsible for whatever happens next.

“Thank you again, *Ms. Willow*,” he says as she reaches the top of the stairs up from the table. Chordata shoots him a look, but he keeps talking. “Needless to say, you will be relieved of your former duties until this is resolved. Finding out everything you can about your come-from-away is your new fulltime job.”

Is she being punished? This feels like an attack, if only because of the eye contact, and his tone. He can’t possibly know how much losing her daily routine will actually affect her.

She doesn’t know how to respond, so she just nods. *blushoftangerine* looks back at her, with Hyuk perched on the corner of his tank.

“Come on, Harriet,” the raven says, his eyes kind. She finds she no longer has the energy to be mad at him, or at *blush*, for swapping secrets behind her back. She trails after them, still dripping the soundless tears of emotional overload.

## CHAPTER 19

The first thing I notice about the woman is that she is nothing like the others I have met. She comes into my room cautiously, with her hands tightly at her sides, her steps small and awkward. She lacks the assertiveness and swagger of most of the guards.

The second thing I notice is that she has no framework.

I only notice it second because, initially, I assume her framework is simply a colour that blends in with her clothing or the background wall behind her – this happens sometimes. But as she comes closer, it becomes obvious that no, her torso is just a human torso, devoid of any colours or shapes or moving patterns.

Immediately, the situation has changed.

I reassess quickly. With the other humans I have interacted with, I have been able to maintain some control over my situation by refusing to engage. But this person has flipped things, maybe without even meaning to. All I want to do is to ask her questions. I am kept well-fed in this prison but now I feel a different hunger waking in the back of my mind. For the first time, I want to know something about my captors, about this place. Does she know about framework? Has she learned to control or hide hers? Can she see it too? I do not have framework to my own eyes – do I have some to her?

I sit up sharply on my mattress. For the first time, I feel more curiosity than fear, or blind rage like that of a trapped snake.

The woman pulls the only chair away from the wall and sits down just out of my chained reach. The others must have told her to do that. She is taller than me, and her skin is the colour of the dainty, narrow-capped beige mushrooms that used to grow out of the moss at the end of Forest's warm season. Her hair is very curly, and a strand of it is loose

against her eyebrow. She is finely freckled all over, like the skin of a wood frog. We regard each other, two wary creatures. Without framework, I am not sure what to expect from her.

“Hi,” she says. Her voice has a slight waver in it. She is afraid of me.

Good.

“My name is Harriet. Harriet Willow. I’m the one who found you.”

I take in her features again, in a new light. Yes, she is familiar; I remember now. I remember only the faintest impression of a halo of curls against the sun and a voice saying ‘stay calm.’ I remember her saying other things, but not what they were, and a strange voice with no emotion speaking back to her. I had thought it was all part of my death dream on the back of the monster.

The Harriet in front of me keeps talking.

“And I – well, look, I’m just, I’m sorry. I’m really so sorry that they’ve been keeping you like a prisoner, and that your first experience of the Mollusk has been –” she gestures around at the room and the chain in the floor, “this. If I had *any* power whatsoever over how you were treated, things would have been different. But I don’t. I’m just a nobody, really. So, I just – I’m sorry.”

She looks down at her knees for a minute, takes a deep breath. I keep watching her, saying nothing. I’ve learned that an unblinking stare gets under humans’ skins. But when Harriet looks at me again, she seems more focussed on something going on in her own head.

“Right, so, the Phyla have asked me to figure out which language you speak. I’m going to start with the human languages spoken by the most people at the transition point



after the end of the old-world. Then, if none of those strike a note, I guess we'll have to move on to nonhuman languages. But we'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it."

I want to ask her how she found me. Did she see the monster? If she had, what had it looked like from a distance, far removed from its bulk, its body? And if she hadn't, where had I been, and how had I gotten there?

"The language I'm speaking now is called Molluskan." she continues. "It's the shared common language of all the peoples who call this city home."

I don't know when I decide that I'm going to break my silence for this woman, but before she can continue, I open my mouth and say,

"No."

She freezes, eyes wide. But her shock only lasts a beat and then, to her credit, she works through it.

"No to what?" she says.

"English. You're speaking English."

She takes another beat, looks down, swallows.

"Well, yes, as I was about to clarify, Molluskan has its roots in English, the language most commonly spoken in Newfoundland, which is what this island was called before it just became 'the Rock.' But Molluskan contains a hodgepodge of words and phrases from other languages, spoken by our ancestors or by the other peoples our ancestors began to collaborate with."

"Sounds funny," I say. My voice is so unused that it almost hurts to pull the words up from the gummy depths.

"I mean, I suppose I have an accent, to you."

We look at each other. Harriet chews on the inside of her cheek and tucks the stray strand of hair away. I guess that she is trying to maintain a calm exterior, but without framework I can't know for sure.

“So, um, what's your name?” she says. She is so nervous. She has nervous eyes. They flit around and land everywhere but my face. I think: *if I'm going to decide to trust anyone here, might as well be someone I could easily overpower.*

“Clayer,” I say.

“Claire?”

“*Clay-er.*”

“Oh.” She scuffs her feet, which are closed up in sturdy boots, against the stone floor. “So, Clayer, where did you come from?”

*You tell me*, I want to say, but instead I give her the only answer I have.

“Forest. A forest. Far away.”

I expect the next question to be something similar to what the others have asked, since obviously Harriet will be taking this information to them. But she surprises me. This woman is one surprise after another. She says,

“Was it very beautiful there?”

“Yes,” I say without thinking, my mind instantly flashing to Forest. “Tree green Whisper Web blueberry clean rain.” Being caught off-guard, I slip into the sideways talking that Nan always hated. If this exchange is still a dynamic of power, I have just given some away.

Harriet looks confused, but smiles at me anyway. I only remember human smiles like some kind of distant, hazy impression. It has been so long since bared teeth meant anything other than a snarling intent to eat me.

“Sounds incredible,” she says. “What was it called, this forest you came from?”

“Forest,” I say.

“Just ‘forest’?”

“Yes.”

She sits back, confusion spreading to a crease in her forehead.

“Were there... other people there?”

“No.”

“None?”

“No.”

“So you were... what? How long have you been alone, then?”

I think about this.

“Winters. Not too many. Enough. Nan died.”

“Your Nan... How old are you?” Harriet asks. I shrug. Fifteen plus five? Maybe.

“Not a child,” I say. Harriet nods.

“I get that. People always think I’m younger than I am too,” she says, and then looks startled to have revealed something about herself to me. She is letting her guard down, ever so slightly, and I cannot hold my questions back any longer.

“Why don’t you have framework?”

“Have what?”

Of course, they might call it something completely different here. ‘Framework’ had been the word Nan had given me, after all. I gesture helpfully to my chest and ribcage.

“Colours. Emotions. Can you see *mine*?”

Harriet’s frown gets even deeper. I imagine that her brain is smoking, like a bundle of birch bark trying to light.

“I’m sorry, Clayer, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

There is a firm knock, and a guard steps in.

“Dr. Willow, they say that’s enough for now.”

Harriet turns back to me, and she looks suddenly very sad underneath the confusion and intrigue. I find that I believe her apology about the way I’ve been treated here. I find that I believe her, period.

“Look,” she says, “I have a friend I’d like to bring with me next time I come to talk to you. I didn’t bring him this time because I wasn’t sure what you’ve seen, where you’re from, and I didn’t want to scare you. But he’s, uh, he’s a cuttlefish.”

I notice that she hasn’t used my name while the guard has been in the room. I appreciate this small protection of my privacy more than I can say.

“What is... cuttlefish?”

I have never heard this word. A fish? Harriet is friends with a fish?

“It’s hard to explain,” she says. “But is it alright if I bring him?”

I nod. Harriet stands and walks quickly out of the room. Before she passes through the door completely, I catch her casting a glance over her shoulder at me. We make eye contact. Her face flushes and then she is gone.

I resume kicking the bare soles of my feet against the wall, as if it has any chance of breaking anything other than my skin. My hands are still numb and my wrists are still chafed to bleeding.

But perhaps all is no longer lost.

I know that Harriet Willow will tell the severe woman and the man I'd bitten and the boy with the beads and all the rest of those question-askers everything I've said. They must have sent her. But if Harriet is the only other human I'll speak to, then not only do I keep myself useful and interesting, but I make her useful and interesting to the predators too.

I like this idea. I'm pleased with how well I've navigated this human world of unspoken clues and glances and tensions they think I won't catch. They have no idea how closely I can watch. I notice everything. Just because an environment is unknown to me doesn't mean I can't learn its workings through observation.

I am less mindlessly angry now. I find I am looking up each time the door opens, hoping it is a curly-haired woman with no framework.

But when she does come back, she brings a moving box with her. She enters, and it follows, its four legs bending and stepping like a sporebuck's, but not made of flesh. The closest comparison I have for their material is the pot Nan and I used for cooking. Metal. The legs are metal. But its head, the box itself, is clear, and liquid, like a bucket filled with water. Perhaps it is water, but I do not understand how water is contained by invisible walls. And then, in the water in the box with legs, is its brain, floating there, squishy and writhing.

I recoil. I crawl back on the floor as far as my leg chain will allow. I do not want that brain-box to come anywhere near me. Even after all the monsters I have seen and

fought and killed, there is something about this one that spikes through my bones, fear hitting my teeth like I've just bitten into ice. It is wrong. It is not a monster from Forest, not a monster that grew like a plant or a mushroom out of a body. It is a monster that has been *made*. I want to destroy it, take apart its metal shell piece by piece and throw them into a lake.

And then it speaks.

“Hey, it’s okay, I’m super nice, I swear.”

I freeze, curled on the floor with my legs tucked under me, ready to spring into an attack if necessary. How is it speaking with no mouth? Its voice is flat, devoid of the regular tones of human speech. I snarl at it, show my teeth like I would to stand down a myco.

Harriet comes towards me, holding up both her hands.

“Clayer, this is my friend. Remember, the one I mentioned, the cuttlefish?”

So this was the fish. Well, it is like no fish I have seen. Perhaps that word means differently in Molluskan. I growl, low in my throat, and Harriet stops moving.

“His name is blush-of-tangerine. He won’t hurt you.”

“Not a fish.”

“No, no, he’s a *cuttlefish*. He’s a cephalopod. Have you ever heard of cephs before?”

“Monster.”

“Do you mean, is he an assemblage? Because he’s not. Cephs are every bit as natural as you and I. I guess you’ve just never seen one before.”

The brain-box – the *cuttlefish* – speaks again.

“Honestly, wow. Hurtful. I am like the opposite of a monster. You want to meet a monster? Go to a Phyla meeting.”

Harriet glares at it – him.

“blush, shut up, you’re not helping.”

And then the strangest thing happens. The brain in the water changes colour, and I watch, and then, suddenly, I know what it’s thinking.

*She needs to be careful. This human is dangerous. I won’t let anything happen to her, not while I’m here to protect her.*

It is like framework. Like, but not exactly the same as. I see the colours and shapes and movement on the thing in the water, and they have meanings, and the meanings are same kinds of meanings as framework. The reds are alarm or anger or fear. Greens or blues are sadness, loss, or other kinds of fear. The white shapes make individual thoughts, passing by, and the speed of the movement is how fast the mind is moving, how quickly the emotions are churning – it is all so *similar*. But instead of general impressions of emotion, this creature’s framework is full of coherent thoughts, full messages.

I am stunned out of my fear. I am stunned out of any other thoughts. I stand up.

“How are you doing that?” I ask the cuttlefish.

“Doing what?” he says in his toneless out-loud voice.

“Saying words with your framework like that.”

“My what?”

I watch his brain change colours again. It goes fast, but I’m a quick learner.

*I do not understand. I do not like this human. I do not trust.*

“You’re thinking that you don’t like me,” I tell him. Instantly, his brain turns fully white. The framework is gone. It is as though he has lowered a solid wall between us.

Harriet is looking back and forth between us.

“What? What is it? blush, what did they mean?”

“That fracker can read Colour,” says the flat voice. “They just read my godsdamn thoughts.”

Harriet looks back at me, bewildered.

“Is that what framework is, Clayer? Is it Colour?”

I point to the cuttlefish.

“It made its brain in the box say framework words. Never seen.”

“Did that thing just call me a brain in a box?” snaps the cuttlefish. He begins to wave a bunch of fleshy appendages around. “Hello, this in here is my whole body. Not the brain. Me. The rest of this is a machine. Ma-chine. Have you ever heard of a machine?”

“Okay, okay, let’s all just calm down,” Harriet says, raising her voice a little, but not enough to summon a guard. The cuttlefish allows some of his framework to reappear, but just a vague colour, enough to project his unsettled annoyance but nothing more.

“Now, I don’t think we need to take this to the Phyla right away. Do you, blush?”

“Definitely not.”

“Good. Okay, this is something that’s never been known before, and it needs to be studied. We need to understand what we’re dealing with before we risk it being misinterpreted. Let’s just... sit down. Alright, Clayer?”

Harriet very slowly pulls the chair back over, and sits. She is still holding her hands up like she is trying to calm a wild animal. The cuttlefish and his ma-chine clomp closer



and stand next to her, turned at an angle so he can see me with what I now realize is an eye, and just part of a brain. He really is a whole animal floating in a clear container. The mass of limbs in front of his eyes wriggle and flutter in an uncomfortable way, but at least Harriet seems to trust him.

And I've decided to trust Harriet, for better or worse. So I sit back down on my mattress.

“Clayer, cephalopods have a language that is displayed on their skin. We call it Colour. My work – and blushoftangerine’s work – is dedicated to learning and translating languages, but Colour is especially difficult, because human brains and ceph brains are so fundamentally different. On a basic level, Colour is a language comprised of a combination of colours, shapes, patterns, and combinations of all those things, how they interact, overlap, and change from one to the next. Have you ever seen a creature like blush before?”

I shake my head.

“So how could you have seen Colour before? In your words, is what blushoftangerine does with his skin called ‘framework’?”

“Yes,” I say, then think a moment. “And no.”

“What do you mean?”

“His has words. Framework is only feelings.”

“But if you’ve never seen a ceph before, then who has framework?”

I look at her like she’s asked the stupidest question of all time.

“Everything.”

“Everything has framework.”

“Yes.”

“So, you can see emotions?” the cuttlefish says. “What’s Harriet feeling right now?”

“No, but that’s the thing,” Harriet says, and I can imagine her brain doing that smoking tumble again. “Last time I was here, Clayer, you asked me why I didn’t have any framework. Do I still not have any?”

“No framework,” I confirm.

“Does everyone else have it? The guards? The Phyla?”

“Are those the question-askers?”

Harriet nods.

“Yes, they do.”

“But I don’t. Okay, okay. So, if everything has framework, how often do you encounter someone without any?”

I meet her eyes, and she looks away.

“Never,” I tell her. “Never.”

For a long moment, my room that is also a prison is silent. All three of us are thinking, changing, reordering what we thought we knew about everything in the world. Finally, Harriet says,

“I think I know why.”

The cuttlefish – blush of tangerine? – and I look at her, waiting. She glances at him and holds up one arm. I see some unspoken understanding flicker between them, but now that the cuttlefish is hiding his framework, I cannot read it. I don’t like this, either. Usually, I am the only one who knows about framework, and other creatures have no ability to disguise it. They do not even know they possess it.

Harriet turns back to me.

“Okay, don’t freak out –”

I am immediately tense.

“– but if cephalopod Colour is like advanced framework, let’s say, given the basic data we’re working with right now, then maybe I no longer have regular human framework because I have taken on the ability to speak in Colour.”

I am not following her. But then she reaches down and rolls up the sleeve of her shirt, exposing her bare forearm, and I see.

The skin on the top of her arm swirls with complex, beautiful colours. *Please do not be afraid of me*, she is thinking.

I look up at her eyes again, and this time she does not look away. Her irises are green, like the moss that grows on Forest’s stone ruins.

**//IN THE PAST//**

Sarah Murray was 86 and she'd be damned if she was leaving her home. The reports of unexplained animal attacks coming from the Central didn't frighten her, nor did the continuous panic about supply chains and rising seas levels.

She was too old for this. She would take what came as it came to her.

The district of Bay Bulls had become part of the Greater St. John's Area when she was a kid, but there were still pockets of the old small-town feeling, and her boxy bungalow, with siding painted her favourite dark blue, was one such place. She still kept a wooden box for trash bags at the end of her driveway, still watched the bay out the window from her kitchen table. Her nephew, Sean, still brought her moose steaks to store in her freezer in the fall.

The problem with 22<sup>nd</sup> century Newfoundland, if you asked Sarah, was that no one had respect for the old ways anymore. No one honoured tradition. She didn't even recognize St. John's anymore, with the Gushue an expressway now and the Jellybean Row houses renovated and extended upwards – long streets of brightly-coloured condo buildings, red, yellow, blue, lavender – cool modern interiors for rich Ontarians disguised with a façade of exterior Newfoundland charm. *Look*, the city seemed to say, *I still fit in*. But it was like an ugly full-grown man trying to squeeze into his childhood clothes. There'd be no fixing it.

Still, Sarah wasn't like to leave. She'd lived here all her life and she would die here. But the cost of food had almost doubled since her retirement, the price of gas was utterly unmentionable, and she was hard-pressed. Her son had moved to the mainland three decades ago and she only saw her grandkids at Christmas. No respect for family. Sean was

a much better boy, checking in on her whenever his dad asked, bringing her that moose meat – yes, a good boy. Not like her son, who she missed desperately despite her attempts at holding onto bitterness. Her son worked in law, had always been a smart one. Her oldest granddaughter had just finished a Master’s degree in some kind of science – was it birds she studied, or fish? She got all those ologies confused. She didn’t used to get confused so easily.

Sarah looked out at the bay. Her house was out on the point on the south side, and her view took in the bright blue water and turquoise shallows, and the round, bare-faced mountain on the north side of it. She was happier than ever to live out here now, what with the troubles overseas.

As she watched, two young women on those blasted Hover-Doos pulled up off the shore across from her. Such a disturbance, those things, sucking up so much water just to shoot it out again so hard, elevating them a solid metre above the waves. *What a sin*, Sarah thought, clucking her tongue. Heaven forbid they come across any sea life in those.

But still, the girls looked happy, out there in their rented purple wetsuits. They pulled their Hover-Doos around and started doing donuts, sending up massive sprays, laughing open-mouthed laughs that Sarah could see from her window. She remembered when she was that young. Her and her girls playing the field, back when Tinder was still all the rage, sleeping with oil rig workers and medical students and the sons and daughters of those few lingering fishermen. There had been late nights on the balcony and gluten-free baking weekends and oh, Tonya and Emilee had had that cat, the white one –

*Who are you?* she suddenly wanted to ask the hovering girls. How can you afford to be here? Do you have partners, pets, careers? She longed for their details so she could

then deride them, sneer and feel superior, but also, secretly, because she had been feeling more and more like she was losing her own. Her memory was like the tide; it sometimes pulled out for hours at a time, leaving her standing on a cold, bare slab of basalt.

They must be Canadian, Sarah knows at least. Maybe American. But there was definitely a full travel ban on anyone out of the U.K. or Europe in effect. Russia too, and the Middle East. Maybe northern Africa? But it had started in the U.K., whatever it was this time. The news was unclear, disturbing. She tried not to watch it too often. The news did nothing but radicalize anyway. It was a polarized mess of contradicting information, depending on which sources you watched. Whatever was going on over there, it was a contagion of some sort, and pandemics of one sort or another had been in pretty much continuous rollover since bat flu in the 2050s. There were protocols in place; Sarah wasn't worried. Not yet, anyway.

The two Hover-Doos made a sort of buzzing, gushing sound as they regurgitated multiple litres a second. The young women turned and started heading across the bay. There was a time, Sarah knows, that the waters of the north Atlantic were not considered safe for watersport. There was a time when they were much colder, much fiercer. Fewer creatures could live in them, and humans did not toy with them for fun.

She was about to turn away herself, and start prepping dinner – rice and some very wilted carrots, maybe some turnip; her options were slim – when she thought she saw movement on the mountain, in the corner of her eye.

There is a moment of disorientation, sometimes, when we see something on a scale beyond our regular comprehension, where our brains literally cannot make sense of what they're perceiving. That is what Sarah experienced then, on that bright August afternoon,

looking at the broad slopes to the north edge of Bay Bulls. She thought, at first, that there was a rockslide, and her first instinct was to cry out, as if the girls on the Hover-Doos might hear her and ride to safety, and the residents in the houses on the northern arm would evacuate their houses, faster than the speed of sound. But her cry quickly petered into silence, a strangled silence of utter terror, as she realized that the movement was not *on* the mountain.

It *was* the mountain.

There was a long segment along the top of the ridge that was barren of trees. It had always been exposed stone. This bareness curved down towards the water in several branches – maybe old landslides, maybe the path of water – Sarah had never bothered to think too much about it. But this rocky section was now lifting upwards. It was tearing itself out of the rest of the hillside, bending in places closer to the water, curling and – yes, it was – *clenching*. The rocky section was revealing itself to be a hand. And not just a hand, but a hand attached to an arm, which, now that she could understand its shape, appeared to have been draped over the mountain itself from behind, as though a giant had collapsed and died while desperately reaching for the water with its final strength. The hand shook itself, and the ocean exploded with the great clots of earth asteroiding into it. She couldn't see the girls on the water anymore. Sarah's house was shaking with the full force of an earthquake. Her good china fell out of the dining cabinet and shattered all across the hardwood floor. Her TV fell off the wall and cracked the VR platform. The stone fingers came together, pulling into a fist, and then the arm pulled back and slammed the fist into the ground. Sarah's windows burst. Screaming, she ducked under her kitchen table, blood already dripping from a piece of glass embedded in her forehead. When she managed to look up

again, quivering and weeping, the arm was pushing up the rest of a giant's body. It was unimaginably huge, roughly human-shaped, and made from rock and soil and tree. As it stood it disappeared far into the clouds, blocking out the sun and casting Sarah into twilight dimness. The air was thick with car alarms blaring, people screaming, and a rumble underneath it all, a sound so deep Sarah felt it in her back teeth. The giant was bigger than all of Bay Bulls. It was bigger than she could measure in her mind. Where it had wrenched its arm free of the hillside, water and something darker, almost black, seemed to be flowing. The hole was cavernous and crumbling on either side.

“*Jey-sus*, Mary and Joseph,” she said quietly.

The giant lifted one great leg and stepped over the mountain which had held its arm, and into the bay. A wave surged forth from the impact, sweeping over the shore and around Sarah's house, not quite high enough to flood her out completely. It brought its other leg down next to the first, and Sarah caught a glimpse of symmetrical root-like toes, all the way around the round stump of stone foot. Like a sun-star, or the nose of the star-nosed mole, the appendages wriggling. All around the stone legs of the giant gulls flocked and cried, looking like specks of dust next to its immensity – like a cloud of blackflies.

This was the end of days. She couldn't think much farther than that, couldn't formulate questions. But her tears slowed, and were replaced with a burning defiance in her stomach. She stood from under the table, swiped the blood out of her eyes, and walked to her front door. She walked out into the middle of the road, squarely centering herself in the gap between trees that gave her a clear view into the bay. The giant's hands hung by its sides, and she could see them, a hundred metres up, still flexing like they were getting used to being alive, though whether that process was one of remembering something, or of



learning something new, Sarah couldn't say. It made a sound like a sigh, which shook the ground again and rattled the shingles, and then it lifted its massive foot to take another step.

As the great shadow rose over her, Sarah smelled the sea. She looked away from the giant's starlike foot, taking up her whole sky now, and instead stared out towards the mouth of the bay, towards the horizon. She felt strangely calm, and the screaming from down in town and the sirens faded, and it was just her and the Atlantic in an elastic moment, still blue, out there in the distance, still catching unblocked rays of sun. She took a deep breath of it.

Sarah Murray had lived here all her life and she would die here.

The giant crushed all six nearby houses on that road in a single step, and carried on, not even aware of the puny creatures beneath it.

## CHAPTER 20

*blushoftangerine* has invited Harriet out for lunch at Emberley's Crab Shack, down in camera 23-6, way mouthside. He'd failed to mention who else would be there.

Harriet walks in already dysregulated from mouthside's bustle, as per usual, and almost turns around and walks right back out again, when she sees her friend around a table with *nighttime-teal-awashwithstars*, Klik-Hyuk, and Izik the Skin Sightist.

But she's hungry, and she's already missed the Tram heading back to the hat, so she's stuck here for at least an hour. She walks over as coolly as she can manage and sends a hundred eye-daggers at *blush*.

"Wow," she says out loud, falsely chipper. "What are the odds of running into you *all at the same time*?"

"Harriet, don't be like that, come on. Sit down." *blushoftangerine* is apologetic, but only a little. He seems to be steeling himself for something he's schemed up and considers more important than her feelings.

The only free seat is next to Izik. She sits down reluctantly and he smiles at her.

"Nice to see you again," he says under his breath.

"I'll reserve judgement until after I hear what's going on," she mutters back.

"Okay," *blushoftangerine* says. He has opened the top of his quadrutank and is draping some of his tentacles out, shimmering with slime in the torchlight. "Crab legs for the table are on me."

"Dude, what the hell?" Harriet blurts out.

"Harriet, look, I'm sorry, but both of these gentlemen came to me seeking an audience with you, and H.E.R.E. is being cagey as frack about letting anyone speak to you

through official channels, and given the current nature of *your work*,” here he gives her a pointed look, “I thought you needed to hear them out. And I knew you wouldn’t come willingly.”

“I tried going to your office again, Dr. Willow, but there was a guard posted outside who told me you were no longer available for inquiries,” says Izik.

“And H.E.R.E. wants nothing to do with me now that I’m on their bribe payroll to keep my beak shut,” says Hyuk, lowering his squawk.

“A lot has been going on while you’ve been... otherwise absorbed,” says *blush*.

“*blush* has told us that your work right now is top secret, and I respect that,” says Izik. “But look, there are rumours about that human who came from away, no matter how hard the Phyla are trying to deny it. And we know that you and *blush* are the ones who found them. *blush* told us. We know they’re real. But since H.E.R.E. is keeping them locked away, we’re worried about what else they’re hiding, right? There are more and more stories of mutations inside the Mollusk. There are whispers every day. And H.E.R.E. paying Hyuk for his silence is as good as admitting that it’s a real concern, if you ask me.”

“Look, I can’t comment on any of this,” Harriet says, the anxiety creeping up her spine. “You should all know that. But I guess my *friend* here doesn’t care about that anymore.”

*awashwithstars* interjects.

“Harriet, we all know that you are a brilliant, driven person, and *blushof Tangerine* does everything he can to support you. But *blush* needs support too, and whom he chooses to confide in is frankly out of your control.”

Harriet addresses *blush* directly.

“I’m not saying you can’t have your own friends. I’m saying that there are rules for a reason! Do you realize that you’ve made us all liabilities now? Everyone at this table could get into terrible, terrible trouble!”

“Harriet, H.E.R.E. and the Phyla are not working in the Mollusk’s best interest,” says Hyuk. “Surely you’re not blind to that.”

She looks around the table.

“Just what, exactly, *is* going on here?”

“Things are changing in the Mollusk, Harriet. And whether you want it or not, you’re becoming an important player,” says *blushoftangerine*, gently but without room for argument.

“Is this an intervention?”

“No, it’s a beginning.”

Harriet rubs her forehead and tries to slow her heartbeat with several deep breaths.

“Okay, fine,” she says. “By all means. Let’s have some kind of wannabe revolutionary meeting at midday in a crab shack underground. This seems like a great idea, guys. Absolutely no flaws.” She looks back at *blush*. “How much have you told them about Clayer?”

“Um, not their name, for one thing.”

“Frack.”

“Just that they really did come from off the Rock, and that you are working with them to develop some common communication.”

“Clayer,” says Hyuk, and reaches for something with his talon.

“Don’t you *dare* right that down,” Harriet snaps, and he lowers his foot again.

“But Harriet, can’t you see why this needs to be shared with the public?” Izik says, leaning in closer to her. “This proves that we are not alone out here. Somewhere, elsewhere, other humans have survived. How can the Phyla possibly want to keep that quiet?”

“They’re worried that Clayer’s community is hostile,” she says, giving up. “They don’t want Molluskans to panic, or worry that we’re under attack. There’s more to it than just that, but I’m not going to tell you, and neither is blush. Right?”

*blush* says nothing, but turns a contrite blue.

“Seriously, what is it you all want from me?” she says. No one will look at her. *awashwithstars* sheepishly pulls a crab leg into her tank. Finally, Hyuk says,

“We want you to speak out.”

“No.”

“Harriet, you’ve seen everything. I know you’ve seen the mutations in humans. You as good as told me that night in the Blue Iron Ring, remember? And now you’re directly involved with a come-from-away! The first in a century! You need to blow the whistle on this. You, not us, because people will *believe* you. You’re a H.E.R.E. scientist. Your voice will carry the weight we need.”

“Absolutely not. No! I’ll be fired. Or worse.”

“I did warn you she’d never do it,” says *blushoftangerine* to the others.

“We had to try.” Izik shrugs, and smiles at her again. “I understand, Harriet.”

“Well, I don’t,” snaps Hyuk. “I think you’re being insular, and selfish.”

“Yes, well, I think you’re being foolish and reckless,” she snipes back, and stands. “I think I’ve had enough of being cornered against my will today, thank you. *blush*, don’t bother coming home tonight. This was *so* not cool.”

As she storms out, she hears *awashwithstars* say, pointedly out loud, “It’s okay, honey. You did what you thought was right, and she’ll see that eventually.”

She rides the Tram back north, and, without thinking, goes to Clayer’s cell. She’s started thinking about it as a cell because that’s what it is. In the couple of weeks, since the strange human started speaking to her willingly, she’s convinced the Phyla to unchain them, given that their attack of Cnidaria was only self-defence. But Clayer is still not allowed out of their room, for fear that they are a spy of some sort, looking to map the inside of the city, or that they will run off and vanish into the Mollusk’s many dark alleys.

She nods to the guard – there is only one at a time now – and he unlocks the door. She walks and in he closes it after her, lock clanking back into place.

Clayer is sitting against the far wall of this low-ceilinged opening in the shell-wall, drawing something onto the stone with a chunk of burnt wood. Charcoal is one of the things Harriet has been able to get them for entertainment, since they cannot read and are not allowed sharp objects, like needles for stitching or knives for whittling. This drawing appears to be a vaguely humanoid creature, with a head like an overturned bowl.

“What is that?” she says. Clayer does not turn around, their white hair fanned out over their back.

“A giant,” she says. “A monster.”

Harriet walks into the room and sits down on the floor. She leaves a solid five metres between them, but she does not believe they would harm her unless she struck the first blow.

Then they would totally knock her out. Probably before Harriet had a chance to blink.

“Are all the giants also monsters?” she says, trying not to think about what had just happened at the crab shack. “Or are there some good giants?”

“No. All monsters. The monsters are everywhere in Forest.” Clayer puts down the blunt, burnt stick and looks over at her. “You are upset,” they say, studying her with those uncanny gold-hazel eyes that rarely blink.

“What? Oh, a little, I guess, yeah. But don’t worry about that, tell me more about these giants.”

“Why upset?”

*Oh gods, here we go*, she thinks. She should have gone home. Why had she come here?

“Um, a friend of mine... betrayed my trust.”

“I do not know that word. Betray.”

“It means to, like, do something you know will hurt someone. It damages the trust between you.”

Clayer digests this for a moment. Harriet likes watching them think. They take every new piece of information so seriously, even words or details Harriet might have considered extraneous. Clayer remembers everything they see and hear; she is certain of this.

“And would it make you... feel better to talk about the giants?”

“Yes.” Harriet latches on to this immediately.

“They wake out of the mountains,” says Clayer, resuming their drawing. Their voice is soft, close against the wall as they focus. “Never the same, but always big. I think they are sad. They make sad sounds. And they start to walk, and then they are gone.”

This is more words than Clayer usually strings together, and Harriet is held rapt. She waits to see if they will continue, but they don't, so she prompts them.

“If you think they're sad, then why are you so certain that they're the same as the other monsters you've described? The... the sporebucks, and the dogrels, and the like?”

“Monsters can be sad.”

Harriet doesn't have a rebuttal for this. She just watches them draw for a moment, their cheekbones sharp in their hungry face, the muscles in their arm starkly defined. It still fascinates her that Clayer's skin doesn't have any warmth to it. Saying they're white-skinned would be incorrect, because their skin is distinctly different from the pinkish cream of even the palest Molluskan humans. No, there is no pinkness to Clayer at all, the flush of their face instead a yellowish grey. It is as though she was raised without the sun, but this cannot be the case, given that her many stories of her forest home all take place outdoors.

“Clayer, I've mentioned before that the creatures you call monsters, we call assemblages. I'm pretty sure we're referring to the same thing. But can you tell me more of what you know about them? Your... forest monsters?”

“They are hard to kill,” Clayer says, looking back at Harriet again. “You have to burn them, or cut them apart completely. Or they'll come... back together, after time.”

“Do you know why they're so hard to kill?”

Clayer frowns. “They just are. Who cares why?”

Harriet blinks. She has never encountered this mindset before. The very foundation of H.E.R.E. is caring about the 'why' of things. Without knowing why, how can they predict what might happen next? How can they strive to reverse, or undo, the harm that has been done?



“I do,” she says, opting for simple truthfulness. “So here’s what we know, as a society. Assemblages are collaborative bodies created by the release of a spore called the ‘Myco Mutations,’ in the old-world. The genetic base was fungal in nature, hence the short form *myco*, after mycology. The mutations only affect endothermic creatures, particularly mammals. The more complex a lifeform was, the more changed it became. No two assemblages are exactly the same. Their DNA always contains multitudes of unrelated genes. We do not know how or even *if* assemblages reproduce. We do not know how their assembled bodies work despite decades of dissections. They are hard to kill because they do not have central organs like we do, but rather seem to possess neural and circulatory tissue throughout the web of hyphae within their body forms. If wounded, they can regenerate, even entire limbs, though some long-term studies have observed that these new growths are often completely different from the original body part. Their digestion is more fungal than mammalian, as it appears to work by dissolving and absorbing nutrients throughout the body instead of in a stomach or obvious intestines. We still know very little about them, because of the extreme danger they pose to researchers. I mean, it’s insane. This is a fungal pathogen that destroyed our entire world almost two centuries ago, and we’re trying to solve the case with what little technological leftovers we could salvage and a handful of samples!”

Clayer is staring at her. She realizes she’s gotten on a tangent about one of her areas of special interest, and it’s even more embarrassing because Clayer is not a fellow academic or a student – they are a feral forest person who literally just said they didn’t care.

But then Clayer says,

“Myco?”

“Yeah, uh, the Myco Mutations. We have essentially no records of how it all happened. It’s like this big... gap in our history. A chasm we can’t fill in, but we also can’t just jump over it. Like, we have all these books and photographs and technologies from the old-world, so we know what it used to be like before the mutations started, and then we have stories and legends about the Mollusk and how this city came to be, but the in-between bits are just... lost. A lot of people died, I know. A lot of terrible things caused a lot of suffering and ruin.”

“No, but –” Clayer seems to be straining to find the right way to say what they want to. “I know that word. That word, ‘myco.’ It means... not a germ, It’s a kind of monster.”

“Describe it,” says Harriet. This has become a frequent addition in their mutual learning sessions, when they find their words for things don’t match up.

“Like a human, but green. Leaf wings, sharp teeth, long tail. Hang from trees, troupes, clever. The cleverest monsters.”

Harriet is once again completely captured by this mental image. Every time Clayer conjures their world Harriet feels she could lose herself in the horrifying beauty of it.

“Okay, so, these Myco monsters, do they speak? Do they have language?”

“Not ‘Myco-something-else.’ Just myco. *A myco*. One thing.”

Harriet works through this for a minute, then nods.

“Ah! So to you, ‘myco’ is a noun, not an adjective. You’re describing *a myco*. Got it, got it.”

“Nan taught me their name,” says Clayer. “Just like she taught me bloodbear and thylafox and others. Why did she know your old word?”

This is the part that is falling into place for Harriet. She feels the joy of discovering something taking over her face.

“My guess? The Myco Mutations were called that long enough ago that both your people and my people knew that word. Your ‘mycos’ were *created by* my ‘Myco Mutations.’ The word just evolved differently for you, or rather, for your Nan. But this teaches us something amazing, don’t you see? It gives us a tiny piece of the puzzle! It tells us that an understanding of the fungal nature of assemblages was widespread, at least in some capacity. It tells us that Molluskans probably didn’t invent the name ‘Myco Mutations.’ That name survived the transition from the old-world. Isn’t that incredible?”

Clayer says nothing. They stand, and walk closer to Harriet, crouching down next to her. This is the closest they have been to each other, and Harriet would have expected Clayer to smell rank or unwashed, but they don’t. They have a loamy smell, like soil after rain. In the sideways glint of light from the one electric light strung from the ceiling, their eyes look almost yellow.

“Harriet,” they say, and her name is so unexpected in their voice that a small shiver runs down her spine.

“Yes?”

“You are still upset.”

Harriet immediately looks down to see if her skin graft has become visible, but no, her sleeve is fully covering it. The fact that Clayer can read Colour is something she’s still not used to and isn’t ready to face the implications of.

“No, no, I’m fine,” she says.

Clayer looks confused. “I do not like when you are upset. You have been kind.”

Harriet isn't sure what to do with that. She ventures, "Have you ever had a friend before, Clayer? Do you, um, do you know what a friend is?"

"Part of the pack," they say immediately. "Like Nan and me. Protect each other."

"Um, yeah, okay. Your Nan was family, and a friend is like that, but not related to you, I guess? It's hard to explain. But sure, friends protect each other."

"Then you are my only friend in this Mollusk place," says Clayer, and it's such a bluntly honest statement that Harriet blushes.

"I'm glad you think that," she says. "I'm trying to protect you as well as I can, just like I'm trying to protect blushoftangerine, when he'll listen to me."

"Can I see your arm?"

The request is so sudden that Harriet holds out her arm without processing it. Clayer reaches out and pushes back her sleeve. She had not expected Clayer to touch her, but they seem unconcerned by the contact as they hold her grafted arm gently, their palms cool and calloused. Harriet can feel herself blushing again, and then her cuttlefish skin turns pink too, a rippling fuchsia.

"I am scaring you," says Clayer, dropping her arm as fast as she'd picked it up.

"No, no, it wasn't fear, that's not quite the Colour —"

"Please go. Leave the *prisoner* until tomorrow."

*Oh frack, oh frack, what had her arm said?*

"Clayer, whatever you saw there, I'm not —"

"Go."

Harriet goes.

She storms through the halls of H.E.R.E. in a blind rush of emotions she can't pin down. She's always on thin ice these days, has been ever since *yellowswirltosunrise's* prophecy, and it doesn't take much to send her spiralling. The last couple of hours have contained more than enough unprecedented events. Just when she thinks things can't uproot her more, the universe proves her wrong.

She is flushed and her heart is pounding. She keeps thinking about Clayer's cool hands on her arm, their strange eyes, her name in their voice. She doesn't realize where she is going until she knocks, and Marajory answers the door. Harriet walks in without asking.

"Well, holy frack," Marajory says, closing the door behind her. "If it isn't the ever-more-secretive Harriet Willow. What's been going on since the Phyla –?"

"Shut up and kiss me," Harriet says, and pushes her against the wall.

## CHAPTER 21

Several days pass where Harriet does not come to study me.

I know that is what she is doing now because that is what her arm told me.

I know it is days because I count how many times the guard brings me food. All meat in the Mollusk is cooked, and lacks the flavour of blood. I eat mindlessly.

I had been hurt at first, but now that I've had nothing to do but think for many hours, it makes sense to me. Of course I am being studied by these Molluskan people. Of course they still fear me. What did I think would happen? That Harriet would tell those important humans I could see framework, when apparently no other humans can, and they would just let me leave this place? I imagine what I would do, if another human arrived in Forest on the back of a giant and showed me their impossible abilities.

I wouldn't trust them either.

I remind myself that I only decided to speak to Harriet because she seemed weak and far too earnest. I have always known she is being told what to do by others. But still, that bite of anger simmers in me, a low-boiling pot. I think about how Harriet had been upset because someone had betrayed her trust. And I think now I know what that feels like.

When she does come back, she looks tired. There are dark hollows under her eyes and her hair is stringy with oils. She sits in the chair a careful distance from me, and I lope closer on all fours, perching on the mattress.

"Clayer," she says. "I'm really sorry about whatever misunderstanding we had last time I was here. I don't just see you as a subject. I swear to you. But I need to talk to you about something much more important right now."

I say nothing. I wish I could read her framework.

"You understand that the Phyla are the people in charge, right?"

I nod.

"And you understand that they get to say what happens to you?"

I nod again.

"Well, it's been almost three weeks and they want... better answers about where you came from, what you saw, what you know. They told me to – to find out, whatever –" She looks down. "Whatever it takes. But they know I'm not like that. I'm not a – a *violent* person. So, if you won't tell me, then I think they're going to get other people to ask you soon. Other people who might – who might hurt you."

I take this in.

"Beat me?"

“Yes, or worse. I really don’t know, Clayer. I don’t think I actually know what *anyone* is capable of anymore.”

She rests her face in her hands for a long moment. Well, this is a development. How does prey behave when the threat level increases? Freeze then flight then fight – how does that look here, and now? Be useful, or be interesting.

Okay. I can be interesting.

“Smoke,” I say. Harriet raises her face and rubs her bleary eyes.

“Pardon?”

“I saw smoke. People fires.”

“Coming from the Mollusk, you mean?”

“No. I saw from the monster.”

Harriet sits up straighter. Her forehead does its thinking furrow.

“How far away from here? Maybe it was a forest fire.”

“No. I know forest fire. This was control.”

“How far?”

“Days? Days on the monster.”

“Frack, that really doesn’t help me, because we don’t know how fast your assemblage walked, or swam, so we can’t work the calculations backwards. *Frack!*” She stands up, and begins to pace. “But this is good, Clayer, this is good. This feels like the right kind of information to placate the Phyla and HERE for a while.”

“Placate?”

“Satisfy, soothe – it doesn’t matter. Look, I just want to be absolutely sure – you were alone in your forest, right?”

“No humans. Without Nan.”

“You’re totally positive of that?”

I stare at her, unblinking, until she nods.

“Okay, okay. So you saw evidence of controlled, possibly person-made fire somewhere between your forest – which we can’t identify given how little you can remember of your journey – and the Mollusk. That means – that means that there are other people out there. Maybe even other cities, other societies! How could you not mention this before?”

I shrug, a human gesture I’ve learned from Harriet herself. She does not need to know about my prey tactics.

“Right, fine, yeah – so what *do* we know? We know your assemblage came from the west. We know it swam across open ocean. And we know your forest had deciduous trees in it, based on your descriptions. So maybe you came from the mainland. Maybe not, but it’s not impossible. You’re *sure* you don’t remember any more?”

“A dream,” I say, and this is the truth. “It became a dream.”

“Yeah, you were barely alive when we found you, I get it, I get it.” Harriet is moving fast in every way now – fast pacing, fast speaking, fast thinking. It is almost as though she is shaking. I have not seen her like this before, and it is alarming.

“We might not be alone,” she mutters. “The Rock might not be all that’s left.”

I do not care about this. I have more pressing concerns.

“Will they let me go now?” I say. This stops Harriet’s movement. She turns.

“I – I really don’t know.”

“Will you ask?”



“Of course. Yes. And I already have been.”

“Will they hurt them?”

“Will who hurt who?”

“Will your people hurt the people who made the smoke? If they find them.”

This seems to trouble Harriet. I guess it had not occurred to her.

“I – I don’t know that either, Clayer. I hope not. This could be a really good thing.

A return to community, to trade, to sharing ideas and technologies.”

We look at each other, and it is clear we have very different definitions of a good thing.

“Look,” says Harriet, “I’ll report this right away, but I think we should also try to figure out the route your assemblage took, or as close as we can.”

“How?”

Harriet smiles for the first time since coming in.

“Have you ever heard of something called a library?” she says.

I have not, but the next day she brings me a map of the Rock. The map is on a substance Harriet calls ‘paper.’ She claims it is made of trees, but I can’t see how. And the Rock is this island, the one they all live on. Or the one *we* all live on, now, I suppose. Harriet says I need to start learning about how Molluskans survive, how people work here, so that eventually, I can show the Phyla how I might contribute.

When she first unrolls it, Harriet points to dots and shapes on the flat surface and lists the names of old-world places.

“Sin Jawn’s, Clarenville, Corner Brook, Bonny Vista,” she says, leaning over the map spread wide on the floor, a curl of her hair, clean and shiny again, hanging loose over it. “But really, for Molluskans, only one small section matters: the Isthmus.”

“Is-mus,” I try.

“Isthmus.”

I make the *th* sound between my teeth but it still isn’t right. Harriet actually laughs. I have not heard her laugh before – in fact, I cannot remember the last human laugh I heard at all.

“In the old-world,” Harriet explains, “The Isthmus was just a small strip of the island that connected the Avalon peninsula to the rest of the Rock. People probably travelled along it and hardly paused, but now, the narrowest segment of the Isthmus is where the Mollusk sits, crossing north to south, its own stone wall, cutting off the Avalon from the rest of the monster-held lands to the west.”

“Monster-held lands?”

“Yes. The Avalon is mostly cleared of assemblages. This was done by the same people who built the greenhouses and the harbour, back when lots of bad things were happening and people were trying to prepare for new ways of living. But west of the Mollusk? That land is wild. We don’t go west. The rest of the Rock belongs to monsters. Assemblages. The Myco Mutations.”

“Oh,” I say, but I am not sure I really understand. How could anyone ‘clear’ monsters from a place? How could any of this be built by people? Perhaps they had once had more machines, like the cuttlefish’s tank – machines that did many things, impossible things.

On this old-world map, Harriet has helpfully drawn in the Mollusk's long cone of a shell, along with the five Molluskans outpost camps that exist. She describes them each in turn, even though I think, maybe, she's not supposed to tell me these things.

First, there is Camp Port, the fishing hub, where the boats are made and stored and the incoming catch is processed and cleaned. Then east across the Bellevue Barrens is Camp Greenhouse, the biggest of the outposts, where several hundred people live full-time, growing almost all of the Mollusk's produce and grains. The greenhouses had been built long ago, likely shortly after the Mollusk itself came to its resting place. There are 12 of them, each three storeys tall and covering several acres, and maintaining these buildings is the most important task for all Molluskans. Without the greenhouse system, they would all starve, fast.

A full day's hike to the north from there is Camp the Pass, a waystation for those on their way up to the science stations. While Port and Greenhouse are mostly worked by tradesmen and skilled labourers, citizens knowledgeable about their particular areas, the northern science stations are run by scientists and their protectors, along with some hunters and lumber-cutters and tanners. Trips to and from the science stations are preoccupied with keeping the route clear, but if animals are caught and skinned or prime trees are felled on the way back, no one can complain. Have skilled people with you, that seems to be their motto here. They do everything in teams, and groups, and packs.

I do not like it, but have to admit it sounds effective.

The science stations are called Camp Carbonear and Camp Verde. Harriet loves studying the old-world, and she says that Camp Carbonear isn't actually located where the now-buried town of Carbonear once was. It's a little farther north. The camps are laid out

so that it's an eight- or nine-hour's walk from Greenhouse to the Pass, then from the Pass to Carbonear, and Carbonear to Verde, which is up at the very tip of this particular point, looking out at Back-Allow Island. No one bothers with that little offshore island, Harriet says, although she knows a group of geologists once tried to go and were capsized almost immediately.

Harriet knows a lot of things about a lot of things. But over the next few days, she asks so many questions it makes me dizzy, my head clogged up with all the things I do not know how to explain, do not have the words to describe. It has not taken long for me to realize that my English was never very good to begin with. Maybe Nan's wasn't either. But Harriet has words for everything and anything, and they are like keys. Keys that open doors to images and feelings and ideas I know, but did not know I knew until I learned the word for them.

*Mutation:* the way the monsters change into new monsters.

*Deception:* convincing someone of something that isn't true.

*Joking:* to say something to make another laugh.

Harriet tells me I can be funny. I do not know how to recognize this. Harriet tells me it is okay to smile. I do not know how. Harriet tells me that I am going to find a life here in the Mollusk, and that it is just a matter of time now before the Phyla accept that I am trustworthy.

I am almost starting to believe her when it all comes apart.

## CHAPTER 22

As with most things in her life, Harriet misses the clues for what is about to happen.

She's sitting on her bed, studying a map of old-world Canada, when *blushoftangerine* comes in, his skin a muted tan with stripes of brown.

"Hey," she says, unable to resist an opportunity to run through her latest theory. "Clayer and I have been making some progress on figuring out where they came from, I think. It's to the northwest—" She begins to rustle the map upwards so she can display it to him like a lecture-room slate-board, but he cuts her off.

"Harriet, tomorrow a new issue of *The Unquiet Wing* is going to be distributed."

She's still looking at the map, but her mood sours.

"Oh yeah? What, do you work for Klik-Hyuk now? You and all your Skin Sightist besties and your crab shack conspiracy?"

"Harriet, listen to me."

She looks up. Rarely is *blushoftangerine* so serious.

"Is something wrong?" she asks. Despite still being pissed, she cares about him more than anyone else.

*blush* seems to be carefully considering his next words.

"Something could be," he says. "Depending on the reception."

"Why? What's the headline?" Harriet asks, but her stomach is already sinking. She puts the map down, forgotten.

"Hyuk's breaking the story about Clayer. And more than that, it's going to claim that the Phyla and HERE are keeping secrets from the people, with calls for immediate transparency."

“So you’re all blowing the whistle anyway,” she says.

“What, did you think if you refused to speak out that everyone else would just go away quietly and stop being angry? Harriet, this is bigger than you and I. This is about cephalopod rights. This is about not repeating the mistakes of the old-world. This is about demanding what we were told was our due.”

Harriet stands up sharply. “Oh my god, *listen* to yourself, blush! What, do you think you’re a revolutionary now? Do you *know* what used to happen to revolutionaries?”

“Yes, Harriet, I do,” says *blushoftangerine* coolly. “Because I went to school, and learned to read English human history books, something *you* argued I should have the right to do.”

Harriet sighs. He’s got her there.

“This is just – just so reckless, is all,” she says, and crouches down in front of his quadrutank. “I don’t – I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“It’s true, your life would suck without me,” he says, and she chokes on a laugh.

“Well, okay, if it’s just another story in *The Unquiet Wing*, maybe nobody will care about it. I mean, it *is* considered a gossip paper, after all. No one bothered about that story on mutations.”

*blushoftangerine* looks away.

“It’s not just the paper.”

“Oh no, what else?”

“The Skin Sightists are holding a rally in the Siphuncle, up in the hat. Their goal is to cause enough to disruption of day-to-day life in the north end for HERE to notice.”

“Oh, blush, don’t go. Please. You can’t go.”

“Not all of us can look away from discrimination and corruption as easily as you, Harriet,” he snaps.

“What? I have dedicated my *life*—”

“To cephs? Yeah, sure. Typical human martyrdom. When have you ever organized real action? Taken part in something outside your thinking and writing?” His quadrutank begins to clomp in reverse out of their quarters. “I just wanted to warn you. Chances are this’ll come down on your head too, whether you stand with us or not.”

Harriet is flushed with fury and that hot nausea that comes with being accused.

“My work matters!” she shouts after him. “You and the Skin Sightists wouldn’t be able to organize at all if you couldn’t *speak to each other!*”

She hears the door close, and he is gone.

Harriet sits in silence for a minute, fighting off tears. She’s been spending so much time with Clayer that she’s ignored *blushoftangerine*, and she realizes now that she hadn’t taken the scene in the crab shack nearly seriously enough. This is partially her fault. As a big sister, a coworker, and a best friend, she has failed him in every respect.

She splashes her face, smooths her hair, and goes out into the hallways of H.E.R.E. It seems so different, though nothing has changed but her own life. The crisp whiteness of the walls, the abundance of electricity when the rest of the Mollusk has so little – whose best interest is it, really? Is H.E.R.E. still working for the greater good, as they claim has always been their goal?

She hears *yellowswirltosunrise*’s words in her head: *Another end is coming, for these long generations have been nothing but a stop-gap, nothing but a pause.*

What has she really been part of?

She starts walking.

When Marajory opens the door, she looks surprised to see Harriet again so soon. Her hair is tied up and she's wearing small glasses on the end of her nose, interrupted in the middle of work.

"I need your help," Harriet blurts out.

"Wow, okay, pushy much. Who are you and what have you done with quiet, meek little Harriet?"

"Are you going to let me in or not?"

Marajory sighs, as though Harriet is asking some tremendous sacrifice of her, and steps aside. As soon as she's in Marajory's room, she starts pacing.

"Jory, be honest with me – how much more clearance did you get when you got promoted?"

"I don't know, Harriet. Not that much."

"Do you know if there are mutations in the Mollusk?"

Marajory grabs her arms, and tries to pull her in closer, but Harriet jerks herself away.

"I'm serious! Do. You. Know?"

"No, Har, I have no idea what you're talking about. You're freaking me out."

"I don't believe you."

"What, that you're freaking me out? You are, here, feel my heartbeat." She takes Harriet's hand and places it on her chest, but Harriet yanks this away too.

"Stop touching me! No, I mean I don't believe you have no idea what I'm talking about. I think you know a lot more about the Phyla's intentions than you've told me."



“And? If that were true, wouldn’t I just be respecting the rules of my job?”

“Jory, I’m worried about blushoftangerine. I’m worried that he’s gotten involved in something the Phyla won’t like. And I’m worried about Clayer. Like, why won’t the Phyla or HERE just let them start living a normal life here? What more do they want? Everything just seems so – so – so much *shadier* than it used to be!”

Marajory laughs. The sound is so at odds with the rage and panic Harriet is feeling that it startles her into shutting up. Marajory cups her face with her hands.

“Darling, you’re overthinking this. Again, as usual. Clayer is going to be released soon, I promise. I can tell you’ve gotten a bit too... attached to them. It’s sweet, but don’t start thinking you know everything about them, or that they aren’t dangerous. As for blush, we know all about the Skin Sightists’ plans to hold a rally tomorrow. HERE and the Phyla know where and when it will be and they’ll disperse it peacefully. Just a few folks getting a bit too excited. I’ll make sure, if blush gets into any trouble at all, that he’s excused.”

“You can – you can do that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve become a bit more influential since this whole come-from-away thing and that personal meeting with the Phyla. I’ll keep him safe.”

“I just – I feel like I need to *do* something, Jory.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, there’s nothing you know that we don’t know already. You know you’re not always the best at keeping up with things. Come here, sit down and have some tea.”

Harriet doesn’t know what to do. Marajory is always so much surer than she is. She steers the boat, while Harriet is busy belowdecks with her papers and microscopes. Marajory is always so good at convincing her that she doesn’t know anything.

And maybe she doesn't. She's misread so many things before. She steps back into Marajory's arms.

"The individual is fallacy," she says into Harriet's hair.

"The Entanglement holds us all," Harriet whispers.

Later that night, Harriet wakes to a soft sound behind her. She does not move, just listens. Marajory is crying, barely audibly. Harriet feigns sleep. She could turn around, ask, confront, comfort, but she's afraid to. She already feels that whatever happens next, she will be on her own.

And it happens first thing.

"The Phyla want to see you this morning," Marajory says as she hands Harriet a cup of chaga brew, in a tone that even Harriet can tell is falsely casual.

"Well, that's not a coincidence."

Marajory stirs the brown liquid in her clay mug with a wooden spoon.

"Probably not, no," she says quietly.

"Have they asked you to come as well?"

"Yes. We can go together."

"This can't be about the Skin Sightists already, can it?"

"I don't know what it's about," says Marajory.

But by now Harriet is almost sure she's lying.

She did not think the Phyla met this early, and indeed, most of them lack the presentation of Harriet's last encounter with them, a few weeks ago. Whether that's because the meeting was called in a rush or because they no longer care what Harriet thinks of them, she cannot say. But the entire council is not there; in fact, looking around, Harriet realizes

that only the human Phyla are present, minus Echinodermata, the boy with the beaded necklace. That makes seven of them – still enough for a majority vote, if an unfair one. She sees *blushoftangerine*, *nighttime-teal-awashwithstars*, Hyuk, and Izik waiting somewhat sullenly against one of the walls of the chamber. And on the other side of the inset table, gagged and tied to a chair under a strange, hastily rigged panel light, is Clayer.

She makes to move towards them, but Marajory’s hand grips onto her wrist.

“Don’t,” she hisses under her breath.

“Ms. Willow, glad you could join us.” It’s Cnidaria. His face is unshaven this time, and it makes him look more menacing. “We’ve got quite a lot to discuss, if you would like to have a seat, make yourself more comfortable.”

She looks over at *blushoftangerine*, but he’s masking, projecting all-white. Then she looks at Marajory, who will not look back at her.

She goes and sits next to *blush*.

“So,” Cnidaria continues. “We have some truly exciting news to share with you. You have all been selected for a field mission.”

“Excuse me, a *what?*” caws Hyuk.

“You heard me, bird.”

We all stare. A speciesist tone like that was unacceptable even in the dregs of the mouthside markets, let alone in the seat of the Mollusk’s highest government.

“What did you just say?” Hyuk’s throaty voice has lost all trace of its usual jovial sarcasm.

“A field mission,” says Chordata, cutting the exchange off and stepping forward. “Imagine how delighted we all were to hear from our guest,” she gestures to Clayer, “that

there may be other settlements on the Rock, to the west! This is a possibility that absolutely must be investigated. However, as I'm sure you can appreciate, we would have a hard time justifying sparing a large number of trained fieldworkers, or assemblage-fighters."

There is a heightened pause.

"So we're sending all of you."

"Sending your troublemakers," snaps Izik, his voice cold. "Is that it? Get rid of us in a way that sounds legitimate?"

"Not at all," says Bryophyta. They look haggard. "If you find evidence of other people on the Rock and are able to return to the Mollusk with that information, you will be most welcome."

"Oh, sure. Right, okay," says *awashwithstars*. "So it's as good as a suicide mission." The Phyla ignore her.

"How did you know about the Skin Sightist rally planned for today?" Izik says, his voice rising. "How did you know to raid *The Unquiet Wing* in the night?"

"We keep a close eye on groups that seem like they might threaten the peaceful, egalitarian, multispecies society we've built here, young man," says Chordata.

Hyuk squawked a bitter laugh. Chordata shoots him a deadly glare and continues.

"What you were all planning would not have brought about the positive change you were hoping for. It would have created unrest, distrust, and a ripple effect of harm. What you are all too young to understand is that our existence remains precarious here, on this thin edge of the world. Resources are scarce, altruism is scarcer. We are all just trying to stay alive, and what may have felt like an alliance today could turn into anarchy and chaos tomorrow. We are not punishing you. We are *protecting* the Mollusk from your influence."

Then, to Harriet's great surprise, Marajory speaks up.

"Phylum Chordata, ma'am, if I may."

Chordata nods.

"Harriet was not involved in any of the plans the rest of this group made. Perhaps she should be permitted to stay and continue her valuable work for HERE?"

Cnidaria steps forward again, and puts a hand on Marajory's shoulder. She looks like she wants to punch him, but restrains herself.

"Harriet Willow is perhaps the biggest threat of all to the delicate balance we cultivate here in the Mollusk, Dr. Heal. When we initially signed off on her cephalopod skin graft surgery, we thought it might be a bit of freak science, limited to one lab in an already niche department. But Ms. Willow's become a bit of a figurehead, haven't you, Harriet? Even without your intentional involvement, these Skin Sightists and Blue Iron Ring Union members and other cephalopod advocates know who you are, see you as a symbol of symbiosis. And, more than that, your discovery of the come-from-away seems like a nearly impossible coincidence. Especially considering that *they are responsible for the mutations that have breached the Sentient Species Barrier and are now spreading rampant throughout our city!*" Cnidaria is yelling now, his face red.

"That can't be true!" Harriet blurts, then instantly regrets speaking, when all the Phyla's faces turn to her.

"And why not?" says Basidiomycota calmly, from the back.

"Because – because – I saw two people with mutations before Clayer even arrived on the Rock!"

The Phyla glance at each other, exchanging looks that Harriet can't read.

“Perhaps Clayer was in control of that assemblage,” says Chordata. “Perhaps they had been on the Rock for some time, and chose to reveal themselves to you, specifically, in that moment.”

“That seems like a stretch,” says Hyuk. No one acknowledges him.

“We have strong evidence that Clayer is responsible for the new mutations.”

“What?” says Harriet, glancing over at Clayer, who looks ready to tear out someone’s throat. “What could you possibly have? How can you be sure?”

“Because they *are* a new mutation,” says Basidiomycota, and she flicks a switch.

The rickety old-world panel light propped up above Clayer’s chair turns a radiant purple. It’s an ultraviolet light. And the moment the UV light comes on, Harriet knows what Clayer really is.

Myco.

Their skin glows slightly under the light, and it’s just not because of how pale they are. It’s because, on every inch of them where the skin is bare, there are fluorescing criss-crossed veins. Well, not veins, but vein-like. A network under Clayer’s skin, creeping and fibrous, glowing a brilliant yellow-green in the UV light. Harriet knows that it’s fungus. She knows how the Myco Mutations work, in theory. The interlacing veiny lines under Clayer’s skin are fungal hyphae and mycelia, threaded through every muscle and organ, an integral part of their body’s functioning. And therefore, Clayer is not human. Not really, not completely. They’re an assemblage. Or part-assemblage. A type of assemblage never encountered before, because Harriet has never seen one based on the human form.

Clayer is looking at her, and only her. Their eyes are yellow. Harriet had thought that the hazel of their irises was unusually golden-tinted, but this is something else,

something elevated. Clayer's eyes glow the same way their internal fungal network does, and their paleness makes so much sense now, the lack of pink in their skin, the ashen tinge to their fingertips and cheeks.

"Holy frack," says *blushoftangerine* next to her, and she holds out her hand without thinking, so he can reach up and loop the end of one tentacle around her fingers.

"No way," says Hyuk.

"May the Mollusk protect us," whispers Izik.

Cnidaria, Chordata, and Basidiomycota look smugly pleased with themselves, watching the little group's reaction to their big reveal. The other Phyla keep their eyes downcast.

"We discovered this when we did our initial full medical tests on them," says Basidiomycota. "When they came in unconscious. We had to be sure they weren't dangerous, you see. And good thing we checked! This is why they could not leave their room, I'm sure you understand. And why we didn't want anyone too... valuable interacting with them."

"So you sent in Harriet? Harriet is valuable! What if she's infected now?" *blush* exclaims, and she squeezes his tentacle gently.

"It's okay, blush," she says quietly. "I was the perfect combination of knowledgeable, naïve, and 'already knows too much.'"

"Now please, we implore you," Chordata says, "do not think of this as a punishment, or as a doomed endeavour. This is a great honour! Just think, you could be the first Molluskans to make contact with other people in 180 years. We *want* you to return to us with such news! We do."

“Sure,” snorts Izik.

“Think of yourselves as a gamble we prefer to take on the distant future, rather than the immediate one,” says Bryophyta, apologetic.

“You know we won’t live that long,” says *awashwithstars*.

Chordata ignores her.

“You will have the rest of the morning to pack up your things, under guard, of course. And I hope you understand that there is to be no public fanfare to celebrate your departure on this momentous journey. We wouldn’t want the populous getting too... excited.”

She smiles, and for the first time in her life, Harriet feels enough dislike for someone to maybe call it hatred.



**//IN THE PAST//**

Spencer Choi was partway through a Saturday shift at Living Seas Whalewatching & Extinction Museum when the first emergency alert went off on her phone.

It had been a slow day; the whales didn't arrive around the Avalon in full force for another week or two, depending on the movement of the schools of capelin. She was sitting at the front desk of the harbourside kiosk, on a stool that had once had an upholstered seat but now just felt like a slab of metal, doodling dolphins on the back of a brochure for Penny's Eco-VR Café. She was trying *not* to look at her phone, because she didn't want to admit that she was hoping Taylor would text her back. It had just been one date, so being ghosted was a perfectly reasonable outcome, but she had sent 'Hey, I had a great time last night :)' three hours ago, and she wanted a response so badly it was making her anxious.

Living Seas was a typical Newfoundland summer business, leaning into the lucrative field of extinction tourism, which was basically all the Rock was good for these days, now that the north Atlantic oil had run out and the fishery was completely dead. People came from all over the world for the chance to see a whale, or moose, or caribou, still in a 'natural setting.' Birds were a big draw too; Spencer had recited the facts of critically-endangered gannet and puffin populations to enough eager tourists with massive telephoto lenses to know that. Even the boreal forest was a rarity, what with Russia having decimated their belt of it for industry, and most of northern Ontario and Quebec being logged half to shit. The Canadian Territories still had some, but melting permafrost had well and truly fucked them over up there. In conclusion, she'd met people who had flown in from Europe just to pick unpolluted wild berries, or search for rare black-backed woodpeckers, and that was what extinction tourism was, at its heart.

Living Seas loved to emphasize this partially fictitious vision of the island as unspoiled. The banner on their website was a photo of a humpback's tail and the slogan *Newfoundland: one of the world's last natural wildernesses!* The people she took phone calls from and scanned tickets for generally came in one of two forms. Either they were, in her opinion, far too hopeful, or they were entitled bigots from big cities who saw the whales as just another Instagram post.

In truth, Spencer spent all day, all summer long, steeped in loss. The tourists she dealt with were not here to protect Newfoundland; they were here to see the last dregs of an ecosystem before it was gone. She talked and talked about the beauty of her home, but she had realized recently that she always did so in the past tense. She was 23, and she believed, deep down, that she would see the last of the whales in her lifetime. It was enough to drive anyone to nihilism, but she still liked her job. She liked that she was part of giving people this experience, and she hoped they were changed by it, even if she knew that was unlikely.

When the emergency alert went off, it startled her so badly she almost toppled the stool. Canada's emergency alert system sent a simultaneous blaring klaxon to every cellphone in a selected area of the country. Usually, they had to do with child abductions, or severe weather warnings. She reached over and looked at the pop-up text dominating her screen.

**EMERGENCY ALERT/ ALERTE D'URGENCE**

This is a Province of Newfoundland and Labrador emergency bulletin that applies to people within fifteen (15) kilometres of the eastern and northeastern coast of the

Avalon peninsula. Extreme rockslide and earthquake activity has been reported.  
Tsunami warning in effect in the Greater St. John's Area. Move to higher ground.  
Take shelter immediately.

Spencer was stunned. Newfoundland had, to the best of her knowledge, never once had an earthquake, let alone a tsunami. Except that once in 1929. And yeah, maybe over in British Columbia they had that problem sometimes, but Canada and tsunamis just didn't seem like related ideas.

But the emergency alert system didn't mess around.

She stood up, already dialing her mom's number. The phone was ringing in her ear when she looked out the back door of the kiosk, facing the Narrows that led into St. John's Harbour, and stopped breathing.

It was a wall of water. It came through the bottleneck of the Narrows like two great arms reaching frothily around the edges of a doorframe, bursting and blasting their way in. Its great mass was spotted with boats and houses torn from the seaside cliffs of the Battery, even the orange-red hulls of the massive retired oil boats. And above it, to the left and barely visible, was Signal Hill. The city's most famous landmark was swaying side to side, rising higher and higher, as though the hill itself were somehow standing up, pushing away from the ocean floor.

Spencer Choi saw all this in the span of one heartbeat, and she realized that she would not see the last of the whales after all. She'd be gone first.

Strangely, in this long, suspended moment, she felt relief.

“Hello?” her mother said, on the phone. “Spencer? Did you get the alert? Are you okay?”

“I love you, Mom,” she said, and then the wave hit the harbourfront, and she disappeared.

## CHAPTER 23

When they finally release me from the Mollusk, they toss Harriet out too.

There is a group of us: me, Harriet, her cuttlefish friend *blush*, another cuttlefish, a bird that talks out loud, and a human with strange black eyes on their cheeks.

The guards deliver me last, when everyone else is already standing on a scrubby expanse of rock. They untie my hands and give me a light push so that I stumble-step out into the light. I squint my eyes. I have been in dimness for too long.

“And take this freak too,” says one of the guards, and the other one laughs. I try to look at Harriet through my narrowed, burning eyes. She is crying, and so is the other human. I do not know if cuttlefish or birds can cry, but they are definitely upset.

“Please!” Harriet shouts at the guards, her voice snapping like a twig coated in ice. “Please, you have to know we’re not going willingly! Don’t send us to our deaths!”

The guards are both human, both gruffly male.

“Do you know how many people we’ve left outside this door?” one of them says. He does not seem sad about it, though he does not seem happy either. It is as though he has removed his mind from his actions. “You’re not the first to be expelled, and you won’t be the last. And if you hike around back mouthside, the guards there will have been told you’re wanted criminals. I’m sorry.”

And then the two of them drag the heavy stone door back into place, and it sinks into its bracket with a heavy grating thud.

“How is there even a door up here?” Harriet shouts at the now-inert wall. “Why does HERE have a *secret fracking door*?”

And she collapses into the low-crawling brambles.

I take a step towards her, but one of the cuttlefish, in its walking machine, steps in my way.

“Hey, keep back,” it says.

I say nothing, but I don’t step back either. Turns out Harriet has been my friend all along, and now she’s in some kind of trouble for it. Friends protect each other.

“Seriously, keep your distance,” says the human with the eyes on his cheeks. “You could put us all in danger, if you haven’t already infected us.”

“Clayer is not dangerous!” Harriet shouts, from her knees. Everyone stops and looks at her in surprise. “The Myco Mutations in their body aren’t contagious,” she continues, quieter now that she had everyone’s attention, wiping her face sharply, as though her tears offend her. “If they were, or if the Phyla actually thought they were, then they would have quarantined them. They would have quarantined me, and blush, and anyone who’d come into contact with them, not letting us come and go as we pleased. Think about it, think *logically!* If Clayer were really a contagious threat to everyone in the Mollusk, then the Phyla’s casual, almost bored response to them – and to your organizing and publishing, too, actually – makes no sense at all. No, it’s a lie. A well-crafted, convenient lie, but a lie. The Phyla, and H.E.R.E. too, I suspect now, know everything that’s going on in there, even the real reason for the new mutations. Maybe they even know where the Myco Mutations came from, in the old-world. Maybe they know the entire story of the past. But why would they tell *us* anything? We don’t matter to them. Maybe we never have.” She spits out the last part like the words themselves are venom she is sucking from a wound.

There is a long silence. I look from face to face, and see them all changing their minds in live time. I am still not quite sure why they are more afraid of me now, but it is good to hear that they are wrong about whatever it is.

“You’re totally right,” says the black bird eventually. “Holy gods.”

“But they’re still an assemblage,” says one of the cuttlefish, the one with the female-sounding voice. I do not know how to tell those two apart until they speak. “A human assemblage. Which is unprecedented, right?”

Harriet nods slowly, and looks over at me.

“Yeah, it is. You’re really special, Clayer.”

“I’m sorry, I just still don’t trust them,” says the female cuttlefish. I bare my teeth at her, and she turns a mottled red. *Keep away from me, filthy thing*, her skin thinks. For added effect, I growl.

“Hey now, we all need to stay calm,” says the bird. “I know they said not to head mouthside, but I vote we wait up here for a bit, just in case someone comes back, and then hug the Mollusk’s edge all the way back down and try to sneak into one of the camps. Any other ideas?”

I study him for a moment. I have never seen a bird wear clothing before, but he has a little vest on, with holes for his wings, and lots of pockets. A bunch of tiny metal tools are fastened to it.

“Why not fly away?” I say. Everyone looks at me.

“Holy frack, it talks,” says the female cuttlefish.

“I told you” says the other one. They are also saying the same thing to each other with their skin, I notice. I wonder why they bother to speak aloud at all, with their machines. They do not have to humour these humans.

The bird cocks its smooth black head at me, and though I cannot read his face, from his framework I get the sense that he is giving me his most withering look.

“I’m not going to just fly away and leave my friends here. What kind of person do you think I am? Or is that the kind of person *you* would be, if you had wings?”

For a moment, I’m distracted, thinking about the myco back in Forest and their wings of leathery leaf. Then I process his question and shake my head, hard.

“No.”

“Okay, well, me neither.”

“I agree with Hyuk’s plan,” says Harriet, standing up. The human with the face-eyes helps her. “Let’s find some shelter for the rest of the afternoon and find some wood to make a fire with tonight. Assemblages fear fire. It’s good to have it, for warmth and for protection.”

“Do you think there are any assemblages up here at the hat?” says the male cuttlefish – *blushoftangerine*, his name is *blush* – “Other than our resident one, I mean.” He looks at me. Or at least, I think he looks at me. His eyes are positioned differently than mammals’.

“I don’t know,” says Harriet. “But obviously we need to be prepared.”

“As if we would survive an encounter with a single assemblage,” says the female cuttlefish, and *blushoftangerine* says to her with his skin,

*awashwithstars, come on, enough pessimism, for Entanglement’s sake.*

She think-says back, *don’t tell me how to feel right now.*



*Ah*, I think. So they do have conversations that don't include the others. I resolve to watch them closely for these exchanges.

I follow the group to a small curved beach underneath the long stone point of this giant round mountain, which the city is inside of, I have gathered, not underground after all. I keep a distance between us, wary of everyone but Harriet, wary of their fear of me and what that might make them capable of.

The land here is nothing like Forest. I am more fascinated by the bare rocks and ankle-height plant growth than by the stone city. Several times I stop to pluck a sprig or leaf, studying its framework in my cupped palms as I walk. Many are edible. If I could pray to the Whisper Web, I would know even more.

Then I have a disturbing thought. What if the Whisper Web doesn't exist here? What if it was only in Forest? What if the giant carried me so far that I have lost my mental map, my connection?

This is almost enough for me to drop to all fours and try right away, but I do not know how to explain this to the others and I do not want to give them further cause to find me strange, or dangerous. I will have to wait for darkness.

They keep calling me an 'assemblage,' which Harriet has explained is the Mollusk word for monster. These people think I am a monster. And yes, I have thought this about myself before, but it is not the same. I have been proud to be a monster, in Forest. I have been proud to be alive, and fast, and strong. But when these people call me an assemblage – or even call me special, as Harriet had – I can tell there is something else beneath it. Something that has to do with the purple light they had shone on me, the strange lines that had appeared on my skin. When these people call me an assemblage, they are terrified.

There is little wood to be found in such a landscape, but I search along with the others. Humans like to do things in teams, I remind myself. Make yourself a part of this team. Be useful.

As night falls, we huddle around a small fire, tucked under the overhang of the Mollusk's point. The others have brought food with them, and Harriet offers me some of hers. I say no; I am not hungry after eating more than enough in my prison room.

"Of course. Myco-slowed metabolism," says Harriet quietly. I do not know what she means, but I do not ask.

When everyone but *blushoftangerine*, who is on watch, has fallen asleep on the rocks, I stand and start to walk away into the more open land. *blush*, of course, says, "Where are you going?"

"Relieve myself," I say, because I have already figured out that this is something Molluskan people are private about.

*Don't go far*, says *blushoftangerine* with only his framework – his 'Colour.' It feels like he is testing me, to see if I really can read it, every time.

"I won't," I say back, out loud, and his Colour goes white.

I walk until the small light of the fire is hidden around the side of the Mollusk. Then I bend at the base of one of the sloping hills coming down from its mountain-like side and dig my fingers and toes into the shallow, rocky soil. I close my eyes, and breathe out into the world.

And I feel the familiar tether of energy being drawn up through my limbs. Relief floods me. The Whisper Web is still here; it is everywhere, and always. Now I can sense the life all around us on this rock in the ocean. The Mollusk utterly buzzes with it, so

crammed full of life that its colours and sounds are distracting above me and to either side. But the farther I send my mind out along the threads of the Web, under the ground and slithering up the roots of plants, the more warm beads of life I start to sense.

I see both monsters and un-monsters, large and small, moving across this thin strip of the island that Harriet calls the Isthmus. Some are standing still, maybe sleeping, and none of them are near enough to worry me. For a while, I rove across the Whisper Web, my fingers reaching into the earth, each breath knitting us closer together, pulling its thoughts into me and my thoughts into the ground. I see that the bright, vibrating Mollusk is like a wall, dividing this place like a glowing line through darkness. I see that on the opposite side from me, there is very little, save bright splotches I assume are the camps from Harriet's map. But then, on this side of the Mollusk, these 'monster-held lands,' as Harriet calls them, I encounter something new. It is several days of walking away, so far away that watching it in the Whisper Web feels the same way it does to strain and squint with my eyes at something on the horizon. This newness looks like a thicket of vines, but it shimmers in the Whisper Web's darkness, its tangled dark web of mind-space. The thicket is almost reflective with iridescence, like the inside of a shell, in a way that other living things are not. It has more colours than anything I have seen before, and it covers the rest of the island beyond this Isthmus place. It writhes, like a ball of snakes waking from winter's sleep, every movement creating new shimmers of colour on the edges of otherwise black vines. I cannot see anything inside or under it. It is beautiful, but strange.

Then, it sees me. I do not know how I know this, but it overcomes my senses all at once. The carpet of tangles has noticed me, and it wants me to stay. It wants to know me. It is not a menacing feeling, but a welcoming one. Still, I draw away, flashing my way back

across a distance of many days' walking. I pull my mind back up out of the soil and in through my arms the way you pull a fish on a string up through a hole in the ice.

I open my eyes. I feel alive in a way I haven't since the monster uprooted me from Forest. It feels like I have just eaten a deeply satisfying meal. I stand and stretch and walk back to the fire, much less cautious about nearby monsters than before, and awakened by new curiosity.

*That was a long time,* says *blushoftangerine* when I return. I crouch, the low fire between us. The waves behind me sound like voices, hissing and humming.

"I was checking for monsters," I say, keeping my voice low. "We are safe for now."

*I'm not even gonna ask,* he says.

For a while, we sit in silence. He keeps his Colour neutral.

"Do you think I should leave?" I say eventually. His framework Colour becomes surprised.

*What? Why?*

"You all fear me. Fearing me will make it harder to notice other dangers."

*No, I don't think you should leave.* At the end of this thought, his body turns a new combination that does not read as a word the way the others do. His back is pale grey with darker grey veins pulsing on the edges, and a pale-yellow flush in the middle. Intuitively, I understand that this is my Colour. This is *blushoftangerine* saying my name: *No, I don't think you should leave, Clayer.*

"Okay," I say. I stare back at the fire. "That is good. I am strong. I can protect."

*blushoftangerine* says the next part out loud, since I've stopped looking at him.

"But if you hurt them, Clayer, I will end you."

I should find this threat laughable. I have fought monsters singlehandedly and brought them to the ground. I have ridden giants and survived alone in wild lands and this person is a wriggly cone of slime in a box.

But I believe him.

“Come on, let’s wake up the others and get some rest,” he says, and I nod, nothing further to say.

## CHAPTER 24

Harriet and Izik are on the second watch, and she is staring upwards.

She has never seen the underside of the Mollusk, and she can’t quite get her mind around it. They’re camped on the rough, dark rocks of the shore underneath the pointed tip of the city’s great shell – a portion of which, Harriet knows, comprises H.E.R.E.’s archives. But the tip, the very end, is just dense calcifying shell, being worn by the wind, nothing inside. It juts maybe 100m out over the ocean, a conical overhang, with a few small chips broken off and lying here on this hidden beach, like fingernail cuttings, or rib bones.

The little beach they are on is cold, with a sharp easterly wind. Harriet has never seen the North Bay; few Molluskans have, since Camp Port and all the food production is to the south, and everyone exits mouthside. Or at least, she had thought everyone exited mouthside, until today when she discovered that H.E.R.E. had an adapertural door.

Harriet wonders how many others have waited here, under this impossible, alien overhang of the Mollusk, knowing that whatever they decided to do in the morning, they weren’t really expected to come back. She wonders if those other people knew what they’d

done. Had they been proud of it, or, like her, had they felt they'd fallen out of favour by accident, by some indecipherable landslide of events?

She keeps her eyes trained on the ground, while Izik sharpens his knife on a rock. She has a bow and a quiver of arrows with her, and she's practiced, on her field work excursions. But even between the two of them she doesn't want to imagine their chances.

Waves crash in and thunder up the jagged rock on either side of the narrow cove, covering up any sounds they could have made, any cries for unlikely help. She stares down at the rounded, grey, fist-sized pebbles under her boots, interspersed with the brownish yellow pustules of bladderwrack and the leathery olive-brown of horsetail and sugar kelp washed up at high tide. She starts mentally reciting the Latin names of north Atlantic seaweeds to keep herself focussed. *Fucus vesiculosus*, *Fucus spiralis*, *Laminaria digitata*, *Saccharina latissimi*, *Fucus* – until Izik says quietly,

“Listen, Harriet, while we have a moment to ourselves –”

“Yes?”

“Well, I, uh,” Izik rubs the back of his neck and looks out at the stars over the ocean for a second, “I just wanted to say how much I admire you. You know, before we probably get eaten. I admire you for more than just your research and how you care about cephalopod rights. I think – I think you're really brave, for doing what you do. And for your surgery, I mean, that was *groundbreaking*, and now for being out here, so calm, considering –”

“Ha, I am not calm.”

“– well, keeping a brave face, then, even though I can tell you're anxious out here.”

“Thank you, Izik,” Harriet relaxes a little. This conversation is now less stressful; she knows the appropriate response for compliments.

“I just – the way you put your life on the line for those who have been made voiceless, for the disciples of our eight-armed god, it’s really beautiful. And um, *you’re* really beautiful.”

“Oh my threads, you and Hyuk both, talking about me like I’m some kind of guru. I don’t want to be involved in your – your mythos. I’m afraid I’m a bit disappointing in person. I don’t even have control over my cephalopod skin, you know. It just says whatever I’m thinking, like a paralarvae – a child’s – skin would.”

Izik has been leaning weirdly close to her, but now he straightens. “You’re *not* disappointing,” he says, and the strength of his response startles her. She looks at him, meeting his tattooed cephalopod eyes instead of his real, human ones.

“Well, regardless, I didn’t want any of this.”

“Still,” he says, sadly now. “You’re involved in our ‘*mythos*’ anyway. The decision to get that graft on your arm was a much... bigger choice than maybe you realized.”

She sighs. “Well, obviously, I know that *now*.” The tears threaten again, but she holds them back. *Alaria esculenta*, *Palmaria palmata*, *Chondrus crispus*...

For a moment, they sit in silence. Izik puts his arm around her shoulders in a brotherly way and she leans into him uncharacteristically, feeling a night chill.

“Harriet?”

“Mm.”

“That wasn’t really what I wanted to say, though.”

She frowns.

“Oh? What was, then?”

“Before we die, I was trying to...” Izik touches her chin to turn her head and force her into direct eye contact, which she dislikes, and then, a second later, he kisses her on the mouth.

She jerks backwards so fast she almost falls off the rock she’s perched on.

“*What* are you doing?”

Izik puts a hand over his mouth.

“Oh, frack, I’m sorry, I thought – I thought I was being really obvious!” he mumbles.

“You were *not!*”

“I thought we had a connection, you know? I – I misread it.”

Harriet feels guilty. She’s done it again, somehow. *She’s* the one who has misread things, no doubt, missed something that would have been obvious to another person. Here she was thinking of Izik like a brother and he was ramping up to kiss her. It’s always her fault.

“No, no. I – we do. Just... as friends.”

“Is it something I –?”

“No! No, don’t feel bad.” She puts an awkward hand on his shoulder. “It’s that I, um, I don’t really think about masculine people like... like that.”

His face widens, then settles, as he takes that in.

“Ohhhhh,” he says. Now, at last, a cheeky smile returns to his face. “So, is there a girl –?”

“No. Or at least, not anymore. If I ever mattered to her more than her career.”



Izik looks lost, his smile fading again. He is trying to be nice; he is a nice person. But this is not the time to waste energy on people's feelings, so she stops trying to talk past this awkwardness. When Hyuk wakes up and hops over to make conversation with them, she's never been more grateful.

The morning does not make them feel any better. Rain arrives with the sunrise and the Atlantic looks grey and ghostly under the clouds. Harriet eats a piece of dried salt fish with numb hands, trying not to mentally calculate how long the food they were able to bring would last.

"So, today we head for the mouth?" says *blushoftangerine*, clomping over next to her. She absently polishes the solar panel fitted to the top of his tank.

"Guess so," she says. "The Mollusk is 22 kilometres long. We can do it in a day if we don't break much."

"What's the assemblage up to?" says *awashwithstars*, coming over to stand by them.

"Don't call them that," Harriet says. "They have a name."

"Yeah, but what *are* they doing?" says *blush*. Harriet has no answer. Clayer is standing ankle-deep in the ocean, staring down at their feet, unmoving. This early in the warm season, Harriet knows that the water is hypothermia-cold. But Clayer seems unbothered. She walks over to them, keeping her balance with one hand on the algae-covered sides of the cove.

"Hey," she says. Clayer looks up, those hazel-gold eyes extra sharp in the flat light.

"Hey," they say, in a tone that mimics hers exactly. It's uncanny. They're still learning; Clayer is always learning.

“Are you... okay?” she says.

“Yes.”

“What are you, uh, what are you looking at?”

Clayer crouches and swirls their bone-white fingertips in the shallow waves above their toes.

“I have never felt...” they cock their head to the side, “salt before.”

Choosing to ignore the odd phrasing of this, Harriet says, “Right. Um, okay. So, we’re going to start walking south, towards —”

Just then, a low buzzing sound hits all of them like a wall. It isn’t loud so much as it’s deep, somehow; Harriet can literally feel the vibrations in her body. Clayer immediately claps their hands over their ears, but Harriet can’t imagine it makes much difference. The sound is all around them, inescapable, and as Harriet looks back up the small beach where they had stayed the night, she sees something she hadn’t been able to see from under the Mollusk’s point.

Speakers.

She’s never seen speakers bigger than the ones they install in ceph tanks, but they all project sound, she knows. And these ones are projecting this very powerful sound from the top of the tip of the Mollusk.

Projecting it out to sea.

“Harriet!” someone cries.

She rushes back up the slippery slope of water-smoothed rocks and finds Izik and Hyuk kneeling by *blushoftangerine* and *awashwithstars*. The two cuttlefish seem to be in some kind of seizure. Their Colour is flickering, moving far faster than is natural, and the

speakers on their quadrutanks are making a high-pitched, stuttering, squealing noise unlike anything Harriet has ever heard. It sounds like, inside this frozen state, the two cephalopods are screaming.

“What the frack is happening?” Izik shouts.

“How would I know?” she screams back, her teeth being jolted together by the depth of the big sound coming from the Mollusk. Her brain is going to explode if this keeps up. She’s barely able to keep from shutting down. “Izik, we have to get them out of here!”

Hyuk flaps his wings from *awashwithstars*’ tank, to get their attention. He’s just about to say something when a massive pink shape rockets out of the water and yanks the quadrutank away.

There is a second, as Hyuk’s scream hangs in the air, where time seems to freeze for Harriet. In the space between one breath and another, she sees Izik’s eyes widen in terror, sees *blushoftangerine* flickering and seizing, sees Clayer leaping up the rocks in slow motion. She looks toward the water, and sees it has changed, become darker, and that the darkness is the shadow of a vast body lurking underneath.

The body of a giant squid. Which, now that she sees it for what it is, she can see fills the cove below the Mollusk – easily 500 metres long.

She takes a second breath.

And time begins again.

Another tentacle whips out of the water and lunges for Clayer, but they dive out of the way, rolling, tucked in a tight ball, behind a boulder. The tentacle holding *awashwithstars* pulls back and then brings her tank down on the kelp-coated rocks. Harriet hears a shattering crunch. The tentacle’s tip feels around for a moment, fishes out the limp

body of the cuttlefish, and drags her underwater, presumably being deposited into the feeding suckers that serve as a double-sided squishy conveyor belt towards all ceph's beaks.

Never has Harriet regretted her vividly imagistic biology knowledge as much as in that moment.

She sees a dark speck speeding past overhead – Hyuk. Then she feels Izik's hands on her shoulder. He is shouting something, shouting, "Get down!"

As another tentacle lashes forward onto land, he throws his knife, and a burst of blue blood erupts from it. The cove thrashes as the squid recoils, startled, maybe, and it sucks its injured arm back into the water.

"blush!" Harriet screams. "blush, come on!"

And then the buzzing sound stops. She sees her friend's Colour return to normal, and in the lightspeed of time there is a brief pause.

Harriet takes one breath.

"Run!" Izik is shouting, and they do. She does not know where her bow is, and even if she did, she's shaking too hard to take a shot. They start running away from the water, and Izik is right behind her. Everything is too fast. She can't see *blush* anymore. Where –?

"Run, Harriet!" Izik is screaming. "*RUN!*"

Her lungs are going to explode. They're both running full tilt now, about to crest the hill and round the edge of the Mollusk, where Clayer went, and he reaches out his hand to her, and then suddenly he's gone, as though he was never there to begin with.

"No!" she hears herself scream, as Izik's body whips backwards in the tip of a tentacle. More of the squid is visible above water now; it's had to come out a bit to reach for them. She can see its eye, its terrible, pearly eye with its round pupil, so unlike the

sideways 'w' shape of the cuttlefish and octopus. Suddenly, all the times she has looked into cephalopod eyes and felt kinship seem so far away, impossibly distant, and there is nothing but brutal animality here, hunger and coldness.

The squid brings Izik down on a rock, shatteringly hard, like it had with *awashwithstars*, but unlike before, it drops him, and then begins feeling around, trying to find him again.

Harriet rushes back down to him, common sense be damned, dodging the tentacle tip that's scenting and tapping around. His back is surely broken, along with his ribs and shoulder. He is practically in pieces, shattered inside his skin. Harriet knows immediately that even if they both survive this moment, there is no way he will make it, and she starts to cry, nearly hysterical.

"Izik," she whispers, touching his cheek and his chest. Her hands come away bloody. "Izik! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

His eyes flutter open, mirroring the tattoos beneath. She takes a breath. He touches her fingers, just a whisper of pressure before his hand falls.

"The changes," he whispers, his voice grating over a burble of blood, "that transform us... allow us ascension..." He coughed. "All is under the... the Great Foot now."

"Izik, it's gonna be okay. You're gonna be okay."

"All is in... in their eight arms, Harriet. Even..." he looks right into her eyes, "even you."

The tentacle is joined by another, this second tentacle wounded by his knife somewhere and leaking blue blood, and this second one finds them, even though they are lying prone. It wraps around Izik's leg and begins to pull.

"No," Harriet moans, an animal sound, ripped from the bottom of her stomach. "*No.*" She scrabbles weakly after him atop the now-slick stone, coated in blood both human and ceph, grabbing uselessly onto his hand. Then the tentacle is lifting him up, and lifts her up too, but her grip slips, and she falls, and the first tentacle is there still, feeling around, and it tastes her, tastes her tears and her sweat and chemical adrenaline, and it swings towards her. Harriet closes her eyes. She has no religion but she thinks at any god listening, *please.*

The tentacle coils around her leg.

She screams, flails, tries to kick it off, but even as she does so, she knows that each sucker on a ceph tentacle is its own powerful muscle, capable of gripping her in a hundred different ways, and it is hopeless to struggle.

The giant squid lifts her up, so that she hangs upside down in the air. For a moment, she sees the Mollusk from on high, stretching out across the land like a dark rope, and then she is swinging sideways and down past the edges of the cove's cliffs, towards the water. She closes her eyes, almost a little relieved that the end has come so quickly, so effortlessly.

And then she hears an animal shriek, and feels the tentacle holding her dip with an unexpected weight. She looks back up at her trapped leg, and sees Clayer gripping the tentacle, tearing into it with their bare teeth. Harriet's vision loses focus as the tentacle begins to whip back and forth, trying to dislodge its new attacker, but Clayer must have

dug their fingers through the squid's protective slime layer and into the flesh, because they hold on, and more blue blood begins to drip onto Harriet's face.

She kicks at the tentacle again, as hard as she can, and just when she's about to pass out from all the blood rushing to her head, it drops her, and Clayer jumps, into the frigid ocean.

No one in the Mollusk is a terribly good swimmer. Where would they have learned that wasn't more dangerous just to visit? But Clayer grabs her under her arms and pulls her to shore. The two of them come to rest, lying on the rocks, next to the tip of a tentacle messily severed, the length of Harriet's whole body.

Clayer had chewed and torn it right off. To save her.

She takes one breath, then two, then three. Cautiously, looks.

The wreck of *awashwithstars*' quadrutank is gone, washed out. Izik's body is gone. The squid is slowly pulling away, and submerging. As she watches, it sinks down into the mouth of the harbour, and jets off into the deeper sea.

An eerie silence descends over the cove. The water laps at the pebbled beach; the wind whistles over the headland. Harriet is covered in that mixed up mess of blood. She feels it on her face, where it spurted from a tentacle. There is definitely blood in her mouth.

She vomits, then straightens to find Clayer staring at her, blueish purple blood dripping off their face and hands.

"Thank you," she says.

"I can protect," says Clayer, as though this was a point up for debate.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll say you can," Harriet says, and spits into the water.

Back up the beach, she sees a familiar glass-and-metal shape behind a grass-tufted boulder, and starts to cry again with pure relief. “blush,” she whispers, crawling faster over to his tank. He has folded all the legs underneath so that he’s as low to the ground as possible. “blush, are you okay?”

He looks at her through the glass and turns the Colour of cephalopod calm, as if to signal, “Yes, unhurt,” before turning brown and striped again, trying to panic-camouflage. He keeps flashing *awashwithstars*’ Colour, and then it breaks across his skin, dissolves, shatters, over and over. He seems to have lost concrete words, for the moment. Harriet can’t say she blames him. The shock is turning everything into one long, blank scream.

With a flutter of wings, Hyuk lands on the boulder, and Clayer comes up behind him. The four of them sit there in stunned silence, trying to process what had just happened. Barely a minute has passed, but two people are dead, and Harriet’s mind is racing.

“That sound,” she says, her teeth starting to chatter as shock sets in. “That sound summoned it. They do it on purpose. HERE. The Phyla. They know. They *know!* That we’re gonna stay here, that we’ll try to go mouthside after. Of course they know that. It’s the most rational course of action. So – so everything is intentional. The way they kicked us out without enough time to make it to the mouth that first night. The way this little beach looks so inviting and protected. Maybe they can even see us, from inside! They called that squid. They’ve trained it to connect that vibration to food. They *called it!*”

“Okay, Harriet, Harriet, focus. Focus!” Hyuk flaps his wings in her face, and she has to admit it has the same effect as being slapped. “Yes, everything is terrible and your world is a lie. Our friends just got eaten. But we’ll mourn later, because you gotta go. You gotta go *now.*”



“We’ve gotta get out of range of the Mollusk,” says *blush*. “Clearly it’s not enough for the Phyla to just exile their troublemakers.”

But Harriet is focussed on something else.

“Hyuk, what do you mean ‘you’ gotta go? Why not ‘we’ gotta go?”

The raven looked down at his chest, ashamed.

“Hey, maybe the assemblage is right about me after all. Maybe I’m not a very good friend. But they’re right that I can fly away from this, and you guys can’t. I’ve got answers to find, people to talk to. This isn’t over. Just because you’re heading west doesn’t mean you won’t be coming back, okay? I believe that. I *do*.” He gently scrapes his beak on the back of Harriet’s hand, a gesture of affection. “I will find you all again, okay? I promise you. I will see you again. But I can’t leave without some more answers.”

Harriet doesn’t know when she started crying, but that’s probably the shock. She is trembling all over, but she stands anyway.

“Okay,” she whispers. “Okay. Go. Avoid detection. Tell people what happened.”

“Fly,” says Clayer, and it sounds like both an order and a wish.

“I will find you,” says Hyuk, and then he lifts into the sky and disappears over the Mollusk’s back.

“We need to go,” *blush* repeats, his body red with fear. “Bring everything you can.”

Just then, the speakers turn on again, thrumming deep in Harriet’s bones.

“Come on, come on, come on,” *blush* shouts. Harriet tosses Izik’s pack to Clayer, both of them still coated in blood, and without any time to think or plan or grieve, they run, away from the shoreline, leaping from boulder to boulder, with *blushoftangerine*’s tank clomping behind like a galloping metal horse. Wearing old-world green rain-jackets and

hide pants and stitched boots, skin slick with the thickening rain, they turn northwest, and run towards the distant treeline of boreal forest that marks the edge of the Bellevue Barrens.

Through a curtain of downpour and fog, the Rock swallows them, as though they had never been here, never lived their lives – as though it were all a dream, and there had never been a last bastion of human civilization called the Mollusk at all.

## **Part 3**

# **Becoming**

*[coral pink with white dorsal stripes, magenta shadow rolling like cloud]*

**//IN THE PAST//**

Mila Qasim is working the night-watch shift at H.E.R.E.'s Fogo Island biological station when the monitors for Project Fangorn start going crazy.

She jolts, trying to get her legs down from where they'd been up and crossed at the ankles on the edge of the computer desk, and almost falls off her rolling chair. The gingersnaps she'd been eating fall to the floor, and she swears, before frantically opening the readout screen she's supposed to be watching.

It's too early. The symbiotic hybrid their team has created isn't meant to be born – hatch? emerge? – for another week. If Dr. Rideout had expected anything even remotely interesting to happen tonight, he would have left Kokebe in charge, or Brandon, or even Ceilidh, although her dog had just died so she wasn't really up for much.

*Focus!* Mila shakes her head and checks over the data from the last hour. Definite spikes in activity. No doubt about it; this isn't a false alarm.

She pulls her cellphone out of her pocket and dials Blake Rideout, 3:00 a.m. be damned. Their voice on the other end, picking up on the second ring, is gravelly with hangover.

“This better be the actual end of the fucking world, Mila.”

“It's happening,” she says, and the shift is immediate.

“How long has the tree been giving off internal vibration?” She can hear them rolling out of bed, the clatter of a sliding closet door, the rustle of a shirt being tugged on while the phone gets crushed between chin and shoulder.

“First spike was 25 minutes ago, but minimal, small enough to disregard as the same kinds of neonatal movement we’ve been picking up for weeks now. But just five minutes ago now the spike was undeniable, enough to trigger the monitors’ alarms.”

“Have you been to check visually?”

“No, I called you immediately, but I’m on my way as we speak,” Mila says, realizing she definitely should be and standing up, hurrying out of the tiny office full of monitors and down the windowless concrete hallway towards the gestation nursery.

“Do you see anything? Any change in the tree?”

Mila walks faster.

“No, not yet,” she fudges, admonishing herself internally and rolling her eyes at the ceiling.

“Okay, I’m in my car, be there soon. I’m going to hang up and call the rest of the team as I drive, get them in too.”

“Okay. Bye.”

She stops in the dimly lit hallway. Dr. Rideout lives in Joe Batt’s Arm, only a ten-minute drive from the lab, which is just outside Tilting, on Fogo’s northeastern edge. Ceilidh lives nearby too, but Kokebe and Brandon are roommates down in Seldom, so it will take them at least half an hour to get here, longer if they take the time to get dressed in any semblance of work clothes or encounter any caribou on the road. Fogo’s caribou are still fairly active now, during spring, filling up on fresh shoots and nutrients.

*Focus!* Ten minutes. She’s only got to keep from fucking up this monumental occasion for ten minutes, and then Blake will be here and they’ll take over and she can step back, hands up, releasing any ownership of this anxiety.

She should probably straighten up her hijab and wipe the cookie crumbs off her face, she thinks. Her hands flutter nervously through these motions. And then she steps into the viewing room off the gestation nursery, and looks through the window, and all other thoughts leave her mind.

It's a balsam fir tree, or, at least, it started as one. The room had been constructed around it, originally, but now it fills the space with strange, upside-down roots that coat the ceiling and walls. Growing in a mycelium-like pattern, without soil. Its flat-needled boughs press against the glass ceiling, like they're trying to get out of the room. Every time she comes in here, Mila can't help but think that the tree looks like a furious, protective mother, arms being kept from their child, held painfully behind their back.

In the centre of the nursery, the tree's trunk is grotesquely swollen, as though with a burl of disfiguring size. But it's lower than a naturally-occurring burl would be, down just over the bottom roots.

And it's moving.

Or, at least, it's sort of quivering and rupturing, still in place on the tree. But something, Mila knows, is ready to come crawling out. For the first time, it really hits her that this is more than just a research job, more than just a prestigious postdoc position she'd had to compete for. This is more than work, more than science, more than her own life.

This is world-shaping stuff.

"What rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born," she whispers to herself, quoting a Yeats poem she'd had to memorize back in high school. Why she thinks of it now, this allegorized Christian imagery, she could not say, except that it feels true, all of a

sudden. Some rough beast is being born right now, but instead of Bethlehem it's in Newfoundland, Canada.

She looks at her phone. It's only been three minutes since Blake hung up. She leans against the window, her fingernails clenching bunches of her white H.E.R.E. blazer. The tree pulses, the wood somehow more elastic than wood should ever be, but still pushing the extent of its flexibility. A small series of cracks begins at the bottom of the tree, spidering up from between the spread roots, and she knows.

She cannot wait for Blake or Ceilidh. She has to go in now.

She opens the attached compartment and puts on a Hazmat suit. She seals the viewing room and then, once she's cleared the decontamination procedure inside the adjoining chamber, opens the other door into the nursery. She can only imagine how rich the smell of the boreal must be in this room, a scent like tuckamore and juniper, fir needles and damp soil. She smells nothing through her respirator. She approaches the tree cautiously, but nothing in the nursery moves except for the burl, and so she crouches down in front of it, where the cracks have appeared. She leans in, peers up into the space below and behind the cracks, and finds it hollowed, opened. Sticky sap runs copiously down the edges of this passage, and Mila can't help but compare it to a human birth canal. She thinks of a midwifery show she used to watch: breach births, tangled cords, *I can see the head*.

And then, just as she thinks it, she can.

The creature's skin is greenish white, but its crown has a very human growth of pale hair. Its top half slides out of the tree's swollen burl coated in a slick of sap, and dead and dried needles immediately stick to its head as it seems to flail weakly. Mila, heart in her throat, pushes the roots aside and reaches in with gloved hands to pull the slippery baby –

because it *is* a baby, whatever she suspects Blake might claim later about test subjects and the definitions of human – the rest of the way out of the tree. She delivers the earth’s first humanoid mycorrhizal hybrid the same way women have assisted with births for centuries. Its tiny green lips are coated with balsam sap, so much thicker and stickier than the usual human fluids, and Mila struggles to clear its airway, frantic, even though it seems strangely calm. In the end she must remove her glove and scoop its mouth clear with her pinky finger. It does not respond. Its face calms; it does not cry. The baby is as silent as the tree that looks down on them both. Peaceful. But then Mila feels a nip of pain and is surprised to find that the baby has bitten her finger. She is surprised to find that it has teeth at all, as a newborn, let alone that those teeth are pointed and sharp. She doesn’t remember that detail being in the plan. In fact, it seems counter to their basic goal: to develop a way for humans to live off sunlight alone.

The baby’s skin is cool to the touch, but human in texture and softness. All across its cheeks and thin chest, yellow veins of fungus show through. When Mila wipes the sap from its squeezed-shut eyes, they open, only once, and glimmer an alarming yellow. They fix on her face, unexpectedly aware, then close again. This makes her shiver, slightly repulsed, slightly afraid, but the protective feelings are stronger.

And then she sees something else.

She holds the little creature against her Hazmat-suited chest, in one bent arm, and slumps down to sit with her back against the tree trunk, now gone still. She finds that she is crying at the insane wonder of it, the beauty and the horror of this impossible thing she has helped create without really thinking about it. Or, perhaps, thinking about it but not



*feeling* it, the heaviness of it. The green baby does not fuss, but nestles against her, its temperature like a cool, damp river rock.

Mila's not sure how long she sits like that, but when Blake bursts into the nursery, followed closely by Ceilidh, both suited up, she is still in the same position. Blake rushes over, their mouth stuck open in an 'O' of amazement.

"Is it alive?" they whisper reverently, kneeling down in front of Mila.

"Yes," she says, and gently twists her arm so that Blake can take the baby from her.

"How did it come out of there?" Ceilidh says. "Did you have to assist? What did you do?"

"Shh," says Mila gently, putting her now gloveless hand on her coworker's arm. "Look."

Blake lifts the baby up with a hand under each armpit, and as they do so, strange wrinkles of green on its tiny back droop down and unfurl. Two green wings, the texture of a freshly budded maple leaf, extend from its shoulder blades.

"That... that doesn't make sense," whispers Ceilidh. "It was a fir tree..."

"I don't think we made what we thought we were making," says Mila, and meets Blake's eyes, suddenly turned hard and steely, over the newborn flaps of this baby monster's wings. "I think there are a lot of things that H.E.R.E. has not told us."

The baby opens its yellow eyes, and its gaze accuses them all.

## CHAPTER 25

As Harriet, *blushoftangerine*, and I walk, I crouch every so often to pray and check our surroundings. After I confirm that there are no monsters nearby, I reach out farther, searching for that shimmering thicket, that strange barrier of writhing vines, that I had seen in the Whisper Web on our first night outside the Mollusk.

And that had seen me.

We travel northwest for hours and the iridescent barrier does not move. Every time I pause to check, it is there, waiting, days of travel ahead of us. I am not afraid of it; I am curious. I wonder what it will look like through my eyes instead of my mind when we arrive at its edge.

I do not tell Harriet or *blushoftangerine* about it.

That first night, it rains. It has rained all day. I keep watch from the low branches of a tree that I speak with as a Tree. Nowhere in their recent memories are there any telltale signs of monsters. Through this Tree's remembered senses, I pick up no musky scents or dripping slimes. I thank it, and then let it keep me awake with a story in framework about wind, and all the things that wind has brought to it over many cycles of the seasons.

I look down at the moon's highest time and find Harriet staring back up at me. *blushoftangerine* is asleep in his tank, flickering through what I understand are the indecipherable, nonsense Colours of dreams, and she is sitting next to him, hugging her knees. Her curly hair is flattened down by the rain; there is no getting dry tonight. Her stare is hard. I recognize, with some surprised respect, that she is ready to fight for her life, if she has to. In just one day, she has become a desperate animal trying to survive.

I, of all people, know how dangerous such animals can be.

All the next day, she does not speak to me. The air is chilled by the grimness of our group, even as the sun peers down and dries our clothes. We move in silence, we eat in silence, and the two of them worry and mourn in silence.

*Mourning* is another word I learned in the Mollusk.

That next night, the third night we've spent outside the Mollusk, I see my first monster here on the Rock. It is some kind of bloodbear, maybe, but smaller than I'm used to. Its fur is shaggy and dark, and a tall grove of orange mushrooms sways atop its broad back. It has no eyes, not even sockets where eyes should have been. Instead, across its face sprout multiple small circles of tendrils, waving in the air. They catch particles of dust and tiny bugs and feed them back into the centre by folding inward on themselves, like little grasping, fluttering cups. The tendrils are pale blue. The monster walks past our camp, and does not bother with us at all.

Harriet calls herself a biologist, and once explained to me that biology is the study of living things. If this is the only requirement, then I am a biologist too. No one has observed these 'Myco Mutations' more closely than me, for as long as me. I listen to the sounds of this forest long after the monster – the *assemblage* – has gone, checking in the Whisper Web to make sure it is not returning, hungry. I watch the framework that glows and twinkles and shifts between the trees – bugs and birds and rodents of the night. I am patient. I am vigilant. Maybe I take my notes in my head, but it's no different, really, from the notes Harriet writes in the notebook she hugs to her chest. I am a scientist and a monster all in one, and there is no one, I think – no one better able to keep her and *blushoftangerine* safe.

And I will, even if they fear or flee me. They are my group now. They are like Nan was: my responsibility. Which is a good thing to have decided, since the next morning we have our first monster attack.

I am honestly surprised it took as long as it did. *blushoftangerine* slows us down and my two companions know nothing of stealth and hiddenness. For all their effort, they may as well be leaving a trail of bait. We are weaving our way through a scrubby area of bog, following a line of wind-stunted, soft-needled trees that Harriet calls *tam-a-racks*, when I stop them. Yes, there have been more monsters visible in the Whisper Web the farther west we go, but I cannot be connected to it constantly. Monsters move just as fast – or faster – than we do, and as soon as I hear twigs snapping above shoulder-height ahead I suspect that at last our paths have met.

“What is it?” buzz *blushoftangerine*’s speakers, on their lowest volume. A machine that can whisper, I think, amused for a second. And then the monster steps out into the bog, and into our view.

It is a sporebuck. I’ve seen them this big before, in Forest, but never with antlers quite so heavy, and sharp-looking. It is thickly-muscled, glistening red with what I now know are Myco threads and coated in a shimmering layer of slime. Several long cords of ropery roots swing out of its belly, sweeping the ground beneath it and looping themselves loosely around its legs, and on its back and haunches patches of short brown hair have tried to grow in and between the pinks and reds of exposed flesh and spongy fungus.

“Did that used to be a moose?” Harriet says, and her voice is right in my ear. I almost startle, so focussed on the monster – or ‘assemblage;’ I am still getting used to that word – but I manage to keep my face and body lake-surface still.

“Maybe it only eats plants, like moose used to?” she whispers. Right on cue, the sporebuck opens its mouth, revealing that behind its droopy lips hide rows of jagged teeth, all different shapes, like shards of roughly broken ice. It makes a long, low, keening sound that gets gradually higher-pitched. The cry chills me, raising bumps on my skin. The bugles of sporebucks are a haunting sound in the dead of night when you are safely up a tree. To hear one from flat in front of you is enough to shoot an arrow of fear through anybody, even me.

“Not a moose, not a moose, not a moose,” Harriet is saying, backing away from me. I want to grab her wrist and stop her from moving, but I don’t dare move myself.

Long trails of pale, minty-green moss drape off of the sporebuck’s antlers, fluttering in the heavy breath from its rounded muzzle as it looks side to side. It tilts its head back and up, and lifts its upper lip, curling it away from its teeth.

“Flehmen response,” Harriet whispers, unable to stop being a biologist even in the grip of terror. “It’s scenting us.”

“Harriet!” *blushoftangerine* hisses.

And then the assemblage looks right at us. Which of course it was always going to; we do not have much to hide behind.

“Oh frack,” Harriet says, at normal volume this time. There is no point to whispering when you’re fully in a monster’s sights.

“Run,” I say, my voice low and hard, and then the sporebuck charges.

Be useful, or be interesting. Well, the only use I can be to a sporebuck is as food, so I will have to be interesting. Instead of following Harriet and *blush* sprinting for cover

at the edge of the bog, I bare my teeth and run towards those lowered, bloody antlers, screaming.

It stops. For the barest moment, I am the predator, an unexpected and unrecognizable creature, fighting back. And then, just as I reach it, it swings its head to the side and I barely dive to the ground in time to avoid being gored by the lichen-crusting bony spikes.

I hit the bog face-first and inhale a mouthful of muck-water. I come up choking, and the sporebuck is already whirling on me, stomping its wide-split hooves into the spongy moss and peat, looking to break limbs and crush bones. It makes a ragged screeching sound and I hear its jaws snapping on the air, a sound like wet flint. I start to crawl, trying to regain grip with my feet so that I can push myself upright into a run, but slipping and squirming. The hooves seem to be all around me at once. I roll over, avoiding one by my head, then snatch my legs up to my chest just in time to miss having my knee crushed by another.

I coil my body and find just enough footing to spring out of the monster's immediate reach. I skid behind a flimsy tamarack tree and pull my longest knife out of my belt. But then, just as I'm about to launch back towards the sporebuck, it roars, and turns away from me, and I see *blushoftangerine*, the extendable arm from his tank machine sticking out, the metal hand he uses to hold things stabbed deep into the monster's flank.

"Didn't see that coming, did ya, big boy?" he shouts, his skin a riot of Colours. I see my chance. I dart out from my scant cover, my feet splashing small explosions of brown water with every step, and slide under the sporebuck's head, my knife slick across its throat. It staggers, but at the end of my arc, as if in slow motion, the edge of its antler catches me

between my shoulder blades, a furious retaliation. I feel the dirty prong sink deep – too deep – into my back, and then I am lying in the bog water on my side, gasping.

The sporebuck is not dead. *blushoftangerine* has not withdrawn his claw, and I think he is stuck. I hear his machine shouting as the assemblage's movement drags him, in danger of tipping him over. The sporebuck moves slower now, as it leans its head down and sniffs me. Its massive nose huffs strangely cool breath over me – not as hot as a mammal's should be, I now realize, half delirious with pain, because assemblages are half made of fungus.

Like me.

The sporebuck opens its mouth and sucks at the air around me. Its breath gurgles over its wet teeth, and thick yellowish slime drips from the slash in its throat across my face and body. I keep my eyes open, look up into its. They are fully black, no iris, no pupil. Something slick and red is growing out of the corners, like tear-tracks become roots, become veins. Like it is crying its own innards.

I look at the sporebuck and remember how relieved I had been, on the giant-island in the ocean, that this, right here, would not be how I would die. *I spoke too soon*, I think, even as the bleeding, oozing assemblage collapses onto its front knees, weakening fast.

It is going to live just long enough to kill me.

And then suddenly there is an arrow sticking out of the side of its neck, and it slumps into the bog with an enormous sloshing thud and is dead.

With what little consciousness I have left, I trace my gaze back along the path of the arrow and find Harriet standing at the edge of the trees. Her dark hair is wild and tangled, her eyes wide, her breath fast. She is still holding the bow upright, like she's frozen in time with pure shock from her success.

“The yellow slime,” I choke out. There is blood – red, human blood – coming up into my mouth. “Leave – the slime.”

Harriet is dashing towards me and *blush* when I go unconscious.

## CHAPTER 26

In the monster-held lands, Harriet’s brain is always in overdrive.

After the sporebuck, there are no more notable assemblages. They seem to be scarcer than she was led to believe in the Mollusk, or at the very least less aggressive. They have not been chased, or sought out, since that first accidental encounter.

After being gored by the sporebuck’s antler, Clayer had healed completely in a couple of days. When they’d come to, Clayer had insisted that it was because the assemblages’ blood – a yellow, fungal-smelling mucus – had healing properties. Harriet told them she had washed their wound clean in fresh water.

“But it heals,” Clayer had insisted. “Happened before.”

Harriet had been thinking about this a great deal, and had offered her hypothesis.

“I don’t think it’s the assemblages’ blood, Clayer, I think it’s your own. You *are* an assemblage. You may have more mammalian tissue than they do, maybe, redder blood for sure, but I think, like them, you have the ability to heal yourself much faster than an ordinary human. Your body is full of fungal tissues, and it’s adapted to use them to patch you up. That’s my theory, in any case.”

Clayer had stared at them, mouth fluttering open and closed for a few moments, and then gruffly nodded and hurried away.



Now, another evening, they have made camp near the top of a sprawling, rounded mountain overlooking the ocean. With this strong a wind, they do not make a fire. Tucked behind a large glacial erratic to shelter from the unending gust, *blushoftangerine* and Harriet eat in silence while Clayer eats nothing and sharpens one of their knives. It's been a hot day, headed into proper summer now, and Harriet is grateful for the cold night breeze coming off the Atlantic. In the glimmer of full moon, she can see its endless dark expanse, heaving in slow, giant swells. The sharp cliffs of the Rock's coastline stretch away to both the east and west, looking like mirages or dreams in the faint silver light. It is beautiful, but so vast. Harriet looks out at the cliffs and rocky points blasted by the white spray of distant waves, and she has never felt so alone – so small – in all her life.

When the tears come, they are a relief. She has been holding so much. She cries for Izik and *nighttimateal-awashwithstars*, and she cries for Marajory and Dr. Netmaker and H.E.R.E. and everything she has lost. She cries because Clayer was almost killed by a sporebuck and because she, Harriet, is the one who killed a large living creature in return. She cries because she knows that eventually, *blushoftangerine's* quadrutank will need repairs that are impossible outside the Mollusk. She cries because the Mollusk is corrupted, and people are suffering, and there is nothing she can do. And she cries because, when she did have the power to do something, she was a coward.

Eventually she becomes aware of Clayer sitting on the boulder above her. They are not looking at her, but staring out at the moon above the sea, their white hair blowing back like a gentle flag. Harriet looks; *blushoftangerine* is still asleep tucked between low-growing alders, his lights off.

“I'm sorry, did I wake you?” she says.

Clayer does not look down. “No,” they say. “Was not sleeping.”

“I was just, you know – it’s been a lot.”

Clayer does not respond. Instead, they hold their hand up in front of them in the moonlight. After a while they say, “Am I a monster?”

This is not what Harriet is expecting them to ask. Her embarrassment lightens at the subject change, and maybe that had been Clayer’s intention, or maybe they were just preoccupied with their own concerns. Either way, Harriet wipes her cheeks dry.

“I think that depends on how you define the word ‘monster.’” Clayer says nothing, so she continues, “I mean, if you’re asking if you’re an *assemblage*, then yes, I think you are, although you’re not like any I’ve ever heard of before. But if you’re asking in the more abstract sense of that word – the human sense – then that’s a harder answer.”

“Human sense?” Clayer parrots. They parrot a lot when they’re learning.

“Like, a monster as being an inherently bad thing, an evil thing. A creature, or person, that does violent things.”

“Like kill?”

“Yeah, like kill.”

“So I am a monster.”

“Well, no, I don’t think so. Because you kill in self defense. You kill for food, or protection. A real monster kills for sport, for fun.”

At last, Clayer looks down at her.

“What creature would do that?” They seem unnerved by the idea.

“Well, humans used to. There were even humans who killed other humans, just because they wanted to. *Those* are the ones that humans used to call monsters.”

Clayer takes this in, and Harriet blows her nose onto the ground, one nostril at a time, trying to clear the congestion caused by tears. When Clayer speaks, they surprise her again, the subject jutting away sideways, changing unpredictably.

“You should have run.”

“What?”

“Sporebuck. I told you: run.”

Harriet blinks, bristling with unexpected annoyance.

“I saved your life.”

“You could have died.”

“Yeah, but if you died, Clayer, the two of us would be *as good* as dead.”

“I do not need help.”

“Oh, come on, really? You’re gonna be like that? Out here, now?”

“I protect.”

“I’m getting better at protecting myself! I’m a decent shot with my bow, you saw yourself, you can’t deny that!”

“You need me. I do not need you.”

They sit in silence, looking at the moon, and it is not melancholy or nostalgic anymore. It is just the thread-damn moon.

Harriet feels a surge of anger. She’s not usually an angry person, but she has just spent an hour crying in what was pretty much abject hopelessness, so she’s feeling raw. How dare Clayer admonish her for saving their goddamn life? How dare they imply she was useless?

“I didn’t need you in the Mollusk,” she snaps. “Everything was fine until you showed up. I could have shown them the wonder and potential of Colour, maybe even learned more about the Myco Mutations. But you came and you scared people, you made the Phyla think anything new would be dangerous, and this –” she gestures to her and *blushoftangerine* and the general outdoors, “is all your fault!”

But she does not deny that she needs Clayer more than they need her, because out here, it is true.

Suddenly, Clayer is on the ground in front of her. As usual, she has not heard them move. The back edge of their heels practically sticks over the edge of the cliff, and they’re centimetres from falling, should their balance shift, but they seem unconcerned by this. They hold Harriet in their yellow eyes, which are glowing softly, like the bioluminescence of deep-forest mushrooms.

“Did not choose to come here,” they say, their voice cold. “Tree on an island, no wings, fleet rabbit foot held in snare.”

“I know!” Harriet says, the tears resuming. “I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

Clayer regards her steadily.

“Tore up your life like the giant tore up mine,” they say finally. “Monster to *you*.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Clayer parrots. “I know, I know.” They lean in closer to Harriet, rock back and forth slightly. Harriet resists the urge to tell them to step away from the edge. Finally, they say, “Phyla already saw you as dangerous.”

Harriet sighs. “You’re probably right.”

“But I am sorry.”

Clayer shuffles around to sit beside Harriet now, and her heartbeat lowers a bit now that they're not at immediate risk of falling. *blushoftangerine* is still asleep. When it feels like the outburst has settled and floated away, she says, "As much as it almost killed you, that sporebuck was kind of amazing, wasn't it?"

"What?" says Clayer, back to sharpening their knife.

"These assemblages we've encountered, the way their bodies are really just many organisms, large and small, mammalian, botanical, and fungal, collaborating to create a whole – it's everything that HERE was working towards, everything we wanted – idolized, even. It's the holistic ecology Entanglement we talked about but real. And I never thought I'd get to see such a creature – or ecosystem, I suppose, in the shape of a creature – and survive to think about it philosophically afterward."

Clayer snorts.

"Was that – did you just *laugh* at me?"

"Monsters are monsters," Clayer says, the blade singing against the stone. "They kill. No time for amazing."

"There is always time to be amazed," Harriet quips back.

"That is why you need me to protect you," says Clayer, an unusually long and cohesive sentence for them, and then without another word they lope away into the dark scrub, moving from all fours into a human run seamlessly. They do not return, though Harriet waits at least an hour.

When Harriet wakes up, her back screaming from sleeping at a strange angle against the stone, she finds Clayer perched atop the glacial erratic again, hair braided tightly, the wiry muscles on their arms standing out as though they'd worked their body hard at some

presumably unsavoury task in the nocturnal woods, and there is the body of some small, uninfected animal roasting over the fire.

“Ew, gods, mammal meat, how rare and disgusting,” says *blushoftangerine*, waking up and flickering pinkly. Harriet watches as Clayer hops down and pats the top of his tank, almost smiling.

The Mollusk is beginning to seem far away and long ago. Harriet has to consciously think about the horrors of those last few days in order to keep her sadness fresh, since time keeps trying to soften it, and that feels wrong.

*The individual is fallacy*, she repeats to herself, looking out over the morning-calm sea. She thinks of her quarters in the hallways of H.E.R.E, of the labs and the classrooms – even the bustling chaos of the Siphuncle or the Blue Iron Ring. She mentally walks its catwalks and narrow cameras, trying to hold in place every memory, good and bad.

She has been doing this exercise every night and every morning and sometimes even as she walks, the vastness of the landscape blurring together. She repeats it and repeats it and repeats – *the Entanglement holds us all*.

## CHAPTER 27

I have lost track of days by the time we reach the strange shimmering red-and-black place I’ve been watching in the Whisper Web. I feel it as we get closer, a tickle like a bug crawling up the back of my neck, but I can see nothing in front of me to differentiate the forest ahead from the forest behind.

We are hungry, all of us, but Harriet most of all. Her warm body burns through its fuel so fast that it makes me tired just watching her. She is viciously protective over the

salted fish and stale buns and turtle jerky she and *blush* took from the Mollusk, reminding us at every mealtime how important rationing is. But at least twice a day she must eat something, and though she knows many wild plants, soon she is lagging behind us, pale and vanishing, a bony thing that chews its own cheeks and sucks on stones.

I start to catch fish for her and *blushoftangerine* from the rivers and streams we cross, and gather her what roots and leaves I recognize in this forest that is not like my Forest, that is full of new and othered things. Sometimes she points out a patch of dried seaweed on the shore and I clamber down to fetch it when she is too weak. She is too weak more days than she is strong now.

I sense she is angry with me, or at least bitter about relying on me, her whole body like the pucker of unripe partridgeberry. If I could see her framework, I imagine it would be the shape of sourness, pinched cheeks and triangles of yellow and white. Or perhaps I am imagining this. Perhaps she is just tired, and I do not matter any more to her than any other assemblage, in anger or curiosity or any other feeling.

Still, she eats what I catch, and sometimes can contribute her own gatherings. She tells me where we are each day, based on some strange shapes she scribbles in the dirt around the fire. She calls it 'math.' She says she can tell how far we have travelled by how fast and how long we walk. She says she has seen many, many more maps than the one she showed me in my room inside the Mollusk. She remembers them all. She thinks we are nearing the end of the Isthmus, near a place once called Arnold's Cove.

"Who is Ar-nold?" I ask.

"I don't know, some person from the old-world."

“Probably some straight white man,” says *blushoftangerine*, which I do not understand, but Harriet swats a hand at him.

“Did he own this cove?” I ask.

“Maybe a long time ago he lived on it. I don’t know, Clayer.” Harriet’s voice is clipped.

“Because you cannot own a cove,” I say, stating the obvious. Harriet lays her head down against her pack, the dark patches under her eyes looking even deeper in the moving firelight.

“Humans in the old-world did a lot of things they could not do,” she murmurs, and falls asleep. *blushoftangerine* and I watch her, and his skin says he feels powerless to help her, and scared, and we exchange a worried look.

But even as Harriet gets sicker, she is constantly amazed. It frustrates me. I want to urge her to hurry, but she stops often, both to catch her breath and to look closely at things, like a strange flower she does not recognize, or a flock of twinkling birds that seem to have two long-necked heads. She mutters words in a language *blush* tells me is called Latin, and sometimes exclaims in delight over a change – a *mutation* – that somehow confuses or makes new what Harriet knows about this plant or that animal or the entire world.

Snap out of it, I want to say to her – something Nan would shout whenever I got too lost in watching the world’s framework move around me. Monsters are awful things, things to be survived, just like life is a thing to be survived. While you are busy in your wonder, something will creep along behind you and tear out your throat.



But at the same time, I do not wish to stamp out what flicker remains of Harriet's old self, the kind and hopeful human I met in the Mollusk. And so I say none of these things.

The next day, *blushoftangerine* requests my help re-filtering his tank. His water has grown brown-green and stagnant, like a pond you should not drink from. Harriet sleeps fitfully in the afternoon sun while he and I pick our way down a patch of shore that slopes more gently than the Rock's coastline usually does, full as it is with steep cliffs of dark stone. I have to hold a long snakelike tube that he extends from the end of his machine, and it is a long process, with a lot of bubbling and whirring. He tells me with his skin that the new water must be treated and heated before it can be swapped with the old, or he will suffer discomfort or illness. I help him move the tube around to keep it out of the rocks as the waves lap, and support its weight in ways he could not.

"It's not a perfect system," he says, out loud. "But then again, the Blue Iron Ring didn't design the quadrutank refilling process thinking it would be used outside the Mollusk in the actual ocean. My internal filters can keep me clean for multiple days, which is definitely longer than most cephs would even be in these things without a break back home." His speakers pause and break a little on the word 'home,' and his skin momentarily shows sadness, and loss. I shuffle awkwardly with the hose, as he says the tube is called, back over to him and put my hand on the side of his strange clear box.

"I am sorry," I say, like I had said to Harriet. *blushoftangerine* swivels his oval body sideways, looking up at my face with one of his round, zigzag eyes. His skin flickers and wrinkles, the Colours moving like clouds racing themselves across the sky of his back.

*No apology, Clayer, he says, making the Colour that is my name. The past is far away now. All we have is each other.*

A few moments later, the filtering is complete. I help him coil the hose back inside a panel of his machine, and we wake Harriet, who pretends she had not been sleeping, only resting her eyes.

We walk.

Eventually, the tickle on the back of my neck gets so strong it is closer to a scratch, and so I crouch and connect to the Whisper Web, to check our surroundings. This time I'm almost startled as the map unfolds behind my closed eyes like black, spreading ink, because the vine-thing is only a few steps away, this coiling mass that looks like a shiny reddish wall inside my head, a wall made of dark, smooth snakes, black and burgundy and rusty orange. I watch it, looking hard. It smells like a mushroom, but also like blood. Every few moments a pulse flickers down its length, which stretches beyond my mind-sight in either direction, and the woven coils quiver, spark with a hundred coloured, floating shapes of framework, hexagons and trapezoids and triangles and other shapes Nan had named for me when I drew them as a child.

And again, I am overwhelmed by the sensation that it *sees* me in the Whisper Web, this massive thing, this invisible monster. The shapes, some larger than me and some small enough to rest on my fingernails, start drifting towards me and brushing against my bare arms, or landing on my skin like snowflakes. It does not feel like it intends to hurt me, but it still unsettles me enough to withdraw.

When I am looking through the network of this forest – which is beginning to feel like a Forest, but not the same – I cannot move my mind past the roiling wall, cannot see

beyond. But when I lift my hands from the dirt and open my eyes, there is nothing. Just more trees and moss and ferns high as my head. Nothing in this ‘real world’ marks the boundary at all. I frown.

“Hey, there’s something –” I start to mutter.

“What are you doing?” Harriet says. Without my noticing, she has stepped forward into the unseeable Whisper Web space. I open my mouth to ask if she feels any different standing there, but the hollowness of her face stops me. She does not need another burden to worry over.

“Nothing,” I say, and I follow her and *blush* through the wall that maybe only exists in my brain.

I cannot figure it out. Nothing seems weird. Once inside, I reconnect to the Whisper Web and find it normal. I can follow the knotted threads of the world back the way we had come and there is no longer a distortion in my mental map, not from this side of the thing. It is as though once you pass inside, you cease to be aware that there is something to *be inside of* at all.

I do not like it. It makes me feel like we are being slowly swallowed. But it does not seem like there is any other way to keep going west, and west is the direction I came from, the direction where we might find the source of those strange smoke trails.

No other choice.

And so we pass over the strange barrier. Nothing happens, and by the end of the next night I have almost forgotten about it, having concluded that whatever it was, we have left it behind.

## CHAPTER 28

Harriet wakes up to find a ridged black slug the length of her arm sliming its way over her chest. For a moment, she doesn't react, just watches its long eyestalks and mustache-like feelers swaying silently over her ribcage. Its weight presses on her lungs as the last of its long foot leaves the forest floor and creeps up onto her.

*Then she screams.*

Clayer is there immediately, hefting the slug up the same way Harriet has seen children in the Mollusk carry pet iguanas, the slug's lower half dangling below Clayer's crossed arms. They waddle a few steps to the side and lay the creature down on a bed of tufted lime-green moss, where it scrunches itself up into an oval, tucking all its extremities away and pulsing with a faint bluish light just under its dark skin. *Arion ater*. Harriet thinks the Latin name woozily. Just a hugely oversized, glowing one. Okay.

"Quiet, quiet, must be quieter," says Clayer, coming back over and crouching on a rock covered in ferns above where she's laying.

"Sorry, sorry, I shouldn't have screamed," Harriet mumbles, pushing herself up and then leaning back on the trunk of the fir tree she's slept beneath. Everything is damp from the fine mist of rain and fog rolling through, plus the thick trail of mucus the slug has left across her jacket. Even the small exertion of sitting up has made her dizzy. Without any fanfare, she turns and vomits into the roots beside her.

Clayer says nothing. When Harriet wipes her mouth and looks back at them, they shake their head, their expression creased and unreadable.

"You are sick," they say.

Harriet stands and rubs her face with her hands. Her legs feel like loose stacks of stones, shifting, at risk of tumbling.

“You’re sure that the plants we’ve been eating aren’t poisonous? Or... infected?”

“Yes,” says Clayer, like they’re offended she’d even question it. “Whisper Web has no *deception*.” They emphasize the word the way they do with all the new words they’ve learned from Harriet.

“Well, sick is still better than starving to death,” Harriet says, more unkindly than she means to. It’s like when she’d snapped at Clayer about everything being their fault. Hunger and exhaustion and fear make her even more brutally honest than she used to be.

She glances around. “Where’s blush?”

“Did not say.”

“Oh, great. Because wandering off is definitely something we should start now.”

“He is okay. I can feel him,” says Clayer, and motions down at their feet, which are bare and ashy with dirt. No matter how many times they explain their ‘Whisper Web’ to Harriet, she keeps forgetting or miscalculating what Clayer can do with it. She’s watched them ‘pray’ at least twenty times in the days since they left the Mollusk, their fingers and toes dug into whatever soil is available, eyes closed and roving back and forth, lips sometimes moving with inaudible words. As a scientist, Harriet was initially skeptical of the knowledge Clayer claimed to gain from this connection, but she has to admit that they’ve yet to be wrong. Whatever the Whisper Web is – and Harriet has theories – Clayer is drawing information from somewhere, *something*.

So if they say *blushoftangerine* is alright, she’s inclined to believe them, at this point.

Still shaky, Harriet kneels by the nearby stream and drinks out of cupped hands. The first time she'd drank water in the woods, she'd expected it to taste filthy, infected. But it's clean – in every brook, pond, and river they've encountered. It's colder and fresher than any drinking water that was ever inside the Mollusk. This, so far, is pretty much the only good thing about the world out here.

Ten days. Ten days, walking seven or eight hours a day, sometimes being stopped by assemblages or impassible patches of bog or coast. But it doesn't feel like that; it feels like months. They'd had to go south for half a day, down and around what Harriet thinks was the Bay of Exploits, and now that they're back up at the northern coast of the Rock, she's beginning to lose the shape of the map in her head. Are they near where Springdale was, or still closer to Lewisporte? Maybe she was wrong entirely and it had only been Freshwater Bay, putting them closer to Musgrave Harbour.

No signs of smoke, or settlement, or even of self-aware species. None of the birds out here speak, for the ravens are all in the Mollusk. Once she thought she'd seen an owl, but it had sported orange fungal trumpets from its chest feathers and had a head the wrong shape.

She is so tired.

They still have food, because Harriet is rationing carefully and Clayer barely eats anything, since their fungally-slowed metabolism was given plenty of fuel to break down while they were the Phyla's prisoner. But supplementing these rations with foraged plants will make it last longer, and Harriet is nothing if not pragmatic. There's a reason Marajory always called her 'the planner.'

At the thought of Jory, what little resolve Harriet had been mustering for the day fades. She slumps forward, watching the water trickling by over the dark mossy rocks, its shadows inky. At least her girlfriend had tried to defend her at the end, even half-heartedly. If they had even really been in a relationship at all, that is.

*Power, she thinks. Power mattered more; how cliché.*

“What power?” says Clayer. Harriet startles. They are perched on a rock across from them, knees up by their ears and hands down between their feet, like some kind of bony, humanoid frog. They hadn’t made any noise getting over there. They watch her, unblinking, with those gold-hazel eyes that Harriet is hyperaware of, now, as hiding an alarming yellow.

“Geez, Clayer! Don’t do that!” Harriet says, yanking her sleeve back down over her cold, wet arm.

“Do what? What do?”

“Sneak around like that, look at my skin graft, read my thoughts? Frack.”

“Submissive dogrel,” says Clayer, then looks down at their feet as though imitating that canine behaviour.

“I’m – pardon?”

“I mean sorry.”

“Okay, whatever, what direction did blush go?”

Clayer tilts their head to the side, and points north, towards the shore. Breathing deep and slow to stave off dizziness, Harriet picks up her pack and starts walking that way. She hears Clayer behind her, snapping twigs and tinging pebbles off of tree trunks as they go. She stops and turns around.

“Now what the frack are you doing?”

Clayer looks up at her with apparent innocence. “You said no sneak.”

Harriet’s face stays totally flat. Wordlessly, she starts walking again. Clayer darts off to the right and vanishes into the dense trees, resuming their usual uncanny silence.

In the past couple days, Harriet has reached a bitter stalemate of both resenting and requiring Clayer’s presence. The gestures of friendship that had felt so magnanimous in the Mollusk became regrettable and uneasy the first night the three of them had spent alone. Clayer had not slept, but had perched in the low branches of a tree and watched them. Harriet had sat on the dirt and watched them back, their eyes glinting in the firelight like an animal’s. Every time she closed her eyes, she kept seeing them under that UV light, the forked veins of the Myco Mutations laced throughout their body like thread. What did she and *blush* know about them, really?

In the morning, as *blush* had woken, the two of them had still been regarding each other, knowing that their tenuous arrangement had changed somehow. Perhaps counterintuitively, Harriet has found that it’s not so easy to be trusting when you’re utterly vulnerable.

She knows full-well that Clayer, who tore apart a giant tentacle, could rip her throat out in her sleep.

They meet *blush* on his way back to them. His skin is a subdued yellow of relief.

“Why in the Entanglement would you go off alone like that?” Harriet shouts at him, before he has a chance to say anything. She’s breathing hard just from walking, and has to put a hand on his quadrutank to steady herself.

“I was harpooning some breakfast with my claw hand, calm down.”



“I knew that, but I thought we were going to go to the shore together! It’s not *safe!*”

“You’re not well, Harriet. You needed your rest. And I knew Clayer would probably be tracking me in the Whisper Web and sense any large assemblages coming my way.”

She swipes away a few fresh tears angrily. “I don’t think the Whisper Web works in the ocean, blush. What if another giant squid...?” Izik’s broken body invades her mind and she has to close her eyes for a minute.

“Clayer, does the Whisper Web work in the ocean?” says *blush*, looking behind her to where she assumes Clayer has soundlessly appeared.

“That’s not the *point!*” she shouts, smacking the glass. “The point is that we need to stay together, always – *always*, blush! I can’t lose you!”

She falters, and sits down on the bank of the stream, broader now as it approaches the sea. His tank clomps over and gently lowers itself to her level, with a hydraulic hiss.

“Harriet, look at me,” his speakers say. She does, wiping her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be more efficient for me to filter my tank before you woke. I trusted Clayer to keep an eye on me, with their weird forest-mind shit. I am alive. You are alive. We are okay.”

She takes a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She has to fight the upward rush of vomit again, but keeps it down.

“We’re not okay, though. We’re fracked.”

“Obviously,” says *blush*. “But out here it’s kinda day-by-day, you know?”

“We should move,” says Clayer from behind her, standing up and dusting off their hands. “Pack of dogrels in the area, might scent us.”

“Harriet, are you okay to walk still?” says *blush*. “I mean it, I can carry you if you feel too sick.”

She nods into her hands, hiding her face for a minute while she recomposes.

“Yep,” she says, and maybe it’s pride, or maybe it’s fear about putting extra strain on the quadrutank. “Yep, I’m good.”

She catches Clayer watching her out of the corner of her eye and snaps, “What?”

Clayer blinks, then walks ahead quickly and doesn’t answer. Harriet feels bad, but not bad enough to apologize. The three of them fall into a line, and they walk northwest, mirroring the coast, and all day they see no smoke, no deliberate cuttings, no structures – no signs of tool-using creatures, of people.

Once, as they’re crossing a moor-like stretch of barren juniper and grass, they hear some low, sonic rumblings far off to the south. Clayer says it is a giant, like the one that brought them here. The three of them stand in reverent silence and listen to the echoing moaning and keening of an assemblage that must, Harriet calculates, be impossibly huge, for them to hear it from so far out of visual range.

“What are they?” *blushoftangerine* asks Clayer. “Do they all look the same?”

“Mountains wake up,” says Clayer, shrugging. “Always different, arms and legs and heads and shapes. Like you, inside.”

“Like me?”

Clayer wiggles their arms about.

“Uh... they have tentacles?” *blushoftangerine* mimics Clayer’s movements.

“Yes, tent-tuck-ulls. Moving their big stones. Body is –” they move their arms inward, like they’re scooping into their own ribs, “inside mountain.”

“Gods, that sounds crazy. If I hadn’t seen one with my own senses... I wonder why we’ve never seen one before that island-thing that brought Clayer.”

“Obviously they avoid people,” says Harriet, cringing at how clipped and cold her voice sounds. “They must be able to see signs of us from hundreds of kilometres away.”

*blushoftangerine* turns a pale beige with black and white stripes flickering across his back. His speakers do not translate this, as is always his choice to make when he is conscious. If she were feeling more herself, Harriet might have tried to work out the flowchart for this conversation, figure out if and when she’d gone wrong. But she doesn’t have the energy. *blush* changes Colour again and says, “Do you think they avoid us so that they don’t crush us? Do you think these giants are conscious, or moral?”

“Honestly, blush, I don’t care, as long as *we* don’t run into one.” She hefts her pack and sips carefully from a waterskin. She looks down at the green-grey lichen on the rock under her feet and blinks, hard. In her sickly dizziness, she could have sworn for a minute that the scaly patches had been swirling, ever so slightly.

She tries to remember its Latin name, its Linnaean classification, and finds that she doesn’t know it. But even more strangely, her memory can’t quantify the ‘why.’ She can’t tell if it’s because she’s forgotten it, or if it’s because this lichen is one she’s never seen before.

She crouches down to look at it more closely. Nothing is moving. But she has the most unnerving feeling that the lichen is watching her back, a mat of a thousand microscopic eyes, bursting with childlike delight at hiding its true self from her.

## CHAPTER 29

I wake in the dark to Harriet crying out in pain.

She does not scream, trying to avoid notice, but she is breathing hard, sucking the air in and out through clenched teeth, every so often letting slip a high-pitched, half-heard *ahhh* of agony.

She sounds like a rabbit in a snare.

I am at her side in an instant, my hand on her forehead. She is clammy and sweating. I know she has been fighting off terrible headaches and dizziness for the past few days, but at least the vomiting has stopped and I had hoped this meant her body was growing stronger. I swallow back a cold gush of fear.

“Where is the pain?” I ask her. For a moment she does not seem able to respond, and then she turns slightly and I see that her left hand is clenched around her right forearm, her whole body curled around her cuttlefish arm in a tight seize.

“Let me see,” I say. I hear *blushoftangerine*’s tank powering up as he, too, wakes. I reach out and gently pry Harriet’s arm from her own grasp. She closes her eyes, breathing through the pain of it. I push up her sleeve, and for all that I have seen, this still surprises me.

Harriet’s cuttlefish skin has spread.

Where once it took up a clearly-defined rectangle, now its edges are soft, blended, and further up her arm I can see new patches of the same skin, irregular and splotchy, almost like a rash. There is one on the side of her elbow joint, and two handprint-sized patches on her upper arm. All are ridged and textured in that way I’ve learned ceph skin can get, and flickering between a purplish-black and a searing red and connected by what look like dark pink veins.

The Colours remind me of something.

I wriggle my toes a little deeper into the soil, and concentrate. Yes, there it is, the red and black vines of the barrier in the Whisper Web. So, it has been swallowing us after all. It never went away. The tendrils are reaching out of the ground and creeping up Harriet's arm, wrapping around to her back. They hold her as tightly as tentacles; in fact, they remind me a lot of this anatomy whose name I now know.

I wonder how long this thing has been watching us. I wonder how close it is to getting what it wants from Harriet.

*You*, I hiss at the tentacles, in my mind. They hear me; they stop pulling. There is no head to speak of, no eyes, but I get the sense that it has turned to look at me. *Let her go*, I think, and to my surprise they do, and then something else truly strange happens.

I smell meaning.

*Protect, give gift, love*, say the tentacles coming out of the soil that are invisible to everyone but me. But they do not say this with words. It is beyond words, beyond even the concept of words. Instead, I perceive it as a smell, a smell that sparks, in my mind, images and emotions of those word-ideas – Nan brushing my hair, giving me a small carving of a deer she'd made, towelling me dry after bathing in the lake. Nan keeping me safe, even when I rebelled against her attempts.

And it is not even really a smell, because I cannot name anything it smells *like*. It is just a chemical scent, chemicals I don't know, but it means, it makes meaning, it tells me more in an instant than any spoken words ever have – more, even, than framework and Colour can.

I release Harriet's arm and slip back onto the ground, stunned. Harriet has stopped whimpering and is trying to catch her breath, looking at me sideways. *blushoftangerine* is standing over both of us, a concerned teal.

"What is going on?" his speakers say. And then, right after, his skin says, *gods save us*, which by now I know is a rare show of superstition from him. He must be very frightened, deep down.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," says Harriet, rubbing her cuttlefish arm and looking at me. "What did you do?"

"The tentacles," I manage, rubbing my forehead and pinching my nose, trying to shake the weird sensation of the chemical smell-speech. "The Whisper Web. Did not mean to hurt – I think."

"Wait, are you saying that your Whisper Web was what was hurting her?" says *blush*. "I knew it! I *knew* that whole thing was gonna lead to something freaky!"

"Did not *mean to*," I hiss at him, still not feeling like myself, and his skin turns red and blistered with a mix of fear and anger.

"You literally *just* implied you don't know that for sure."

"Guys, guys, stop." Harriet stands up. In the dim light of the dying fire, she looks frail, but calm. Calmer than she's been in a long time, even. "I'm not in pain anymore."

"Nope. No. Absolutely not, that was too easy, that's a bad sign," says *blushoftangerine*.

"Unlikely? Yes. Suspicious? Maybe. But honestly, blush, I'm not gonna complain."

I let their conversation fade into the background. I crawl on all fours around the tree where Harriet had been sleeping – where the tendrils had erupted from. I lean down and

smell the dirt, and sure enough there are traces of that chemical scent still there. What I see in the Whisper Web is real. I know this. But I just want to make sure.

I dig a little bit in the soil over this spot, but find nothing out of the ordinary. In the darkness on this side of the trunk, the framework of the roots and bugs and mushroom threads glows and sparkles. I see the tangle of red, black, and also yellow threads twinkling out in all directions, spotted with fast moving, many-legged dots of blue and violet and stinging orange, and for a moment I feel as though I am looking down from way up high on an entire world, a universe.

A universe of unseen kingdoms.

“Clayer?”

I look up. Harriet has crouched down next to me. Her eyes are on my face, intent.

“blush and I agree that we can’t go back to sleep. Are you down to keep walking?”

I shake my head to clear it.

“Won’t see smoke in the dark,” I point out.

A kind, sad look crosses Harriet’s face, as though she cannot bear to tell me some horrible news. Her hand rests briefly on my shoulder. It is so much warmer than my own skin.

“I don’t think we’re going to see smoke in the daylight, either,” she says. “I think we can admit by now that we’re just walking with no destination. We’re walking until the end, I guess.” Her hand lifts from my shoulder and touches my cheek, just barely, a flutter in the dark. “Thank you for saving me there. Whatever you did.” She stands again. “Now come on, let’s continue our march to the end of all things, shall we?”

I stand. I look at her. She has not rolled down her sleeve, and her expanded cuttlefish skin, four patches of it now, has the same glow that framework does – to my eyes alone, I suspect. But it's new; it's something I've never seen on her body before. Her whole right side swirls with a blueish-silver aura, like dust in the air, and it radiates acceptance, which is also defeat, which is also mourning. I do not question what is happening or how it works anymore. I know what Harriet is feeling right now and that is enough, that is a gift. It is becoming too difficult to determine what is framework and what is Colour and what is the Whisper Web. Or maybe they have always been different forms of the same thing, and I just did not understand. With Harriet in front of me now, I am beginning to.

We have been trying to see the same thing in different ways.

“Okay,” I say to her, as *blushoftangerine* tramps out the fire with his metal feet. “To the end of all things.”

We walk, again.

We walk for so long I start to lose track of days, and nights, and every time I pray with the Whisper Web, I see those black-red vines, snaking under everything, following us, waiting for us, surrounding us with their chemical voices scenting: *stay*.

*Stay here with us.*

I do not know what they are – monster or friend, sneaking or innocent or no plans at all – but I do know that there is more to what I have always been able to see than I thought. Framework, Colour, Whisper Web, my own body – everything is more complicated than Nan could ever have explained to me. More complicated than I could have figured out in Forest on my own.



**//IN THE PAST//**

Dr. Valerie Manning sits in a laboratory in the H.E.R.E. Faroe Islands biological station, wearing a full Hazmat suit, staring at the microscope in front of her. Not *into* it, but at it, sitting back on her raised chair, gut churning.

What she's been seeing on that slide is impossible.

Of course, she had been expecting something unprecedented. For months now, people have been finding mycological impossibilities. There have been groves of fungi that have no right to grow together, at sizes they have no right to grow to. Corpses coated with mycelial webs like in some kind of gimmicky horror novel. Trees and plants growing at latitudes they've never been seen before, suddenly tolerant of the cold, or, in other cases, the heat. And there have been – she hesitates to think the clichéd word, but can find no adequate replacement – monsters. Mutations, all covered in the same webs of off-white or yellow hyphae, reaching out, connecting not just to each other, but to flesh, and organ. Fleshes and organs that don't even belong to the same bodies. She's seen photos from her colleagues in Newfoundland, the Bering Sea, the Azores, Tasmania – thylacines with gills. Seedlings that sing. A pine marten that projected slime and acid-seared the walls of its containment unit before it was incinerated.

Impossibilities.

But still, the sporeprint on her microscope right now chills her. She and her team have examined samples from across the world. So have her colleagues. Hundreds of species, in hundreds of locations, all displaying the same irregularity in their sporeprints. Their own spores, appearing as expected, mixed with another, a generic ellipsoid spore that was so perfectly unexceptional it almost seemed intentionally designed that way. Like how

a bomb might be delivered in a plain brown cardboard box, or Anthrax in an unmarked white envelope, on her favourite crime dramas. A Trojan horse. But the enemy soldiers are out and about now, aren't they? They've been noticed, gotten too bold. Always the same new spore, always inexplicable, but not invulnerable, surely. Now that they've identified it, they can start finding a way to isolate it, halt its spread, before it becomes a human pathogen.

If that hasn't happened already.

She's seen the unassuming new spores under her microscope undergo mitosis at twice the rate of the original spores of the mushroom this sample was taken from, and she's just watched them display behaviour a spore should not be capable of, acting like phagocytic cells, absorbing the original, smaller spores into their membranes, ingesting them so that, soon, all that would be left of this sample would be the new spores.

This isn't just a fungal pathogen. Using its host in some form of parasitic symbiosis, like a virus, is not the goal here – or at least, not the whole goal. It's physically *changing* its hosts into something new. And, from the infected mammalian specimens H.E.R.E. has already collected and kept under wraps to the best of their ability, it's clear that this spore is somehow capable of knitting disparate tissues together, building bodies with any amount of unconnected DNA, like a unicellular Dr. Frankenstein. Patchwork quilts of biological material, stitched together with any hyphae that's handy in the environment. Grotesque experiments in a fast-forward evolution.

Val thinks she might vomit.

She carefully removes the slide and returns the sample to airtight storage. She disinfects, removes the Hazmat suit according to protocol, and then goes to her office, with

its sleek modern design, slate-grey walls, and bay window overlooking Faroe's dramatic green slopes, its seabird-covered basalt cliffs and sea stacks. This office alone proves that H.E.R.E. is no longer the feisty, anti-establishment academic research group she'd joined during her PhD 40 years ago. Science, she has come to accept, must follow the money; you cannot do research without research funding. H.E.R.E. has become a multi-minded, secretive, and overly-bureaucratic bio-corporation, and Val has risen through its ranks by toeing the line. They all have, those of them who still have some small hand in what happens next, some say with the board and its corporate lawyers.

She looks out at the kittiwakes and shearwaters soaring over the rough seas. She smooths her grey flyaways back behind her ears and considers, for the hundredth time, calling Cleo. But her daughter is in her 30s now, with a daughter of her own over in Canada, and has made it very clear what she thinks of H.E.R.E. and her mother's 'blindness' to their 'inaction.' She would not want to hear about a new fungal pathogen.

But still, Val feels strangely like she should warn her of something. What would she say? *Cleo, something is coming. Something that will change everything.*

Well, Cleo had heard that before, hadn't she? She'd stopped believing in 'everything changing' when she was 11, and the River Mersey put their neighbourhood in Warrington underwater and they'd had to move to Leeds, and the government left people homeless in the rising tides, saying there was nowhere to put them. She'd stopped thinking about changes as monumental and started seeing them for what they were: increments of slow suffering. She'd been traumatized at 15, when the summer set wildfires burning across the UK, and the unbearable heat killed Mrs. Varga, the elderly woman she read to on weekends, who she'd found, by herself, prone on her sofa between five running fans. Cleo

had stopped buying her mother's hope when her favourite teacher died of one of the strains of bat flu, when her friend's father was killed in a hate crime, when Google started keeping a cartoonish little memorial counter for the animals that had gone extinct that year.

So no, she could not say 'something that will change everything.' Her daughter was more of a realist than she was, always had been. It would be much more honest to say, *Cleo, something is coming, and it scares me.*

But there was something else, something troubling her deep in her gut. She rubs her temples and picks up the phone. But instead of calling Canada, she enters another long-distance number, and then an extension, for an office much like this one on the other side of the world.

"Tawhiri? We need to have a meeting. Yes, just our group. Secure channel."

She watches the familiar shape of a razorbill cut across the overcast sky.

"Yes, about the spore. I have some questions."

## CHAPTER 30

Harriet wakes next to a river. She feels well-rested, strong. The sun is warm on her skin, but not hot, and from every direction come the sounds of birds, weaving over the gurgling water. She rolls out of the bed of moss she's been curled in, and walks to the water's edge, drinking deeply. Strange mushrooms she cannot name cover the damp shore, all range of reds, oranges, whites, and yellows, some domed and others trumpet-shaped, and some sprouting an unlikely stalk tipped with feathery stems, like the stamen of a flower. These mushrooms are Myco Mutations for sure. They are barely able to hide behind the façade of familiar biology.

Looking up, she sees an assemblage on the opposite shore, a small, squirrel-like creature whose bristly tail resembles a spruce cone, but bends like a limb. She raises a hand and waves at it. The assemblage drinks, ignoring her, then leaps away into the trees.

“Good morning,” says *blushoftangerine* cheerfully, clomping up beside her. He is eating a fish with great delight and enthusiasm.

“Where'd you get that?” she says. “This river?”

“Freshwater fish is still fish,” he says, doing his cephalopod interpretation of a shrug and opening and closing the claw on his tank's extendable arm. “And I'm getting pretty good at snagging them.”

“Not as good as Clayer,” Harriet says, smirking. Clayer can snatch a fish out of the water with their bare hands, as fast as a heron's beak.

“I'm not arguing that,” says *blush*, and his skin trickles through the bumpy pinks of a laugh.

She sits back on the long, flat rock, and stretches her legs out in front of her, crossing them at the ankles. *blushoftangerine* lowers his quadrutank on bending legs to be level with her.

“How does your new skin feel?” he says. She looks down at her arm, with its new splotches of cuttlefish skin shifting in Colour across the top of her forearm and across her bicep.

*Oddly, not that different,* she think-says.

“Why do you think it’s spreading?”

*I have theories, but they’re frightening to consider, so I’m trying not to.*

“You’re infected,” says *blushoftangerine*, and it’s matter-of-fact, not thrilled but not afraid either. That is mostly how Harriet feels too.

Still, she sighs, her mood dipping. “Yeah, probably. Like those people in the Mollusk. And since I already have some nonhuman genetic material in me, I guess maybe that’s the direction the mutations are taking?”

“Do you think the Phyla were right about Clayer?” says *blush*. “Do you think they infected you and it’s just starting now?”

“I don’t know, blush.”

“Or do you think it’s being out here, among the Myco Mutations all the time?”

“I don’t *know*, blush!”

“Yeah, of course, of course, sorry.”

*And I don’t want to talk about it,* she think-says with her new skin. *Let’s just enjoy this strangely peaceful morning.*

She goes over to her pack and opens it, lifting up her jacket to uncover the space underneath where she's been keeping the last of the Molluskan food. And then her heart freezes.

It's empty.

"The food! It's gone!" she shouts to *blush*. He clomps over.

"Well yeah, we ate it."

"What? When?"

"A few days ago. You asked me the same thing yesterday morning."

Harriet watches a bee the size of her hand bumble along between feathery fungus stalks.

"Oh right," she says, rubbing her eyes. "Right, yeah, of course. I remember now."

But she doesn't.

"I think it's okay that we're out of rations, though, don't you?" says *blushoftangerine*, ejecting the skeleton of his breakfast out the top of his quadrutank and into the river. "Clayer finds us enough food."

"But we were having such a hard time – I was so hungry – it's weird, it's like I can't quite remember the past few days. Why am I not hungry?"

"You've been kind of different since that night with your arm," says *blush*.

"And I didn't throw up this morning."

"Or yesterday morning, or the day before."

"Wait, really? What the threads is –"

At that moment, Clayer returns, holding two large fish, their knife between their teeth. They spit the blade out onto the flat riverside rock and grin at Harriet. She tries to remember if she's ever seen them smile like this before, and can't.

She feels so strong and healthy, so different from a few days ago, but this moment also feels like a dream, right before you wake up and realize it was too good to be true.

"Am I dreaming?" she says to Clayer. Clayer smacks her with one of the fish.

"No," they say.

Harriet rubs her cheek, now slimy with scales.

"I just feel weird, okay? I feel weird."

"Here. Clean guts," Clayer says, tossing the fish down next to their knife.

"Where are you going?"

"I hunt, you gut," they say, and with a single bound pull themselves up into a nearby tree.

"What would gender roles say about this?" says *blushoftangerine*. Harriet snorts.

"One benefit of leaving the Mollusk: you can't read old human books anymore."

"You love my wealth of historical knowledge."

"Gender has been dead for 180 years, blush," she says, and she picks up the fish to offer her fair contribution to the party.

## CHAPTER 31

Three dogrels come at us in the night.

I am keeping my usual watch in a tree, obscured by gummy boughs of fir needles. Tonight, as most nights, I have placed my hand flat upon its bark and entered into an



exchange with it as a Tree. This Tree tells me – with no emotion attached, only observation – that something larger than a bird or vole moves nearby. I unsheathe my knife and crouch low, ready to spring. It feels good when I get to become my old self again, the one who did not know Harriet or *blushoftangerine*. The one feared nothing.

I see them from above, coming into the firelight and fanning out, surrounding my group – my two sleeping *friends* – by circling right on the edge of shadow. The fire seems to make them nervous, which is why we always try to light one. But, at the same time, a fire does make us easier to find, for the bolder monsters, this kind that travels in packs.

In the yellow-orange light of the flames, the dogrels' inside-out muscle glistens like cooking meat. The slime coat from their mucus looks slick, like sizzling fat. All four are not the same, but they are close enough in size that they must have come from similar places, grown in similar ways.

I wait. I hold my position in this Tree as long as I can.

Let them think my people are unprotected.

One of the dogrels has a crest on the top of its head, a ridge of bracket fungus that runs down even the centre of its snout, lower the closer it gets to its nose. Bony spikes stick out along its back, one for each bump of its spine. It seems to be in charge, snarling at the others when they get too near either Harriet or *blush*. It thinks it will lay claim to them.

I will kill it first.

Another of the dogrels has thick ropes of muscle that move around its shoulders and haunches like a halo of tentacles. It has bony spines but not as tall as the leader's. It nips at the smallest of the pack, who has no ears or tail and is covered in small gasping holes, like one of those tall, conical mushrooms pockmarked with openings. The smaller one turns,

and begins to scrap with the tentacled one. The leader barks, one short, hard sound. I see Harriet wake up, then clap her own hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

*Good job, Harriet, I think. She's learning.*

I watch her eyes, the only part of her moving, search frantically around for me. She scans the midlevel of the trees, until she finds me, barely visible. I watch her shoulders loosen ever so slightly with relief.

The two scrapping dogrels snarl at each other, tussling in circles. But the leader has come closer to Harriet, below my Tree, to the right. It sniffs her with its mouth open, and I see in the glint of firelight some small slug-like creatures crawling around inside, between its teeth. Its tongue is lined with red, veiny tendons.

Harriet keeps her eyes on me. She is trembling as its breath huffs over her head. I raise my finger to my lips in a human gesture I learned from her, and then I swing silently down through the branches onto the needle-soft soil.

Whatever Harriet says, I can be a monster too.

My knife is through the eye socket of the leader before any of the dogrels even sense me. It falls, whimpering. Then I slide under and slash its legs. Assemblages may not have central organs, as Harriet has tried to explain to me, but an animal that cannot run is much less dangerous.

The two scrapping ones are only just turning to me as I run at them. I stab my knife into the throat of the tentacled one and use my momentum to swing myself onto the smaller one's back. It snarls and spins, trying to reach me with its jaws. I sink my bare hands into two of the strange holes in its flesh, one on either shoulder, and find the inside spongy. I dig my fingers in, start tearing out fistfuls of the mushy centre. The creature howls in

pain. I wrap my arms, now coated in their blood-slime, which is a milky red-orange, around the dogrel's neck, and squeeze and twist. Despite the outward cords of muscle, I feel that soft inside breaking, and with one huge heave I rip its head free from its body. Its spine is barely bone anymore, squishy and rubbery, and it oozes that same slime.

I spin back to Harriet's side of the fire. The dogrel with the blinded eye has stood, wobbly, and is snapping at her. I launch myself into a running jump, but I am not quite fast enough. The dogrel, even dizzy with at least part of its main brain injured, manages to sink its teeth into Harriet's calf. She screams, her arms reaching out frantically beside her. Just as I am about to slash this dogrel's neck and disable it for much, much longer, Harriet's hand finds grip on a burning log from the fire, and she swings it, hard, into the side of the dogrel's face.

It shrieks, flames immediately licking up its crackling skin, and dashes headlong into the dark, its burning head a terrible torch, visible well off into the bogland below us.

The dogrels I had damaged would rise again, but not for a matter of hours. Their bodies had to stitch themselves shut, repair and regrow. I crouch next to Harriet and the fire, chest heaving, my arms slick with glossy assemblage blood.

"Holy frack, Clayer, you're a badass," says *blushoftangerine*, the lights inside his tank flickering on. "That was actually insane."

I spit into the fire, and say nothing. Harriet is gripping her leg, breathing through gritted teeth.

"Let me see," I say. Grimacing, she removes her hands. It isn't a terribly deep bite, luckily, since the dogrel had been weakened. But there are still five or six puncture marks, half on her shin and half on the back of her calf muscle. Her very human blood, so red and

watery, dribbles out of them. Whatever cuttlefish happenings are happening in her, healing does not seem to be one of them. At least, not yet.

I feel a strange urge to reach out and touch the bleeding places. As I do, the palm of my hand begins to tingle, not painfully, more like every inch of it has become ticklish. It is overwhelming, and makes me want to rub the skin of my palm, hard, to get rid of the tingling. But when I go to do so I stop and stare instead.

Tiny, hair-thin, yellow-white filaments of fungus poke through the skin of my fingertips and palms. They are stretching towards Harriet's open wound.

"I can heal you," I say to her, and to myself, and I know it is true the moment I speak it. The thing inside me that has healed me before is reaching out to close up her wounds. With the hand that is not ticklish with tiny wrigglers, I take a firm hold of her ankle. Then with the fungus hand I approach the bloody holes.

With a gasp of horror and revulsion, Harriet jerks away. But I have always been stronger than her and I hold on with that other, un-fungus hand.

"Let go of me!" Harriet pushes with her feet on the ground, dragging me over onto my knees, both of us toppling over into the dirt next to the fire.

"Trying to *help!*" I snarl, yanking her leg close again. I reach out and the fungal threads seem to bend involuntarily towards Harriet's skin, like a pack of dogrels scenting blood, but this time with good intentions.

"No! No, let go! Let *go!*"

And Harriet throws a fistful of soil into my face.

Spitting out dirt and wiping my eyes, I do. The filaments pull back into my fingertips, retracting like a devilcat's claws, leaving no break in the skin, no blood – no sign that they'd been there at all. The tickling stops.

“Fine,” I say, standing. “Bleed, then.”

“What in the Entanglement, Clayer?” Harriet snaps.

I walk to the nearest tree and scabble up its trunk, bare feet gripping the bark, and then I am off through the upper branches, jumping tree to tree.

“Is that new?” she shouts after me. “Have you always been able to do that?”

I ignore her. I cannot stop thinking about the disgust in her eyes as she'd pulled away from my touch. Harriet, my friend, who says I am not a monster.

Why does she keep making me think otherwise?

## CHAPTER 32

Harriet wakes up and cannot remember how many days they have been outside.

This doesn't hit her immediately, or as she washes her face in a small nearby pond, or even as she eats blueberries that shouldn't have been ripe yet, straight from the bushes on the low hillside next to which they'd made their camp. Instead, it hits her when she goes over to wake up *blushoftangerine* and he opens not two, but eight eyes.

The six new ones are human in shape and pupil, all brown, arranged in a line down the centre of his cuttlebone back, which dances now, too, with a low layer of finger-like cilia.

*Good morning*, she says with her cuttlefish skin, blinking in surprise, and then, looking down she sees that it has spread across her entire forearm, the splotches starting to connect to one another, bleeding up her bicep and onto her collarbone.

“Good morning,” say *blush*’s speakers.

Harriet realizes her memory is faulty because she is not fully alarmed by any of this – *blushoftangerine*’s spine of eyeballs, her own changing skin – but she cannot remember how or when these things happened. This all feels normal, but how long has it been normal?

*The blueberries are ripe*, she thinks. Something tickles in the back of her mind.

“You’re right, it’s late summer,” says *blushoftangerine*, reading her skin-thoughts.

“But... how... what...?”

“You haven’t had a memory lapse like this in a while. Just sit down, breathe.”

“What’s *happening*? Where are we? *When* are we?” Harriet says, running her unaffected hand over the shifting Colour of her right arm. It is blue, then red, then dotted with white spots outlined in black, then white with brown stripes – on and on it rolls and pulses.

“Clayer and I don’t know where we are, but if I had to guess I’d say we’re getting close to the base of the that big northern pointy bit.”

“The Great Northern Peninsula.”

“Whatever. But yeah, my memory is hazy too, but not as bad as yours.”

“Why?” she practically shouts at him.

“Personally? I think your brain is mutating, and it’s fracking you up a little bit.”

“My – what?”

“Harriet, what’s the last thing you remember?”

She squints, tries to find anything with a concrete shape in her brain.

“Dogrels attacked us, and Clayer grew some kind of fungal threads out of their hand.”

“Oh, threads, that’s an entire moon ago. Don’t worry, it will come back to you. Or at least, it always has before. Sometimes you wake up and everything is gone, like in the night your brain had to make room for something and temporarily shifted a whole bunch of stuff to the side. But you’ve always remembered by midday.”

Harriet’s head does indeed hurt, a dull ache throughout her entire skull, unlike any headache she’s ever had.

“How long have you had –” she gestures at his blinking back-eyes and the skirt of cilia, “those?”

“Only a week or so. When you’re more lucid, you talk about the Myco Mutations like they’re predictable, like the things changing in us make sense to you.”

“Do I? Frack, I’d love to know what I’m thinking, then.”

“That’s a weird sentence.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Harriet smiles. “But I suppose these are the weirdest times.”

Without making a single sound, Clayer drops out of a tree and lands next to *blushoftangerine*, holding a dead bird. Red blood smears their mouth and the side of their jaw.

“Snacking before the rest of us?” says *blush*, apparently unperturbed. “How rude.”

Clayer makes a sound like a low growl in the back of their throat, but smiles. Their teeth are stained red too, but for some reason, Harriet is not afraid. The changes in Clayer

are less dramatic than those in herself and *blushoftangerine*, perhaps because Clayer, being an assemblage already, does not have as far to go in order to fit in out here.

And that is what Harriet suspects the Myco Mutations of doing, she remembers. Changing them to fit into the landscape, to belong to this monstrous world.

Clayer's yellowish veins – those internal fungal hyphae – are more visible, and their skin is maybe slightly greener under its ashy whiteness, but between the three of them Clayer looks closest to the same. They drop the bird next to the fire, which has gone out, and say, "Cook if you want."

Harriet remembers that Clayer pretends to still prefer raw meat, but always brings their kills to Harriet to skin and cook. They will not admit that cooked meat gives them more energy, but Harriet knows the science, knows that it does.

Clayer just likes to play aloof.

And, watching them lope to the pond, Harriet remembers her affection for Clayer, which is a strange thing to have forgotten, but it rushes back in – how they bring her the best food, how they apologized for trying to heal her, how they have not touched her again since that night.

They are such a strange, angry, earnest person. They continue to save her and *blush*'s lives. When *blush* had sprouted his new eyes, Clayer had comforted them both, in their stilted way.

"See all the stars at once, now," they had said, and brought *blush* an uninfected crab every morning for days after. Right. How could she forget that?

And just last week the three of them had fought off a devilcat, its claws made of sharp splinters of wood that grew continuously, snapping off with each strike then coming



back, like self-generating shrapnel. Harriet had even landed another couple of arrows in its chest, though Clayer, of course, had dealt the decapitating blow.

They'd burnt the head in the fire, to truly kill the assemblage once and for all.

"Ah, I'm remembering," says Harriet, rubbing her temples.

"Good, good," says *blushoftangerine*. "Shall we eat and get under way?"

"Suppose so," she says, and starts plucking the bird, checking for veiny traces of Myco Mutations, but finding only flesh.

Her arm rolls and roils with Colour, always in her peripheral vision, singing the silent song of her own thoughts.

They walk in their usual marching order – Clayer, then Harriet, then *blush*. The sun is just beginning to dip in the afternoon when Clayer says suddenly, "I hear waterfalls." They all stop, but Harriet hears nothing beyond the soft wind.

"You sure?"

"Certain sure. Not too far walking to them," they say, and, as usual, they are right.

A narrow, tannin-dark river tumbles down the gradual mountainside towards the ocean, pummelling away at plateaus and eroding deep golden-clear pools before flowing on, down over the next frothy drop. Clayer scrambles up and down the steep rocky banks for a few minutes, trying to decide which pool is best, and settles on the third one from the top, where the waterfall cascades in such a way that there is a hollow space behind, a curtain of cold water over a shallow scoop of a cave, with dark emerald moss growing in bountiful clumps, hanging down the walls in creeping, misted threads.

Unselfconsciously, they strip off their dirty clothes and leap into the water, the hazel pool much deeper than it seems. They burst up again with a whoop, and begin rubbing the dirt from their arms and face and scrubbing their messy hair with their fingers.

“Come in!” they shout, over the roaring falls. And Harriet, sticky with sweat from the summer day, actually feels a flicker of delight. She leaves her lightest layer of clothes on, for the extra wash, and jumps in.

*blushoftangerine* watches the two of them swim from the shore, content, like a bemused parent at some strange playground. Clayer ducks behind the waterfall and uses their hands to create a little window in the centre of its flow. Harriet splashes them through it, and they drop their hands so that the silvery wall returns. She hears them laughing.

It’s a good sound.

Harriet swims back over to the edge of the little pool and rests her arms against a slick stone, fluttering her feet lightly in the water behind her. *blushoftangerine* looks down at her, and he says, *I am so lucky to live my final days with a friend.*

No, he doesn’t say that. Or at least, his speakers don’t.

It’s his skin speaking in Colour, and Harriet understands it.

Harriet is so startled she jolts back from the stone and slips underwater for a moment, losing her balance. She comes up choking and spitting.

“What?” says *blushoftangerine*, out loud. “What did you do that for?”

Harriet coughs through the last of the river water she’d inhaled and sputters, “I read your Colour!” And even as she says it, it happens again, and again, a constant stream of new sensory information. It’s coming from her right eye, her right side, in a way that makes

her left eye hurt and lose its focus, and she feels a little nauseous. She closes her eyelids, hoping for a brief reprieve.

But *blush* is still speaking.

*Is Harriet okay? Is this hurting her? Can she read Colour like Clayer now? It is because of the spreading cuttlefish genes in her body?*

“Yes to all of the above, I think” she says, eyes still closed. But it’s beginning to make sense to her, and she’s excited. Her cuttlefish skin is also perceiving *blush*’s Colour. She is seeing beyond her eyes, because the photoreceptors in ceph skin are seeing too, in their own way.

Skin-sight.

Clayer swims over and looks back and forth between her and *blushoftangerine*. Already proficient in reading Colour – or framework, or whatever you wanted to call this system beyond language – they did not ask for any clarification. They looked, they read, and they knew.

“Now I am the only one who must speak out loud,” they say, and duck under the water. They resurface so that their chin is still submerged and only their face is visible. They smirk. “Or, maybe – what am I thinking, Harriet? Colour-splash, water on the skin-mind.”

Harriet pulls herself out of the waterfall pool and sits with her legs dangling over the side. *We are changed*, she thinks, looking down at herself, then over at *blush*’s spine of eyes and dancing cilia, changing Colour in the gush of his filter. *We are changed and no one at home would believe us.*

“*Was the Mollusk home?*” says Clayer, reading her skin. “Real home?”

“I mean, it was the only one I’d ever had, so yes.” Harriet answers out loud. It feels strange not to, like she’s not really saying what she’s saying if it’s only on her skin.

“But there you were rabbit-in-burrow, nervous ears listening, no sunlight, flicker-heart.”

Harriet thinks about this. As she does, she feels the patches of ceph skin on her upper arm and shoulder shifting and flexing in a way she’d never felt with the grafted section. She thinks and also physically feels herself think. She circles her ankles thoughtfully in opposite directions in the clear water.

“No one at home would believe us,” she says again, this time out loud. “We’re impossible.”

Clayer bursts their upper half out of the water and howls at the dusk sky like a dogrel. Harriet consciously looks away from their bare chest.

“Impossible!” they shout, clearly delighted, and dive back into the deeper part of the pool, making as big a splash as possible.

“It’s funny,” says *blush* out loud, when Clayer resurfaces and swims back to rest their chin on their crossed arms next to Harriet’s dangling legs. “I barely remember it.”

“Was not long ago,” says Clayer.

“No. But none of us can say for certain how much time has really passed. We can only guess. And for a ceph, anyway, I am old. I have lived a life so much longer than most cephs get. And so, today, right now, the Mollusk is – *nnnnnn* – far away.”

For the first time, Harriet understands the word his speakers could not translate. She grasps the meaning of his Colour intuitively, in a way she’s never understood anything before. *blushoftangerine* is trying to name the sensation that a place is lost to not just the

individual, but to time itself, to concrete meaning. This is a place that has ceased to have a solid *place-ness*. The way *blush* is using the Colour does not imply sorrow, or loss, just a sense of distance. This is a place not physically gone, but gone from his reality.

All this understanding hits her brain with a great rush of force, and she is momentarily dizzy. Her cephalic neural connection is getting overwhelming. She'll have to work on closing it off when she needs a break, or she'll get overstimulated fast.

When she looks at *blush* and Clayer again, she knows that they have read all of this on *her* skin. *blush's* skin says, *I can help teach you.*

There are to be very few secrets between them now.

### CHAPTER 33

The next afternoon we come to a structure – the first old world structure we have seen that remains intact, whole, solid-looking.

“It’s a bridge,” says Harriet, standing on one side of the long path of metal, stretching over a deep inlet like a fallen tree resting across the steep edges of a sunken creek. The ocean rushes in and out of this narrow path, wearing it deeper and deeper with every wave, crashing like breath.

“Bridge,” I say, like it’s also a question.

“Humans built them to be able to transport their large machines over barriers, or across chasms or bodies of water,” says Harriet. “Most of them around the Mollusk were made partially of wood, and so they rotted and then eventually fell down. But this one looks sturdy, if rusted.”

“Saves us a climb or a detour if we cross on it,” says *blushoftangerine*.

“We’ll go one at a time,” says Harriet. “I can do it first, I don’t mind.”

*blushoftangerine* turns a Colour of surprise that she is not more scared.

We walk through the tangles of scrub and smaller trees that grow out of the cracks in the hard grey surface Harriet says was called ‘road,’ and descend towards the bridge itself.

I stretch my strides, walking faster than the others, and I am going to reach the bridge first, when one of those new chemical smells hits me like a wave. The feeling it sends me is not a good one – nervous, wary, memories of unstable rocks clacking and tumbling under my feet, of ropes snapping. I stop walking at the beginning of the bridge.

“Why’d you slow down, there, speedy?” says *blushoftangerine*, clomping past me. Harriet raises an eyebrow as she tentatively tests her weight on the nearest metal.

“Seems sturdy enough still,” she says, following *blush*. “You okay, Clayer?”

I am still paralyzed by the strange sensations washing over me. I think they are messages. I think they are messages about the bridge. I rush after Harriet and grab her arm. She looks startled.

“Hurry,” I say. “I do not think we should –” and then there is a great groan, and the horizon begins to tip sideways. The whole bridge is falling out of its space, slipping separate from the cliffs on either side.

*blush* turns white with fear inside his tank, and Harriet screams. I do not hesitate; I run forward, to try to grab Harriet and toss her forward to the far bank, but even then, I am not fast enough. I am running and then suddenly the metal I was running on is straight up and down instead of a flat surface. The far bank falls away, and *blushoftangerine*’s tank is above me, mid-air, then tumbling past, and I see Harriet dangling from a rail, then slipping,

her body getting smaller and smaller through the rain of rusty flecks and chunks of bridge and stone. I hear a heartbeat, and I realize it is mine.

Then, with a heavy impact, everything disappears.

At first, I cannot tell if my eyes are still open or not. I try to blink but feel no sensation. I no longer feel like I am falling, but instead like I am floating in air, in nothing at all, in darkness itself. I move my arms and this also causes nothing. I am bodyless, waiting here.

That is when I realize: I am in the Whisper Web.

This is the Whisper Web but it is not like before, not like I know it. I have only ever entered it on purpose, pushing my mind out through my hands or feet and seeing with it, into it. This time it feels as though the Whisper Web has reached out and pulled my mind inside. Or like I am inside a mind, but whether it is my own mind or the Whisper Web's, I do not know.

On the surrounding darkness, as though they are flat surfaces, or pools of reflections, images begin to flicker. They are both visual and not. I see them but I also know, behind these scenes, these faces, more details of each – I know these are memories, memories of the Whisper Web. And I know these memories are true in the same way I have always known how to read framework. They are being given to me, poured in like sand into a jar. I have no choice about whether the jar is open or not.

First, the memories are recent. I see myself and *blush* and Harriet, walking across the Rock, rain thudding from the sky in heavy curtains, curled around a campfire, nervous and tired. I see myself on the giant-island, baking in the sun like a corpse, shrivelling with dehydration, barely alive. But then I begin to see scenes without me in them. I see Harriet

standing before those same people who had forced us to leave, but this time with no cephalopod skin on her arm. I see her younger, looking through a strange cylinder-like machine I do not recognize. I see *blushoftangerine*, half his current size, trying to drive his tank and turning red with the frustration of learning. Harriet guides him like a child. I see him and Harriet in a room with glass and water around the walls. They are laughing.

But then the memories go farther.

I begin to see things I do not recognize. Their names come to me the way knowledge arrives in a dream. I see cities. Glistening, impossible, full of grids and brown boxes and green squares of open field. Roads paint themselves in loop-de-loops across the landscape, full of tiny zooming mites – called cars, trucks, vehicles. All the old-world ways of moving. I rock with the realization of airplanes, the power of engines, and I am afraid again, of what once was. In the empty darkness, I reach out for something, anything to grasp and steady myself, but I have no hands to reach with.

I see a man with peppery hair holding a shelled cephalopod that looks like Harriet's Mollusk. Its shell is a long, narrow cone, with a sharply pointed tip. But it is small enough to be held in his two hands, with a living cephalopod body dangling out of its opening, tentacles peachy and speckled, eyes round and frightened. If it is speaking Colour, I cannot read it.

I see this same Mollusk from high above, through a gap in clouds, now stretching the width of the Rock's Isthmus. It is a mountain range made of shell. I see cars and hundreds of dots that are humans, moving around it. I watch it die. It is too late for it to fight.

Swooping wide across the Rock, I see clouds of heavy smoke billowing from what used to be cities and towns. I watch flashes of bloody death flicker past, humans gored by



animals become monstrous, human bodies rejecting the fungus and dying with yellow mucus oozing from their mouths, humans mutating into shapes that could not survive, like the fungus took a wrong turn, tried a bad combination. I watch human bodies breaking and vomiting. I watch skin tear and bones click and snap into new shapes. I watch death both fast and slow, and both kinds are horrible. This happened everywhere, everywhere – the memories are run through with the scent of ‘no escape.’

I see humans shuffling into hollowed Mollusks, some rotting flesh still dripping from the inner walls, even as humans in white suits and masks spray big hoses against the shell and wait for it to turn to stone. There is the Mollusk I recognize, and then there are others. One has a long conical shell twisted like a horn, which rests on an ocean of sand. Another is long and thin and curls up at the tip like a fiddlehead, hanging over the edge of steep cliffs and hills of brilliant green. Still another is a spiral, and lays on its side in a rocky field surrounded by scrubby trees, the hot sun baking the stone-shell. All around these Mollusks I see humans shooting down mycos, their green bodies falling lifeless from the sky, from the treetops. I see them exterminated everywhere a Mollusk comes to shore. I see the Rock being emptied of them, all islands being emptied of them, piles of green winged bodies burning in a bog.

The memories stop following logic. The grains of time being poured into me have no set order, and my mind leaps from one to the other across hundreds of years. I see children playing on a sandy beach by the ocean. I see wildfires churning through vast patches of land, destroying whole forests. I see clean, white rooms with bright lights and glass tanks, cephs speaking to each other about the stupidity of their human captors, and then I see similar rooms where the cephs are using simplistic Colour while humans stare,

frowning, at computer screens, trying to understand each other. I see huge meeting halls, bigger indoor rooms than I ever thought could exist, full of humans. I see a raven being awarded a medallion, hanging like a moon from a bright ribbon around her neck. And then I see humans throwing stones at crows in alleyways, a mother ape snapping human necks, her infant lying murdered on wet earth – I see cephs lying in the middle of hot roads, their tanks toppled, a flock of bright red and blue birds tearing apart a human with their thick beaks – banners hanging from balconies that say “People” and then words I can’t read, and buildings that the Whisper Web knows were called universities and laboratories, on fire, windows shattered.

I see giants like my mountain monster stepping on entire towns.

Tentacles the thickness of highways wiping along beaches, crushing running crowds.

Slimy red assemblages scaling buildings, pulling screaming bodies out of windows.

It is horrible, more horrible than anything I could have imagined. Harriet has spoken of the old-world many times, spoken of the knowledge that her fancy H.E.R.E. has kept from back then, but she has never mentioned anything like this. Nobody knows what happened, she says. Not even H.E.R.E.

I think maybe that is a lie. I think Harriet and *blushoftangerine* have been lied to. I wonder if they know.

The images slow.

I see a human woman with cream-coloured hair. She is smiling. She sits in the doorway of a cabin built up in the treetops. She reaches up, and a green hand reaches down and wraps around hers. It is a myco, my kind of myco, like the ones back in Forest. Leaf-

wings and sharp teeth and yellow eyes, like mine. This human woman is not afraid of them. She lets this one nuzzle her neck. Her eyes are distant behind her smile, and I wonder if she has seen terrible things, like the things I have seen today.

The image shifts to a tiny group of cabins in the middle of Forest, my Forest. A devilcat, the biggest I have ever seen, stalks through the gap between two of the shacks, claws through one of the doors, and soon there are screams. The screams are so loud, so much louder than any of the other horrors the Whisper Web has shown me. They feel too real, too sharp inside me.

I think this one is my own memory.

I think I lived in that group of cabins, once.

As I watch, a small child comes running out of another shack. The devilcat flings the body of a human man out the door it has entered, and the child leaps over it and onto the monster's back. They rip into its loamy flesh with their bare hands. The vicious child has greenish white skin, and hair the colour of a bone.

And then the memory shifts to a face I do remember, and my heart stutters for a moment. The image pauses, and holds, almost as if the Whisper Web is letting me have it, sensing my longing and sadness.

It is Nan. She is holding a human baby. The sight of her nut-brown face, less crinkled than I remember it, fills my heart with warmth, like I've just taken a sip of hot tea. But as she looks at the little baby, she begins to cry. I look closer and I see the baby's milk-white skin is covered in yellow veins, just like mine is now, after almost two moons in these monster-held lands. It opens its eyes and they are as yellow as the myco's.

It is then that I realize the baby is me.

Nan wipes her face and makes it stern, and hard. It is like watching her put all her feelings into a trunk and lock it. I have seen this face before, on every day hard choices had to be made to keep us both alive. She lifts up the baby from under the arms, and two small, pale green wings flutter, wrinkled and deformed, from its shoulder blades. Nan turns the baby on its stomach, and the baby – who is me – begins to wail.

As I watch, my Nan, in the past, takes up her sharp-bladed hunting knife, grabs hold of each badly-formed wing, and cuts them each from my back with one swift slice. I feel a stab of pain, the memory of my body, and everything goes black again.

**//IN THE PAST//**

Dr. Tawhiri Williams has been working at H.E.R.E.'s Tasmania station for almost a decade, and is nearing his forty-fifth birthday. He has no partner, no children. It had never seemed ethical to pursue that amount of future, with the world in the state that it's in. He's settled for his job, and a clear-eyed understanding of what his job really is.

This week the news has not been good from H.E.R.E.'s other island-isolated labs. He and his four closest colleagues are all team leaders in their own small, insular labs, kept apart from the rest of the world by high levels of security clearance. They share a dubious sense of morality tinged with a dash of saviour complex. The five of them talk to each other with an openness they cannot have with anyone else. They joke darkly. They are self-aware of their roles as the 'star players' of H.E.R.E, outwardly critical of their own egos. Though some of his colleagues act like this self-awareness makes them better than other geneticists who've come before, Tawhiri knows better. He long ago donned a pinched and ill-fitting nihilism, the opposite of his nature, the enthusiasm that led him to pursue ecology in the first place. Because, for all its talk of hope and futurity, the Holistic Ecology Research Entanglement is just another institution.

And it's a secretive one.

The islands that H.E.R.E. had selected for their sealed, self-sustaining laboratories had needed a certain base level of emptiness, combined with a considerable distance from large populations centres. Most of the Pacific islands were ruled out by their population density or the amount of tourism traffic to them, and so employees and acolytes of H.E.R.E. have come to expect cold Atlantic waves and bare rocks. There are few sandy, sunny beaches on the islands where H.E.R.E. hides their work, except, of course, at his station.

But Tasmania, though warm, is by no means an easy climate. Even Ilha das Flores, of the Portuguese Azores, is steeper and harsher than some might expect. H.E.R.E.'s labs make life on rugged places.

Tawhiri has never been to the Flores office, or the Savoonga botany base on St. Lawrence Island, nestled out in the Bering Sea off the coast of Alaska. But he has been to Faroe and Fogo, Newfoundland, and the virtual meeting he is setting up for this morning will include representatives from all five high-security labs. His friends, he might even call them.

Valerie had asked for a private meeting, secure channel. As the unofficial planner of their group, Tawhiri often schedules such things – and they have happened often enough before.

He probably should have met privately with Val last week. But there's so much going on, and the higher-ups have been breathing down his neck even more than usual. The five of them started, years ago, calling their bosses 'the Phyla.' This nickname is a bunch of biologists' scathing in-joke about H.E.R.E.'s ironic hierarchy, considering that the organization was started with the desire to be a flat, collaborative power structure. The lab heads, Tawhiri included, refer to themselves as 'the Class that keeps Order in the Families.' The Families being their island staff, and their liaisons on the various nearest mainlands. The 'Phyla' didn't need to know about this Linnaean witticism. They and their corporate and government 'Kingdoms' seemed to have lost their sense of humour when their salaries hit a certain mark.

Tawhiri sighs. He wishes he'd had another coffee.

Val Manning is the first to appear in the secured VR conference room. She blinks over her glasses as she adjusts to the simulation, looking down at her virtual notes and trying to grip and flip the top page with her projection-hands in that slow, self-conscious way that older folks have, when dealing with technology that has surpassed them at speeds faster than they can pick it up.

The windows outside are showing a landscape of Tasmanian shoreline, since Tawhiri's station is technically 'hosting.' It's a lovely video from Bicheno, if he's not mistaken, with erosion-rounded pale grey juts of stone coated in brilliant vermillion lichen, the yellow bottle-brush flowers of a Sydney golden wattle, and a forest peppered with towering blue gum eucalyptus trees in the foreground. He watches the waves, recorded on some other day, roar silently in the distance while Val gathers herself. The virtual windows are framed by a tasteful selection of houseplants, large monsteras and aglaonemas, that someone has programmed in as conference room décor.

With a small automated chime, Drs. Ferreira and Nakagawa, from the Flores and Savoonga stations, respectively, appear in the room, still on mute. Dr. Rideout, from Fogo lab, blinks into existence sipping from their travel mug, which doesn't transfer into VR, and makes them look a bit ridiculous, but no one laughs.

"Hello everyone, welcome," Tawhiri says. His colleagues unmute and echo his greeting. They look at him, expectant.

He switches off the recording feature.

"This is no longer being recorded. It should appear as a drop in the Wi-Fi if rewatched." The four faces at the table before him react on a broad spectrum. Blake Rideout

looks excited, while Alistair Nakagawa looks alarmed. Val Manning is serious, and Telma Ferreira looks like she might cry.

Tawhiri takes a deep breath.

“Now, I want complete transparency. Val, tell us what you think you’ve seen.”

The virtual room still manages to capture the weight of the silence.

“Complete transparency, Tawhiri?” Val says eventually. “We’re looking at extensive mutation in endothermic and tidal creatures within the next five years. Less in optimal spreading conditions.” Her Yorkshire accent is much flatter than usual, effortfully level.

“You can’t know that,” snaps Dr. Nakagawa. “We don’t know how long these spores have been circulating, and the changes that *have* been noted are far too subtle to make any broad claims about.”

“You know we have to think in worst-case scenarios, Alistair,” says Dr. Ferreira. “That’s literally our job.” She nervously tucks her light brown hair behind her multi-pierced ears.

“Look, I don’t want to argue – I mean, we will, I’m sure, but give me a minute – there’s something I need to know.” Dr. Manning places her hands flat, palm down, against the virtual table, matched with her desk surface in the real world.

“What?” Tawhiri says.

Dr. Manning glances around the table, looks at all of them in turn.

“Between the five of us, we probably know every top-secret genetic project H.E.R.E. has been working on. For example, Tawhiri, how are your de-extinct nautiloids? Any sightings?”



He's taken aback for a moment, but answers dutifully.

"Well, the ones we've been tracking have already increased their size by 400%, so it looks like the edited genome is giving us the predicted phenotypes."

"And Blake, creating photosynthesis in humanoids?"

"You've seen the mycorrhizal tree-kid yourself, Val. She only needs sunlight to survive, *and* she appears to be able to communicate with any mycelial network just by touching the soil."

"Alistair, hollowing mountains with your rock-dissolving organisms?"

"I'm using biological tools to craft geological spaces for future human development. Don't intentionally make it sound nonsensical. What's your point, Valerie?"

"I'm getting to it. Telma, how is your biolinguistics team doing?"

"We think the corvid and psittacine vocal translator is at around 80% accuracy, and attempts to combine sign language with ape systems of communication have been much more successful than previous human attempts."

"Val, what is it you need to know?" Tawhiri interrupts, reading the exasperation in the room.

"Okay, my question, everyone, is this: did we make this spore?"

The room goes silent. They look at each other, confused frowns and furrowed brows, while Dr. Manning scans them hard, a detective looking for a silent confession.

"What do you mean?" says Dr. Nakagawa eventually. "Of course H.E.R.E. didn't develop this spore. You just said it yourself: if there's a project, it's happening on one of our islands, at one of the labs that the five of us helm."

“But how do we know for sure, Alistair?” says Dr. Manning, her firm exterior beginning to break, fear creeping through. “It’s too insane, too unlikely to just happen.”

“Evolution *is* insane and unlikely,” says Tawhiri, keeping his voice even.

“What you’re suggesting,” says Dr. Rideout, “would mean that either one of our projects sparked the creation of this spore accidentally, by proxy, or that one of us, in this room, has been lying to the rest of us.”

Again, the looks. Eye contact is snagged, then avoided, in every direction.

“Look,” says Dr. Manning, “All I’m saying is that H.E.R.E. has done, and continues to do, ethically questionable work. Work in which we are all, in some way, complicit.”

“But even if H.E.R.E. *did* develop this new spore,” says Dr. Ferreira, “which does imply one of us has been untruthful, yes – what would its purpose be? We have always innovated with the goal of ensuring the survival of humanity. Underground cities, or cities encased in giant shells, for protection from extreme weather and increased radiation. Trying to make humans invulnerable to new viruses or able to partially photosynthesize, to save us from pandemics and food shortages. Cross-species communication to foster nonhuman community and shared survivalist learning. Heat-resistant crops, underwater breathing, fireproof homes – *everything* we do is meant to rescue, not destroy.”

“I don’t know,” Dr. Manning admits. “I don’t know why H.E.R.E. would make such a destructive pathogen. But I had to ask.”

“I swear to you, Valerie, I know nothing about how this spore came to be,” says Tawhiri.

“Neither do I,” says Dr. Ferreira.

“I swear as well,” says Dr. Nakagawa.

“Same,” says Dr. Rideout. “I almost wish it *was* H.E.R.E.’s creation, because it’s so impressive, but, if anything, it’s impressiveness is an argument in favour of it having evolved naturally. Humans could never make something quite so virulent, so wildly adaptable, except by accident or luck.”

Dr. Manning covers her face in her hands for a long beat, then looks back up at everyone’s VR projections.

“I believe you,” she says. “I trust all of you. I do.”

“So, what does this mean?” says Dr. Nakagawa. “What do we recommend to the Phyla? Because we’ve got to do something, and fast. This spore is highly dangerous, and everywhere, and we don’t know how it spreads yet. If it gets into human bodies...”

The silence once again drapes its heavy wings over them. Finally, Dr. Manning says, “We do the only thing anyone’s ever able to. We do what we *can*.”

Tawhiri closes his eyes for a moment, thinking about the real-life shore outside his lab, the real waves crashing against the real rocks. He has a flash of a future tangled in mycelial webs, all living things absorbed and incorporated, and he shivers.

*Did we make this spore?*

What if they had? Even if it hadn’t been a project ordered by the Phyla, what if they had inadvertently caused it to evolve by meddling in ecosystems they shouldn’t?

But then, what if they hadn’t? What if this complex, aggressive fungal lifeform had evolved all on its own, changing all the rules of biology, rules they’d all had the hubris to think they knew.

Tawhiri could not say which possibility frightened him more.

## CHAPTER 34

Harriet wakes up on a beach.

A stream is flowing beneath her, trickling down a narrow, rocky bed into freezing cold Atlantic waves. Dead strands of dried bladderwrack and the crispy dead body of a crab are stinking next to her face, which is wet. She coughs and touches her forehead. Her fingers come away red. Every single muscle in her body feels stiff with cold. She tries to wiggle her fingers and finds them barely cooperative.

She searches for recent memories and finds them hazy. She's getting sick of that.

A bridge. They'd been on a bridge.

Looking around herself, she sees splintered beams and rusty hunks of metal, jutting out of the stream like giant, dark bones. She pushes herself up onto her elbows, coughing some more, and looks for Clayer and *blushoftangerine*.

Clayer is crumpled behind some rocks closer to the wash where the stream meets the sea. They are not moving, and some kind of dark algae coats their skin. To their left, smashed against a sharp outcropping of basalt, is what remains of *blush*'s quadrutank.

Immediately, Harriet is on her feet. Her head and right ankle hurt fiercely, but she barely notices. She hobbles over to the tank's metal frame, flipped on its side with its four legs akimbo. The glass, designed to break into soft-edged granules rather than jagged shards, is sprinkled across the rocks and algae like tiny diamonds. The only water that remains is a thin pool, cupped in some of the stone below the wreck, and in that cold puddle lies the motionless white body of her dearest friend.

“blush!” she screams, scooping him up in her arms. She holds his oblong body close against her chest and begins to rock back and forth. “No, no, no, no, no,” she whispers, the tears and blood mixing in a hot paint on her cheeks.

But then she feels one of his tentacles wrap weakly around her wrist.

“You’re alive!” she says, and her ceph skin says the same.

*Can’t get rid of me that easy,* he says, although his Colour is sluggish and pale.

*What do I do?* she think-says to him. *Can you last until I can heat seawater somehow or –*

*Put me in the ocean.*

She looks down at him, not believing she’d understood correctly for a moment, but he keeps making the same Colours, the same signifiers.

*Put me in the ocean.*

*No! It’s way too cold, blushoftangerine, you’ll die!*

*I’ll die here in your arms too. At least in water I know I can breathe.*

*No, no, no, noooooo* – Harriet’s skin is either repeating the word or screaming it in one long, constant Colour. She projects refusal and denial with every fibre of her being.

He squeezes her arm with his, but then begins to writhe, Colour pulsing with pain. Harriet doesn’t think she was unconscious very long, but even then, cephs can’t live longer than half an hour out of water. *blush* is suffocating.

*Hold on,* she think-says. *Hold on, friend.* She runs the rest of the way to the shore and gently slides blush’s body into the water. A wave instantly pulls him a little further out, and she wades after, the cold feeling like knives driven directly into her shins. His Colour flickers a few more times, nonsensical, random, and then he grows still, and white.

“NO!” Harriet falls to her knees in the shallows, gasping as she gashes her shin on a rock, but also grateful to feel something, something that could transform her shock into hard realness. She crawls a little on the slippery algae, reaching out to *blushoftangerine*’s body, a few drops of blood from her head wound landing in the water, and then she slips again, hard, and lets out a sob. The ocean is not gentle here, and it reaches in and yanks *blushoftangerine* out to deeper water, threatening to topple Harriet and drown her too. But she cannot move. She cannot bring herself to do anything at all.

“I will get him,” says Clayer, suddenly beside her. They put their hand on her shoulder and walk out into the waves. Harriet considers arguing, but she does not doubt Clayer’s abilities, while she does doubt her own. She watches them crouch and slide off a kelp-coated rock and into deeper water, chest buffeted by another heavy wave, but they keep their footing. In the lull between swells, they swim forward and grab *blush*’s body. When they re-emerge from the waves carrying *blushoftangerine* in both arms, Harriet feels tears prickle her eyes. Her best friend looks so delicate and exposed like this, his tentacles dangling down around Clayer’s forearms, the skirt around his mantle fluttering weakly.

But then she sees his Colour surge brightly across his skin, the whiteness of cephalopod death flushing away.

He is not dead.

“Clayer!” she shouts, trying to lunge forward and slipping and cutting her knee on a sharp barnacled edge. “Clayer, he’s alive!”

Clayer does not respond, focussing on returning to stable ground. Harriet cannot stay still, wringing her hands and crying.

*blush, you're alive!* she think-says, splashing alongside them as Clayer steps up onto a drier rock. *how are you alive?*

*I don't know*, he says, and his Colour is all shock and wonder.

*Oh my gods, I'm so happy. Oh my gods, it's a miracle.*

*I don't know*, his skin is still saying. *I don't know, I don't know.*

“I know,” says Clayer, out loud, kneeling down on the beach. Harriet looks at them, her arm translating this for *blush*, who now, without his tank, cannot understand Clayer's voice, or speak aloud himself.

“What do you think?” Harriet asks.

“*blush* is changed. Like you. Like me.”

“I mean, he does have those eyes, and the cilia, and —”

“I do not feel cold,” says Clayer. “So he does not feel cold. Or you, expect.”

Harriet sits back on her haunches as the information clicks together. It's true. The water is not painfully, numbingly cold. Not the way it should be.

“Slowed metabolism, slowed heart rate, lowered body temperature,” she mutters to herself. “Of course.”

*So I can live in cold water now, is that what we've concluded?* says *blush*, and both Harriet and Clayer nod, but then Harriet looks over at the destroyed quadrutank.

*We're going to figure this out, I promise*, she says to *blush*, and her skin fills in the details of what ‘this’ is – the broken tank, how to get him back on land with them. *blushoftangerine* turns the Colour of sadness.

*Come on, no you won't*, he says. *How could you? We're in the middle of nowhere.*  
*What are you going to do, make glass with sand and a campfire?*

*Don't say that.* She puts her right hand, the knuckles of it now bumpy with cuttlefish papillae, palm-down against his back, and Colour blossoms around it.

*Harriet, he says, displaying her special name-Colour. The tank is gone.*

*I know, but we can try to fix it, we can –*

*Harriet, stop.*

Clayer is still holding *blush* in their arms. They look serious, revealing nothing in their expression, but Harriet can see their sadness in the tense rigidity with which they sit.

*yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine, if you think I am just letting you go, then you don't know me at all,* she says, but already she knows where this is going, where it has to go. She's known it from the second she saw the tank shattered on the rocks. They are nowhere near the Blue Iron Ring now. There are no repairs. It has always been only a matter of time. She starts to cry again.

*Okay, well, Clayer and I will camp here from now on. We can survive out here and you can live by the shore and we'll still see you every day.*

*I mean, I don't hate that idea. But I don't think it's the best one.*

*blush. What are you saying?*

*I think you need to keep heading west. Keep learning about the Myco Mutations. Get to the far coast and I'll meet you there.*

*But – but –* Harriet is lost for words, or Colour, for a minute. Her heart churns. *But what if something happens to you on your way? I can't lose you. You're my best friend.* Even as she says it, she hears how selfish it sounds. *blushoftangerine* flickers a series of soft, pastel Colours.



*Harriet, you are my sister. You are my family. I will always love you more than any other being in this entire world. But that's why I can't watch you waste away on shore, tethered to my whereabouts. And what about when winter comes?*

*I know. I know, it's just –* She chokes on a sob. *It's not fair.*

*blushoftangerine* reaches out a cold, wet arm and touches Harriet's cheek. He wipes away her salty tears, small oceans brimming up and overflowing from each eye.

*It isn't, he says. But hey, think of the science. I'm going to learn so much about the ocean!*

Harriet laughs through her snot and tears.

*Don't try to spin this on me,* she says, the skin of her arm raising up in textured lines as she talks. *You matter way more than any discoveries.*

*Well, that's gratifying to finally hear,* he says, and she laughs again, despite herself.

*blushoftangerine* wraps several of his tentacles over her arms and hands. Each of his suckers pulls on her skin gently, and she knows it is a hundred tiny hugs.

*I think I'm quite ready for another adventure,* he says.

*Did you just quote Tolkien?* she says, unsure how the author's name will translate into Colour. It is green and brown and striped lengthwise, like tree trunks.

*No,* says *blush,* but his skin erupts with pink dots she can only describe as giggles.

*I'm glad I never stopped letting you read,* Harriet says, and kisses the top of his slimy head, between his eyes.

*Harriet, Clayer, this is only a temporary goodbye, okay?*

*Promise me,* Harriet says.

*I promise. Now throw me back in the godsdamn ocean.*

His good humour, even if it's just a brave face, soothes Harriet's heart somewhat. She nods, and watches Clayer carry *blush* back out past the wave line. They hover there for a minute, watching *blush*'s Colour, and then Clayer strides carefully back. *blushoftangerine* raises his tentacle again, and Harriet raises her hand, and then he jets off into the dark water, a darkness which puts him just out of sight, but maybe not too far away.

Harriet is still crying when Clayer comes out of the ocean again.

"What did he say to you out there?" she asks. "I saw you looking at his Colour."

"To take care of you," they answer. "I said, 'depends how annoying she is,' but he couldn't understand me." Clayer puts their hand on Harriet's elbow and begins to guide her off the beach. "Come. Find camp, warm fire, cook."

Harriet nods, reeling and numb from the speed at which everything has happened. And the climb up from the beach is difficult and steep. By the time they reach the upper forest on the opposite side of where the bridge had been, all she wants is to curl up and cry herself to sleep. But Clayer does indeed cook some seaside plantain leaves on a rock they heat in the fire, and it is the best food Harriet has ever tasted. She hadn't even realized how hungry she was. Clayer helps her wrap the cut on her temple with a torn piece of her shirt, and she elevates her sore ankle and gashed knee up on a small rock.

They sit by the small, spluttering fire, and it feels so empty with only the two of them, like a crucial organ is missing, a phantom limb. The wood pops, and a shower of sparks shoots up into the air. Harriet watches Clayer watch them dissipate.

"I had a dream," they say towards the sparks, not looking at her.

"When?"

"Dream that was not a dream. When we fell."

“Like, when you were unconscious?”

“I was in the Whisper Web, but...” they search for words, “deeper. I fell... far.”

Harriet remembers something.

“You actually did have something on your arms and legs when you were lying there. I didn’t get close enough to see what it was, because, you know, blush suffocating took priority. But maybe it was fungi. Or fungi *and* algae, some kind of lichen? Fungi are everywhere, you know, even the intertidal zone.”

“They... showed me things.”

Something in Clayer’s tone makes Harriet sit up straighter, forces away some of the fog of shock and sadness clouding her brain.

“What things?”

“Do you –” Clayer bites their lip, a strangely human tick for them. “Do you know how the old-world ended?”

“How the – I mean, I know it was the Myco Mutations. That’s all anyone knows.”

Clayer closes their eyes, shakes their head. Strands of their pale hair fall from their braid and hang in front of their downcast face. “Horrors,” they whisper, flicking their knife out and spinning its blade in the firelight. “Horrors.”

Harriet shivers. How horrific must those horrors have been to shake Clayer, human assemblage, fighter of monsters?

“I saw my Nan,” they add, tracing the tip of the knife across the surface of the dirt by their foot. “The Whisper Web showed me... memories. Mine. Yours. Before born. Before the Mollusk. I saw my Nan and –” they swallow, “my mother. I think, wonder-guess.”

Harriet tries to remember if they've ever heard Clayer say so many words at once. "Do you have any other memories of your mother? Like, before today?" she asks.

"No. She died. Nan said."

"What did you see?"

Clayer prods the fire with a long stick they've taken off the forest floor, and does not answer for so long that Harriet thinks maybe the conversation is over. Conversations with Clayer do often start and end without cue. But then, after another popping shower of sparks, they say quietly, "I had wings."

"What?"

"Wings. Nan cut them off."

Harriet absorbs this for a moment, then, cautiously, "How could you have had wings, Clayer?"

"My mother... lived with mycos."

"Like, other assemblages? Was your mother an assemblage?" Harriet hears the scientist in her coming out in her excitement and tries to temper it.

"Don't think so."

"So you mean mycos like those creatures you described from your home? Your... Forest?"

"Yes. None left here – all killed."

"The mycos on the Rock were killed? But on the mainland somewhere your mother lived with them?"

"Yes. In Forest."

Harriet puts all this together. “And you had wings as a baby, so you think... do you think your mother had... are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Clayer only shrugs.

“Why would your Nan cut them off? Why harm a child like that?”

“Deformed. Body not right, for either.”

Harriet sits back, rubbing her uninjured shin while she thinks. “Neither human nor myco. An in-between creature. And maybe she was also afraid *for* you, I guess. Based on what Molluskans do know of the old-world, a lot of people were killed after mutating, or being born mutated.”

Clayer shrugs again.

“Nan protected me,” they say, and Harriet knows they mean this in a broader sense than just removing their wings, which would have been the fastest giveaway of their difference.

“There is one way to know for sure if the Whisper Web showed you the truth,” Harriet says after a while. “To confirm if this was all a dream or if it was real.”

Clayer looks up at them, their eyes even more vividly yellow than usual in the firelight.

“Scars,” they say. Harriet nods.

Clayer puts down the stick and comes to sit cross-legged next to Harriet. They turn so their back is facing her, then pull their raggedy hide shirt over their head.

The scars are small, hard to see in the dim light, but they are there, unmistakable. Two small ridged ovals of pink, with a slight bump on each shoulder blade where severed knobs of bone must lay concealed. Harriet runs her finger over one of them, lost for moment

in the imagining of wings once growing there, made of leaf, the way Clayer had described myco wings, what felt like long ago.

Clayer shivers, and where Harriet's finger has traced, a glowing line of yellow appears beneath the surface of their skin.

"Whoa, that's new," she says, lifting her hand. The line of light that has responded to Harriet's touch fades, and Clayer's skin looks normal again, or as normal as it ever does. Curious, she touches Clayer's back again. The light appears instantly this time, as though leaping to her warmth.

"Scars?" says Clayer, unable to see what Harriet is doing.

"Yes, it does look like wings were removed, but there's something else."

"What?"

"I think your fungal symbiont is responding to external stimuli."

Clayer turns their head, expression flat.

"What?" they say again, unimpressed by her big words.

"Here, watch." She takes Clayer's hand and traces her fingertip up their forearm. The yellow light follows, brightest at the point of her touch, and fading away down the trail a minute after.

"We are changed," Clayer says, a phrase that keeps echoing back to them, over and over. Harriet nods. She is so astounded that she forgets to be embarrassed by Clayer's bare chest.

"Or maybe we're just becoming more ourselves than we've ever been before," she mutters. *blushoftangerine* is out there in the ocean, his ancestral home, a place he has been

separated from all his life. Why does she feel like she might be headed the same way, now, watching Clayer's fungal bioluminescence and her own cuttlefish skin flicker side-by-side?

"Harriet," says Clayer. "Let me heal you."

And this time, she does.

Clayer removes the dirty scrap of fabric from around her head and places their palm flat against the wound. Harriet cannot see what's happening, and maybe that helps with the disgust she'd felt before. She doesn't feel the fungal hyphae from inside Clayer's hand penetrate her skin; she just feels a gentle sort of tickling sensation, and the fading of pain.

Without speaking about it, Clayer lays their hand on her knee too, then her ankle. The pain seeps away as whatever fungal cells are living in both their bodies knit tissue back together, sooth pain receptors, and who knows what else. She cannot see her head, but when Clayer is finished with her knee the cut is sealed over with a webby poultice of yellow strings. Harriet swallows, and resists the urge to tear it out.

"Thank you," she says, and Clayer nods, slipping their shirt back on and going back to their side of the fire.

"We will see blush again," they say. Her Colour must still be wracked with loss.

"Thank you, Clayer," she says again, and they only shrug.

Harriet offers to take first watch, but after several hours of listening to the wind and waves, she goes over and lays down next to Clayer on a bed of reindeer moss beneath a fir tree.

Clayer is sleeping, and instead of moving Harriet lies there and looks at their back, slowing her breath until she can barely hear herself. The roots of the tree surround them both, like arms reaching around and shoving fists into the dirt.

Flickers of pale-yellow light pulse under Clayer's shirt. They are not in time to a human heartbeat; they're more like random neuron impulses firing along the veiny fungal hyphae under their skin. They are glowing the same way they did when Harriet had touched their skin earlier, but faster, the indecipherable patterns of dreams.

Harriet does not sleep. She thinks, and listens. When she sits up again, she gasps, just slightly, under her breath, because in front of Clayer's face, a bloom of yellow chanterelle mushrooms is growing. The mushrooms had not been there when Harriet lay down, and they are growing in real time, in time Harriet can see. Every time Clayer exhales, the mushrooms bulge a little wider and taller, their trumpet-shaped bodies glowing the same soft, incandescent yellow as the electrical flashes under Clayer's skin. Harriet sees that light crackle across Clayer's pale cheek. Their eyes are roving under their eyelids.

Hand shaking slightly, Harriet reaches over Clayer and touches the largest chanterelle with one fingertip. Nothing remarkable happens, except that she feels calm, suspended. The moment balloons, stretches outward, and Harriet can feel a great motion all around her, as though geologic forces are suddenly palpable, as though the Earth itself is breathing and she is rising and falling on its chest. But it is all so gentle that she does not feel afraid, or even startled.

Everything living nearby stretches out before her, illuminated.

She looks down and finds Clayer's eyes are open. Their irises glow golden. The bioluminescence fades, at the same instant that the sun seems to spread its first peach rays into the underbrush.

"I felt you," Clayer says, staring up at Harriet. "In the Whisper Web. How?"

Harriet points to the chanterelles.



“Your breath made those grow while you were sleeping.”

For a moment, the two of them stare at each other.

“What is happening to us?” Harriet says after a beat, her stomach growling with hunger, but not nearly as much hunger as she should be feeling.

“Unknown,” says Clayer. “Afraid?”

Harriet looks out at the ocean, still just visible through the trees from where they’ve made their camp. She wonders where *blushoftangerine* is right now, if he’s seeing wonders with his many new eyes.

“No, Clayer” she says, and her cephalopod skin flushes a pale gold, a new signifier for their name. “No, I don’t think I am afraid of what we’re becoming.”

## CHAPTER 35

Harriet and I reach the western coast of the Rock at sunset a few days later.

“These are the Long Range Mountains,” she says. “And on the other side, somewhere out there,” she adds, gesturing at endless ocean, “is the land that used to be called Quebec, or Labrador. If I had to guess I’d say we’re at the base of Great Northern Peninsula.”

I shrug. None of that means any meaning to me.

Then she smiles, and I smile back. She splashes some water at me, and I take off running, jumping from rock to rock, skating the edges of pebbly cliffs. My movements feel effortless, and smooth. Harriet follows me. Once I had worried about protecting her, had thought her easily overpowered. Now she keeps up without strain. I skid to a stop near the edge of the low, windblown trees, and plunge my hand into the soil. With a simple pulse

of intention through my fingers, I make roots lift up from the ground beneath Harriet's feet and trip her, but she somersaults into the fall and bounces up, unharmed. Her right cheek blossoms with white dots ridged in dark brown, like big freckles on a blue-green background.

These are new things that we can do.

Every day, now, we act a little giddier, as though we are full-up with some mischief or delight we cannot explain. The next morning after I'd grown the mushrooms with my dream-breath, Harriet had woken up to find her ceph skin had spread again, this time up her neck and across the right side of her face. The pupil of her right eye has started to bleed sideways slightly, the black dot elongating into a now-silvery iris, heading towards the horizontal zigzag of a cuttlefish eye. There was a time, I am sure, when Harriet would have tried to claw that eye right out of herself, panicked with fear and disgust. A time when she would have chased a cure. But this Harriet, the Harriet I know now, responds to her changes with nothing but amazed curiosity.

*There is always time to be amazed*, she had said to me once. Now, it seems, amazement fills our days so full that time slips away from both of us. Perhaps this is how the Myco Mutations kill now. They fill you with so much wonder that you stop caring, and then they change you into something they can chew right up.

But even when Harriet and I discuss this, I am not afraid.

I fear nothing once again.

That night we sit on the shores of the Strait of Belle Isle under a full moon, and we are not hungry. We have not been hungry for a few days now. I assume it is something else changing inside us – or, in my case, getting stronger than it already was. It is as though we

are eating only the sunlight, all day, and do not need anything else. We are not cold either, and light a fire only out of habit.

“They’re all the same thing, aren’t they?” says Harriet, rubbing a smooth stone between her fingers. Her cephalopod skin says, “*One, togetherness, interconnected, absorption.*”

“What is?” I say, even though I already know.

“The Myco Mutations fungus, your Whisper Web, the Entanglement – it’s all the same thing.”

“Yes,” I say.

Her mouth says, “It’s got some kind of evolutionary goal that it’s working towards, trying to connect all life on the planet somehow, trying to give us the gift of communication. Slowing our metabolisms so we do not have to eat as often, and can eat more things without getting sick. Allowing us to not feel the cold. Bioluminescence, even. It’s all fungus, and fungus is everywhere, in every part of the planet, all the time.”

Harriet speaks all of this, but her skin simply says, “*The Entanglement holds us all.*”

“Yes,” I say again.

Her mouth says, “And Colour is clearly part of that goal. Or framework or whatever we call it – it’s all the same thing – a kind of communication without words. It’s better than that. It’s *more.*”

Her skin says, “*The individual is a fallacy/a lie/is not true/should not be true/it is limiting to believe it is true.*”

“You know what I think, Clayer? I think I was getting sick when we first left the Mollusk. I was malnourished, maybe had eaten something toxic. I think I was in danger of dying. But when the Myco Mutations really took hold, when they got inside me, they

pushed that sickness out. They immediately started the process of changing me, of making me strong and adaptable. I think *that's* why it hurt so badly, that one night. The pain was not the new coming in, but the old going out.”

“Yes,” I say again. I think she is right.

That night we do not bother keeping watch. It feels absurd that any creature would hurt us. Still, when I lie down on a grassy patch sheltered behind a boulder from the wind, I have my knife within easy reach.

Harriet usually sleeps a few metres away, but tonight she comes over and sits down behind my curled back. She touches my arm with her hand, moves it back and forth along my skin.

“What?” I say, without turning.

“I like to watch the fungus respond to me with bioluminescence,” she says, running only her fingertips along my arm now. “I wish I could test its awareness, somehow. It’s so strange, like a living thing separate from you entirely.”

“Maybe it is,” I say, because although now I understand that there is a fungus inside me, that came from a myco, a myco who was maybe one of my parents, I still do not know whether we have separate minds, this fungus and I, or whether we are one tangled brain. I do not know whether the fungus inside me even thinks thoughts like me at all.

“Do you think it knows?” Harriet whispers, as if she is reading my mind now, instead of the way I can read hers. She lies down behind me and curves her body around mine. It is very comforting. I do not move away.

“Knows what?”

“Anything. Where it lives, who you are, where it came from, what its goals are.”

“I think,” I yawn, “it just lives.”

Harriet sighs.

“You see everything exactly as it is, Clayer. Do you think I make everything too complicated?” she says, against the nape of my neck.

“No,” I say. “You are just you.”

She laughs, though I do not see what I said that was funny. I sense one of those chemical smells, coming from her this time. It is the smell of calm, and makes my head flash with images of the Great Lake on a quiet morning, the warm crackle of a fire.

“How strange to have ended up here. The old me would never have thought,” she mumbles. She falls asleep with her arm over me, and I watch the Colours of her dreams play out across the back of her hand like the old-world paintings I have only heard about.

The next morning, it rains.

Not a friendly, misty rain that carries the smell of salt and seaweed in its banks of fog, the kind the Rock has often, but a hard, thunderous rain, that pushes us up into the trees to shelter.

“Where do we go from here?” Harriet says, staring out at the water, tossed and fierce.

“Home?” I suggest. We look at each other. We do not need to speak to agree that neither of us knows where that is.

“Maybe we could try to make a bowl, collect some of this rain to drink,” she says after a thoughtful while. I nod; this is practical.

We set off in search of a sturdy-enough fallen log, travelling together but allowing more distance than we once would have, just keeping each other in sight. I follow the

gradual rise of the land for half an hour, moving slowly south, weaving through wind-stunted spruce trees, hopping the rocks across a creek headed down the shore. My hair drips thickly down my back, and my clothes are soaked. The earth tingles beneath my bare feet, and once, when I stop and twist my knee to look, I see those same fine yellow-white tendrils that had come from my hand poking now from the bottom of my foot.

With every step, my body – or the thing inside my body – is sinking a little into the soil, getting a taste, touching the Whisper Web, heightening my awareness. My mental map of my surroundings is clearer than it's ever been.

If only my fungus had done this back in Forest. I could have been an even better hunter.

I sense something new and different ahead and to my left. I climb a steep hill and push through some thick undergrowth into a clearing, and for a moment I am stopped. My mind goes blank with beauty.

There are flowers growing here, under the open patch of sky in the midst of this low forest. They look like the ones Harriet calls lupins, but they are much bigger, taller than me, growing well over my head. Each long beam of flowers is as thick as my waist, on stalks as thick as my arm.

There is a loud *Puff!* sound, and I startle back, but I see that is it just one of the flowers. The top of it has burst and a small cloud of bright purple dust floats above the grove for a moment, before being hammered down by the rain.

“Harriet!” I call, and I see her turn at the bottom of the hill and start her way up to me.

I walk over to the flowers. They are so brightly colourful. It makes me wonder, for a moment, if they are real. I lean in nearer to the closest of them, and see that fungal threads, yellow and red and white, are wrapped around the stalk, gently creeping across the leaves. It does not look like a sickness. It looks like part of the plant.

I feel the threads on the bottom of my feet sinking deeper into the soil the longer I stand in one place. I am not worried about this. Every time I shift or adjust my body they lift and move with me. The more connected I become to the Whisper Web, the more the fungus on the flowers flickers between the vision of my eyes and the vision inside my head – that dark Whisper Web place, that place now fuller than ever of chemical smells.

I see that the lupins are not just covered in the fungus. They are covered in those red-black vines in the Whisper Web, the same ones Harriet, *blushoftangerine* and I had stepped through back on the Isthmus. I have not seen them in a long time.

I have not seen them since we were on the edges of that unknown thing, since before we walked inside it.

“Something is –” I start to say to Harriet, turning as she enters the clearing. But in the same instant I see something moving very fast in the Whisper Web, a huge shape that my mind sees as pale pink and orange and smelling of blood.

I only get two strides in before the bloodbear clamps its jaws around the back of my neck and yanks me backwards into the flowers.

I am flying.

My body is a doll made of rope and I am whipping backwards so fast the purples and pinks of the flowers blur together into one long smear. I do not even have time to feel pain where its teeth are in my upper back. My hands scrabble frantically behind me, trying

to grab its fur, its jaw, any part of it, just to pull myself up a little. Finally, I find warm, slick skin.

And just as fast, it stops.

It drops me.

I lie on the grass, in the hard rain, and look up at a monster the size of Nan's cabin. Each of its long grey claws are the length of my hand. It has a mane of thick brown fur down its back and over its head. Its nose is wet and black and more animal than the monsters usually are. It has eyes, and they are bear eyes.

But the rest of its body is wet and red, and it has tufts of round lichen sprouting from its hips and shoulders. Mossy patches glisten on its legs, running with streams of water. On one side of its ribs, a cluster of small white mushrooms is growing, their stalks curving out and upwards.

It is not eating me.

Why not?

I go to stand, to run back through the lupins towards where I can still hear Harriet screaming my name. I feel a tug on my right palm, so I risk looking away from the monster's face to glance down for just a second.

We are attached.

For a moment, I do not understand what I am seeing. It is like the sap on a pine tree, gummy and stretched in long strands. But the colour is all wrong; it is the milky yellow of my fungus threads, and it drapes, ropey and dangling, between my hand and the bloodbear's jaw.

It is still not eating me. It is waiting for me to do something.



I hold up both my hands in front of me, palms out.

*I am not prey*, I think at it.

“No,” says the bloodbear. “*You are not.*”

I blink in surprise. Even with all the framework, or Colour, I have seen by now, even with all the ways of speaking I have learned or watched, I am still surprised that a monster can speak.

Harriet would say shame on me.

We are connected by my fungus. I can see that much. The fungal threads that connect me to the Whisper Web, that always have, even back when they stayed inside my skin, have taken it further, are now connecting me to other creatures who are part of it, who are – what is it Harriet says? – ‘entangled’ in it.

“*Will you let me go?*” I say to the bloodbear. It is as effortless as thinking the words, directing them down and out of my hands the same way I do with my mind when I connect to the Web, when I ‘pray.’ I wonder if this is how Harriet and *blush* feel when they speak in Colour.

“Yes,” says the monster, and without another word it turns and walks away, the trees parting around its wide body. My ropey, stretched-out fungal threads detach from it and slither back up into my hand. I do not feel anything but a faint tickling itch. I examine my palm after, still sitting in the wet grass. There is still no wound, so I guess my skin can open and close itself at will, like a hundred tiny mouths.

Well. This is something new.

I stumble back out of the tall flowers, the pink bursts of pollen becoming sticky now, in the rain, mixing their bright colour in trickles through the mud. As soon as Harriet

sees me, she is running up the hill, the rain falling hard now, so that she slips once or twice and has to catch herself. I allow myself to sink down onto my knees, looking up at the sky and wiping my face clean.

“Oh my gods, oh my gods, oh my gods, you’re alive!” says Harriet, sliding straight from her run to her knees in front of me. Her hands flutter frantically over my shoulders, my arms; they cup my face, trembling, and I realize she is crying. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“No,” I say, still in my own shock. “No, I am fine.” I hold up my arms as if to prove this, and stare at my own hands as if I do not know them.

“You’re alive,” Harriet says again, like she’s trying to convince herself it’s real. She chokes on a sob, her hands pressed firm against my jaw, her thumbs on my cheeks. She looks me in the eyes, and I realize with some surprise that this does not happen often, that it is unlike Harriet, and that her eyes startle me every time she allows me to meet them.

“I thought I was going to be alone,” she says. “With blush gone, and then you – for a moment there, the world felt so empty again, and it – it terrified me.”

I touch the shifting skin at the outer corner of her becoming-ceph eye.

“Not alone,” I say, and then Harriet does something I do not have enough human observations to explain. She pulls my face towards hers and puts her mouth against mine. It is confusing, but not unpleasant. She has one of those chemical smells, a new one, and I find that I like it. Her mouth is wet with rainwater and tears, and without thinking, I dart out my tongue and lick the taste of it off her lips.

Harriet jerks backwards so suddenly she slips in the muck and falls over.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her ceph skin is projecting one long scream of embarrassment. I am even more confused, because the chemicals coming off her still want something. But since the chemical smells are new to me, and framework/Colour is not, I trust what I know. Humans are a confusing mess of contradictions.

For a long moment, I look at Harriet and she will not look at me. Finally, I say, “It did not want to kill me.”

“What makes you say that?” Harriet says, and her skin tells me she is relieved that I have changed the subject. I shrug.

“It could have, and did not.”

“Yes, but what *happened*, Clayer? It had you, it did.”

“I touched it, and –” I stop speaking midsentence, my words falling off as I feel a familiar tremor in the earth beneath me.

“What?” says Harriet, looking at me, eyes wide.

“A giant,” I say. “A giant is waking.”

It has been some time since we have seen one, and I stand, almost excited. I motion for Harriet to follow me, back down through some dense forest, before we emerge to see a great open expanse of bog and open water, with massive cliffs rising out of navy-blue depths.

*What does it want?* Harriet thinks, and her skin flickers through the Colours.

*I do not know.*

I crouch down at the edge of this pond. On the Rock, Harriet calls every freshwater place a pond, not a lake, which is what Nan would have called it, in Forest. I touch my fingertips to the edge of the pond, and stare down the narrow passage of water between two

towering cliffs, the top corners so sharp it is almost like the are folded at the top, one flat surface to another, like the edge of a table.

“Western Brook Pond,” says Harriet suddenly. I glance back at her. “That’s what this place was called. I remember seeing photographs of this exact landscape. It used to be famous. Like, around-the-world famous.”

I grit my teeth, preparing to push my fungal tendrils deep into the dirt.

“Well, let us see if the giant of Western Brook Pond is awake,” I say, and press my palms against the wet ground, splashing into the lapping shallows.

Yes, it is awake.

I feel it instantly. I have never seen a giant in the Whisper Web before. Its Colours tower over me just like the cliffs, and in the Whisper Web I can see that the giant is *inside* one of them, the cliff on the left, its body not bound by stone, but comfortable under it, snug within a suit of earth that it wears, but is not trapped by. When I enter the Whisper Web, it flutters and slithers, like a half-made creature in a womb. Outside the black canvas of my closed eyes, my ears hear a massive rumbling, and I feel more tremors that its movement makes through the bottoms of my feet.

“Clayer?” Harriet says, nervous. I do not answer her. I am about to try something new.

*Hello?* I think to the giant.

*Here, here, you are here, they are here, they have come,* the giant’s Colour says, communicated with a sense of delight, of ‘at last.’

I am momentarily frozen.

*What are you?* I think into the Whisper Web.

*I am me*, the giant thinks back.

I do not know how to respond to that. I am only me too, after all.

The giant's Colour flickers between excitement and sorrow.

*It is time. I must be born*, it thinks. *Warm, warm, damp, earth, deep, sleep* – it projects feelings of comfort and safety, sharing the sensation of several lifetimes within the mountain, and I understand its fear that birth is also a kind of loss. But then it thinks something I do not understand. It thinks, *Being born is an eventual directive for project success. Self sacrifice is necessary.*

And part of the cliffside at Western Brook Pond explodes.

## CHAPTER 36

Harriet hears none of this exchange, so, when the flat top of one of the left-hand cliffs explodes, she has no warning.

“Holy frack!” she screams, and her cephalopod skin screams the same sentiment, all raised papillae and red flashes of panic. She ducks down and uses her body to shelter Clayer, whose hands are still deep in the sandy earth, eyes shut tight, but none of the chunks of debris land anywhere near them. The pond is wider than it appears.

The giant that emerges from the cliff is less stone than the one or two Harriet has seen. It retains a large, flat-topped rectangular slab of stone at its top, dusted with green conifers, as though to hold on to a piece of its geology's original silhouette. It has a flat front of striated cliff, like a breastplate, and the same at its back, but between these three slabs of stone, two pink, tentacled ‘shoulders’ slope downwards into muscular arms. At the bottom of the cliff, more pinkish flesh emerges, smaller tentacles, like four feet, one at each

corner of the rectangular breastplate-body. Harriet gets the sense, watching it move, that the locations of its head and arms are inaccurate, only illusions. The giant does not mirror human form. Perhaps its brain is in its feet. But either way, it is huge, and it is alive, and it coming across the pond towards them. Behind it, in the cliff, it leaves a deep and strangely stable-looking hollow, the entrance to an impossibly large cave.

Western Brook Pond is deep. Harriet remembers that. At the deepest point in its crossing, the creature is almost completely submerged, and it's, what, 500, 600ft tall? Still, the top of its rectangular head-slab remains aloft. When it begins to rise out of the water again, dripping under a rare blue sky, it has not slowed in the slightest.

“Clayer? Clayer we really need to move now. *Now*, Clayer!”

“It will not crush us,” says Clayer, finally opening their eyes and standing, brushing sand from their palms. “It knows we are here. It knows we are *people*. They did not know, before. The giants. They did not know.”

“Okay, that's great, but I still don't want to be standing here,” she says, and yanks their hand, darting back into the trees. Together, they run back up the hill they had come from, stumbling with each seismic jolt of the giant's movement. When they reach the clearing with the lupins again, they are just in time to see the giant reach the shore of the Atlantic, where it begins to wade in.

“Where – is it – going?” says Harriet, out of breath.

“Do not know,” says Clayer. “Did not say.”

Together, they watch the giant of Western Brook Pond walk or crawl or drift slowly deeper, until the top of its head-slab vanishes beneath the waves.

“That was incredible,” says Harriet, once it’s gone. “Terrifying, but incredible. And, wait, you said you *spoke* with it?”

“Never happened before.” Clayer seems a little disconcerted by this. “It said something strange, like ‘being born is a – a directive? For project success.’”

“Those are old-world words,” says Harriet, frowning. “What the frack does that mean?”

Clayer shrugs. Harriet sighs, and looks at the sun, now clouding over again. “Come on,” she says, “we should go north. If I remember the maps correctly, the farther north you go up the peninsula, the closer to the mainland you get. We’ll stick to the coast, leave signs for *blushoftangerine*.”

“North,” Clayer echoes, still watching the ocean where the giant had disappeared.

“And hold on, Clayer, how did you convince that bloodbear not to kill you? We’re not past that yet!”

Clayer shrugs again. “Hard to explain,” they say.

“Try,” says Harriet, but all they will offer her is, “My hand was pine gum. We talked through my fungus.”

They walk north.

The land up here is mostly bog and barren. Wide swathes of it stretch out before them, cut periodically by massive boulders, deposited in this place long before even the old-world was bustling and mucking around. They see a herd of sporebucks from a fair distance away, and since they are downwind, they can both sit and watch awhile, unnoticed by the assemblages, which were once – if Harriet can trust her memory – probably something like caribou. Their antlers are tall scoops of narrow curled branches atop their

heads, rising to twice the height of the rest of their bodies, so different from that moose-like sporebuck they'd first encountered, a lifetime ago. Their muzzles are rounded and look so soft that Harriet has trouble believing how dangerous they must be. Little purple-pink jellyfish-like creatures undulate in the air around the sporebucks, resting in the crooks of their antlers or in the cups of the chanterelles sprouting from their unusually furry shoulders and spines. Harriet cannot be sure, but it looks like these sporebucks are eating plant matter from within the bog – rotting leaves and moss and peat. Decomposing matter. She wonders if her and Clayer's assumption that all assemblages are strictly carnivorous suffers, perhaps, from a lack of data. Still, the two of them arc wide, in order to pass far beyond the sporebucks' range.

Harriet had not known that the Rock had sandy beaches. When they come to a section of this northwestern coastline that is covered in low dunes, she wonders if they have somehow crossed into another world altogether. The white sand of the long, curved beach stretches out and on for kilometres, and that giddiness overcomes her and she takes off running onto it, towards the shallows of the radiant blue ocean, perfectly clear over the ripples of a packed sandbar.

Clayer is more hesitant. They follow her to the edge of where the sand becomes wet and darkened by the waves, then kneel down. They place their palm flat against the ground, and Harriet sees the tiny filaments of fungus poke out of their skin and snake down into the damp grains, like thin, burrowing earthworms. Clayer closes their eyes, stepping mentally into the Whisper Web. Harriet watches them, the way their eyes rove back and forth under their eyelids. Their skin glows slightly, along the patterns of veins up their wrist.



Harriet looks out at the gleaming white and blue beach and tries to imagine what Clayer must see in the Whisper Web. Is this unexpected beauty veined with thick hyphae, like the most root-ensnared jungle floor she'd ever seen in old-world books, the tips of the seeking, wriggling limbs reluctantly touching the ocean?

When Clayer lifts their hand again, they look up at Harriet.

“Try something?” they say.

“Okay,” she says. She is pretty sure, right now, that she would try anything Clayer asked. She trusts them completely.

“Come,” says Clayer, and together, they sit side-by-side on the warm white sand in this alien landscape, with the bluest ocean in front and low scrubby barrens of heath behind. Clayer takes Harriet's arm and holds their hand gently palm-down a few centimetres above it. Harriet looks at this and tries to remember where her original skin graft had been. She cannot.

Clayer's fungal tendrils poke out from the skin of their palm and spend a moment feeling along Harriet's skin, the way a cephalopod cautiously tastes and explores with its tentacles. They look a bit like extra-thin stalks of the 'golden spindles' fungus, *Clavulinopsis fusiformis*, Harriet thinks, and the reappearance of those ancient, Latin words in her mind spikes a little, gives a jolt of pain. She touches her forehead with her free hand, and winces.

Yes, indeed, her new brain has no use for the old ways.

Clayer closes their eyes as the little hyphae, some hair-thin, others twice as thick, finish their scenting of Harriet's skin. Harriet watches with fascination as the little tendrils begin to pierce the skin of her arm. She feels no pain, and there is no blood. Not that long

ago, recently enough that *blushoftangerine* was still with them, she would have had to look away from this.

But now that curiosity stirs in her chest, becomes delight and amazement. Clayer is frowning, afraid how she'll react. Clayer is always afraid of how she'll react; they worry that they frighten her, that they always have and can do nothing to assuage it.

Wait.

Harriet realizes this is not something she is observing about Clayer, but rather something she knows. She knows it instinctively, on a level deeper than words. She knows it because she is reading Clayer's framework.

It's not exactly like that, not as visual as speaking in Colour to *blush* had been. It's more like Clayer's mind is being transmitted to her mind somehow, but not in such a vulgar, simplified way as in Molluskan words. No, it's just this wordless knowing, this complete understanding. Any clarification that might have been necessary in an auditory conversation is automatically fulfilled, checked and explained. It is effortless. But there is a visual component, too, Colour that doesn't move on Clayer's physical skin the way it moves on Harriet's, or a ceph's, but instead Colour that floats in shifting shapes in front of their ribcage and then drifts away, fading into the air when it gets a few feet from their body.

Clayer was afraid of how Harriet would react but now they are not, because they can read her Colour, and they know what she is feeling too. Clayer is thinking about those early days trying to communicate in the Mollusk and how much easier this would have been, had we been ready, and able. Clayer is wondering what is happening as Harriet would explain it, with her biologist words.

What is happening? *Chemicals*, Harriet thinks, sifting through what she knows of fungal and tree communication. *Chemical signals*. But more than that, too. Something unique to the Whisper Web, to the Myco Mutations, to the Entanglement – whatever this is, whatever is taking over. It is Colour and it is shape and it is emotion and knowledge and it is also communicating those emotions and knowledges, all at once.

Clayer is emanating feelings about Harriet, to Harriet. Every response and reaction either of them has can also simultaneously be countered and reacted to, in turn, at the speed of neurons firing. Clayer's abstract feelings are honest, without discomfort: *tenderness, family, loneliness, apprehension, longing, protection, determination*. Harriet knows, as easily as breathing, all the up-to-now unspoken nuances of their relation to each other and how Clayer thinks and why.

She smiles, and tastes the tears of joy streaming down her face. To be known, to be truly, deeply, undeniably known – is that not what all people have always wanted? Is that not what her and *blushoftangerine*'s work was about, really?

Clayer opens their eyes, hand still connected to Harriet's arm, and meets her gaze. She finds the eye contact does not bother her when they are speaking like this, because Clayer does not feel like another person from herself.

"I understand you," Clayer says out loud, their face an open door, letting awe escape its usual confines behind their stoicism. Slowly, cautiously, they lift their hand. For a moment, the fungal threads seem to have become elastic, and stretch and sag as Clayer attempts to pull their flesh apart. But she sees them take a deep breath and relax, and the hyphae slide back up into their hand.

"Whoa," says Harriet, a little breathlessly.

“Whoa,” agrees Clayer.

“Holy threads, I think – Clayer, I know –”

“Yes.”

“It’s a gift. The Myco Mutations were a gift.”

“Yes,” Clayer says again. They knew it the same moment she did.

“Whether it evolved naturally or was made by humans of the old-world, it can *help* us. It can help all of us. To *know* each other. To know all things.”

“Relation,” says Clayer, which might be a word they had just learned from her thoughts.

“Of course. Of *course*. This is how people stay alive.”

“The Entanglement holds us all,” says Clayer, and Harriet doesn’t know if this is something she’s said out loud before or something that was running like an undercurrent behind her thoughts, but she laughs and rests her forehead against theirs for a moment, watching the yellow glow of their fungal veins dance like the northern lights across their collarbones.

The two of them sit side-by-side on the sand for hours, unspeaking, having already thought and shared everything they have to say, for now. When the wind kicks up and the waves start tossing white spray high into the air like furious confetti, they slip behind the taller of the dunes and nestle into a sheltered hollow. It feels perfectly natural now for them to fold their bodies spooned around each other, like two snug vertebrae in some massive spine. As she drifts off to sleep, Harriet feels Clayer’s tendrils pressing into the back of her neck, and she does not shy away. They dream the same dreams, and wake up better rested than either of them can remember feeling before.

## CHAPTER 37

We have been walking north up the Great Northern Peninsula for maybe three days, maybe four. Or maybe it is much longer, and time has slipped and slid away from us like the smooth body of a snake caught with dry, bare hands.

I drink from a small freshwater waterfall cascading down onto the rocky shoreline. When I stand and walk back to Harriet, she is eating some kelp, raw and uncooked, which would once have been unpleasant to her.

“Shall we make a proper human camp tonight?” she says, gesturing up at the cliffs and east, to the forest.

“We are not human anymore?” I say. She turns and looks at me with her cephalopod eye, the pupil fully shifted sideways, the whiteness around it swirling with silvery shimmer. The splotch of Colourful skin on her cheek is moving up into her forehead and has almost reached the side of her nose.

Then she stops.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“My name. I thought, for a moment, I heard my name carried on the wind.”

“Harriet! Clayer!”

“I heard it that time,” I say, and we are both spinning around, looking up, trying to find its source. I wonder for a moment if the Whisper Web/Entanglement is so deep in our heads now that it can make sounds appear outside us, but then I see the black beating wings of a distant sky-shape and I know it is real.

“Harriet!” the voice calls again, and it is a croaking voice, squawking and rubbery.

“Oh my threads... I don’t believe it,” says Harriet, and her skin flushes with awe, as Hyuk the raven flaps down and lands on a boulder in front of them both, wearing a tiny beige leather vest full of pockets.

For a moment they all stare at each other.

“Holy frack,” says Hyuk.

“Yeah,” says Harriet.

“Do you – are you – do you know who I am?” he says eventually.

“Of course, you’re Hyuk. You ran a magazine. We left you at the Mollusk after a giant squid attack, and you said you would find us again,” says Harriet. I stay silent.

“Gods, it *is* you. What the frack *happened* to you two?”

He shuffles back a little on the rough stone, shifting his weight nervously from side to side.

“We changed. That’s all,” says Harriet.

“You’re frackin’ infected is what it is!” Hyuk shivers and all the feathers on his chest puff up. “We have to get you help! Can’t you see yourselves? I mean, Clayer was already a mutation, but Harriet, gods, your arm, your *face* –!”

“Hyuk,” I say, interrupting him and stepping forward. He steps back, but does not fly away. I hold out my hands, palms out, like *it’s okay*. “Harriet and I are not sick.”

“I beg to differ.”

“We are not. We are just...” I choose the word carefully, “becoming.”

“Becoming monsters!” Hyuk says, and if ravens could spit I think he would have.

“I can show you,” I offer.

“Show me what, Clayer? What could you possibly –? And where’s blushoftangerine? This is almost worse than you being dead, I have to tell –”

I see that Hyuk will not be calmed with words. So before he can lift off into the air, I dart my hand forward and my fungal tendrils lash out and coil around his thin grey leg.

He freezes. I imagine that he might struggle, but he does not. As soon as I am connected to him, his beak goes slack and his wings resettle against his sides. I feel all his fear and exhaustion and sorrow and rage. I see his framework and Colour, the red corkscrews, the orange cubes, the white hexagons. And I share mine with him, the same way I did with Harriet just yesterday, thoughts zipping back and forth almost faster than we can think them.

I focus on the safety Harriet and I have started to feel. I project feelings of warmth and beauty, of no hunger or thirst, and of being given a powerful gift. When I withdraw my hyphae, he does not take off.

“Are you okay?” Harriet asks him. He preens his chest for a minute, shakes himself. Finally, he looks up at us with a kind of wary hope, like an animal that does not believe you’re offering to feed them.

Finally, he says, “Tell me what you’ve learned out here.”

“Let’s make a fire and get comfortable,” says Harriet, and that is what we do.

For much of the afternoon and evening, we share with Hyuk all the stories we can remember. Our memories have holes sometimes, but I do not worry about this. Those memories must serve no purpose, now.

“So, blush is out there somewhere? You’re not kidding me?” Hyuk gestures to the ocean with one wing.

“No. He was able to survive in the Atlantic! He said he’d find us, just like you did.”

“His tank was ruined,” I add.

“Yeah, but he decided to treat it like an adventure,” Harriet says.

“That’s true.”

We tell him about the sporebuck and the pack of dogrels and the bloodbear and all the other, lesser monsters that attacked us, before we had become enough like them to assert ourselves.

“Wait, don’t assemblages eat other assemblages, though?” says Hyuk, pecking at a roasted crab he’d snatched.

“We think, when they do, the Entanglement is allowing it. Like, if one assemblage gets weak then it allows itself to become fuel for something stronger. Like a giant body reallocating resources to the organs that need them.”

“You say that like all the assemblages are connected,” says Hyuk.

“Everything is connected,” I say.

“I assume you mean that literally and not as a clichéd metaphor?” he says, tossing his head back and swallowing a shiny piece of meat.

“Yes,” I say, and push the tendrils out of my hands to wrap around a nearby fern. The fern grows a little bit bushier, and the yellow criss-cross under my skin glows bright.

“Right,” he says, blinking.

And then we tell him about the past, what we have learned of it, and what the Entanglement showed me, which was much of the same.

“So the Mollusk *was* made.” Hyuk’s crab is finished and forgotten now. He has forgotten his caution and is perched next to Harriet’s knee on a lichen-covered log.



“And old-world humans were not all wicked destroyers. Some of them had ways of knowing from even older times. Some of them tried to create good things.”

“But most of them died in the experiment of mutation anyway,” says Hyuk. “Eh? Isn’t that right? So how do you two know that your bodies are going to respond any differently?”

“I think they already would have, Hyuk,” says Harriet gently. “I think we’re past the point of success or fail here. And we’re successes.”

“Still, seems like an awful lot of risk to be called a gift.”

“Semantics,” I say, another word I learned from Harriet.

“Oh ho, big word o’clock over here,” says Hyuk, but his framework is a fond yellow.

As the evening falls into true night, and the darkness wraps around us thick and heavy, Harriet grows more serious. “What about your story, Hyuk?” she says. “You’ve told us next to nothing. How did you find us? What is happening in the Mollusk?”

For a long moment the raven looks at the soft bark beneath his feet, his talons clenching in and out of it.

“Well, that’s because things are not good in the Mollusk.”

Harriet and I both lean closer.

“You’ve been gone for an entire season. And of course, the Phyla never expected you to return. Myself, I’ve had to lay low, staying with contacts from *The Unquiet Wing* and keeping hidden. But after a week or two of total stealth mode, I felt safe enough to remerge a little, and I started searching for you guys. In the past moon, I’ve been flying

farther and farther west, but the Rock is so godsdamn big that I didn't think I had a turtle's chance in a butcher shop of finding you."

"Why did you keep looking?" I ask.

Hyuk sighs, or, at least, the bird equivalent.

"Guilt," he says. "I think mostly guilt. I had abandoned you, and as unlikely as it was starting to seem, I wanted to know I wasn't the only one of us who had lived, you know?"

"I understand," says Harriet, the firelight casting her face in warm orange light.

"The past few times I flew all the way out here I'd take a break by this western coast then fly north or south along the shoreline as far as I could without completely exhausting myself. I figured if you had survived at all, you'd eventually make your way as far west as it is possible to go."

"Good guess," says Harriet, and she smiles at him. "You found us. The hypothetical turtle escaped the butcher shop."

"I still can't believe you're real."

"Neither can we," I say. "Sometimes."

"But Hyuk, what's wrong in the Mollusk? Tell us," Harriet says.

"Well, it's not really anything that's going to surprise you. Your exile was kind of the start of an increased level of... watchfulness, shall we say. The Phyla began to recruit people, almost all humans, to work as, uh, how to phrase this – as 'enforcers' of rules, or the Phyla's expectations for Molluskan citizens. Cephs have been watched especially closely. No one is getting... physically hurt, per se, but... the atmosphere isn't good. I've

heard of people who have worked in H.E.R.E. their whole lives getting the boot because of something they wouldn't go along with. There's less... tolerance for dissent, let's say."

Harriet is sitting up so straight it's like there is a tree growing up her spine.

"But that's – that sounds so *human!*" she says eventually. "Surely the Phyla and the higher-ups at H.E.R.E. know enough history to know that they're only repeating it. For gods' sakes, that's why we were given access to old-world texts! To avoid the foibles of the old-world, to make a better society – gah, how *frackin'* cliché." Her skin is a raised-ridge boil of red and crimson.

"I'm just telling you what I see."

"What about the mutations?" I ask, changing the subject, because even having briefly known what she knows, I am not really sure what history Harriet is talking about.

"Mutations inside the Mollusk? Oh, there's been more. It's getting harder to keep it quiet. Or, I think so. It's a shady realm. Look at how quietly the folks in charge disappeared you."

"We have to tell them," Harriet says suddenly. She's been rubbing her arm and cuttlefish cheek, as though expressing so much anger was physically painful for her, but she looks up and shoots these words out like arrows. I watch them land.

"Who? What?" says Hyuk.

"The people of the Mollusk. We have to tell them what we know. That they shouldn't fight the mutations, that they should let them happen. Maybe, if you fight it, that makes it more likely to go wrong and –"

"And kill you? Do you have anything to support that?"

"No," says Harriet, "But it seems like a reasonable hypothesis, doesn't it?"

“Well, good luck getting within 500 metres of the Mollusk looking like that. They’ll probably shoot you on sight, you know that right? By Molluskan standards, you’re not just monsters now – you’re contagious monsters.”

“That’s why Clayer and I won’t be the ones telling them.”

“What?” Hyuk and I say together. I am not following Harriet’s plan. I want to reach out and touch her with my tendrils, but we have not talked about when and how I am allowed to do that, so I sit in confusion.

“Hyuk, you have a publication. You’ve seen inside Clayer’s being now, inside the Entanglement. You know we’re right. You have to go back, and *tell them*.”

“Okay, um, two things. One, remember what happened last time I tried to do an exposé in *The Unquiet Wing*? And two, what are you guys gonna do, then?”

Harriet puts her cephalopod hand on Hyuk’s shoulder, or where his neck met his back, in any case. “You’re one of the cleverest people I’ve ever met, Hyuk. You’ll figure it out. You have to, because this could make or break the very future. And as for Clayer and I, we’re going to the mainland.”

“Uh, *pardon*?”

“Answers,” I say. Hyuk is stumped for a moment.

“To what?” he says eventually.

“The past,” says Harriet. “And what comes next. We’ve learned little snippets here and there, from what the – what the Entanglement remembers. But there’s more.”

“So you’re gonna... what?”

“We’re going to find a way across and we’re going to find out how far the Myco Mutations really go, and what they have become, and after that, we will decide whether or not to return.”

Hyuk sits in silence for a long time. Finally, he turns to me, his black eyes glinting in the firelight.

“Any chance you could get me another crab?” he says. “We’ve got some very careful wording to prepare.”

## CHAPTER 38

The morning dawns foggy and cold.

“You could stay with us, you know. For a few days.” Harriet is stretching next to the damp embers, her cephalopod skin a fawn beige, almost matching her human skin except for the white dots raised across it.

Hyuk looks at the two of them and shakes his head. His framework is all sad regret and blue-spiralled branches.

“You said yourselves, the longer something living stays out here, inside this ‘Entanglement,’ the more they mutate.”

“I thought we had convinced you that this is a good thing. Or, if not good, then at least not good or evil or moral in any way.”

“You have, I just... I’m not ready yet.”

Harriet looks at him with great affection, the way a parent looks at a child who has just reached a major developmental milestone.

“I understand,” she says.

“So,” Hyuk adjusts his little leather vest with his beak, “how will I know you two haven’t just died?”

“I suppose you won’t,” Harriet admits. “But share our story anyway, as much as you can.”

“I shall prepare the people of the Mollusk for your return like the coming of a new Messiah.”

“Hey, lay off, I’m being serious,” laughs Harriet.

“So am I,” says Hyuk. “Nothing gets Molluskans going like a secretive mythology laden with religious archetypes.”

“*When* we return,” Clayer interjects, absently tracing their fingertips down the trunk of a spruce, “I do not think we will be welcomed, whatever you do.”

Hyuk glances from one of them to the other, then nods brusquely.

“I do hope to see you again, my friends.”

“You found us once,” says Harriet. “So, I think we will meet again.”

“And I hope, whatever comes next for you, that it is what you wish for.” With one last, long look at them both, Hyuk takes off and flaps away to the southeast.

After Hyuk leaves, Clayer and Harriet sit in silence for a long time. The sun creeps past its highest point, and the day becomes wasted, but neither of them moves. Harriet imagines moss growing up both of their legs, their bodies slowly petrifying, turning to stone like the shell wall of the Mollusk.

Harriet wonders, not for the first time, if they should even bother to press on. Why shouldn’t they both live here, in these new, wild forms, apparently sustained by minimal nutrients, for the rest of their lives?

But of course, the answer is, because of the Mollusk. Because of what Hyuk has told them. Because the future could look very different. And because there are things that only her and Clayer are capable of, now, things only the two of them understand, with one foot still in the realm of the human.

Near nightfall, Harriet stands. Clayer looks at up her questioningly.

“We can’t just keep sitting here,” she says, offering her hand. “Let’s look for some shelter, or fresh water.”

They walk, this time further inland. Tamarack, balsam fir, and spruce cover a forest floor deep with moss. It feels, to Harriet, as though she has been walking across the back of the Rock her entire life. Bog and spongy peat and pitcher plants, boreal forest and balsam fir and fern and alder, barrens and lichen, coast and crowberry and creeping juniper – her feet have carried her over it all, and will continue to do so. All those years inside the Mollusk, the dim hallways and slick catwalks dripping with condensation, feel like a dream. All her work at H.E.R.E. is tainted by what H.E.R.E. has become, by the flawed history of their origins.

In fact, she can scarcely remember the people who populated her Mollusk, her home, except for one. Her father’s face remains clear as a mountain stream to her. Her father, *blushoftangerine*, and Clayer might be the only people she’s ever actually, honestly loved.

This evening it is back to boreal forest again. They haven’t yet reached old Gros Morne, and likely won’t, if they plan to keep the distant smoke in view. But the hills are growing steeper here nonetheless, and Clayer says the glistening red-black vines in the

Whisper Web are getting ever denser, an invisible thicket they step through and on top of without seeing.

It is almost dark when they find the mushrooms.

Harriet has always known, of course, that the Myco Mutations were just that – mycological. Obviously – it was a fungus that transformed mammalian life. It's one of the first things they teach you as a child. But for all the strange fungal growths and small clumps of mushrooms and trumpeting chanterelles that grow on the bodies of assemblages, for all the fungal wonders she has seen, Harriet has, for some reason, never imagined that the Myco Mutations could have mutated mushrooms themselves.

And this is a mushroom forest.

The white stalks, some ringed and some fringed and some flaky, push up through the woods, as thick as human bodies, sometimes thicker, and strong enough to push the trees aside. Harriet recognizes edible boletes, their domed brown tops and porous undersides earning them their common name: the penny bun. She sees a poisonous *Amanita*, the common fly agaric, both young and rounded – like a dark-yellow hardboiled egg yolk in a little white cup – and mature, wide brimmed and concave, like a broad, shallow bowl. There are whole stands of each, the agarics' brilliant orangey-yellow caps speckled with raised patches of off-white, almost polka-dot but not quite, a warning.

Shockingly white angel wings, wide enough for Harriet to sit on, push up from the base of a fallen log that looks meagre in their presence. Bright red *Hygrocybe*, knee-height, pepper the reindeer moss, and of course, corts everywhere, the slimy *Cortinarius* glistening, the spindly ones wavering and wobbling along their stalks, the dark purple and lilac ones growing bulbously and smelling, by turns, like rotting potatoes or sweet fruit.



*Russulas* she does not know by specific name reach almost to the sky, showing her, from below, only their gills and a glimpse of their sandy-beige colour. Or maybe they are *Lactarius*, but she'd have to cut into them to see if they ooze that telltale gooey white 'milk.' Toothed hedgehog mushrooms hang their whitish bristles down above them like stalactites. And then there are some that she doesn't know for sure. Convex white mushrooms grow in clumps out of the sides of the trees. Bell-shaped caps, conical caps, caps with dimples in their centre. Brilliantly blue-green lichen explodes in starbursts across fallen branches, and globules of orange jelly bubble, waxy, from the edges of stumps.

It is like another world entirely.

Harriet looks over at Clayer, and, for what she thinks might be the first time ever, she sees unsuppressed wonder on their face. Clayer is looking around at the mushrooms with their mouth slightly agape, the misty golden light filtering past the trumpet caps of the mammoth fungi and glinting off her equally golden eyes.

"It is beautiful," they say. They reach out and touch the loamy stalk-trunk of the nearest mushroom-tree, delicate with reverence. Their skin glows its soft, almost imperceptible yellow, just like it had glowed that night when Harriet watched their breath sprouting chanterelles. Harriet realizes that this might be how Clayer's symbiont, their fungus, expresses happiness, or contentment. She hasn't really assigned emotions to the fungus itself before. It's an odd thought, but not necessarily an uncomfortable one.

"I did not think..." says Clayer, trailing off and looking back at Harriet.

"You did not think the Myco Mutations made beautiful things?" Harriet prompts them, after a minute.

“Only made monsters,” Clayer says, the hard edge of self-hatred in their voice hidden from neither of them.

Without thinking, Harriet says, “But they made you.” She walks into the centre of the mushroom grove, moss spongy beneath her bare feet, and when did she lose her boots? She can’t remember. She touches Clayer’s cheek and the yellow glow gets brighter at the point of contact.

“Let’s sleep here,” she says, “like in the stories of faeries from the old-world.”

“Faeries,” echoes Clayer, and they turn and lean their forehead against a sweet-smelling stalk, cool and dry. If faeries were ever real, Harriet thinks, they should have looked like Clayer. Not impish and winged, but feral and tangled in their own forest of skin and teeth.

When darkness falls, the stars are visible through gaps where the broad mushroom caps have bent the trees but don’t quite touch their edges together. It’s not often you can see stars on the Rock; the fog and cloud cover hide them most nights, and Harriet, even with – according to Hyuk – a whole season of sleeping outdoors under her belt, has only seen the stars a handful of times.

“What are they?” says Clayer, when she points to them, the two of them lying side by side on their backs on the thick cushion of verdant moss.

“What do you mean? They’re stars. Surely your Nan explained to you about stars.”

“Yes, but –” they pause, seeming to sift through all the words they’ve gathered from Harriet. “Science.”

“Oh, like what *are* they? I get it.”

Harriet looks back up into that rare skyscape and feels inexplicably sad, for a moment, for all that she has lost. Becoming something new is a not a process without grief.

“They’re balls of burning gas and debris, I think. I never read too much about outer space. It seemed silly to me, at the time, to bother with the sky when we were struggling to get by down here on the Earth.”

“Outer... space?” says Clayer. It seems so silly to be talking about this here, in a giant mushroom glade. Almost obscene, to use such dated human words in the presence of humanity’s undoing.

“Here, Clayer, I’ll just show you,” Harriet says. She turns onto her side and rests her head on one crooked arm. She reaches over and gently lifts Clayer’s hand, sliding her own neatly into it so that their palms touch almost flat against each other.

Instantly, Clayer’s little yellow threads shoot out and curl themselves around her fingers, puncturing without puncturing, stitching their skin together without pain, linking them through whatever fragments of the Entanglement they by now have in common.

She begins to feel Clayer’s thoughts, just like on the beach.

She thinks of outer space.

She doesn’t know a lot, but she remembers images from old-world books. She remembers the word ‘nebula,’ and that Earth was only one of multiple planets around the sun. She imagines flying through stars and clouds of pink and blue and gold and purple. She imagines silence, and emptiness.

“Lonely,” says Clayer, out loud.

“Yeah.”

They lie there, holding hands, and twirl each other through shared imaginings, of distant planets made of sand, mushroom forests by multicolour oceans, distant moons on which only the two of them sit. They laugh at the same moments, exclaim in unison.

It is so peaceful. Harriet wants to join their beating hearts together with a living yellow thread, connect their thoughts forever. This is a communication deeper than anything humans have ever been capable of, and she wishes she could share this sense of oneness with everybody, could explain it to those they'd left behind in the Mollusk, could give every person the gift of this feeling.

She feels Clayer feeling the symbiont that lives inside them straining to get closer to her, to the warmth of her body, still so mammalian. Clayer's skin is always so cool to the touch, like the cap of a mushroom. So she rolls in closer.

Clayer says, "Uh –"

"Sorry, I just –" but Clayer is not talking to her, and then she sees the yellow and white tendrils, still like thin roots but thicker than the ones on their palms, pushing out from Clayer's collarbones, forearms, thighs, chest, and stomach.

*Does it hurt?* she thinks.

*No,* thinks Clayer.

It does not bleed.

"What's happening to you?" Harriet whispers. The threads emerging from Clayer dance in the air, scenting her, reaching out across the moss between them.

"I do not know," says Clayer. Harriet lightly taps one of the wriggling threads on the top of their thigh. She feels Clayer feeling this new sensation, but it feels good, not painful. It sends a shiver through them.

“Are you afraid of me?” they say, so quiet in the dark.

*No*, Harriet thinks.

“Do you want me to go away until it stops?” they say, staring down at their wriggling torso.

*No*.

Harriet adjusts her weight so her other hand is free, and reaches out towards one of the tendrils sprouting from Clayer’s sternum. The end of it curls around her finger, and she feels Clayer feeling every ridge of the pad of her finger through it. They can taste the salt of her sweat and the grains of dirt in the grooves and the microbes moving busily on her skin through it. They perceive what the tendril perceives, in every minute detail.

*Huh*, they think, or, at least, they impart the intrigued surprise that usually accompanies ‘huh.’

“No,” says Harriet, out loud this time. “I don’t want you to go away.” *I think I’ve wanted to be near you ever since I first met you.*

Clayer stops absently spinning their fingers through their new hyphae and looks back over at her, their face closer than Harriet had anticipated when she moved. They already know what she is thinking, because she has already thought it. Every exchange is faster than consciousness; she can’t take it back. But she doesn’t want to.

For a moment they are both still, breathing, even though they know what the other wants to do, plans to do. Harriet can understand her own chemical communication, as Clayer is perceiving it. She understands what she is saying, without meaning to say it. The fungus and the forest around them all speak in chemical scents, and hers is layered on top, stronger, warm-blooded, overwhelming.

Clayer closes the distance between them and kisses her.

The longer they hold each other, the more Clayer's yellow hyphae begin to connect them, attach them. Everywhere their bare skin touches, the tendrils stretch out from Clayer's flesh to slip painlessly into Harriet's. The hyphae lift out and readjust with every slight movement, never allowing the connection between their bodies to become solid or entrapping, but rather flowing and shifting, rippling across their skins, a gentle, caressing tether at a hundred points.

And there is something else Harriet is becoming aware of. The whole world around her is unfolding in her brain, mapping out in her mind's eye, a three-dimensional space rushing outward, like a blot of paint bleeding across wet paper, spreading and spreading from the place where her skin touches the ground. Every passing moment it becomes more vibrant. Ferns are unfurling around them and flowers are blooming beside her head – huge, white, impossible flowers. The air almost seems to shimmer with barely perceptible shapes and colours. She can feel every living thing for several kilometres. She feels what Clayer feels but, connected this completely, she is beginning to see what they see, see the Whisper Web itself, exactly as they have always described it. Her mind is rushing out along a hundred different pathways, and she can feel the mushrooms all around them, the trees, the woodpecker inspecting a cavity above them, the vole sleeping under nearby roots, the hungry dogrel over the next hillside, the pair of devilcats running in the mountains – it is almost too much to perceive at once. She feels cells rushing through lignin, mitosis inside her own organs, fungal cells infiltrating and waiting and changing, and then she has to pull away, as the plant life around her and Clayer seems to bend towards their bodies, and each sound she makes creates a burst of green.

## CHAPTER 39

Harriet and I wake in silence, in a bog beneath some windblown shrubs. It has either been a night or an entire moon. We do not know. The mushroom forest feels distant, but might have been yesterday. We glance at each other and I see her thoughts in her Colour and she sees something in me. I do not know what. But we share the same certainty in our look.

Today we are going to cross the ocean.

We have reached a part of the peninsula where we can see across to the distant place Harriet calls Labrador. If we go too long without seeing it, we start to forget it, Harriet and I. The mainland and its meaning, like the Mollusk of memory, fades away in the Entanglement. It is an effort to remember why we are here, sometimes.

When the thought does reappear, and the urgency and importance of what we have done and are doing rushes back to us, I find myself repeating old habits, from Forest.

*Purpose*, I tell myself, and Harriet, by extension. *Purpose*.

Harriet is worried about *blushoftangerine*. It never fully fades; I see it all over her skin. This morning I wrap my fungal threads around her wrist and tell her how certain I am that he is still alive, and that he will find us like we planned. If Hyuk could find us, *blushoftangerine* will.

*Perhaps, if he can't find us here, by the shore, he will return to the Mollusk*, she thinks. *Perhaps Hyuk will meet with him at Camp Port, and they will get him a new quadrutank. Perhaps they already have.*

*Or maybe he is on an adventure too distant to return now, I think. Maybe he is learning the whole story of the past before we do. Maybe one day he will come back to tell it.*

Harriet smiles at me, a little sad, then pulls her arm away.

“We may have split up from blush and Hyuk, but we all seek the same truths,” she says out loud. “Let’s not let Izik’s death be in vain. Or *nighttime-teal-awashwithstars* or any of the people with mutations in the Mollusk who have probably been exiled or jailed or even killed.”

I am ashamed that I have forgotten about Izik, but then I steel my mind and think: *Purpose*. As tempting as the peace that the Entanglement offers is, I cannot let myself fall into its warm arms just yet. No matter how much I want to go back and lie in the mushroom grove and live off of sunlight and run with the river for the rest of my life. Harriet is right; we have a goal. The rest of the Entanglement’s secrets are still out there. The memory of Izik’s face, a face I knew for barely a night, comes clearly into my mind, as though through the focussing of bleary eyes after a thick sleep.

*Remember, remember, remember: purpose.* The Entanglement will wait for you until your work is done. The work of saving what we can still save.

But first, we must cross this expanse too wide to swim.

At midday I am praying, lying on my back, the fungus tendrils sticking out of the back of my body and down into the rock and fine dirt and lichen below me. The sun is warm even though the air is cool. The crisp smell of the spruce trees comes on the wind from one direction, then the fishy smell of the waves gusts from the other. I am in the Whisper Web inside my mind, the Rock stretching out around me, colour on rolling



blackness, the Entanglement as seen through my fungally-altered senses – or at least, this is Harriet’s theory now that she can see it too. I watch another herd of sporebucks on the barrens to the north of us, on the tip of spit of land Harriet calls a northern peninsula. I watch a pack of dogrels running along a river to the east. Did the monsters always have families? I remember thinking of Nan as my group, the way mycos had troupes in my Forest. But it was never so gentle, or never so obvious.

I had not thought the Myco Mutations made anything beautiful. When survival is all you can manage, beauty does not matter.

Or that is what I thought, once.

“I was thinking,” says Harriet, coming to sit beside me. Her fingers twist and glide through strands of my hair, splayed out on the rock. “You came to the Rock on a giant. Perhaps we could leave it the same way.”

I open my eyes and look up at her. Her half-and-half face is part blue and part fawn beige, the brown freckles on her human skin looking like distant silver stars on the cephalic side of her nose, moving and blinking in and out of existence.

“How?” I say, sitting up. The wind off the ocean gets colder each day, and now it whips my shirt against my back.

“I don’t know,” she says. “But maybe you could contact one with Whisper Web – or, the Entanglement. Mind message, sea pulse.” Since sharing our minds with each other, she has started using my sideways speak sometimes, no longer as confused by my meaning or intent. “Maybe...” she hesitates, “maybe you could try to contact blush that way too.”

“Alright. I will try,” I say. Harriet blinks.

“Wait, wait, it was just an idea – and how do we know a giant wouldn’t just crush us?”

“We do not,” I say, shrugging, “still worth trying.”

“Hold on – Clayer –”

I slide down off this slab of rock onto a lower one, then a lower one still, until I am close enough to the water to reach my hands into a rough pool, full of wrinkle snails and tiny crabs. The glow of my flesh casts small circles of light on their shells. My skin has a greenish tinge today, and the fungal veins under it are a bright yellow, getting stronger every day we are being absorbed. Being digested.

Being made new.

Harriet, watching me, does not protest any further. I have never tried to do my praying underwater before, with no soil to dig my fingers or toes into. I do not know if my fungal tendrils can pierce rock. But then I feel them begin to intertwine with the algae and seaweed, like fingers interlocking, like the hand of the land holding the hand of the sea. And the Whisper Web that unfolds before my closed eyes is vaster than any I have known before, with an up-and-down scale as well as a side-to-side one, from the surface to the depths. In it I see much life, but also huge patches of emptiness. The ocean is big, so much bigger than I even thought.

Disappointment sweeps over me for a moment. I cannot find *blushoftangerine* directly, at least not right now, not without many hours to send my mind all over, seeking traces, or clues. There is too much, and it is too far, and I do not see any cephalopod bodies nearby. I remember him asking, a lifetime ago, *does the Whisper Web work in the ocean?*

It is time to find out, I think, to the memory of him. And maybe, if I send out a signal, he will sense it, wherever he is.

I just send out a feeling – to *blushoftangerine*, to any giants who might receive it – a sea-pulse, like Harriet had said. I push a memory of giants waking from their mountains, and the sensation of searching, out into the ocean. I send it hard, squeezing my eyes shut so hard it hurts, my face screwed up and pinching, my hands tensed into spasms. It echoes out away from me like a ripple, different from the slithering along roots and under-soil networks I am used to.

I wonder how far it will go. I allow myself a breath of fierce hope that our friend will feel me in the water – in the fungus and the algae and the echoes of sound – and will know we are alive, that we have made it to the western coast.

When I stand and walk back to Harriet, she is sitting cross-legged on the rocks, taking deep breaths of the cold wind. She raises her eyebrows in question. I shrug again.

“I do not know,” is all I say.

Harriet puts her arm around my shoulder. Her narrow coils of dark curl blow across my face, soft and smelling of salt and earth. “Keep soaking up your sunlight,” she says to me. “I wish I could photosynthesize.”

I lie back down on the stone, and drift into hazy dreams of sporebucks and monsters that do not hunt me, but bow their heads in friendship.

The sound of footsteps wakes me.

For a moment, I think I am still dreaming, because it feels like a dream. I open my eyes, I sit up, and there, right in front of me, giants are rising from the sea. The one from Western Brook Pond is closest; it walks in a straight line towards me, water raining off its

head slab in great sheets as it glides forward. But there are two others, different shapes and heights, one tall and twiglike, its body armored in long, hexagonal columns of dark rock, the other like an enormous human made of stone, coated in algae and barnacles and pink and orange corals.

They move slowly, until their height covers the horizon and blocks out the sky.

I feel Harriet's hand on my shoulder, and I turn and slide off the rock I was lying on, motioning for her to follow. I walk back a bit and press one palm into the soil, entering the Whisper Web, and use my other hand to link with Harriet's and bring her with me.

The three giants loom in the black space like thunderclouds of brilliant light. One is mostly orange, another pink, another pale blue. Their Colour swirls and whorls and speaks and knows.

*You called us*, says the giant from Western Brook Pond.

*Called, called us, humans, directed, directives, connectors, connected*, say the other two, their Colour singing and layering over each other's.

In the Whisper Web, the Entanglement, like this, I do not even feel the need to think in words. Like with Harriet, I simply show the giants what we are asking of them, with the energy of a question.

*Yes, yes, simple-short journey, locating reference markers, L'Anse aux Meadows 51.58, 55.61, Labrador Station 53.31, 60.42, Sept-Îles tour de guet, 50.19, 66.10, come. Come.*

Still a distance from their shore, the Western Brook Pond giant reaches out the end of one pink tentacle, and rests it on the sand. Even its thinnest point is too tall for us to get

any purchase on, so the giant creates ridges in its flesh, which is undeniably cephalopodic, and flickers to us Colours of welcome.

*Fear not, do not, fear, not, do not fear*, it says, with a swirling repetition. I only hesitate for a moment, and then I walk to the lowest ridge and begin to climb.

As soon as we are suspended on the side of the tip of its tentacle, the giant begins to curl its limb around us. I do not feel trapped, just secured by a gentle pressure. It lifts the two of us up, and up – up so high that I can see the Rock spread out below us, see up and down the western coast, the wide stretches of bog and the rivers and ponds fed by waterfalls, etched into the land.

I hold my breath. For a moment, I am pinned in place by it all, the size and the wonder. I see with amazement. Harriet would be proud, if she were looking at me at all, but her gaze, too, is taking in this sight, this whole world painted flat below us.

The giant deposits us on the top of its head-slab. At our size, this looks like any other patch of forest, big enough for us to be comfortable in, covered in firs and moss, although all the plants are only half-alive, drenched in saltwater. A few dead fish are scattered across the dirt, and fungi has already reached hyphae up from under the soil, and is beginning to break down and absorb the bodies.

The ground below us, which is not really ground but the head of a giant, lurches, and Harriet grabs onto a tree, heart catching. I walk, cautiously, to the edge of the head-slab, looking backwards. I sit, looping my arm around a trunk, and pat the ground next to me. Harriet makes her way shakily, switching her grip from trunk to trunk, trying not to stumble.

“It would catch you,” I say, as she sits down. I am certain of this. I trust this giant, now, even though I cannot explain quite fully why. “It is always aware of us, up here.”

*Is this what it was like when you came here?* Harriet asks.

“Yes. But I did not know I was protected. Did not know how to ask for food or water. Did not communicate.”

This giant is much like the one that carried me to the Rock in the first place, it is true. I wonder now, suddenly, if the giants can talk to each other, if they have always known the things that Harriet and I are only just learning. Then again, does it matter now?

*Leaving the same way you arrived,* Harriet thinks. *Leaving.*

*Leaving.*

I lay my hand over the back of her hand and feel my hyphae connect through her skin. I swim through her thoughts and feelings, and she mine, as we stare out at the sun-sinking autumn mountains of her home.

Harriet has only ever known the Rock, and for most of her life, she only knew a tiny fraction of the Isthmus. As the giant wades into the Atlantic, she can hardly bear to see her island fading away behind them. She does not look away, will not; I feel her sentimental stubbornness and so, too, do I know the words for it. The mountains grow smaller and are smoothed out by distance, until the Rock is truly just a slab of reddish-brown stone in the middle of the ocean. Harriet watches it even then, until it becomes a thin brown line on the horizon, until her eyes fail her, and it dips away behind the curve of the earth.

She doesn't realize she is crying. *You will see it again,* I think to her. *And I will protect you until you do.*

The other two giants, with some unspoken farewell, move ahead and sink under the water again. With great, slow strides pushing through a massive weight of water, then with smooth, tentacled swimming strokes, our giant carries us into the Strait of Belle Isle. The memory of what this water was called comes to Harriet unsearched-for, and I learn it too. She still thinks about her old maps and field guides sometimes, despite the missing parts, the gaps and hazy pieces. She still tries to place and pin down the things she sees and their origins and names, because there is a familiarity and comfort to it that she enjoys. But it does not preoccupy her anymore, not the obsessive way it used to. As she and I watch the vast expanse of ocean passing for hours, Harriet does not bother with kilometres or approximations of old-world locations. She just knows there is water, and ahead of and behind us there is land, and there is also everything in between and all at once and it is in her, and in me too, and in the giant beneath us both.

*We are no longer human, I think, or maybe she thinks; it is hard to tell.*

*But we will see what comes next.*

This contents her, and Harriet's contentment is also mine.

## CHAPTER 40

At first, Harriet thinks it's a trick of the light, a shimmer where the clouds of coming night meet the horizon. She calls Clayer over, across the giant's head-slab, to look south along the Strait. They have been travelling for a couple of hours, she'd guess. Swimming, the head-slab is the only part above water, and the waves splash only a few metres down from where the two of them stand, and watch.

“It was a white mist. Like the crest of a wave, but not. Like an upward spray.”

“You already think you know what it is,” says Clayer, reading her skin.

“I have to see it again,” she says. “I have to be sure.”

When the spray does come again, much closer this time, Harriet gasps. The moist air carries the sound of a loudly-sucked breath: in-out, *whomp-whoosh*.

“What is it?” Clayer asks, although they don’t have to. Harriet’s skin is shouting it, dancing with it, tingling with joy and awe.

“A whale,” she says. “It’s a whale.”

Together, the two of them watch as the whale falls in line with the giant, keeping pace easily. It comes close enough for them to see the details of its long, knobbed fins and white, grooved throat. It swims with its back kissing the surface, right along the top of the ocean. No, not ‘it.’ They. The whale is a person, a member of the Ocean Peoples.

Harriet remembers a conversation she’d had with *blushoftangerine*, a lifetime ago.

*I think the Ocean Peoples are all dead.*

She wonders if he’s still out there, and if he knows he was wrong. She hopes so.

*He knows*, says the whale, its broad back flickering to life in a swirling pulse of cephalopodic Colour.

For a second, neither her nor Clayer say anything. There is a pause that hangs in the air over the giant’s salty-forest head like a rain cloud about to burst, and then Clayer says quietly, “I remember this.”

“The whale has Colour,” says Harriet.

“I’ve seen this before.”

“The *whale* has Colour!”

“I thought it was a dream.”



*Not a dream, dream not, no, we watch you, says the whale's skin. Watch-study-wonder, all the way along, what humans, what humans are these, who leave, and left, and embrace-accept the great changes, who?*

Harriet and Clayer listen-watch in stunned silence as the whale's skin speaks to them, Colour words and thoughts and sentiments flowing front to back, blowhole to dorsal fin. The Colours blur into each other and create new meanings halfway along, repeating and restarting. The whale's language is more complicated than a ceph's, Harriet realizes. It's saying more than any ceph can say at once, with their smaller surface areas of skin, more than any other person can say at once, with hands or beaks or lips and tongues. Harriet is both jealous of and confused by it.

The whale's Colour seems to crackle, forks of new thought shooting across its skin like shatter-lines of lightning. It glows from beneath, the way Clayer's symbiont glows.

And then it flashes a Colour signifier Harriet knows: *yellow-ruststripe-blushoftangerine*.

Her own skin starts asking a hundred questions in rapid succession. *How? Where? Is he okay?* But the whale is already curling away, its great body arcing sideways, one long fin rising above the water, as if in salute. Then it dives, its great tail lifting up, water dripping from its edges, and flipping in slow motion, to sink straight down. Pink and purple sparks snap and sizzle across the white patches on its underside.

*We watch*, the Colour says. And as these final fizzing lights vanish into the depths, the sun sets.

Night falls. There are no stars.

*The Ocean Peoples are real. They've met blushoftangerine.* Harriet and Clayer exchange variations on the same shocked restatement for a few moments, Clayer's tendrils in Harriet's wrist.

*This changes everything,* Harriet thinks. *Everything, Clayer.*

*Where do you think blushoftangerine is?*

*I don't know, I don't know – we don't even know what we don't know anymore.*

Harriet begins to cry from a wave of pure exhaustion, mingled with relief, and shock, and sublime wonder. Clayer kisses her forehead, and from the soil they grow a delicate pink mushroom, that they pick and tuck behind her ear.

The giant slows in the dark, as if it is resting too. Floating. The trees of the headslab shelter them. They lie facing each other, and Clayer curls up against Harriet's ribs and falls asleep, their breath cool against her solar plexus. Their skeletal-thin fingers hold Harriet's dirty sweater loosely. She strokes their bare arm and watches the faint glow of yellowish light follow her touch. She wonders if Clayer's fungus is awake, feeling comforted by the weight of Harriet's hand, even when its host's body is sleeping. How much of its consciousness is separate from Clayer's? But then, just as quickly, she discards this line of inquiry. It is no longer a fruitful question to ask.

It is not the point.

They arrive at the mainland as the sun rises in a clear sky. Harriet had assumed it would be overcast, or covered in the decaying ruins of the old-world, but this place shines under a warm light. The trees they see from offshore are red and orange and yellow and dark green. They are making landfall in a forest, and it seems just as empty of human constructions as the one they've just left.

Clayer is excited. Through their hyphae, Harriet shares a sense of homecoming, the complete opposite of the brief sorrow she had felt as they departed from the Rock. Clayer has so much else they want to share with her. Just as she had shown Clayer all the plants and creatures of her island, so Clayer knows intimately much life on the mainland.

The tentacle reappears at the edge of the head-slab. Together, she and Clayer climb out onto it and lay down flat on their stomachs. The tentacle curls, and there is a terrifying moment where they flip upside down and Harriet feels the lurch of gravity as she begins to fall, but then her back hits more of the giant's flesh, and soon she and Clayer are pressed safely inside a coil again.

The giant unrolls them on a rocky beach, and the two of them slide down, picking their way out of the intertidal zone, over slippery rafts of bladderwrack, sharp barnacles, and the hollow, knobbed, white-green tests of dead sea urchins. When they've reached sturdier ground, Harriet turns, and sees the giant already wading away. This time, without her and Clayer atop its head-slab, it is sinking completely under the ocean.

"Where is it going?" she asks Clayer. "Back to where it and the others came up from?"

"The Deep," they say, also watching it vanish.

"Maybe it will walk on the ocean floor all the way to another continent," Harriet says, and something about this idea makes her smile. The unlikeliness of the image, mixed with gratitude, even fondness for the giant. "I hope it finds a good place. A place that makes it happy," she adds. "Maybe blush will see it, talk to it."

"Hope," says Clayer. And then the two of them turn and face the forest.

The trees are taller than Harriet is used to. It makes her even more apprehensive about walking west into the mainland. So many secrets could be hiding in there. So many dangers. But Clayer starts off without hesitation, and Harriet knows they will protect her, always, so she follows.

They walk for an hour or so before the trees part at the edge of a gentle ridge, and below them spreads a heath, a clearing in a valley, scooped out as if by some long claw. Perhaps it was a road, once – Harriet can see the remains of greyish rubble at the bottom of this slope – but now it is full of flowers the size of her head, reds and pale blues and yellows.

And it is beautiful.

Clayer takes her hand. This is unexpected, but makes her smile. She glances down and sees the different colours of both of their symbionts flickering side-by-side, yellow veins inside Clayer's green-tinged hand, blue and pink patches rolling like clouds on the surface of her own. The tendrils thread into her palm, connecting their minds. Clayer is not looking down. Their eyes study the horizon, and they point.

Far to the west, snaking up from the dense trees, there is a thin trail of smoke.

The trees across the valley below them seem to sway and warp to either side, as though this forest is opening a path within itself, beckoning to them. The wood seems to transform from solid to rubbery in an instant, and the colours of the horizon line seem to drip down into the colours beneath it. It is a message on the skin of a different sort of body. It is the kind of display only possible from something vast and sentient and united. Harriet watches all this happen in the span of several heartbeats and the realization hits her so hard she rocks physically backwards on her heels.

This entire place is an assemblage.

Clayer comes to the same conclusion. *This is an Entanglement*, they think. They reach out with their other hand and sink hyphae tendrils deep into the trunk of a spruce tree. Harriet feels the voice of something enormous flow through Clayer and into her as well.

*Hello*, it says.

She and Clayer both inhale, small gasps.

The birdsong all around them weaves itself into a symphony with the wind in the trees and the rustling of animal bodies, as though all the connected creatures here are speaking about them. This Entanglement – or this part of one continuous Entanglement; Harriet does not know – is ages older than the one on the Rock. While the island's remoteness kept it uninfected for many years, long enough to build the Mollusk, to become a society, to be a human home, here on the mainland it is already everywhere, encompassing everything. That smoke, that real and distant smoke – were the people who made it already part of this web? And what about where Clayer had come from? Would the Entanglement reach there eventually, taking the Myco Mutations to the next level? Had it already?

As the Entanglement flows through her mind, tingling across her cephalopod skin, Harriet can see what it is doing, what it will continue to do, on the Rock and elsewhere.

*The individual is fallacy.*

I am like one sentient microbe in a giant body, Harriet thinks.

*The Entanglement holds us all.*

Holding onto Clayer, who is holding onto the tree, Harriet feels observed, but more than that – she feels seen. She feels herself becoming known by the Entanglement in the same complete way that she has become known by Clayer, beyond the limits of the word.

Her cephalopod skin turns sunset pink, rippled with streaks of orange, the Colour of amazement, anticipation, alacrity.

“Come on,” she says, squeezing Clayer’s hand gently. “We have work to do.”

Clayer looks at her, their smile small and cautious. “We will go back,” they say.

“One day,” Harriet says, nodding, “when they’re ready.”

Together, the two of them step into the next world.