



WIKTOPHER

REKKA BELLUM

Wiktopher

Desert tales

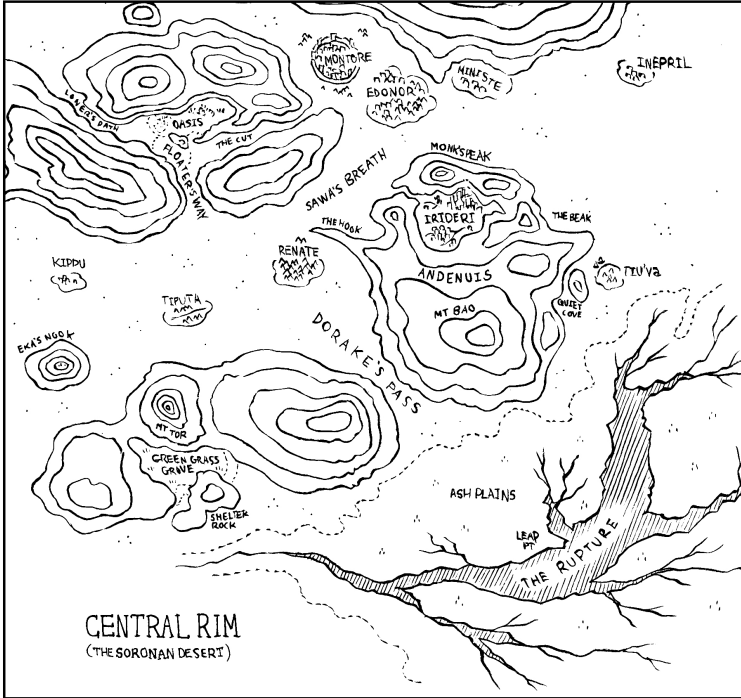
Rekka Bellum

Table of Contents

Bed Of Dust	3
Mountain With No Name	13
The Sandfin	21
Tiputa Pit Stop	31
Beobug	41
Skyrock	53
An Oasis	57
Montore	87
Little Light	109
Tent Village Of Renate	121
Kingdom Of Irideri	137
The Ilk town of Balandri	163
Toronka	183
Lupen's logbook	197
The Big Dark	209

Lexicon	217
Locations	217
Characters	221
Flora	233
Constellations	241
Other food and drinks	242
Entertainment	243
Professions	245
Misc	246
Events	249
Languages	250

This story takes place in the Central Rim of the Soronan Desert, but the world is bigger than this region. The wind blows counter-clockwise around the planet. The top of the planet is referred to as Yoramawa, and it's bottom as Yoralo.



Directions in Wiktopher are written in Finic:

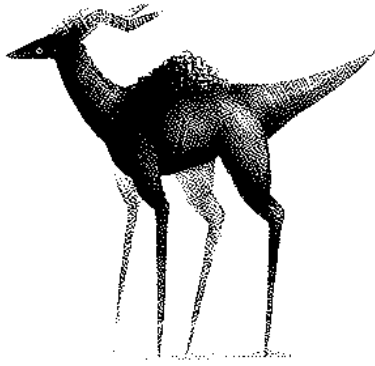
Saa'mu(sawa'muko) — against the wind

Saa'ta(sawa'atae) — with the wind

Yora'mu(yoramawa'muko) — towards the soul of the land

Yora'ta(yoramawa'atae) — away from the soul of the land

Bed Of Dust



The giant walkers of the Soronan desert. There are three Ilk in existence: Oto, Bala and Vol. To communicate with each other, Ilk produce low-frequency vocalizations at high amplitudes.

“When we, people of the Soronan Desert, are ready to die, we journey to the Southern Ash Plains to leap into the Rupture, to take death before it takes us. Because it is a conscious choice we call it a leap, but what is happening to me now isn’t that, it wasn’t my choice.”

One end of a tether was tied around Lupen’s waist, the rest stood upright, with waves moving across its length. The end of the line was frayed, and the once-tight braid was coming apart, its arms reaching for a blue ribbon dancing overhead, a piece of sky. Lupen’s arms too were extended skyward, apart from the blue band the world was opaque, monochromic yellow. Not knowing how far the ground was, nor when pain would happen, gave Lupen’s entire body a constant unpleasant sensitiveness.

“I remember being grown, I couldn’t see, or smell, but I could hear singing. Someone was singing to me while I was still in the ground. Wow. I remember that! I wonder what else is rattling around in here? Can I remember life as a seed? Or life before that? Ah. No, I can’t remember. There was only darkness. Darkness scares me. How can I know I exist if I can’t see or feel anything? But wait, rocks exist, and they can’t smell, see or feel — Well, at least I think they can’t. Maybe that’s what it was like to be a seed, and before I was even made into that, and before a rock was a rock. I felt nothing then, and after I die I will feel nothing. It’ll be the same. That makes it okay doesn’t it? Yea, it’s okay. This is okay. I’m okay.”

A great dark mass met with Lupen’s body, followed by a great wave of pain. And then, nothing.

The seed, the light, we sow, we sow.
A leaf, a child, I grow, I grow,
My heart, my mind, hello, hello.

Lupen, eyes closed, was becoming part of the desert once more. Soon, Lupen would be just a word.

Together, forever.

Bits of rope lay in the sand. Small breaths escaped from Lupen's mouth.

Below, below.

"It's time." The bones and muscles agreed, but the brain refused to give in. "No one is letting go!"

"But we're broken! It hurts!" The left arm and its corresponding muscles cried out in pain. Then, came a rush of adrenaline, the body and the mind stopped quarreling and began to work together again.

Lupen looked around, but the Ilk was gone.

Lupen's toes buoyed to the sand's surface. "They're all gone. Everyone is gone." Lupen wanted to cry. "Why didn't I die from the fall? This is cruel, too, *too* cruel!"

With the two suns perched high above, without cover or water, it wouldn't take long for death to come. "What is the point of *this*!" Lupen cried out, angry at the desert, weeping at the thought of never seeing Volare again. No tears came, the body couldn't spare the moisture, the skin felt tight, as if pulled in different directions, crisp, broiled by the two suns. The scarf had disappeared in the fall and moving to search for it was out of the question.

I'm useless, Lupen thought. Then this mind became tired of thinking.

Lupen woke again later to more pain, and more sorrowful thoughts. Although at this point, even the brain had too little energy and will to conjure up anything positive.

A leaf, a child, I grow, I grow...

This song was soothing. Lupen's cheek lay flat on the sand, eyes unable to point skyward because of this heavy, heavy head, eyelids drawing down over the eyes. "No wait, not yet!" Lupen's yellow eyes exclaimed, they'd found something moving in the distance.

An Ilk? No. Smaller than an Ilk, but big. Very big!

The figure was coming this way. "This better not be land sickness playing tricks." Now *that* would be cruel."

The closer the figure came, the more details Lupen could make out. There was a tall rider sitting atop a furry, large-eared beast. They were enormous from afar, and even more so up close. The rider disembarked and walked over, carrying a blue scarf, the one Lupen's mapa had made — it had slipped off during the fall. It looked tiny, held between the giant's thick digits. A pair of heavy knees crashed onto the sand floor, the stranger's head towered high above, obscuring one of the two suns.

"Hello Lupen of Volare," the rider's voice boomed, startling a flock of Passari Tremblers.

The giant had dark hair, sharp facial contours, eyes like silver marbles, and carried a thick yellow robe that resembled the desert. The robe was as large as a dune, and could serve to shelter a fair-sized group of people. The most impressive detail was the height of this being, thin with proportions that dwarfed most. Now, those silver orbs stared at Lupen's broken body.

"How do you know my name?!" Lupen exclaimed, startled by the stranger's words.

"It's written on your face, remember?" The rider replied with a soft smile. "I'm Uno."

Lupen was growing weaker, drifting in and out of sleep. "Look up at the sky. Protus is out. Name all of the skyrocks that you know, loud so I can hear." The giant said in a commanding voice.

When Verido children were young, they'd make a game of naming all of the known bodies in the sky. The names were difficult, so anyone who could remember them all won the game. The majority of the skyrocks were not visible to the naked eye, but the children were taught that they were up there. No one remembered who had named them, they just passed the names down through generations. Protus was one of the moons in view now. Encela was another.

Lupen knew many of the names, but was too tired to remember them all, "Baladvos." A fear gripped Lupen then, was Uno here to carry this body into the next world? Was there such a place? "Cencitris. Naxagorus." Was this giant the embodiment of death, or a hallucination? There was a chance that the pain in this body was

so grand that it brought forth these visions. In a moment, these colorful visions of Uno and the beast would vanish from the world, and the darkness would take over, “Liminik. Omoretus.” The darkness did not come. Uno and the beast were very stubborn hallucinations. Thinking about skyrocks kept Lupen’s mind away from the growing allure of sleep.

Uno began unfastening sheets of rolled fabric from the beast’s back, all the while humming a tune that reverberated all the way down into Lupen’s core. The tune was soothing, like a salve, it helped to quiet the pain, “Retna. Alpaninsis.”

Uno pulled out some long poles and put up a tent, then laid a vibrant orange carpet inside it. Another bag lay strapped to the furry creature’s side, Uno grabbed it and began to unload its contents. A collection of herbs, a small kettle, mugs, some grains, plates, a crate of waterstones¹ and a bag-full of other miscellaneous items.

Uno walked back over to Lupen, “you’re only missing Aristollo.”
 “I’ve never won the skyrock game,” Lupen breathed.

“That’s okay,” Uno said. The giants scooped the Verido’s body up with ease, and carried it inside the tent gently.

While Lupen slept, Uno stayed close, sitting at an arm’s reach, reading through a pile of old books, a thick finger rapidly tracing from the top to the bottom of every page. The rest of the time, Uno was cooking and caring for Lupen’s wounds, leaving the tent every now and again, but never for long.

At one time, Lupen noticed that Uno held a copy of *A Tale of Three*, covered in annotations, but could not gather enough energy to ask about it. Overcome by a sudden wave of fatigue, this body and mind agreed that it was time for another nap.

“You look better,” Uno said one morning, offering the patient a cup

¹**Waterstones** A liquid preserved in a hard membrane, protecting it from evaporation. The water can be extracted using a press, or a heavy tool. It’s also possible to draw out the liquid by putting the stone in the mouth, the water will seep out from a collection of pores on the stone’s surface.

of lemilim² tea.

Lupen nodded, sadly, feeling better only physically. “Yea. Part of me does anyway. You don’t have anywhere to be? I feel bad to keep you here like this.”

“Everything heals in time. The sand doesn’t blame the wind for shifting it around day after day, and the wind doesn’t know guilt. Take your time.”

Uno was quiet, and did not always care to answer questions.

“Why do you carry so many books?” Lupen had asked once.

“They are my roots,” was all Uno had said.

Like every other first sunrise they’d spent together, the giant served tea, a mixture of medililly³ and lemilim herbs. “Great for circulation,” Uno would say.

Lupen did not know how much time had passed, but had noticed that the wind outside was getting stronger everyday. A constant strong wind in this area meant that they were in the gusty season. I’ve been here a long, long while haven’t I, Lupen thought, there are 240 sunrises in an annum, I’ve seen at least 30.

All places in the Soronan Desert were gusty at some point or another, but the Ilk walked with the wind and seasons, staying ahead of the gusty time of year. Verido people were blessed with good weather all annum long. Storms could still happen on the back of an Ilk, but they were rare.

Today, Uno seemed especially interested in the surrounding environment. After serving tea, the giant’s silver eyes scanned the skies and the horizon, before stopping on a mountain. “Drink your tea. You need to be in good shape if you’re going to climb a mountain,” Uno said with a grin. “That one, right?” A long finger pointed to a tall mountain in the distance, a thick layer of clouds obscured its

²A culinary herb with a subtle tang, used fresh or dried. It has antifungal properties. It is often steeped as tea.

³**Medililly.** A rare leafy plant. It is hard to grow, requires much water and attention, and takes annums to grow to maturity (the only time when the plant gains its medical properties). It is used to reduce inflammation.

upper half, “all the way to the top is what you said. Very brave of you.”

“What? I never said that,” Lupen replied, “I’m better than I was, but I’m not fully healed.”

Uno scanned the Verido’s body, stopping at the face. “You’re healed enough.” The tall being spoke in a calm, inspiring, authoritative voice, but those silvery eyes had the power to lull you into doing almost anything, they could see past your flesh and pulled at your insides.

“Why would I want to climb that mountain?” Lupen asked, eyes now set on the mountain, wondering if it had always been there. Uno had cast a spell on the world, the mere mention of a mountain had spawned one into existence.

“My friend came back today,” Uno said, walking out of the tent, “come, let me introduce you.”

Lupen felt too weak to stand, but Uno pretended not to notice.

“Come!” Uno insisted. Lupen stood up, groaning, hands grabbing onto anything they could, crawling over to the entrance of the tent.

“Lupen, meet Kit!”

Images of a tall rider sitting atop a beast resurfaced. Kit was a large big-eared creature. It had light-coloured fur with black spots spattered all over. Two dark spots sat over its eyes, giving Kit a constant air of severity and general discontent.

“I thought hyroos were extinct...”

It occurred to Lupen then that like the mountain with no name, Uno was familiar. Lupen remembered a story with giants that towered above the clouds and spent all their time admiring the passing skyrocks and far away lights. They kept their eyes to the skies, but then one day, a skyrock landed at their feet and they looked groundward, watching sandstorms forming and dissipating. Green things began to sprout at their feet. The tall ones witnessed this change with great interest, they were delighted to see the green spread. They spent so much time looking down, that they began to shrink.

“It’s you,” Lupen mumbled, eyes fixed on Uno, unable to draw

breath, it was like the air had vanished from the world. Nothing in the environment had changed. This was awe.

“What was it like in the early days of the world?” The Verido asked suddenly, eyes full of wonder.

Uno laughed. A thunderous, but friendly laugh that did not confirm or deny it. Lupen spent the rest of the day watching the ageless giant. Uno’s head did not reach the clouds. Lupen tried to imagine what other great creatures lived in the desert.

The nameless mountain came back to Lupen’s mind then. “I’m going to climb you.” The next day, Lupen shared this intention with Uno, who smiled and denied ever having introduced the idea in the first place.

“Good idea.”

One morning Uno got up and began packing up the carpet, the herbs and the waterstones. It was time to go. Before they parted ways, Uno handed a copy of *The Tale of Three* to Lupen.

“For you,” the book was bound with a beautiful red thread, made from a material unknown to Lupen. Even the paper was different, it was textured and had a blue tint. “I transcribed it from a rare original. It’s all true, all about your people. You’ll enjoy it.” There was another gift too, a small sheet of fabric rolled up tight and folded over itself so that it was now the size of a small loaf of bread. Uno also gave Lupen a single short banabo pole. “Fabric is hard to come by in these parts. You can use it for shelter.”

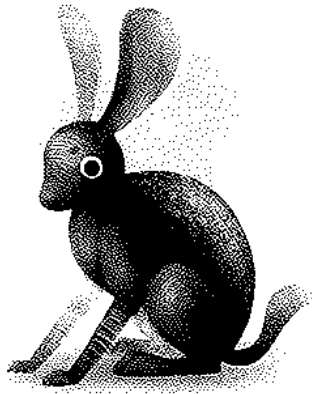
“Thank you.” Lupen presented a gift too, Levi’s blue scarf. “My mapa did tell me I would need it long, maybe it’s because it was meant to be yours.” Uno accepted it, with many thanks said. It appeared tiny on Uno’s neck, the piece of fabric could not go a full two turns around it so the giant wrapped it around once. Uno took a liking to it straight away, carefully rearranging the knot, as if handling the petals of a flower.

Uno climbed up on Kit’s back, sending a flurry of sand flying around them.

“Aristollo was an Iridi, and a good friend of mine, reminds me of

you, actually.” As the giant said this, right before Kit bounded up high and far into the horizon.

Mountain With No Name



Hyroos are large creatures with big rounded ears and strong hind legs. Their snouts are large, they can smell and hear things from far away. These beasts are known for being able to run and jump long distances with little effort, they grow in moist environments, although they are thought to be extinct.

Lupen, carrying a bag full of waterstones, loaves of teaweed[^] bread, and a few dried root vegetables, headed toward the mountain. Lupen's couldn't walk well, or fast, but made good time, arriving just as the first sun rose over the horizon.

On the climb, there was no evident road or path to take, Lupen progressed slowly, climbing faces of jagged rock, finding cracks and creases for support, stopping often to eat, sleep, or to watch the world below get smaller and smaller. The mounting altitude was comforting, like being on the back of an Ilk. The sand plains stretched past the limits of Lupen's vision, what looked unfamiliar from the ground was easy to recognize from up here. Their former campsite was just a few dunes away from the mountain.

Lupen eventually arrived at a point on the mountain that exceeded the height of an Ilk. "If I were a giant, this scene would be most ordinary! Oh yes! With a flick of my finger, I could brush that dune away or pinch a new one over there!" Lupen said with a laugh, gesturing over specific points on the horizon.

Soon thick wet clouds engulfed everything in sight. The air became moist. "Like breathing water!" The walls were perspiring, stained with green. Lupen's climb slowed to a crawl. It wouldn't take much to send this body over the edge.

"One fall was plenty." Lupen mumbled.

Then finally, Lupen's hand reached up to find a grip, but instead of a rock, it found wet moss.

The Verido rose, gazing at the top of the mountain with no name. The summit was flat and full of shrubbery and flowers. The smell was dizzying. Mesmerized at the sight of a bright purple flower, Lupen's knees met with the damp ground. The flower had massive petals, arranged in tight rows and bound together by a single fuzzy yellow button. Little droplets of mildew had accumulated on the petals, resembling jewels. "Is any of this *real*?" Lupen asked, fingers catching some of the droplets to taste them.

Amongst the flowers and wet leaves was a red-haired being, asleep, chest rising and falling with every breath, pink lips curved into a

smile. All these things made for a bizarre, yet wondrous sight. Verido people liked to color their hair, but no dye could produce a red like that. The tone was so rich and so vibrant that it burned these eyes. This creature was unique, different, with round ears.

Lupen took a step back, keeping a line of tall grass between them. Awakening to a stranger could be unpleasant, Lupen thought. There was also a chance that this person did not care for the company of others, why else would anyone be alone up here? Perhaps this place was a refuge, a place of rest, or some sort of secret garden. It didn't appear that anyone else had ever come here. The grass was tall and thick, it had been allowed to grow unhindered for many, many annums. Lupen gulped then, realizing how careless it had been to climb up here, to a hostile place without a clear goal, and wondered if Uno knew that someone lay here, atop the mountain.

There was no shelter here, no pots or a table, not even a kettle, but there were fresh herbs everywhere. These nostrils could sense many different varieties, but could not put a name to them. Every passing moment revealed something new and amazing, but Lupen's attention was on the one with red hair. "I ought to call you something. How about Saffa?" Lupen waited for a response for a short while, then nodded to no one. "Saffa it is, until you wake up anyway. What question should I ask you first? Where's your kettle?" Lupen thought this one funny. "What is this plant? And that one? What about this one? Yes. So many plants to ask about, maybe I can take some home!" The Verido paused then, there was no more room for grieving in this heart, there was no point.

With all this thinking and speculating Lupen thought that a long time must have passed. "No one sleeps forever, right?" Saffa did not stir, the slow breathing continued. Lupen sighed, impatient, but knew better than to disturb the sleep of another without good reason. Lupen would have to wait for a cue, a yawn, maybe some stretching or some wrinkling of the eyes. After much waiting, the sleeper still lay there, not a yawn or hint of eye wrinkling.

The mountain was quiet. Lupen watched the flowers all day, undisturbed. There was an astonishing variety of plants, some sat

atop lanky stems, others had long green fingers, curling around bits of neighboring grasses. A beautiful rosary of dew drops accumulated on everything. Saffa's skin bore these silvery jewels too, the result of the occasional droplet of water slipping down the center of a leaf, and dripping onto this living canvas. Saffa's torso now had a complicated motif all over it, thousands of little wet eyes.

After many days, burdened by disquietude, Lupen decided to try and speak to the stranger.

"Ahem—" clearing the cobwebs from this throat was the first step, "he-hello?" A quiet voice was key, no sense in startling Saffa into wakefulness. No answer. I'll have to be a bit louder. "Hello?" Again, no answer.

A fear gripped Lupen then, what if Saffa was stuck in a state of perpetual sleep and couldn't wake up? Lupen could still wait a few days longer. Dwindling supplies wasn't an issue, there was enough plants and water here, but loneliness was a factor to consider. Verido people lived in groups and were seldom left on their own. Lupen imagined being here for annums, this Saffa-waking vigil seemingly unending. Maybe this was a trap? To keep people here until they were too tired to move, and then plants would sprout from their ears and make a garden of their flesh. Haunted by such thoughts, Lupen decided that staying here forever was not an option, but leaving meant that the Verido would always wonder about the one sleeping in the bed of grass.

"Just a few days longer, then I'll leave."

The air at the foot of the mountain was always thick with sand, but here it was fresh and clear. Its perfume varied depending on the time of day. Lupen imagined a flower guild, busy regulating smells using a timetable with slots allocated to each flower type. There was no need to protect the skin from the harshness of the desert. Lupen had no need of a sweater either, it sat at the waist along with the vest that was underneath. Lupen found a spot in the grass next to Saffa, then sleep grabbed hold and would not let go. The flowery scent permeating the area could rob travel-worn visitors of

their wakefulness.

Lupen dreamt of a city erected on the back of a giant hyroo, onto which the inhabitants had braided its fur into elaborate houses. The leaflings would play hide-and-seek in the forest of hair. A hatter made elaborate hats from the fur, twisted into high spirals or matted into various geometric shapes. Life here was idyllic and peaceful. Lupen was a hyroo whisperer and would go to the head to laugh and whoop with the hyroo, the sound travelling far across the world. In the dream, someone arrived and shouted so loudly that it threw the city, along with all its inhabitants off the hyroo's back. Lupen fell into darkness. The hyroo leapt from one planet to the other, and bodies were adrift in space. There were no stars, and the hyroo vanished in the distance. Even the suns had gone. Lupen felt nothing, and began to weep.

Then, a loud noise woke up Lupen. The whooping sound from the dream was real! Looking up, Lupen saw a large figure passing through the thick layer of clouds above, it landed opposite of the bed of grass without a sound and without disturbing the droplets on the leaves. The beast had large round ears, like Kit, in fact, it looked very much like Kit although its fur was different. Lupen didn't know very much about hyroos.

"Is that you Kit?"

Sitting up, mildew trickled into the grass from Lupen's chest. That fear of bodily intrusion by plants returned, but these ears had no sprouts, and the mouth and nostrils were also spared. Lupen thought then that perhaps Saffa had arrived around the same time, and exhausted, had lain here for a rest.

The beast let out a laugh then, a high-pitched noise causing droplets to slide off their beds. This was definitely the sound Lupen had heard in the dream. The creature was a hyroo, like Kit. It moved over to Saffa and went in for a good long lick. Saffa yawned and stirred, then smiled, lips curving and carving a new shape for the cheeks. Then the arms and legs stretched out, Saffa's hands found the tip of the beast's snout and moved to caress its large head.

All the while, the beast kept its eyes on Lupen, Saffa's eyes opened and followed its gaze and stopped upon the stranger. They stared at each other for a long while, but Saffa's silvery voice broke the silence.

"Can I have that?" Saffa asked, reaching forward and tugging at the isilk sweater wrapped around the Verido's waist. Lupen blinked, and undid the sweater, handing it over without hesitation. Saffa slipped it on, then put a pink nose in it to smell it. "Hmm! Smells like sand and earth! I can smell the hands that made it! Ah! I love sweaters, they say so much about a person and of the world. Every fiber tells a story you know! I can smell yours, most of all." Saffa took a deep whiff of it again. "You wear this a lot!" Saffa smelled the fibers some more, and looked at Lupen again, wide-eyed. "Oh oh oh oh oh...ohh... ohhh oh!" This Oh-ing did not stop for some time. "Oh. Oh oh! No no no!" Saffa said, reaching forward and putting their foreheads together. "You're lucky to have survived a fall like that! Oh, I'm glad your bones are better."

Saffa was alive and full of energy. Lupen didn't know what to say, this fool of a tongue had somehow gotten itself into a terrible knot, plus all this talk of sweaters was confusing. Saffa left the bed of green and went to look at some flowers, body swaying from side to side as if there was a song playing no one else could hear.

Saffa turned to face Lupen. "Are you ready to go? I'm dying to get down there to see what's changed!"

Lupen swallowed hard. "Um. Wait. I have so many questions!"

"Nope! No questions! I forbid all questions unless they are about food, but I will say this! My name is Eka, and that fuzzy beast is," Eka paused, as if trying to remember something important, but the hyroo filled in the silence, letting out a series of quick low barks. "Hush! We are Eka and Hush!" Eka said, a hand brushing bits of red hair behind rounded ears. Hush, the hyroo, let out a whoop, taking a seat by Eka, who was inspecting the markings on Lupen's face. "Lu-pen. Lovely! Will you come and see the world with me?" Without waiting for an answer, Eka climbed up on Hush's back. "Let's go Lu!"

Lupen was too stunned to answer. Eka's arm shot forward and gripped the Verido's collar, then, with a yank and a pull, both were sitting on the beast. Seconds after that, Hush pushed off the ground with its powerful hind legs, bounding high and away from the mountain top, piercing the layer of wet clouds, the sandy world below coming into view. Eka laughed, while the other passenger tried not to scream. Hush made a few dampening landings, before its paws reached the warm yellow soil.

Both slid from Hush's back. Eka laughed at the state of the Verido's hair and brushed a hand through it to comb it back into place, the blue dye was all gone now, washed away by both wind and time.

"Where should we go first?" a round, and pink button nose pressed right up to Lupen's tanned, flat nose.

Lupen's eyes became round, lips curling inwards, with cheeks turning a deep shade of red.

"You're so timid!"

Lupen pulled away then. "I'm not timid! I'm shocked! You were unconscious just a moment ago! This is weird."

"Do you always call things you don't understand weird? If you want weird-weird look at this," Eka's ears wiggled about, independent of each other, waiting for a reaction.

Lupen smirked, like Eka, Verido too had great command of their ears and began to mirror the ear wiggling. To finish, Lupen's flute-shaped ears unfolded and flared open, before twisting back into shape. Eka watched the trick and laughed aloud. "Here's a weird-weird move I bet you can't do." Lupen said. A whistle tunneled out from the Verido's rounded lips, a poem in Ilken.

Mi Re. Do Re. Fa.. Mi.... Sol___ _____ Re.. . .
 Fa_____ Re..___ . .
 Fa.._ Do Re.. Fa. _____ .. Do.... Mi.._
 Mi.... Re . . _____ Do.._ .. Re_
 Mi.... Re.. Do.._ .. Re.. ___

Eka's smile would broaden and narrow depending on what was

being said in the poem. Was it possible that Eka knew Ilken? Only Verido Voices knew how to speak it. Lupen stopped, turning red again. “Did you... understand the lyrics of the song?”

“Something about a beautiful Saffa flower on a green mountain,” Eka said, smirking still, “I’m flattered.”

Lupen couldn’t believe it. How is it that everyone out here understands Ilk tongue? The Verido was going to ask, but didn’t have time because Eka had wandered off, running through the sand, kicking up loads of it while laughing.

“Do you know a city called Inepril?” Eka asked, kicking up more sand while exaggerating a walk.

“Vol went by it a few annums ago, not much left there though. When the waterstone well went dry, everyone left.”

Eka paced back and forth, making a mental note of this. “Um. Okay! Then Montore it is!”

“Why do you want to go there?”

Vol stopped there every annum, Montore was modern and exciting. Lupen had heard that many important people lived there. Lupen had never stepped down to visit any city while living on Vol, only the adventurous, or those who exchanged goods with locals climbed down.

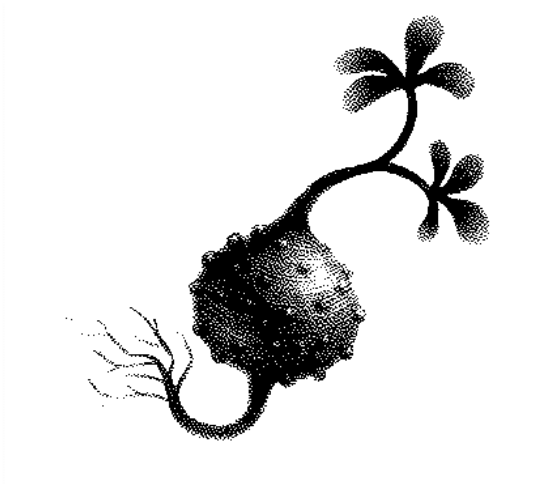
“They make really good babam[[^]] cakes there. Cakes paired with a fresh cup of mepperpint[[^]] tea.” Eka paused, eyes closed with a hand pretending to hold a cup. “It’s like your insides become green! Maybe they really do turn green, I’ve never checked. I will get you a cup as soon we get there, and we’ll fill a bag so we never run out!” Eka continued, before climbing back up onto Hush.

Lupen laughed and moved onto the hyroo’s back. “So we’ll live off mepperpint leaves then?”

“No. No you can’t. If you eat too much your eyes will sprout leaves.”

Lupen fell silent, suddenly very afraid of mepperpint.

The Sandfin



A Cactub is a nutritious, bulbous root vegetable. They spend most of their time underground, and only emerge at dark to gather moisture from the surrounding air. Cactubs are sensitive to loud noises and movements, and they temporarily seize when panicked.

Eka, Lupen and Hush wandered the desert, alleviating their thirst with waterstones. Hush could no longer stand to have any weight on its back and walked behind them, panting. They could not get to Montore fast enough, though the thought of cake and tea did offer some motivation. During the walk, Eka sang about babam cakes, listing the ingredients aloud. Every song ended with a solo of groans and growls, courtesy of Lupen's empty belly.

“Ba-ba-ba-bam cakes! Ba-ba-ba-bam cakes!”

~

Babam Cake

Ingredients

Ten babams
Two marima leaves
Two avoka nut pods
Three bushels of nutshroos
Six bunches of bobonions
Seven sprigs of dilly herbs
One bale of teaweeet, stemmed and floured

Instructions

Remove skins from babams, and dice into cubes. Boil with a marima leaf until soft. While babams are softening, crack one avoka nut in a pan and saute diced bobonions and chopped nutshroos. Cook until all the liquid has evaporated, then let cook until browned. Chop the dilly herbs, add to pan with nutshroos. Mix together and take off heat.

Drain babams, mash with a stone mortar and let cool. Add teaweeet flour to mashed babams. Take a handful of dough and flatten into a disk, add some nutshroo mix into the center and cover with more bam dough. Crack another avoka oil in a pan, and fry until golden, flip, and repeat.

~

“Please stop singing about food,” Lupen said.

They tried to ration some teaweed bread, but Hush, hungry, raided their stores after the last second sunset. All five loaves had already been eaten, the remnants now scattered across the desert floor. So, Eka and Lupen sucked on waterstones, slowly drawing out the water.

“We’re going to die out here,” Lupen said, groaning.

Eka did not share Lupen’s concerns. “Haven’t you ever walked on foot in the desert before? To those who know how to look, there’s always something to eat.”

“Verido don’t walk on the ground,” Lupen said, every mention of eating made the stomach whine again, “if what you’re saying is true, then why aren’t we finding anything?”

“Because it’s too hot!”

“Of course, only idiots would be out here in this heat.”

“Oh! The things you say Lu, it’s like you’re not of this world! When the suns set we should be able to find something.”

Lupen continued to complain, but in a hushed, low voice.

Then suddenly, Eka stopped, stomped on the ground a few times. “We’ll set camp here,” Eka said, pleased with the spot.

Lupen was too tired and too hungry to ask why this spot was good, it looked like any other spot of sand in the desert. Together, they built a makeshift tent using Uno’s fabric.

After the second sunset, Eka took a seat on the ground just outside their tent. “Lu. Pssst! Lu! Come over here!”

Lupen yawned, rolling over to Eka’s spot outside. Their tent wasn’t very big, it provided some shade in the day but did not protect them from wind, and most of the space under it was already filled with Hush’s gigantic head—the beast could not be persuaded to move.

“What is it?” Lupen asked.

Eka pointed over to a collection of little stems nearby, working their way out of the soil, their small, round leaves fanning out.

“Take the one closest to you,” Eka whispered.

Lupen came to sit beside Eka, and tried to grab it, but all of the stems went to hide back into the soil.

“You’re terrible at this.”

“This? I have no idea what *this* is!”

“Lower your voice,” Eka commanded, “and be still. When the stems come back out and the leaves open up, clap your hands together to stun them, and then you can grab one. Haven’t you ever harvested cactub before?”

“No,” Lupen said. “What’s a cactub?”

Eka laughed. “Only the best vegetable ever. Look, I’ll do it.”

Like before, the cactub stems emerged, and the leaves opened up in a fan. Eka neared two hands to one of them, and then...

Clap!

The cactub froze. Eka grabbed the stem and pulled it out. The cactub was a bulbous root vegetable, purple and covered in little round nubs. They peeled the skin off, and ate slices for dinner. Cactub was soft and had many seeds.

“You can eat these too, or toss them. They’ll grow back from the seed if you do that. For every two I eat, I toss one,” saying this, Eka tossed one.

“Eat one,” Lupen said, chewing on a seed, “toss one!” The other found its way back into the earth. They did this for a long while, eating some, tossing some.

With food in their bellies, they huddled-in together to stay warm and tried to get some sleep. Eka’s finger moved from skyrock to skyrock, drawing a line between each one to make constellations.

“Salarus, Vitali, Neoneve...”

Eka found another skyrock in the distance, it was lying low, and was brighter than all the others. A false star. Lupen had just dozed off. “Lu! Something! Over there!”

Lupen turned to look, long-faced and red-eyed. “It’s dark. We’ll check it out after the first sunrise...”

“Fine. You stay. I’ll be back.” Halfway through the sentence Eka was up already and racing towards the point of light in the dark.

Lupen followed partly because somewhere within lived the fear that Eka would leave and never return.

They arrived at the low star, which turned out to be an avoka oil lamp attached to the stern of a vessel, its bow lay half-buried in the sand.

“It’s a sandfin!” Lupen said, circling it, trying to make out details in the dark. The hull was painted yellow. It had a single wooden mast, and two sails hanging limp from their ropes. Eka pointed to a faint glow of a lamp from one of the portholes. Someone was inside.

“Hello? Who’s in there?” Lupen called out, knocking on the hull.

A thin-eyed, short thing, came peering out of one of the openings. “Wai’re korei?!” a shrill voice responded. “I ask who is *out there!*” The voice repeated, switching from Finic to the Common Tongue.

The creature stuck its face in a porthole, the frame contoured it perfectly, making it look like the sandfin had a head growing out of its side. The creature was a Finiku. The Finiku’s hair was light and wild, not a single strand seemed to point in the same direction, except for a chunk of hair covered in pinny tar and coiled in a thick braid. Pinny tar was a thick, black substance used to protect ropes on a sandfin. The Finiku’s hands were also stained with it. Eka giggled, and watched as Lupen approached the porthole so the Finiku could see better. Even when standing close, the sandfinner’s eyes looked everywhere but in the right place.

“Mai’ia! Noho’uta!”

“No! We’re not ghosts!” Eka replied.

“What? No. We’re fleshy people. We’re right in front of you! Can’t you see us?” Lupen asked, perplexed.

“Iane. Too dark!” The Finiku disappeared below. They could hear noises, as the owner of the vessel searched the cabin for something. Then a beam of light flashed in Lupen’s face. “Verido de yorala? Impossible. And who is with you, hm?” The glow of the light shifted toward Eka, as the Finiku searched for whoever this ‘Verido in the sand’ was with.

“An Eka! Yora’nae!” Eka said with a smirk.

“Friendly, orae?”

Eka nodded. "Friendly and fleshy"

"I'm not a mai... uh. Maya? Ugh. I don't remember the word..."
"Mai'ia?"

"That's the one! I'm not a mai'ia. I'm a fleshy too. I'm a Verido in the sand now." Lupen felt uncomfortable and opted to change conversation, "I'm Lupen."

The Finiku inched forward out of the porthole and smacked the Verido in the head to see if it was opaque. "Orae. I now believe it. I am Nono."

"Ow!" Lupen stepped away from Nono's finger.

Nono explained to them what had happened. "Sandfin is fine, but it no more move!" Nono's eyes widened saying this. Lupen saw there was plenty of light in the cabin, yet the sandfinner claimed to see nothing.

"Right. Well it's too dark to do anything about it now. Come daytime we'll help you fix it."

The next morning, Nono emerged from the cabin and stood on deck. Lupen was up already, unfortunately sleep had not come. It was easy now to make out Nono's features, although their eyes appeared clouded, and sickly.

Eka laughed, arriving at the foot of the sandfin just in time to catch Nono trying to shake hands with Hush's snout. "Nono, this is Hush, who was asleep during our introduction."

"I see, I see! Yora'nae Hush!"

They surveyed the damage. The sandfin lay over a rocky patch and the rudder was gone, ripped out. Most of the hull looked fine, but the area where the rudder had been was now a large gaping hole. Nono leapt off the side of the vessel, and went to stand with the others. "A light kink!" Nono said.

"A kink? You serious?" Lupen said, outraged. "There's a giant hole! You've got no rudder!"

"Ia'ia. There is no problem. Verido must be crazy from too much time on land."

Nono's eyes narrowed down to try and see the hole, then Lupen

arrived and helped the Finiku closer. “Big hole. Right there!” Lupen said. The Finiku was unphased. It was only when Lupen put Nono’s nose up to it that the extent of the damage was revealed.

“Iaaaa... iane, iane...” Nono’s head shook from side to side, there was no stopping it.

Eka went to stand closer to offer moral support, and even laid a hand over the Finiku’s shoulder to try to steady that tottering head. “You have materials on board?”

Nono nodded, the shaking of the head had ceased then too. “We sandfinner, we are always ready! We make a rudder. No problem. I have material, all we need!”

Once all three got to work, Lupen realized just how terrible Nono’s vision was. “Who in their right mind would allow someone so blind to captain a sandfin?” Lupen asked. Eka only smirked, gathering materials from inside the cabin.

Together, they devised a plan to build the sandfin a new rudder. They removed bits of the old one, took measurements. “You sure you want to use this? You don’t need a table?” Lupen held a thick slab of banabo wood, but then Nono walked up and began to mark it. “Okay then,” Lupen said, releasing the table and reaching for a hacksaw stashed under a pile of ropes. “It says ‘Maka’ on the handle.”

“Renate steel,” Nono said, “sosae’di de yorala!”

“Best in the land.” Eka translated.

Lupen cut the banabo board for the paddle, while Eka was carving an old oar with a blade to make the new rudder post, and Nono was busy retrieving bolts and nuts that would fit it. All the surfaces of the cabin had something laying over top, and every crack was filled with tiny stray bits of hardware.

Lupen was fascinated by the sandfin, they were a common sight while traveling on the Ilk. The winged vessels looked tiny from up there, the color of their sails and the dust rising with their passing was all Lupen could make out.

“What’s that?” Lupen asked, pointing to a barrel stored on deck,

“plumpkin juice?”

“Kapo.” Nono said.

“Poop,” Eka translated. Seeing the look on Lupen’s face, both laughed.

Lupen had heard of this, but did not think it was true. Nono explained that while the sandfin had no need of fuel there was always a barrel stored on this vessel to give to others. “Montore people say it is miracle fuel, that it make life easy! Why use hand when there is machine, they say. Beobug[^] sell this dream to Finiku people, they give them machine... but what happen when they break? Finiku can no fix, so Beobug come and they ask for coin! Beobug create a dependency, dae’na? It is a problem. Before, Finiku people depend only on sawa te kira!”

“Wind and sun.” Lupen said, happy to know that this mind knew a few Finiku words. Everyone in the Soronan Desert used these two words. “I don’t understand what Ilk kapo has to do with fuel.” Lupen said, perplexed.

“Beobug sandfin follow Ilk and take the kapo, they process it aboard. It is very profitable! My mapa tell me, ‘If you go captain Beobug sandfin, you make good coin’,” Nono’s head shook again, “My mapa say this to me, but I am like my grand-mapa Etyl, I care only to sandfin. I listen to the voice of sawa te kira. Coin mawani’ia oro.” Nono said, putting a hand on the heart.

“Coin has no soul,” Eka said, “Etyl is your grand-mapa?” That name is known all over! First one to travel the whole of the land by sandfin!”

Nono nodded. “Orae orae! Did it alone too!”

Nono repaired the hole, and completed the construction of their makeshift rudder, fitting it to Etyl’s stern, all the while, listening to Nono telling stories of the early days of sandfinning.

After a day of hard work, Nono tested out the rudder and saw no problem with it. The hull was missing paint, but was otherwise immaculate.

“I offer you a ride to Tiputa, come aboard fleshies!”

Lupen and Eka hopped aboard. Nono said that the sandfin could use the extra weight at the stern.

They unfurled the sails and set course for Tiputa, plowing through the sand, leaving a golden cloud in their wake. The sandfin was running downwind, with two cream-coloured wings pulling it along. The wind freshened, and the sands began to wash over the deck but handling a vessel with a crew of three was easy. Eka made sure the sails had good shapes, while Lupen kept an eye on the horizon, careful to avoid rocky patches, there was no trusting Nono's eyes. Nono kept mistaking dunes for other sandfins.

The Finiku offered to make dinner, serving them something that stank of pomparu with an unappetizing gray color. Lupen joked that it had probably been scraped off of the hull.

"Do you know many other sandfinners?" Lupen asked.

"Orae, I know many many, but I think they are not so good."

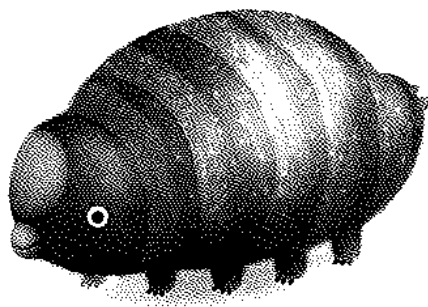
Lupen's mind conjured up images of sandfins in piles lining a city, their hulls full of holes with squinting Finiku captains at the wheel, unaware of the fact that their vessels lay broken and unmoving. "Light kink!" They all said aloud together.

Eka could not believe that Nono was a bad sandfinner, no one trained under Etyl could be terrible. After spending many days together they noticed a pattern, Nono's vision was worse after drinking from the waterstone tank. To extract the water out of the stones there was a foot pump in the galley, the pump pressed the stones down, funneling the water up a tube to the sink. Eka and Lupen, who still used their personal stock of stones for water as to not to impose on Nono's limited supplies, deduced that the water was to blame. One morning they opened the tank and found it infested with mudbears, tiny insects that burrow in waterstones and secrete a toxin. Eka offered the Finiku waterstones from their supply, and after a while Nono's eyes cleared up.

Nono returned to the helm. The Finiku could read the sand and sky well, and knew to adjust sails right as conditions changed. The sails no longer sagged, the vessel was stable and soon they arrived at their destination. On arrival, Nono thanked them for their help.

“I fill my waterstone tank back in Kippu. ‘It is clean!’ they tell me, but it is not so! I think I better go back to help. Sick eyes are dangerous, dae’na?”

Tiputa Pit Stop



A creature, feared by all, because of its horrid stink. The pomparu likes stinky things, it is drawn to them. The word 'pomparu' is sometimes used as an insult to mean foul-smelling.

Tiputa, along with other towns like Kippu, Tiu'va, Inepril, and Renate, exists primarily as a relief station for travel-worn visitors.

The town's shops line a single road, suggesting that a traveler would leave as quickly as they have come, with every service just a short walk away. All the buildings are triangular, built with a slant pointing saa'ta as to align with the prevailing winds. Strong winds, known in these parts as Shriekers, pass through every 10 days, and during this time all activity in the town stops. Many travelers come through Tiputa to re-supply, to repair, but take off as soon as they are able to avoid the Shriekers.

Today Finiku workers are outside, with their banabo leaf brooms, brushing the sand from their storefronts, beating the dust out of their floor mats and window shutters, knowing that all of this work would be likely undone the next day.

No one seemed to mind having to redo the work. Each could start a small task and finish it moments later, with plenty of time to start and finish many more. Savoring a cup of tea was counted as a task, so was buttering a slice of muckwheat[^] bread with bonan[^] puree. Some argued that every bite or sip or breath or step ought to be tallied and counted, others preferred different metrics, such as making someone laugh or smile, like brushing the dust from a mat, it serves to embellish the town.

Eka was wandering through town, eyeing the yellow sand clinging to every house, filling every crack, as if looking for a way inside. Eka appreciated the desert filling gaps as its way of helping to strengthen old structures. People on the street stopped their work to wave and say a friendly "yora'!" A diligent troupe of children armed with brooms furiously brushed the sand away from the main road, laughing and telling jokes as they did, making a game of the task.

The main road was made of flat stones. Eka enjoyed the sound the dry fronds produced when brushed against them. The children were not aware of it, but there was a rhythm to their brushing. A song came to Eka's lips then:

"Brush the sands, sweep the lands," Eka's voice got louder, "-

brush, brush, brush,” and then went lower, “sweep, sweep, sweep!”

“Brush the sands, sweep the lands! Brush, brush, brush!
Sweep, sweep, sweep!”

Busy singing, Eka didn’t see that someone was standing close by. A Finiku with a long white river of hair blocked the path. The stranger stared at Eka’s sweater. A pair of eager hands hovered close to it.

“Arraaaa! W-where did you g-get t-this?!” said the Finiku in the Common Tongue. They wore a red jacket overlapping a shirt of delicate soft thread and ending with frills at the neck and cuffs. “I will do *anything* to get this shirt! What do you want for it?”

The Finiku was gripping the sweater now, feeling the threads with greedy fingers.

“You want coin?!”

With every question the Finiku’s stream of hair became more and more disheveled. Eka tried to back away, but the stranger still held onto the sweater.

“It isn’t mine to sell,” Eka managed to say.

Most would think it easy to break away from someone so little, but the stranger held on, as if hanging from a cliff.

“Please! I must have it!” With all of that pulling, the seams at the bottom of the shirt ripped. The Finiku let out a horrified squeal. “What did I *do*?”

Eka put a finger through the hole in the sweater, wiggling it on the other side.

“This is unforgivable. I am a monster. Orae! I will mend you.” Orin said, addressing the sweater. Eka did not think this was necessary, but the crimson-clad Finiku would not listen and led the sweater, as well as its wearer, over to one of the triangular houses.

The house had a red roof and outer walls. Eka wondered if everything inside was also red and imagined a house with objects, walls and floors that were so red that they were indistinguishable from one another. A carving over the entrance to the house read ‘Orin, the Tailor’, with a second one underneath it with the words ‘Now

Retired'. The signs had green lettering, dispelling Eka's fantasy of this place being an all-crimson fun house.

"You make clothes? Convenient." Eka said.

"Orae, orae. Well... once. Mind the low ceiling!"

Eka entered the space on two knees, and could only stand up fully once reaching the center of the house, the area where the ceiling was highest. Orin's workshop had angled walls filled with spindles of colorful fabric. Between the spindles lay frames with endorsements of past commissions from various famous characters, including a signed portrait of The Luminary Moera⁴. On the ceiling hung clothing Orin had made, favorite pieces from past and current projects.

In a far corner of the house was a small mattress, and a table with a giant empty bottle, that Eka was certain once contained bonan wine. There was no room to cook, and no food either. Eka had seen a small restaurant on the other side of the road which likely doubled as a community kitchen.

The tailor grabbed a needle, and then reached for a thread wound around one of the many spindles on the wall. The dark-coloured spindle Orin chose had very little thread left and was soon empty, all of it now bound to Orin's needle. The tailor's hands were shaky at first, but steadied when the point of the needle came in contact with the shirt. The tailor, moving with machine-like precision, the thread, disappearing into the sweater, and the hole quickly coming to a close. The thread on the needle was the same color and material as the shirt, Orin had just enough fiber to finish the repair. In the end, it was like it had never ripped at all.

Orin used to live in Edonor, a place that, Eka made a point to say, made the very best peagram⁵ pancakes. The Finiku's great-great mapa opened a shop there many annums ago. Because the shop was so popular, Orin had had no time for anything other than clothes-making. The tailor had an itch to make different sorts of

⁴**Moera** Moera, also known as The Luminary, and The First Light, is the first ruler of the Iridi people.

⁵**Peagram** A type of pulse growing from a thorny bush, with large seedpods filled with a green liquid that contain 10-15 peas.

clothes, more risqué items, but the customers always asked for the same thing: copies of copies of copies, all copies of past works, nothing new, nothing exciting. It was then that this tailor decided that it was time to retire to Tiputa, where Bou, a relative, now lived. Orin did not produce new clothes anymore, but continued to help mend holes or strengthen seams.

“I’m sorry I can’t give this shirt to you, my friend’s mapa made it you see! After I get some new clothes, it won’t be mine to keep,” Eka explained.

“I understand, and I apologize for my un-towardness. It is a long time since I see isilk, but no matter,” while saying this, Orin glanced at Eka’s frame, already making calculations, “you want an outfit? I will make you a desert travel set. I have a thread that would suit you. Orae, orae! Come, come!”

After picking out some colors the tailor pulled out a flat banabo braid, each division with markings at specific lengths indicated by red stitches. It took some time to measure Eka’s frame, because unlike Orin’s usual customers Eka was tall. The redhead sat on a stool, extending an arm or leg forward as required.

“I never see anyone with round ear like you.”

“That is due to centuries of erosion.” Eka said.

Orin laughed. “You know, my child Bou own the repair store next door, please stop by, you two will get along I am sure of it.” After jotting down all of the numbers, the measuring braid returned to Orin’s belt, secured alongside a set of assorted needles in a shroo leather sleeve, and a single bobbin.

“You keep these with you always?” Eka asked.

“I never leave home without them!” Orin went to stand on another stool, a hand over the heart. “As long as I live, no fabric will be left unsown, and no pant leg left askew! Ianae! I will not allow it!” Even if standing on a stool, Orin still had to look up at Eka. “It will be ready after the second sunrise tomorrow.”

As payment Eka offered to help at Bou’s repair shop, Orin agreed. There was always a lot of work to do there, and with the Shriekers coming in three days Bou would have a lot of customers.

Eka wandered over to the repair shop next door, which used to be green, Eka could tell, but like Orin's place most of the color had been ground off. There was still color left around the door and windows, and on the underside of the roof, but there too had begun to flake off. Like the interior of Nono's sandfin the little workshop was full of tools. Instead of thread and clothes, the ceiling and walls were covered in bits of metal and wood. There was some order to the chaos, with objects organized by shape and material. All the long cylindrical objects shared space on a shelf, coiled lines of varying thickness, color and length populated another.

The owner glanced at the tall stranger who stood there at the door. "Come back later. No time today." Bou was dark haired, pale-skinned, and enveloped in a pair of tattered overalls, which were stained with grease and covered in holes. Those tears must be torture for Orin, Eka thought. How had these openings escaped the tailor's needle?

"Orin is making some clothes for me and I offered to help you here in your shop as payment," Eka said, knees on the ground and wearing a great big smile. "Yora'nae. Eka're."

"Yora'. Bou're." Bou craned a large head to one side to see the part of Eka obscured by the top of the door, "Eka know it is dirty, dirty work, orae?"

"That's okay," Eka copied the head motion, "a favor for a favor!"

"In Tiputa no one do work without promise of coin. You better like grime, grease and grossness. Today we have a pomparu problem, it is stuck inside a sandfin sand scupper. Then, we fix a broken water pump, the owner think it smart to press juice out of plumpkin. This list, it go and it go. Still want to help?"

Eka nodded. Bou looked at what the outsider was wearing, and walked in close to touch the fabric of the sweater Orin had mended. For a second, Eka feared the same reaction in Bou.

"Blue isilk," Bou said. The greasy shop owner's green eyes went round. Bou's eyes had a wonderful shine to them, they appeared glass-like with minuscule herb gardens growing inside of them. "A Volare Verido make this for you? Verido no export isilk anymore."

Not many people could tell the shirt was made from Ilk hair, even fewer knew that the hair of the desert walkers had a subtle pigmentation, it could be either blue, green or red. Eka wondered what the tailor thought of Bou's profession, they were family yet their lives were so different.

"This belongs to my friend," Eka explained, "Orin really loves isilk, huh?"

"Hm. Orae. Seeing isilk... it is like finding ghost of a friend at the door, a friend you think dead." Bou's fingers brushed over where the hole in the sweater had been. This repair was visible to experienced eyes. "Grand-mapa Nok have a store in Edonor once. One day, they go on a trip and bring back a spindle of blue isilk. Suspicious, no? Illegal, I think. Later, Orin inherit the business, but the blue isilk? Well, it is all gone by then. Grand-mapa Nok use it to make isilk suit, then go jump into the Rupture wearing it. Orin was sad to see isilk thread so fine fade into nothing, never had a chance to make a big project with it, and never will because Verido no trade it now. I think you need to know this..." Bou didn't give Eka a chance to reply, and walked over to a closet, pulling out a large pair of brown overalls and a mostly clean undershirt. "Because it is dirty work, no want to ruin that shirt."

Eka changed into Bou's undershirt and overalls. The clothes fit, but there was a lot of room in there for another Eka or two, and the pants had turned into shorts. Seeing this, Bou gave Eka two heavy notcott knee-pads.

The first task was to try and get a pomparu out of a pipe. The sandfin was moored in front of the shop, its owner was at the snack bar having a drink, Bou waved from across the street, shouting a word in Finic to say that the work would likely be done today. Both moved to the back of the sandfin, once there Eka caught a whiff of the pomparu and gasped, hands moved to cover up both the mouth and nose. It had been a long time since Eka had encountered one.

"Nohi sosae'ia're dae'na? Pomparu smell burn the nose! The first time I smell one, I no eat for many day. The smell is so bad it make all food taste like rot."

Bou grabbed a jar from a side pocket, dipped a finger in it and scooped out a thick glob of purple gel. Then, without warning, Bou smeared the purple gel under Eka's nose, near and around the nostrils. Now both had a thick purple mustache. "Better, orae?"

"Lavendiri⁶ flowers! Good trick!" The fresh scent would help cover up the nasty pomparu fumes. Bou also had a thick scarf on to keep the smell out, and passed one to Eka. The scarf was just enough to block the stink entirely while keeping the lavendiri gel from drying out too quickly.

The butt of a plump pomparu was sticking halfway out of the scupper, its four back legs were dangling in the air while the four forward legs were wedged inside. The pomparu's colorful spots were hard to see because its body was brown with dirt.

"Pomparu like strong smell. The sandfinner owner ferment bobonion⁷ aboard, this one try to follow the smell but get stuck on the way."

It was common for people to make a pile of rotting food outside of town to get their attention, and to keep them there. Tiputa did have a pile like this, Eka had seen it, but this sandfin had acquired the pomparu while on transit.

"Is it dead?" Eka asked, noticing its legs weren't moving.

"Iane. If pomparu dead, we no stand around to talk about it. It make lavendiri gel rot, and then we have to go bury face in sand. But even like this, it no help, the smell stay." Bou paused, recalling something that happened. "My friend find a dead pomparu once, the smell was so *so* bad that they cut their nose off. Crazy'di'naa? Pomparu smell bad, but I blame the crazy on Kavava⁸. Kavava make the brain loopy, and my friend chew it too too much."

Eka's eyes widened, imagining someone without a nose. "How

⁶**Lavendiri** A purple bulbous flower that is often dried and used in homes to cover bad smells, or to freshen a room

⁷**Bobonion** A spicy octagonal vegetable, enveloped in a thick black rind. The inside is soft, and can be scooped out with a tool.

⁸**Kavava** An addictive root that when chewed numbs the mind and body, it can also cause minor hallucinations.

horrible.”

“When it come to pomparu, some say no nose is better! I carve a new nose for my friend out of banabo, I add color with ground lavendiri flower. My friend love it, call it poronoso’di’no, to mean my special purple nose. Tawari’ia’di. No touch the pomparu! You can say goodbye to *all* friend if you do this. The smell, it *no* come off!”

“So, um. Shall we do this thing then?” Eka’s nose was eager to move on to some other task, it had no desire to be replaced with a poronoso’di.

Bou covered the inside of the scupper opening with avoka oil, and reluctantly did the same for the area around the pomparu’s body, all while wearing multiple thick pairs of pinny-tarred hampa gloves. Then, Eka shoved the small end of a broom through the pomparu-free end of the opening while Bou held it down with both hands.

“Ready?”

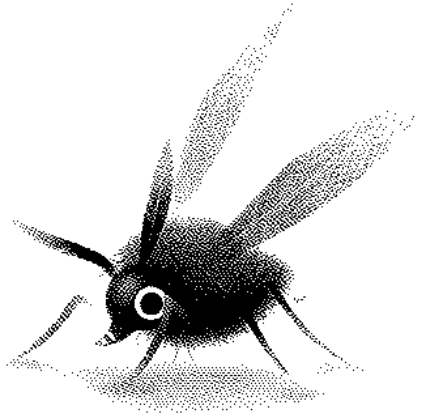
Eka pushed with such force that the pomparu came flying out and went rolling inside of Bou’s workshop. Bou shrieked, tore the broom from Eka’s hands and ran inside, but it was too late. The floor was covered with a stinky green discharge, and some had slipped under the various piles of materials. The slimy curvaceous thing was pushed with the bristled end of a broom, out of the workshop, out of the city, away from all the houses. Already some of the villagers were outside, noses pinched and afraid of what this smell would do to the town’s shops. They all scurried about, covering the pomparu drippings with ground lavendiri leaves and other strong-smelling herbs, while others scooped it up with shovels and brooms that they knew would have to be discarded after. All had purple gel mustaches.

Bou took Eka’s side, the broom was at the edge of town with the pomparu, marking the spot where it was so no one would go near it. Those creatures were slow, and Bou had plans of putting a bowl of sour muckwheat far out into the valley to lure it even further away.

Eka looked at the putrid drippings it left behind. “Wow. All this came from one pomparu?”

“Look like I have to add ‘burn workshop’ to my to-do list...”

Beobug



Messenger woths are sturdy creatures, they fit in the palm of your hand. They have excellent memories, and can travel long distances. Many use them as a means of sending messages to other cities. They can carry items many times their own weight.

Lupen was enjoying a mug of bonan wine at the local snack bar at the edge of town, where Eka and Nono had agreed to meet later that day.

Bonan wine was an alcoholic drink traditionally brewed in Finiku villages, each had its own recipe. Some added herbs, or used other fruit as a base. It wasn't uncommon to give some of yours to a friend, the restaurant owner Javi explained.

"Sosae'di de yorala!" Noticing Lupen's vacant expression, and understanding that the Verido didn't know Finic, Javi said it again in the Common Tongue. "Best in the land!"

"Sosae'di de yorala, sosae'di de yorala..." Lupen repeated, determined to remember this time. "Think others in the land say this too about their wine?"

"Orae," the restaurant owner said, "but they are wrong!"

Lupen laughed. "I've had bonan before. Cut thin and dried as chips, never as a drink. How do you make it?"

~

Bonan wine

Ingredients

Two stalks of bonans
A quarter pail of waterstones

Instructions

Let bonans ripen for seven days after harvest, cut bonans and add the squeezed liquid from waterstones. Do not stir the mixture.

After one day, squeeze the liquid from the waterstones and bring to a boil in a hot pot. Add to bonans, and leave to stand for another day. During this period, fermentation will occur.

Filter the water through a cloth, and consume the filtrate as bonan wine.

~

Lupen enjoyed conversing with Javi, that is, until Gree showed up. Gree was also a Finiku and captain of one of the Beobug supply ships Nono had mentioned. Gree took a seat by the Verido, despite there being unoccupied seats all around. Gree's big bulbous green eyes matched the Beobug uniform, with dark hair licked tight, so tight that the Finiku could not frown.

One of the gigantic supply vessels, with the name Beobug II painted on its side in yellow letters, was moored outside of town, it had two masts and a green hull. Gree was the captain of Beobug II, and before Lupen could ask Gree was already explaining how Ilk kapo was treated to be turned into gas to power machinery and vessels in Montore.

Lupen knew about Beobug, the Volare elders didn't like them, they thought it was disrespectful of them to follow the Ilk. In cities Ilks would eat their weight in teawet, and when it was on the move again Beobug was always there to catch its kapo.

Gree threw an arm around Lupen. "Nono is a good friend to you, dae'sa? I see you arrive on the same sandfin."

"You want something?" Lupen asked.

"Hm. I see that Lupen like to speak plain." Gree said with a smile. "Nono is a good sandfinner, but package delivery is a waste of talent! In the Beobug fleet, there are two ship. I steer Beobug II, but the lead sandfin need a captain. I ask and ask, but always, Nono say no. I ask too much! *You* ask for me! The Voice of a Ilk can do anything, orae?"

Mentioning being Voice to Vol, the Ilk of Volare, was a mistake, Lupen regretted it, blaming the bonan wine. Seeing that the Verido was hesitating, Gree spoke again. "Lupen talk to an Ilk! You are a authority! Use this title to get good thing for *you!*"

"Are we still talking about Nono? I don't understand why a title is so important."

"Lupen forget, a Voice is a grand being! If you talk big, it make all around listen." Saying this, Gree sharply elbowed the Verido in

the ribs.

“I don’t know.” Lupen said, attempting to move away but Gree’s arm was unyielding. “You really think being the captain of a vessel that recycles Ilk kapo is worthy of praise?”

“Orae!” Gree threw their hands up into the air. “No limit to the energy! Montore no more wait for wind! Beobug give city great success! Gree swim in coin! No poor, no pain. No more, no more!” Gree said, eyes aglow.

“Wind is free. And when there’s no wind well, you wait.” Lupen said.

“Lupen seem to think Verido people taint-free,” Gree’s bulbous eyes were set on the Verido, narrowing for a moment, “all of you take free ride on Ilk. How long you do this for, um? A ki’annum?” “Yea, a ki’annum sounds about right,” Lupen said, deep in thought, “over 320 twin sunrises.”

“Up there, it keep you from the worst of the desert. You always safe on an Ilk, you no understand true misery.” The captain smacked the top of the Verido’s thigh then, causing the sand embedded in the isilk clothes to rise. When the dust settled again Gree laughed. “Well, you are learning this now, orae? You are here in the dust with us.”

“The Ilk is a friend. We co-exist.” Lupen retorted.

“This is what Beobug do too,” Gree turned to the restaurant owner, raising two empty mug. “Mou ipaya Javi!”

Javi nodded, pouring a generous serving of wine to both, a bit of the liquid overflowing outside their mugs.

Lupen noticed a patch on Gree’s arm then, “what’s that?”

The captain lifted up a green sleeve to show the full patch, pressed onto the skin. “Lunch! Much better than the real thing, oro!”

“Yoroi’di!” Javi said, inspecting the patch. “Babam cake! It is a good one.”

Lupen was unphased, “aah I see, I see... another Montore industry. Another way to amass coin, another path to titles.” An empty mug sat in Lupen’s hand, “did I drink all of this just now?” Gree’s mug was also empty, but Javi was there to fill them right back up

again.

“Industry mean progress.” Gree said, leaning into the Verido.

“Progress means coin...” Lupen replied, bored with the conversation.

“Coin is future Voice of the Volare Ilk.” Saying this, Gree slapped Lupen in the back, resulting in Lupen nearly spitting out a mouthful of wine.

“What is there to do with so much coin?” Lupen said, coughing and trying to move away from Gree, again, with little success.

“You are new to the desert, you have much to learn,” saying this, Gree pulled out a shiny golden coin, which now found itself into the palm of Lupen’s hand. One side bore a poorly-chiseled face, and the other had Montore inscribed on it along with the number one hundred. Lupen was going to return the coin but Gree refused it. “Keep the coin, it is payment for the favor I ask. You ask Nono for me, orae?”

Lupen nodded, pocketing the coin. Gree then stepped off of the stool, jelly-legged, and returned to the crew aboard Beobug II.

Lupen stayed at the bar, unable to put a phrase together.

Javi laughed. “Eat a muckwheat dumpling, it is healthy with bobonion, dilly herb and looma root. Verido people like looma root, orae? Wawa’de, the food will imbibe the bonan in your belly.” Javi pushed a plate of steaming dumplings in front of the Verido. “Eat, eat.”

Having finished all deliveries, and now armed with a tall bottle of plumpkin⁹ ale, Nono felt it necessary to treat the fleshies to a drink. All three gathered at Javi’s snack bar, savoring their drinks, although Lupen had opted for tea this time.

Eka, still wearing the coveralls, told them about Orin, Bou, the incident with the pomparu, the fixing of the waterstone pump and all the other items on the list they’d been tasked with. Lupen spoke of the encounter with Gree, and told Nono about the favor.

⁹**Plumpkins** A large scaly purple root vegetable. The scales can be peeled off, revealing the bright and soft red flesh underneath.

“This komororo ask Lupen to ask me to captain a Beobug sandfin? Ia’! Ianae!” The Finiku’s head began to shake and the shaking did not stop for some time. Eka wondered if their friend was stuck in a loop and needed help, but Nono recovered moments after that. “Ia’ is what I say and always say to Gree!”

“Being on a sandfin like that must be impressive. Why not do it?” Eka asked, remembering the large green sandfin at the edge of town.

“Yorala’no mai aini’re de mutau’wi, coin ianae.” Nono said with pride.

“The way of the land is perpetuated in righteousness, not coin.” Eka translated, grinning.

Both Eka and Lupen laughed at this. Nono went on to say that they were both grown on the same plot of land, “because of this Gree think that we are close. When I was young, I travel on sandfin, but Gree stay in Tiu’va, talk much, and make my mapa think that I am useless! Gree say I waste time, and that the only good job is a Beobug job. Komororo...” Nono said, cursing at the air, “Beobug do scam. All profit, no work. Not many know this, but Beobug sandfin need no captain, only worker to do the scamming.” After saying this, Nono leaned in to whisper to them. “I follow the Beobug sandfin always. Ponopo follow Beobug II, another woth follow Beobug III. I go to village after Beobug sandfin leave, and I correct their misdeed!”

As the evening went on Nono began to tell sandfin stories, like the one about the notorious Dorake’s passage, known to have buried countless sandfinners over time. While Nono was talking, a small creature flew over to them, and landed on the table. It had short antennae, and delicate yellow hairs all over its body. “This is Ponopo. Ponopo carry message for me, it have good memory and it know the desert well.”

Ponopo fluttered off the table and landed on Eka’s head.

“Wow! A woth^[42]! Yora’nae Ponopo!” Eka said, watching Ponopo hover back down onto the table, landing near a puddle of spilled plumpkin ale. The woth began to mop it up, its antennae

wiggling as it drank.

Nono pulled out a small wooden box, laid it out on the table and opened the lid. Six round eggs sat in it, laying over a soft tan blanket. “Woth egg,” Nono told them, “I carry many.” Nono’s hand reached into the box and picked up an egg. “This woth egg is ready, but a woth only come out when it find someone it like. Woth is loyal, it follow you always.” Nono reached over the table, grabbed Eka’s hand, and placed a single woth egg in it. As soon as the egg came into contact with Eka’s skin, the white egg turned sky blue.

“It’s blue!” Eka said, amazed by the unborn woth.

“Blue? Woth egg never go blue,” Nono said, looking very confused, “no matter! Put a finger on the egg. Do gentle, gentle stroke.”

Eka did as Nono instructed and put a finger on the egg, stroking it.

“Less stroke mean good woth!” Nono continued. The blue egg cracked open after only a single stroke. “Impossible.”

Lupen and Eka watched as a new woth emerged from the egg. It had a blue body, covered in light blue hairs, it had long antennae, and even longer wings.

“Sakoi’di! It is a strong woth!” Nono said, shaking their head in disbelief.

Eka knew many things, but knew little about woths, although this one did appear larger than Ponopo. Nono grabbed a measuring stick and jotted down every detail, the color of its hairs, the length of the wings and of the antennae, the diameter of the eyes too. Everything. “I visit the hatchery soon, I then ask question to my friend. My friend know much about woth.” Nono put the stick away, and continued to marvel at the quality of Eka’s woth.

“What should we name it?” Lupen asked Eka.

“Ianae! You no choose the name! Woth choose,” Nono said, waving a finger at them, “it is no easy to guess the name!”

“Yea, I mean, the name could be anything! How long did it take you to guess Ponopo’s name?” Lupen asked.

Nono took a long sip of plumpkin ale. “Five annum, but only after I eat bad herb. For my friend, it take long time. Around four-

teen annums.”

“Fourteen?!”

“Orae, orae! Mu-mu-mu-mu-mumford. The woth stutter, it make the guess difficult,” Nono paused, “woth will listen with or without a name, but the name make the connection strong! Some think woth no choose the name, but that they wait to hear a name it like.”

Eka hoped it wouldn't take that long, a fourteen-annum long guessing game did not sound fun. “You've got an easy name, isn't that right Tom-tom?” A finger traced along the soft hairs on its back. The woth went about its business, and joined Ponopo on the table to get some of that sweet plumpkin juice.

“Tom-Tom?” Lupen said with a laugh, “it looks more like a Pino.”

After an evening of unsuccessful name-guessing, Eka and Lupen said goodbye to Nono, who gave them a map with areas marked in red of the desert between Tiputa and Montore. “This place, it have many floater[^]. Many, many danger. Take care when you come near.”

They raised their tent in a clear space outside of town. Bou had given Eka an extra length of fabric to extend the size of their shelter. They had sown the two pieces together, and now two and half travelers could lie under it — Hush agreed to lie halfway outside of the tent, so the other two could have room.

“I would have loved to keep traveling aboard the sandfin,” Lupen said, watching the unnamed woth tracing shapes through the air. They wondered if this was its way of communicating its name, they spent a long time trying to decipher it, but it turned out to be complete gibberish.

Eka agreed. “They're wonderful aren't they? Wish the cabin was taller though, I hit my head on the cross beam too many times during the voyage.”

Lying in the tent, Lupen thought about name-giving. Verido had their names written on their faces, but this wasn't true for everyone. “Did you pick your own name?”

Eka didn't answer right away, brows furrowing as if in deep

thought. “Yes, I’ve had many names though.”

“Do you remember being grown?”

“Nope, but I have slept for long periods of time. I imagine being born is like waking up after a long, long sleep.”

“What about dying? Where do you suppose we go after we’re dead.”

“Your body stays right here.”

“What about my mind? Where do you think that goes?”

“Think about the time before you were grown. That was an okay time wasn’t it?”

“I guess so. Well, I don’t remember...”

“We’re all part of the grand sweater that is our universe. We are a single thread, and together we form a complex design, criss-crossed into a variety of patterns. Sometimes these individual patterns unravel, but they’re not lost, they remain part of the grand sweater. Nothing ever disappears entirely,” saying this, Eka began to unravel Lupen’s sweater, tugging on a loose bit of thread.

Lupen noticed this, and moved closer to help undo it. “I like this analogy.”

“Analogy? You mean you don’t adhere to the idea of a sweater-verse?”

Both spent the evening unraveling the isilk sweater until it was back to not being a sweater at all, just a collection of thread.

Lupen lent Eka a vest to wear, and together they cooked up a pot of bobonion soup. They ate it with some slices of toasted muckwheat bread. Then, they recited poems about the sweater-verse until they fell asleep.

Lupen did not dream of death, but dreamt of a world where everyone was made of fabric, their skin and clothes knitted together. Children made a game of unraveling each other’s arms, while the adults scolded them. Lupen was in this dream, and there, hanging from the side of everyone’s wrist was a thread, connecting Verido to Aodals, to Finikus, to Terins, to looma roots, to every grain of sand, and to skyrocks too. This thread bound all things, both known and unknown.

The next day, Lupen and Eka spent time with Bou. They had finished their tasks early, so Bou closed the store for the day and introduced them to some of the locals. They ate plenty of muckwheat bread, a local specialty. The bread was served with fermented sagery jam and thin slices of sun-dried totomites.

One of Bou's friends had Vennec babies and insisted on showing them off. Vennecs were large, humpbacked, furry beasts with thin snouts, large pointy ears and a long slender neck. The vennec babies were asleep in a pile, it was hard to tell where one started and another ended. Soon, the babies were on their feet, and ran circles around them. Eka laughed, stroking their soft hairs. Lupen's face was buried in the fur of one of the larger cubs.

"Vennec are too young now, but in one annum you come back. Vennec will become strong, it make a good travel companion." The vennec grower said.

Having a pup now would be impractical, as they had much travelling to do. Lupen liked the idea of adopting a vennec. "You look like an Aristollo."

"Aristollo?" Eka said, eyes wide and glancing over at the Verido. "But that's the name of a—"

"Skyrock? Yes, I know that."

"No. Well yes. But it's also the name of an—"

"Iridi?" Lupen's mouth curled into a smile, it was nice to appear all-knowing for once, a rarity around someone like Eka.

"Yes again! Wow! Lupen you know *everything!*"

"I know a hundred ways to prepare looma roots," Lupen began, "but I don't know the story of Aristollo. I'd like to hear it if you know it."

"It's not my story to tell. We'll find someone to tell it to you, and on the way, you can tell me of the hundred ways to prepare Looma roots."

"I really couldn't."

"Yes, well, the muffled cries of your stomach pairs well enough with my singing," Eka said.

Back at their camp, Lupen held a hand up, making a landing platform for the woth. They had been gifted a little portable house for their new friend, a round glass ball with a hole on its side to be used as a door. Inside, was a lining of soft banabo fabric, so that the woth could easily find a spot in there and stay hidden. The ball was wrapped in yellow thread and had a permanent attachment to Lupen's belt. Bou had left the gift hanging at the entrance of their tent.

"Rest well Duster," but the woth did not react.

"Not even a twitch," Eka said, looking at the sleeping messenger, "it's a nice name, maybe it didn't hear me say it?"

They weren't sure what the rules were. How would the woth react once it heard its own name? Maybe it would flutter extra harder, or would change color again? Lupen wished they'd asked Nono more questions, but the Finiku had left after the second sunset for another delivery, both suspected that Gree had something to do with their friend's hasty departure.

The following morning, even before Eka had time to slip on some day clothes, Orin appeared at the door with a bundle in hand. The clothes were ready and the tailor was eager to see them on Eka. Eka changed into the new outfit while Lupen brought the Finiku some herbal tea, served with a slice of lemilim and some grated sweet root. The tailor was unusually quiet, and stared at the Verido.

The trousers were loose, yet tight in all the right places, reaching up over Eka's midriff and held there without the need for a belt. The undershirt looked plain to the untrained eye, but it was made of banabo fibers. The stitching was reinforced around the neck and shoulders. Orin even made a scarf with sleeves, large enough to throw over your head for protection from sand storms.

"You are a true master! These are wonderful!"

Orin's face reddened at those words. "Oh, it's nothing, really! It please me that you like it."

"Like? I *love* it!" Eka said.

The tailor had not noticed then, but Lupen had moved to the end

of the room. The Verido came back with a large bundle of thread and placed it onto the Finiku's lap.

“Vo-vo-vo-lare isilk?” Orin said, voice high with emotion.

Lupen nodded. The thread of the sweater was re-bundled and bound with a matching blue ribbon.

“Now you can make something for yourself with it,” the Verido said.

Orin began to bawl, fingers curling around the precious bundle of thread. “T-t-this is t-too much,” there was no stopping those tears, “y-you are t-too k-kind.”

Skyrock



Seshell krabs are pearly white creatures that bear a shell with a face. It is thought that if you do them harm, they will remember your face and chase you down.

This is the tale of a lonely piece of matter. It was once part of some other, larger body, but they'd since parted. There was no way to measure how much time had passed since then, which was just as well, because time didn't matter out here. Skyrock had seen much of the universe. It no longer grieved for home, nor did it fear the unknown. Contrary to what it first thought, the great expanse did not inspire fear, it was soothing, and everything made sense here. The celestial bodies danced with one another, locked into a slow waltz.

Skyrock rather liked the time it had spent adrift, but then it neared the atmosphere of a yellow planet and was pulled down onto it. It lost much of its mass in the descent, but still had enough to cause a great big fuss when it struck.

Now, Skyrock was faced with a new reality, but it knew that one day the waltz would resume, and so its mind quieted.

It sat idly for many annums. It saw the suns and moons pass many times. It wasn't tiresome, on the contrary, it celebrated each passing and would count them up.

"..."

Skyrock did not know how to count, but it liked to try.

It was about to assign an outrageously large series of what it thought to be numbers and letters to this next moon passing when some travelers stopped a short distance away. A shell lodged itself in the foot of their furry companion, and the riders were forced to dismount.

One had hair like a sun, and the other hair like sand with a face like the sky. Skyrock gave them names then: Sun and Sky-sand. They were fascinated with the shells that covered the ground, and began to search, to try and find the most beautiful shell of all.

Skyrock wondered if perhaps it too qualified as a shell. Sun found one that was turning and coiling and somehow ending back onto itself. Sky-sand had dug up a shell of a most peculiar shape, it had a face carved into it. Skyrock knew these well.

"Um. Lu. That's a seshell krab," Sun said.

Multiple pairs of legs came pushing out of the sides of the shell, along with a set of tiny black eyeballs sitting atop lanky strings of skin. Sky-sand screamed and dropped it to the ground. This amused Skyrock, oh the sounds these fleshy ones could make!

The seshell krab began to throw bits of broken shells over itself, burrowing deep into the ground. It was not rare for one of them to burrow underneath Skyrock, and to cause it to shift to a new place—this too was fun, each time it happened it wondered where it would shift to next.

“Are they *all* alive?!” Sky-sand said, breathing hard. “Not sure I like the idea of standing on a sea of living things...”

“No no, just the ones with faces. Avoid those if you can. They’re bad tempered. If you mess with them they’ll chase you to return the favor. They never forget a face.”

“What if they only saw half my face?” Sky-sand said, coiling a piece of blue fabric to conceal part of it.

“Then all who share your upper face are in trouble. Bit selfish don’t you think?”

“What if I had no face?”

“Then everyone’s a potential victim.”

Sky-sand’s eyes widened. “Scary.”

Sun started to whistle a tune and found yet another impossible shape: a flat shell coiling and again, ending back onto itself. “Look at this one!”

Sky-sand seemed to envy Sun, wishing to find an interesting shell too. Then, Skyrock caught the eye of this sky-faced scavenger and grew nervous, no two-legged land dweller had ever come this close to it.

“Beautiful,” Sky-sand said, eyes aglow and nearing a hand to Skyrock.

“Disqualified!” Sun shouted, Skyrock fidgeted with ever-growing excitement. “That’s a skyrock, not a shell.”

“Really? I thought they’d be bigger than this.”

“They lose bits of themselves when they fall out of the sky.”

“Oh. That’s sad isn’t it? Losing bits of yourself,” Sky-sand said,

looking at the rock from all angles.

“You lose bits of yourself all the time too, you know.”

“You mean like, skin and hair and things?” Sky-sand said, trying to picture this body worn down to the size of a fist.

“Does it make you sad?” Sun asked.

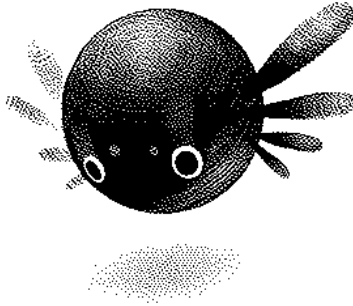
“Not really. Um. I don’t know why I said that.” Sky-sand’s fingers traced around the flat face of Skyrock then, “there’s nothing sad about you Skyrock. You’re the most experienced of us all, and too beautiful for this ball of dust.”

Skyrock felt proud. It was in a most wonderful state. Time and weather had smoothed down its exterior. The two land dwellers were very impressed with this, and decided to transform its body again, in a very big way. Skyrock was ground down further, and shaped into two pendants, a string was tied to one end. Skyrock was now split in two, it hung around the necks of each land-dweller. It could see itself on the breast of the other, it was a most unusual sight. Skyrock relished this new perspective.

How wondrous, it thought.

Sky-sand and Sun returned to their fuzzy companion, and left the sea of broken shells behind.

An Oasis



A round floating creature that changes color depending on its mood. It is orange when normal, red when angry, and yellow when confused. If threatened, the creature will throw itself upon an enemy, its skin is like goo and sticks to its victims. The skin can become as hot as hot coals, prolonged exposure can kill.

Lupen and Eka made a detour to a hollow, despite Nono's warnings that the place was dangerous. The weather that day was not cooperating, and this particular detour offered better conditions. They were instructed to transit quickly, but their sore feet made walking fast difficult.

Near the hollow, Hush stopped after seeing spotted round creatures hovering in the distance, they had black points for eyes, long fluttery wings and tiny slits for mouths. The hyroo would not move forward, fearful of the strange beings ahead.

"Whoa! Look at those!"

Eka grabbed Lupen's shoulder, "remember what Nono said." These creatures were familiar to Eka, but little was known of them because usually people made a point of avoiding them.

The Verido took a step forward, the creatures turned a solid red color and flew towards them. Eka leapt onto Hush and reached over to grab Lupen's collar, but one of the creatures latched itself onto the hyroo's side and another to Lupen's chest. Their bodies were sticky like goo, and burned like hot coals.

In a panic, Hush bounded fast and far into the distance. Eka kicked at the soft gooey body to get it off, but it would just bounce back into shape. Hush landed with a roll, sending all passengers cascading onto the ground before rubbing its side on the sand and clawing at the parasite with its hind legs. Clawing was not enough to get this spherical creature to let go, Lupen even tried hitting it with the butt of a mug, nothing worked. Hush leapt into the air again, as high as Eka had ever seen it jump. The beast became a point into the sky, just another skyrock orbiting the planet.

There was no way to help Hush now, and so Eka went to assist the other victim. The creatures had burned through Lupen's vest and undershirt already. Lupen was in agony, twisting on the ground.

"I can't get it off!" Eka cried, trying to pry it off using a rock as a barrier.

Moments later, Hush returned, the parasite was gone but the skin where it had been had been stripped of all fur. This is how

they would get rid of them: altitude and cold. Eka whistled for Hush and climbed onto its back, pulling Lupen along.

“Take us up again Hush! As high as you can!”

As before, Hush jumped high and fast. The parasite quickly abandoned its host. When they landed again, they were a good distance away, leaving the fluttery fiends behind.

Lupen lay on the ground, speaking through gritted teeth. “Those things, why did they attack us?”

“They’re territorial, I know that, but there’s usually not so many together in one place.”

There was a logical explanation, but right now Eka focused on crushing waterstones over Lupen’s wounds to help reduce pain and swelling. The injury was covered to keep air and sand from the seared surface. Hush received the same treatment. It was nearly dark, and with two wounded it was best to set camp here.

That night, the skin around Lupen’s burn had become red, swollen and sore. Eka prepared some tea laced with herbs to prevent infection, but lacked many key ingredients. Staying out here was not an option, and the next town was too far. Tomorrow, Eka would try to search the land for the missing herbs.

Eka prepared nuni nuggets for everyone. Nuni was a starchy stubber with bright yellow flesh, it had a taste and smell that could best be described as being robust. Lupen loved nuni, more for the manner in which it stained the inside of your mouth yellow than for its flavor. They ate many on the trip, and made bets on who’s mouth would be most yellow. Eka placed the leftovers, the skin and tips of the nuni into a jar along with some brine to pickle for a few days.

The food was divided into three plates, but before breakfast could be served, a plump leaf-tailed orange hound appeared at the entrance of their tent, mouth agape, gushing with saliva. Eka wondered where this leafhound^[44] came from, but glancing behind the hound, Eka’s eyes locked onto a distant point of color, a spot of green.

“Is that where you came from?”

The hound barked, triggering a series of faint yaps and yips, all

coming from the faraway green smudge. A pool of clear slime had accumulated at the animal's feet, dripping from its long purple tongue. Eka cut a piece of nuni, tossed it over, watched as their visitor gobbled it up, and waited for more, its antennae-like ears twitching in anticipation.

"You really like that, huh?" Eka said.

Breakfast was served, although Lupen was in a feverish state and couldn't eat. Hush had no problem eating, and despite Eka's warnings helped itself to Lupen's portion.

"Yea, yea. I know. I know you've got two stomachs," Eka said, caressing the hyroo's fur, "right now you're the mapa okay? You take care of Lu while I'm gone."

Hush's ears twitched at the word 'gone'. While not familiar with the letter making up the word it recognized the sound and length and associated it with a moment of prolonged absence, a thing it didn't like. Hush let out a pained whine, lowering its head into Eka's hands.

"I won't be far, just listen for me," Eka said, fingers brushing the contours of the hyroo's large parabolic ears. Hush yielded then, letting out a yip and taking Lupen's side.

Eka smirked, and turned to the orange hound. "Okay! Let's get going!"

Both walked out of the tent and into the desert. The wind was down, and the suns felt extra hot. The leafhound followed Eka closely, well-aware of the existence of a secret piece of nuni, hidden in the palm of Eka's hand. The leafhound stayed close, as if to make sure no one else would get it.

Gradually, the point of green expanded into a row of trees. At its center there were patches of bright colors, each one corresponding to a different crop. There was no way that this place had come into being on its own, this improbable oasis was the work of a devoted carer. Looking further, Eka glimpsed a few of those horrible floaters hovering around the green piece of land. It would be impossible to go near it without them noticing. If one of them did, without Hush

or Lupen around to help, Eka and the hound would be in trouble. The orange hound seemed calm, not bothered by their presence. Eka assumed that it had come through here once already, and yet it had not suffered any harm. Had they not seen the hound? Maybe it knew of another way inside. Eka's eyes were looking out for any movement in the oasis. There were many other leafhounds there, one of them was chasing a floater that had wandered a bit too far inland. The floater turned yellow and backed away, returning to the outer perimeter.

Eka returned to camp, the faithful leafhound trailing behind. Using the nuni as a lure was brilliant, Eka thought. They would make their way inside with the hound, drawn close by the irresistible allure of the yellow tuber, and keep the floaters away all the while. Hopefully, this hound was scary enough to protect all three of them and grant them safe passage into the oasis. Eka packed the tent and supplies, and the injured Verido was secured onto Hush. The group marched towards the oasis, stopping at the edge, waiting.

Lupen opened one fatigued eye. "Eka no... we can't."

"It's okay, we've got a guide this time."

The hound was at their side, mouth dripping with saliva. The last bit of nuni in hand. Eka stepped onto the grass, marking the entrance to the oasis. The spheres reacted. They raced over but did not attack, not while the orange mutt was there. Eka gave the leafhound half of the piece of nuni, swallowed it whole and waited for the rest.

"Mind guiding us all the way in?" Eka asked, "I promise you'll get the rest, and more!"

The hound yipped, and led them deeper into the oasis. The spheres had all gathered around them, but left a corridor for them to walk through. Their skin color changed from red, to orange and back to yellow. Lupen was hiding under the fabric of the tent, feeling dubious about the whole idea. The round creatures stared, but did not move.

Eka was glad that they were safe, but then noticed other hounds in the oasis staring at their little group. None charged at them, or

made a sound.

Lupen breathed a sigh of relief, and Eka offered the rest of the nuni to the hound, caressing its head. "Good job hound!"

Someone was shouting from the top of the hill, then came running towards them brandishing a rake. A Terin, dark skinned, dark haired, two-toed with thick limbs, head covered by a brimmed hat made from banabo leaves. The hat was secured with a cloth tied under the chin. "Waldek! What did you do? *No* one is allowed in here! You know *this!*" Waldek, their guide into the oasis, yipped and wandered off, nose to the ground, searching for more food.

"I love your green place!" Eka said, brightly.

"Leave! This is *my* property!" The Terin said, getting ready to push the group back, but then noticed the hyroo and froze mid-step. "A hyroo? Rare creatures, very few grow... hyroos need lots of moisture, a temperate climate. How is this possible?"

Eka could see the farmer's fascination for Hush, but right now they had more pressing matters. "Those things out there attacked us, my friends are hurt."

The Terin was distracted, eyes fixed on the hyroo still. "There has been talk of receding genes, of young ones hibernating in the soil and awaiting the proper conditions to grow. Yes, yes. This is what must have happened..." but then a frown replaced the expression of wonder, "staying here? Impossible. You'll have to go somewhere else."

Eka removed the scarf, revealing a red head of hair, "time, shelter and medicine, in exchange for 3 questions about my friend Hush."

"How will I know your answers aren't lies?"

"You can trust me."

Those eyes, and those same rounded ears, the Terin thought, then spoke aloud in a quiet voice, "similar, but different." Dirty digits scratched at the wood of the rake, nail beds brown with soil, there were bits of it stuck on the clothes too. The farmer then glanced over at the sick Lupen, laying a hand on the side of the Verido's face, then briefly put two fingers to the side of Lupen's throat, grabbed the chin to see the tongue, and then lifted an eyelid to see the eyes.

“Umph, your friend had another accident, before *this* one I mean.”

“Yea,” Eka nodded, “fell off an Ilk.”

“Well, that explains a lot. No Verido in their right mind would choose to leave an Ilk. And before that?”

“I wasn’t there before that, but now that I think of it, my friend *is* very accident prone. Not a lot of world experience, if you know what I mean...”

The Terin took a deep breath. “You can stay until your friend’s condition improves, but you can’t wander around my grounds without me saying so, and you can’t touch *anything* unless given to you. Is that clear?”

Eka nodded in thanks. Lupen breathed out a weak, but heartfelt thank you. The Verido was sweating profusely, eyelids heavy, drawn down by many tiny invisible hands.

“I need some medililly herbs to treat my friend’s wounds.”

The Terin promised to bring some fresh sprigs over later, returning to the house atop the hill.

Hush started to whine then, with Eka nodding to every grunt and growl, “yes I agree. Our host is overprotective, and has a big heart! I’m glad you picked up on that.”

Eka raised their tent, helped Lupen inside and sat down to watch the orange dogs walking through the fields. They looked at every single crop, their antennae prodding them gently, as if they were asking them about their health. The oasis was divided into many parts. The front had fresh produce, like karonins¹⁰ and babams, teaweat and other grains sat in between the vegetables and the small house atop the hill. Eka could see a space contoured by tall hedges behind that, but the green fence made it impossible to see what was inside.

Waldek would come by their tent often to check on them. A very good mapa, Eka thought.

Later that day, the voice of the Terin sounded outside of the tent.

¹⁰**Karonin** A fruit with a warty assymetrical shape and a hard rind. The inside flesh is crunchy, eatable raw, and has a pungent, slightly spicy flavor, varying in intensity depending on its growing environment.

“Hello Zucca!” Eka wandered out, “you can call me Eka, and that trumpet-eared invalid in there is Lupen.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Oh, your leafhound Waldek told Hush, and Hush told me because I don’t speak leafhound, not *well* anyway. I always mix up the subtleties in the yaps. Don’t get me started on the yips! It’s a very tonal language, not easy to master, and there are *so* many dialects!”

“I don’t like lies, or jokes. I’m going to apply your friend’s medicine. I don’t want to hear any more nonsense.” Zucca prepared two medililly poultices. The soft, moist mass was applied to Lupen and Hush’s wounds, and wrapped carefully with a clean strip of notcott cloth. “What is the name of the mountain you spoke about, where the hyroos grow? It’s within the Central Rim isn’t it?” Zucca asked, eyes locked on the hyroo. The large-eared creature was resting now, coiled into a tight ball with its head hidden. Its body expanded and contracted with every breath. Zucca put a hand to the hyroo’s side, inspecting its fur.

“It hasn’t got one, places without names remain strangely unseen.”

“You won’t say. You think I’ll tell?”

“I’m telling you the truth. It *hasn’t* got one.”

“Okay. Fine.” Zucca was displeased with this answer. “So then, how long do hyroos live for?”

“Two haty’annums? Maybe? It really depends.”

“And how old is Hush?”

“Less than an annum old, Hush is very green,” saying this, Eka turned to caress the back of the sleeping hyroo.

“They grow that big in just one annum? Remarkable.”

“That makes three questions!”

“No, no. That first one doesn’t count. I didn’t get an answer.”

Eka thought about this for a moment, then shrugged, “okay, you get a redo.”

Zucca nodded before leaving the tent, that last question needed to be pondered carefully.

The next day, Hush was sitting outside the tent with Waldek, healthy, gnawing contentedly on a stalk of spicy gingin root. Under the cover of darkness, their leaf-tailed guide had snuck a pile of fresh produce for them. Zucca's words came to Eka's mind then: 'Take only what is given to you.' Zucca had not intended on Waldek helping them. "Technically, we aren't breaking any rules..." Eka said, eyeing Waldek.

Waldek let out a yip before returning to its meal, it had helped itself to some of the items in the pile. Eka smiled, gathered some produce and began to cook breakfast.

~

Pan-fried mapple toast

Ingredients

Two mapples
 One grated sweet root nub
 One avoka nut
 Four teawheet bread slices
 One pureed bonan
 One lanivanil bleen
 One waterstone

Instructions

Cut open a lanivanil bleen and scoop out the insides. Mash the bonan with the back of a spoon, and squeeze one water stone on top until empty, add the lanivanil bleen paste and mix well. Put mixture aside.

Peel and cut mapples into cubes and grate a nub of sweet root. Put pan over source of heat, when hot crack open avoka nut and empty the oil in the pan. Add the cubed mapple and the grated sweet root, pan-fry until caramelized. Keep aside.

Dip the slices of teawheet bread in the bonan puree mix, and cook in a pan until the sides have browned.

Serve the slices with a generous scoop of caramelized mapples.

~

“I made you some toast! Eka style!” Eka said, presenting this tasty creation to the bed-bound Verido.

Lupen was awake, and was looking much better. “Whoa! Fresh mapples! Zucca let you take them?” With eyes now closed, the patient took a bite, as if the momentary absence of one sense could heighten another.

“It was a gift from our friend Waldek. Our little secret! Oh! You’re going to *love* this place Lu! It’s full of greens and oranges and purples and—”

Yesterday, Lupen had been too sick to take in the details of the oasis, but now beyond the fragrant poetry of the mapple toast, this nose detected hints of sweet norcorn¹¹ and teawet in the air.

“—and blues!” Eka finished.

“Looking forward to seeing that,” Lupen said with a smile, before taking note of the poultice, “thanks for taking care of me.”

“Sure Sure! Zucca made that poultice for you though, that’s what healed you up.”

“Oh. I’ll thank Zucca too, then.”

“You’d better! Medililly takes ages to grow, it was kind of our host to spare some,” Eka said.

After their meal, they removed the poultice and checked the wound, the inflammation was down.

Under the midday suns, Lupen and Eka sat in front of their tent, playing the game Nohi’yara to pass the time. They had jars covered with a thin cloth, and each person had to smell and guess the spice aloud. Whoever got the most right won the game. Lupen picked up another jar to smell it.

¹¹**Norcorn** A plant on a stalk that produces inflorescences called nibs that yield bright yellow seeds. With enough heat, the seeds explode into bright orange puffs which are eaten as a snack during special events.

“This is a tough one. Rosemeric? I think?” And passed it to Eka.

“Thymin.”

Lupen frowned, jotting down their guesses, “no way that’s thymin.”

Eka smirked, picking up another jar to smell. “Popmeg.”

Lupen took the jar in turn, and frowned. “Popmeg? Yea *right!* It’s dilly.”

“You know, it’s okay to make the same guess as me.” Eka said, grabbing the last jar to smell it, “dilly.”

Lupen was going to start complaining about how unfair the game was because Eka knew everything about everything always, but then they heard Zucca yelling outside. They peered out through the opening of their tent, spotting the Terin chasing pale winged insects out of a plumpkin field.

“What’s going on?” Eka said.

“Mosslings. I can’t get rid of them. They hate lemilim grass so I planted some to keep them away, but I’m beginning to think they’ve developed a taste for it. Curse these things, they make everything rot!” Zucca said, breathing hard, tired from chasing after them.

Lupen had stayed near the tent, sipping tea, content despite the ever-present chest pains. The oasis had a voice, speaking through the rustling of the various plants. A concerto of greenery. There were not many around to listen, a handful of hounds, the caretaker, and Eka. Zucca and the hounds were producing all of this food for themselves, with no one else around to feed, that is unless there was a village of tiny people over there in that walled garden by the house. Lupen brought up the topic later that day, when tasked with peeling babams for their meal.

“Let’s ask the vegetables!” Eka set the peeled babams down in a pot and wandered over to the fields, stopping near a mossling-infested karonin patch, “hey there, how are you all feeling?” Eka paused, then laughed aloud, “yea, those mosslings are relentless, aren’t they?”

Lupen watched from afar, frowning. “Stop it. You do not speak Vegetable.”

Eka responded with a quick shush, then resumed the conversation. “So what’s the deal with Zucca anyway?” Eka pressed an ear against the side of a karonin, listening for an answer, “oh! A *secret* you *say*?”

Lupen watched, resisting the urge to ask about what the karonin was saying. Asking would mean giving into this prank, but then again Eka knew a lot about the world, perhaps there was such a thing as Vegetable Speak, a language of light and vibrations. After a short conversation, Eka rose and wandered back over to Lupen.

“So um, what did the karonin say?” Lupen asked.

“It said that there is something valuable here,” saying this, Eka covered these ruby eyes with two hands and uncovered them just as quickly, “hidden away!”

“Valuable? You mean like a treasure?”

“Like a secret,” Eka corrected, pressing the point of a finger hard on Lupen’s nose before continuing to peel some babams.

The thought of a secret was intriguing, but likely false. Even so, Lupen could not sleep, haunted by the idea of a treasure, drawn by mystery and the unknown. If Zucca had a secret it would be somewhere near the house, that whole area looked very sheltered and private.

The next day, Lupen got up before the first sun. Zucca was awake already, standing in the fields, tending to the crops and far too busy to notice anyone else was up. Lupen knew better than to break into someone’s home, and instead decided to circle it, hopefully this would satiate this Verido’s curiosity.

Lupen arrived near, but the tall green hedge blocked the way and there was no break in its branches, no way to see through the thickness. Lupen put an arm’s length in it, to see if it was as thick as it looked. “Um, thick indeed,” Lupen said, but then froze. Waldek was here, standing close. “Hey Waldek! We’re friends right? You’re not going to tell on me are you?” Lupen said in a low voice, stuck

halfway into the hedge, scarf and hair caught into the branches.

Waldek let out a quiet bark, and then another.

“No no no shush, shush!” Lupen begged. Getting out of the shrubbery was harder than getting in, its branches curled inwards and refused to let go, “I can’t get out!”

Waldek caught the scent of food in the air, from Eka making breakfast and ran off, leaving Lupen alone in the hedge. “Oh good, oh good...” Lupen tried to wriggle out, but the only way out of this would be to break branches, and then Zucca would know someone had been here. Going inside, giving in to the pull of the branches was the best option. With a grunt and an ow, the Verido popped out of the other side, clothes full of leaves, and skin full of scratches. The hedge now had a Lupen-shaped hole, a weird not-quite triangular outline that made the hedge look like it was in mid-cry. This supposedly inoffensive excursion around Zucca’s house had turned into a break-in. The branches of the shrub and its curly fingers made me do it, was hardly an excuse. Lupen could not accuse the karonin either, blaming the words of a rotten vegetable would do no one any good.

“What am I doing,” the Verido took a step back, but another orange leafhound began to bark and growl from inside the compound. Lupen kept as far away from the hound as the hedge permitted, fitting back in the Verido-shaped hole, and in this instant, Lupen saw what the hedge was concealing. A vast green field full of unborn children. The reason that the hound was so miffed, was because Lupen had almost crushed one. “Oh hey, I’m sorry.”

The hound’s antennae-ears caressed the near-crushed child gently, all was well, its protector was content. Although it did not approve of the intruder’s proximity, and with a push of the nose, the leafhound nudged Lupen away from the field. This place was full of little green nubs pushing out of the soil. Some had leaves that had different shapes, and colors.

“This is a nursery.” Lupen said, amazed.

Lupen had seen nurseries before, they had a small one in Volare, but at most the village had two children growing at once, this place

had many more. A nursery this size explained the need for a large and reliable food source. Zucca had planted enough to populate a small city. After circling the field, under the watchful eye of the hound, Lupen moved closer to the house to look at a calendar on a wall, marked with possible birth dates. There were bags of grains, as well as a giant stone bowl with a yukwood mallet. Lupen ran a hand along the insides of the bowl, and tasted. “Granulated teaweeet berries!” Teaweeet was a widely consumed grain, but this teaweeet was different, it had a strong aroma and tasted sweet, clean and fresh.

Lost in thought, Lupen had only just noticed a figure moving inside the house. It was time to leave. The Verido hurried back towards the bushes. Precipitated by the fear of being discovered, Lupen kicked dirt over the footprints, threw the broken branches back into the hedge, and pushed through the dense thicket before emerging on the other side.

“You *do* realize I was making fun of you. Zucca *does* have a secret though, that much is clear,” Eka said.

“There’s a nursery in there! Full of tiny people like we said! A nursery encircled by hedges. There’s tons of grains, and rows and rows of growing children!” the Verido paused, “think Zucca’s raising an army?”

Eka laughed at this, “definitely. They’ll be carving swords from karonins, and helmets from hollowed-out kyabel!”

Just then, they heard barking outside. The hounds were likely chasing away another floater, but then there were strange voices, followed by Zucca’s classic line: “Get off my land!”

Lupen and Eka poked their heads out of the tent to look at the scene, Zucca was at the edge of the oasis with a band of leafhounds, barring entry to a vennec-pulled wagon and three travelers.

“You need to leave!” Zucca said to them.

One of the travelers raised an empty sac of grains to show that they were in dire need of supplies.

“Leave *now*. There will be consequences if you don’t!” Zucca yelled again.

“You’d prefer we die then?” One of the travelers said.

Zucca pulled a handful of green herbs out of a side pouch and tossed it at them before pulling away. The hounds, too, backed off as the floaters came rushing in, attracted by the scent of the herbs.

Lupen watched, cringing as multiple floaters latched onto the skin of the smallest of the group. The victim fell on the ground, screaming, as the others tried to get them off. Lupen’s chest still ached from the recent attack, “we’ve got to help them!” The Verido turned to Eka, who had already left the tent and was now riding Hush. With a quick motion, Eka grabbed the collar of the injured traveler, and together they jumped up high toward the sky like they’d done before. Altitude and cold, two things they knew worked against them. The other two travelers boarded their wagon and ran away, urging their vennecc forward.

Zucca did not fail to see that Eka had helped them, and the farmer’s angry eyes moved to Lupen. “You’re with *them* aren’t you? They sent you ahead didn’t they? I trusted you!” The leafhounds stayed at the edge of the oasis while Zucca moved toward Lupen, flipping the rake around and aiming the end of the handle at the Verido’s throat.

Lupen did not move. “You *can* trust me Zucca!”

“Then why’s your friend helping them?” Zucca spat.

“Because Eka is kind.”

“What about you? Are you *kind*, Lupen?”

“I like to think I am, yes.”

Zucca’s face was warped with rage. “You were in my nursery today. Don’t deny it! I know you were there! What did you see? You stole from me didn’t you?”

Lupen knew it was dumb to think that their host wouldn’t find out, only a blind person could have missed that large hole in the hedge. “I’m sorry. I *did* go, but I took nothing.”

“I’m sick of this! Of people like you coming in here, feigning kindness to steal from me!”

Lupen was afraid of what Zucca would do in this heightened state, then Eka landed back in the oasis with Hush and the injured trav-

eler. “Why did you bring that filth back in here!?” Zucca’s voice was becoming shrill with fury.

“We need to care for these wounds,” Eka said, carrying the injured traveler, which did not help to suppress Zucca’s growing anger.

“I made a mistake letting you come in here.” Zucca’s hand dove into the side pouch again, but Lupen grabbed the Terin’s arm.

“Don’t do it! *Please.*”

“That’s sweet grass, that’s what attracts the floaters!” Eka said, hand on Zucca’s pouch of herbs.

Zucca couldn’t push Eka away, those ruby eyes had a soothing quality to them. Eka and Lupen learned then that the valley around the oasis was full of patches of sweet grass, planted there purposefully, to attract the floaters and to keep people away.

“You’ve been feeding those things? Do you know how many of us have been hurt?” The injured traveler said.

“You think I don’t *know!*!” Zucca’s voice adopted a deep, menacing tone. The caretaker looked tired of fighting and arguing. “I take no pleasure in hurting others, I really don’t, but I don’t have the energy to keep intruders away on my own anymore, I don’t have many hounds left.”

They convinced their host to let them heal the wounded traveler. It was uncharacteristic of the Terin to trust strangers like this, but Eka inspired trust. Round ears. People with round ears, according to this Terin, were known to be kind.

After the second sunset, from their camp in the oasis, they could see that the wagon was still out there. A fire danced in the distance, signaling their presence. Eka had sent the woth over, to instruct the other travelers to stay close, to make no attempt to come to the oasis, that their friend would be cared for, and returned to them the next day.

The woth fluttered back after the message was delivered, “thank you Crumpet,” but alas, the woth did not answer to that name and went to rest inside of its glass house.

Zucca, Lupen, Eka were in the tent. The Terin decided not to rest

until all the intruders had gone away. Eka's nose had discerned all the ingredients used in Zucca's poultice, and had re-created it using herbs that Waldek had once more secretly provided. Of course, none of this was lost on Zucca. The farmer eyed both Waldek and the poultice with suspicious eyes.

"All they want is food. Surely you can spare some?" Lupen asked.

Zucca was busy filling a pipe with dried bonan leaves, after lighting it, the Terin took a few deep puffs. The whole tent was soon filled with the smell of bonan. "They *never* just want food."

The Verido looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Land, food, and seeds."

"The children..." Lupen said in a low voice, but Zucca had seen the word on the Verido's lips.

"What made you trespass into my home Lupen?"

"You have so much produce, more than enough to feed yourself and those hounds for annums. I just wanted to understand. Besides, you can't know that people will want more, the travelers just wanted a bit of help."

"You're right, I can't know, so I prefer to assume that they're false, it's safer for the children and I." The Terin dipped a finger in some of the pipe ash and drew a symbol on the tent wall, a circle with a diamond shape in its center.

Lupen eyed the symbol carefully, but did not recognize it.

Zucca took another long puff from the pipe, before exhaling again. "You Verido live very sheltered lives, don't you? It's the Irideri city emblem," then sighed, exhaling yellow smoke. "Iridi people are obsessed with chloromyce shroos, a plant with unique properties. They discovered it about a ki'annum ago. Harvesting them was hard work, Iridi workers had to spend days in the dark digging. They didn't want their people to do grunt work, so they began to enlist workers from neighboring cities to do the harvesting for them. At first, there was promise of compensation, they would be housed and fed and allowed to live in one of the fastest growing cities in the Soronan Desert. Empty promises. Workers were confined to the caves, they

were not allowed to mingle with the Iridi people in the city. Evidently, as news of the horrid work conditions traveled, few enlisted. The Iridi then decided that their only option was to capture workers. Their first target was Ministe, where I lived at the time. The city was quickly overrun with Iridi soldiers, and many of my friends were taken. Those who could fled to nearby villages. They soon became overcrowded, as a result many were forbidden from planting their young, but it was just as well because malnutrition was rampant, and not many could produce healthy seeds.” Zucca paused to refill the pipe with fresh bonan leaves.

“The Iridi had a steady flow of chloromyce shroos, but their leader Moera was greedy, and tired of dealing with Terin workers. My people work hard, but we’re stubborn.” Saying this, Zucca’s hand rolled into a fist. “Moera decided that they would have to grow their own workers instead, only then, would they be fully submissive. Myself, along with a handful of other Terins, built the Suvalba Sanctuary, where a mapa could come and sow their young in a protected environment. It was a secret location, and it worked well for many annums, but then a group of Iridi soldiers got word of it. They raided the sanctuary and took all of the unsown seeds, and destroyed the rest. I escaped with a collection of seeds, and some of the resident leafhounds. Losing the sanctuary was... hard, harder on the parents that had trusted us with their young. We weren’t soldiers, we couldn’t fight back.”

“Alone, I searched for a place to start fresh, somewhere far and hidden. While on the outskirts of Montore, I met two strangers in the desert who told me about a place that was still invisible to the world and that could host such a project. Tired, and desperate, I followed their instructions. I found the place. It was perfect. There was a great recess in the land, surrounded by large irinwood trees, and rows of fragglebush on the ground. This was no mirage. It was a miraculous remnant of the old world. The trees and shrubs would protect the new sanctuary from sand dunes shifting in high winds and from the eyes of curious onlookers. In the hollow, I found a boundless waterstone pit. But there was nothing growing there,

getting it to the state it is now took a long time, and a lot of work.”

“I’m glad they never found this place,” Lupen said, relieved.

“The Iridi might have expanded much further, if it hadn’t been for the loss of their Luminary Moera. No one knows what happened, but it was enough to stop them from advancing further. The next leader, Bao The Bright, put an end to it. Now with a reliable source of workers, they stopped the raids and closed their city to the world.” Zucca’s eyes had burned through the tent wall, parted the row of irinwood trees, shifted the sand dunes and split whole mountains to better watch Irideri, to make sure that the Iridi city was still dormant, still closed to the world. “May those brutes never leave the Andenuis again.”

The next day, Zucca allowed Eka and Lupen to view the nursery, while Hush and the hounds were left in charge of the patient in the tent. Everyone on this dust ball was born in the earth, from seeds. A willing, and healthy parent could sow a seed, and eventually the seed would grow into a child. This could take a long time, depending on the state of the soil and temperature. Some could only grow in the dark, others in high-moisture environments, even altitude played a part in the growing process. On their birthday, a carer would sever their roots, helping each child out of the ground. The children needed protection and good nutrition to thrive. The leaves on their heads would fall in time, and like the roots, they left no marks behind.

Zucca pointed to the markings on Lupen’s face, “those lines are a remnant of when everyone lived in the wilds. The Verido didn’t have color on their faces then. The color segregation of your people is unfortunate Lupen, I rather liked the subtleties of the patterns from before, like veins on a leaf. These colors are so vulgar.”

Lupen wasn’t sure what to say, looking at the patterns on these arms in silent embarrassment. The Verido recalled when these patterns were coloured blue, it was a painful process. The people of Volare were proud of the color, it was a tribute to Vol, their carrier and protector. The festivities around this event were extravagant,

everyone in the city was there baking looma root pies, organizing glider races and whistling contests. For Lupen, the party was even more grandiose given the relation to Volare. Now, thinking of it, perhaps these colors did serve to separate their people...

Eka put a hand on Lupen's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "The blue looks nice," saying this, before ruffling up the Verido's pale head of hair, dispelling all feelings of unnecessary shamefaced-ness.

Zucca went on to explain that bearing seeds was a complicated matter, anyone could start bearing seeds after a certain age. Though not all would grow into children. A hungry and tired person would produce nothing at all. Greenery too was a rarity, and it was the same for safe planting grounds. Many stopped sowing. For the better part of history, Terins were responsible for the steady, and healthy growth of children. This dependence on outside help was the main cause for the world's growing depopulation problem. Levi had spoken of a Terin living in Volare that cared for the seeds, but this was long ago. Growing up, the Verido had no memory of a Terin living amongst them. This raised many questions, had the elders done away with this practice?

"Have you ever planted one of yours?" Lupen asked Zucca.

"I owe it to all of the mapas who entrusted me with their young to finish the work I started in the Suvalba Sanctuary. Planting my own would be selfish. These children are my responsibility, their needs and safety are above my own."

Conversations with Zucca always seemed to take a dark turn, it would always end with Lupen feeling terrible.

Eka had wandered to another part of the nursery, accompanied by Waldek who was excited to show how big the leaves of the children in the far end of the field had become.

"I guess I don't really want to sow seeds either." Lupen said to Zucca, eyes on a leaf, part of a row reserved for Aodal children. "My reasons are selfish. I've always had pressure to do it. Because of my connection with the Ilk, and to Volare... it was always expected of me. I would have to sow a seed, to raise another Voice. It's kind of a big deal. Now that I left, my branch of the family has ended. I

feel bad saying it, but I'm sort of, you know... relieved."

"Don't dwell on it. You would make a terrible mapa," Zucca said, looking at the leaves of a nearby growing child.

Lupen laughed, Zucca's honesty was brutal at times, but correct in this case. "Yea. Maybe."

Lupen returned to the tent midday, to check on their patient.

"Can you help us?" The patient was awake and sat up, despite the wounds being fresh. A pair of thin hands shot forward and grabbed onto Lupen, saying it again again, but with more confidence this time. "Help us."

"To do what exactly?" Lupen wanted to look away, but couldn't.

"We need food if we hope to make it back to Kippu. All the usual places we go to find cactubs or gingin roots were empty... it's never happened before."

"This annum's been tough, I heard. I'm sure we can convince Zucca to part with some produce."

"That would be wonderful. By the way, my name is Laris." Laris began to relax, releasing the Verido and melting back into the bed. "You've been here a while then? Have you seen the nursery?"

"Why do you ask?" Lupen replied, unsure if it was a good idea to speak about this.

"Children are such a rarity these days, I'm of bearing age but it just isn't working out you know? It's probably for the best, I can barely feed myself." Laris paused. "Do you think it is cruel to create more life in such times?"

"I'll talk to Zucca. I promise."

"What about you? Would you bear children, I mean, if you could?" Laris asked.

"No." Lupen replied, but was shocked with how quickly this was said. "I mean, I don't know, really. I feel like I don't know anything about anything! One of my good friends told me once that I was always underperforming, so afraid of failing to achieve great things that I continued to fail. I lack confidence in a lot of things that I do, and I'm wondering if my 'not wanting to bear a seed' is just another

fear I have, of failing.” Lupen noticed then that Laris had drifted off to sleep, and laughed. “Rest well.” The Verido said, smiling, relieved that this little speech had had no spectators.

Lupen decided to go and speak with Zucca again, walked around the property, past the Verido-shaped hole in the bush, and entered through the front door of the house, which was built in the Montore style, a mixture of mud, sand, waterstones and dried grasses. It was a tall cube, with several shorter annexes all around, where several holes had been carved into every side, to allow the air to enter through one end and to flow out of the other. A series of decorative lines, criss crossing each other, were carved into the outer walls. Lupen noted that the lines were exactly the thickness of Zucca’s finger, the farmer had likely drawn the pattern by hand before the material had set.

The front door of the house opened onto a narrow passageway, which ran straight through the building, opening onto the nursery in the back. At each side of this passage were spaces bordered by half walls. The space on the left housed large recipients that were integral to the house, filled with soured and salted plumpkins. The pickled food was weighed down by large stones. Lupen could see that a thick, leathery skin had formed on the surface. This skin, Lupen had learned, was a byproduct of the pickling process, it was possible to dry it and to use it as a sponge for cleaning. On the ceiling near the windows wrinkly mapples hung from their stems, shriveled, dusted with the bloom of their natural sugars on their surface. Zucca liked drying mapples, and during their tour of the house yesterday had explained how at a certain stage each fruit had to be massaged once a day to bring the sugar content to the surface.

Along the walkway stacks of dried norcorn, and several other dehydrated vegetables, were packaged into neat bundles of dried bonan leaves. Each bundle was wrapped using a single leaf, held together without string by a series of tucks and folds.

Lupen entered the nursery then, and saw Zucca adding waterstones to a large hopper, with its bottom opening onto a set of thick

rollers. A windmill overhead would turn the rollers and crush the waterstones, water would then flow down small trenches running through the crops, flooding the area gradually.

“Can’t you give them supplies?” Lupen regretted the abruptness of the question, but didn’t know how else to ask.

Zucca continued to work, heaving another armful of waterstones into the hopper. “What did that vagabond tell you, hm?”

“The same thing they told you. They’re hungry.”

“And, like I told you and Eka, this is about more than food.”

“You can’t be sure of that! You may kill them if you don’t help. This is what I know.”

“Dying, yes. That may be true, but that’s only because they spend all their time begging for food. They should try gardening, or learning to forage, instead of living like parasites.”

“Laris told me the harvest was poor out there,” Lupen said, “I thought you cared about all life.”

“I do,” Zucca replied, irritated, “I’ll give them food and they’ll ask to stay, then they’ll ask to see the nursery. The nursery makes everyone lose their minds. Many feel that this world has too many unfed mouths. Mouths. What about minds, I wonder? No one wants to learn. Hardly anyone can name all of the plants that grow where they live. Yes, I could teach the younger ones how to sow and care for food. I could do that, but I can’t teach adults.” Zucca’s voice was gentle, even if the words were harsh, the farmer knew better than to be angry in a nursery. The children slept in the ground, their leaves swaying from side to side as they dreamed good dreams. “Nowadays most prefer the comforts and conveniences of a town, rather than finding their own food in the desert. There’s plenty out there, but it takes time, it is difficult, and you can’t be picky. The absolute guarantee of comfort and safety is all anyone ever cares about now.”

The Soronan Desert had plenty of nomads, but every annum, more and more settled into towns, lured by the promise of stability. Lupen spied a sign on the back of the house.

Wherever you tread, greenery will follow.

Eat one, toss one, Lupen thought.

Zucca noticed the Verido's wandering eyes. "My people used to find all they needed out there. We'd walk from garden to garden, sowing as we went. Many don't like what I do because it is so laborious, but as I said, their lives matter more than mine, I'll do it even if it means I don't have time for anything else."

"But if you had help?"

Zucca's hands were gripping so hard at a waterstone that clear liquid was seeping out of the hard skin, from tiny cracks zigzagging on the sides. "Everyone is false."

Lupen swallowed hard, "Eka told me that those who grow up in Montore aren't taught these things anymore. If they don't know what's important, then how is it their fault? I mean, I didn't know what a cactub was until Eka taught me. You said it yourself, you'll teach the children to care for themselves. Why not teach travelers?"

"You would have me care for this land *and* run a school for inept gardeners? I've got no time for it. Besides, grown adults do not change their ways... they just don't. They lie, they come to steal, and I won't give them any more of my precious time." With this, Lupen was ordered away. At least the hounds couldn't talk, they only yipped and yapped to report a problem. "You will leave with that vagrant tomorrow. I'll deal with my own problems. I always have."

"You know not everyone is like this. I'm sure you can all live here together. You'll need help to raise all those children, right? Give them a chance," Lupen insisted, in a near-begging tone.

Zucca eyes darkened then, lines formed in places where there had been none previously. "You understand nothing. Get out. Gather your things and go." With this, the Terin moved away from Lupen and climbed up a ladder leading to the second floor of the house, disappearing from view.

Lupen returned to the tent and told Eka everything that had happened, the conversation with Laris, and the one with Zucca too. Eka was running fingers over Laris's face, even in sleep, the traveler

looked worn-out, near-spent.

“Zucca wants us to leave,” Lupen said, hurt by the Terin’s indifference.

“Then, we will do what Zucca says.” Eka replied. “You know, back in the old days, Terins used to do check-ups on the Ilk. They did this every annum, back when Ministe was still standing. The Voices would report to the Terins on the annum, on the pains the Ilk may have mentioned. When Ministe fell, a Terin boarded the Ilk of Volare, taught your people how to care for Vol, and helped to create the Hands, as you know them. Terins can see sickness and health in others, it’s second-nature. They’re the carers of the world.”

Lupen swallowed hard then, “when the carers are as spent as Zucca, what does that say of the state of the world?”

“Get some rest,” Eka said with a smile, “it’s late.”

All went to sleep, but not Laris, who had overheard their conversation. In the dark, the patient left their bed and went over to the house atop the hill. The strong scent of the medililly poultices covered up all smells, no leafhound could smell Laris. Laris pushed through the hedge, like Lupen had done, and arrived on the other side, where slept, row after row, unborn children with green tops sticking out of the soil. They looked beautiful under the moonlights, casting tiny shadows. To Laris, this field was a thing of cruelty, this land would not keep its promise and would not stay green. Panicked, Laris’s hands dove into the dirt, fingers wrapping tightly around the stem of a child. “You won’t suffer like I did. I won’t allow it.”

Zucca awoke to tend to the usual early day chores. Walking into the nursery, the Terin froze, Laris was sitting in the nursery, hands full of dirt and head hanging low.

“Why are you here?”

There was a long silence, but eventually, Laris spoke up. “I wanted to rip out every single one. To spare them of all misery, but I couldn’t do it.”

Zucca stepped forward and looked around to make sure that all of the children were safe. Laris had done nothing, all swayed gently

in the early first sunrise breeze, calm and content.

The Terin was relieved, and could resume breathing again. Zucca grabbed hold of the intruder's arm, but the fingers found a food patch, "you've been living off of this crap?" Upon close inspection, there were other food patches decorating this stranger's skin, all expired, all sucked dry. The Terin took a seat down in the mud, in-between rows of greening leaves, and began to peel the patches off one by one, careful not to hurt Laris. Like a leafhound searching for parasites on a plant, Zucca's fingers searched around for patches. "No one ever tell you that you can't live off patches? What a ridiculous invention, these are no substitute for real food..."

Zucca's tranquility surprised Laris. Despite being handled by gentle, caring hands, these limbs could not stop trembling. "Everyone in Montore uses these."

"These," Zucca began, removing yet another patch "are expired. They can help a little when fresh, but not like this."

Laris's eyes threatened to spill all of their water, "the crew of a passing Beobug sandfin sold us a crate-full."

During yesterday's events, blind with rage, Zucca had failed to notice how thin Laris was, with arms that weren't the same length. One was visibly shorter, the ears bore this same kind of unevenness. In the old days, keeping children healthy and safe was all a Terin needed to be happy. It was easy to forget that everyone was a greening thing once, small and frail.

Zucca accompanied Laris out of the compound.

As they walked through the fields together, Laris glanced at the endless supply of produce. "You have false-mosslings in your produce."

"What are you talking about," Zucca said, hurrying ahead, wishing Laris would not talk—this little walk was painful enough.

"False-mosslings. They mimic mosslings. They have curly antennae, and are impervious to lemilim grass. They hate mepperpint. I can't read, but a book saying it was read to me."

Zucca froze in mid-step, having never before heard of false-mosslings. Both continued to walk in silence, to the encampment

where the others travelers were waiting, a leafhound had come along. The two travelers moved out of the wagon to greet Laris. “Thank you for helping Laris,” one of them said, careful to avoid Zucca’s eyes. Like Laris, the two had uneven limbs, and their skin was see-through and fragile. Zucca was embarrassed to stand there with a fleshy body. The travelers helped Laris onto the wagon, and urged the vennek onward. Zucca went back into the oasis with the leafhounds.

Eka and Lupen were awake, and noticed the bed was empty, saw the group leaving in the distance. They kept their promise to Zucca, and were now pulling the tent apart and packing away their gear. They did not address their host. Zucca walked to a field of herbs, and picked out a handful of fresh meppermint, then went over to the mossling-infested fields and distributed some in a plumpkin patch that had been plagued by these pesky insects. Zucca waited for a moment, nothing changed. With a sigh, the Terin walked off but then noticed a mossling flying past, and then another. All had curly antennae. The pests began to fly off in droves. “False-mosslings. How elegant.” Zucca laughed.

Eka saw the insects flying away, looking for another place to nest, and smiled. “You did it! Mosslings are leaving!” Saying it loud enough so Zucca would hear.

“False-mosslings,” Zucca corrected. “Didn’t used to have these here. It’s something new, something I didn’t know.” A rush of emotions overcame the Terin then. “I thought the world had nothing more to teach me. Not everyone is equipped with the knowledge to save themselves. I mistook this for lethargy.” Terins were supposed to care for others, not just in the growing phase, but throughout their lives too. People never really stopped growing. “I’ve made a huge mistake.”

Eka held a hand out. “Not yet you haven’t.”

Zucca and Eka climbed onto Hush, ready to go intercept the travelers aboard their wagon. Before leaving, the Terin looked at Waldek. “You’re in charge. And as for you Lupen,” the Terin smiled at the Verido. A first. “Don’t. Touch. Anything.”

Lupen laughed, and did as told.

Hush disappeared into the distance, and later returned, leading the wagon back into the oasis. A meal transformed their faces completely, the three looked less translucent, solid and warm. The Terin agreed to teach the travelers to grow food, in exchange for help around the fields. To start, they would be fed and housed for an annum. It was difficult for Zucca to commit to longer than this, the Terin did not trust others yet, but one annum seemed reasonable, and after perhaps they'd be granted an extension, or better yet, permanent residence. The travelers accepted, they had no ties to any city.

The next day, with Zucca's permission, Eka and Lupen filled their bags with fresh produce. They all stood over a mapple bush, picking the fruit by hand. Lupen grabbed hold of an oversized mapple, its ribbed skin glistening under the suns. The Verido peeled off part of the outer layer and took a big bite. "This doesn't taste anything like that other mapple I had, it's so bitter," Lupen said, nose wrinkling, resisting the urge to spit out the piece, "it hurts my face."

"You really know nothing of the world," Zucca said, reaching into the mapple bush and picking out another fruit, checking the underside of the fruit, and the area around the stem before handing it over to Lupen, "you'll like this one. Finish that other one first though, I don't tolerate waste."

Lupen reluctantly swallowed the bitter fruit.

The Terin glanced at Eka then. "You're also a carer aren't you? Do you think that making green places and growing children really matters? On a grand scale I mean... say, you were flying over this rock we all inhabit, or if your head reached high above the clouds."

Eka, mouth full of mapples, couldn't answer right away, so Zucca decided that this was something that would be better left unasked. "What is your favorite food?"

Eka swallowed the bits of mapple, smiling. "I like noranges¹² a lot, they're a bit rare though."

¹²**Norange** A near-extinct, sweet, and bitter fruit with a thick rind. It has a fragrant smell, and can calm the mind.

The Terin disappeared inside the house, and returned with a small pouch made out of weaved norcorn leaves. Inside the pouch was a single seed. “Plant this seed in a green place. It needs a lot of moisture and shade. When the leaves grow broad, full suns is fine. In a few annums you’ll get some noranges.” Zucca explained that this seed had been salvaged from the Iridi raids at the Suvalba Sanctuary. Their host also gave them two fresh noranges from the only tree on the property as thanks. “Keep the seeds,” Zucca made a point to say.

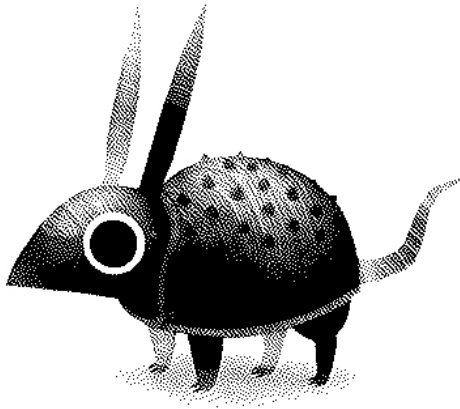
“It will be planted in the greenest of places, I promise,” Eka said, before eyeing Waldek the leafhound who sat there at their feet, wagging its leaf-shaped tail. “Keep your friends safe okay?”

Waldek barked, before turning to Lupen, its antennae prodding Lupen’s legs and chest. It let out a whine then, but Zucca stepped in. “Don’t you have work to do?” The orange hound barked again, and moved off into the fields with the others. The Terin handed Lupen a bag of medililly herbs. “Brew a leaf with your tea, a leaf a day,” Zucca paused then, a thick hand coming to rest on the Verido’s shoulder, “make it part of your routine. A leaf a day. Easy to remember. You’ve got enough here for a long while, but come back and see me when you run out... well, before you run out.”

Lupen accepted the gift, acknowledging how precious the leaves were. “A leaf a day, got it. Thank you.”

The two left shortly, their bags plump with fresh supplies. They wished Laris and the travelers well, thanked the leafhounds, and the farmer. Zucca watched as the two, led by Hush, disappeared behind the row of canopied trees.

Montore



Durdles are shy creatures that like to retreat within their shells, they move very slowly and sleep for most of the day.

“I really couldn’t let you in, not without identification!” A young worker said, from behind a desk equipped with heavy bars.

“We don’t have that in Volare!” Lupen said, getting hot in the face.

“I see.” The clerk reached for a pamphlet and handed it over to Lupen through an opening in the bars. The pamphlet read: ‘So you don’t exist.’

“What is this?”

“If you want to exist in the eyes of Montore you need a piece of identification.”

“A piece of identification that tells others who I am? That’s stupid.”

“It’s the law.”

The clerk reached under the desk and pulled up a durdle, a creature with long ears and a spiked shell, it had a tag stuck to one of its spikes with the writing ‘D-126’. “See. Even D-126 here has an ID.”

“Okay, *fine*. Say I want to get an... *ahy-dee*, where do I get it?”

“You’ll need to visit the next stall, Specter¹³. Next!” the clerk called, eager to move on to another customer.

“Specter?” Lupen stormed off, looking for that next stall the clerk had mentioned. The stall was easy to find, it had a long line of people standing in front of it, a long, long line, snaking around Montore’s outer wall, and lined with colorful tents.

The city of Montore sat on a hilltop enclosed entirely within a single, continuous wall, made from rammed earth and decorated with geometric motifs. The tops of large hampa sails were visible from the ground, raised high on a ledge atop the wall so that nothing could disturb the wind. The sails lay over a rotating circular track, following the whole top of the city wall. The orientation of each sail changed depending on the wind, their motion was slow, but

¹³**Specter.** The name given to those in Montore who don’t have ID, who don’t yet exist, and that cannot enter the city. It is also used as an expression, to refer to those who live alone, outside of communities

constant, powering the city.

On one end of the city, a wall extension was in progress. Wooden scaffolding lay in place, with workers standing on the top of the wall with long ramming poles, pressing and packing the soil down into the mold. Lupen approached a young Terin standing in line, “hey, how long have you been waiting here?”

“We’ve both been in line for 5 days.” Lupen followed the voice and turned around, meeting with the forehead of another Terin. “I’m Kuzi.” Kuzi wore a notcott bandana, a long, white loose-knit shirt, and a colorful scarf. Kuzi’s line neighbor was indeed unresponsive, standing, but just barely.

“Lupen,” Lupen said, “that long? For an ahy- dee?”

“Yeesh, you’re saying that real weird.”

“Saying what weird?”

“Nevermind.” Kuzi said, “waiting in line is a good job. It pays well, well, it pays enough for a quarter kavava root.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Someone’s paying us to wait in line for them, while they stay in one of those tents out there. When I reach the desk, we switch places, and I get paid! There’s always people willing to pay not to wait. They get what they want, we get what we want, it’s perfect.”

Lupen estimated that it would take at least seven days to reach the front desk, “seven days is too long.”

“Yea, it’s long long, but it’s the only way any of us can afford kavava root. I just ran out, I’m usually careful to have some left for my time in line, but you know, it is difficult to reason with yourself when you’re on kavava,” Kuzi said with a laugh, “can’t believe I went through the whole root...”

Lupen noticed a root laying in the hand of the person standing ahead of them in line. The Terin was in another world, body swaying slowly from side to side, mouthing nonsensical words.

“Every surrogate in this line is here for kavava.” Kuzi said. “So everyday, you wait in line to earn coin for kavava, the wait is so long that you consume your entire kavava supply purchased with the coin earned from your previous time in line, so when you reach

the front desk you get paid and spend it all on more kavava, then you find someone to wait in line for because you know you'll run out again waiting. That is psychotic Kuzi."

"You don't know anything about anything."

"You're not the first to tell me that..." Lupen frowned and was about to leave but then asked another question. "I was wondering, do you know a Zucca?"

"If I know azucca? What's azucca."

"Zucca. It's a name."

"Azucca'itsaname...? No, sorry. Don't know one. Hell of a name though, would sit real long on an ID."

"Are you done wasting my time?" Lupen asked, impatiently.

"Way I see it you're wasting *mine*. I might start being useful if you throw a coin or two my way though..." the Terin said with a wink, presenting an open hand.

Already, Lupen hated everything about Montore, even those living outside its walls. The Verido gave the Terin a rotten look before walking away.

"Come on now Specter, I was kidding. It's a thing called humor, learn about it! *Every* Terin *knows* about Zucca. Has something of great value I heard. Many go out into the desert to look for it, but most never make it back. I bet you know that though, being a friend to Zucca! If you know the location and tell the guards I bet you and I could get ahead in line real fast! There's a guard right there, see? Hey! Hey *you!* Guard person!"

Lupen wanted to run away, but the Terin gripped the Verido's vest collar. A tall guard in uniform walked towards them.

"Kuzi, I wish you wouldn't call me 'guard person'..." The guard said, offended by this.

Lupen spied a name on a piece of ID pinned to the front of the guard's green blazer, the tag read 'Averet'.

"Averet here has a fear of being perceived as ordinary," Kuzi said, turning to Lupen.

Averet's face turned red. "I've got grand ideas! There are plenty of things I want to do with my life! This is not my forever job you

know, I am *not* going to spend my life making sure kakava addicts, like you, don't fall down a ditch..."

"This Specter and I know the whereabouts of Zucca!" Kuzi then blurted out in a hurry, before Lupen could react.

Lupen tried to deny it all, but the response was delayed, unnatural. "I'm just a traveling potter! I make pots! I don't know anything about anything! Well, I know about pots! But that's really *it!*"

"Montore already has a Verido potter, you dolt. If you're gonna make up a back story, take it from someone who doesn't look like you." Kuzi said with a laugh.

Lupen became red in the face, "there's already a Verido potter here? Really?"

Kuzi knocked on the side of Lupen's head with a closed fist, as if to check if it was hollow. "There is definitely something swishing around in there," before turning to Averet again, "*Zucca!* Come on, you've heard of the one with the green place, yea? Well, we'll tell you where it is if you let us skip the line."

"As if either of you would know where it is, least of all *you*, Kuzi, and we've just established that this Specter is a liar."

Whenever Lupen tried to tear away, the Terin found some other limb or piece of clothes to grab onto. As Kuzi tugged away, a norange fell out of Lupen's vest pocket and rolled onto the ground.

Both the guard and Kuzi froze at the sight of it.

"A norange." Kuzi said, releasing Lupen and going to grab the colorful piece of fruit instead. Kuzi held onto it, stroking the bumps on its surface gently, like stroking the soft hairs on the head of a newborn. There was a hint of sadness in Kuzi's eyes. The Terin put a nose to the fruit, smelling it, and whispering softly into it. Averet reached forward and tore the fruit away, inspecting it from all angles.

"Where did you get *this?*" A question aimed at Lupen, although the guard's eyes were fixed on the fruit.

Kuzi leapt at Averet and stole the norange before running away, grabbing Lupen's arm in passing before darting into the crowd. The

guard rushed after them, but soon lost sight of the two runaways.

“A norange...” Averet whispered. If it weren’t for the fruit bits still stuck under these fingernails, Averet would have thought it to be a hallucination.

Kuzi stopped running once they had gone far away enough, breathing hard, the norange in hand.

“You lost your place in line! Weeks of waiting!” Lupen said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Kuzi replied, eyes still on the fruit. “You really were at that oasis.”

“Yea, you thought I was lying? This was a parting gift. I’d never heard of noranges until I was given one. My friend knew, though.”

“Noranges were thought to be extinct. I thought the plant and seed had gone up in flames with Ministe and the rest. Ah, I love the smell of noranges warmed by the suns! Some have tried to synthesize the smell and taste, but it’s not the same. I forgot how fragrant it was. So sweet, yet so bitter.”

“You can have it,” Lupen said with a smile. “It’s yours to eat.”

“I love the smell, but I also hate it, it brings back memories I’d prefer to forget.”

Lupen knew why. After the Iridi raids many Terins had grown lethargic. They stopped growing food and lost their connection with the soil. Kuzi’s eyes were set on that fruit, having a silent conversation with it. The Terin then smiled, breaking out of the trance and throwing the fruit up in the air before catching it again in mid-flight. “Thanks for the gift. Seems like I owe you big now, eh? I’ll get you an ID, I’ve got some connections.”

“Yea, that’d be great! I need one for my friend Eka, too.”

“Not a problem,” Kuzi eyed Lupen curiously then, “why do you want to get into Montore anyway? It sucks there.”

“We’re in the mood for some babam cake and tea.”

The next morning, Lupen and Eka went to wait at the foot of the new wall that was being built. Kuzi had instructed Lupen to wait there, but now the second sun was nearing midday, and their helper was a no-show. They wandered back over to the town entrance, mak-

ing sure to avoid any guards, while keeping an eye open for Kuzi.

By then, the story about a Verido in possession of a real norange had reached the ears of many other Terins. Many of the ones standing in line for IDs glanced at them as they walked past.

“Hey!” One of them called out. “Is it true that you’ve met Zucca?”

Lupen nodded. “Yes, but keep your voice low.”

“Got any more of those noranges?” Another yelled.

Eka did have one left, but wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to say so.

“I’ll get you an ID for one!” One Terin said. “I’ve got coin, you want coin for it? What about kavava?”

“Uh oh,” said Eka, noticing the amount of attention they were getting. Some guards turned, tipped off by the many Terins beginning to encircle them, shouting offers.

Then, the woth moved out of its glass ball, and reached into Eka’s pocket, pulling out the last norange. The woth took off with it, carrying it high and above everyone’s head. Eka let out another “Uh oh,” followed by, “Humhum come back!” All of the surrogates in line were staring at the brightly coloured fruit, jumping into the air to try and grab it. The guards saw it too, now hurrying over. The woth hovered out of their reach, and flew over the main entrance and inside the city. A crowd followed, a mix of surrogates, guards and visitors, all reaching for the fruit.

“Norange!”

“Get it, get it!”

A mob was chasing the woth inside the city, Eka and Lupen, following, were able to get inside.

“That woth is brilliant! A first-class instigator of change! A genius!” Lupen said, running inside, shouting the war cry: “Cake and tea!”

“Cake and tea!” Eka yelled while laughing, mimicking Lupen. “You’re going to start a riot!”

“I’m just an opportunist, the woth is the mastermind!”

The woth landed on top of a high building, setting the norange

on a visible but inaccessible place, and waited. Out came several “ooohs”, as well as a succession of reverent “aaahs,” from the growing collection of admirers at the foot of the building.

Eka and Lupen ran deeper into the city, past buildings and street vendors, until they arrived at the town’s public square, a clear space, encircled with tiny stalls selling a variety of flavored food patches.

“Get your bobonion soup patch here! Best in the city!”

“In the mood for some mapple pie? Get the patch right here, right now!”

The floor of the city was paved with stones, but dusty, with bits of debris here and there. Young workers stood around with brooms, there to catch spent patches. The people of Montore threw them over their shoulders when they were done, mirroring the habit of throwing away remains of fresh fruits and vegetables. The desert and small critters consumed the peels quickly, but not the same could be said of those patches.

“What do you do with the collected patches?” Eka asked one of the children.

The child pointed to a building adjoined to the outerwall.

“And what happens when the building’s full?”

The child cocked a head to one side, “I guess they’ll put it in another building...”

Every house, or business in this city had thick yellow walls made from a mixture of mud, sand, waterstones and dried grass. They were constructed in a way to remain cool in the day, and warm once both suns had set. A large building topped with a dome sat at one end of the public square, adorned with the Montore insignia, the same symbol stamped on the face of every coin. A dozen green flags perched on the roof gave the building some color.

In the middle of the city was a thick beam with a large wheel around it, spinning slowly. Eka noticed that the beam and wheel were connected to a much larger cog, built under the city. Following one of these long branches, Eka arrived at a bakery. Inside, another one of these large beams came out of a hole in the floor, behind the

counter where the baker worked. This secondary beam had a series of smaller branches and cogs attached to it, leading to a flour mill.

“Whoa!” Eka said, kneeling down near the hole in the floor around the beam to catch a glimpse of the underground mechanism. “This is brilliant!” The city was built on top of a huge cog, powering devices in the businesses of the city. In the bakery, the beam had an arm that could be repositioned to power a grain mill, or a dough beater.

“You shouldn’t mill so much muckwheat!” someone said, “we sell so little now, no one wants any! Why waste it?”

The baker sighed, and glanced over at a fresh loaf of muckwheat bread. “People in this town need to be reminded of what real food looks like and smells like, Ira!”

“They’re going to shut us down, Avril. We need coin to keep this place running.”

Eka overheard the conversation, and was sad to hear it. Eka carried these words back to Lupen, who had somehow gotten dragged into a Montore tour group. Leaving it was hard, everyone kept pushing them from one place to another.

“The town operates on a schedule!” A tour guide said to a group of visitors. “During rush horo, the strongest in the city come to give the master cog a boost by spinning it faster manually! Food patch production increases dramatically during these times to meet the increased demand, otherwise, the cog spins at a continuous and consistent speed, made possible by the outer cog, powered by the wind. But remember, currently Beobug is trying to build a new system that would remove the need for wind! Imagine! A city that runs all day, everyday no matter the weather!”

Lupen and Eka followed the guide. They found their way into a factory that made sweet-tasting food patches. On arrival everyone was given a sample, the guide gave Eka and Lupen a babam cake patch.

“It’s just like having the real thing! Try it!”

Eka gave the patch a sniff, followed by a quick lick. “Um,” Eka thought, giving it another lick, “I can sort of taste it.”

Lupen licked the babam cake patch too, “yea, I mean. It’s fine?”

The tour leader continued to talk about the factory. “Our Grand-Leader Monty had the idea for this wonderful product! It has saved countless lives, and propelled this city to fame!”

“Monty?” Lupen said, loud enough for others to hear.

The entire group turned to look at the Verido.

“You mean to say you don’t know the Grand-Leader’s name?” One of the tourists asked.

“Oh, well I was kidding! Of course I know!”

“Smooth.” Eka whispered.

“Yea? Then when’s Monty Day, hm?”

All eyes were on Lupen. “Um. Today?” Lupen said, tentatively, tipped off by the decorations in both the town and the factory.

The group then relaxed. “That’s right! Today is Monty Day, celebrating the Green Day of our Grand-Leader!”

Lupen was eager to get away from this group of zealots. As soon as the tour group made its way to the gift shop, the Verido and Eka snuck out.

“I’d like to give this Monty a piece of my mind,” Lupen said, unimpressed with the factory, as they walked away the Verido continued to lick the babam cake patch. “I hate the idea of this patch, but I can’t stop licking it.”

“It’s not bad,” Eka noted.

Lupen gave the patch a last, long lick, but then stopped to look at it. “Now, what do I do with this?”

Eka and Lupen spent time exploring the city, determined to see every shop that the great cog was powering, like a woodshop, where the cog turned a metal wheel to cut giant logs.

Eka wandered into Alkarawin, the oldest library in the Soronan desert, its emerald-tiled roof visible from anywhere in Montore. The complex was home to hundreds of ancient texts written by renowned scholars and thinkers over the years. The library had two giant in-wood trees guarding the main entrance. The branches of the tree were heavy with small wooden discs, hanging from thin ropes, each

disc had words carved onto its faces. Visitors who came from far to visit Alkarawin would come here to offer knowledge to the library, inscribing a short story, or fact to the wood of a disc. At the end of every annum, these were removed from the trees, tallied, and gathered to form new texts. A small basin lay near the door where visitors could wash their hands and feet, a symbolic act of cleaning the mind and body prior to entering.

Clean and centered, Eka entered Alkarawin, and stepped into a square room, with books lining the walls from floor to ceiling. Books stored near the ceiling were accessible via a small elevated walkway, built around the room and accessible with a ladder, this room branched out into several smaller alcoves, each featuring a unique ornately-painted yukwood ceiling.

Eka wandered onto the higher walkway, fingers tracing along names embossed on the bindings. Eka spotted a blind librarian browsing through books on a nearby shelf, helping a customer find a specific tome, fingers reading the text quickly before moving into another section. The librarian pulled out a book and then handed it over to the visitor in silence. The visitor breathed a low ‘thank you’, and made for one of the many reading alcoves. The librarian turned to Eka then, waiting for a book name. “Habitants of the Dark please,” Eka said, in a quiet voice. The librarian’s hands returned to the shelves, hunting for the book Eka requested, they skipped down many rows of books, fingers touching the wood between each row to identify the right section, and after finding the correct shelf, the hands stopped, having identified the book. Just as the worker handed the book to Eka, a horn sounded outside. Eka thanked the Librarian, and hurried down the stairs, following the sound.

Outside, the main city square was filled with people, who had gathered around the central beam of the cog. Two Montore guards held a ladder near the rotating beam. A Finiku walked out of the crowd, climbed the ladder, and after reaching the top, made a short elegant hop from the last step to the top of the beam.

“Dot! Dot! Dot!”

The crowd cheered. Dot smiled and raised two arms to the sky, causing the cheer to become even louder.

“Monty! Monty! Monty!”

The character standing on the little rotating platform wore a bright green ensemble with the familiar Montore emblem in the back. “Monty love you all! And they thank you for your hard work! Montore can no be as great without you!” The crowd cheered once again at these words. “Production of foodpatch is at an all-time high!” The crowd cheered again, as Dot began to list their yearly accomplishments aloud. Lupen suddenly remembered Gree’s coin, and pulled it out from a side pocket to look at it.

“Oh! How did you get this?” Eka said, eyeing the coin.

“Gree gave it to me, I don’t know what to do with it though. My spirit doesn’t feel elevated at all.”

Eka smirked, grabbed the coin from Lupen’s hand, and disappeared into the crowd.

“Eka? Eka! Ah, never mind. I’ll just wait here, *alone*.” Moments later, Lupen’s eyes found a familiar face, one lined with blue. “Rosmus? Hey Roz!”

Rosmus looked up, eyes locking onto the other Verido standing near. “Well, well! Look who’s got two feet in the dirt!” Rosmus said with a laugh, “fancy genuine Volare wares?”

“Pottery!” Lupen said with a laugh, reaching for a cast-carapace pot, one of many lining the shelf of the stall. “You always said you’d leave to do this, but I never thought you’d actually do it! Well, I’m not *that* surprised. If anyone could succeed out here, it’s you. Just so you know, I pretended to be you a moment ago to get out of something...”

“Yea, a bunch of people have been coming over asking me about a norange. I don’t know, guess that’s something to do with you, huh?”

Lupen nodded. “It’s been a weird day, but hey, how long have you been in Montore for?”

“4 annums and counting,” Rosmus replied, “I’m shocked to see you out here though! I guess Mago became Voice after all.”

“Kind of...” Lupen said, caressing the side of the pot, a finger tracing along the bumps decorating its side. This pot was made from a material endemic to the Ilk, formed by baking a cast mixture of ground carapace shavings and looma root juices. The walls of the pot were covered with a shiny hard membrane. “Aodal technique,” Rosmus said, tapping the pot with a finger, “keeps the material from cracking in the sun. Learned it when passing through Renate.”

“It’s beautiful.” “You know, I’m really glad you didn’t become Voice, I didn’t want that for you.” Rosmus suddenly reached into a bag for an object, switching the pot in Lupen’s hands for a small teacup. The teacup had a bulbous shape, mottled grey with a blue hue, Rosmus had coiled a decorative isilk braid around its handle. “A gift for you. You can tie it to your belt. Drinking tea in it will help you think.”

“I don’t think I need this.”

Rosmus grabbed the cup again, and set it atop Lupen’s head. “It’s a Thinking Cup. It forces you to look at the world, it makes you question everything. If you need to have a long think, fill it with tea and set it atop your head. It works, you’ll see.”

“I don’t need a cup of tea on my head to think,” Lupen said, removing the cup from its perch. “I’ll look ridiculous.”

“No, you’ll appear pensive, which will make you look smart,” Rosmus said, grinning widely.

Lupen then noticed Kuzi was sitting on a crate near the bakery. “I’ve got to go, can I come and see you later?”

Rosmus nodded, waving as Lupen left the stall.

Lupen rushed over to Kuzi. “You forgot to meet us!” The Verido stopped talking, noticing that like the other Terins in the line outside of town yesterday, Kuzi too was high on kavava.

“Oh, hey Lu-Lu!” Kuzi said, smiling stupidly.

“Kuzi, you didn’t...”

Kuzi looked at the Verido with red eyes, and groaned. “I didn’t even taste the norange. Not one bite. I’m *so* weak.”

Lupen sat down, shoulder to shoulder with Kuzi. Both said nothing, sitting together with Dot's voice in the background. Just then the woth returned, carrying a small bit of norange peel around. Lupen grabbed the peel, and handed it over to Kuzi, "you can taste it now." The Terin pushed it away.

"No. I don't like how it makes me feel."

A curious onlooker noticed the norange peel. "Norange!" Word of the norange on the rooftop had traveled, everyone in town knew about it. Dot stopped speaking then, words falling on deaf ears as the crowd gathered around Lupen. There was nowhere to run this time. The guards arrived, recognizing both Kuzi and Lupen.

"You two!" The guard gripped Lupen's arm, then began to search for the piece of ID. "What! No ID either?! We've got a Specter here!"

"I've got ID! I exist! See? *See?*" Kuzi yelled, fumbling around for it, but the guard didn't want to hear it, and both were dragged away from the main square and into the courtyard of the building with the Montore emblem, and were asked to stay there.

The space was enclosed by 4 walls, with two doors, one leading inside the courtyard, the other, inside of the main building. Unlike most of Montore, this place was a lush garden, bursting with color and life. A giant yukwood tree grew in the center, providing shelter from the high midday suns.

Lupen thought the place beautiful, but wondered what lay beyond the second door. Like the first, it was a heavysset door with deep carvings of intertwining branches and leaves, and a single golden knob in its center.

Kuzi gave Lupen a shove. "Why'd you have to get me involved?! Is babam cake and tea code for something?"

"I didn't do anything! Everyone here just gets real crazy whenever there's mention of noranges! I didn't know that would happen!"

"You can't just go flaunting extinct fruits around!" Kuzi realized something then. "That's how you got into the city."

"Yea, me and a ton of others." Lupen smirked. "Another accident."

“They’re going to put us into a mill and grind us into food patches!” Kuzi yelled.

“It’s your fault! You were supposed to meet us, but instead you went on a kavava bender!”

Kuzi began to fight Lupen in the courtyard, although the fight occurred mostly on one side, and less so on the other. The Verido didn’t know how to fight, and instead made a dance of it, avoiding the onslaught of fists with ease because Kuzi’s movements were sluggish, still high on root juices. Their fight was interrupted by Averet, the guard.

“Hey! Stop that!” Averet instructed them to follow, and brought them in front of a large door, made of carved banabo. “Whom does this belong to?” Averet asked, holding the norange peel.

Lupen didn’t put a claim to it, having no desire to get ground up into anything. Kuzi addressed Averet then. “How would I have a norange? I was raised here and never left, same as you.”

The guard blinked, then gripped Lupen’s arm. “Right. Come with me, Specter.”

“I bet the food patch version of you will be *disgusting!*” Kuzi shouted, just as another guard arrived to escort the Terin outside.

Lupen gulped as the large carved banabo door opened, revealing a thick curtain, obscuring both the room and its occupant. “Go,” Averet said, pushing the captive onward. Lupen took a few steps forward, found an opening in the fabric and pushed on. A young Terin, dressed in a green robe, was on the other side. “You’re the Specter, the norange smuggler?”

“Smuggler? That’s escalating things a bit don’t you think?”

“Follow me,” the young Terin said, pushing past yet another set of curtains. On the other side, Lupen’s fingers found moss clinging to the fabric. Small trees grew from holes in the ground, their roots raising the tiled flooring. There was a large gap in the ceiling, bringing light into the room. The walls were covered with notes, and drawings. A large ornate table lay at the center of the room, buried in a blanket of greens, with plants wrapping around its legs. Some of

the chairs encircling the table lay on their sides, with pieces broken off, used to build other projects. A painting of the table as it once was hung on the wall.

“The norange thief is here.”

“What? I’m no thief!” Lupen retorted.

A Terin with graying hair and a thin young face rose from behind the table, head reaching just over a mound of moss. “Where did you get that norange?” The Terin asked, nonchalantly, speaking low and slow while bending down again to check over the leaves of a nearby plant.

“If I said, I’d betray a friend and endanger lives,” Lupen replied, bending down to look under the table to see what the Terin was doing. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you who it’s from though...”

“You are correct. I am happy to learn that Zucca was able to save some norange seeds,” the Terin said, moving from one plant to another, “nornorcorn patties just aren’t the same without norange sauce.”

Lupen observed that the Terin wore a simple pair of tan hampa pants, scuffed at the knees. “So um, are you Monty?”

Monty stood up again, slowly, to look at Lupen only to find that Lupen’s head wasn’t there. “Not what you were expecting?”

Lupen mimicked Monty’s movements, and stood up again. “No, not at all... you’ve got all these plants, yet you’re feeding others false food, then there’s the Beobug goons and their sandfins. Hard to believe it all comes from you.”

Monty laughed. “It’s been a while since I’ve heard someone attacking me for my ideas,” Monty said, yellow eyes now fixed on Lupen.

“Yea well, I’ve got a problem with pain, and misery,” Lupen replied.

Monty smiled, composed and calm as ever. “The food patches helped feed refugees during the Iridi raids.”

“Did you know that Beobug employees sell expired patches to the hungry for coin?” Lupen was proud of this rebuttal.

Monty thought about this for a moment. “And you’re blaming

me.”

“Yes, yes I am.”

“I don’t have as much control over others as you might think.”

“People in this city aren’t eating real food anymore, and everyone is obsessed with coin...” Lupen wanted to stop talking but the words kept coming out.

“Coin was supposed to be a way to simplify exchanges in the city. It was really a good idea, but great ideas have a way of growing, and changing as more and more heads and hands get involved, and big ideas require more hands and heads. I’ve let go of the helm many, many annums ago. I had more energy back then, it was easier to steer, but now...” Monty sighed, “I just decided to stop having ideas.”

Lupen took note of all the drawings and books scattered in the room, clearly Monty wasn’t done having ideas. “You mean you decided to stop telling others about them.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. The giant cog was my first idea, my best one. It is designed to run forever you know, with little maintenance, but then no one can do anything when the wind is down. Waiting didn’t used to be a problem, but the city has grown, and with all the transients we get demand is increasing and Montore can no longer afford to wait. The new system will work day and night..”

“Did you ever tell anyone all of this? That it’s a bad idea? Maybe if they heard it from you they’d stop?”

“Those who live in Montore see it as an undivided blessing. For me to criticize modernity is to criticize the needs and wants of my city, and of those we invite within its walls.” Monty replied.

“So Montore will just keep growing forever, and ever?” Lupen said.

“You would have me kick people out to reduce demand?” Monty asked the Verido. “Just as the wind changes the shape of dunes in the desert, Montore too will be shaped by those who inhabit it. I’ve decided to instead focus on this room, it is small, and because it is small, I only need my own head and hands and I quite like that.” Monty stood up then, and began to walk around the room, stretching arms and legs and stopping in front of a large portrait hanging

on a wall.

Lupen took note of a painting on the back wall, it resembled the portrait carved on the coin, “that looks nothing like you.”

“If I were to go out there on the city square right now, they wouldn’t believe I was Monty.” Monty too stared at the painting, then turned so Lupen could compare details. “My artist got carried away, they thought I needed to look more imposing, more angular. It’s why I’m here really, and that no one can see me. If they did, they’d throw me out, thinking I was a pretender. Anyway, I am tired. Dot has the helm now. Staying here, at least I’m safe and free to think up ideas all day, everyday...”

“Yea. You’re comfortable while people suffer.”

“People have suffered long before your time and mine. I was wondering, how did you get Zucca to give you that fruit?”

Lupen bore a sad expression, eyeing the entrance. “If you want to know the full story you’ll have to walk out of here with me. How about it? It’s Monty Day after all.”

Monty smirked, “I would have really enjoyed hearing that story. For you to know, and me to wonder I suppose.” Saying this, the grand leader continued to look after the plants in the room, checking the leaves for signs of malnutrition with much love and care, like a leafhound would.

“Why did you ask me in here?” Lupen asked.

“Curiosity. A Verido with a norange, a hyroo and a round-eared companion together, *very* unusual.” Saying this, Monty glanced at Lupen once again, the pair of yellow eyes appeared focused, quietly dissecting the visitor.

“I’ll add that story to the pile, in exchange for you to tell your people the truth.” Lupen teased.

“Goodbye Specter.”

Lupen let out a deep sigh, there was nothing to do then but leave. The Verido glanced at Monty’s second hand. “What now? What happens to the ones who don’t exist in the eyes of Montore? Do I get ground up into food?”

The green-clad Terin laughed, “the things people think we do.

Sometimes I wonder why we bother making laws at all, stories like this keep people in line better than our laws ever could.” With this, Lupen was escorted out of the building. “You need to leave the city right this instant.” Monty’s second hand watched as Lupen stepped into the main square, and headed towards the city gate. The guard kept close, to make sure the Verido didn’t decide to take a detour on the way out.

As Lupen was escorted out of Montore, Kuzi stood by, watching. Eka stood near too, chewing loudly, eating chunks of freshly baked babam cake. “D’you know where I can get some mepperpint tea around here?”

Kuzi looked over, catching the scent of fresh babam. “No, I don’t really know.”

“Do you want some?” Eka offered, putting a slice of cake under the Terin’s nose. “I could eat it all myself, but that would make me a glutton. You eating a bit would make me feel like less of one.”

Kuzi was hungry, having forgotten to buy some food patches. “Sure, more for you than for me though.” Kuzi bit into the pastry. The texture was bouncy, and airy, it offered little resistance. A piece was torn off, and passed to the next point in line. This experience of eating was so intense, so enjoyable, that Kuzi began to shiver. “There’s gingin in it! I love gingin! Well, I used to...”

“Enjoy it, this is likely the last cake the bakery will ever make. It’s closing tomorrow, not enough people are buying food. A real shame. They make amazing breads too, Avril and Ira I mean, they’re the real deal! Soon they’ll be gone. Extinct, like the noranges.”

Kuzi stopped chewing, feeling sad. This was usually the point where the Terin would start ingesting some mind-numbing kavava...

“Oh! Now I remember,” Eka began, “Avril’s grandmapa Moki was the one making the mepperpint tea! The shop had a garden outside, it was a popular place back in the day. Some Terin was working there too, the only one who really understood mepperpint. I miss it. But you know... if you drink too much of it—”

“—It makes your eyes sprout leaves,” Kuzi finished, with a weak smile.

Eka nodded. "Exactly! Alright. Have some more cake. I'm going to go for a walk now."

Kuzi stood there, a giant slice of babam cake in hand, staring at the bakery. For some reason, Kuzi had forgotten it existed, stuck in a perpetual kavava haze. The fog had cleared, and the world had much more detail in it. Without a moment's hesitation, and drawn by the smell of muckwheat, the Terin walked to the bakery and went inside.

Lupen was at their tent outside of the city, waiting for Eka to return. Hush was there, conversing with the woth, listening to a re-telling of today's events.

Eka arrived before nightfall, finding Lupen in the tent, but there was something different, something unusual...

"You've got a cup on your head, you know that right?"

"It's a Thinking Cup," Lupen said, with a sigh, knowing all-too-well how ridiculous it looked.

"Wow! Is it working? Are you having some great thoughts right now?"

Lupen removed the cup, staring into it. "No. Maybe it's because there's no tea in it..."

Eka presented a slice of babam cake to the dispirited Verido. "I did not find mepperpint tea, but this cake stands well enough on its own. Try it."

"Mission failed," Lupen said.

"How so?"

"On getting some Montore babam cake and mepperpint tea."

"No, I think our excursion into Montore was a success! We learned many things today, and we made lots of friends."

"Friends? Everyone here thinks I'm a fiend. Did you not see my walk of shame?"

"I did, I did! You're Montore-famous now!"

"Great," Lupen moaned, "but I was hoping we could help somebody..."

Eka gave Lupen a big hug, "is that what you think we're doing?"

Helping others?"

"Yes? Maybe? I don't know."

"We came here for cake and tea."

"Yea. Yea, you're right," saying this, Lupen took a bite of the babam cake. "Oh wow! This is *so* good!" The woth moved out of its glass house, eager to get a bite of this famed pastry, even Hush was intrigued. "I'm not sharing, sorry!" Lupen said, but both approached, eager to sample the remaining chunk of cake. Lupen was pinned to the floor, with Hush chewing on the end of the cake and the woth eating stray crumbs off its snout. "Yea yea, you've got two stomachs..."

"Hm. Maybe I should come back later, you look busy." Rosmus said with a laugh, standing near.

"Sorry I didn't come to see you." Lupen said, trying to inch away from both Hush and the woth.

"I saw guards escorting you out, figured I'd come to you instead." Saying this, Rosmus turned toward Eka, waving. "Hi! Me and Lupen grew up together, but that's easy to guess isn't it?"

"Hello Rosmus! I'm Eka." Eka waved back, smiling from ear to ear upon noticing that the visitor was carrying a pot of tea. "Mep-permint!"

"Everyone here drinks this." Rosmus took a seat on a rock and motioned for their cups to be handed over. Eka snatched Lupen's Thinking Cup, and grabbed another they had picked up in Tiputa. The cups were promptly filled to the brim with hot liquid. "I much prefer licky root, it doesn't grow out here though..."

"Only on the Ilk," Lupen replied.

"Only on the Ilk." Rosmus echoed. "So, what made you leave?" Seeing Lupen's expression, Rosmus decided that perhaps it was better to continue talking, "like I said to you before, I'm glad you didn't become Voice. Someone being at the Ilk's ear, it's a nice idea and all, but it doesn't guarantee a thing, it's all a matter of superstition."

"Tradition," Lupen corrected.

"Right. But our people see it as a guarantee. If the Ilk tells the Voice it's healthy and happy, then we're happy too, and it means we

can continue to live on its back. But that's wishful thinking, there is no guarantee, and our people have forgotten that. When Verido were nomadic our situation was precarious, sure, but we knew the desert. When a generation doesn't know storms, how can it hope to weather one if it comes?"

"You think a storm is coming."

"A storm is always coming," Rosmus said, re-filling all of their cups, "how badly it strikes you depends on how you stand to it. Better to know it is coming and to take it on the nose, than to not know and take it in the back."

"Our friend Nono says this too." Lupen said, eyeing Eka.

"Yes yes," Eka nodded, "life on a sandfin requires it. Etyl flies on the whims and wants of the weather."

They talked about life in the desert, traveling by foot, by sandfin, well until the second sunset. Rosmus spent the night at their tent, but returned to the city early the next day. After a hearty meal, Lupen and Eka packed up their tent and gear and left Montore.

Later that same day, Kuzi had sold the last of the kavava in exchange for coin to pay for more pastries at the bakery. This sell, helped to convince Ira to keep the bakery open, at least for another day or two. Kuzi sat in the city square, looking at the townspeople, and ate bread.

"Hey Kuzi, keeping out of trouble today I hope," Averet said.

"For now," Kuzi replied with a grin.

There was a pause, but Averet spoke again. "Do you know where I can get some norcorn patties around here?"

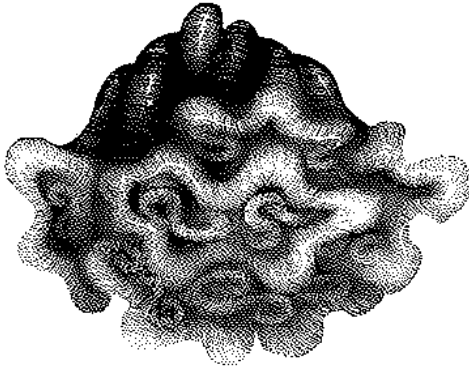
"I'd ask Avril's bakery."

"Bakery?"

Kuzi pointed to it. "Yea, it's where I got this bread. You want to try some?"

Averet grabbed a slice of bread, and took a bite. "It's *so* moist! Why do I never buy real bread? Thanks, I'll visit Avril later, to ask about the norcorn. You see, I kept this piece of norange peel..."

Little Light



A type of fungus that emits strong phosphorescent light, it grows in caves underground where there is no light. It is an object of desire for the Iridi, who have fought wars in its name.

“Irideri,” Eka said, “home of the Iridi! That’s where we’re going next. The monks there make the *best* chloromyce shroo noodles. They glow in the dark! Plus if you eat too much the soles of your feet become iridescent.”

“Monks who make noodles?” Lupen said, while caressing the spot between Hush’s ears, who had carried them much distance and now demanded payment in the form of a head massage.

“Oh yes! At the end of every annum, Iridi monks go deep underground, into the chasms of the Andenuis and spend ten days there, alone, meditating. When they emerge, they prepare the noodles to celebrate the new annum. It symbolizes a renewal of the self, a shedding of your old skin kind of thing.”

“Alone? In the dark? For ten days? Oh no no no, I could *never* do that. I mean, it’s scary isn’t it? You’re in the dark, there’s no one around to talk to, or to touch you. It’s like you’re not really there.” Lupen said, swallowing hard. “If I don’t feel or see anything, how do I know I exist?”

“Oh, precious Lu. If you’re thinking that you’re nothing, you are something. You are a *thinking thing*.”

The Verido made a face, processing the words, “I’m a thinking thing. Thinking things are not nothing.” A reassured smile formed on Lupen’s lips. “Having iridescent feet would be fun. I still don’t want to go meditating in a cave alone though, I hope that’s not required to eat chloromyce noodles.”

“We shall see!” Eka said, tearing away from Lupen for a moment and reaching into Hush’s saddle bag for a book bound by banabo thread with silvery writing on top. “This book is going to tell us everything we need to know about Irideri.”

“Where d’you get that book?” Lupen asked, having no memory of it ever being around until now.

“Borrowed it from the Alkarawin library in Montore.” Eka said.

“How are we going to return it? I’ve got no plans to go to Montore again... couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

“I’ll woth it back.” Eka said, smiling at the woth, asleep in the glass ball on Lupen’s belt.

“Is that something people say? ‘I will *woth* this letter to you?’” Lupen asked.

“It’s something I say, and that others ought to say.” Eka said, showing Lupen the cover of the book, it read *Habitants of the Night*.

“I had a long talk with Zucca about the Iridi, they ruined a lot of lives. They raided all those villages for workers, destroyed the Suvalba sanctuary, all that because they didn’t want to harvest the chloromyce shroos themselves. It’s horrible. Why are they so dependent on them anyway?”

“That’s because of The Luminary, Moera, the first ever Sovereign of Irideri. Moera loved the stuff.” Eka opened the book and began to turn the first few pages. It was an old tome, the pages, like the binding thread, were also made from banabo fibers. “I’m going to read the story out loud! I’ll make voices and everything.”

“I don’t care to hear it, I already know how it ends.” Lupen said.

“Shush, shush, this is not for you, this is for Hush and Wormple the Woth.” Eka said. The woth stirred inside its glass ball, but did not rise to the name Wormple. Eka flashed Lupen a smile and began to read aloud...

~

Habitants of the Night

Moera rose to power in the early days and united the five villages built inside the protective ridge belt of the Andenuis. These villages were combined and named Irideri. Under the order of Moera, the townspeople spent ha’annums[[^]] digging at the mountain side, they built foundries, to make the tools necessary to erect a beautiful walled city, worthy of their ruler. The Iridi people lived in the light in those days, but everything changed when they found chloromyce shroo in the underground caves.

Moera was enthralled by their beauty. The Sovereign

called upon the best artisan in the city and asked that the chloromyce be embedded into jewelry.

Moera was having tea under the high midday suns when the artisan presented the gift of the crystalized shroo, wrapped in a silvery cloth adorned with a bright yellow ribbon. Moera undid the ribbon, but once presented to the suns the shroo exploded in a thick cloud of spores, the spores entered the Sovereign's eyes, rendering Moera blind.

The chloromyce shroos, the kingdom learned, could not be exposed to daylight. On that day, Moera declared that the suns were a menace and decreed that all should seek the light of the chloromyce shroos instead.

The residents of Irideri began to sleep in the daytime, living in the dark. The only light present was the one emitted by the glow of the chloromyce shroos.

The Crown began to ingest chloromyce shroo powder, with the belief that in time these eyes would be healed. Eventually, the custom spread through the village, where people mirrored the actions of their Monarch. Ingesting chloromyce shroo powder permitted them to live healthy lives in perfect darkness, and their vision too adapted to the low light. Fresh shroo spores were dangerous, it is why Iridi people kept them in closed, glass balls, but when dried they lost their irritative qualities.

Overtime, Moera developed a sensitivity to loud noises. A servant could be executed for dropping a spoon on the ground. From that moment on, all citizens of Irideri left their shoes at the entrance to the palace and walked barefoot inside. This practice of silence was widely adopted. The entire kingdom learned to make as little sound as possible, they kept their voices low.

When Moera left this world, the heir to the throne, Bao The Bright, assumed the role of Light of Lights.

The army was disbanded, the mining sites outside of the city were shut, and the kingdom of Irideri shut its doors to all foreign visitors.

Ingesting chloromyce shroos made the habitants of Irideri sensitive to light, causing mild phototoxicity, strengthening their hatred of the suns. Over just two generations, their skin grayed and their eyes darkened. Such is the story of the Iridi, the habitants of the dark.

~

Eka read on. “They see clearly in the dark. It says here that the chloromyce shroos speak to them, they see words and colors in them!”

Lupen laughed. “I can see words and colors too, all I have to do is eat some bad herbs...”

“Ah! So you *did* listen!” Eka said. “I bet you’ll be impressed with the Iridi once you see the city. Well, if we get to see it. It’s hard to get inside, I’ve heard.” They could already make out the shape of the mountain in the distance. The second sun was setting, leaving room for the moons and stars to shine. “Things have to be different now.”

“I hope you’re right.” Lupen wanted to believe that the Iridi had abandoned their former ways. “Second sun is coming down, let’s set up camp.”

As the second sun fell over the horizon, the people of Irideri were waking. The kingdom slept during the day and came alive at dusk. In the palace, Kurono, the Young Light of the realm, was already out of bed. Kurono wore dark robes that shimmered in the light of the chloromyce shroos. Part of Kurono’s hair was sculpted into a bun, held up by silver wiring and adorned with colorless jewels, the rest was down and stopped short of touching the floor.

Hair arrangement, as well as clothing, was important in Irideri. Your outer facade was a reflection of your inner self. Untidy hair communicates that you have no discipline, that your thoughts are

cluttered, but having a well-sculpted head of hair is a sign that your life is in perfect order.

Iri was helping the Young Crown get ready. The servant's face was covered by a mask from the nose down, which was a symbol of silence, of servitude, a reminder to others that Iri were not allowed to speak. Servant-wear was simple, with little skin visible, aside from the eyes and forehead. They had no eyebrows, no discerning physical traits or means of producing an expression.

Iri always had a tall silver rod in hand, topped with a T shape. Dangling from one branch was a glass ball, and in it, a glowing chloromyce shroo. In public, Iri shadowed Kuro no and made sure that the Monarch-To-Be was never unlit. Most of the kingdom was kept dark, making the presence of a royal in the room the center of attention.

"Playroom Iri." The Young Light said with a sigh, knowing that being in a room designed for play without a playmate wouldn't be much fun at all. There wasn't anyone around to play with. Iri was a good servant, but a poor playmate because all who served Irideri could not talk unless spoken to. Iri had even fewer privileges, they couldn't eat, sleep, walk, or move without Kuro no saying so. All servants of the Light shared a single name: Iri.

Today, nothing amused Kuro no, not even the large collection of puzzles filling the room. These contraptions had been more friend than any living person, but all had been solved and held no more secrets.

"Will you dance with me Iri?" the Young Light asked suddenly.

Kuro no spoke to Iri often, having an ear to talk to with a mouth bound by law meant that anything could be said without fear of punishment.

Iri flashed an open hand then, which meant: Have no illusions about me. I am not worthy of language. I am nothing.

"Would you deny a request by your crown-to-be?" Kuro no asked with a smile. "Dance me with *now*, I demand it!" The Little Light stood up and went to take the servant's hands. Iri could not refuse.

Kuro no led the confused Iri into a waltz. "Do as I do." Iri

followed Kurono's steps well enough. After a while it was difficult to tell that this Iri had never before danced a waltz. Iri had been part of Kurono's life for a long time and knew many things, like how this Young Light enjoyed overcooked peagram dumplings, and the smell of Montimori flowers.

"I've been thinking about this a lot," the Young Crown began, "you've never given me any gifts on any of my past Green Days. I am *very* upset about that."

Iri began to sweat, upsetting Kurono was punishable by death.

"Don't worry! I know what I want you to give me," both stopped dancing then, but Kurono kept hold of the servant's hand. "I want...no, I *need* to hear your voice."

Iri appeared calm, but the organs inside were all twisted up into knots. With every breath came great pain. Once again, an open hand came to pass in front of the servant's face to mean: I am nothing.

"I know I'm asking a *lot*, but I promise you I won't tell. You're the only friend I've got, and I'm sick of doing all the talking. No one here listens to me, but you do! Surely, there are some beautiful, unique thoughts in that head of yours. I want to know what they are. I want to know *you*."

The servant motioned with a hand: I am nothing.

"I'm *ordering* you to speak to me Iri." The Crown-To-Be demanded, with mounting irritation.

Iri was conflicted. The rules of the realm forbade servants of the Light to speak, but the Young Crown demanded it. The purpose of an Iri was to do what was asked, but doing it meant breaking another rule. Rules would be broken either way. Making a decision was impossible.

Irritated by this silence, the Young Light moved forward and tore the mask covering Iri's mouth. Kurono hated silence and rules, perhaps now with it gone Iri would speak.

Even without the presence of that physical barrier, the servant's lips produced no sound. The servant followed the laws of Irideri. Now, with lips unmasked, Kurono could see Iri mouthing the words.

I am nothing. I am nothing.

Kurono's teacher Mura came at the door then, but could not enter, the door had been locked from the inside. "Young One! It is time for your history lesson!"

Kurono stuck a tongue out at the closed door. "I don't want to! Go away!" Then, went on to pinch Iri's nose, "you're going to have to open your mouth to breathe sometime!" Iri's mouth remained shut and the face contouring it turned a deep shade of blue.

Mura was in the hall still, muttering behind the closed door. "Our Brightest will *not* be pleased with you Young Light!"

"I don't care!" Kurono yelled, eyes fixed on Iri's face, watching it turn a deep and unsightly purple color. "You're not going to die like *this* are you?"

Iri had no death wish, this one could not serve Kurono, or the realm if dead. The servant's mouth opened, and Iri took a deep breath.

Kurono gasped. Iri had no tongue. Back in the old days, those who knew things the Crown deemed unsavory had their tongues and vocal cords cut out. Kurono thought that this custom was long gone, the previous monarch thought it was too barbaric. The Young Crown's eyes moved to Iri's neck and spied a number hidden under the collar, the number "10" written in flesh. "10? What is *this*?"

Iri hurriedly pressed a finger to the Young Light's lips with a low, "shush!"

Kurono had never seen Iri behave like this. The servant's face was warped by fear. For the first time there was a display of personality coming from this Iri, something that had long been hidden away.

When Kurono tried to speak again, Iri put a whole hand over the Young Crown's mouth. They locked eyes, both were shocked at what was happening. Kurono did not try to stop Iri.

Mura's voice resounded in the hallway once again. "I am *very* upset with you Kurono. Now, where is that key..."

Iri panicked at the thought of having touched the Little Light

without permission. Hearing the sound of the teacher fiddling with the door lock, Iri tore the mask from Kurono's hands and put it back on.

The door opened with Mura looking very displeased. "I will not ask again. Iri, walk Kurono to the study hall". Mura left, leaving them alone again.

Iri walked to the door, and Kurono followed the servant to the study hall, all the while staring at Iri's neck and thinking of the number inscribed onto it, wondering what it meant and why it was there.

Focusing on today's lessons was impossible. The number 10 was emblazoned in the Young Light's mind. 10. 10 what...? Kurono wondered.

After a while, Kurono's brain conjured up images of 10 tiny workers at the crook of Mura's nose, getting ready to go on an expedition inside the left nostril. The teacher did not fail to notice that the student wasn't listening. After the lesson, they went to inform Demeri. Telling Demeri was not done out of concern for the young student, but to make clear that this was not their fault.

After Kurono's lesson, the Light Of The Realm, Demeri, came to the study hall. Demeri was tall, made taller by an elaborate vertical diadem. The diadem kept the Light's hairdo together, pinned in the center, like the knot of a giant bow. "Kurono, light of my life, what is the matter?" Demeri was followed by many servants, careful to keep the monarch well-lit. The light shone on the robes, reflecting off the layers of dark fabric, fanning out in all directions, like the petals of a flower.

"Your teacher tells me you had trouble focusing today. You must tell me if you need a replacement. There is no play of light that can rightly conceal Mura's growing collection of wrinkles, it's dreadful."

"Isn't it true that Bao The Bright forbade the cutting of tongues?" Kurono asked suddenly.

Demeri, surprised, glanced at the Iri before giving a reply. "Is this what Mura has been teaching you?"

Iri looked tense, in pain, as if burned by fire.

“My Iri has a number. 10, it says,” Kurono continued, sitting upright in the chair to appear more confident, “why?”

The Light of the Realm stood up. “Enji, take Kurono back to the playroom.”

Kurono wanted to scream. Enji accompanied the Young Light out of the study hall. Iri followed, but before the servant could step out, Demeri shouted another order. “You stay here Iri.”

Kurono’s misbehavings were often the cause of Iri’s time spent in rehabilitation. Everytime the Young Light complained of the Iri, it resulted in what was commonly referred to as ‘rehabilitation’. Iri always reemerged transformed. Kurono was always happy to have Iri back, with things being as they were before. But this time felt different. Kurono was scared.

“No! It was my fault! Don’t do this!”

Enji shut the door and forced Kurono back into the playroom, as requested. “You have to stay here Young One, the Brightest In The Realm commands it,” the guard said, before locking the door from the outside.

“Don’t hurt Iri, please! It was *my* fault!” Kurono cried through the thick of the door.

There was some silence, then Enji spoke. “This is not the first time Iri goes to rehabilitation, Young Light, don’t worry. A servant will be returned to you shortly.”

Kurono listened to Enji’s footsteps. They grew fainter and fainter, until all sound and echo quieted.

A servant.

The way Enji phrased it stuck in Kurono’s mind...

The next day Iri was not there to brush Kurono’s hair. One of Demeri’s servants came to do it instead and answered no questions. Fortunately at breakfast, Iri stood at the door, unharmed, like all those other times after returning from rehabilitation.

Demeri was sitting in front of a small table, covered with a dark cloth. On the table lay a simple breakfast of mugiko porridge and

fresh nukaberries. The meal was served in dark earthenware that sparkled under the light of the chloromyce shroos. A servant was pounding an ear of dried chloromyce shroo into a powder using a large pestle and mortar. Once the shroos were pulverized the servant took the pestle away from the bowl, bowed and backed out of the room. As soon as a servant left, another walked in to transfer the powder into a shallow bowl using a thin banabo scoop. The servant then set the serving bowl on the table along with the breakfast. A long line of servants stood outside, each holding a different tool, waiting for their turn. Each Iri was good at doing one thing, and they practiced this one skill everyday. Each action took the same time, and used the same number of moves, choreographed to perfection.

“10,” the Sovereign began, “is a marker given to some of our workers. That is all.” “You didn’t like that I asked.” Kurono said.

Monarch Demeri dipped 2 spoonfuls of powdered chloromyce shroo powder into a cup of warm water, then proceeded to gently stir it into the drink, drawing a swirl of light. “I did not like your tone Kurono.”

“And the tongues?” Kurono insisted.

“What about them?” Demeri asked, taking a sip of chloromyce-infused tea.

“Iri has no tongue. I thought Bao The Bright had made that practice illegal.”

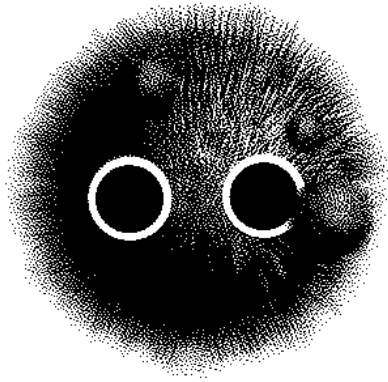
“If I hear that name one more time I shall erase it from the history books.”

Kurono took a sip of tea as well, thinking hard, trying to find ways to get some answers without angering Demeri.

Number 10 went back to having a lackluster persona, muted, without worry or fear. This worried Kurono. The Young Light was suspicious, and so that morning when the servant was asleep Kurono went to look for the number on Iri’s neck. The number on the skin had changed to 11. This was not the same Iri.

Kurono knew the ugly truth. Every complaint about an Iri resulted in an exchange. Iri would go to rehabilitation and be replaced by another with a new number carved onto its neck. Kurono did not want to think about what happened to an Iri in rehabilitation, were they sent back to the mines? Were they tortured? Killed? “What have I done...” The Young Light whispered. Kurono remembered sending an Iri to rehabilitation for breathing too loud, for walking too funny, for blinking too often, and sometimes Kurono asked Iri to be sent away out of boredom. Kurono felt like a fiend. “10 lives...” After that, no complaint was made of 11, in fear that this Iri too would be harmed. Going to Demeri for answers was impossible. Kurono felt more lonely than ever, with no one to confide in, with no way to know what had really happened to Iri number 10.

Tent Village Of Renate



Papilions travel with the wind and in the hairs of passing habitants of the Soronan desert. It is said that when they find suitable soil, they burrow and later grow into Hespers. 'Having papilions in your throat', means being kept from speaking due to anxiety.

“So! If the tunnels *are* guarded, how are *we* going to get in?” Lupen asked, standing in Hush’s shadow. The suns were very hot today, but the large furry beast did not seem to mind.

“In? No no no,” Eka said, head shaking in a Nono sort-of-way.

Lupen’s eyes narrowed down. “So... no to noodles then?”

“Yes to noodles! That hasn’t changed.” Eka replied, mouth watering. “The monks live in a tower overlooking Irideri, set on the highest peak of the Andenuis. It lies *just* outside of Irideri, that’s what Aristollo says in the book I borrowed anyway...”

Lupen’s eyes widened at that name. “What did you just say?”

Eka grabbed the book and opened it to the first page, the title *Habitants of The Night* was written in black ink, and underneath it, was the name Aristollo.

“No way!” Lupen grabbed the volume, as if happening upon a rare flower. “A writer,” Lupen began flipping through the pages, wondering if there was any information about the author. There wasn’t. “Why didn’t you tell me Aristollo was a writer?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“So Aristollo was in Irideri back then, when it was closed off to everyone! How did the book make it out? What *else* do you know?” Lupen’s curiosity grew with every mention of the name.

“It’s not my story to tell.” Eka said, grabbing the volume again to put it away in the bag hanging from Hush’s side.

“You think the monks would know?”

Eka shrugged. “Only way to know is if we go!”

“So if all goes well we’ll get to eat chloromyce noodles up in monk tower, to catch a far-away glimpse of a city we’re not physically allowed to visit, but all of this depends on whether or not we find the tower, and whether or not the monks allow us to eat their noodles. Oh, and guards might catch us. Did I miss anything?” Lupen asked.

“With iridescent feet! It’s worth a try! I mean, the city’s been closed to foreigners for something like...fa, no...” Eka paused, counting up the number of annums inaudibly, “two haty’annums!”

“Not *that* many, couldn’t have been *that* long” Lupen said.

“Were you there Lu?” Eka asked, nose pressing up onto Lupen’s.

“N-no.” Even after all the time they’d spent together, being so close always made this Verido uncomfortable. “Wait, maybe I was! No one is ever nothing, that’s what you said! I was a seed, probably? Well, no maybe not even that... but I *was* something!”

Eka’s hands came to rest over the sides of Lupen’s face. The Wonder’s delicate fingers traced along the blue patterns etched in the Verido’s skin. “That’s right. You are a lovely strand Lu, ever-changing, but never gone.”

Lupen’s ears began to redden, and the rest of the face followed suit. “A haty’annum! A bit over that, something like 200 twin sun-rises. I read it in a book once.”

Eka’s eyes moved past Lupen’s left shoulder, focused on some distant object. “Whoa! Look at that! Someone’s there!”

Lupen groaned. “I really, really *hate* this game.” Eka’s eyes could see mirages for what they were, but the same couldn’t be said for Verido eyes. This gave Eka an opportunity to get a few laughs at Lupen’s expense. The last time they had encountered such an event, Lupen had asked a mound of sand for directions, the time before that, the Verido had a very long and embarrassing one-sided conversation with a tree about the nutritional benefits of bibiskiss. The worst thing was the tree, *my* hallucination, didn’t even agree with me, Lupen thought.

“It’s true! The truest of truths! Has a funny-looking head too!”

“You really think I’m a fool don’t you?” Lupen wasn’t ready to be made fun of again, not so soon. Hush lifted a nose to the sky, trying to catch a scent. For a second, the Verido wondered if Hush, too, was in on this joke. Risking humiliation once again, Lupen turned around to try and see what Eka was pointing to. “Oh, so there is! Never seen anyone with a head like *that*.”

“A hat then? Hats do have a tendency to get more and more outrageous with time. A hatter I met in Montore some annums ago made one so large it doubled as a dwelling.” Eka said, arms extending outward, to show the size of said hat.

Hush carried them over to a lone figure sitting on hot sands, it had a large metal prism for a head, it had many faces, each one bore

a symbol. There was no order to it, no logic, the faces were sized differently and there was no repetition in the symbols themselves. When they called out to the prism-headed stranger, the figure recoiled, curling into an even smaller shape.

“That’s not a head.” Eka said. A symbol lay burned onto this being’s back, a circle with a diamond shape in its center. “That’s the Irideri emblem.” There was also a character carved in the flesh of the stranger’s neck...

“Ten.” Lupen and Eka said aloud together.

“That’s not an Iridi is it? Would they do this to their own?”

“Eka sighed.” No, you’re right they wouldn’t. This is an Aodal.”

“Aodals are much taller than this usually aren’t they?” Lupen asked, saddened by the thought of someone suffering like this.

“Stunted growth,” Eka said, “from malnutrition, and from living in the dark. Workers in the Irideri mines aren’t allowed chloromyce, and because they don’t get any, they get sick.”

Hush had a nose to the ground, catching a nearby scent, the huroo followed it and stopped at a mound, pushing sand off the top with its snout, off of something that was buried there. First, a shriveled hand came into view, then a torso. Hush continued to brush sand off, revealing the rest of it. It was small, gray, wrinkly, with skin like leather, and like Ten, this body also had a character carved into its neck.

“F.”

Lupen and Eka began to dig through the soil, both had the same idea. F couldn’t be left here for someone else to find. They put the body in the hole and Lupen placed a piece of cloth over F’s face, then they covered the body with a thick duvet of golden sand. The two stood at the place where the hole had been, hand in hand.

“What do Verido say on Leaping Days in Volare?” Eka asked.

“We say nothing. We instead focus on recalling good memories with as much detail as we can. Then, we take those good thoughts into ourselves, thusly preserving our loved ones in our hearts.” Lupen’s hand closed into a tight fist, coming to rest over the heart. Eka did the same. Lupen’s attention turned to the prism-headed

creature sitting on the ground. “They send their workers out into the desert with metal heads. Why?”

“Punishment? Sending them out here with those things on is a death sentence. They can’t eat or drink, plus there’s the heat of the suns. They don’t last long out here.” Eka whistled for Hush to move near Ten, to shield the prisoner from the suns. Ten reacted to the change in temperature, hands coming to rest over the burnt flesh. “Lu, put a hand to Ten’s chest, and then take Ten’s hand onto yours. I’ll do the same. After that we won’t be strangers anymore.” Eka said with a soft smile.

Lupen did as told. After Eka had done the same, both noticed that Ten appeared more relaxed.

“I bet they put those heads on as a warning to others too, of what can happen if you mess with Iridi people.” Lupen sighed. “How are you so great in situations like this?” Lupen asked Eka, “you’re calm and always seem to know just what to do...”

“When it comes to helping others it comes easy, had you been alone you’d done the same.” Eka’s fingers traced over the prism on Ten’s head. The shapes and pieces on its surface were not random, every one could be pushed and moved to a new place. It was an elaborate puzzle. Eka soon stopped touching it, realizing that every bad move resulted in the prism shrinking. There was no way to pry it off this poor child’s head. “We can’t leave Ten here and we know we can’t go to Irideri. There’s a village just a day’s walk away, we’ll go there.”

The woth slipped out of its glass ball and fluttered ahead to show them the way.

“How does it know where to go?” Lupen wondered.

“Good internal compass,” Eka replied, chasing down the woth as it disappeared in the distance. “Slow down Plit!” Eka called out to the woth.

“Do you really think that any woth in its right mind would answer to the name Plit? Oh no... what if this woth actually *is* crazy? What if its name is a sentence, and that the sentence isn’t actually a sentence at all but a succession of random words? Or that the words

are not words but just strings of random letters? What then!? This woth is crazy Eka!” Lupen said. The Verido was relieved to see that it did not, in fact, answer to Plit, although there was no real way to know if the woth was of sound mind or not.

Hush bounded forward, carrying Ten on its back. Soon, Lupen joined in, climbing behind Ten to make sure that their guest wouldn't slip off.

It took them half a day's time to get to the village, with Eka and Lupen taking turns on Hush. They arrived at the famed tent village of Renate.

Historically, Renate was an open bazaar, a place of exchange with no permanent residents. Nowadays, many artisans made Renate their home, but still kept to the tradition of temporary housing. Most tents were kept up by flexible banabo poles and had walls of fabric, offering less resistance to wind while providing a cool shelter. Each tent was unique, with walls of varying colors and patterns, some were weaved from banabo fiber, others from lesser-known materials like hampa, or notcott. There was no visible organization for the placement of the tents, in fact this village had few rules, and no official leader. The people here liked it that way, Eka said.

When they arrived, they approached a group of children playing in an open area between tents, they'd heard of these prism-headed prisoners, but didn't have time to answer questions because all of their attention quickly turned to Hush. The children combed the hyroo's fur with their fingers, along with repeated 'oohs' and 'aahs'. This caught the attention of an older villager, who'd been busy sifting sand and rock from a batch of freshly dug lanivanil bleens. The villager left the basket and bleens on the ground and hurried over, urging the kids to move away.

“Hush is not dangerous.” Lupen said.

After successfully shooing the kids away, the villager shook their head, “nan nan. Nan ti...” and then pointed a finger toward Ten “*ti estre! Volubi, seklo vi. Rappida!*”

“Follow me, quickly,” Eka translated at the end of the conversation. They could sense the fear in the villager’s eyes. They were led to a large tent on the outskirts of town. They could hear the sound of someone beating into a piece of metal inside.

“Atedu nio citi.” The villager said, slipping into the tent.

“Are we in trouble?” Lupen asked Eka, “also, what language is that?”

“Aodan, and no no, we’re fine.” Eka replied.

The clanging stopped. A tall and brawny character stepped out, eyeing the one with the prism for a head. “I’ll take care of it, Lussa.”

“Danki, danki Maka,” Lussa said, bowing to the two strangers before scurrying away, disappearing behind a row of tents.

The group was hushed inside, as if they had a secret that needed to stay hidden. They learned that the tent owner’s name was Maka, a metalworker, thick with muscle. The metalworker’s body appeared to be made of rock. Maka had short white hair, crowning the head and face. Maka showed great interest in Ten. “No one’s ever found one alive. I’ve tinkered with one other of those head prisons. I found it on the desert floor. Couldn’t keep it for long though, it had to be returned because those Irideri guards come and look for them.”

“Really? Why would they do that?” Lupen asked.

“Maybe they can’t make more...” Eka mused.

“That’s a good guess,” Maka said, “but we don’t really know, the truth is we prefer to leave the metal heads where they are, because having them around scares people. No one here wants to give the Iridi a reason to threaten us again. It’s why Lussa brought you here, we don’t want anyone to see. The young ones aren’t afraid because they haven’t lived through the Raids, but the older generation fear anything that has to do with the Iridi. They won’t want the prisoner to stay here for that reason.” Maka walked over to Ten, inspecting the poor child’s wounds. “Poor kid looks very weak, I have something for that,” Maka helped the young prisoner to the far side of the tent. “So,” Maka began, “why help a

stranger?” The metalworker helped the child onto a bed and began applying medicine to the wounds.

“I suffer from acute empathy.” Eka said.

Alarms went off in Lupen’s head then, the brain opening up thought drawers in succession, searching for an answer that too, would impress, but the drawers produced no such miracle. “Can you *believe* it? I wanted to say that *exact* same thing! Embarrassing when that happens! When you have the exact same thought as someone else, but they say it first and you wanna be an individual so you *try* to come up with something new, that is, you know, unique, but you can’t because that first thought was just so, so good...”

Maka stared for a while, then started to laugh with gusto. “You’ve got beautiful minds. I like you both already.” The brawny Aodal walked back over to their side of the room, with a box in hand, taking a seat on a metal stool that Lupen could tell had been handcrafted. “I can’t open the prism, but I know someone who can help you.”

Lupen’s face brightened at these words. “Really?”

“Possibly. It’s a topic I’ve long avoided with my apprentice, but everyone has to face up to their past sometime, don’t you agree? I’ll take you over there after lunch, you two must be starving!” The metalworker reached into a box, a sort of cooling box, similar to the cold pot in Lupen’s house in Volare, and pulled out some teawet bread, jam and dried sausages. Maka began to cut slices of teawet bread, laying the pieces out onto a wooden board along with some sausages. “My apprentice came to Renate many annums ago, broken and near-dead. Villagers here were ready to cast the poor thing back out into the desert, who can blame them... Iridi have a bad reputation in these parts, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you why...”

“Your apprentice is an Iridi?” Eka said, surprised.

“That’s right.” Maka uncovered a crock of spiced mapple jam, scooped out a portion for the group and ladled it into a small wooden bowl before setting it down with the rest of the food. “Eat,

eat! All local products. Made those plant sausages myself, a mix of spices, teawet flour, bobonions, nutshroos and plurple bleens.”

~

Sausages

Ingredients

One medium size bobonion
 Three bushels of nutshroos
 Two minced gewrik cloves
 One full stalk of stemmed aroot bleens
 Five dips of fermented choko paste
 One avoka nut
 Tree sprigs of smoked papakitas
 Two crushed lemilims
 Three crumbed slices of teawet
 Six stalks of plurple bleens, stemmed and floured

Instructions

Mince the bobonion and the nutshroos. Sauté together with the oil from a cracked avoka until they have softened, and all of the water from the nutshroos has evaporated.

Add all of the other ingredients to a stone bowl and mix together into a smooth batter. Using a heavy pestle will make the job easier. Add a bit more plurple flour if it's too moist.

Take some of the batter and roll it into sausages, pan-fry with some avoka oil and serve with your choice of topping!

~

Lupen and Eka thanked their host, grabbed a slice of teawet bread, and added a dab of mapple jam with a slice of sausage on top. Eka took a bite, but hesitated to take another. “Ten must be

starving...”

Ten was still resting in the corner, Maka didn't look concerned. “Don't worry, Ten ate. It was the first thing I did. It's my number one rule: empty bellies must be filled at once!”

Lupen didn't understand. “How?”

“Food patches.” Maka explained, pulling one out of the pocket of a work apron.

Lupen couldn't believe it. “Oh, not *those* again...”

Maka laughed. “Yes I hear you, not everyone likes these, but when the Iridi were attacking the cities, everyone was on the run and these saved many lives. Good nutritious food was hard to come by, health problems arose and these came in useful. A sandfin comes by every now and then, always bringing a crate-full of the stuff. Not one of those Beobug scammers, a solo traveler, on a sandfin with a yellow hull. Renate suffered much loss during the Iridi raids, a stranger brought us our first crate. Kindness was in short supply in those days, you can imagine the look on the people's faces when a tall stranger arrived here with it”.

“*Tall* you say?” Lupen glanced over at Eka, half-expecting a reaction, but the Wonder had other preoccupations.

“Think I can give a few slices of teaweeet to Hush?”

Maka smirked. “Kids outside are giving your friend plenty of good grub, saw them trailing behind Lussa with basket-fulls of nutshroos.”

“Oh, I hope they'll figure out that Hush will eat as long as there's food. That hyroo's appetite is insatiable, it's been compared to the Rupture, in the way that it has no bottom.”

“I'll let the kids know.” Maka said with a warm smile.

After the meal, Eka, Lupen, Maka and Ten marched over to the apprentice's home, erected far from all others. The tent had no visible openings, all the panels were bound with clumsy, heavy stitching. Some panels looked better than others, it seemed that its maker had improved over time. It was tradition in Renate that all who came to live here, make their own tent from thread and needle, with

local materials. Maka's apprentice had a different life before, not one where you were taught the art of thread-work. "You have to promise not to tell anyone that Iri is in Renate." Maka whispered.

"Iri?" Lupen said, "that's a derogatory name isn't it?"

"I know it is, but my apprentice insists on it," Maka explained. "So you won't tell right?"

"Promise!" Eka said.

Lupen also chimed in. "Will tell no one."

"Good, good. You see, Iri did not leave Irideri by choice. My apprentice served in the Court of Light, but deserted after an unfortunate series of events. Iri will not like that I've told you this, but I have a feeling that I can trust you." Maka found an opening in the tent and put a head inside. "Iri, some people are here to see you."

"For work?" Iri asked from inside.

"Yes, you can call it work." Maka said, turning to the three visitors, whispering. "Whatever you do, you've got to make Iri help you. Do not leave this tent without the promise of help."

Eka and Lupen nodded, hands searching for a gap in the fabric of the tent, after finding it they slipped inside. The outer fabric of the tent was thick, it kept most of the light out.

Iri rose when they entered. The apprentice had a thin face and an equally thin build, a loose hampa knit shirt hung off of one shoulder. The Iridi's hair was short, dark and wavy. Iri's eyes were black, well adapted to a life out of the sun. "Who are you?" Iri asked, scanning them from head to toe.

"That's Eka, I'm Lupen and this one is... well, we call this one Ten." Lupen dragged the youngling from behind them, putting the prism into full view of their host.

Iri's eyes widened as shameful memories of Irideri came streaming back. The face of their host seemed to have gone an even paler shade of gray. "Better to spend your energy on the living," the apprentice said, inaudibly cursing at Maka for sending those strangers over here. Thoughts of Irideri were irritating, Iri made a point of never thinking about that place.

"You must not have helped many to say this." Lupen said. Eka

elbowed the Verido, insulting their host would not help their case.

“I don’t deny it. I don’t help the dead. It’s pointless.” Iri said, uncaring.

“From what Maka told us, you were near dead too when you first walked into Renate. People helped you,” Lupen retorted.

The changes in Iri’s face were small, eyebrows furrowed slightly, the apprentice was angry but appeared annoyed most of all. These subtle face twitches did not rightly convey the Iridi’s true feelings. “I still had a leg to stand on. This prisoner will never be rid of that head. Within seven days, Ten will be dead and you will needlessly burden yourselves with guilt over it.”

“Is that the truth?” Lupen asked, “Maka said you would know what to do.”

“Maka was wrong.”

Eka insisted. “Please help. You *must* know *something*.”

The apprentice appeared to be troubled, remembering what had happened all of those annums ago, when arriving here in the village...

“You have to let me in. I can’t go back out into the wilds, I’ll die!” A young Renzo, dressed in tattered traditional Iridi robes was standing at the Renate city border, hair disheveled, the veil of perfection gone. Renzo’s legs were travel-worn and threatened to buckle, but the pride of an Iridi was such that one would never kneel or show signs of weakness, even when in pain.

Renzo had first sought refuge at the city of Edonor, but met a lot of hostility there. Many disapproved of the presence of an Iridi, whispering insults under their breath. “How dare you come into our city with *that* face!” They would say. “Do you wish for death?”

To the older residents of Edonor, this stranger was a harbinger of war, many still carried scars of that time. Seeing an Iridi soldier stroll through town was cause for concern, were there others coming? Was this the beginning of another time of fear under Iridi rule? Not

all were reserved in their hatred, some would come near, ready to fight. Renzo, young and fearless, did not take kindly to insults, which only served to aggravate things.

The city of Irideri had been closed off to the outside for many annums, but that did nothing to soothe the pain inflicted on the land during the raids. No Iridi of this generation knew how the rest of the world perceived them, their history books gave no account of all the death and pain. Renzo was the first Iridi to step foot in Edonor since the raids had ended. That day, Renzo discovered what awaited residents of Irideri dumb enough to leave the security of the Andenuis. Some residents of Edonor had pain in their hearts, and revenge on their minds. There was another city, a village, a day's walk away called Renate, but like Edonor the people there too had knives for eyes.

"If the desert wants you dead, there's no escaping it." One of the Renate villagers said, throwing a stone. "Your people chased our ancestors from their lands! Iridi foot soldiers forced entire villages to flee. If they didn't leave, a life of darkness and death awaited them in your mines! Entire families lost! Because of *you!*" A shower of words and stones.

Renzo, burdened with all of the wrongdoings of the Iridi, tore off the set of traditional Iridi robes, throwing the mass of dark fabric at the villager's feet. "I've deserted! I've got nothing to do with all that!"

The traditional robes added a lot of volume to an Iridi, it made them look imposing and strong, without the added plumage Renzo looked painfully frail. Renzo hoped this gesture would be enough to convince them of the legitimacy of this desertion, but the people did not show an inch of compassion. One of the villagers took some steps forward to spit on the discarded set of Iridi robes. "A killer without a cloak is still a killer," and then

proceeded to kick mounds of sand onto it.

Renzo was afraid. No one would ever accept an Iridi into their village. There was nowhere to go and returning to the desert meant certain death. "Please." Renzo fell on bended knees, that veneer of composure, gone. "I am nothing. I'll do whatever you say. I'm yours to command." Renzo leant forward then too, face in the dirt. "I am Iri, lower than low, akin to dirt. I relinquish my name and rights, I am not worthy of a name."

Maka, a well respected citizen of Renate spoke up. "Very well then, you will live." The other villagers whispered amongst themselves. "But that's an Iridi!" one said, clutching a stone.

"Not anymore." Maka replied, walking up to the despondent Iridi. "Come." Maka instructed.

Renzo insisted on being named Iri. Maka refused, but when the young Iridi stopped eating in protest the metalworker saw no other option. Iri wanted this, as penance for the wrongdoings of the people of Irideri. Maka trained the young Iridi to work metal, while giving regular teachings of the world Irideri had kept hidden all these annums. Deprived of chloromyce shroos, the youngling's gray skin lightened and became less sensitive, allowing for more time in the suns.

Now with more annums on, Iri could see that this was a way to repay Maka's kindness. Iri's lips were quivering, these foreigners were not going to leave, they were determined to save Ten.

"Only one person can open it," Iri breathed, voice heavy. "Hori, a puzzle maker, perfected the design." Seeing their faces light up, Iri finished the thought, "but Hori died."

"There must be plans for it somewhere in the city?" Eka asked, tentatively.

Iri's mind was racing. "Plans, yes, it's possible, but entering the city is difficult, impossible even."

“If the city is so impenetrable, how did you manage to leave it?” Lupen asked.

Iri was eyeing the Verido with growing animosity, unaccustomed to questions.

“Please.” Eka’s silvery voice broke the silence. “We’ll tell no one.”

Iri’s lips curled inwards, remembering that promise to Maka. “There is a hidden entrance, but you can’t think of going, they’ll catch you and you’ll have prisms fitted to your heads.”

“We’ll be alright, Eka’s the muscle and I’m fast on my feet,” Lupen said.

“You cannot hope to survive this...” Iri said.

“What kind of creatures would we be if we allowed Sixteen to die?” Lupen said.

The cogs in this Iridi’s heart were thick with rust and getting them to turn required some effort. “Ridiculous.” Iri said, with much disdain. “I’ll take you, but that is all.”

“I’m happy you’re coming with us,” Eka said. “Will the entrance be guarded, you think?”

Iri’s throat felt dry and coarse, irritated by the constant stream of words. Most times the apprentice was alone, working in the dark, with only tools and metal as companions, they were not great conversationalists and Iri liked it that way. “Hardly anyone knows about it, save a handful of guards. I imagine most have forgotten it exists, there was no real reason for its construction you see, it is unlikely that my people would have ever undergone a siege.” Iri paused then, eyes staring at the floor, as if in shame, “only we excel at the art of savagery.”

They spent the next few days putting convincing Iridi wardrobes together. If they hoped to go in the city unnoticed, they would have to look like locals. Maka still had the apprentice’s former robes, Iri had wanted to bury them but the metalworker knew that this young Iridi would need them again someday. With the help of a tailor two tents over, they made two additional robes for Eka and Lupen to wear, using the first as a model. The townspeople had heard of

Iri's return to Irideri to help a prisoner and the two strangers, they thought it noble and did their best to help in any way they could.

"Silence is highly prized in Irideri. Wearing a scarf is symbolic of that, and in this particular instance, it will also help to conceal your foreign features. Iridi now mostly speak the Common Tongue, so you'll be fine, but don't ask too many questions, speak clearly and concisely." These last words were for Lupen.

Lupen stood in full Iridi wear, the blue of the Verido's face was somewhat visible, but Iri pulled the hood down further to conceal it. "Keep it low, always."

"I can't see anything!" Lupen cried, arms flailing.

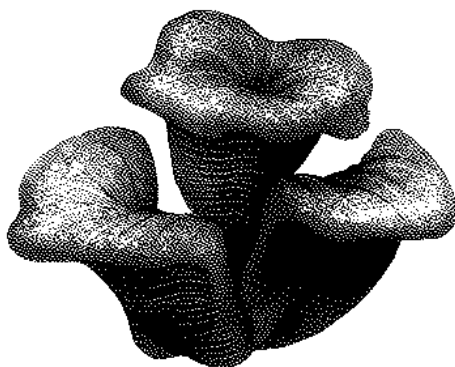
Eka's eyes were also difficult to hide, not much could be done to mute their intensity.

"You will keep your heads down and address no one unless necessary. If you must talk to someone, again, keep your gaze to the floor. People will not think it strange, it is a sign of respect. They will accept this." Iri explained.

Then, came Iri's turn to change into traditional Iridi wear. Wearing these was difficult now that Iri knew the Iridi's violent history. The robes hung heavy on these shoulders, thick with guilt, all of the lives lost adding to the weight, their blood and anguish woven into the fabric.

Iri couldn't stand it.

Kingdom Of Irideri



Conks are hard, woody, cave-dwelling shrooms. They are found in mountainous areas, and used to make a variety of objects. Conks can also be eaten, but the texture makes it difficult to chew.

“Things will be different. It’s been more than ha’annums,” Maka said, a hand on Iri’s shoulder, who was now a few heads taller than the first time they met.

Iri’s face betrayed little emotion, as if carved from stone. “Thank you for your help.” Now in Iridi wear, with hair trimmed, the apprentice was unrecognizable. The disguise was so effective that Maka had asked the villagers not to come today. Many people in Renate still suffered from mental and emotional stress from the Raids, and seeing Iri like this would likely worsen their condition.

“You left your name at the gates of the city, it’s only right that you should take it back now.” Maka said.

Iri’s gaze wandered to the ground, and began mouthing the words: Iri, not worthy of kindness, not worthy of a name either, not ever, then spoke aloud, “I won’t.”

“Do I need to hammer it out of that stubborn head of yours?” Maka asked, eyebrows raised.

Iri shifted uncomfortably in the set of Iridi robes, “but the others...”

“Please. You are one of *us* now. The wars of the past were the fault of many, you don’t have to suffer forever.”

The young apprentice returned the gesture, putting a hand to Maka’s shoulder. Saying the name aloud was difficult, painful, as if the word itself was poison. “My name is... Renzo.”

“Renzo,” Maka said softly, smiling, “don’t forget this, you are one of us now Renzo. Be safe.”

The people of Renate were too kind, too forgiving, Renzo thought.

Maka watched as the group left, their figures dissolving in the distance. The metal worker had planned to say many more things, but decided to keep them for Renzo’s return.

During the voyage, thoughts of Irideri that had long been buried came to Renzo’s mind, when being a guard in the Court of Light was all that mattered.

The group was walking towards the Andenuis, which was the

longest mountain range in the Soronan Desert, and formed a continuous highland along the middle of the Central Rim. Irideri was built on a plateau just yora'ta of Monk's Peak. Each member of their little travel party took turns to rest on Hush. Ten had priority, it was too dangerous to walk in the desert without sight. The last thing they wanted was for their prism-headed friend to fall into a crevice.

"Why did you leave Irideri?" Lupen asked Renzo suddenly.

"You don't need to know this."

"Did you do something bad?"

"Quiet yourself."

"You were a guard in the Court of Light, right?" Lupen asked, unabated.

"It's a wonder you can hear the sounds of the world with all of that talking," Renzo said, pulling a hood on as if to keep some privacy.

"Talking *is* a sound of the world! Like the sound of the wind and the chime of a bell."

"Bells don't ask questions," Renzo retorted.

"So, you speak bell then?"

Eka tried to imagine the grammar and rhythm of bell language, but knew that if Lupen was to continue this interrogation Renzo would never warm up to them. The woth agreed, it flew out of its glass house and onto Lupen's nose.

"Pity it didn't land on your mouth," Renzo sneered.

Lupen smiled. "As if *that* would stop me!"

By then the woth had moved to Lupen's cheek, wondering which part of the Verido's face to protect next, fearing a fist coming to it very soon. Eka acted quickly too, smacking the back of Lu's head.

A day later, the mountain range was in sight. It took them another half-day to round it to get to the furthest end. The path was long, and dotted with rocks. Eventually, they arrived at a chasm.

"This is our path," Renzo said, pointing downward.

"I see nothing," Lupen said, gazing down into the gap.

“That’s because you’ve got the eyes of a day walker,” Renzo explained, “even Iridi have difficulty seeing it. You’ve got to look at it from a specific angle.”

They decided to stop here and wait for daybreak to make their descent into the city.

When a sliver of the first sun peered over the horizon, Renzo showed them the secret stairway, carved into the chasm wall.

“These lead to a tunnel inside the city walls.” Renzo looked over their disguises to make sure that nothing was missing, then, unrolled an old hand-drawn map of the city, laying it on the ground.

“You drew this? It’s beautiful.” Eka said, noting the details in the drawings. Every street was named. Many of the houses even had the name of their resident inscribed.

Renzo placed a finger to a spot on the map, circled in red. “This is where Hori used to live. The house will be there. Although it’s likely someone else will have moved in.”

“Think the puzzles will still be there?” Eka asked.

“Hori’s work was famous. If they’re not there, asking at the house is our best bet. As I’ve told you before, don’t ask too many questions. And keep your hoods on!” Renzo grabbed the edge of Lupen’s hood and pulled it down hard. “Avoid all eye contact. Take this map with you, keep it hidden.”

“It *was* on!” Lupen cried, adjusting the heavy hood, “I don’t have eyes on my chin you know...” Eka grabbed the city map, rolled it up tight and slipped it into a pocket sewn inside the robe. Ten had to stay out here in the desert with Hush. “Stay out of view, move with the shadow of the mountain to keep cool. Keep our friend safe *mapa* Hush.” Eka said, nuzzling the beast’s snout.

Eka, Lupen and Renzo slipped on their scarves, and pulled their hoods over their heads before, and ventured into the mouth of the chasm. They started down the stairs, hugging the wall, the path was narrow and the chasm wide and deep. Lupen was no stranger to heights, but found it difficult to maneuver in the thick robe.

“If I fall, you’re going to come and get me, right?” Lupen whis-

pered, swallowing hard.

“Do like me,” Eka had parted the front of the robe to better aim a foot on each step, “I know that falling is *your* thing Lu, but try not to do that today please, thanks.” While saying this, Eka smiled, waiting for a reaction.

“How is it *my* thing?!” Lupen said, outraged. “Falling *so* isn’t my thing...”

“Quiet! You fall, you die.” Renzo whispered.

Soon, the stairs ended and they arrived at a tunnel, carved into a wall. The group walked back to back, holding onto the robes of the person ahead. Renzo could see in the dark, but they could not. They walked underground until the tunnel opened onto a space bordered by a palace wall on one side, and a stone wall on the other. Renzo described the various areas, warning them of changes or dangers.

“It gets narrower here,” Renzo explained, “walk sideways, back to the wall.”

The group walked shoulder to shoulder, sections of the vertical stone faces were at a slant to further confuse the eye. This uneven walkway led them to the main street. Looking back the walls gave the illusion that this was a closed space, visible only to those who knew it was there.

“Never seen anything like this.” Lupen said, noting the color and texture of the surrounding buildings, white, translucent almost, marked with patterns of swirling bands of cream and brown. All structures were connected, built wall-to-wall. They all used the same materials but the facades bore elaborate carvings unique to each building.

“These represent the family that owns the house,” Eka explained in a whisper. “Every family lives under the same roof.” The faint glow of chloromyce shroos lanterns lit up the front of each house.

Near the highest peak of the Andenuis stood the palace, an imposing octagonal structure rising along a cliff. The main facade was decorated with large bas-reliefs with stylized depictions of the chloromyce shroo.

“Beautiful,” Eka said, admiring the details.

Some guards were patrolling the streets but paid no attention to them. Their disguises were good, Renzo had made sure of it.

"You'll be going down this street, it'll be the ninth house on the right." Renzo whispered. "If you get lost..."

"We've got the map, yes, but wait... you're *not* coming with us?" Lupen asked, worried.

"No. I'll meet you back at the tunnel in eighty pulses." With little explanation Renzo disappeared, pushing deeper into the city.

"Pulses?" Lupen said, confused. "Yea, pulses," Eka pointed over to a shroo-covered crystal erected in the center of the city. The crystal pulsed from dim to bright. "That's how the Iridi count time."

"How does that convert to horos?!" Lupen said panicked. In Volare, the rhythm of Vol's heartbeat was used to count time, to rock children to sleep, and to measure their advancement towards their next stop.

"Let's see. There are forty pulses per shimmer, so eighty pulses is about two horos. No wait, that's not right. I think Bao the Bright changed the unit from shimas to glimas, and glimmers don't *exactly* equate—"

"What are we gonna do? We're *never* gonna pass for Iridi!" Lupen interrupted, panicked at the thought of being discovered. "They'll put prisms on our heads! Renzo did this on purpose! This is revenge for earlier, for what I said!"

Eka grabbed Lupen's shoulders. "Renzo couldn't have come with us. People don't forget the face of defectors."

"This won't work. Your eyes are ruby red and my face is blue Eka!"

"They won't see our faces. Keep it under the shadow of your hood. We'll be fine. You believe me right?" Eka's voice had a soothing quality to it, it calmed most people, but Lupen remained unaffected, unsoothed. They'd been together long enough that it seemed to have lost its sedative qualities.

"*How* are you *not* scared?!"

"Oh I *am* scared," Eka admitted, "but also excited! Think of the chloromyce noodles!"

“Ugh. I feel sick.”

Eka grabbed Lupen’s arm. Both walked down the street, counting houses as they did. Soon, they found Hori’s street, and then the ninth house on the right. It appeared that after the puzzle maker’s death, the house had been converted into a museum. Eka noted the opening times carved into the wall above the door, today the museum was to be open for six glimas, four glimas after the second sunset.

“What if we don’t find anything?” Lupen whispered, walking close to Eka.

“Then we’ll make a new plan.”

They walked up a set of white steps up to the doorsill. A small silver bell hung on the outer wall, Eka tapped the bell to alert the people inside of their presence. No answer. They were going to tap the bell again, but saw a silhouette behind the veiled doorway, houses in Irideri had fabric for doors. Someone was coming. The silhouette put an arm out and pushed the curtain aside, revealing a long-haired Iridi wearing a dark grey robe, with a neck and wrists decorated with silver trinkets.

“It’s very early you know, what do you want?” The museum owner said in a sleepy voice.

“Forgive our intrusion,” Eka said, eyes and face low, “we are from the colonies. We’re here on a short short visit. We’ve always dreamed of seeing this place, but seeing as we are leaving in the mo...evening, would it be okay to trouble you for a quick visit?”

“Colonies?” The museum owner said.

Eka nodded. During the raids the Iridi established colonies in far-away camps, used as relief stations for soldiers but also as temporary camps for captives. It was rumored that two of these were still active, inhabited by both Iridi and liberated slaves of the Crown.

Lupen had doubts that this would work. No one knew for certain if the colonies really did exist. But then, the Iridi put a finger to their nose. “Yes *of course!* The *colonies.*”

“We are *such* fans of Hori’s work!” Eka said.

At these words, the Iridi smiled. “I’m happy to hear it! It’s a dying art, and I mean that quite literally. My brain is hot with ideas but this body does not give a damn. Please, please, come in, come in!”

Bariton, the museum owner, invited them inside for a drink. Lupen and Eka could not refuse. Bariton was second to Hori, they were not related, but they were very close. The Iridi made puzzles too, but admitted that theirs weren’t as good as Hori’s work. When the puzzle master died, Bariton took possession of the house to preserve its appearance and contents, turning it into a museum. All over the house, puzzles sat on shelves, contraptions of all shapes and sizes, for all skill levels.

“Hori could see patterns in the world others couldn’t. My dear one had a bright mind. A unique vision. Where I saw nothing, Hori saw opportunity.” Bariton grabbed a puzzle off a nearby shelf to show them. “This is one of two. The other is in the palace, in little Kuro-no’s playroom I imagine.” The old Iridi tried to solve it, but could not remember how. “Our Little Light loves these puzzles, Hori designed hundreds for Kuro-no. I like to think that it’s thanks to Hori that our Sovereign-to-be’s mind is as sharp as it is!”

Lupen glanced around the room, searching for images or plans of that prismatic puzzle. None were visible. Perhaps Hori did not consider it worthy of display, many would agree. “Those head prisms are *quite* something too aren’t they?”

Bariton sighed. “Yes. They’re a puzzle maker’s dream. A true test of patience, very difficult to solve. Our Monarch, the Light of Our World, found out about it and asked Hori to the palace, demanding that the design be altered, well, scaled up I should say... to fit a person’s head. This was a difficult annum for Hori with Noko dying just a quarter annum before. Imagine, your most *prized* design used to hurt others... what kind of legacy is *that*?” The Iridi paused, wondering if these strangers would pass these words on to others. One could be killed for speaking ill of the monarchy. “What do *you* colony-folk think of Demeri?”

“Demeri is a tyrant.” Lupen said aloud without thinking, but

then realized it was a dangerous thing to say to an Iridi, even if it was the truth. “What I meant to say is that Demeri is so so lovely!” These words had little weight to them, Lupen knew it. ‘So so lovely’ lingered in the air like a fart. “Forget I said anything. I’m an imbecile, *that’s* the truth.” The Verido dribbled, shrinking deep into the Iridi robes. Any moment now, the guards would come and take them away. They would die with metal heads on, in the desert.

The old Iridi laughed. “You colonists are such liberals! I envy you.”

Lupen let out a nervous laugh. Eka smiled.

“Hori continued to make puzzles for Kurono after that, but denied making the prisms. The hatred of this thing brought us close though I suppose.” Saying this, the Iridi began to fiddle with a distinctive trinket, a bracelet, hugging Bariton’s wrist. It was thick, metallic, with connecting blocks criss-crossed with lines. Like the prisms, pieces could also be shifted. “Another puzzle,” Bariton explained, “a gift from Hori. Clamped it on my wrist while I was asleep one day. It cannot be removed unless it is solved. As you can see, I have failed my beloved in this.” The Iridi smiled and ran a finger along one of the gaps in the metal. “How Hori would laugh to know that the damned thing has been on my wrist for more than ha’annums. *Quite* a sense of humor that one.”

Eka laughed. “Never helped you solve it?”

“ No. My dear one was determined to have me find the solution alone. Then, with the death of Noko... well, we forgot about it. And you know the rest. A sad tale. I apologize for boring you with it. Others here don’t like to speak of such things, it’s what Hori liked most about me. I speak freely, and because I do most think me eccentric. In fact, if you were to repeat my words to others, you better believe that they’d roll their eyes. ‘That kook is at it again,’ they’d say. Well, this kook is a freethinker hiding under a veil of senility. Best place to be if you ask *me*.”

Eka laughed again. “You’d fit right in at the colonies.”

Bariton gave Eka a wink. “Maybe it’s time for a change of scenery...”

They spent a long time with Bariton, talking about Hori and the puzzles. Eka liked this house and its owner, both were warm despite exhibiting few colors. They had a tour of the house, tried to solve some of the puzzles. To Lupen's amazement, The Wonder had difficulty with them all.

"Wow, we *finally* found something you're bad at."

Eka reached forward and pulled Lupen's hood down deep. "Yea well, you're a cactub licker."

"You should talk! You, uh, you stinky, stupid butt!"

"Oh dear. I've got to teach you to insult me better," Eka said.

They stopped with the name-calling when Bariton re-entered the room with cups of freshly-brewed herbal tea. They drank tea for some time, and still, had not found any way to open that prism.

"Does Hori draw plans for the puzzles?" Eka tried.

"Hori? No. Never. Was all hidden away in that mind-safe, didn't want others using them to cheat."

"Can *you* solve the prism?" Lupen said. It was bold to ask, but they had been here too long already.

"You really *are* interested in that prism aren't you?"

"Yes," Eka admitted, "we enjoy puzzles, and it being the *hardest* one..."

Bariton smiled. "Hardest is right! No one has solved it, aside from Hori that is. Hori died rather suddenly. It's why Demeri reclaims those heads from bodies out in the desert. Not many know this, but the head opens when there's nothing in it! It can be reused in that way, but it is impossible to slip it off a live person, not without breaking their heads off. Forgive the graphic nature of this story. It's a grim affair. Hori and I had many troubled sleeps about it."

Eka enjoyed their time at the museum, but they could not find help for Sixteen here. They needed to find Renzo. "Thank you *so* much for your hospitality, but we should go."

Bariton nodded. "I hope you enjoyed the house and the ramblings of *this* kook?"

"That last bit is what I enjoyed most." Eka said.

"Me too." Lupen added.

The Iridi, too, seemed to like them very much. “I have something for you, let me get it.” The museum owner disappeared into another room, returning moments later a puzzle in hand. It was a mid-level one, octagonal, made of cast iron and decorated with engravings. “This is the first puzzle Hori made. I kept it but it was destined for Noko. I’d like you to have it. It’s never been solved. Not that I think I couldn’t do it, I just can’t bring myself to try, it wasn’t made for me to solve. It’s time someone else had a chance with it. An unsolved puzzle is a sad, sad thing.”

Eka accepted the gift, putting it in a pocket inside the robe. “Thank you. I really enjoyed our conversation.”

“Comeback any time. Oh! And um, be careful out there...” Bariton warned, opening the door for them. They heard sirens wailing in the distance then, Bariton watched as Iridi guards came running down the street and toward the palace.

Eka was nervous. “You don’t think?”

“I hope not.” Lupen said, afraid. They said goodbye to their host and left. Eka regretted having stayed there so long, Renzo had advised against it.

“What’s going on?” An Iridi asked one of the guards from a bedroom window.

“Word is that the deserter Renzo was sighted in the city. Our Luminary will be pleased.”

“They’ll hurt Ren!” Lupen whispered. They stayed hidden for now, trying to think of a plan.

Eka looked determined. “No they *won’t!*”

The two traversed the city, as fast as their feet could carry them. Eka whistled for Hush, a distinctive sort of whistle, sharp and melodious.

“Hush is on the other side of the mountain!” Lupen said.

“You, speaker of Ilken, should know just how far the sound of a whistle can travel! That paired with Hush’s parabolic ears!”

They looked at the sky. A large shape had bounded up into the clouds and was coming down fast. Hush landed on the roof of a building, cracking the tiles. Ten was sitting on its back, gripping

the fur, hard.

“Wonder what Ten thinks is happening, must be confusing,” Lupen said, watching the Hyroo take another leap down to meet them at street level.

Monarch Demeri’s face turned pale when told that Renzo had been spotted in Irideri. “Is it really Renzo?” the Sovereign asked, swallowing hard. Demeri and Kurono usually stayed up late, having tea in the Moon Room. Servants were there to serve drinks, Demeri’s cup was already dosed with chloromyce shroo powder.

“Are you sure?” the Light of Lights asked again, lips quivering.

“Yes my Brightest, the traitor was seen in the courtyard, somehow bypassed the security there and vanished.” Enji, head of the guards, explained.

Demeri appeared distraught. “*No* one disappears. *You* were outwitted! That is unacceptable. You are not worthy of your post, General Enji. This is the second time you’ve failed me. You *will* find the traitor, or I will have a prism fitted to *your* head!” Enji bowed, apologetically. “As you command.” With this, the general and subordinates disappeared. Kurono remembered Renzo, that former guard of the Court of Light.

The Monarch left the room in a huff after the announcement, determined to have guards posted at every door. The building was enormous, and many rooms were unoccupied.

“No one sleeps until that filth is found!” the Sovereign shrielled.

Kurono drank tea alone. The Young Light glanced at the bowl of chloromyce shroo powder on the table, and decided to add a few extra spoonfuls to the cup—a touch of rebellion felt good every now and then.

After tea, Kurono was asked to stay in the playroom with Eleven. A guard stood outside the door. The word was that there were two foreigners on a rabid beast attacking the palace. There were people outside running, yelling out orders. Eventually, even the guard at the playroom door had to take part in the hunt. With an ear pressed to the door, Kurono could hear the guard’s steps growing

fainter.

“This is *amazing*.” Kuroono said, the quietness that reigned in the realm was a real bore, now the palace felt alive, chaotic. There was no way to know if what was happening was good or bad, but it didn’t matter. The disobedient Lightling commanded the Iri to stay inside, left the playroom and proceeded to wander around the palace. Kuroono had only just turned the corner when, ahead, stood a stranger, an Iridi with foreign clothes—an uncommon sight. The stranger smelled of earth, their feet left marks all over the floor. How delightful, Kuroono thought, picturing all of that dirt tangled in Demeri’s pristine hair.

The stranger was out of breath. “You’ve grown.” Renzo swallowed hard, “you know who I am Little Light?”

Kuroono nodded.”No one can anger Demeri as well as *you*.”

“Are you going to tell on me?”

“No, Demeri makes me angry too. It’s all lies, all the time. Too many things are kept hidden from me and I don’t like it.” Kuroono replied.

Renzo could hear footsteps down the hall and retreated into a room, beckoning Kuroono to follow. “I know many things that Demeri would hate me to reveal,” Renzo said in a whisper.

“It’s Renzo! The dangerous deserter!” A voice shouted from behind them. The history teacher, Mura, had emerged from a closet, but returned within it right away.

Renzo looked at Kuroono, ignoring Mura. “They’re coming, but you have to hear and believe what I’m about to say. You are *not* Demeri’s child. Your true mapa, Hori, was ordered dead so that Demeri could take you.”

Guards rushed inside. Renzo moved to fight them, to the sound of Mura squealing in the closet. “Why? The Iridi wouldn’t have given me a title if I hadn’t been of royal klorea! How do *I* know you’re telling the truth?” Kuroono asked.

Renzo knocked one guard over the head and smacked another in the gut with the butt of a chloromyce shroo-lit lamp. “You are good at puzzles. Hori was too.” The deserter gave another blow

to the head of a third guard, the glass bowl around the lamp's head shattered, plunging the room into complete darkness. Saying this, Renzo's face cracked into a smile. Renzo's cheeks ached, from a lifetime of still-facedness. "You were taken as a baby, because Demeri could not bear healthy seeds."

Kurono was shaking. "How do you know all this?"

"I wanted Demeri to like me. I did all that was ever asked of me. So when asked..." Renzo paused, reluctant to divulge this bit of information, "to take Hori's life, I could not refuse. But even *that* wasn't enough, it wasn't enough to earn Demeri's respect. I was desperate and it was a mistake. I deeply regret it. Your mapa was working at the foundry, alone. I hit Hori over the head with a length of metal. The event was thought to be an accident, that the piece of metal had fallen from above and had struck Hori dead. The foundry building was old, no one suspected foul play."

Just then, more guards came bursting into the room. "I'm no different than Demeri. No less evil. I've wronged you and I'm so, so, sorry." Renzo said, in a low voice.

Enji walked ahead of the other guards. "You will not talk, you will not gaze upon our Young Crown. You are Iri, lower than dirt." The general's face showed great disgust. "Belly to the floor insect."

Renzo did not do what was asked and continued to eye Kurono. "Your *real* name is Noko, don't forget it."

Enji grabbed hold of Renzo and tackled the prisoner down to the floor. "Quiet yourself Iri!"

Renzo, now with an ear pressed to the floor, could hear that something was happening below. Something was inside the mansion and making a real mess. Then, voices calling Renzo's name could be heard.

"I'm here!" Renzo answered, shouting through the floor.

"My failure to capture you all those annums ago tainted me. I won't fail our Brightest *this* time." Enji said.

"There is no honor in carrying out the orders of a dictator." Renzo said.

Enji pressed a foot on the prisoner's cheek. "You are not worthy

of words, therefore not worthy of a tongue..."

Guards pried Renzo's mouth open, reaching for the tongue. Then, the guards stopped, hearing something panting in the hallway. A wild animal? They could hear someone talking too, "Eka I can't see a *thing!*" followed by another voice, "Grab that lamp!" Then they saw a light in the hallway, and a large animal came bursting into the room. A big-eared creature stood there, snarling. Hush rushed at the guards, chasing them off. The general fell away to the back of the room with the others.

"You okay?" Lupen asked, sliding off Hush and helping Renzo off the floor.

Eka noticed Kurono in the corner, eyes wet with tears. "Kurono?" Eka asked, tentatively, pulling the hood and scarf off. Kurono backed away, having never seen a foreigner before. Eka pulled a puzzle from the robe and handed it to the Young Crown. "A gift for you from Bariton. You like puzzles *right?*"

Kurono took it, began to turn and twist all its parts, solving it within a second. "My mapa made this..." It didn't feel weird to say that. Kurono remembered the smell of metal and heat from burning coal, these were the smells of Hori's workshop.

"Hori made that one too." Renzo said, pointing to Ten who was standing by the entrance.

Kurono saw the number on the prisoner's neck. "It's you!" Without hesitation, the Young Light took Ten into a loving embrace. Then, these eyes fell upon the prism. "It's a puzzle?" The Young Crown's fingers scanned the face of the prism carefully. "I *know* this." Fingers began to move the pieces around, it took a few moments, but then, there was a loud clicking sound and the head fell away into pieces. All in the room stared, wide-eyed, believing the prism to be unsolvable.

Now freed of the prism, Ten looked terrible, pale, thin and confused, but when the Iri's eyes fell on Kurono they regained a bit of their former vigor. Ten scanned the room, the people in it, there were two foreigners, Renzo, a large eared beast, and a handful of guards all piled up in one corner.

“We need to go.” Renzo insisted, but at that moment the doorway filled up with more guards. Hush growled, they backed away, but pointed their iron swords forward.

“Kurono! Come!” Enji ordered, but the Young Crown moved away.

“Is Demeri here?” Kurono asked.

“I am.” The guards parted so that the Light Of The Realm could see, but made sure that no one could get close. Two Iris stood near, keeping Demeri illuminated. When spotting Renzo the Monarch’s pale lips twisted, like a venomous creature ready to strike. “Kill this Iri. Do it now.”

The guards hesitated, fearing the strange creature that was bearing its teeth at them.

“You had my loyalty. My body was yours. I worshiped you. I would have taken this secret to my death. All I ever wanted was to serve you, and you ordered me dead!” Renzo yelled back.

“As you said, your body was mine to command. It is my privilege and birthright. You failed to remove yourself from the world when I asked. A true servant would not have failed me in this.” Demeri said. “Guards, rid the realm of this taint.”

The guards inched forward, but Enji spoke up. “With respect my Brightest, it is disconcerting to hear that Kurono is illegitimate...”

At these words, the guards paused in mid-stride, their general was wise and second in command after their leader Demeri. Kurono, who had been silent for a long while, glared at Demeri. “You stole me away!”

The Brightest lost some radiance then, on the verge of tears. “My womb failed me so many times. I could not fail the realm, my ancestors. I was broken inside, then... then I *saw* you,” the monarch said, looking at Kurono, “a beautiful, healthy child, wandering about the palace halls. The child of a puzzlemaker. I pictured a crown on your head, your tiny body in my arms...”

“So you had Renzo kill my mapa!” Kurono said, turning to Renzo, “and Demeri betrayed you.”

Renzo nodded. “To avoid death I ran away. Left my home,

everything I knew and loved.”

“Had I known...” Enji said in a whisper, eyeing Renzo.

Demeri laughed. “Don’t delude yourself, Enji. You would have done as asked!”

“What you have done,” Kurono began, addressing Demeri, “is unforgivable!” At that moment Kurono’s skin began to glow, and appeared translucent, swirls of color forming at the surface.

The guards began to whisper amongst themselves. In the realm of Irideri, the people followed the brightest light, and in this particular moment, the room was lit by Kurono. They lowered their weapons and set them down on the floor, then all in the room bent the knee. The Young Light flashed a confident grin at Demeri, who did not protest, there was no higher power than the Light.

Eka looked at the puzzle box, the one Kurono had solved. “Maybe Hori built these puzzles so you could solve the prisms! Bariton told us Hori was always ashamed that these creations were used to harm others.”

Iridescent tears streamed down Kurono’s cheeks “Maybe this was my mapa’s way of teaching me to correct those wrongs...”

“Isn’t anyone going to ask why Kurono is glowing?” Lupen whispered to Eka.

Eka put a finger to Lupen’s lips.

Later that day, Kurono appeared in full illumination before the people of Irideri.

Enji approached Kurono. “I am yours to command my Brightest.”

Kurono nodded, gently tugging at the general’s pant leg. Enji stooped down, but as was tradition, could not, would not, set eyes on Kurono. “I’d like you to look at me, as you would any other.” Kurono said.

“That would be disrespectful.”

“I thought you were mine to command?”

“Yes. I apologize.” Enji said, looking at Kurono then.

Enji caught up with Renzo who was leaning on a balcony railing,

staring at the city below. "I envy you." The general said.

"How so?" Renzo kept eyes on Irideri's complex network of streets, rediscovering it from a distance.

"Years ago," Enji began, "if Demeri had asked me to kill Hori I would have done it, like you, without question. Then, if *I'd* been ordered dead, and that's where we differ, I likely would have driven a blade into my own chest. I would have never questioned our Brightest's reasoning for wanting my death. I always wondered why *you* didn't. I couldn't understand why you ran away, it made no sense to me at *all*. I've never had a mind of my own. When you left I never stopped wondering, why you chose to do what you did."

"That sounds exactly like having your own thoughts Enji..."

"I suppose you're right."

"Growing up, we were told that when death was near, we'd *feel* it in our flesh. Every part of our body would feel light, ready to return to the sand. When faced with death my body felt heavy, I was hurt, and afraid. I looked over and I *saw* myself running away, away from Demeri, through the door and outside of the palace, through the secret mountain pass and into the desert. I thought this was a fabrication of my mind, with my body still with Demeri in the Moon Room... but my physical body was many mirits[[^]] away, already running in the desert." Renzo laughed. "When faced with death, my body chose to run, and I let it."

Enji processed this information for a moment, with a bit of difficulty. Facing death, and talking about it were two very different things. "A guard obeys orders and does not think. I fit that description, but you never did." Enji sighed. "You know, it wasn't the same after you left. You were a friend to me. No one else played Hako half as well as you."

"You were ready to cut my tongue out back there." Renzo said, eyeing the general.

"You left me alone with a bunch of dullards. I was angry, I guess. Also, a tongue is not required to play Hako." A near-imperceptible smile appeared on Enji's lips.

Renzo knew this look and what it preceded. Soon, Enji's mask

would crack off too.

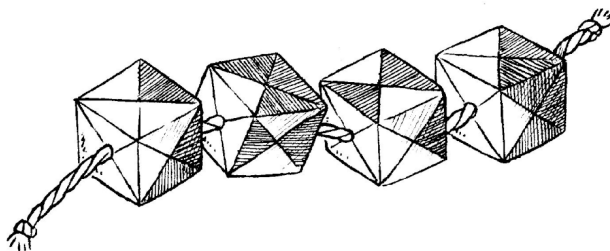
Enji's eyes thinned down into slits as the first sun began to rise in the distance, and looked away. "The suns don't hurt your eyes?"

Renzo's eyes kept to the horizon, smiling still. "No. Not anymore."

Enji tried to stay next to Renzo, but had trouble looking at that growing sliver of light. "How can you *stand* it?"

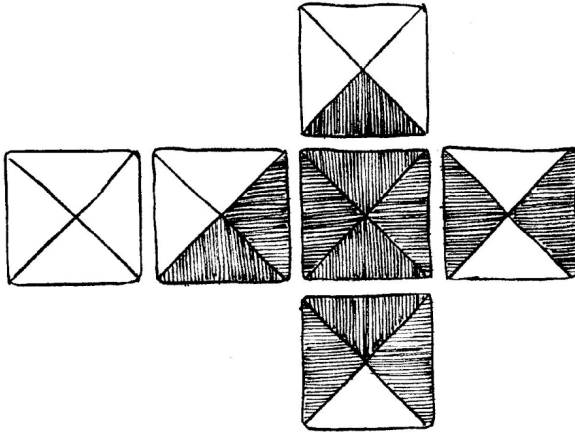
"Better get used to it. I sense a very big change is coming."

Hako



Hako is a capture game popular with Iridi soldiers. Each player carries a **Sonozai**, a set of four stone dice strung on braided hampa.

A game of hako is played with **eight six-sided dice**, each of the six faces is divided into **four triangles** that are either **smooth**, or **textured**.



- **Soli.** Day, light. Smooth side
- **Nocta.** Dark. Textured side
- **Son.** Dusk. Side with two connected textured triangles
- **Nos.** Dawn. Side with two disconnected triangles
- **Nulalun.** Null-moon
- **Grandalun.** Full-moon

Each player begins with four dice, picking either smooth or textured. Each turn, a player rolls a die and try to surround a die in play, with four triangles of its own texture.

After playing their last die, players must pick one in play which was not played last, and that does not create a floating die. A floating die has no immediate non-diagonal neighbor. The game ends when a player surrounds a die with four triangles of their texture.

In this example game, the player with the smooth triangles wins.

On the eve of the coronation Lupen and Eka were given free reign over Irideri. This was the first time any sovereign had allowed foreigners inside. They wandered the city with Enji, who pointed out various sights, including Bao The Bright's childhood home and the Kangoku, a library containing writings from the city's best authors. Because paper was difficult to produce, writers never produced drafts, they planned the work in their heads, and only produced one final physical copy.

If someone wanted to read a book they had to do it on-site. Today, many locals were sitting in the common room, they sat cross-legged, with a book laid out on a mat in front of them. Everyone wore white isilk gloves.

When Lupen asked Enji about why the gloves were white, the general said this: "I don't know anything about color, having never seen an Ilk in real life. Moera, our Luminary, and our First Light, commissioned twenty pairs from a tailor in Edonor." This is all Enji knew of it.

Lupen noticed that there were fewer than twenty people reading, concluding that the readers could not exceed the number of gloves available.

A Kangoku employee stepped forward, wearing one of the twenty pairs, holding a copy of *The Wind in Passage* by the writer Gurahem.

"Would you like to read? Or to be read *to*?"

"I'll do the reading, if you've got gloves to spare!"

The librarian nodded, and produced a pair for Eka to wear. The gloves were soft, and comfortable. Eka found a copy of *Wise Sprouting* bound in white thread, with a conk shroo cover.

"They grow well here in the mountains. They are hard, woody, cave-dwelling shroos, perfect for making strong and durable paper that hold up well to inks. My grand-mapa was the first to produce them."

"I would love to see the process!"

 Moerap; "We've got no books to make today, but know that it warms my heart to have outsiders having an interest in this. My

grand-mapa dreamed of a time when foreigners could come and read these.” The librarian said.

“I think that dream is about to come true.” Eka said.

During the conversation, Lupen was busy inspecting the white gloves, wondering which Ilk the thread came from. “Why not keep the original color?” Lupen interjected.

“A request by Bao.” the Librarian said, “the kingdom bears no color, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Our people prefer shapes and texture.”

Lupen remembered how Zucca had disapproved of the art of skin-dyeing in Verido culture. “Why not use a material that is already white?”

“Isilk is the softest and most durable thread in the Soronan Desert.” The librarian replied. “It doesn’t damage the conk shroo paper, it’s also impermeable.”

“You are a true treasure,” Eka said to the library worker, “a wealth of knowledge.”

The librarian would have blushed, but seeing as color was considered to be an extravagance, decided to bow in thanks instead.

After a very busy day at the Kangoku, Enji accompanied them back to the palace for a midday outing with Kuroko.

All sat together in the Moon Room around cups of freshly-brewed chloromyce shroo tea. Renzo had gone to harvest the chloromyce ears alone, since the workers were on leave.

Lupen stared at the cup of sparkling tea. “There’s color in this. I thought color was considered a bad thing in Irideri.”

Kuroko smiled. “It isn’t a bad thing. We like color. Its absence makes it all the more precious. Color exists in the food we eat, and the liquids we drink.” Kuroko’s eyes locked onto Lupen’s face. “You wear your colors with pride. I would love to see what life in a Verido city is like.”

Lupen forced a smile. “I hope you get to.”

“I haven’t told you the truth.” Kuroko began, addressing all who shared the room. “Everyone in the realm has one cup of chloromyce

shroo tea per day, with a teaspoon of powder swirled in, no more, no less. When news spread of Renzo, Demeri left the room and I helped myself to a second, and third cup. Later when Renzo told me the truth I was so angry! I think the extra rations of tea combined with my anger caused my skin to glow.”

Eka smirked. “Overdoses of chloromyce and the complex chemistry of our bodies can cause skin to flare up, to glow! In the old days people made a game of it.”

“Eka! You knew *too*? Why didn’t you tell me?!” Lupen said, wounded to have to learn this now.

“It’s an uncommon and little known side-effect. Affects one in five. Most people get some glow out of it, but it is usually very dim, and localized.” Eka explained.

“Like the soles of your feet!” Lupen said.

“Please don’t tell anyone that I owe the throne to a skin condition.” Kurono said, and all laughed.

That evening, there was someone at Bariton’s door. “My Brightest!”

Kurono stood there, wearing a lovely multi-layered gown. The fabric shimmered in the light of the chloromyce-lit alleyway. The Young Crown’s hair was down, coming short of touching the ground. A simple diadem sat on Kurono’s head, with a tiny ear of chloromyce embedded in the metal. Ten was there too, wearing a gray robe and simple cloth head covering. “May we come in?” Kurono asked Bariton.

Bariton was embarrassed by the mess, but tried to appear courteous, disappearing into the kitchen to prepare some tea. In the meantime Kurono and Ten stared at the puzzles, the palace playroom had copies of each one. Back then servants weren’t allowed to handle any of Kurono’s things, but Ten recognized the puzzles, and knew how to solve a few. The museum owner returned with a tray with a kettle and a single cup. “Forgive me Bright One. This cup is rather old.”

“Don’t worry yourself, this is perfect. Might I trouble you for a second cup? For my friend Ten.”

Bariton blushed, and began to nod rapidly, “oh yes yes! Right away!”

Kurono inspected the cup of tea, wondering if Hori had ever drunk from it. The cup had a crack, but Bariton, or perhaps Hori had repaired it, filling the gap with dried farawood sap. Kurono loved how they had made no attempt to disguise it, the crack was beautiful, it was now part of the history of the object.

Bariton returned and served Sixteen a cup of tea before sitting down.

They spoke for a long while. Bariton shared stories about Hori, and the museum. “Hori would be happy to know that you’ve been here. When Noko died...” Bariton paused, “I don’t know if it’s proper to say, but Hori felt an obligation to you, to help you in any way. The way Hori spoke of you, it was like you were family.”

Hearing those words, Kurono swallowed hard. “It’s okay.” Kurono reassured Bariton. “There is a banquet tomorrow, to celebrate my Green Day and coronation. I’d like you to come.”

Bariton had no words. The museum carer was touched, and tried hard not to cry. Crying in front of royalty was hardly respectable, Bariton thought.

The banquet took place in the Garden of Light. All the tables were decorated with common sumiras, their soft heart-shaped petals were sprinkled with chloromyce shroo powder. The menu included local vegetables and fruit, like kiari, and gorins. Kiari were sweet root vegetables, best served roasted over a fire with a side of gorin puree. In the absence of light the food was dull and grey, but would emit rainbow-like patterns under the light of a chloromyce shroo.

Eka wished Zucca was here to see this.

Renzo made a toast to Kurono, holding a luminescent drink that looked like liquid starlight. All raised their mugs.

“Light of Lights!”

The day ended with a master of shadow puppetry, performing a play on the outer wall of the garden, a comedy involving Kurono and the foreigners. Lupen laughed hard, belly aching with every

joke. Eka clapped with much fervor, the hands continued to vibrate long after the clapping had stopped.

All went to bed late, exhausted from the night's events. All, except for Renzo who had skipped the puppet show to visit Demeri's quarters. The former Sovereign was free to roam the grounds, but no longer had any governing power.

After the festivities were over, Eka, Lupen and Renzo announced their departure, as they stood together at the edge of the city. Kuro no made sure that their bellies were full, and gave them enough supplies for the trip back to Renate.

"You won't stay?" Kuro no asked Renzo. "I'd like you to be my advisor. You would be good at it."

"I still have things to do in Renate, I'll come back someday. I promise." Renzo bowed lightly, thanking Kuro no.

The Light turned to Eka and Lupen, giving them two gifts. The first, was a set of five blank conk shroo pages, the librarian had insisted on it. The second, was an ear of dried chloromyce. "You've returned my friend Ten to me. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Could we have some chloromyce noodles? Or is that a monk-only thing?" Lupen asked.

"I will with a fresh batch over to you in Renate." Kuro no said.

"Wow, it really *is* used as a verb!" Lupen said.

Ten was standing at Kuro no's side, no longer wearing a mask. When asked to choose a name, Ten kept the number.

"Really? That's hardly a name..." Kuro no said. Ten insisted on it, so Kuro no never asked again.

Kuro no watched as the foreigners disappeared back into the desert. "Would you like to start living in the day again?" The Light asked Ten. "I would love to see the suns."

The Ilk town of Balandri



Snakadil are shy reptavians, they hide in the sand. They have a habit of latching onto those who pass too close to them, and it is difficult to persuade them to let go.

When the group arrived back in Renate, they stopped at the edge of the city, at an invisible grave, where many annums ago, a guard from the Court Of Light had died. Lupen and Eka did not know that this spot marked an important moment in Renzo's past, but they stopped too.

A crowd had gathered at the city border carrying lavendiri leaves, and was tossing them into the air, welcoming them back into the village.

Maka pushed through the crowd and pulled Renzo into a hug. The metalworker wept. Lupen had sent the woth ahead with a message, a story about a former Iridi guard doing a lot of good in Irideri.

"Not so hard!" Renzo said with a laugh.

Maka couldn't believe it. Renzo never used to laugh.

"Hard is all I can do, you know that!" Maka replied, as tears cascaded onto Renzo's robes.

Lupen flashed Eka a smile. "All thanks to Leonin the woth!" The woth returned to its glass ball without acknowledging the name, and started picking the dust out of its wings. "Leonin *was* a great name though..." Lupen grumbled.

Eka shrugged. "Woth heart wants what woth heart wants."

"What if it speaks some obscure Finic dialect? What do we do *then?*"

Maka offered a tent to Eka, Lupen and Hush for their stay here in the city.

They erected the tent together, on the outskirts of town in a space reserved for travelers. It was made of tightly woven yellow and blue hampa thread. Maka positioned a tall banabo pole vertically, before burying it deep in the sand. "This tent is also a gift, it's yours to keep, whether you choose to stay, or not." Previously, the group had used a small length of fabric donated by Uno as a tent, but it was not large enough to accommodate Hush. However, Hush preferred to think that the tent was not large enough to accommodate Lupen and Eka.

“Thank you!” Lupen said from under a sheet of fabric. Eka raised another section of the tent up with a second banabo pole, freeing Lupen.

After erecting the third pole, Eka went to Hush. “Think you can carry this for the group? We’ll only take it if you’re okay with it.”

Hush thought for a moment, then yapped and yipped three times.

“That’s a yes! Well, three times yes!” Eka translated.

“Great! Thank you thank you thank you Hush!” Lupen said.

Eka, Lupen and Hush stayed in town for a while. Everyday, different villagers invited them to tea, to play cards at the tavern, or to go on excursions in the canyons. Lupen enjoyed the brief moment of stability, of feeling part of a community again. The Verido liked traveling, but missed the little things that only the sedentary could do, like planting a garden, or steeping massive quantities of tea for days to share with neighbors. Lupen knew a lot about the plants growing on the Ilk. High-altitude gardening was hard, but Verido could grow shroos with ease. They also grew hardy plants that thrived in shallow soil, like looberries, loomas, kabacho, trumpets, plumpkins, bibiskiss, woodgeons, yellow brushfins and licky root. Lupen knew how to grow all of these, what they liked and needed, but could not say the same of the ones in Renate.

Maybe we could stay here a while, Lupen thought, we have friends here, friends we can count on, and learn from, but committing to a city was difficult, and soon a voice called on them to keep going.

Lupen and Eka went around the village to find food and other items for their trip onward, by then, they had gone through most of the stores donated by Kurono. They had received a fresh batch of chloromyce noodles by woth, and had gobbled it all up too. In fact, the soles of Lupen’s feet were still iridescent.

“Is this normal? Am I dying?” The Verido had asked many times since then, sincerely worried, but Eka would only laugh.

“Was this really baked this morning?” Eka asked, inspecting the loaves of bread produced by the local baker, each one more solid than the next. “Maybe Maka could use this one as an anvil...” Eka

banged the loaf on a bababo pole, but regretted it instantly as it caused the entire tent to shake.

“The Ilk is late. When it arrives, we’ll have better stock. In the meantime you’re going to have to make do with what’s on the shelves. We mix in half norcorn meal, I’ve had to cut back on teaweat to make sure we can feed the Ilk.” The baker watched Eka eyeing the loaves, and smiled. “If you let it rest with ripe bonans, the moisture will help soften the dough. If you soak it in stew, or soup, it’ll be easier to chew. It may have less teaweat, but it’s not less healthy. You’ll build a strong jaw eating it!”

Another villager overheard their conversation. “Sometimes, Ilk change their route, depending on the weather. I just hope it gets here soon. We’re down to babams and kyabe, and even *those* we’re running out of!”

“I thought Renate had loads of fermented kyabe always?” Eka said, remembering the cellar tour given by a villager some days earlier.

“Yes, but we can’t give any to transients, the yield was bad this annum. The cellars are usually filled to the ceiling with four layers of barrels, but we’re down to one.”

Eka nodded. “Understood. Got to feed your own first.”

Lupen was busy trying to find directions to the next city on their list. They already had a map but it was old and needed corrections. Renate housed a cartographer, whose dwelling was easy to find, because it flew an iconic striped black and red flag. The tent bore a map of the city, transients would often gather here to find out where things were. Renate’s size had doubled in the last ha’numms, and kept expanding. Lupen approached the tent, stepped inside and found its occupant, scratching away at a map that spanned the entire room. Lupen looked at it, and saw the writing saying *Edonor*. The map was complex. Edonor was gigantic, its size rivaling Montore. Most shops were there. While looking it over, Lupen spotted Nok’s workshop, tucked between a dye artist and a hatter. This was the former workplace of Orin, Bou’s mapa.

“Nok’s shop!” Lupen exclaimed, startling the cartographer.

“Have you been standing there long?” The cartographer breathed, hand to the chest.

“No, no...” Lupen said, feeling guilty, “you’re busy, I’ll come back later.”

The cartographer adjusted a set of thick spectacles, eyeing Lupen carefully. “Busy, yes. I’m always busy. Since I never stop being busy you ought to ask me what you need now, and it’ll be up to me to tell you whether I can help.”

“Oh, well my friend and I are going to Edonor. We need corrections on our map, it’s a bit old. We heard there was a new village between it and Renate.”

The cartographer nodded, and then waved a hand, asking for Lupen to come forward. Lupen approached, walking over the map and avoiding newly-painted markings. The Verido unrolled the map, laid it over the floor, and went down on hands and knees, mirroring the cartographer’s position.

“I’m Lupen.”

“Leonin,” the cartographer replied, eyes on the map.

Lupen’s eyes widened. “Really? Like the name I tried to give our woth, what a coincidence...”

It was no coincidence. Earlier that morning, Lupen passed in front of this very tent and had seen the name, but forgot about it.

Leonin’s eyes studied Lupen’s map, hands already busy correcting mistakes, adding new bridges, danger areas and such. “Didn’t happen to see an Ilk on your way over here did you? It’s late.”

“An Ilk is coming here?” Lupen was sweating now. “Which one?”

“Ilk of Balandri,” Leonin answered, “is supposed to arrive here soon, we hope.”

Lupen glanced outside through an opening in the tent, heart beating so hard it threatened to break out. Soon, Leonin finished adding corrections. Lupen thanked the cartographer and hurried back over to their tent. Eka wasn’t back yet, and Hush was resting in a recess in the ground, keeping cool. One side of the tent was

open, to let air transit through. Lupen took a seat, waited, eyes on the horizon as memories of Volare came rushing in. Then, there were people shouting.

“It’s here! The Ilk is here!”

The Ilk arrived from yora’ta, not its usual path. The whole town was a swirling mess. People amassed empty carts and bags, gathered tools and extra hands. All were getting ready to help unload the Ilk. Lupen saw a familiar tall ramp, with people running up the steps to greet the visitors, but these eyes had never seen it from down here. The ramp looked frail and unsteady, swaying from side to side as people scaled its many steps.

The Ilk arrived at last and came to stand by the platform. It was skinny, long-legged, had giant three-toed feet, long thin faces with a great big set of horns. On their backs, they carried a small Verido town.

Already, caretakers prepared bags of teawet grain to feed it with. Renate villagers hoisted bags over their shoulders, and ran up the ramp. Others were busy brushing the sand off the Ilk’s skin, picking rocks from its toes. Other workers moved tents, to make a pathway up to the town. People would be coming on and off of it for seven days.

“This is so exciting!” Eka said to Hush, having just returned to their camping spot in the city. Hush lifted its head, stared up at the Ilk, unimpressed. Next to the hyroo, was Lupen, who bore the same disinterested gaze. Hush continued to sleep, but Lupen could not stop watching the Ilk. Eka went to pat Lupen on the head, but didn’t, due to the presence of a cup full of tea. Eka wanted to say something about it, but chose to ignore it.

The quiet town from this morning had turned into a bustling open-air market. Vendors from Balandri were setting up shop in the center of town, between masses of tumbling weeds, dry sweet grass, lavendiri bushes and blue ploviess. The place was full of life and color, people laughing and shouting. Eka took a seat and watched, the market was set up right near their spot. Already, some Balandrians were exploring the city. Like Lupen, they had

ears like delicate flutes, but unlike the Volarian blue, bore the red pigment iconic to Balandrians.

Eka was glancing from Lupen and back to the people of Balandri. “Don’t you want to say hello?”

“To what end?” Lupen said, reaching for the Thinking Cup, taking a sip of tea, before putting it back up on its pedestal.

Eka took Lupen’s side. “Suit yourself! Ilk are impressive though aren’t they?”

“Nearly 578 mirits tall...”

Lupen noticed that the Voice of the Balandri Ilk was walking through town. They’d never met, but Voices were easy to recognize. They all wore the same robe. Lupen wanted to hide.

Eka gave a loud whistle then, a song that held no secrets to Verido ears...

(...)Si-Re Re(..) Mi(.) _ _ _Fa-Sol(..)**

The sound caught the ear of Klev, the Voice of the Balandri Ilk, who turned toward them. Lupen’s dumb body was frozen in place, but it was too late now because Ilken was a dead giveaway. Klev pushed through the vendors, and arrived at their little camp. By then, Eka had wandered off, to leave them alone together.

“The desert is loud, huh?” Klev said, smiling. “You are far from home Volarian.” The Balandrian could not read Lupen’s name, as the tattoos were partially hidden under a scarf, but the blue ink was a clear indicator of which city this Verido belonged to. Klev noticed the Thinking Cup, but like Eka, thought it might be better not to ask about it.

Lupen nodded, shyly. “Yes, though technically that would depend entirely on its whereabouts...” Only those with a birthplace with legs could say this.

“I admire you! It’s very brave to venture out into the world like this, you must have seen much of the desert!”

“I have.” Lupen said, while a confused soup of pride and sadness swished around in this gut. “Any word of Volare?” Lupen managed

to say, looking up at the horizon, as if expecting to see Vol. This sudden gesture sent the Thinking Cup flying, Lupen caught it, but the tea spilled into the sand.

Klev stared at the puddle of tea. “Moving towards the Yora’ta Ash plains, last I heard.”

“Yora’ta Ash plains?” Lupen said, alarmed. “But that would take them to the Rupture.”

Klev shared Lupen’s concerns. “It’s what I’ve heard. People are saying that the Ilk of Volare is dying. I don’t know if you know this, but their Voice fell and died last annum. It pains me to be the bearer of so much bad news, but I thought you’d want to know. It’s been an emotional time for us all.”

Lupen wanted to cry, but was too stunned to produce any expression resembling grief. The Verido’s face was eerily devoid of emotion.

“Bala, our Ilk, has been behaving strangely. They impart fewer and fewer thoughts, it may just be grief, but I am worried...” Klev continued, in a lower voice, “we’re *all* scared, afraid that both Bala and Oto will follow Vol into the Rupture. If this happens, what does that mean for our people?” Klev’s arm also extended out toward the market. “And what about them? They rely on us to transport goods and food between cities.”

Lupen thought of a conversation with Rosmus then, and on how their future on the Ilk was uncertain. “Not certain...” Lupen muttered. “Maybe all of this is my fault.” Lupen said. “The Voice of Volare isn’t dead.” Saying this, Lupen removed the scarf, revealing the tattoos.

“I am relieved you’re alive Lupen, but I don’t believe your death was the cause of all this.” Klev said, “I” Lupen nodded, swallowing hard. “I knew this was coming, I’ve been avoiding thinking about it. Maybe I can dissuade Vol, maybe I can...”

“So what will you do, Voice of Volare?”

“Whatever I can.”

Lupen parted with Klev and went to see the cartographer once more. “I need whatever update you have for Dorake’s pass, the Ash

Plains and all the way to The Rupture. I swear to you, I'm not going there to die." Lupen said.

"You'd better, I do not want to be the one marking the road to it." Leonin finished adding the desired modifications.

Map in hand, Lupen returned to their encampment. "Change of plans, we're going yorama'tae to intercept Vol."

Eka was lying over Hush, arms hanging down its sides, caressing the large furry beast. "Okay Lu, yorama'tae we go!"

The Verido eyed Eka carefully. "You don't want to know why? Or is it one of those situations where you already know why and that I'm an idiot for asking?"

Eka was ready to go, standing upright. "Less thinking, more doing!"

"I'm scared Eka."

Eka had anticipated this sudden shift in mood, and was already halfway to Lupen, coming for a hug. "I know." They stood in each other's arms for a long while.

"If we walk we won't make it on time." Lupen said.

"I think I know how." Eka said.

Eka led Lupen to the area of town where transients moored their sandfins. Hush accompanied them, bounding ahead toward a broken vessel that lay on its side. Its sails were in tatters, and its hull punctured. It bore the name Toronka. Lupen walked over to it. "It's not looking too bad! But who does it belong to?"

"I don't know, but I know who might." Eka said, gesturing toward a yellow vessel bearing the name Etyl.

Lupen could see someone was in Etyl, a light was on.

"Nono's home." The Verido said, relieved.

"Kiao'ri Nono!" Eka shouted.

They heard lots of noise inside, and then Nono's head pushed out a porthole, like the first time they met. Nono looked healthy, and quickly found them in the dark. "Kiao' aikana dii!" Nono shouted, smiling. "Come in! Come in!"

They all went inside Etyl, sitting around the small table in the main saloon. A small avoka oil lamp hung from the ceiling. Etyl was in better shape, the tools were organized in drawers or secured in boxes with lanyards, even the floor was free of debris. Nono had recently waxed the floors, Lupen could smell a mix of lemilim, cactub fat and salts. Nono served oversized mugs of bonan wine from a bottle that was as tall as themself to each one of Etyl's guests.

Lupen eyed the mug, wondering if bonan wine could induce a headache by proximity. Eka threw an arm around the Verido's shoulders then. "We have time for this okay? Don't worry."

Nono eyed Hush whose head was halfway inside. "Ipayaya?" Nono said, offering the hyroo a mug. Hush gave it a lick, but did not enjoy the taste. Nono laughed, and served the hyroo a bowl of mashed babams. "Sou mawani te dodon oro!"

"Good for the soul and the stomach!" Eka translated. "Looks delicious!"

"What brings you here?" Lupen asked Nono.

"I deliver teawet from Montore for the Balandri Ilk."

"Oh? Renate villagers asked for extra feed?"

"No, no, no. The teawet is a gift!" Nono corrected.

"From who? Why?" Lupen asked, perplexed. People in Montore weren't known for their generosity.

"I know who, but told no say... but I will say this. Balandri Ilk go to Montore before go to Renate *always*, when Ilk late to Montore, someone see a problem for Renate people. This make a Montore donor do a rare, kind thing."

Lupen laughed. "That's okay, I think I *might* know who."

There weren't many well-endowed philanthropists in Montore. This bit of good news was heart-warming, and it offered comfort. Lupen knew that the residents of the Soronan Desert would find ways to continue exchanging food and goods, even without the Ilk. The Verido raised a mug-full of bonan wine. "To those who care!"

"To those who care!" They all said again.

"Do you know if Toronka belongs to anyone?" Lupen asked.

Nono thought about the name for a moment. "Iana. Belong to

no one, it is sad.”

Lupen’s eyes lit up, with the Ilk in town it would be easy to find parts to repair it. They drank their wine, and Lupen once again failed to catch Nono re-filling their cups.

Eka leaned into Lupen then, “you know, if you don’t want Nono to refill your cup, drink slowly...”

The Verido had much to learn about Finiku drinking etiquette, but did not get sick, having eaten enough muckwheat bread and purple bleen sausages to soak it all up.

The next day, they marched over to Renzo’s tent to ask for help to patch up the holes in Toronka’s hull, who agreed. They didn’t have to ask Nono, the Finiku was already hard at work mending an old sail. For many annums, Nono kept a sail in Etyl’s bilge as a backup, but forgot it there. Now, the sail had holes in it. “Ora, ora, the sail is still good. I will fix it!”

Lupen and Eka repaired the rudder and mast, but faced a problem when they saw the state of the lines onboard, the hampa fibres were worn and brittle, they had to be replaced, but Nono had used up the last of the hampa thread to fix the sail. Eka asked around town, but found out that Renate suffered a shortage of hampa, even banabo was difficult to come by this season. For a moment, Eka considered using the poles holding up their tent but Nono said that this wood was too dry, it had to be cut fresh when used to weave ropes.

“What else can we use?”

Nono looked up at the Ilk then, and Eka followed the Finiku’s gaze.

“Of course!”

Eka told Lupen, who went to ask Klev. Verido did not export isilk anymore, but would never deny one of their own kin. Klev secured enough hair for their project, and again, Nono stepped up to do the work, delighted with the quality of the material.

“Soft dii! It is perfect!” First, the Finiku cut all hairs the same length and tied the ends together. Then, divided the bundle into

three. Nono twisted the three sections, holding two bundles between each finger, with the third bundle set between the toes. Nono began twisting them all in the same direction, the bundles wrapped around one another forming a rope. Eka watched the process, and was soon able to replicate the procedure. They twisted and spliced isilk all day, to the sound of Nono singing sandfinner ballads.

When the ropes were done, Lupen climbed up the mast to run the ropes through the new blocks Maka had made. The blocks were made of dense mapplewood, they had a light coating of avoka oil against the weather. Mapplewood was Nono's recommendation, and Maka was able to source some locally from a fellow artisan. Despite never working with this wood before, Maka's work was so good that Nono requested more for Etyl. Eka was happy to see that both were getting along, and was grateful for their help.

Once Lupen was finished feeding the rigging through the blocks, Eka eased the halyard, slowly, giving the Verido time to apply pinnytar to the ropes on the way down. Lupen returned on deck, hands black and sticky.

Nono gave them an extra container of pinnytar for their trip, "it protect rope from kira!" Nono said.

Lupen smelled like pinnytar for the rest of the day, and realized that this was distinctly Nono's. It was the scent of a seasoned sandfinner.

After many days of hard work, it came time to test Toronka.

On the first run, Lupen got the sandfin stuck in a sandbank, on the second, the tiller came loose. The third and fourth run revealed even more problems, but gradually they found less and less. After many more runs, the sandfin surfed on the desert plains beautifully. Nothing rattled or threatened to break off. They began filling it with supplies for the journey ahead.

The sandfin's lockers were filled with bags of teawet flour, crates of waterstones, purple kyabe, sweet babams and mapples.

On the eve of their departure, they made a fire, and laid out a fabric tarp on the ground to sit on. That evening, Klev played traditional

Verido music, Maka cooked for everyone, and Renzo told Iridi legends.

Klev presented Lupen and Eka with a bottle of kabacho, which they later shared and savored with others, and then improvised a tune using a donmol, an instrument with a flat back, triangular-shaped sound holes, four double strings, a long neck, and a raised fingerboard. Lupen smiled at the lyrics. It was about mountains that could not kneel, moons that could not sleep, and of fires that could not touch. Eka was translating the meaning of the song to the other guests through exaggerated gestures. Nono and Renzo watched, each interpreting the pantomime in their own way.

“Ara ara! A durdle! Ora! It is hungry! And it no can swim.” Nono said.

“No, no, it’s about the journey of a great warrior!” Renzo corrected.

After the song, Nono recited a poem about a loose bit of thread on Renzo’s pant leg.

*Bit of standing thread,
Many sand it long to see,
But blade come, too soon.*

Nono inched forward and cut the bit of tread away with a blade, cackling. Everyone roared with laughter.

Nono filled all of the empty mugs with kabacho. “Drink! Drink!” the Finiku said, tapping the bottom of Lupen’s cup, causing some of its content to spill.

“I am, I am!” Lupen cried.

All in the group were merry, all but Nono and Eka, to whom it had little effect.

“Eka, I want to say to you,” Nono said, moving close, “I stop by Edonor to talk to my friend who know a lot about woth.”

The Finiku filled up Eka’s mug again. “To see the bottom, it is bad luck.” Nono once said.

“We haven’t found the name of our woth friend yet.” Eka said.

“You will find soon,” Nono replied, “I tell my friend about the detail of wingspan, antenna and color of your woth. They say it is *super* woth!” Saying this, Nono’s arms spread wide, spilling half the contents of a mug into the sand. Then, Nono’s body relaxed. “Long, long ago, there is more big thing in the desert, and now, not so. But, when I young, I see a rare creature...” Saying this, Nono’s eyes glassed over. “Nono teki kira te sawa no mawani...”

Maka overheard the last bit of their conversation, and eyed Nono in disbelief. “You saw the soul of the suns and the wind?”

Nono drifted to another place, recalling something that had happened annums ago. Nono began to tell the story, switching to Finic, speaking in a low voice so Eka could translate for everyone.

When I was young, I went to the Rupture with my grand-mapa Etyl, who was sick, and decided that it was time to take The Leap.

In the Ash Plains, near the Rupture, the ground was black. I was scared, but I never did say it, because this was an important day for Etyl and I did not want to ruin it. Together we walked to the edge of the chasm. We sat near it for a long while, talking, drinking tea, sharing muckwheat bread... but then, before dark, came time to say goodbye. Without a word, I watched my grand-mapa leap into the chasm, and disappear into the dark.

I stayed there, and I could not sleep, so I got up, and went to stand on the edge of the Rupture again. I knew my grand-mapa would not be there, but I found it comforting. Then I saw a giant figure. Its long legs passed over my head sending swirling clouds of ash into the air, which stained my clothes, and obstructed my vision for a moment. I cleared it away from my eyes, just in time to catch the giant stepping down into the Rupture!

Then it was gone...

Eka said, stopping as Nono took a breath. All were listening,

gathered around the fire and enthralled by Nono's story.

"I've heard a similar story," Klev said. "My friend Uggi was up late, observing the reflection of the moons on the dunes below. Uggi saw a tall shape in the distance, moving. Its legs spanned entire dunes. Uggi went to grab a glass to make out its features in detail, but lost sight of it."

Maka nodded. "A giant left crates of food patches for people in Renate during the Raids, our people would not have survived without it."

"No one spoke to the giant?" Renzo asked.

"No," Maka began, "all they saw was the crate at the edge of the village and a tall silhouette, riding away."

Renzo also had something to share. "Like you, Klev, I did not see it with my own eyes, but I heard stories. During the Raids at the Suvalba Sanctuary, soldiers stole seeds to bring back to Moera. One day, all awoke to the blood-curdling screams of a soldier. The soldier was shaking, claiming to have seen some kind of large apparition wandering through the camp. No one else had seen it. When they arrived in Irideri, they found the bags were empty, full of holes. Some of them went back to gather the lost cargo, but they found nothing."

Lupen smiled, "Zucca would be glad to hear this."

The day ended with everyone sleeping around a dying flame, all, but Lupen and Eka. Both were lying next to each other, gazing up at the sky. A question burned at Lupen's lips. "You didn't look surprised when you saw me at the top of the mountain."

"Surprised? No. Happy? Yes." Eka said with a kind smile.

"If not me, then someone else?" Lupen said, feeling small and unimportant.

"No. Couldn't have been anyone else. Couldn't have happened any other way," Eka said, rolling over and throwing an arm around Lupen's middle. "Others have come before you, but you weren't born then so you have a good excuse." Eka said with a smirk.

"You're getting real tall," Lupen noted.

"You noticed that, huh?"

“When I met Uno, it was difficult to have a conversation. Uno was always sort of... distant. Is that what will happen to you?”

The Wonder said nothing, but pulled Lupen in close, until they were cheek to cheek, belly to belly. Lupen’s eyes locked onto the skyrocks above. “Why aren’t you two together?”

Eka was drawing invisible pictures on Lupen’s back. “You could ask the same of the Ilk.”

“Oh. Well, they used to be together,” Lupen began, “but then they agreed to help us. Verido did this too. We used to be together. One big tribe. Separating made more sense though, even if it was hard.”

“You’ve got your answer, I think.” Eka said.

Lupen gazed up at the moons then. “I wish I could live forever.”

“A good life is better than a long one Lu, and whether a life is good can’t be determined by its length.” Eka’s hand slid over Lupen’s skyrock necklace. “Remember what I told you about skyrocks? They look small from here, but they come from far, far away, and there they are giants. You too are a giant to someone, and you shine brighter than you think.”

As Lupen drifted off to sleep, Eka was reciting constellations. “Salarus, Vitali, Neoneve...” at that moment Eka’s eyes took note of a shooting skyrock. A name came to mind, an old name, belonging to a friend that was now long gone. The name never left Eka’s mind. “You came as quickly as you went my dear Wiktopher. We had a lot of fun though...” Eka said. Suddenly, the woth crawled out of its glass ball and flew onto Eka’s head, wings fluttering wildly. It then began to shimmy its body from side to side, wiggling its antennae. When it settled, Eka smiled, “I agree, it is time someone else bear this name,” and began to stroke the ends of the hairs on its back, humming.

The next morning, Lupen woke to the sound of arguing. Nono was awake, standing at the foot of a Beobug sandfin, which must have moored here in the dark and kinked Nono’s vessel, an accident that Nono believed was deliberate.

Lupen walked up to Nono, and noticed Gree at one of the portholes. “Gree! Come down! Stop hiding!”

“I no hide!” Gree shouted back, exiting the sandfin in a huff, ready to smack whoever had said this. “Araaa! Voice of Volare! What an honor!”

“Stop right there,” Lupen said, putting a hand forward “did you wreck Etyl on purpose?”

“Oh no no no...” Gree said, in a Nono kind of way.

Nono was furious, and jumped onto Gree’s back, who was now running in circles, pulling the Finiku’s ears and screaming into them. “Komororo’ia!” Both switched to Finic then. Lupen understood nothing, but could guess what they were saying, because their fight was an old one. Nono was tugging at the Finiku’s ears, like one would pull on carriage reins. When the captain of Beobug II continued to deny the damage, Nono grabbed onto Gree’s nose, a finger pulling at each nostril.

“Iaa! Nono iana!”

Lupen thought about separating them, but also thought that Gree deserved it.

“I admit it!” Gree shouted. “It was no mistake. I bump into Etyl on purpose...”

Lupen sighed. “Now why did you do *that*?”

Nono slipped off and moved to stand next to Lupen, eyes thin and angry. “It is *because* Gree only have rot inside...”

Gree’s face turned red and puffy then, hands curled into tight fists. “Iana! It is because I am angry! You no understand that I get job with Beobug to impress you!”

“I don’t care,” Nono said, disinterested. Lupen nudged the Finiku then, seeing as Nono wasn’t being very kind. “If you want to do something that I like,” Nono began, “leave the Beobug job! Go home to our mapa to correct the lie about me.”

Lupen’s eyes widened then. “Gree is part of your family.” Lupen did remember Gree saying that they’d been grown on the same plot of land. “Wow! You were grown together!”

Nono nodded, but was not proud of this fact. “Orae. Gree and I

grow together. But the stem of Gree wrap around me, like a snakadil do!” Saying this, Nono’s hands wrapped around this throat. “Gree suffocate me already then, and today Gree never stop to smother me!”

“You always reject me!” Gree complained.

“Even when I was a seed, I want nothing to do with you.” Nono spat.

Lupen remembered that Zucca had said that when children were grown, they developed links to one another, and the emotions of one could affect its neighbor. Gree depended on Nono more than Gree cared to admit, and Nono wanted to get away after being trapped early in life.

“How about you two sandfin together?” Lupen suggested.

“Lupen is crazy. I no want to work for Beobug.” Nono said, disgusted with the idea.

“Aboard Etyl.”

“But if I do this, it will leave Beobug II without a captain...” Gree said.

“Gree no worry. Beobug can find other lazy captain *easy easy*,” Nono said with a laugh, “Gree have *no* talent.”

“So it’s decided then! You’ll travel together from now on,” Lupen said.

Nono realized what Lupen had said. “No no no no no...” but before Nono could no-no any further, Lupen let out a loud whistle, so loud that even the Ilk of Balandri turned its head.

“This is no fair!”

“Maybe it’s time to revisit the feelings you have for Gree. It sounds like you never really gave Gree a chance. You are family, and family... it’s, it’s everything...” Suddenly Lupen’s eyes started to water. Lupen sat on the ground, shaking, overcome with grief. Inconsolable.

Both Finiku stared, uncomprehending, thinking themselves responsible. They gathered around the Verido.

“Iane harioki’ia’re...” Nono said, in a gentle voice, hand over Lupen’s shoulder. Gree did the same. They looked at each other then,

sighing. “Ok.” Nono said, “We will travel together. I will be patient. I promise.” Gree was about to put on the Beobug cap but Nono slapped it away. Both Finiku continued to bicker, but more quietly this time.

Lupen was on the ground still, unable to calm down. “I have to go home.” Lupen managed to say.

“You *are*. Toronka is ready,” Klev said.

“But even if Vol *doesn't* die, how can I go back? They'll think I betrayed them.”

“You fell,” Klev said, “how is that a betrayal?”

“I never tried to tell them that I was alive. I could have, but I didn't. I never wanted to be Voice, maybe I did want to fall off the Ilk...”

“Your reasons are your own Lupen,” Klev said, “but maybe it's better this way, better that you found your way here, to meet Eka, to learn about the world. If what I think is happening with the Ilk, *is* happening, we'll need someone to help us live in the dust. I'm scared too, y'know. In fact, I've been land-sick all day.”

“I'd be a bad teacher,” Lupen blinked and began to laugh, “y'know, that's something I've always said about myself. But it's not true. I think I could do it.” Lupen looked up at Bala, and began to whistle to the Ilk.

The Ilk of Balandri was eating teawet and stopped mid-chew to listen. After Lupen's message, Bala swallowed and turned its head downwind. It took a deep breath, and a low, deep sound pushed out of its throat, reverberating through the town and across the desert plains. As it sang, the whole town stopped to listen.

Klev smiled. “They will be happy to hear you're alive.”

“Yes, I think so...”

Toronka



Licky root is typically grown for its roots, which may have anti-inflammatory and antibacterial effects. This plant is very hardy, it grows in high-altitude, like mountains, but also thrives on the back of the Ilk. Verido people like to use the roots to make tea.

That morning Lupen got up early, eager to set eyes on Toronka again after dreaming about wandering its insides, fingers running along bolts, nuts and tracing along the grain of the wood. The yukwood hull held records of history, Lupen could read it by following the growth rings, “like moving backwards through time.”

The Verido saw Maka near Toronka, knees in the sand and hands in a bucket filled with thick purple bleen grease. Lupen had seen other villagers in Renate make it to use as decorative paint. The grease was thick and wet, but would cure after a day of full suns.

~

Plurple Bleen Grease

Ingredients

Ten stalks of purple bleens, stemmed
Five avoka nut pods
A half pail of waterstones

Instructions

Press liquid from waterstones into a large recipient, discard skins, and add purple bleens in liquid. Let purple bleens soak for a day. Strain, but reserve the liquid.

Crack the avoka nuts, and pour the oil into the liquid, mix well. Then, place the recipient over a hot fire, until liquid content is reduced by half. Dip a stick in the mixture, if it stays upright on its own, it is ready.

~

All were awake now, and gathered around the bucket to dip their hands in it. They took turns stamping their gooey palms on the sandfin’s hull.

Nono’s hand print was nearest to the ground, small and covered with cracks due to annums of handling ropes. Renzo’s was medium-sized with thin fingers, Maka’s print was the largest with

thick rounded fingers, Eka's was small, but bigger than Nono's.

"Your palms are *very* wrinkly Eka." Lupen noted. "Like an old licky root rind."

Eka was getting the last basket of supplies onto the sandfin, "or like your face when you're complaining about something," Saying this, Eka smirked and disappeared inside the cabin.

"Well, my face *doesn't* do *that...*" but creases formed on Lupen's face then from scowling. "Okay, okay. It *does* crease up a bit."

Lupen looked at Toronka's hull again. The Verido's hand print had lines and dots, resembling growth rings on a tree. The Verido thought of home, and was surprised to find that thinking of home was pleasant again.

Eka arrived outside to pour tea into the mugs of their companions. All had slept around Toronka, except Nono who preferred sleeping on Etyl. Lupen passed some bonan leaf plates around, each one had slices of toasted muckwheat bread with a generous serving of spiced bam purée. Klev and Ren decline a plate, having not yet recovered from yesterday's drinking.

After breakfast, Nono boarded Toronka to inspect the deck, outer hull and rigging again. The Finiku's big wet eyes scanned every part, followed every rope from working to bitter end, the hands inspected every knot, and even the feet got to prove their worth by stomping down to sound the deck for abnormalities. After a thorough inspection, Nono climbed up to half mast to make an announcement.

"Good work aikanae'wati! Toronka ready to fly!"

There was no breeze to sail with yet, but there were signs of its coming. Once in a while, the Finiku would climb up the mast to look at the horizon. "Sawa come. Sawa come soon!"

Eka was spending time with Hush, caressing the beast's large parabolic ears. "I'm sorry you can't come with us on Toronka." The hyroo had grown too large for a sandfin, even Eka could not stand upright in the cabin. The Wonder caressed the hyroo's soft cheeks and grabbed the sides of the beast's snout. "We'll come back for you soon. I promise."

Nono would stay until Toronka left. Gree, too, was aboard the sandfin. The Finiku wore plain clothes and the Beobug cap, but even with the Beobug logo gone it angered Nono. Gree was taking boxes from Nono's hands, and carrying each one below deck. Nono was tense, and Gree was quiet.

"How's it going so far?" Lupen had asked, with Gree out of earshot.

"It... how do you say in Common Tongue? Full of mind and body pain," Nono replied.

"Painful," Lupen corrected.

"Orae. Very, very pain-full, but Nono try." Nono glanced at Gree on Etyl with feigned affection, who was adjusting the standing rigging, and began to yell. "Ianae! Ara maha! Tawari'ia!"

Gree gave Nono a dirty look and continued to adjust the lines. "This way is better!"

Nono stormed back on deck and both continued to bicker in Finic.

"In short, too many captains." Renzo explained, having witnessed the argument.

"How's your head?" Lupen asked.

"Like it is filled with rocks," Renzo replied, massaging a painful spot between the eyes and the bridge of this nose where the bonan wine had made a quarry, "but you look fine. How is this possible?"

Lupen smirked. "The trick is to drink slowly. I suffered from head rocks many times before I learned."

Renzo groaned. "Yes, but I did put my hand over my cup. Nono must have filled it through the gaps in my fingers while I wasn't looking."

"Yea, empty cups are bad luck. I saw a durdle licking your fingers this morning while you were asleep. Are your hands sticky?" Lupen quizzed the headache sufferer, with an ever-widening grin.

"No," Renzo made a face, "well, not anymore."

"You sure it's okay to leave Hush with you?" Eka asked Renzo, joining them near Toronka. Hush, who was sitting near the bow of the sandfin in the shade, had a crowd of appreciators around at all times. Children were gathering around the hyroo now, stroking its

fur. A mess of tiny hands ran through its mane, separating the soft hairs like teeth on a comb. The large beast seemed to enjoy the attention.

“Yes, it’s fine.” Renzo offered Hush a sip of plumpkin juice, and gripped the cup tightly so the beast wouldn’t lick it up by accident. The children laughed as the beast drank, spilling plumpkin juice everywhere. Renzo smiled.

Eka caught the smile, and was as determined to catch many more before they left for their trip. “Vi ana tribu.” Eka said.

Renzo froze, and by these words was transported to another time and place. Its rhythm was comforting, better than music, like rediscovering a long-forgotten, and favorite childhood meal. Ren had learned Aodan while first employed in the Court of Light, Enji grew up speaking it, and taught Renzo over games of Hako...

“Nocta,” a hand flashed in front of Renzo’s eyes, showing the fully-engraved topside of a six-faced stone die, which Enji turned, showing a smooth face, “soli.” A side with two connected textured triangles, “son.” A side with two disconnected triangles, “nos. And the remaining sides are nulalun and grandalun,” Enji explained, “I play soli. Soli *always* starts.” Renzo could hear Enji’s voice through the thickness of a time now long gone...

A Sonozai was still attached to Renzo’s belt, the set of four dice hung loosely on their string. “We are one tribe, one family.” Renzo’s face softened, moved closer to Eka, and they put their foreheads together. “Jui, vi la ana granda tribu. Tanka koroa Eka.” Each had one hand pressed behind the head of the other, they stayed like this for a moment before Eka pulled away.

“We will see each other soon, yea?” Eka said.

“Yes. I wish for it to be soon,” Renzo replied, smiling brightly.

Eka went to meet with Klev and Nono to say goodbye. Klev was busy braiding a bracelet when Eka came, they spoke at length about playing the donmol, and about the best technique to ferment kyabe.

Then, Eka moved to talk to Maka. The metalworker held a

box with a gift inside. It was full of fresh purple bleen sausages, appropriately paired with jars of mapple jam. “I added loads of grated chilabi to one of these sausages,” Maka said with a wink, “not telling you which!” Chilabi was a popular ingredient in Aodal cuisine. A hot, pungent condiment that burns the nose. Renate residents liked to play a game called Chilabi Plusa, to mean chilabi with something extra.

Chilabi Plusa

Chilabi Plusa is an acting game where the best pretender wins.

Each player has an identical dumpling which they must eat in turns. All dumplings contain chilabi, but one has ten times the amount of the others, a quantity enough to make you cry, sweat or cough. The goal of the game is to hide your discomfort if you got the spiced dumpling, or to pretend you got it when you didn't. It is up to others to guess the truth.

~

They had played this game once already at a party, at that time Eka had not eaten a spiked dumpling, and neither had Lupen, although Eka was very good at pretending and had won the game. Now, it was almost certain that one of them would have to suffer its effects.

Nono was next in line, Eka knelt down to match the Finiku's short height. “By the way, our woth friend is named Wiktopher.”

Nono's eyes widened in surprise, “sosae'di!” Nono said, ecstatic, pulling Eka in close, the Finiku's short arms barely able to encircle The Wonder. “I am happy to hear this!”

Lupen also said goodbye, but spent the most time with Klev, chatting away in Ilken. Both Verido were using the short form, whistling away while the villagers stared, perplexed by the absence of talking.

Klev had finished the isilk bracelet, and gave it to Lupen as a parting gift. “Now you carry Bala with you.”

“Thanks, it’s lovely.” Lupen said, stroking the braid, its red hue evident under the two suns. Then, the Verido removed the skyrock necklace and handed it to Klev. “It’s a piece of skyrock. A reminder that the world is bigger than the Ilk, bigger than the Soronan Desert even. It’s an amazing place, and there is much to see.”

Klev took the necklace, eyes locked onto its shiny, smooth surface. “Wow. They’re as small down here as they appear up there! Incredible.”

Eka and Lupen stepped aboard the sandfin, each taking on the tasks they’d agreed on the previous day. Lupen pulled on the mainsail halyard to raise it, while Eka kept the rope rings that secured the sail to the mast from catching. Once the sail was all the way up, the rope was tied and Eka loosened the sheet to let the boom hang to one side and catch the wind. The sail soon filled with air, pulling the sandfin forward.

All in the village waved as Toronka sandfined away. Nono held up a scarf, letting the wind catch into it. The others in the group let their scarves fly too.

As Eka and Lupen left Renate, they could see the scarves undulating in the wind, hundreds of colorful knitted arms waving goodbye. The Ilk of Balandri sang a parting song that resounded throughout the desert. This song would catch the ear of the other two Ilk, and for a moment Lupen wondered if it could convince Vol to slow down its pace, or alter its course. Lupen knew that thinking this was silly, as it was near impossible to dissuade anyone from taking the Leap. Lupen’s mind drifted to a day when Levi was still alive, a day they’d spent together... Lupen sat with this wonderful happy and sad memory for a while, and then let it go. That day, Lupen made a plan to try and plant a garden in the desert, like Zucca. “I wonder if woodgeon shrubs can grow down here...”

As Renate faded away, they settled into their respective tasks, taking bearings, checking the horizon for obstacles, or anything that

could help them identify where they were. The Soronan Desert has many mountains to use as landmarks by countless sanfinners and foot travelers to find their way. In the Central Rim, the wind always circulated in the same direction. To find saa'ta, all they had to do was walk with the wind at their backs. On days without wind, one need only to look at the sand dunes which are shaped by the wind, the direction of the slant indicates saa'ta. Finding yora'mu is easiest after the second sunset, all avians sleep with their heads pointing in that direction. Etyl's old compass twitched, their bow heading saa'mu, or 'into the wind' in the Common Tongue. The needle always pointed to yora'mu, another Finiku term to mean 'towards the soul of the land'. On the compass were Finiku symbols for all 4 directions. Lupen took notes on a map while Toronka was sandfinning itself, bow pointing toward the Rupture.

About midday, the wind died. Lupen kept an eye on the horizon for wind, but not a single grain of sand was shifting. With all of this time to think, the Verido remembered The Tale of Three, Uno's gift.

Every page was full of annotations and drawings, Uno had tracked the paths of the three Ilks for annums and annums. There was a drawing of their world route, along with all of their usual stops. There were also notes on the three founders: Otorá, Balandri and Volare. Uno had been there with them and recorded all of their conversations on paper. In one of the exchanges, Uno tells Volare about the location of the nesting grounds of the Ilk. The book had handwritten letters scattered throughout, one of them was written by Volare. The letter was a series of notes, like a set of instructions on how to play a song. It was written in Ilken. Lupen read it, and saw that it was addressed to Uno...

Today the Verido found salvation. It is amazing to think that the solution lies with the giant desert walkers. Our collaboration will ensure both of our futures in this desert. I don't like to think about us, or them, falling into nothing. I made the foolish assumption that Ilk were beyond death, but their lives, like yours, are finite and

near-spent. I will keep my promise to you dear friend, we will care for them until the very end. Already, I've secured dealings with cities, they will provide teaweed, and *we* will carry items for them.

The world really is changing though, isn't it? Food is scarce. At least, it is for giants like the Ilk. You told me that there was little room for giants in this new world, but I do not believe it. I know you are tired, and that it is greedy of me to ask you to stay. I will do what I can for the Ilk, to spare you and your companion from this demanding task.

I trust this message reaches you safely, have a good rest my friend. When you see me next I'll be dust, so please, say hello to the wind that carries me anyway...

— Volare

Lupen's heart was racing. "Volare knew the Ilk were dying, Uno did too." The Verido continued to turn pages, finally arriving at the main story...

~

The Tale of Three

During an annum of terrible desert storms three Verido siblings, Otora, Balandri and Volare, took it upon themselves to save their loved ones from the hardships of the Soronan Desert. The eldest, Otora, proposed that they build a city, with thick walls to shield them from the weather. Such a wall would require too many resources—this detail worried Balandri. They would need to dig the earth, further damaging the desert.

Balandri, in turn, proposed to build a large sandfin that could keep the town moving so they could stay ahead of the weather. All places on this dust planet were dangerous at one point or another. After designing

this vessel they realized that it would not be possible to build. No one could help design one large enough to carry a small city. They considered a flotilla of smaller vessels too, but given their sizable population and lack of experience sandfinning, it seemed difficult.

One day, a tall stranger arrived at Volare's tent. The stranger had heard about their predicament. "I have an idea for you." The silver-eyed giant said. The next day, Volare announced to Otor and Balandri that there was one other option to consider. "We will walk." The others did not share their sibling's love of trekking on hot sand, but they followed Volare across the desert to a lonely mountain. They rested during the day, and traveled at night. Eventually, they reached a mountain, and went through a pass carved in its middle. On the other side they found three Ilk, grazing on bibiskiss and hampawoods. They appeared thin, and tired.

The giant told Volare that this was their main grazing ground. There were three Ilk, and three Verido siblings, nothing could be more perfect.

The Ilk were as tall as mountains. They had strong backs and legs, their feet were wide and gave them stability for walking on sand. In terrible storms, they could anchor their toes deep into the ground. They had long slender necks, a thin face with a set of curved horns.

The siblings spent annums learning about these giant beasts, on how best to approach them, and how to communicate. One day, the Ilk lowered their heads and invited Verido on their backs. Each befriended a different Ilk, and with their permission, built dwellings in the carapace that grew upon their spines.

Traveling on the back of Ilk ensured both their survival. The Verido were safe from the weather, and kept the Ilk healthy. Many worked at keeping parasites away, inspecting every inch of skin from head to toe for bruises,

and tending to them. One annum two Ilk became sick with a rare fungus, but the problem was diagnosed and the fungus eradicated. Verido could build anything using isilk and carapace shavings, materials endemic to the Ilk. Every annum the carapace thickness was measured, and the Verido would only ever harvest it if it had grown enough. Food and drink was harder to come by, but they found shroos, mosses, which contained water, and they found clever ways to harvest it. Overtime, they were able to grow bibiskiss, looberries and looma roots.

Otora, Balandri and Volare taught their children how to converse with the Ilk. A child from each mapa took on the role of Voice. The Veridos became a race of traveling merchants, craftspeople and inventors. They secured agreements with various cities, carrying provisions from village to village. They gave away their wares to people from Montore to Tiu'va, in exchange for feed for the Ilk. The desert wilds had grown thin, and could no longer sustain three Ilk, not without outside help.

~

“Wow.” Lupen said, eyeing the various drawings and notes in The Tale of Three. One drawing by Volare featured a rough design of the city on Vol's back, another tallied all the residents. Just as the Verido was reaching for another letter, the wind rose again...

“Sails up up up!” Eka bellowed, running to the foredeck to raise the headsail, tying off the line, and hurrying amidships to raise the main sail. Toronka started to shift forward, and as the wind continued to rise its twin keels cut through the dunes, sending sand flurries on deck.

Lupen hurried and put the book away to avoid getting sand lodged between its pages, but the wind caught one of the letters and sent it flying. Eka was there to catch it, and handed the sheet back over to Lupen. The Verido smiled, and secured the pile together, putting it away inside.

That evening, both took a seat on deck and watched the stars.

“You tired?” Eka asked Lupen.

“No, I can take the first watch.”

Eka nodded, and went inside to sleep. The woth was on deck, hiding behind a bulkhead from the wind.

“How’s your shift so far?” Lupen asked the woth.

The woth moved its antennae, not because it was replying to the question, but because it was busy working bits of sand out of them.

“Do you know what lies ahead Wik? A pass,” Lupen paused for dramatic effect, “Dorake’s pass.”

Dorake’s pass was an opening between two sets of mountains, the meeting of two great capes. In this area, the height of the surrounding mountains accelerated the wind.

The previous day, Nono had helped them plan their route to the Rupture on a map, and the Finiku explained that taking Dorake’s pass, although treacherous, was a shortcut and the best way to intercept the Ilk. The wind was usually strong in that area, but they had timed their departure for after the passing of a dry cold front, sandfinning on the trail end of the system. They knew it would take time before another would come trailing behind it. Nono had gone through the pass many times, unharmed, but countless unfortunate sandfins were buried in its blowing sands.

~

“How did you make it through safely all those times?”

Lupen had asked Nono.

“When the glass fall, sandfinner make sail small.
When sky turn yellow to brown, sandfinner put anchor
down.”

~

Nono had many more rhymes to memorize the signs of incoming bad weather, and how best to respond to them. Lupen remembers them. “When ring around kira, all gone is sawa...” The Verido said

aloud to the sand, the stars and the glowing skyrocks, “not today. Today sawa is with us.”

Toronka sandfinned through the darkness. The sails were well-balanced, and required little adjusting. Lupen would loosen or tighten the sheets as needed, skin black with pinny tar. It appeared as though the Verido had no arms, like the environment had swallowed them up. Lupen proceeded to making handprints everywhere, with one final print covering this face, which triggered uncontrollable laughter.

Eka awoke a few moments later, and climbed out of the cabin. “Time for sleep Lu!” But saying this, Eka noted that the Verido wasn’t in the cockpit. “Lu?” It was dark, but the sky was clear and the skyrock Retna illuminated the entire deck from bow to stern. No Lupen. The Wonder returned inside to search there, but that space too was devoid of Verido. Eka returned outside, eyes locking on the dim horizon line, wondering if maybe Lupen had fallen overboard. “Oh no... Lu!” Eka grabbed lines, ready to turn the sandfin around, but then heard laughing overhead. Lupen was perched at the top of the mast. Eka was relieved, and whistled in Ilken, the sound cutting through the wind. Lupen heard it, and came down, coming to meet Eka on deck.

“Beautiful sandfinning, eh?” Lupen said smiling, but then noticed Eka’s expression. “What is it?”

“Thought you’d fallen off.”

“Sorry if I scared you. It can’t happen though, I’ve got a tether and everything, *see?* With a good knot too.” A line encircled Lupen’s middle, and led back to the mast.

Eka’s eyes inspected the knot, and could see that it had been tied correctly, then noticed the dark hand print on Lupen’s face, “the mark of a true sandfinner,” saying this, one of Eka’s fingers traced around the print. “You looked at home up there Lu.”

Lupen nodded, “Yea. It’s like being on a much shorter Ilk, but having more control you know?” The Verido stared at the taut sails, hundreds of hampa strands working together, and thought it beautiful, elegant. “Balandri wanted our people to travel by sandfin. It

didn't make sense then, but *now...*"

"Mind's a-whirring!" Eka said, "I'm proud of you, y'know."

Lupen's cheeks reddened, but no one would see the subtle change under the low-light. This Verido leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on Eka's mouth, leaving a pinny-tar lip print behind, then unfastened the rope and tied it around Eka's middle. "I love you. Good sleepings!" Lupen said, before hurrying below in the cabin to sleep.

Eka smiled, hand lingering on the lip print. "Good sleepings lovely, lovely Lu blue."

A voice inside the cabin enumerated the skyrocks above, "Balavados, Encitris, Naxagorus, Liminik, Omoretus, Retna, Alpinin-sis..." And then this part of the world quieted. Toronka's voice resounded across the desert dunes, the hull creaked and groaned, pushing through sand and leaving a deep track behind. Dorake's pass lay ahead, a three-day sail away. For now, it remained a distant concern for Toronka and crew.

Lupen's logbook



Passari Tremblers are small, sand-dwelling avians. They've got long, thin bills, which they use to pick food through sand. They have a big, colorful head crest. They are rather skittish creatures. They prefer quiet areas, staying away from cities and most creatures.

Day 1*First sunrise*

Hello Logbook. Dorake's passage is a day away. Our progress is good, but slow. Toronka's sails hang from their ropes, as if asleep. Everything but my mind is still. I am impatient, unaccustomed to being dependent on weather for movement. The Ilk never had to wait for wind.

Earlier, I spotted the top leaves of a cactub off Toronka's stern. Plants like cactubs can survive almost anything, that is, unless they fall prey to a hunter. In calm weather plants emerge to take in moisture and light, but this leaves them vulnerable. Many of the desert perennials I've seen have scars, or have leaves or nubs missing. The desert leaves marks on us all.

I used to think I knew this land well. From up there, the world below looks quiet and barren, but there is so much life down here.

Most creatures live in the topmost layer of the sand dunes, and will only ever show themselves under specific weather conditions, like hespers. Hespers are born every ha'annums, but have very short lives. They're in constant flight, drifting in the breeze. They go where the wind takes them because they don't have limbs, or wings. I think I saw one floating above the mast yesterday. I climbed up to see it, but by the time I made it to the top it had already drifted out of sight.

There are reptavians flying around our vessel too, the sound of their leathery wings evident when the wind isn't blowing. I've never been good at identifying reptavians, but Eka can put a name to them straight away. Crested-hirudines. They are quick flyers, with red crests on their heads and bright green scales on their bellies. They always fly in tight groups, sweeping up together, twisting at great speed. I sat on deck a while to enjoy the show, gasping whenever the group narrowly avoided our mast.

In Volare, we had hololomimos. Small, bulgy-eyed reptavians that like to nest in houses. We didn't used to have them, we think they climbed aboard during one of our stops. They like it on the

Ilk because there is plenty of shroos to eat, but of course that was a problem because the food supply was limited. No one wants to harm the hololomimos, so we had volunteers looking for nests to move them back on land, but now Verido nests may also have to move onto land, it seems like.

Later, Eka & I spotted a group of yellow avians with forked tails. They stared at us, immobile. We stared back. We did this for a while, neither us or the avians wanted to lose the staring contest. But then the group, all at once, scattered into holes in the ground for shelter.

“Yay! We won!” I told Eka, but I understood the reason for their hurry. The wind was back.

Toronka creaked as it began to slide forward. I pulled in the sheets for extra power, and we started to glide.

The calm was over, it was time to fly again.

Second sunrise

Every midday, I sweep the sand from the deck, but there is always more of it coming. I clear it anyway. It’s become a routine, an activity I’ve come to enjoy. While I sweep, I look at the deck, I look at the lines, sails and blocks, to make sure all is fine.

When Eka gets up, we eat breakfast together. We still have loaves of muckwheat. I choked on a piece of purple bleen sausage this morning. I dipped it in mapple jam and it was like eating flames. Eka laughed, I wonder what *that* was about...

When the two suns are up, I hide in the shade and read. I finished reading Volare’s letters in *The Tale of Three*. Most letters are short messages between Volare and Uno, but there are also poems. I like them.

Eka is sitting at the bow, staring at far-away mountains. It is a nice day, and I hope it stays that way.

Having so much time to think is wonderful, but it also makes me realize how forgetful I am. I forgot to ask Renzo about the story of Aristollo. I am so distracted. Out here my eyes lock onto the horizon,

and thoughts that lie deep inside my brain bob to the surface. I like to latch onto one, to hold onto it for a long while to dissect it.

I wonder what Eka is thinking about now. I ask a lot, and fear I've asked too much already.

Yesterday, Eka was thinking about the mountain top. The green place. I think about it a lot too, and hope that I get to go again. There are plants there that I've never seen anywhere else. Sometimes I catch their scent in the air drifting from across the desert.

I prepared roasted plumpkins for midday. I scooped out the seeds and will leave them to dry on deck, weather permitting. The seeds are delicious, they are crunchy on the outside and gooey on the inside. I eat one, and toss one. A motivated traveler could re-trace our steps by following our trail of seeds. I hope that they grow into mature plumpkins, and form a long green line across the desert.

The mountains ahead are getting closer. A thick, yellow cloud is obscuring the top of the tallest peak. Nono said that a cloud like that indicated rain. Rain. I am excited, but also concerned because I remember something else Nono said, that it could mean severe localized weather. I'll keep an eye on it.

First sunset

It's Eka's turn to prepare food. We had a dinner of bonan chips with a looma root stew. Because Bala was in Renate, we were able to get some of my favorite produce. We now have a basket-full of looma roots and shroos. Wiktopher ate some of the leftover chip crumbs, our friend is greatly benefiting from us being messy eaters it seems. The galley floor was licked clean.

Our woth friend likes to walk up and down the side of the mast. The wind is a bit stronger now, and Wik appears unaffected.

The cloud on the mountain ahead is getting puffier. Eka and I prepared the storm anchor. Neither of us have ever used it before. We did not experience severe weather on our passage to Tiptuta on Etyl. Nono explained how to set it up during one of Toronka's test runs. It was easy. All we had to do was to pull the anchor out of

its locker, and attach a long rope to it. Then, we had to douse the sails, lash them down and throw the anchor off the bow, tying the bitter end to a strong point on deck. I practice my knots to make sure I can do them well, even in stressful conditions.

Eka is a fast learner, and always gets everything right on the first try. I sometimes wish I was the same.

Second sunset

The dark shifts were easy because the wind left us again. I walked around the deck reciting Volare's poems from memory, but was careful not to wake Eka.

The last poem I learned, goes like this:

*The Skyrocks alight,
Golden sands mask their color,
The dark draws a path.*

I know there are rules for poetry, I don't know them, but I think I will try to write some of my own. Levi taught me how to write. We'd practice on flat bits of carapace, dipping our fingers in looberry syrup to use as ink.

Volare's writing has an illustrative quality to it, while mine is crooked and clumsy. Not two letters are even. Volare's As look the same throughout the text. I can see that this is my problem, my letters aren't always the same. I know what beautiful letters look like, but even if I see them in my mind I can't reproduce them. Sometimes my letters shrink, or grow big, all in one word. Eka said that with practice, I will be able to match the image in my head. I hope that's true.

Not a single creature in sight. Strange.

Day 2

First sunrise

I woke up to a roaring sound. The wind had risen, and the entire cabin was shaking. The yukwood hull creaked, as if the walls were

afraid. There was sand inside the cabin, covering the stairs and floor near the entrance. The hatch was shut, but sand had found its way inside. I got up, looked outside and found no horizon. I slipped on a pair of goggles and a scarf, and followed Eka's tether to the bow, glad to find my companion there, safe and sound.

All of the sails were down, and I saw a line extending out into the sand. The line was taut, we were riding on our storm anchor. Eka too wore goggles and a scarf, we stared at the rope together.

Right now all creatures are hiding in their respective shelters, and we ought to do the same. Nono had told us that if there weren't small avians around, that it was a sign that the weather was deteriorating. We should have seen the signs, a barren land is a portent of disaster.

When we were certain that Toronka wasn't going to blow away, we retreated back inside and prepared some food. Eka explained that the wind had risen fast, and threatened to turn us over.

Second sunrise

Eka and I took turns shoveling sand from the deck. The wind was still screaming, and became more ferocious as the day warmed. Erring on the side of caution, we decided to throw another anchor off the bow. If our main anchor failed, then we'd have the second one to rely on.

I have no appetite. As usual, Eka doesn't share my fears. I am glad.

First sunset

Eka is Toronka's time keeper, flipping the sand timer every time it gets empty. The sandstorm makes it difficult to see the position of the two suns, and so with the timer we know how much time has passed. Knowing is both a comfort, and a source of worry.

The accumulating sand is beginning to bury us. I don't know how we'll be able to get the anchors out. We went out often on deck today to push the sand off from the bow, but the wind brought more back. I wonder if it would not have been better to run with the weather, but I remember Nono saying that running in heavy winds

might result in Toronka rolling sideways, or face first. Few sandfins could recover from such an ordeal. I bet that's how this area got its reputation of being a sandfin graveyard.

Many shovel-fulls later, I still can't eat anything. My whole body is on alert, putting aside regular processes. Hunger doesn't happen under stress, nor is thirst.

Second sunset

Both of us stayed awake, the noise outside makes it difficult to sleep. We spend time stuffing bits of fabric into openings, to try and keep the sand out, but it *always* finds a way in.

The mainsail got loose. We could hear it shaking the entire rig. The sail was whipping violently above our heads. The two of us went out to try and lash it back down. Opening the hatch sent a flurry of grains below. We closed it tight, tied our tethers, and felt our way forward, moving towards the mast. The wind was much stronger now, and the sand scratched our exposed skin. We'd noticed that the rocks in the area were all smooth, and now we know why.

I had to re-tie the scarf many times, but the wind managed to loosen my scarf all the way, I could feel sand funneling inside my nostrils and into my throat. I plugged my nose with one hand while Eka rushed over to fasten the knot again. I coughed and wheezed. My throat was burning for a long time after that.

We tied the boom down again and wrestled the mainsail in. We folded it down in sections, with Eka adding rope as we went along. I trust Eka's knots more than my own. It doesn't look as though the sail was damaged.

Once everything was lashed down well we hurried back inside. I am tired now, but I don't know if I'll be able to sleep today.

Day 3

First sunrise

The storm abated, and it started to rain. A gentle, cool rain. We sat outside for a long while, letting it clear the sand from our clothes.

It helped strip the sand from the deck too. Now that the wind is down, we can see plants coming out of hiding, their leaves fanning out. The ground is covered in green now, resembling Zucca's Oasis. Nono told us that this place had many hidden waterstone caverns, but no one ever stayed here long enough to uncover them, the area was just too dangerous.

After the rain subsided, we began freeing Toronka from the enormous sand bank that had engulfed it. The whole front of the bow disappeared under a thick, and heavy yellow canopy. I understand now why Nono insisted on us carrying a pair of heavy shovels. After a few horos of digging I found my appetite again, I ate half of a muckwheat loaf.

Second sunrise

The bow is almost free, but we still have to retrieve the two anchors. Toronka has a drum that we can wrap the anchor line around. It has a hole at the top, where we can insert a handle to hoist them back up. I tried to use it but could not do it, there was still too much sand. We need to continue digging.

We keep finding sand inside the cabin, under floorboards, in cups, and even in the pages of Volare's book.

First sunset

We did it. We've cleared the obstructions away, and were able to raise both anchors. Our timing couldn't have been better, because the wind is rising. We are both exhausted though, but sleep will have to come later. I volunteered for the first watch. Eka went below to rest. I can taste sleep in my mouth. Whenever I feel sleep coming I eat a slice of chililly, the sting is enough to keep me awake for a while.

The sails are full, we are heading through Dorake's pass under clear skies.

While in the pass, I saw masts buried in the sand, broken, splintered. I placed my hand over my chest as Toronka ghosted by them. Our teacher assured us that if we kept our eyes on the horizon, that

if we smelled the air, and that if we listened to sawa and the yorala well, we would know that bad weather was coming. 'If sky turn yellow to brown, sandfinner take all sail down.' Nono had said that when you go through Dorake's pass, you make a bet with yourself, that you've understood the signs in the sky, in the clouds and in the air. If you've missed any, then things might not end well for you. Reading the weather is difficult though. The effect of wind on an area depends on topography and on temperature. They interact with one another, and when you think you've understood everything, then a new element is thrown into the mix and new interactions arise. To the sandfinner who doesn't understand this complex network of interactions, this makes nature appear fickle, and mean.

My people are subject to superstition. I am too. I feel good when a series of random actions produces a favorable result. Wiggle your ears while looking at the suns while singing, it makes the wind return. Really, it works. Try it.

It is silly. I know it is, and it is laughable that I continue despite knowing this. Sometimes we need rituals. We need to believe that there is someone responsible for the weather, or lack of it, and that we have power over it. Shouting at the desert while becalmed did little to appease my anger. It is just nature being nature, it buries bodies and vessels without prejudice.

I thought about the graves, the ones that are not marked by masts. It is possible that we have sandfined over many of those since our voyage began. If it hadn't been for Uno, I too would be there.

Have a good rest fellow travelers. You are now the sand that carries our vessel onward. One day I will be sand too.

Second sunset

We made it through the pass in good weather. After Eka and I traded places I slept long, and hard. It was the best sleep I've ever had. Now, Encela and Protus are out, they light our way towards the Rupture. If this wind keeps up, and our navigation is correct, we will be there the day after tomorrow. We have Etyl's compass to

orient ourselves, the needle to yora'mu points behind us.

I am nervous. I don't know what I'll do when we find Vol, and I'm not sure what to do if we don't. I've resolved to put it out of my head until I see Vol, and by then I'll be too busy to worry.

Growing up, I remember Levi putting my ear to the ground so I could hear Vol's heartbeat, resonating through its thick carapace. My mapa said it was the most important sound in the world. Now I think I understand why my mapa said this. Vol's heartbeat was a way to measure its health, historically for our people it was also a way to measure the passing of time, but it also served to measure the time we had left on its back, the sound of a thread leaving its spindle.

Day 4

First sunrise

The wind is still with us, but we are the only ones out there. We are in the Saa'ta Ash Plains, it is easy to tell because the ground is no longer yellow. The desert is black, inverted. I've never seen anything like it.

I imagined that it would be a scary place, the air thick with dread, but it is pleasant. There is life here too. The area is full of sooty agocets. Small, wispy, elongated creatures that swim in the black sand. We've had many dive aboard, startled by our passing. When they land on deck they twist and shimmy their bodies until they find the edge of the vessel, and fall off again. In doing so, they leave little sooty trails everywhere. We passed through an area that was teeming with them earlier, they exploded out of the ground and covered the deck in black dust. No amount of cleaning could rid the deck of all this soot. Toronka was now a true creature of the Saa'ta Ash Plains, a moving shadow.

We also saw larger agocets too, rising out of the sand in the distance. Some measured up to 40 mirits, four times Toronka's length. They would launch themselves up, balancing on their translucent flukes for a moment before diving back into the sand. They stayed

far away, uninterested.

Second sunrise

Hello precious logbook, this is Eka. I thought I would write because Lu is too busy trimming sails and steering Toronka. We've found tracks in the sand, fresh tracks that have not yet been covered with sand. I do not think they belong to Vol, it belongs to some other big thing.

The wind is weak, affecting our speed. We were approaching rapidly at first, but this decreasing wind sure has bad timing.

Lu needs me up on deck. We are going to have to work hard to catch up. Good day to you dearest logbook.

The Big Dark



Sooty agocets are small agocets that live in the sand, their fins pushing them through grains with ease. They like to leap out of the sand and to glide to evade sand-dwelling predators, although while in flight, they are weak to avians and reptavians. Because their bodies match the sand, it is difficult for predators to see them from overhead.

Toronka lay at the meeting point between two deep chasms extending far into the black desert.

“This isn’t on the map,” Lupen said. “Leonin must have made a mistake.”

Eka shrugged, “the Rupture is long, and it’s possible that this particular part wasn’t there until recently. It is difficult to map a changing world Lu.”

Lupen wondered if leaving Hush in Renate had been wise, they could have continued on foot together. This part of the Rupture was too wide to gap by foot, but would be possible to cross with a hyroo.

“Come. We’ll sail back and find a way around.” Eka motioned for Lupen to climb back aboard.

“We won’t get there in time.”

“Don’t worry.”

In silence, they raised the sails, turned the sandfin around, and followed the fissure.

The bow cut through the ground, leaving a deep groove behind. The ride wasn’t a merry one, but their mood lightened once they found a way of contouring the gap. Toronka skirted by the dizzying depth present on both sides.

A chart with lines marking their progress lay on the saloon table. Lupen counted up all of the moments Toronka was becalmed, and began to doubt whether they could arrive at the Rupture before Vol.

They labored all day to ensure that the sandfin moved at top speed. “Never seen a sandfin move so fast!” Eka said, hand reaching for the sandtimer to flip it once more. “Fourth flip since second sunrise,” Eka said aloud so Lupen would hear, jotting it down in their logbook.

Eka was at the top of the mast, red hair resembling a lively fire, feet resting on one of the battens of their large, fan-shaped sail. Lupen imagined hundreds of tiny hands with interlocked fingers catching wind and pulling Toronka towards its goal.

The Rupture began to widen, and gradually it became difficult to

see the other side. Leonin's map was more accurate now. This part of the land had stayed the same, Lupen thought.

A curious updraft came from the chasm. It swirled skywards and powered their sails, carrying shoals of tiny sooty agocets, too small to fight the wind. Lupen noted that the shoal gave shape and texture to the wind, revealing its invisible movement.

Lupen's gut was in knots, making it hard to breathe. "We should have seen Vol already."

Eka pointed to a figure sitting at the edge of the chasm, legs dangling in the void.

"Someone! Ahead!"

Lupen tried to make out the shape of the figure in the distance. When the shape became more discernible, Lupen knew who this was. Eka released all sails, letting them flap in the wind, Toronka's hull groaned and came to a full stop.

The figure on the edge looked at them, admiring the vessel. Uno's silver eyes had lost their former radiance and now resembled a piece of unpolished metal. "Beautiful." Uno said, blinking slowly. Every blink took enormous effort, the urge to remain shut growing with every passing second.

Lupen raced to Uno's side, but before the Verido could say anything Uno spoke up.

"Sit."

Lupen was about to protest but Uno said it again, in a more commanding tone.

"Sit."

"What? No! I've *got* to save my people!" Lupen cried.

"They are safe," Uno said, slowly, "they stepped off Vol in Tiputa a few days ago." Uno's large hand patted the ground, inviting the Verido to sit down. "*Surely* you don't think Vol would have taken them along..."

Lupen blinked, trying to process all this information. "What about the people on Bala, and Oto?"

"Any moment now, they too will step off."

Lupen's chest felt warm, heart blazing bright fueled by thoughts

of friends. “But Vol...”

“Is ready to die.” Uno said, heels rubbing against the side of the cliff, disturbing bits of rock and sending them tumbling in the dark. “Your friend will be glad that you are here.”

Vol had not arrived yet.

At that moment the long days of exhausting sandfinning caught up with Lupen. The Verido slumped forward, taking a breath, and focusing on that for a while. Nothing else mattered in this short intermission between moments. Lupen sat beside Uno.

“They’re all safe...” Lupen said, relieved. The hard part lay ahead.

Uno spotted Eka’s silhouette aboard Toronka, busy folding sails. Once their vessel was secure, Eka moved to Toronka’s bow and a pair of red eyes found the giant. Uno rose. Eka raced over to meet the tall figure, arms locking around Uno’s leg. The giant bent down again, and put a hand on the sand floor, palm side up. Eka moved onto it and ran up to grab Uno’s cheeks, caressing them gently.

Both laughed, and Uno remembered how to smile from horizon to horizon. They whispered softly to each other for a long while after.

Lupen was too tired to eavesdrop, but a curious jealousy was settling in...

Eka glanced down at Lupen then, noticing the Verido’s expression. “Caught the gloom bug Lu?”

“Yea,” Lupen said, turning a deep shade of red, trying to appear less morose, “but don’t mind me. You can keep talking with Uno. I mean, you two probably have a lot of important things to say to each other...”

“Oh yes yes, *very* important things to talk about!” Eka said, nodding rapidly.

“Nothing and nonsense, really,” Uno wheezed, “Eka was telling me of a good recipe for looma root bread.”

“Uno! You *wound* me! Bread could *never* be nonsense!” Eka said, outraged.

Lupen laughed.

They sat together on the edge of the Rupture. Eka prepared toasted muckwheat groat tea for everyone. Lupen and Eka had a cup, and Uno had the kettle. The giant didn't carry books, or food, or a tent, and Kit wasn't here either.

In the distance they watched groups of people gathering at various points to witness A Leap. They heard songs in the wind, cheery notes that clung to the air, bouncing off the chasm walls.

Lupen was growing quite fond of this place. Sooty agocets would sometimes fly off the edge of the plateau and into the void, disappearing into the darkening dark before emerging back out again. Many came to brush by Uno's large feet, their wispy bodies caressing the toes, and darting away when one of them moved, only to return again later, as if playing a game of dare. The agocets liked playing with Uno's toes, so much that now every digit had a small black dusty cap. The people attending a Leaping Day paid them no mind, they were far, and focused on their loved ones. Lupen was certain that they could see Uno from where they were, given the giant's size, but again, their eyes and minds were set on little things today, little things that mattered a whole lot.

Lupen wondered if this is how Uno was able to move unnoticed through this world. Small people were as blind to big things as this Verido had once been blind to the tiny birds and plants on the desert floor. Uno was like the wind, the desert and the clouds, a constant presence that all took for granted, touching everyone and everything.

Uno's tired gaze was fixed on the inscrutable chasm.

"Are you going to sleep soon?" Lupen asked.

"Yes."

"So, what *are* you waiting for?"

The silver-eyed giant breathed again, and slowly turned to look behind. Lupen did the same, and then caught sight of a large dark shape in the horizon growing, and growing. Vol was coming. The wind blew the sand up around them, as if an invisible figure with a giant broom was clearing the dust off a path leading to the chasm.

Lupen thought of Volare, its plants, its people, and wanted nothing more than to walk through the town square again, to go pick shroos at Vol's Nape. The sound of Lupen's heartbeat grew louder as Vol approached.

Step. Ba-dum, Ba-dum, Ba-dum.

Step. Ba-dum, Ba-dum, Ba-dum.

Step.

The Ilk's pace quickened as it neared them. Everyone got up. Uno began to whistle, as loud, and as natural as any Voice would. Eka joined in the singing. Lupen too wanted to contribute, but couldn't, swallowing hard, nearly choking, determined to give Vol a proper farewell.

Lupen's voice rose, and rose, subduing all other noise in the area. Its volume was so great, that all in the area stopped to listen.

Vol followed the sound, one of its hoofs landed near them, plunging deep into the sand. Uno caressed its ankle. "You'll find the Balandrians in Renate, and the Otorans in Montore," Uno said.

"Wait. You're not coming with us?" Lupen stammered, but Eka gripped the Verido's arm.

"Uno's going to sleep."

"How could anyone sleep down *there...*" Lupen thought of the mountain top, and thought it infinitely better.

"Kit is waiting for me," Uno said, weakly. The giant eyed Lupen fondly, and without another word, began to go down the cliff, inviting the Ilk to follow.

Eka smiled, and blew a kiss. Lupen was smiling too, but it was blurred by tears. This would be their last ever encounter.

"Aristollo and Uno traveled together, didn't they?" Lupen asked Eka.

Eka nodded, eyes still on Uno. "For many, many annums. They had a lot of fun together."

Vol put a leg forward into the crevasse as if expecting to step on firm ground, and began to fall...

Fall.

Fall.

Fall.

Lupen let out a cry. Eka's hold on the Verido's hand tightened. They stared as Vol tumbled head first into the abyss. Uno's yellow cape too was gradually absorbed by dark. Vol began to sing as it fell. The Rupture amplified the sound, like a great big orchestra played at the bottom of the chasm. The whole area rumbled, dust rose from the walls as its legs scraped the edges, and then it was gone. Uno too was gone, swallowed by the dust cloud.

Lupen continued to whistle, more loudly, and more clearly than ever. The song was about the end of an era, of the splendor of a world inhabited by giants. Eka listened.

The two looked down, having quiet thoughts. They stayed like this a while, hand in hand, eyes fixed on the dark expanse.

"Tiputa..." Lupen said aloud then, "we're going to Tiputa."

Eka nodded. "Plot a course! Captain oh captain!"

"We need supplies." Lupen said, voice clearing as the weight of the day began to lift like morning fog.

"Actually, we'll stop by Renate first. Then, we're going to Tiputa," Lupen said, lips curling into a slight grin, not yet able to form a full smile, eager to see all their friends again.

"Aye aye!" Eka shouted, shooting upright, hands in the air.

Lupen imagined Balandrians, Volarians and Otorans down here in the desert. Suddenly, the Verido felt that there was an infinite amount of time in the world. "Then after that, we'll go back to Montore for some babam cake and tea. Not the food patch kind."

"Oh yes, yes, that sounds good!" Eka exclaimed, mouth watering.

Wiktopher landed on Toronka's mast, beating its wings wildly, watching as the rest of the crew climbed aboard.

Lupen took hold of the tiller. "Let's go sandfinning."

— **Owari, the end** —

Lexicon

Locations

Andenuis

A mountainous ridge housing the city of Irideri, the realm of the Iridi.

Ash plains

Most think that the Ash Plains is a dead zone, where little grows and nothing lives. The land is covered with black sands and salt. Terrible storms brew there. It is feared by many sandfinners because of its numerous chasms, many have been charted, but new cracks keep forming.

Central rim

A belt of semi-arable land that circles the planet. Most of the water-stone wells are situated in this area, others can be found elsewhere but may be further apart and more difficult to locate.

Colonies

During the raids, the Iridi established colonies in far-away camps, used as relief stations for soldiers, but also as temporary camps for captives. These stations were equidistant, getting from one to the next in cover of darkness was possible — a requirement for Iridi soldiers. Most of the camps were evacuated when the raidings ceased, but rumor spread that Bao left two standing. These settlements were built over mines, known for their abundance of chloromyce shroos.

Dorake's passage

Dorake's passage is a long pass just yora'ta of the Andenuis Mountain ridge, a pass that has claimed many sandfinners over the annus.

Edonor

The birthplace of Orin the tailor, and their grandmapa Nok. Edonor is a modern city, a fortress, made this way to keep out the Iridi soldiers during the raids. It is now inhabited by a mixture of Finiku, Terins and Aodals.

Irideri

The capital of the Iridi people. The city is encircled by the ridge belt of the Andenuis. The city is exposed to light, but connects to numerous passes that lead inside the mountain itself.

Alkarawin

A library in Irideri, consisting of books written by its habitants only, with hand-made books.

Kippu

A Finiku road-side town of the Soronan desert.

Ministe

The Terin capital, famous for its lush gardens. Ministe was the main exporter of fruits and vegetables, and its habitants often went on long pilgrimages to other cities to help them create their own green spaces. The pilgrimages and the exports stopped when the Iridi attacked the city, taking all of its workforce to work in the Irideri mines.

Montore

Situated on the Central Rim, it is one of the largest cities of the land, second only to Edonor. It is known for its extravagances, for being technologically advanced, with a giant wind-powered cog generating power for the city. Foodpatches are prevalent here, and is the main source of nutrition. Coin was also invented here, to simplify exchanges. Montore is the residence of the Grand Leader Monty.

Renate

Renate is a place of trade that started small, but that has evolved into a massive permanent tent city. Many sought shelter there after the Iridi Raids of Moera.

Rupture

The Rupture is a place of passing. It is a deep chasm located in the Yora'ta Ash Plains. The dying, and the sick, accompanied by family, journey there to take their Leap.

Soronan desert

The Soronan Desert is a vast desert wilderness stretching over the Central Rim and the yora'mu and yora'ta plains. It is a continuous body of sand which occupies most of the planet.

Yora'ta dust plains

A region of flat lands which encircles the planet, and where little grows. Many sandfinners travel through here to make quick passages to other areas. Since the land has no mountains, the wind screams through unhindered.

Suvalba Sanctuary

After the fall of Ministe, a group of Terins created the sanctuary to provide a safe haven for growing children. It became a seed repository for all the plants in the Soronan desert.

The Ear

Where the Voice stands atop the head when speaking to an Ilk. The short form of 'The Ear of the Ilk'.

Tiputa

A one road town in the Soronan desert, a popular provisioning spot inhabited by a handful of tradespeople.

Volare

One of three cities, built on the back of the Ilk Vol. Volare is also the name of one of the founders of the three cities, the ones who befriended the desert walkers, and that first settled on the Ilk. Lupen and Mago are direct descendants of Volare, which earns them the right to be the Voice of Volare.

Characters

Averet

A guard of the city of Montore. Averet longs for bigger things in life, but never makes the effort to move towards that goal and complains of it constantly.

Bao

The second monarch of the Iridi, also known as Bao The Bright. Bao was stern, but just. This leader thought it necessary to put a stop to the raids, and closed the kingdom of Irideri to the world.

Bariton

The current caretaker of a puzzle museum in Irideri, a former colleague of Hori. Bariton is clever and witty, and likes to speak their mind, but few in Irideri care to lend them their ears.

Bou

Child of Orin. Bou lives in the road-town of Tiputa. Bou is a mechanic, they have a shop in the village and tend to the repairs needed by travelers.

Demeri

The Light of Lights in Irideri. Demeri is a stern leader, feared by all.

Dot

A Finiku and representative of the Great Leader Monty. Dot addresses crowds in Monty's name, and has many grand plans for the city of Montore.

Enji

Enji is the head guard of the Court of Light in Irideri. Enji was once friend to Renzo, they enjoyed playing Hako together.

Eka

A round-eared creature with red hair that Lupin awoke atop a nameless mountain. Eka is loudspoken, and knows a lot about the world.

Etyl

A famous Finiku sandfinner, known the world over for having crossed the whole of the land alone by sandfin. Etyl is grandmapa to Nono.

Gree

An old acquaintance of Nono, who cares a lot for coins and titles. Gree is the captain of Beobug II.

Hori

A skilled and joke-prone puzzlemaker in Irideri, mapa to Noko, now deceased after a terrible accident in the city's foundry.

Hush

A hyroo and friend of Eka, and the one that carries the two travelers across the desert plains. Hush has an enormous appetite.

Kit

A hyroo and friend of Uno. Kit is very large and has spots all over its fur coat.

Klev

Klev is the appointed Voice of the Balandri Ilk. Klev is tall, confident and out-going, no other Voice steps off the Ilk when it arrives at a new town.

Kurono

The young heir to the throne of Irideri, child to Demeri. Kurono is very good at solving puzzles.

Kuzi

A resident of Montore, who has a knack for getting into trouble. Kuzi is addicted to Kavava, and has difficulty functioning in the real world.

Laggra

Levi's mapa, the one who built the family home and that helped to create the safety line system from the Ilk's back to the top of its head.

Laris

A frail-bodied refugee who has little hope in the world.

Levi

Lupen's mapa, now deceased. Levi was stricken with an impairment that involves a progressive loss of language, behavior and executive functions in the end. Levi's work as Hand of the Ilk saved Vol from a major parasitical infection many years ago, one that threatened the creature's digestive system.

Lupen

A Verido in the running to become Voice of Volare. Lupen is a curious, caring creature, but hates being alone.

Mago

Child of Armyn, in the running to become Voice of Volare, and also cousin and best friend to Lupen. Mago has a way of being good at everything.

Maka

Maka is the unofficial leader of the city of Renate. A kind person, trusted by all. Maka is a skilled metal-worker, and mentor to Renzo.

Maliss

The former head of the Volare nursery, responsible for ensuring that the gowing young are healthy, and for keeping the population on the Ilk in balance.

Leonin

A cartographer based in Renate. Leonin has traveled all around the Sononan desert to map it. Passing travelers often stop by to communicate noteworthy changes, which Leonin appends to the main map displayed outside their tent, or to request changes to their own maps.

Moera

Moera, known as The Luminary, and The First Light, is the first ruler of the Iridi people. Blinded and disfigured by an accident, Moera announced that the city would live under the light of the chloromyce shroos alone, and brought the Iridi people into an age of perpetual darkness.

Monty

Grand leader of the city of Montore. Monty is a genius and inventor who has propelled Montore to fame, with such inventions as the great cog and foodpatches.

Nok

Grandmapa of Orin, a renowned tailor from the town of Edonor.

Noko

The child of Hori who died at a young age.

Nono

A proud, righteous, stubborn, and skilled sandfinner. Nono is captain to Etyl, a yellow-hulled sandfin. Nono has skilled hands, and can repair any part of a sandfin.

Orin

Orin is the child of Nok and a grandmapa to Bou. Orin is a skilled tailor, trained by their mapa, both worked in their workshop in Edonor. Orin loves fine fabric, and loves to make risqué items, using bright colours and complex patterns.

Ponopo

Nono's dependable messenger woth. Ponopo knows the whole of the land, and can deliver messages anywhere.

Renzo

A former guard in the Court of Light, now a metalworker studying under Maka in Renate. Renzo uses the derogatory name Iri while in Renate.

Rosmus

A friend to Lupen who used to live in the city of Volare. Rosmus left the city a few annums ago to become a traveling potter.

Ten

An Iri, servant to Kurono in the city of Irideri. Iri was given the name Ten by Kurono.

Uno

A generous giant, who travels with a hyroo named Kit. Not much is known of this being, but it is thought that Uno has been around for a long time.

Vol

Vol is the nickname of the Ilk of Volare. Vol has another name, but it is long and few can pronounce it.

Waldek

A clever leafhound and resident of Zucca's oasis, serving as guide to Lupen and Eka.

Wiktopher

A messenger woth, friend to Lupen and Eka. Wiktopher is also the name of someone that Eka knew and traveled with, a long time ago.

Zucca

A Terin and caretaker of a hidden oasis in the desert. Known by many, Zucca has a reputation for being a grouch. This Terin has much knowledge when it comes to gardening, but is reluctant to share it.

Fauna

Aodal

There are many Aodals in the Soronan desert. They are tall, and have small pointed ears, their skin is brown and their hair comes in a variety of browns and blacks. Their faces are relatively flat, and round, with thin eyes. They live primarily in cities like Montore and Edonor, but are also found in Renate.

Crested-hirudines

Crested-hirudines are reptavians with a wide range, spanning the entire Soronan Desert. Their head crest is bright red and their body scales are blue, shifting to bright green at the throat. They are recognizable by their quick jerky flight. They are sociable reptavians, a dozen to many hundred pairs will nest close together. The nests are in tunnels in the sand. Crested-hirudines are very common, they eat almost anything, but they enjoy looberry fruits the most.

Durdle

Shy creatures that like to retreat within their shells, they move very slowly and sleep for most of the day.

False-mosslings

Insects that mimic mosslings, but that have curvy antennae. Unlike the insect that they mimic, they like lemilim grass, and hate mepperpint.

Finiku

Finiku people are skilled, dextrous, able to make precise repairs. They are short, pot-bellied, with long droopy ears, and large wet globulous eyes. Their skin is tan, their faces round and flat. They love to drink, every household produces their own bonan wine.

Floater

A round floating creature that changes color depending on its mood. It is orange when normal, red when angry, and yellow when confused. They have a set of tiny wings on their sides, tiny black dots for eyes and a slit for a mouth. They live in small groups, and love sweet grass. If threatened, the creature will throw itself upon an enemy, its skin is like goo and stick to its victims. The skin can become as hot as hot coals, prolonged exposure can kill.

Hesper

Hesperi bloom every ha'annum, but most people never see them. They remain in constant flight, soaring on the wind. It is thought that they have short lives, and that they regress to a polyp stage into the earth, to bloom again at a later time. Hesperi are thought to be immortal.

Hololomimo

Hololomimos are small reptavians without tails, with big mouths and red eyes. They have furry yellow and orange bodies and scaly heads. They have a small wing span, permitting them to fly, but they spend most of their time crawling on ceilings and walls. Their thin winged arms are topped with hook-like fingers that permit all sorts of acrobatics. Hololomimos used to live on nests in mountains, but have adapted to living in constructed city dwellings. They primarily feed on shroos.

Hyroo

Hyroos are large creatures with big parabolic ears, and strong hind legs. They have sand-coloured fur, with darker spots on their bodies. Their snouts are large, they can smell and hear things from far, far away. These beasts are known for being able to run and jump

long distances with little effort. They grow in moist environments, although they are thought to be extinct...

Ilk

The Ilks or The giant walkers of the Soronan desert. They walk around the planet all annum long. They have long necks, narrow chests, heavy pointed tails, carapaces and a collection of hairs on their nape, throats and shoulders. Theri coat is a dark shade of blue, red or green. There are three Ilk in existence: Otorá, Balandri and Volare (named after the three Verido founders). Each Ilk bears a city on its back, its inhabitants are mostly self-sufficient, but rely on outside help to feed the Ilk because of its immense appetite, and size.

To communicate with each other, Ilk produce low-frequency vocalizations at high amplitudes such that they couple with the ground and travel along the surface of the desert. Far away Ilk are able to pick up these seismic signals, these vibrations can be detected by the skin of an Ilk's feet, which relay the resonant vibrations. Their large size permits great propagation range.

Imperia

Imperias are considered to be some of the largest flying reptavians. They have the largest wingspan, which may reach up to 39 mirits. They fly like soaring avians, keeping their wings stretched and rarely flapping. They have long, strong beaks, that are narrow and widen at the end. Their body is grey and white, but their heads and beak are yellow and black. They primarily eat cactubs, effectively paralyzing them by clapping their wings. Like Ilk, these creatures are more and more rare.

Iridi

The Iridi reside within the protective ridge of the Andenuis in the city of Irideri. They revere the light of the chloromyce shroos, their

very way of life is centered around the harvesting and ingesting of this shroo. Like the chloromyce, they live and operate in the dark, and sleep during the day. Once Aodals, ingesting the shroos have caused them to become sensitive to light. The entire realm is lit with chloromyce, especially the reigning Light of Lights who wears them.

Leafhound

Leafhounds are orange, leaf-tailed and have a set of thick antennae on their heads. They live amongst Terins, there are less of them now because of the events in Ministe and Suvalba. They guard nurseries and fields of plants, keeping them safe, while checking on their health.

Mossling

Pale insects that like to burrow inside fresh produce, making homes of them. Their presence in the fruit causes them to rot, many farmers despise them for it. They hate lemilim grass, planting some near other produce helps to keep them at bay.

Mudbears

Tiny little insects that burrow into waterstones, they ooze a substance that can be very poisonous.

Papilion

Papilions are tiny fuzzy creatures, that have no visible limbs or features. They travel with the wind and in the hairs of passing habitants of the Soronan desert. It is said that when they find suitable soil, they burrow deep, and later sprout into Hespers. A famous expression makes use of these creatures: ‘having papilions in your throat’, means being kept from speaking due to anxiety.

Pomparu

A creature, feared by all, because of its horrid stink. Pomparu are plump, pale, six-legged creatures, with colored spots. They are drawn to strong-smelling items. The word 'pomparu' is sometimes used as an insult.

Seshell krab

Seshell krabs are pearly white creatures with a shell decoration that resembles a face. They are now near-extinct, changes in weather have caused many to die. Their disintegrating shells helped form waterstones.

Snakadil

A type of small reptavian that moves just under the top layer of sand. When surprised, snakadil emerge and suffocate their victims.

Sooty agocet

Sooty agocets are small agocets that live in the sand. They're often seen halfway buried in the sand, with their heads sticking out. Their bodies are black, and they're only found in the Ash Plains.

They like to leap out of the sand and to glide through the air to evade sand-dwelling predators, although while in flight, they are weak to avians and reptavians. Because their bodies match the color of the sand in the Ash Plains, it is difficult for predators to see them from overhead. They eat smaller agocets and tiny organisms hidden in the sand.

Terin

Terins are growers and carers, they have green thumbs and can make any garden and population healthy. Their numbers are fewer these days, given the Iridi raids. They have dark skin, and very bright

eyes. They have thick forearms, fingers and legs, and have two-toed feet.

Vennec

Vennecs are large, humpbacked, furry beasts with thin snouts, large pointy ears and a long slender neck. Their ears are big to better dissipate heat. They are often used to pull heavy carts, because they are very strong and can walk a long time without being hungry or thirsty. Vennec carry water in their humps and store grains in their cheeks.

Verido

Verido are traveling merchants living on the backs of Ilk. They are divided onto three Ilks: Oto, Bala, and Vol, and the colored patterns on their bodies reflect this. Verido have sand-colored hair, and flute-like ears that stick out horizontally. They rarely leave the back of their Ilk because of landsickness.

Woth

Messenger woths are small but strong creatures. They have excellent memories, and can travel long distances. Many use them as a means of sending messages to other cities. They can carry items many times their own weight.

Flora**Babam**

A starchy tuber, pink on the inside, that softens when cooked. Babam is nutrient-rich, and grows everywhere.

Banabo

A tall, tree-like plant. Its trunk is wide, dense and it is often used as a material to build houses and other hard structures. Its top leaves are often used as brooms and to weave decorative items.

Bibiskiss

A purple flowery herb that is often infused to make tea. When brewed, the color leeches into the drink.

Bobonion

A spicy octagonal vegetable, enveloped in a thick black rind. The inside is soft, and can be scooped out with a tool. Bobonion taste just as strong as they smell.

Bonan

A berry with soft flesh rich in starch and covered with a rind, which may be orange or purple when ripe. The seeds are roasted and brewed for tea, or eaten as a snack. Finiku love to make wine with it. The rind of the berry is used to make plates, and other recipients for cooking.

Cactub

A Cactub is a nutritious, bulbous root vegetable. Their outer core is hard, and covered in tiny protrusions called 'nubs'. These nubs helps the cactub move in and out of the ground. The flesh is a white

color, and has a markedly higher fat content than other vegetables. It can be made into cactub oil, it has a high smoke point, making it the ideal cooking oil. Cactubs are a Finiku favorite, served sliced on muckwheat bread. They spend most of their time underground, and only emerge in the dark to gather moisture from the surrounding air. Cactubs are sensitive to loud noises and movements, and they temporarily seize when panicked.

Chilabi

Chilabi was a popular ingredient in Aodal cuisine. A hot, pungent condiment that burns the nose, and that is be painful depending on the amount consumed. It is a short, and stout pink rhizome. It is grown on the outskirts of Renate, in a valley with a few yukwood trees. Chilabi grows over waterstone pits, its roots digging deep and latching onto stones. Their roots are strong enough to pierce them. This plant is only ever consumed in Renate, as it loses its pungency not too long after harvest.

Chloromyce shroo

A type of fungus that emits a strong phosphorescent light, it thrives in low-light environments. It is an object of desire for the Iridi, who have fought wars in its name.

Conk shroo

Conks are hard, woody, cave-dwelling shroos. They are found in mountainous areas, and used to make a variety of objects. Conks can also be eaten, but the texture makes it difficult to chew.

Hampa

One of the first plants to be spun into usable fiber, but it has fallen out of style in recent annums. Sandfinners continue to use it to make

their sails. The plant is large, with thick broad leaves. It can be found in the Central Rim, near waterstone wells.

Kaba

The Kaba plant has a thick orange trunk, with thousands of stems growing from its sides, each, with a two-headed red flower. These plants have the unique property of growing onto other living beings, like plants or large creatures. They have a symbiotic relationship. A strong alcohol — with numbing properties — is made from the fruit of the Kaba plant

Karonin

Kavava

Kavava is a leafy plant, but the roots is what most people choose to use. The roots are harvested, cleaned, dried and broken up into smaller bits and sold. It can be chewed as is, or pounded to a powder and made into a tea, although it loses some of its ‘numbing’ properties this way. If chewed, kavava numbs the mind and body from first sunrise to first sunset, it may also cause some minor hallucinations. Many become addicted to it.

Lanivanil

Lanivanil plants grow almost completely underground, with just a single flower sticking out of the soil. The flower is a bright yellow, and is very sensitive to changes in the environment. It is said that if music is played near a lanivanil plant, that the bean will grow to be larger and sweeter. Lanivanil bean pods develop underground, and each pod can contain up to three bean. These pods are circular, the size of a fist. Lanivanil is sweet tasting, the roots can be ground up and used to augment dishes. The bean can be eaten as is, or each one can be sliced open, its insides scooped out, to be eaten or cooked in savoury dishes.

Lavendiri

A purple bulbous flower that is often dried and used in homes to cover bad smells or to freshen a room. When the dried and crushed leaves are mixed with a waterstone, the powder thickens into a gel. The gel is often smeared under the nose in situations where a nearby stink is too strong. This plant also leaves a pleasant cool feeling on the skin.

Looberry

A sweet eatable fruit with a hard outer shell, often used as a dye. Verido people love looberrys, they use it to paint their hair and faces blue during special events, it is also used as an ink.

Lemilim

A culinary herb with a subtle tang, used fresh or dried. It has antifungal properties. It is often steeped as tea.

Licky root

Grown for its roots, which have anti-inflammatory and antibacterial effects. This plant is very hardy, it grows in high-altitude areas.

Looma root

A climbing vine with small eatable cream-coloured heart-shaped roots. Verido love looma roots, and even if they aren't endemic to the Ilk's back, they have found a way to make it grow there. Ilk-grown varieties are smaller than varieties grown in the Central Rim.

Mapple

Mapples are heart-shaped fruits with smooth ribbed skin that grow to be the size of a fist. The fruit is a bright orange, but can also be

spotted with yellow. The fruit should be peeled if eaten raw, but if braised the skin will soften. Mapples are either very sweet, or very bitter, only those who have experience in picking these fruits know which is which.

Medililly

A rare plant, grown for its medicinal properties. It is hard to grow, requiring much water and attention. Medililly takes annums to grow to maturity (the only time when the plant gains its healing properties). It is used to reduce inflammation. Immersing the leaf in water, and consuming the soaking liquid everyday is enough to keep sickness at bay.

Mepperpint

A leafy plant with rounded bulbs hanging from a thick central stem. Its leaves have a warm pungent taste with a spicy aftertaste. It is thought that consuming too much mepperpint can cause your eyes to sprout leaves.

Muckwheat

A plant cultivated for its grain-like seeds. These seeds are rich in complex carbohydrates, and can be ground down into flour. It is popular with the Finiku people, made into bread or cooked into stews.

Norange

A sweet, and bitter fruit with a thick rind. It has a fragrant smell, and can calm the mind. It pairs well with norcorn patties.

Norcorn

The leafy stalk of the norcorn plant produces inflorescences called nibs that yield bright yellow seeds. This plant is heat tolerant, its root system is deep and reaches deep underground. There are 5-6 seeds per nib, these can be ground up and made into flour to make Soronan Desert favorites like norcorn patties. The entire nibs and their seeds (which are held together by a stalk) can be grilled as is. With enough heat, the seeds explode into bright orange puffs which are eaten as a snack during special events. There have been events when the environing heat was too hot that an entire norcorn field exploded into puffs, referred to as a 'Puff Event'.

Nuni

Nuni is a starchy tuber with bright yellow flesh, it has a taste and smell that could best be described as being robust. If eaten, it stains the inside of your mouth yellow for a time.

Nutshroo

A type of fungus that grows in habited areas, like cities, they even grow on the Ilk. Many residents promote their growth on their own houses, nutshroos like growing on materials like banabo.

Peagram

A type of pulse growing from a thorny bush, with large seedpods filled with a green liquid that contain 10-15 peas. It is said that this liquid is klorea from past harvesters, and that the pulse owes its sweetness and nutrition to this. The harvesters from the old days would pick the pods without wearing gloves, and the thorns would cut their skin. Everytime a meal with peagram is consumed, the eater thanks the harvesters aloud for their sacrifice: "Estre danki."

Plumpkins

A large purple root vegetable, its skin is covered in scales. The scales can be peeled off, revealing the bright and soft red flesh underneath. Plumpkins can be processed into juice, or fermented to make plumpkin ale.

Shroo

A fleshy plant that grows in low-light areas. Some varieties are eatable, others poisonous and can cause serious physical and cognitive damage.

Sweet grass

A type of grass that is hair-like and sweet-tasting. Many creatures have an intense attraction towards them, especially floaters.

Teaweet

A staple grain for all inhabitants of the Soronan Desert. It is easy to grow, requiring little water. It is the main feed source of the Ilk. Teaweet is used to make bread.

Trumpet flower

A plant that grows on the Ilk's back. The bowl of the flower contains a syrupy fluid, often consumed as a very strong and debilitating drug. It is diluted, and served as a drink during celebrations.

Waternilly

Waternillies are small plants with long, and complex root systems that dig deep into the sand to reach far-away sources of moisture. Habitants of the Soronan desert use them to locate waterstone wells, they typically grow otop of such sites in great numbers. They protect themselves from predators by folding in their petals. The

outside of the petals secrete an irritant. If ingested, the poison will attack the nervous system and cause generalized paralysis. For a thirsty, dehydrated traveler, laying out in the suns can result in death.

Large avians are well-adapted at hunting them. They beat their wings and cover it in sand to soak up the poison, then break it off its stem with their talons.

Waterstone wells

Water stones are found in pockets of air underground, some wells may carry as much as thousand stones or as little as a hundred. There are 4 craters: the Lorana crater, the Toko crater, the Norlok crater and the Ratus crater. All of these were once basins full of water. Overtime, the water receded into the soil and began to pearl, a result of the composition of the sand on the planet, which helped to form a hard membrane. Because the planet is mostly sand dunes, some of the craters were partially filled.

Yukwood

Yukwood grows quickly in full suns and hot temperatures. It is an excellent shade, drought-resistant tree, able to grow 80 mirits high. It has bright-green foliage with leathery leaves. It produces yellowish puffy flowers in the colder season. Sandfinners like to use yukwood to build sandfin masts, and interiors. Older sandfins were built out of this wood entirely, but that practice is now rare.

Constellations

Encela

One of the moons circling this planet, commonly referred to as the twins.

Protus

One of the moons circling this planet, commonly referred to as the twins.

Other food and drinks

Bonan wine

A strong wine made from the bonan plant, a starchy berry that grows in the central rim.

Foodpatches

A patch that if applied to the skin ensures good nutrition, it comes in a variety of flavors mimicking real food. It was invented by the grand leader of Montore Monty, and helped to stave off hunger during the Iridi raids.

Kabacho

A fermented drink made from the fermented fruit of the Kaba plant. To prepare kabacho, the fruit is left in water to ferment in the sun for half an annum. Kabacho has mouth-numbing qualities.

Smellydough

A fermented woodgeon berry and water mixture with a strong smell and taste. It must be fed everyday to stay healthy. The more it smells, the better the flavor.

Entertainment

Chilabi Plusa Game

Renate residents like to play a game called Chilabi Plusa—to mean, chilabi with somethings extra— where each gets an identical dumpling and must eat it in turns. All contain chilabi, but only one of the dumplings has 10 times the amount, enough to make you cough. The goal of the game is to hide your discomfort if you get the spicy dumpling, or to pretend you got it when you didn't. It's up to others to guess the truth. Chilabi Plusa is an acting game where the best pretender wins.

Donmol

A plucked instrument with 4 double strings, a long neck and a raised fingerboard. It has a flat back, with triangular soundholes. The donmol is played during special events in Verido cities.

Hako game

Hako is a capture game popular with Iridi soldiers. Each player carries a **Sonozai**, a set of four dice with a braided hampa string, a thread which binds all things (night and day). Seasoned players make and carry their own, made out of soft stone.

Habitants of the dark

A history book written by Aristollo, explaining how the Iridi came to start ingesting chloromyce shroos.

Nohi'yara game

A smelling game. Jars of spices are covered with a thin cloth, and each person has to smell and guess the spice aloud. Whoever got the most right wins the game.

Koutra

A plucked instrument with a small round body, made from a looberry shell. The neck is 1 mirit long, and pierces the body. Koutras are simple instruments, usually put together by children.

Professions

Beobug

The name of a cargo sandfin company in Montore. Beobug sandfins follow the Ilks to gather kapo to turn into fuel, a process they're able to do while aboard.

Reader

Those who master the art of Pattern reading, which consists of reading the lines present on the skin of every Verido. It is a skill passed down from master to student.

Sandfinner

Those who travel the desert by sandfin, a vessel powered by wind. Sandfinners are often Finiku people.

The Hands

Short for The Hands of the Ilk. Hands inspect the Ilk's body for signs of disease or wounds. It is dangerous work, many have fallen and died while on the job.

Voice

A traditional Verido role, the ones appointed to speak to an Ilk. Only descendants of the founders can be Voice. Voices communicate messages between the Ilk and the inhabitants of the city.

Misc**Annum**

An annum follows the growing cycle of teaweeet, which takes 240 twin sunrises. Habitants of the Soronan Desert communicate time by gathering annums in a group:

ko'annum — 640 annums ki'annum — 320 annums
 haty'annum — 160 annums ha'annum — 10 annums

Horo

A unit of time(kaala), conventionally reckoned as 1/16 of a day. The rhythm of the world is based on the heart beat of an Ilk, which beats at 80 beats per quarter horo. There are 320 beats per horo, and 16 horos in a day. Days are typically divided by 4: First sunrise, second sunrise, first sunset and second sunset.

Iri

Iri is the name given to all who serve the Court of Light, every servant shares this name. An Iri has no voice, no opinion and no value to anyone in the Kingdom of Irideri.

Isilk

A sought-after fabric made from Ilk hair. Every Ilk has a subtle coat pigmentation that is barely discernible to the inexperienced.

Vol has a blue coat Bala has a red coat Oto has a green coat

Kaala

An old Verido word to mean 'time', an onomatopoeia describing the sound the heart of an Ilk makes.

Kloreia

Kloreia is any of several related green pigments found in the cells of beings of the Soronan desert. It allows them to absorb energy from light. Kloreialines are important to the Verido and the Iridi.

Kloreialines

A set of ancestors or line of descent of an important person: the survival of a legitimate royal kloreialine.

Sandfin

A vessel for desert travel, that uses wind to propel itself forward. The sandfin is a Finiku invention. Sandfins are flat-bottomed, with twin keels on either side to prevent tipping in big weather. A rudder and tiller are affixed to the stern and aid in steering the vessel, although the main way to steer with a sandfin is by means of trimming the sails, kept up with a tall mast. Sandfinners carry a wide variety of sails (made from hampa), for many strengths of wind. Some sandfins, like the Beobug supply ships, are much larger and can have two or more masts.

Specter

Name given to those in Montore who don't have ID. They are considered to 'not-exist', and cannot enter the city. It is also used as an expression, to refer to those who live alone, outside of communities.

Mapa

A term of endearment, used by the child of the bearing parent.

Mirit

The mirit is a unit of measurement for length in the Soronan desert. The length of a mirit corresponds to the height of Mirit, the shortest

Finiku to have ever lived. Thought to have originated in Montore, with people were using Mirit (a stone worker) to measure stones for the great outer wall of the city. Of course, they did this for a laugh, but it was soon adopted in other cities. People made rods of wood or metal with Mirit's height.

Pattern reading

The art of reading Verido skin patterns, a skill very few possess. The patterns reveal the Verido's name, as well as their lineage. When the Verido come of age and that their patterns stop changing, their names are read to them.

Verido children bear the names of their grandmapa while waiting for their names.

Toronka

Toronka is the name of the sandfin of Eka and Lupen. They salvaged the disowned and damaged vessel, that had been left to rot on the border of Renate. With the help of many friends, they fixed it up and made it their own.

Events

Green day

The day that the sproutling was taken from the ground, it is usually celebrated within small closely-knit communities. Many throw elaborate parties.

Iridi raids

When the Iridi ordered soldiers to capture workers to work in the Irideri mines, to collect chloromyce shroos. This event caused a great imbalance in the world.

Leaping day

A special event that takes place when a being is ready to die, rarely do beings of the Soronan desert let themselves wilt and expire, most choose to leap from a high place to die at a time of their choosing. For the Verido, Leaping from the Ilk's snout is common practice, for others, many choose to do a pilgrimage to The Rupture in the Yora'ta Ash Plains to do their leap. All believe that when you make the conscious decision to die and Leap, your consciousness separates from your body, it goes skyward while the body plummets to the ground. All people in the Soronan Desert are grown, and so the body falling means it is returning from whence it came. It isn't an end, but a return to normality, closing the cycle.

Monty Day

The day of the annum when the residents of Montore celebrate the greatness of their grand leader Monty. On this day, locals consume bam cake foodpatches, and gather in the center of town to offer tribute.

Languages

Aodan

Aodan is spoken by the Aodal people, but it is a dying language. Most Aodals now speak the Common Tongue, but some older residents of the Soronan Desert still speak it. Aodan stayed with the Iridi longer because of their policy of isolation.

Ana — one, a

Atedu — stay, wait, remain

Citi — in, at, or to this place or position

Danki — an expression of gratitude or politeness, in response to something done or given

Dekon — 18, ten is dek, eight is on.

Estre — verb. to be

Granda — adj. big, heavy, large, long, tall; important; adult

Grandlalun — full-moon

Jui — yes

Koroa — noun. heart (physical or emotional). Adj. Feeling (an emotion, a direct experience)

La — particle. separates the subject and the verb (I am happy, vi la tanka)

Mo — appended to words, (emphasis, emotion or confirmation)

Nan — no

Nio — this, that

Nocta — dark

Nos — dawn, apart, away

Nulalun — null-moon

Plusa — something extra

Rappida — move or act with great haste

Soli — day, light

Tanka — adj. good, positive, useful; friendly, peaceful; simple

Tribu — noun. community, company, group, nation, society, tribe

Salu — expression of greeting

Seklo — go or come after (a person or thing proceeding ahead)

Son — Dusk, together, with

Vi — noun. I, me, we, us

Volubi — used in polite requests or questions

Common Tongue

The Common Tongue is the language of trade in the Soronan Desert, spoken by all.

Finic

Finic is spoken by the Finiku people.

Aini — to perpetuate, prolong

Aikana — love (aikana'ia: hate, aikana'wati: loved ones)

Ara — what

Atae — with something, appended to words

Atuhue — Beautiful (atehue'ia: ugly)

Dae'na? — isn't it?

De — in

Di — appended to word, for emphasis

Dodon — stomach, used to mean hunger when paired with 'sui' e.g., dodon'sui.

Harioki — happy (harioki'ia: sad)

Ianae — no (ia, casual). To negate a word, append 'ia (e.g., Yara'ia, bad kind of thinking)

Ipayae — a drink

Kauga — heart, middle

Kiao'ri — (kiao', casual) Hello

Kira — sun

- Komokomo — smart (komokomo'ia: dumb)
 Kora — that, this
 Korei — there
 Mai — life (mai'ia, dead, without life)
 Maka — way of doing (yara'maka: way of thinking)
 Wati — I, people
 Maha — perform (an action)
 Mawani — soul (mawani'ia: without soul)
 Mou — more, again
 Mutau — right (mutau'ia, to be wrong)
 Naa — appended to word, for agreement or confirmation
 No — possessive particle
 Nohi — smell, nose
 Noho'uta — warning, stay away
 Okini — adj. big, heavy, large, long, tall; important;
 adult.
 Orae — yes
 Orae, dae'sa! — yes, that right!
 Oro — asserts a fact that the listener may not know
 Poro — purple, color
 Re — to be, appended to other words (eg. Yaga're, to
 be wrong) Roro — brain (komororo: bad brain to mean
 idiot)
 Sakoi — strong (sakoi'ia: weak)
 Sawa — wind
 Saa'mu — Short form of sawa'muko, to mean against
 the wind
 Saa'ta — Short short of sawa'atae, to mean with the
 wind
 Sosae — good (sosae'ia: bad, unhealthy, negative.
 sosae'di: very good, the best)
 Sui — empty
 Tawari — verb. To touch (tawari'a: don't touch)
 Te — and
 Teki — perceive with the eyes; discern visually.

- Wai — who
- Wi — manner, state, condition
- Wawa — mouth, e.g., wawa'de, to put in mouth, to eat
- Yara — think
- Yorala — sand, desert, land
- Yora'nae — (yora', casual) greeting, to talk
- Yora'mu — Short short of yoramawa'muko, to mean towards the soul of the land
- Yora'ta — Short short of yoramawa'atae, to mean away from the soul of the land
- Yoroi — cool

Ilken

A, E, I, O, U, Y and H are paired with notes and the rest consist of pauses and elongated notes.

A Do B	. L ___	_ T
E Re C	_ M . _	_ U _____
I Mi D	.. N ..	_ V ._____
O Fa F	___ P ___	. W ..___
U Sol G	._ Q _.	. X _____.
Y La J	. R .	. Y ____..
H Si K	... S _.	_ Z ._____.

Example:

VOLARE

Fa . _____ Do _____ Re . _.

To create single vowel sounds or words, the syllable is sounded by sliding from **Si**, toward the target vowel. For instance, to make the sound O, or Ho, the sound will be that of a sliding tone from **Si** to **Fa**.

