



RHEA RHETORICA

RED G.B.

For me.

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PROLOGUE

Where to begin?

Body unwell.

Feeling Aris' icy sting as in my lungs she swells.

How did here we arrive?

How did we come to be?

There's a good chance you know the answer far better than me.

I am Rhea LeBec.

No others before.

Not named for a lover or sibling adored;

Nor cradled in a tender's embrace for warmth.

Four kuna cycles; still not figured out.

No fierce perseverance in place of debilitating doubt.

Remember. Recount. Reclaim what is yours.

At the end of the battle we're back on all fours.

The story begins where so desired.

Unbelonging to us, but in our transgressions mired.

Rejoicing in rhetoric.

Regaling in relevance.

Rejecting a barrage of malicious benevolence.

Approach with eyes open.

Ingest with salt.

Do not assign blame, cause, or fault.

Be weary and worry-free and woeful at once.
Become, for just a moment... *your* version of Pruncc.

CHAPTER 1

SPACE BEETLE



As sure as you are of your place in space time, a beetle made of stone tiptoes near the edge of this galaxy. Aimless, it dances with a fluid, robotic symmetry atop the freeways of floating rock and stardust, its five vacant, black eyes slightly twinkling as it circumnavigates a dwarf star.

Only alone has the beetle ever been, the stars and meteors its only sort of friends. Does here exist devotion, doubt, or desire? Five glazed, inanimate eyes might say otherwise.

But, perhaps, with enough patience and focus on that fifth eye, one could catch a small glimmer of hope. For within this fifth black hole painted so purposefully in the middle of the beetle's forehead, glows a tiny particle of promise.

Now, as certain as you are that you are who you are, that glow begins to brighten. So bright, in fact, that the inconceivable immensity of outer space is compacted into a single spherical pinhole of entrancing, yellow light.

Muffled white noise crackles into a cacophony of voices while outlines of living figures gradually pulsate in and out of view. Stems and tree trunks emerge from a viscous, still

illuminated foundation. The atmosphere itself is palpable, leaving momentary brush strokes in the wake of its inhabitants' every movement. Even in the absence of wind, the vibrantly colored foliage seems to dance in slow motion, lazily waving to the group of children seated below.

The youngsters sit cross-legged on the forest floor, eagerly eyeing a tall, cloaked figure holding a beautiful leather bound grimoire adorned with a thin title plate of yellow jade.

A clearly annunciated baritone voice confidently booms from beneath the figure's low hanging black hood, reciting a poem from its pages:

“Imagine a seed from nothing sprouted;
Adorned with emptiness, in darkness shrouded.
No solids around which to wrap its eager roots,
No liquids with which to bathe ripening fruits.”

As each word parts from his lips, it materializes into a floating bubble, colored to complement its word's definition and sentiment. He points a droopy-sleeved arm at the first bubble, its plump, aqua curves rounding into a cloud-like puff.

The students stare at the rising blue bubble before them with saucer eyes, their heads synchronized like a litter of kittens eyeing a moonbeam's glister up the wall. Their attention appears to cause the mysteriously manifested material to engorge and expand. He reads on:

“For it was only Guïf for whom the seed did become,
And only with Guif the seed was one.
Guif dreamt the seed and its three primordial roots:
Tenderness first, followed by foundation and truth.”

As he uttered the last line, three immense serpents were painted into existence with an invisible brush above the astonished young Poiseaux heads: one yellow, one red, and one white. They had no eyes, yet interwove fluidly to form a perfect helix amongst the sea of multicolored balloons.

The pupils, no longer able to quell their excitement, began piercing the bubbles with long, metal protrusions jutting from their palms. Although some were clunkier than others, the most adept were able to square up their aim with a thumb and forefinger, fire off a barb, pierce the target, and retract it in the blink of an eye.

The young Poiseaux rejoiced in their rainbow speckled school clothes splotched from the many explosive pops splashing them between giggles.

“And that’s it for today!” the teacher announced, snapping his book shut with a *thwump!*

The serpents and bubbles vanished from the atmosphere as the group groaned disappointedly before nudging and racing each other through the trees towards the school building.

One fledgling lagged behind, a reticent pre-adolescent silently fidgeting with the few strands of feather-like hair that poked from beneath her hood. She hadn’t participated in the

poetry popping, as she was quietly observing the lesson from the obscurity of a tree several meters away. She swept the black and red strands off her forehead to reveal her rubescent face surrounding a large, beak-like nose.

Rhea LeBec ['riə ləb'ɛk] was the only one of her kind. Dubbed a *dud nugget* by the boys, a *no-sow* by the girls, and a *negg* by everyone else, she was born at a great disadvantage to her peers and had learned to avoid them.

She now had an unobstructed view of the strange Poiseau and his book. Her eyes widened upon meeting the cheerful chartreuse sheen of its title plate, a stark contrast to its brown weathered corners and tattered closure twine.

Although expertly carved, to Rhea, the foreign linear symbols of its title were indiscernible.

She crawled a bit closer to get a better look at the teacher, whose voice she initially thought she recognized. As she listened, however, she noticed a distinct disconnectedness that led her to conclude he was a stranger.

Rhea ducked her head slightly in fear as the black wool concealing the stout, magical Poiseau tightened at his feet as if caught in the teeth of a moving escalator. He and his cloak then *whooshed* into a hurricane of gritty liquid that disappeared into the ground plasma below.

She had barely finished gasping when the thud of the thick text he had been holding sent a tremble up her spine. She cautiously approached the open area with shaky breath,

reaching behind her back and positioning her cross-body satchel in front of her.

Following three quick clacks of her tongue, the flap of her bag abruptly flopped open to reveal a single black gem mounted between a pair of white, globular, glistening eyes, their black plus-sign pupils intermittently retreating behind thin purple eyelids as they scoped the area.

“Brie ['bri], safety check,” Rhea whispered.

A hearty yawn pried open Brie’s wide, clammy grin, revealing a worm-like tongue wriggling upon pillows of translucent white flesh. Snapping shut, her soot-colored salamander snout jutted out from the bag’s opening with a frenzy of grunts preceding short, labored exhales.

The bizarre hybrid creature scuttled into the yellow lit valley and planted her four feet firmly on a speckled igneous rock, sharply pivoting her head like a finely trained doberman pinscher. Sensing no danger, she elongated and contorted her firm body and tail into a deep stretch and lovingly looked up to let out a satisfied squeak in Rhea’s direction.

A partially cockeyed smile folded the corners of Rhea’s eyelids into crêped curtains resting gently atop two cream-colored cheek apples. Brie’s clownish nature and appearance often gave rise to a chubby cherub roundness in Rhea’s face, a quality she felt she’d recently begun to lose as maturity chiseled and elongated her avian features. Her cheeks softened as she silently admired the infantile qualities immortalized in her beloved companion.

The inelegant flap of Brie's brown, claw-tipped bat wings to finish off her stretch seemed as much an afterthought as the wings and brown tufts of fur were themselves. She darted back to Rhea, speedily sprang up her right arm, and scaled her frame like a spiral staircase before proudly perching atop her left shoulder.

Rhea cautiously crept into the valley holding her hood firmly over her head. She slowly stepped towards the lonely literature whose center pages lay splayed out to reveal an old map.

“Hachtax,” she read aloud.

It was the only word she could identify amongst the foreign symbols and places she saw hand drawn on its weathered pages.

“This doesn’t look right,” she commented as she bent forward and took a closer look at the landscape.

Rhea stuffed the heirloom into her satchel and smoothly swung it behind her, eager to get home and study it. In a fleeting moment of vulnerability, she hopped coltishly into a wide stance and swirled her fully extended arms and hands around her in excitement.

“What is *wrong* with you?” a low voice behind her mordaciously murmured.

Her spark smoldered as quickly as it had emerged; It was her sibling, Micah ['mikə].

As if pulled by magnets, her arms snapped to her sides before she clumsily pivoted on her heel to turn and face him, her hood falling into a ruched pile atop her shoulders as she halted.

Despite the many self-corrective behaviors Rhea had adopted in an effort to quell criticisms, the feathery tuft of regal red, black, and white locks playfully bouncing above her right eye suggested her efforts to stifle her own perceptual impurities were futile.

“You’re supposed to be home,” Micah sneered, “Go.”



Rhea panted heavily as she approached the root crown of the LeBec family tree. Her lungs burned. She had sprinted the entire way without looking back.

A small pond of silver, translucent liquid lie juxtaposed the family tree. Chest still heaving, Rhea rested her hands just above her slightly bent knees and leaned in to check for glow snails. As she peered below the pool’s surface, her own reflection caught her eye.

She slowly rotated her head, admiring the dark hairs contouring her defined brow. She imagined that the gently swaying pool drawing ripples through her reflection was an ornate veil the likes of which Hachtax had never seen,

ingeniously obscuring the mysterious beauty that hid beneath it.

As the water calmed, Rhea's daydream dissipated. The tiny waves upon which her veil had fluttered now contorted her face to magnify the deep scar troweled into the bridge of a protuberant nose. Her smirk subsided.

Detecting diffidence, Brie scuttled through the thicket of tousled strands atop Rhea's head and playfully popped her own into view. The sight of her was enough to tug at the corners of the deepest frown: tongue hanging limply from the left side of her mouth, plucky, ping pong ball eyes beaming wide, wings faintly flapping beneath a mess of tresses.

Rhea was stubborn in her dejection. She tightened her lips shut and tried glancing away, until the hilarity of one of Brie's meandering pupils set loose the snort she had been suppressing.

Brie clicked with delight as Rhea scooped her into her arms and pulled her to her chest for a snuggle. Rhea had yet to encounter anyone who could pull her from darkness like Brie could.

Brie scurried into her bag as they ascended the root pathway to her front door. With a heavy sigh, Rhea slowly creaked it open. The bitter stench of stale ashes flooded her nose as she clicked the door shut behind her as quietly as she could. She tiptoed down the hallway past her tender's bedroom. Flashes of light beamed from beneath the door, but there was no sound.

“Television on mute; asleep,” she thought.

She continued quietly down the hall and into the kitchen where she prepared a quick snack of crackers and fig paste. Still stepping softly, she tidied up the kitchen as she ate, occasionally dropping crumbs that Brie happily lapped up.

A door opened abruptly and she heard the slow scuff of leather moccasins against the tree roots lining the hallway floor. Tension climbed its way up her spine and wrenched at the base of her skull as she stood frozen at the counter staring down at her plate. Brie quickly retreated to the bottom of her satchel.

Rhea’s tender, Jesh [dʒɛʃ], trudged through the room and placed an empty cup in the sink, pausing for a moment to sigh. Rhea remained still, picking apart her crackers. Without acknowledging her, Jesh turned and shuffled back towards his dark nest.

Just as she was about to exhale with relief, his gravelly voice echoed from the hallway:

“Take care of your mess.”

Click went his door behind him.

Rhea clenched her teeth and closed her fists in an effort to cork the scorching magma of rage flowing through her entire body. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, recalling the

screaming arguments she had with her sower before she left. She wouldn't dare unleash that sort of emotion now.

“I can do better,” she thought.

That evening, when Rhea finished scrubbing, a single, grubby glass sat obstinately in the sink.

CHAPTER 2

ONWARD, CHICKADEE



After tossing and turning through the night, Rhea twiddled her fingers through some beaded string hanging beside the window as she watched Micah through the glass.

There was something triumphant about the way his slender frame glided effortlessly through the misty atmosphere, ascending higher as the very fibers of Häctax eagerly aligned like stepping stones beneath the balls of his feet.

He ran with Häctax's most admired pupils, individuals whose ferocity shone with the same brilliance as the luminescent capillaries ignited by his every step.

Poiseaux share physical and anatomical features with humans, but vary much more in size, color, and brain capacity. Their otherworldly, animal-like appearance is not the only element that sets them apart from their earthling likenesses. They are a species so interconnected with the life structure they call home that the terrain itself includes millions of underground pathways intended for Poiseaux appendages.

In a healthy Poiseau, a nearly autonomous nervous system of a thousand tiny tentacles protrudes from each limb as she navigates her environment, wriggling through the miniature caverns at an inconceivable speed.

Through practice and decisive intention, she spiritually traverses these veiny pathways below her as her physical form navigates above, each tunneling tungsten-tipped tentacle mapping its coordinates as it delicately grazes the capillary walls.

Her gaze continued as Micah's head and shoulders rose into the thick fog above, a bioluminescent trail still glowing behind him like the scattered embers of a burrowing meteorite.

Although Rhea had watched the academy students from her window nearly every morning, the glowing, golden liquid that traced her sibling's steps captivated her as much this morning as it had the first time she saw it.

Lazily floating dust particles and moisture droplets in her room froze upon meeting her linear stare, suggesting the

faintest blip of a notion that the golden glow radiating from Micah's motion was emanating from the tiny yellow zig-zags strung like wreaths of lightning around Rhea's irises.

An abrupt shriek from behind her shook Rhea from her stupor, causing her to briefly stumble in an effort to thwart the momentum of an overzealous counterclockwise spin. She had only just steadied herself when she felt the perturbing pinch of panic.

Her room appeared as it always did: a faded, green, wooden door crookedly framed by brown tree bark walls that were riddled with nails and hooks for her belongings. Clothes were bunched in various heaps near the foot of her bed, but one of them was irrationally twitching and trembling.

She cranked her leg back and was preparing to punt the pile away from her when Brie's salamander snout jutted out with a snort. Rhea clunked her foot back to the floor and formed a crooked smile as she exhaled through her nose in relief.

She picked up the silky floral headband that Brie was preparing to nibble and tossed it over a nearby hook. There were only a few bare spaces left between the many trinkets and pieces of her wardrobe strewn about. Although it appeared chaotic to the untrained eye, Rhea knew everything's place.

A garland of orange string was looped from nail to nail around the room's upper perimeter to display the assorted feathers she'd gathered on her daily treks. The walls were sorted by Rhea's personal preference rather than utility.

In the leftmost corner, a pair of long, brown laces knotted above a silver hook held up a pair of brown riding boots stuffed with long-stemmed wildflowers. Beside them, the matching silver hook patiently waited for the perfect complementary kerchief, preferably something emerald toned.

A large branch serving as a ceiling beam was draped with various “flags” she had found and hand-sewn together. The scraps near the top of the sheet were smaller and more crudely stitched together than the large, elegant pieces now grazing the top of her head as she walked across the solid tree floor towards the window.

Methodically tip-toeing through a field of laundry landmines, she held her arms out for additional balance. As her fingernails grazed the wall’s bumpy tree bark, her hand instinctively flattened upon a smooth bare patch. It felt cool to the touch, but Rhea had an inexplicable feeling that it should be warm.

She always thought the barkless space looked like an adult-sized handprint. It was peculiarly placed at the ceiling branch’s base, and embedded into the wood as if it were a naturally occurring tree knot. Rhea ritualistically placed her palm in it daily, but had yet to sense anything.

She rested her head on the window’s edge and looked outside for her sibling and his classmates, but they had disappeared into the foggy atmosphere above the sky tunnels. Rhea studied the vibrant array of metallic flakes sprinkled

along their path, quickly closing her eyes to watch the emerald and electric blue specks smolder into the darkness.



Rhea stopped at the reflective pool after having silently crept out the door of the LeBec Family Tree. There were no mirrors inside.

Examining her reflection, she ran her fingers gently through tangled sections of the wavy, black tresses draped over her left shoulder. For the right side, a quick tousle through her short, messy spikes did the trick.

She smoothed her hands over the soft, grey blanket scarf she had wrapped toga-style around her right shoulder and waist, plucking stray black hairs from its fibers as she went. She sighed as she ran her hands down her torso and felt the soft lumps of her pudgy belly overhanging her favorite belt. Aside from her nose, her midsection seemed to be the only part of her that was noticeably growing.

She poked another new notch using the belt's buckle, likely the last one she would be able to manage before the cracked and frayed material came apart. Loosening some of the bunched grey fabric, she exhaled deeply from her nose and held a long blink to regain composure.

Rhea's red leggings made her feel more like herself. Although their original rouge had faded after years of wear, she had hand-mended the knees with bright, multi-colored plaid

patches she had found in the family tree's deserted crafting room.

She rotated and peered over her shoulder, admiring the way her slim calves poked out of her oversized camel combat boots. While Rhea was always conscious of her attire, this was the first time she would be venturing out without a cloak since her body had begun noticeably changing.

Just as Hachtax has five kuna cycles, its inhabitants undergo five phases of life. For a Poiseau, these are: uka, fledgling, adolescence, adulthood, and reroooting. Although the planet's cycles can be precisely measured and predicted, each Poiseau's cycle length varies depending on physical, social, and environmental factors.

Uka, the first stage of a Poiseau's life, occurs entirely underground. It is here that a Poiseau is physically connected to his family tree as an extension of its roots. A strong family tree can support up to three ukas at one time, though most modern Poiseaux only opted for one. A sower tends to her uka daily, sacrificing the use of her tentacles for anything but pod care for a full year.

Females are the only Poiseaux born with hollow heel tentacles capable of sustenance, which is an arduous task. Commonly referred to as the *arbonatal pause*, a female Poiseau spends the morning eating before she plants her feet firmly on the ground beside her family tree to nourish her young pods. As she stands, her heel feelers pump liquid nutrients and spiritual energy to the sprouting life below.

Although nearly unheard of in modern society, it was possible for a uka to survive fueled solely by the roots of its family tree. This had historically resulted in undesirable physical and mental qualities in the fledgling that were usually irremediable.

To magnify their misfortune, Poiseaux deemed defective were not warmly welcomed into the flock and were left to navigate the complexities of fundamental development alone.

Fledglings sprout from uka pods after their initial development is complete. The fledgling stage is intended for environmental acclimation, self-discovery, and physical growth. Ranging in size from pygmy goat to giant panda, a sprout's initial proportions and physical attributes are a direct result of the quality of his in-pod care.

Adolescence, a transition achieved ceremonially, is a phase for physical and spiritual metamorphosis. Although not guaranteed, the most notable and sought after sign of maturity is what the Poiseaux call their *Cadence*. Rumored to lie dormant within every Hachtaxian soul, a Poiseau's Cadence represents his unique connection with the planet.

It is marked by a bioluminescent glow in the ground's plasma that is triggered by direct contact with the Cadencing Poiseau's tentacles. Much of modern life is centered around the Cadence. It is the only coming of age event that includes an official ceremony and an entire academy devoted to its mastery.

Through daily challenges, A Poiseau's adolescence puts into practice that which he has learned as a fledgling. Repeated successes and failures gradually mold his mind and body into adulthood. The length of this stage depends entirely on the individual's environment and willpower.

Peculiarly, the current generation of Poiseaux seemed to linger in adolescence much longer than its predecessors.

In spite of the bounty of it around her, adolescence felt infinitely far away for Rhea. She could recall bits and pieces of Micah's Cadence Ceremony that she had witnessed as a young sprout, which was about all the knowledge she possessed regarding adolescence ceremonies.

Female Poiseaux are typically guided through this process by a sower, but Rhea would likely have to endure alone.



Varna Pont

Rhea was the only Poiseau of her time to be sprouted without the care of a sower. She emerged the size of an average raccoon and was covered in birth marks and scars. Much of the community had left her for dead, assuming that Jesh LeBec would be unable to support another Poiseau after his recent decline.

A couple years of uncertainty passed until a toddling tot was spotted scaling the limbs of the LeBec family tree with no supervision. A concerned community determined that a

sower was desperately needed in the LeBec family, but it seemed volunteers were desperately needed... elsewhere.

It was understandable that no one was eager to join the dysfunctional family in the fixer-upper down the block, but it would have certainly been a perfect opportunity to exercise some of that generosity and community outreach they were regularly preaching.

Some of the more boisterous sowers elbowed the unwilling Varna Pont into the role. She was a fair, fledglingless, young adult Poiseau with one of the finest flower beds to grace Hachtax's family trees (a sure sign in Poiseau culture that she would be a sensational sower). She warily agreed to care for Rhea with the condition that Jesh LeBec remain behind a guarded door during her visits.

The community ensured Varna's requests were fulfilled and the pair were off to a great start. Rhea, the wild and nonverbal sprout seen swinging naked from a branch outside her bedroom only days before, happily dressed and communicated with her new sower during their very first visit. Even at such an early stage, it was clear that the two shared a special sort of harmony.

An amazed and elated Varna felt compelled to teach Rhea a melody passed down to her by her own sower. Varna had always imagined she would share her special song with her own fledgling someday, maybe even gifting her with it subliminally as a uka during arbonatal pause.

Although imperfect, something about that moment with Rhea just felt right.

Upon returning home that night, Varna Pont's flower bed looked as if it had been pruned by pixies who had left sparkly dew drops wherever their tiny toes had tipped. Enchanting emerald leaves that gleamed as if made of wax hugged the Pont family tree's trunk like an elegant pleated skirt. Sprigs of silver snake grass served as jubilant accessories flaring above knobby, moss-covered knee caps that peeked out bashfully beneath a hem of silken petals in grape hues.

So spectacular was her garden that day that the neighbors suspected she had been dabbling in the dark arts. The truth, which had long been obscured from modern Poiseaux, was that Hachtax's plant life was moody and unpredictable.

Although sustained through a system of roots, the appearance and behavior of the planet's vegetation were molded by the energy of nearby mobile inhabitants.

Unfortunately, Varna was not prepared for the emotional engagement required to raise a fledgling like Rhea and their progress stagnated. Honest efforts in seeking help from friends and family were only met with criticism and poor advice.

The Pont family flowers, once quenched by Varna's blissful tears, began showing signs of decay as she became tainted by a bitter resentment for her unideal situation.

After nearly a year of her shaky sowership, her garden began to wither and its bountiful blooms became crowded by brittle black locust and buckthorn bushes.

“An absolute disgrace,” a neighbor cruelly cracked within earshot of Miss Pont while examining her plot.

It wasn’t long before Varna, too, was the target of superficial judgment and orchestrated snubbing. Some even went as far as blacklisting certain clothing items she wore. This was a devastating blow, as she had previously boasted the title of Hachtax’s most eligible and fashionable bachelorette.

Poiseaux are very social creatures who thrive on interaction, making ostracism particularly painful for even the most introverted. Varna soon convinced herself that Rhea would be better off without her and resigned from her role as sower.

She did not visit the LeBec family tree again.



Rhea was not provided with an explanation for why Varna no longer visited. Even though the end of their time together was tumultuous, Rhea felt no ill will towards her temporary sower. In fact, she recalled her fondly and used her song as a personal mantra when she needed it.

She excitedly hugged the leather grimoire against her body and darted in the direction of the academy. Her home was tucked within a semicircle of evergreens that completely

obscured it from the rigid rows of neatly planted neighboring family trees.

As she ducked beneath the bristly, pine branch awning and approached the community walking trail, she took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. As excited as she was to begin studying her mysterious literature, she first had to face the anxieties strewn along her path.

A hundred meter, well-worn section of the walkway served as a border between eight of the neighborhood family trees, four lined horizontally on each side. Looking ahead, there was no particular Poiseau, place, or thing that distressed Rhea, and it was this uncertainty that had her palms leaving moist impressions on the brown, leather, back cover of her treasured historical.

She quickened her pace and slid the grimoire into her crossbody bag, focusing straight ahead to avoid any potential eye contact with onlookers. The few times Rhea had attempted a friendly glance at her neighbors, she was met with spooked stares and awkward fidgeting.

As she took her last hurried steps on the community path, she glanced over her shoulder and glimpsed a cluster of simple, white flowers she had never seen before. Opaque and tissue-like, they almost gave the appearance that someone had thrown freshly fluffed socks out the window and left them in crumpled piles amongst the family tree's roots.

There was a kindness to them that made Rhea pause briefly, but she knew it wouldn't be long before curious tree dwellers

began peeping. She quickly veered right to travel the treacherous but more covert trail she had created amongst the trees and rocky hills just south of their housing development.

The community trail was a direct route to the Academy, but Rhea had learned at an early age to avoid a beaten path. As she mounted the trailhead's rocky steps, a small, black-capped bird zipped by only centimeters from her face before landing atop a tall fir.

As she blinked a few times and caught her breath, Varna's sweet, charming voice faintly echoed in her mind and she began to chant along:

“Onward, chickadee,
My sweet chickadee.

Not by land,
Nor air,
Nor sea.

Go chickadee,
My sweet chickadee,

Promise to remember me.”

CHAPTER 3

BUBBLE FISH



YOUNGLING RHEA

Rhea's bright, blue, still sprout-like eyes looked upon a world that shone with a discoverable brilliance. She couldn't wait to see what it had to offer.

There was ample opportunity to explore, as Micah spent most mornings harvesting alone an hour's walk from their tree. Rhea had given up asking to tag along.

“But why, Micah?” a seven-year-old fledgling Rhea cried, “you never let me go!”

“What do Luxfaeries hate?” Micah replied.

“Light,” she answered, rolling her eyes.

“What kind of light?” he prodded.

“I can do it now, Micah! I promise I won’t blink!” she pleaded.

“No, Rhea,” he affirmed, closing the door behind him.

Rhea sighed and trudged back to her bedroom. She knelt beside Brie's bed and delicately slid her hands beneath her, placing her gently into her cloth bag. She paused and waited to hear Brie's snores before closing the curtains on her soundly snoozing salamander.

Just like every other morning, she was fully dressed and breakfasted before dawn in hopes of accompanying her sibling on his hunt. Plan B was always to explore. Before leaving the house, she reluctantly paused in the stale odor just outside Jesh's room.

“Still sleeping. I feel it,” she thought to herself with eyes closed.

Rhea hurriedly exited the tree and jumped to the largest nearby root, crouching upon it for only a split second before leaping to the next suitable landing point. She had traversed the gnarly knotted path of the family tree’s rooting circle since she could walk, and had since practiced in the darkness of night many times.

Rhea loved her home, but always felt an intense yearning to escape the confines of the rooting circle’s perimeter once she was within them.

Somersaulting onto the sleeping plasmatic plain, Rhea lied on her back as a wave of comfort overtook her. She noticed that she always felt much better outside of the root circle, but hadn’t given much thought as to why.

She inhaled sharply to savor the smell of night’s last moments and gazed up at the black ink lazily seeping through the sky’s tunnel network. Within one of the tubes, she noticed a small glob of glowing white light, emanating faint hues of pink and blue.

“A bonbaby!” Rhea whispered excitedly.

After a few moments, the glob disappeared. Rhea rolled onto her stomach, grounded her toes, and walked her palms inward until she was in a standing fold. She then quickly snapped straight up, holding her arms in a V like a proud gymnast.

“Let’s go!” she said to Brie in a loud whisper.

Brie poked her snout from Rhea’s satchel and scurried onto her shoulder as she jogged into the darkness with her eyes only half open.

“A little help?” Rhea whispered as she nudged Brie with the side of her head.

Neither the salamander nor her distant, distant cousin... the bat... appreciates such early morning haste. Brie begrudgingly quickened her morning shake with a snarky grunt.

Once still, she closed her eyes and focused until the black gem nestled between them began radiating a soft, white light. She kept her eyes closed until the light’s reach created a meter-wide, spherical aura to light their way.

“Thanks, Brie-wee!” Rhea chimed as she quickened her pace.

Unbeknownst to Rhea, it was uncommon for such a young Poiseau to have traveled so much of the plasmatic plane (and unheard of to traverse it at night).

She never felt afraid. She felt alive.

Not even Micah knew about the tiny Luxfaery cove hidden beneath the docile trees tucked behind Hachtax Academy. Rhea had been inexplicably drawn there as a sprout and continued to visit almost daily.

Despite her youthful naïveté, she knew she couldn't share her secret spot with anyone. Not only was her sibling becoming the most successful Luxfaery lancer in Hachtax, the malevolent history between the two species was tangible in modern Poiseaux culture.

“A Luxfaery dead saves a barb to the head!”

Her tender's words echoed in her brain like a soundtrack, their meaning to remain dormant, awaiting the moment of clarity that would allow its emergence from the obscurity of Rhea's budding mind.

Considered by many Poiseaux a gift from Guif herself, a Luxfaery's essence was the most valuable element in Hachtax. A single drop ingested would temporarily alleviate pain and fatigue, a spoonful could heal physical and emotional wounds, and it was rumored that a mug's worth had the potential to elevate consciousness.

Only those with the right cadence, like Micah, could pierce a Luxfaery hide and extract its vital nectar quickly enough to bottle it before Hachtax reclaimed it. Many fruitless Luxfaery deaths led to this discovery, but Rhea had to try.

She slowed as she approached the trees lining her secret cove, patting Brie's head to turn off her little living lantern. The abrupt blackness sent a chill down her spine as she urged her heart to calm its pounding. Six orbs glowed beneath the surface of the sleeping plasmatic plane. They were resting.

Steadying her breathing, she forced the nervous energy into her heels, closing her eyes as she felt it wriggle through her toes.

“Eyes open!” she heard Micah shout from her memory.

She forced her eyelids apart and witnessed a faint, orange glow emanating beneath the soles of her feet.

“My cadence?” she blurted in an excited whisper.

Before she could silence herself, her glow began to flicker.

“No, not this time,” she thought, clenching her muscles and digging her heels in deeper.

Just as her sibling had instructed her, she began attempting to visualize the spiritual realm in her mind's eye while continuing to fixate on the physical light in the present.

Her faint, orange glow appeared to liquify into a brilliant, amber syrup. For an instant, she saw the sleeping Luxfaeries in her mind. There was one for each color of the rainbow, but their flesh wasn't plasma like she had been told, it looked more like that of a frog's belly.

“Different colors?” she pondered.

Immediately realizing her mistake, she clenched her muscles tighter and tried to force her mind back to the Luxfaery cove. Brie, feeling the intensity building within Rhea, scurried to the back of Rhea’s neck where she clung to her tousled black and red locks. The light below began to flash, expanding and brightening before disappearing in a brown, ashy puff.

“Not again,” Rhea cried, disappointedly.

Through her tears, she watched the rainbow she’d found below the surface scatter into the darkness. She fell to her knees and sobbed. Hot tears of frustration flooded her flush face as she silently wished she could be anyone else.

An attempt to retreat into her mind for calm was only met with the condescending echoes of her tormentors. She smeared her hand across her face and noticed a faint blue orb still lingering in the vicinity. Suddenly, her tears turned to despair.

“Why am I s’posed to kill you?” she whispered, cupping her face in her hands.

A single tear rolled off of Rhea’s right finger and splashed upon the sleeping plasmatic plane, creating a perfect circular droplet. To Rhea’s astonishment, the lingering blue orb began to move closer.

She slowly lowered her hands, resting her fingertips on her cheekbones as she stared wide-eyed at the approaching creature.

Brie, whose astonishment was overridden by a primal need to protect her family, began angrily flapping her wings and opening her mouth to signify she wasn't playing around.

Without breaking eye contact with the orb, Rhea skillfully snatched her sidewinding salamander and held her firmly in her lap. Brie continued to fidget in her companion's grasp until she glanced up at Rhea's sapphire blue eyes glowing in a way she'd never seen before. She cranked her head back towards the advancing orb, her eyes widening in a frozen stare as she watched blue light break the surface of the plasmatic plane.

The moment it entered the atmosphere, the light transformed into a luminous liquid that oozed into a thick puddle. A thin, translucent, blue veil billowed around the strange matter as it began to take shape before their eyes.

Dumbstruck, Rhea loosened her grasp, allowing Brie to retreat to the safety of her bag. Slowly, the veil parted, revealing a stout figure resembling a telescope goldfish with legs.

Its two bulbous eyes, propped atop a smooth head covered in cool, iridescent scales, peered innocently upon their new environment. Small, tightly puckered lips smacked as if blowing invisible bubbles. If Rhea weren't so flabbergasted,

she'd surely be belly-laughing at the wretched peculiarities she found so cute.

When the creature's eyes met Rhea's, it began swaying and cooing with delight. Rhea dropped her hands and stared intently back. Strangely, she sensed within her a deep connection to the being.

Brie's eyes peeked from a small opening in her bag, widening as they targeted her frightening fish-like foe. She looked to her best friend, eyes wide and mouth agape; she was clearly entranced and in danger.

Brie cautiously eased the bag's flap open to expose her head. Without hesitation, she snapped her eyelids shut to illuminate her gem, engulfing the entire cove in a burst of blinding, white light that awakened a ten meter radius of ground plasma around them.

“Brie! No! The bubble fish!” Rhea shouted.

The glowing blue puddle from which the creature came quickly drained beneath the surface. Although Rhea initially feared it was rerooting, the blue orb was bright enough to shine through the now illuminated plasma beneath her feet. She watched as her orb friend quickly retreated into the obscurity of the spiritual realm.

Morning's green-yellow light began to emanate from the sky tunnels above and awaken the sleeping plane below. Rhea took a deep breath and calmly flipped open Brie's bag.

“You’re lucky it’s morning already. That wasn’t a bad guy, Brie,” Rhea stated in a calm but slightly chastising tone.

Brie slumped into the corner of the bag, sitting on her hind legs with her tail and wings gently blanketing her body. She kept her head down, only raising her apologetic eyes to Rhea.

“Don’t worry,” Rhea assured, “it’s not dead. Plus, it’s morning now, and Mister Globes will know what it is!”

Rhea’s maternal tone comforted Brie and she happily climbed to her shoulder stoop. Rhea gave her beloved amphibi-mammal a pat before darting to the closest tree. She didn’t want to draw attention by lingering in her secret cove too long.

CHAPTER 4

OFFICIAL MASTER OF CEREMONIES



After zig-zagging her way to the wall of the academy’s artistry wing, Rhea ducked and rolled beneath the massive, tubular root structure hugging the building’s corner. She wasn’t sure what would happen if someone saw a fledgling climbing around campus, so she made every effort to remain unseen.

Rhea scrambled up the tube and rolled out clumsily onto the roof. She stifled her own gasp as she hurriedly scooted to the cover of a nearby shrubbery. There were two young Poiseau pupils meandering about the rooftop garden. Rhea couldn't make out words through their muffled adolescent chortles, but she knew they were most likely supposed to be in class.

She remained hidden in the greenery, her hamstrings crying out as she crouched upon them. As it became clear that the pair was sticking around, Rhea signaled for Brie's attention using two fingers pointing towards her own eyes. She then held up three fingers, nodding as Brie confirmed understanding with three wild flaps of her wings.

Brie scurried away, scaling the perimeter to remain out of sight. Excited for the ensuing entertainment, Rhea carelessly flopped onto her belly, rustling the bushes. The pupils, having heard her blunder, began wandering nearer.

She felt her pulse quickening as she became painfully aware of the ruckus caused by her every adjustment.

“Just don’t move,” she silently told herself.

The young voices were now alarmingly close to Rhea and her body was finding it difficult to remain still. Luckily, Brie had quickly bolted into position and was moments away from executing their plan.

Perched atop a stone picnic table, Brie let out an unsettling ululation that instantly jarred the boys into a petrified panic. They slowly spun around to see Brie with wings fully

extended, tail spinning counterclockwise, and tongue dangling from the left side of her mouth.

It was unclear to them whether she was wounded or wanton, but they weren't going to chance it with a creature that was this... confusing looking. They quickly fled inside the school, slamming the door shut behind them.

Rhea relaxed and rolled out from beneath the bushes. Her companion, now awkwardly wobbling along the stepping stones of the garden path, was still engaging in her ridiculous display.

“They’re gone, you can stop,” Rhea laughed.

Brie abruptly froze in her ghastly pose before calmly lowering her wings with a triumphant grin. With her eyes cheerfully squinted, she playfully pranced toward Rhea, who couldn’t help but giggle at her strange sidekick. In true salamander style, she flattened her wings against her body and wriggled up to her shoulder stoop.

A large, hexagonal pane of glass near the opposite end of the rooftop garden overlooked Professor Gole Globus’s classroom.

“Time to pay Mister Globes a visit,” Rhea declared as she hopped the cracks in the garden path.



Professor Gole Globus

He wasn't a confrontational individual, but when the building was remodeled, Professor Gole Globus insisted upon the academy providing him a workspace abundant with natural light as a term of his continued employment.

As one of the school's most tenured professors, the board was obliged to satisfy his request. In a feeble attempt at domineering, the school board left Globus the neglected and slightly dilapidated auditorium in the forgotten artistry wing, the sole area that would still include glass windows rather than holographic screens.

Much to the detriment of Hachtax's pupils, the board's internal politics and individual interests frequently influenced the school's curriculum and campus. Gole Globus, however, would not be derailed by the funereal phase they seemed to be in the last several years.

An advanced team of contractors were tasked with restructuring the entire building, but were delivered an urgent memo on day one that the auditorium was off limits. Curiously, during that same period, Professor Globus would often be seen leaving the academy under night's darkness.

During enrollment, the course catalog did not include any artistic offerings. Although disappointed, Globus specialized in philosophy and was delighted to be reassigned to that department. He, of course, would remain in his naturally-lit auditorium where he had spent many of his waking hours.

His philosophy students arrived on the first day of that semester, aflame with anticipation awaiting the opening of the auditorium's entrance.

“He’s been seen working on some project,” a pupil proclaimed.

“Well, yeah,” another interjected, “he locks himself in there in protest. The place was almost torn down with him in it.”

The enormous, wooden auditorium doors slowly slid open, the students cramming towards the partition to capture the first glimpse of their learning quarters. The interior surface of the doors was an intricately hand-carved, hand-painted mural of fauna and flora.

The doors fully opened to reveal Professor Globus perched atop the railing of a cherrywood balcony about ten meters above them. The tips of his orange, wavy tresses dangled at his camel colored boots, each one soled with two copper horseshoes. White freckles gave his tan skin a weathered and coarse appearance. Contrastingly, fuzzy orange and yellow eyebrows protruded from the edge of his sharp brow bone, resembling the soft down of a juvenile oriole. A matching woolly mustache with a few sparse red hairs sprinkled throughout also served as a disarming diversion for his parrot-esque nose. There was a bizarre beauty to him that was difficult to capture in one viewing, especially while being nagged with the question of just how far a fall a Poiseau could survive.

Several students gasped at the fear of having to watch this superannuated screwball fall to his death before their eyes on the first day of academy. To their horror, he abruptly flopped backwards, the pink frayed edges of his housecoat the last they saw of him before he vanished, seeming to be falling a great distance.

He emerged from the bottom of a painstakingly polished, spiral slide that served as a quick descent from the balcony. Most students laughed, having not noticed the great slide before them due to his distraction. One student, however, was not amused.

“If this is our first lesson or something... not impressed,” she announced irreverently.

“Duly noted. I hope you’ll allow me to try to change your mind. You see-” Professor Globus began.

“Those of us with a history of anxiety, nervous episodes, and post-traumatic stress disorder would beg to differ,” she shakily interrupted, feigning tears and sniffles as her eyes darted around the room for sympathizers, “I really think you should consider the sensitivities of your audience before pulling something like that. You know, artistic and philosophical minds are also some of the most tormented and-”

“This will be a great environment to work on that,” Globus calmly interjected. “Historical philosophy has taught us that, whoever wishes to become a philosopher must learn not to be frightened by absurdities.”

Before the troubled pupil could retort, Gole beckoned the group to the stage centered in the circular room with a flick of his delicate, blush sleeve that playfully danced through the atmosphere behind him. Gole Globus, while best known for his ingenious combo-lessons of philosophy and art, was also a master mixer of fashion and alchemy. Often partnering with the adept alchemist Windsor Snell, the two created otherworldly garments. They used a coveted secret process that seemed to make each exquisite piece physically adapt to its wearer. It was tough to top a genuine Globus-Snell garment, and the two promised exclusivity with one another.

The students stood atop the white marble stage, many gazing upward in awe at the incredible wood carvings that climbed the walls and ceiling. While the contractors had monotonously rattled their way through stone and steel to create the rigid uniformity required to modernize the building, Globus serenely sculpted his imagination up the walls of his new classroom and study.

“*La rêve de Guif*,” Globus bellowed, pointing at the first of five wood-chiseled pieces, “Guif’s dream.”

“*A cochemar’s more like it*,” a student snickered from the back of the group, just below earshot, “I don’t remember signing up for theology.”

“Both our knowledge and mysteries surrounding creation and existence play an integral role in the topics we’ll talk about in this course. Art, science, and yes, even *theology* are all relevant to philosophy,” Globus continued, scanning the

room. He was no stranger to criticism and had especially prepared himself to receive it this year given his recent hiatus.

“This room requires receptivity,” Professor Gole projected, holding his pointer finger in the air, “folks feeling inflexible are free to flee.”

The moment his last words left his lips, they transformed into a kaleidoscope of translucent, bubble-like butterflies beaming with beautiful hues of teal and pink. Most students gasped, but nobody budged, eyes peeled in amazement.

Initially, the simultaneous attention rendered Globus’s creations even more beautiful. Their simple wings transformed into complex, phoenix-like works of art that emanated their own twinkling light. It wasn’t long, however, before the intensity behind the pupils’ curious entrancement caused the bubble-flies to glow as if they were hot coals beneath a pair of bellows. As their surface glows intensified, each bubbly bug’s fluttery ascent became more frantic. They struggled to rise as their hollow interiors filled with warm, pink liquid. Beads of condensation began to drip from their swelling bodies as their labored flaps slowed to a... *Pop!*

Pop!

Pop! Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

A chorus of screams, laughs, groans, and gasps sang beneath the plops of soggy, pink foam globs raining upon the students. Professor Globus had, in the most pretentious fashion, popped open an umbrella before the downpour and remained unglopped. With the same smug grin he had held through the entire display, he declared:

“And that’s it for today!”

Many students were amused. Some were annoyed or indifferent. A few were *enraged*. The board took their complaints very seriously and barred Professor Gole Globus from teaching that semester. He was allowed to return upon the condition that he sign an agreement to refrain from “any and all debauchery, including (but not limited to) lessons and presentations with solely theatrical, artistic, or theological purposes.”

Reluctantly, he signed the agreement, but not without adding his own clause:

“The Cadence Ceremony, an intrinsic element of Poiseau life, will continue to be artistically and elegantly executed by Professor Gole Globus: Official Master of Ceremonies.”

Nobody was certain how Gole Globus could handle his enormous workload while putting on phenomenal ceremonies year after year. With no desire to take on the task, the board saw no choice but to allow it and provided their sign off.

Upon his return, the board begrudgingly granted Professor Globus a new name placard outside his classroom on account of his glossy, new, self-appointed title.



“Official Master of Ceremonies,” Rhea read aloud in her fanciest tone, jestingly holding up her index finger.

She had remained hidden as she slinked through the rear hallways of the academy and arrived at Professor Globus’s massive doors. Even as an unschooled fledgling, Rhea knew the old wing of the academy better than most of its students.

She slowly peeled back the right door just enough for her to squeeze through and entered Professor Globus’s classroom, pulling it closed with her hands behind her back as she quietly stepped inside. She had been visiting since she was able to venture out onto the planes, so Gole Globus was accustomed to her just dropping in every week or so.

Rhea carefully heel-and-toed her thick-soled boots across the dusty wooden floor, keeping an eye intently on the professor’s windowed office door to ensure she wasn’t detected. She could see the vibrant orange knots wiggling atop his bobbing head while he scribbled on the panes of glass that lined the interior walls. When she reached its exterior, she crouched beside the closed office door, still peering at the lightly frosted glass while she tried to silence her breathing.

Moving in slow motion, she delicately placed her hand on the well-worn brass knob and cupped her fingers around it.

Before she could even apply pressure, a voice boomed behind her:

“RHEA LEBEC!”

CHAPTER 5

PEEKABOO



In her startled state, she tumbled clumsily into a rumpled pile in front of the office door. She instantly felt her face become flush and stood quickly to hastily brush the dust from her clothing. Once she had steadied, she gave her outfit a few tugs and straightened her posture in an attempt to recover.

“How do you *always* do that?” Rhea exasperatedly demanded.

A rascally, pearly-toothed smile grew across Professor Globus’s freckled face as he stood triumphantly upon the center stage. His fiery tresses were bound neatly into rows of buns that were held together with a single bone hair pin jutting out from each one’s center.

His garb, however, was contrastingly kinetic: composed entirely of vapor, a gown of constantly flowing streams rippled across his chest and trickled behind his back into

flounces of soft yellows, greens, and blues. Neon yellow eels perfectly traced the garment's outer seams and left crackling trails of electricity on its surface that smoldered out with shimmers of copper and gold. Typically dangerous to the touch for a Poiseau, the professor had personally trained and built trust with the creatures with the intention of creating a wearable environment for them.

All in an average day's attire for Gole Globus.

His arms were crossed at his chest and one of his heeled wooden clogs impatiently tapped the marble beneath it as if he had been waiting there for some time. Still making eye contact with Rhea, he uncrossed his arms and extended them smoothly outward, circling them slowly back until his palms were concealing his face.

As he quickly unmasked, a glittery mist burst out in an explosive peekaboo the likes of which only Globus could produce. Rhea fanned her hand in front of her face with furrowed brows.

Once the sparkly show had dissipated, she saw the professor now standing beside her. He held one arm elegantly in front of him while the other hung heavily behind him, sending the material of his gown swirling down his arm and dripping from his extended pointer finger.

“And you *always* never answer my question!” Rhea complained.

Professor Globus straightened his posture and gave a hard exhale through his nose.

“You’ll find that it’s often better to find your own answers—” he began but paused as he could see Rhea was not in the mood for philosophizing.

He beckoned her to his office and led her to a small alchemy table at the office’s shadowy rear. There were two large bookcases pushed into the corner and covered by faded velvet curtains. The professor swept a curtain panel open with the back of his hand and decisively retrieved a bottle from its shelf.

“These are the ground hooves of a doe,” he began, holding the corked glass bottle between his fingers.

Rhea eagerly stepped forward to get a better look at the bottle’s contents: a very fine, white powder that shimmered angelically even in the low light. At first alit with intrigue, her face scrunched into a grimace at the thought of how the substance must have been obtained. The professor sensed her trepidation and crouched to speak at eye level.

“A special white doe like this isn’t killed, Rhea. Hachtax wanted her remains to be of use to us, so instead of reclaiming her through rerooting, the body was left upon a bed of her rarest and most beautiful flowers. It was one of the finest ceremonies in Poiseau history,” he explained as he gazed off reminiscently.

“What does it do?” Rhea asked quizzically.

She had slipped the bottle from Globus's fingers and was now shaking it precariously in front of her face. Upon noticing, he hurriedly snatched it back with an irked exhalation and clasped it firmly in his fist.

“Everything in here is to be handled delicately,” he said through partially clenched teeth.

Rhea cowered slightly and placed her hands behind her back as she peered upwards apologetically. The professor momentarily examined the powder, pausing to close his eyes and breathe slowly before letting out a mighty exhale through his cavernous nostrils. He opened his eyes and gave Rhea a reassuring nod.

Now stiff and attentive, Rhea watched as the professor approached the alchemy table. She examined the strange configuration of shapes carved into the table's wooden surface: a triangle encapsulated by a ring of circles, some of them partially or fully shaded in.

Her curiosity nearly allowed a question to burst from her lips, but she diligently remained silent and observed.

Professor Globus placed an empty glass beaker in the center of the table. He carefully uncorked the doe powder and gently sprinkled just enough to cover its circular bottom. Leaning in intently, he blinked a few times as he confirmed he had dispensed the appropriate amount. He then carefully recorked the container and placed the prized ingredient back on its shelf.

Rhea watched as her unofficial mentor scuttled like a squirrel across the wooden planks of his office floor. He frantically perused his supply shelves, his wide hips bobbling between his bookcases as he came out empty handed. It was, at most, a gentle jostle for Globus, who quickly recovered.

His poor yellow eels, however, were sent wriggling in wild zigzags towards his shoulders to seek refuge from their now unsteady waters. As they retreated, the eels spurted small, panicked zaps of electricity that zipped up the sides of his neck and vaulted themselves from the tips of his hairs in puffs of off-white smoke.

The miniature lightning bolts weren't intense enough to injure the professor, but his singed eyebrows and mustache would need some extensive primming. After giving his head a hearty shake, he brushed off the blackened tips of his facial hair with his hands and continued preparing his demonstration.

Although she wouldn't say it aloud, Rhea greatly admired Professor Globus's unwavering confidence and charisma. As she looked upon him now, though, he was just another puzzled Poiseau puttering clumsily through life.

Witnessing his fumble evoked confusion within her. It was a little funny, but she dared not laugh. It was a little disheartening, but she dared not sigh. There was no one else around to give her any cues.

As Rhea stood uncertain in the silence and vulnerability of the situation, she began mentally formulating a response, mistakenly grasping the low hanging fruit that was her experiential memories. Voices once cackling at her own incoordination had turned on her teacher, urging her that this peculiar situation was *asking* for some degradation.

She nearly succumbed to the negative pressure until the reason for her visit jiggled its way back to the forefront of her mind. As confusing as its presence was, the feeling it gave her was something inherently real.

Instantly, the imaginary agitators fizzled out, leaving only the silly, blue, bubble fish staring at her with smacking lips. She no longer heard words, only the sweet silence of clarity.

“Delicately, Mister Globes!” she sweetly teased.

Surprised at her wit, Professor Globus glanced up at her with a scrunched-face smile.

“Have a seat, I’m about to answer your question,” he said while putting the finishing touches on his presentation.

Rhea hopped upon some abandoned wooden chairs stacked beneath a white cloth and pulled Brie from her satchel to place her in her lap. Brie fidgeted and let out a couple croaky groans, but remained asleep. As Rhea settled into her seat and stroked the dark, silky strands behind Brie’s shoulders, she reveled in the warm, comfortable feeling of caring for another. She wondered if this might be how a sower felt with her fledgling.

The professor let out a boisterous “Ahem!” that recaptured Rhea’s attention.

He stood tall with ripples of sea green and soft yellow mist cascading across his inflated chest. Holding a red velvet cloth firmly out to the side to conceal the alchemy table, he resembled some sort of otherworldly matador in impractical wooden shoes. Without speaking, he opened his hands to abruptly drop his makeshift curtain to the floor with a heavy, muffled *fwump*.

To Rhea’s disappointment, the table sat empty. She shifted her eyes to Globus, then back to the table, then back to Globus again.

His eyes were shut tightly and he appeared to be in deep concentration. She was becoming impatient when suddenly, the surface of the alchemy table illuminated with the warm, honey colored plasma of the afternoon.

To Rhea’s astonishment, a twenty-five centimeter tall Professor Globus rose from the plasma, his every detail matching life size Gole Globus toe to tip. Frozen in disbelief, her hand stopped mid-stroke on Brie’s back, who twitched grumpily for more pets. Rhea inattentively wriggled her fingertips over Brie’s sides while the tiny professor twirled, tip-toed, and *tendu*’d before her awestricken eyes.

After a few moments, the pool of plasma on the alchemy table began to disappear, swirling towards its center as it shrunk in size. Mini-Globus was also quickly washed away,

but not before crying out tiny, high pitched squeaks of desperation abruptly muffled by his own disintegration.

The professor opened his eyes.

“Well?” he inquired, “What did you think?”

“I... was he... *real*?” a stunned Rhea replied.

Globus picked up the velvet curtain from the dusty wooden floor and gave it a few shakes before laying it flat over the bare alchemy table.

“He is, like you and me, a conglomeration of cells materialized for a creator’s purpose,” he replied.

“So he just died?” Rhea asked uneasily.

“No, of course not. He was unmaterialized,” the professor confidently replied.

Rhea felt reassured that what she saw was another Globus illusion. Her worry gave way to curiosity.

“I liked it, but how’s it s’posed to answer my question? I think I actually have more now,” she declared.

The professor gleefully clasped his hands and took a few hurried steps towards her. He reached around the back of his head and pulled what appeared to be a white ping pong ball from his hair. He held the white sphere between two fingers and extended it towards Rhea so she could get a better look.

It was very clean and glossy. It was solid, but still seemed lightweight based on the minimal pressure Professor Globus applied with his fingertips.

“A simple, polished ball it seems,” Globus explained theatrically, placing the orb in the center of his clothed alchemy table.

“Until...” he crescendoed as he stepped backwards to stand beside Rhea.

The sphere began to vibrate and glow with increasing intensity. A bright white light flickered from its center and then steadied into a conical beam projecting a three dimensional, full size Gole Globus chasséing in the middle of the room.

Rhea approached the hologram with Brie guarding attentively from her left shoulder. She raked her fingers through the blackened tips of its mustache and watched the twinkling granules smoothly swerve away from her hand before feverishly reorganizing into their proper form.

“These tiny photo-particles both mimic and magnify the original alchemical manifestation by which they were created,” the professor excitedly explained, “they will repeat this pattern infinitely because they are bound by it.”

Rhea was half-listening as she stepped back to watch hol-Globus repeat the waves and smiles she had received from the tiny version only moments prior. She studied the freckles

and creases in the replica's face, features that were lost in its miniature form. The figure before her was indistinguishable from the real professor, but she felt no connection to it. She felt sad for mini-Globus again.

“When her creations bond, it is one of Hachtax’s most pleasurable sensations. Our pristine white doe shared her animal experience with an equally beautiful white stag. Their elements, too, share this eternal bond,” he continued as he walked towards the alchemy table and picked up the white orb, abruptly ending the projection.

“This ball was hand-carved from the white stag’s antler. It took years. If, here on the material plane, we combine this with the powder from his beloved’s hoof, we witness some masterful mimicry,” he said as he held the white stag horn sphere over a beaker of doe powder.

Once the stag horn was within ten centimeters of it, the doe powder began to react as if being pulled magnetically. Rhea watched closely as the ultra fine dust tightly balled itself into the largest solid sphere it could muster (about the size of an extra plump blueberry). As the professor gently swirled the piece of antler in small figure eights over the beaker’s opening, the dust sphere hovered directly beneath, matching the antler’s pace as if held by an invisible tether.

Although fascinated, Rhea sensed a tragic desperation in the doe powder’s reaction. She imagined the majestic pair frolicking together in luscious, golden fields speckled with orange and purple. Their immaculate white coats that shone

brightly against the colored backdrop were paled by the aura of their mutual adoration.

She thought it must have been the kind of love she had only read about in poems and stories. She wondered if a love like that would be a part of her life someday.

She tightly clenched her eyelids shut and stretched them wide upon reopening to refocus on the sterile glass beaker housing the physical remnants of the sweet, star-crossed lovers. Fluttering her lashes with a few rapid blinks, she shifted her gaze towards the professor and listened attentively.

“Add alchemy and the spiritual plane and we’ve further magnified its effect. Essentially, it’s an imagination projector. I’ve been using it to fill in for me when I need to be somewhere else,” he said with a sly grin as he abruptly scooped the white stag horn into his palm and plopped it back atop the alchemy table.

The hologram powered back on, but Rhea’s eyes were on the ball of hoof powder that immediately crumbled into a dusty, delicate pile as soon as the stag bone left its reach. Globus was still smiling at his likeness boldly occupying the center of the room as he casually grabbed the beaker, jostling its contents before carelessly reaching back to slip it behind the velvet drape concealing his elemental reserves. Rhea subtly shuddered with each *tink* of glass on glass as he fumblingly fit the beaker into an opening on a crowded shelf.

“I won’t go into the details of the alchemical manifestation of a spiritually derived embodiment, but that’s how we get our raw footage. The ancient fig-mulberry wood of the table retains the memories of any and all divinations made upon its surface, so they just need to be drawn out. The doe’s hoof acts as a sort of charger for our white stag horn projector here- when placed close enough. And then... *voilà!*” Professor Globus explained with his signature gesticulative enthusiasm.

“The power harnessed within the charged orb draws out the remains from the most recent materialization carried out there, and then transmits them into observable, light-emitting particles that put on a skillfully mimetic playette before our very eyes,” he elaborated with an energetic, breathy tone.

Rhea sat silently and attempted to visualize the elaborate processes the professor had outlined. Brie sat comfortably curled upon her shoulder stoop, aware but indifferent.

“I wonder if that’s what the bubble fish does,” Rhea pondered aloud.

CHAPTER 6

YOU NAMED IT?



Professor Globus tilted his head and raised an inquisitive eyebrow in Rhea's direction.

“Do tell, my dear, what exactly is a *bubble fish*?” he asked condescendingly.

“Hmm. I guess he doesn’t know after all,” Rhea muttered disappointedly to Brie from the corner of her mouth.

Brie stared blankly for a few moments before slowly sliding her purple eyelids closed, peeling them open again with a faint *pwah*.

“Rhea. Need I remind you of the horny toad incident?” Professor Globus asked firmly.

Rhea’s eyes widened and she clasped her hand around her left thumb as she recalled the mishap she had with the strange creature. She had a habit of getting up close and personal with some of Hachtax’s most ghastly looking inhabitants.

When she was a relatively new fledgling, she lost the tip of her thumb to a hungry horntoad after attempting to share her cashews. Professor Globus mended her wound, but not without sternly warning her that Hachtax rendered some of its life aesthetically unappealing for good reason.

While she appreciated classic beauty, Rhea was never repelled by the repugnant. In fact, she often preferred it, as she found unblemished beauty to be frighteningly delicate. She never told anyone, but she sometimes pretended to be

one of the statuesque sowers standing unshakably for her arbonatal pause.

Initially, a few creative sowers began creating replicas of their family trees while they stood proudly beside them nourishing their young. Over time, curiosity and boredom created a cultural phenomenon of nearly ever sower spending this stationary provisioning time as a Poiseau sculpture, her hands creating a base for metal trees, flowers, and animals shaped by her wiry extremities. The best *pausers* were so revered, eager Poiseaux would form lines for an opportunity to pose next to one.

Rhea had barely managed to form a crude heart shape with her hand tentacles after months of attempts. She figured she must be better suited for Luxfaery lancing.

“I remember,” she said abruptly, “this is different! Bubleu is cute!”

“You named it?” the professor exclaimed in disbelief.

Rhea snapped her hand over her mouth to avoid any further outbursts that surprised the professor. Her eyes meandered from side to side as she waited for him to speak.

“Why don’t you show me this Bubleu of yours?” he asked eagerly.

Still covering her mouth, Rhea shook her head vigorously in protest.

“Well then. I’m sure it’s likely just a common fish or frog,” he said dismissively while turning to fiddle with some of the ingredients on his shelves.

Rhea pondered whether it was safe to share her secret cove with her mentor. After careful consideration, she determined her curiosity outweighed her need for secrecy. Besides, Gole Globus was known for his mysterious, tight-lipped nature when it came to his work.

“I’ll show you where I found him... but you can’t tell anyone!” she demanded as she hopped to her feet and adjusted the satchel strap on her shoulder.

Globus grabbed a black cloak and fastened it beneath his freckly chin. He followed Rhea, who insisted they move in stealth mode through the giant wooden gates, down the empty hallways, and out the rear entrance of the Academy. He smiled coyly as they hopped the stone pavers only meters away from his office’s convenient rear exit.

Midday’s honeysuckle hue painted the atmosphere with an inviting warmth as the pair marched through the thick forest behind the academy. Were it possible to travel the sky tunnels for a bird’s eye view, one could clearly see a small, circular, seemingly empty valley sitting curiously within the thick pines. On foot, however, the area was completely obscured by bushy branches, unruly vines, and immense rock formations.

Rhea stopped walking and glanced cautiously to the left and then to the right. She only intended to share her special spot with Professor Globus. Sensing it was safe to approach, she

grasped a large curtain of vines in her arms and walked them over to the branch she used as a tie back.

The professor watched in awe as this barely post-sprout fledgling arranged the environment as if it were her home. She strained for a moment as she struggled to remove a wedge-shaped rock from the wall in front of them, taking a few shuffled steps backwards upon its release.

Mostly confounded by his own lack of awareness, Gole Globus stood frozen with his caterpillar eyebrows hugging tightly above a scrunched nose and loosely hanging jaw. He had navigated most of Hachtax, but had somehow missed a small patch of it right behind his place of employment.

As he came to terms with his shortcoming, he realized Rhea was no longer in sight. The wedge sat upright on the leaf-littered ground plasma where Rhea had plopped it, just left of the narrow gap it had been concealing. A faint, blueish light peeked out from the vertical split in the rocks that drew the professor towards it.

He was too large to fit through, so he pressed his cheeks upon the broken limestone on either side of the opening, flattening his palms on the outer walls as if he were holding them up. Although he only had a partial view, what he saw was breathtaking.

The uneven ground shone with a soft viridescence that could calm even the antsiest of minds. Near the top edges of the valley, unimposing insects and rabbits relaxed in silent harmony, nibbling the plentiful greens that blanketed the

area in dense, curly patches. Above, blue birds amicably transported tired wooly caterpillars on their backs through white branches ripe with hearty, pale fruit.

Life here was completely unaffected by the discordant polarities that drove extreme natures and appearances everywhere else. There was no hatred, no love, and all needs were met without suffering or untimely death.

Artifacts from Poiseaux past suggest that Hachtax was originally a vast planet with consistent elevation throughout its spherical domain. Once the planet birthed creatures capable of material manipulation, its solid terrain became malleable, ebbing and flowing with the shared energy of its inhabitants.

Beings with such power rarely coincide peacefully. After years of strife, Poiseaux vanity and selfishness were the key elements that shaped the planet's modern landscape: ostentatiously high, unstable peaks with visually striking colonies clustered along intense slopes that led to black, fathomless depths below.

While the most beauteous of Hachtax life resided on its opulent high ground, its deep, lightless valleys housed some of the land's most grotesque and fearful creatures. Those who followed Guif's teachings believed that Great Terror Prunc himself resided in the darkness below them, detained only by the purity of the light she had bestowed upon Hachtax and the Poiseaux.

The community's religious were easily identified with a green, glowing ring around their family tree at night. Each day, they could be seen tediously peeling dozens of defunct bitter oyster mushrooms from their dead wood fences to make room for more of the light emitting fungus they believed to repel the wretched Pruncc.

Regardless of whether Pruncc truly existed on the same material plane, Poiseaux were strictly forbidden from leaving the plasma floor, whose perimeter served as a physical boundary between the safety of Poiseau territory and the imminent danger of obscurity. Although there had never been an incident, uncadenced Poiseaux were also restricted from traveling the plasmatic plane under darkness (a rule certainly left untold to Rhea).

These disparities of modern life swirled through Professor Globus's mind on a nearly constant cycle, nagging at him for one of his brilliant philosophical solutions. In this moment, however, as he watched a family of plump baby squirrels frolicking with a friendly serpent, there was only peace.

A sudden darkness and a pair of beaming eyes swiftly ended Globus's moment of serenity and he leapt backwards in fright. He frantically pushed up his cloak's hood that had flopped over his face and kept his distance as he warily peered back into the gap. His fingers trembled as they tightly clutched the thickly layered black velvet of his hood that was now draped around his neck.

“You comin’?” Rhea's voice chirped from behind the rock wall.

The professor loosened his death grip and breathed a hefty sigh of relief. Rhea was certainly keeping him on his toes today.

“Not now, we’ll need to come back when it’s dark,” he answered quietly.

“Ok. It’s kind of boring during the day anyway,” she stated casually as she hopped sideways out of the entrance and began using her body weight to budge the rock wedge back towards it.

As the two wandered back towards the Academy, Rhea shared her bubble fish encounter with an intrigued professor. He instructed her to meet him at the secret cove just after day’s end. Though she knew it may be difficult to sneak out unnoticed, she was overwhelmingly excited to learn more about her strange Bubleu and agreed.

Once Gole Globus had departed, Rhea knelt to retie her brown high tops, hiking up her oversized red leggings as she stood. She breathed deeply and stared ahead intently, debating whether she should go home and risk facing her tree mates or simply remain in the area until nightfall.

Micah had a history of occasionally looking for her at mealtime, so she decided returning home was the best option.

“I need you on your best behavior when we get home, got it Brie?” Rhea asked into her open satchel.

Brie responded with a long, scampish smile and a closed eye shrug. Rhea smiled dotingly and gently rubbed her fingertips across her cool, lilac eyelids.

They journeyed home under reddening sky tunnels and tangerine tones in the luminous foundation below. Late afternoon was a particularly ambrosial time for Brie, who had already climbed to the crown of Rhea's head to gobble up the swarms of thrips attracted by its citrus hue.

Rhea helped herself to some salmonberries from a nearby bush before placing a handful in her satchel. She thought about how their deep orange, yellow, and red flesh perfectly matched the time of day. It was fiery and busy, alive with an agitating fury.

She couldn't wait to be in the pale stillness of sweet, calm Bubleu.

CHAPTER 7

TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME



As Rhea neared her neighborhood, she stopped by a small pond that would occasionally be home to some glow snails. Brie climbed down the slope of her back as she crouched for a better look.

Rhea could often be found dawdling here on her way home, picking dandelions or watching Brie hunt for insects. She rarely felt drawn to her family tree, so she had several spots peppered throughout the forest to avoid it.

There were no snails in the pond to watch, so Rhea rose to her feet. She stared in home's direction and felt a faint queasiness in her stomach as she thought about the transition she had to undergo when she arrived.

Her tender and sibling would both be there, the Poiseaux with whom she spent the most amount of her time, but with whom she felt the least amount her self.

When Rhea looked within, she saw a goofy, smart, and caring Poiseau. Sadly, she had already been tersely told that her energy was not welcomed and she learned to put up a forcefield around Micah and Jesh. Beneath it, she became obedient, boring, and sometimes crass.

The only dread denser than the thought of her family's inhospitality was for the mounting list of chores that had surely been left undone. Rhea never questioned why, but her tender was exempt from regular cleaning. Micah was either busy or dragooning her into his duties.

She resented her unsought title of “Maid of the Tree,” but got by using imaginative chore rebrandings. Hand-washing the dishes doubled as underwater hide-and-seek, where Brie swam beneath the bubbles and dodged the drinking glass Rhea used to scope her out.

Brie always enjoyed their games, but was initially hesitant to participate when Rhea asked for her help.

“Brie, come help with the dishes,” she said sternly, mirroring her tender’s tone.

Brie would grunt in protest and sometimes even thrash to avoid the large rectangular basin she had just been splashing in the day before. Rhea paused and thought about how she felt when Micah or her tender ordered her to clean up and concluded that certain word sounds must possess special powers.

“Come play hide-and-seek with me, Brie?” she said sweetly, remembering Varna’s voice.

Brie bolted across the wooden counter top and skidded to a halt just before the sink’s edge. Her spongy, white tongue popped out between clamped black jaws as she bowed the front half of her body to prepare for a tremendous leap. Her salamander tail wiggling determinedly behind her, she quickly thrust herself forward into the dishwater with a *plop*.

Ten out of ten - barely a splash.

“*Word spells*,” Rhea thought with a smile.

From that moment on, Rhea remained cognizant of its power and looked for opportunities to cast word magic on those around her. Having absolutely no luck with Micah and Jesh, she turned to smaller, less abrasive targets who didn't respond to rapport building with hostility.

Ants, beetles, caterpillars, and dragonflies responded well to simple melodic poems. The lyrics could be gibberish as long as the voice behind them carried a pleasant fondness that brewed within the little bugs a deep sense of cherishment and motivation.

Eels, fish, and snakes preferred hypnotizing notes that lulled them into a zombified entrancement. For these songs, Rhea used only a few words that she stretched into long, guttural warbles. She had made progress with befriending a few of these scaly specimens, but had yet to find the right tune to mollify the skittish *Ophisaurus*, who would become so easily frightened he would sometimes run away without his own tail.

She wondered if her voice was becoming too gruff. Although she typically enjoyed the sound of her own singing, Rhea hadn't yet sung for anyone who could give a discernible opinion. Brie seemed to enjoy it, but she was far from an unbiased ear.

Although few would admit it, conventional beauty superseded most Poiseau traits in modern society. The few times Rhea had interacted with similarly staged fledglings, it seemed there were prior discussions she must have missed

regarding how she was supposed to appear and behave. As a result, she learned quickly and cruelly that it wouldn't matter to the other Poiseaux if *she* liked her own singing voice because a rigid, complex approval system was already in place to determine its caliber.

Rhea had never heard anyone describe the invisible social acceptance system by which most Poiseaux operated. Micah seemed to understand it better than most, but he usually opted to belittle her for not grasping it rather than teach her about it. He had managed to dissociate from the LeBec name's negative reputation through early success and being graced with orsange, but was not known for his kindness.

Jesh, a social outcast himself, would rant detailed histories in her direction when he felt compelled to vent. She sat stiffly and quietly while he spoke, keeping her eyes fixed to the wall next to him. She only half-understood his challenging vocabulary through context, but she sensed immense pain in his voice.

Unlike the sugarcoated stories and idealistic allegories shared with her peers, Jesh and Micah painted a very negative picture of Poiseaux relationships that sent Rhea seeking one with nature. Despite her lack of socialization, she felt fulfilled through her adventures and animal interactions. In fact, she never gave much thought to having friends or close family.

Fledglings, even young sprouts like Rhea, were remarkably resilient and it seemed for them life rarely lost its luster.

Rhea gathered Brie in her satchel and ascended the dark, overgrown hillside on the other side of the pond. Although she had never explored it, a row of peculiarly perpendicular root structures caught her eye. Late day's glow was dimming, but there was still a hint of rouge blushing beneath its copper hues that told her she had time to take the long way home.

“Stairs! I knew it!” Rhea exclaimed as she hopped the large root bows jutting out from the vine covered slope.

Although the sky tunnels were still emitting light and thus illuminating the ground plasma below, a band of jungly weeping willow trees formed a permanent shade that bent over the entire hillside. Areas like this with limited light reach produced unappealing undergrowth that exhibited some atypical behaviors.

After swiftly mounting nine or ten stairs, Rhea noticed a palpable change in the atmosphere. It felt colder and barely responded to her thoughts and movements. She had never been afraid of the dark, but in this moment she felt compelled to reach for her gem-lit friend.

She hugged her bag tightly to her chest as she lightly rested the scuffed rubber sole of her high top upon the next step, dragging it across its bumpy bark surface in search of a safe landing.

Before she could fully open the flap concealing Brie, she felt the sudden tension of her shoelace tightly constricting her right ankle. She quickly reached down to free it, but was

powerfully thrusted upside down the moment she touched the strangulating snare.

She could no longer tell where she was, but felt an icy tingling in her right foot as her body dangled by her ankle. To her horror, what she thought was her shoelace began spiraling farther up her calf and painfully pinched the pit of her knee.

“Ouch! Hey!” tiny Rhea shrieked retaliatorily as if whatever was dangling her in the darkness would feel remorse.

Brie freed herself from the folds of Rhea’s bag and lunged upwards with a mighty flap of her juvenile bat wings. She reached for Rhea’s leg, but mistakenly gripped the cloth of her baggy beige tunic which sent her rolling clumsily down Rhea’s side.

Fear locked Rhea’s arms even tighter around her satchel to keep it from tumbling into the blackness below while the rest of her muscles followed suit in an ineffectual attempt to save Brie from doing the same. Rhea gasped as she felt short, intentional tugs at her scalp she feared were creatures pulling her into the darkness.

A fleeting moment of relief swept over her when she felt the familiar, frenzied flapping of fleshy wings tangled in her baby-fine black tresses.

“Brie! Light!” Rhea cried as the stranglehold around her leg tightened.

Brie firmed her grip on Rhea's dangling hair and clamped her eyelids shut with an intensity that bathed the abysmal pit behind the willows in a blinding flash of white light.

Instantly, much of the thorny foliage that had been wrestling and writhing upon the deadened ground plasma beneath Rhea's head disintegrated and she plummeted towards its cleared surface.

Brie was merely the size of an average chipmunk but had the tenacity of the runt of the litter. As her beloved friend fell headfirst towards an unforgiving sleeping plane, she rocketed upwards with her wings superlatively outspread, gem beaming, and front feet clinging to tufts of black hair.

Although she was far too tiny to lift raccoon-sized Rhea, she successfully lifted her head enough to rotate her legs beneath her and provide a safer landing.

Brie dimmed her gem light to a visible level and plopped herself in front of a shaken Rhea. Her leggings had torn and revealed scraped knees from the landing, but she was otherwise unharmed. Brie diligently stiffened into candlestick pose to light the small surrounding area while Rhea found her bearings.

Rhea slowly pushed the tousled locks from her face and blinked a few heavy blinks through scrunched eyebrows and cheeks, glaring upon seeing a grey, slate-like material beneath her. She wondered why the ground looked so strange until she noticed it wasn't responding to Brie's gem

light as it usually did. She placed her palm upon its surface and shuddered at its cold, lifeless touch.

There were black and grey ashes and debris scattered around them as if the sinister undergrowth had been incinerated, but there was no sign of the snakelike foe that had Rhea in its grasp. She knelt on her bloodied kneecaps and scooped Brie into her cupped hands.

“Good girl,” she said gratefully to her batamander through her closed, violet eyelids.

Brie bashfully shrugged her shoulders and peeled the corners of her mouth into a wide, cheeky smile upon hearing Rhea’s praise, causing her gem to glow a little brighter.

Rhea’s smile suddenly retreated and her eyes widened as she stared upon the terror now sharing their modest, candlelit space. It was a being composed of giant, twirling vines whose ends wriggled and thrashed like jumping worms in their search for stability.

Suspended menacingly about twelve meters above them was its serpentine head shaped from the largest banana leaves Rhea had ever seen. Each dull, brown leaf’s brittle edge curled backwards at the serpent’s lips and dusted its mustache of beige and black warts with powdery debris as it peered longingly below from the round discolorations where its eyes should have been.

Rhea was as intrigued as she was terrified, but knew this was no time for taming and leapt to her feet.

“Brie! Light!” she shouted confidently as she grasped Brie in her right hand and held her at head level.

Rhea slowly stepped backwards, holding her left arm in front of her eyes to shield them from Brie’s blinding light that once again flashed through the willowed hillside.

“Brie! Candlestick!” she commanded, continuing her backward saunter.

As Brie’s gem light dimmed, Rhea smelled cinders and hoped to see the Bine Beast’s ashy remains before her. Instead, she was met with the creature’s face now at eye level with her, crying blood-red tears from its frayed banana leaf face. Its body was nearly obliterated from Brie’s blinding blasts, but its infatuation with the light was beyond reason and it began violently pursuing them.

Rhea couldn’t possibly navigate the unfamiliar blackness without the help of Brie’s light, so she had no choice but to try and outrun the tattered, ropy reptilian beyond the tree line and hope that it would be thwarted by the remaining daylight.

Rhea’s agility kept her and Brie just out of their assailant’s reach, but her speed was no match for the Bine Beast who was ten times her size and moved in convulsive lunges like an oversized inch worm.

Its anguishing screeches brought tears to Rhea’s eyes as they pierced the cold, dead atmosphere surrounding them. She

was growing accustomed to the frightened cries of lanced Luxfaeries, but this sounded like thousands of them being simultaneously speared at once.

Adrenaline numbed her burning legs as they carried her towards the wall of dense willows that barricaded them from the living plasmatic plane. The serpent slowed gradually, leaving a trail of snapped stems and dead leaves behind it each time its body crashed against the solid slate ground. Its cries became broken and gurgled, but it still dragged its tattered remains as quickly as it could in its pursuit of the precious beacon.

“Eyes open, Brie!” Rhea whispered through heaving breaths.

She knew as she uttered those words she needed to act immediately or risk them being her last. Suddenly, as if overtaken by a huntress’ spirit, Rhea mounted the knotted roots of a willow and leapt fearlessly onto its dangling limb moments before her light disappeared. While airborne, Brie scurried onto Rhea’s shoulder, fatigued but prepared to light the way when called upon.

Catkins clogged her nostrils and thin, narrow leaves sliced her knuckles as Rhea’s momentum whipped the tiny pair through the dense, oblique umbra. Clinging to the willow’s branch with all her might, she feared they may fall short until a glint of pale, red light peeked in and out of view just meters in front of her.

Rhea released her grip and flung her body towards the red light, which became brighter as she cleared the bristly branch

barrier. She floated forward and inhaled the familiar warmth of the lit atmosphere that hugged her body, but still had a substantial fall to endure.

She tucked her knees into her chest and flexed her toes towards them, aiming the soles of her shoes at the ground plasma below. With focus, she plunged her foot barbs through her brown rubber soles and created sturdy, metal springs beneath each of her feet.

As a tot, Micah gifted Rhea with some unique abilities typically reserved for Hachtax's elite. He was practicing them himself and Rhea seemed to catch on quickly, so the two would spring-barb around the LeBec family tree and see what feats they could accomplish. Rhea could never jump quite as high as Micah, but he would always wait for her with an outstretched hand.

Although the two no longer practiced together, Rhea still kept the ability in her back pocket for emergencies like this one. She braced herself for a hard landing and felt a stinging jolt zap through her ankles as the springs compressed on the ground just outside the willow wall with a *clank!*

Rhea's mighty spring-barbs thrust her tucked body forward, sending her and Brie rolling down the decline towards unfamiliar but still partially lit territory. She somersaulted on level ground with Brie close behind her until her leather heels smacked into the wall of a giant clay structure, her springs clanking against one another as they wobbled with the residual force of her crash landing.

Lying on her back with her legs sticking straight up the naturally formed wall, she calmed her heaving chest and inspected her limbs for injuries. She had a few scuffs and scrapes from the tumble, but neither saw nor felt anything serious. She took a moment to retract her tentacles and then lied inanimate on the brassy hued ground plasma with her arms outstretched.

Brie had rushed to Rhea's side the moment they stopped their descent and hopped upon her exposed belly. Rhea placed a reassuring but exhausted hand on her faithful companion's back and rested her head to gaze at the sky tunnels above. A burgundy, plum, and navy mixture moved like molasses through a drinking straw.

Night was moments away.

CHAPTER 8

WHERE THE RED DAHLIAS GROW



An atrocious, gargling shriek pierced the atmosphere as the Bine Beast torpedoed through the wooded boundary with its battered body. Rhea rolled to her knees and curved her back

into a protective dome for Brie who huddled snugly beneath her chest.

“I got you, Brie,” Rhea whispered through trembling breath as she feared the worst was imminent.

The giant, dried serpent writhed and gnashed for only a few moments before its cries faded away with the dusty flakes of its remains. A putrid flurry of charred, plant bits coated the valley in a blanket of staining soot the likes of which it had never seen.

Rhea slowly lifted her head, which was now covered in foul, crumbly beast bits, and kept Brie concealed behind her hooped arms. Seeing no sign of the Bine Beast, she sat up and slowly examined her surroundings. An eerie silence befell the valley as the last several floating particles came to a rest.

As she stared at the darkening atmosphere around her, hearing only the sound of her thumping heart, tears poured from her eyes as the gravity of the situation set in. Brie snuggled onto her lap to comfort her and offered an empathetic squeak. Rhea peeked down at her companion and wiped her dampened cheeks with her palms, gasping audibly as she lowered them to find her skin smeared in a dark, red liquid.

She began hyperventilating and wiping her hands furiously on the ground beside her while her heavy teardrops plunged around them like aerial bombs. The more she wiped, the

more slippery and thick the deep red juice became. Frantic, she called for Brie's light.

The moment the light made contact with the oily red substance, it dripped cleanly towards the ground as if being sucked by a powerful siphon. It appeared to be moving intelligently down Rhea's cheeks and hands towards a focal point on the dimly glowing ground, leaving no trace as it descended.

The red goo seeped into the ground and pumped through the Poiseaux caverns, spidering into veiny streams only to rejoin upon the rocky wall's surface and form the beginnings of a new plant. Strong, purple stems jutted from the barren clay and sprawled the formation's rocky divots before Rhea's astonished eyes, fanning out lush, fully grown leaves whose grand entrance rivaled that of even the most masterful magician's white dove.

It was now nighttime and the only light available was Brie's dimly lit gem upon Rhea's left shoulder. Rhea cautiously approached the strange indigo growth, leaning in to study its center that had grown buds about to bloom. In a shy but elegant dance, pointed petals of shadowy maroon emerged from their fibrous cocoon and unfolded into an entrancing, symmetrical spiral.

As more flowers and foliage filled in the giant rock's arid landscape, Rhea stepped back to gauge the size of the formation in front of her. She could only see its rear, but the mysterious plant's burgundy blooms seemed to oddly sculpt a pair of legs and a tail.

Not looking to meet any more behemoths today, Rhea stepped closer and plucked the perfect burgundy dahlia from the wall. It dwarfed her cupped hand as she slipped it into her crossbody bag. She gave Brie a reassuring pat and began running in the direction she felt was most likely towards home.



Rhea's navigation skills led her home, but she still had to face Micah and Jesh. On her trek, she thought about what she could tell them that would lessen the blow of her being late for preparing dinner, but nothing seemed to play out very well in her imagination.

After slinking over the neighborhood's many roots and avoiding the glowing halos of bitter oysters, she arrived to a strange feeling at the LeBec family tree. Every window was fully lit and the door was left slightly ajar. She quietly climbed the unkempt root circle to get to the doorway and cautiously peeked in the open crack.

She smelled smoke, but it wasn't the usual stench of Jesh's pipe, it was crisper and more inviting. She gently pushed open the door and stepped into the front hallway when she heard the choppy projection of genuine laughter.

Although she felt excited, she remained silent and crept down the wooden corridor in her usual mouse-like manner. She had nearly reached the voices in the dining room when she was thwarted by a stout figure in a black hooded cloak.

Although she couldn't see any of his features, he didn't seem dangerous.

He quietly rushed her to the stairs and whispered to her that she was in a very dangerous dream and must seek the safety of her bed to wake up.



Rhea awoke discombobulated and sore, peering through crusty eyes at her initially unrecognizable surroundings. She stretched a few seconds longer than usual and wiped the sleepies from her eyes with her fingers, holding her puffy eyelids slightly open before dropping her arms limply onto her blankets.

Her satchel hung dependably on its hook and her clothes were in a pile at her feet. She nudged the well worn heap with the side of her foot a few times, hearing annoyed grunts with each contact. She sat up swiftly and snatched Brie's hideaway to force her awake.

Brie defiantly unfolded her wings and wrapped them over her head to block out the light, snorting cantankerously into the cushy straw bed. Rhea tipped her head to Brie's level and kittenishly batted open her left wing. The tired batamander crabibly popped an eye open to see Rhea's daffy grin centimeters from her face.

“Sweet morning glow, Brie-wee!” Rhea half-whispered.

Brie slowly peeled back her other eyelid, staring blankly for a moment while adjusting the peculiar pupils centered in her bulging white eyes. She arched her slender body and sent her stretch wiggling out her elongated toes.

“I had a cauchemar,” Rhea said as her smile faded.

Brie gave her a puzzled look but jumped to her side to offer support. Rhea stroked the messy, brown tufts of Brie’s fur between her fingers until she noticed the many scrapes and bruises on her own skin. Ruffling the pile of dingy clothes at her feet, she discovered the gaping knee holes in her favorite pair of leggings and let out a perplexed groan.

Brie, who fully recalled their brush with the Bine Beast, scuttled to the floor and attempted to reenact it. Pinning her wings tightly against her back, she elongated her torso and performed her best slither. She then picked up a nearby sneaker and menacingly dangled it by its shoelace before splatting onto her back and dropping it in the process.

She was acting out their death-defying chase when Rhea’s befuddled chuckle interrupted.

“Looks like you had a weird night, too! Come on, Brie,” she laughed while picking her up and placing her on the side table next to them.

Brie whimpered but patiently watched Rhea prepare for the day. After cinching a belt around baggy tan riding pants, she rolled their bottom hems and pinned them securely at her knees. She then pulled on a faded, black turtleneck whose

frayed sleeves and body had been sliced for size long ago. Frilled socks that had once been bright white hung loosely around her ankles just above a pair of black canvas sneakers she had Frankensteined into fitting her feet.

Although Rhea would become fashion-forward in her future, as a sprout, she was at the mercy of her tiny size and lack of personal effects. Never provided with clothing of her own, her outfits were fashioned from garments she found in closets of family members' past. They were always oversized and outdated, so mending was a skill Rhea picked up very quickly on her own.

She ran her fingers through her tangled, shoulder-length hair and shook the debris from its knots. After tucking it behind her ears, she extended her left hand to Brie, who crawled obediently to her perch on Rhea's shoulder. Rhea grabbed her bag from its hook and skipped out the door, leaving her clothes strewn around the room.

She tiptoed wearily down the stairs, hearing commotion in the dining room. Her legs ached as she slowly descended and quietly crouched in the hallway to assess the situation.

“He wasn’t that *glossy* when he was my prof,” Micah said loudly over a simmering pan.

“You were a little shit,” Jesh replied through a bite of his toast.

Micah scoffed but ultimately agreed and chuckled. It was bizarre to hear such a jovial exchange at breakfast.

“To Professor Globus,” Jesh toasted.

Rhea silently stepped in to see her tender raising a glass of dark liquid whose fancy glass bottle sat nearly empty in the middle of the wooden table. She imagined it was a bitter adult drink since she could smell its bite from where she stood. Micah lifted his spatula in Jesh’s direction in response.

Jesh noticed her after setting his glass down and a dopey smile washed over his face.

“Rhea, Rhea it’s good to see ya!” he chimed in a loopy tone.

She could do nothing but stare as her tender and sibling behaved like strangers in the LeBec family dining room.

CHAPTER 9

EVERYBODY’S DOIN’ IT



Rhea skeptically approached the rarely used dining table and slowly climbed onto a seat. She peered over the heaping plate of pancakes steaming near the edge to witness Micah cooking with a smile on his face. He was sporting a black apron over his white buttoned shirt with yellowish egg smears at its pockets.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Micah inquired with furrowed brows.

She paused for what felt like an eternity to formulate a coherent response in the midst of her stupefaction. She felt she must be missing a chunk of time from her memory, but she wasn’t about to try and explain that. Rhea knew she wasn’t a very convincing liar, so she preferred evasive truths.

“I’m really hungry,” she responded monotonously.

Micah snorted goofily and placed a full plate of scrambled eggs in front of her. She didn’t like eggs much, but in that moment, their aroma was heavenly. She ravenously gobbled them up while Micah and Jesh chatted, mumbling out a “thank you” between fluffy mouthfuls.

“You’ll want to head out pretty soon. Don’t keep the professor waiting,” Jesh ordered as he downed the rest of his drink and placed its glass in the sink.

Rhea continued playing along, smirking with a hurried head-nod as she jumped down from her stool. As she landed, her messenger bag tumbled to the floor with its flap open, revealing the perfect burgundy and black dahlia she thought she had only dreamt of the night before.

Jesh’s face twisted into an intoxicated rage as he stared at the pristine flower head in disbelief.

“Where...” he said slowly with a cracking voice, “did you get this?”

Of all the nonsensical elements of this morning so far, Rhea thought a flower should be the least of anyone’s worries, but she could tell she needed another diversion to avoid a tender tantrum.

“It’s not a real flower, just a... first lesson is all,” Rhea stated shortly as she shimmied it back into her bag.

She speedily snatched her satchel strap and flung it onto her shoulder as she jogged backwards towards the front door. Jesh stomped towards his nest pod, swiping the fancy bottle from the table as he left Micah alone with a warm breakfast buffet. He slammed the door and sulked for the rest of the day.

“*Add flowers to the list*” Rhea thought as she *whooshed* the front door shut behind her.

Jesh had many idiosyncrasies, so Rhea kept a running mental list to avoid an altercation. She rarely understood them and never received an explanation, so she made it a part of her routine to actively avoid disturbing her tender. She enjoyed the additional independence it allowed her, but the list was becoming difficult to manage, so she wished she could cross a few things off it every once in a while.

As she quickly bounded the root circle outside her family tree, she felt her knees and calves burn with a pain she’d

never felt before. She carefully hopped onto the yellow plasmatic plane and flipped open her bag's cover flap.

“Things are feeling... weird, right Brie?” Rhea asked, looking for reassurance.

From the interior corner of her bag, Brie stared inexpressively at Rhea before responding with a single, vigorous head nod that brushed the mysterious dahlia's petals beside her. Its plump mass dwarfed Brie in size and was still impeccably formed in spite of its ungentle ride.

Rhea scooped up the burgundy blossom that had inexplicably sent her tender into a tizzy and immediately remembered plucking it from a strange structure in the dark. It was only a quick flash, but it felt real.

She began worrying that something had happened to her brain. Rhea's inferred teacher, Mister- no, *Professor Globes*, would at least listen to her, so she walked as quickly as her sore legs would take her to the Academy.



Her legs were in no shape to travel her rugged side trail, but she arrived at the Academy without having taken a second glance at the majestic sowers stationed along the main road. So confounded by the bizarre behavior and memory lapses this day was bringing, she didn't even notice Brie shifting through outrageous poses from her shoulder stoop to mock the sowers' vainglorious peacocking.

She slowly slinked her way into the Academy building and arrived at Professor Globus's towering doors. Apparently he was expecting her, so she didn't bother sneaking in this time. The classroom was empty, so she casually walked to the center while her eyes traced the detailed wooden carvings climbing the walls.

"He must be a thousand years old to have done all this," Rhea thought to herself.

She studied one column in particular that told a tale from top to bottom. A brown tree's leafless branches clung to the ceiling while its thick trunk dominated the top third of the vertical composition. Alien symbols with sharp angles were carved into the tree's bark like tribal tattoos, covering all but its bottom portion and three tapered roots.

At the tip of each root, a setting had been carved for a stone of unique color and shape. The leftmost, an orange-yellow topaz hexagram fit snugly into the wood; the rightmost, a pomegranate toned heart chiseled from garnet; the center setting was vacant but had been carved into the shape of a rhombus and painted black.

Rhea wondered if the third root was actually missing a stone or if it was part of the story. A grieving Poiseau knelt beneath the diamond shaped hole with his hands clasped while enormous, red tears poured from his face and rained upon the unaware forest of Poiseaux and animals below.

The final meter of the piece was a horizontal rectangle divided into triangles, the top ones painted black and those on the bottom white.

*“If they knew that poor *mec* was crying, one of them would come and ask him why,”* Rhea thought as she studied the fanciful creatures frolicking through the forest.

The clack of a door latch behind her spun her around as the professor opened his office door in the most unGlobus fashion: plainly dressed in tan trousers and a beige tunic holding a large book beneath his arm. His only accessory were his large, egg shaped spectacles whose brown tortoise shell rim matched the dusty leather moccasins and caramel colored fuzzy socks hugging his feet.

Professor Globus looked up at her through his disheveled orange hair as if she had caught him off guard.

“Rhea LeBec!” he excitedly exclaimed as he placed his heavy book on one of the student desks nearby.

He tied his hair back at the nape of his neck and adjusted his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, leaving deep red indentations above his nostrils. He often *maquillaged* his animated face, but today his muscles and freckly skin looked tired and droopy.

A quiet stillness filled the room before Brie popped out of Rhea’s hair with a clunky flap and glared distrustingly at the Poiseau moving towards the stage.

“I don’t usually allow my students *pets* in my classroom,” he began soberly, “but since I’ve never seen you without the little squeaker I deem it’s one of those *comfort animals*, right?”

Rhea felt a strange discomfort in his undertone that had Brie’s vigilance on high as he looked at her with a feigned smile.

“I’m not a student,” Rhea calmly retorted.

“You’ve changed your mind?” Professor Globus asked puzzledly.

His question uncorked the anxiety that had been swelling inside of her with each confusing encounter. She burst into tears and began rapidly recounting the morning’s events while Brie did her best to comfort her with a neck snuggle.

“What’s wrong with me?” Rhea cried as she tried to catch her breath.

The environment had become agitated in Rhea’s angst, sending a fury of trembling bubbles in varying directions that fizzled out with her last word. Gole Globus calmly closed his eyes and brought his hands to his mouth as if choosing his words wisely.

“Rhea, let me explain. I’m so sorry you’re distressed,” he said tenderly as he sat on the edge of the stage and motioned for her to sit next to him.

“When you didn’t show, I searched for you and found you wedged between some boulders near Willow Hill. Your legs were injured so I carried you home, where we shared the remainder of the night with your tender and sibling,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Brie began forcefully flapping her wings and huffing through her nostrils as the professor spoke, but Rhea quickly hushed her and enclosed her in her satchel. Rhea continued to listen attentively while quelling Brie’s attempts to get her attention.

“Why don’t I remember?” she asked worriedly.

“Well, upon arriving at your family tree, we were not warmly welcomed. I reasoned with your tender to allow an official teaching arrangement between us. He agreed, we celebrated, and... you took in quite a bit of the fumes,” the professor replied with some remorse in his voice.

Rhea stared at him perplexedly awaiting his full explanation. He could see she did not understand his nuance.

“Adults sometimes enjoy the effects of a mind-altering plant called meliora. When dried and burned, it ignites euphoria, transient experiences, and sometimes, memory loss in those who inhale its smoke,” Gole Globus said professorially.

“*Ew, I smoked?*” Rhea thought as she looked down disappointedly at her lap.

“It’s harmless, Rhea! I assure you there are no lasting effects, it’s just a bit too strong for fledglings, so you lose a bit of time,” he said glibly in an attempt to reassure her.

Rhea looked up at him through teary eyes, feeling betrayed that she could be left in such a state of unknowing.

“I should have known Jesh and Micah wouldn’t explain, I am sorry, Rhea,” he said convincingly.

A tear slowly rolled off of Rhea’s eyelash and plunged down her plump, rosy cheek. Professor Globus leaned in and briskly wiped it with his index finger, habitually rotating it back towards him as if he were examining a specimen.

“There, there,” he said donning an artificial looking smile, “there will be no more tears in this classroom!”

CHAPTER 10

TEACHER’S PET



PRESENT DAY RHEA

The time lapse of her youth was a distant memory to pre-adolescent Rhea, whose adventuring had been considerably

limited to the Academy grounds since her official apprenticeship with Professor Globus began.

She sat on a wooden bench in the Academy's courtyard, studying the strange literature she had found just two days ago. Her stubby, unmanicured fingers traced the indentations on its glossy yellow jade cover while the tread of her leather boots scraped the ground and stirred the dust into a slow whirlwind around her feet.

A pair of Academy students meandered by wearing the latest Globus-Snell: an orbital ring that allowed the wearer two outfits at once. The Poiseau on the left wore hers diagonally, so the Poiseau on the right did too.

The Poiseau on the right wore clawed shoes, so the Poiseau on the left did too. They walked with a similar stride and shared the same arsenal of snide slaps for anyone they deemed imperfect.

“Sowie taught *me* it’s never okay to be blasé,” the left Poiseau mockingly chimed.

The one on the right said nothing, but giggled devilishly with her friend as they continued to snicker and glance in Rhea’s direction, stomping their stone catwalk towards the Academy.

Rhea hated being criticized for her clothing. Every imperfect stitch bore the sweat of her own learning and labor. Being pelted with pejoratives was nothing new, but it never got easier to dull their sting.

She had learned that giving them any sort of reaction never ended in her favor - so she corked her storming rage and clenched her muscles until it subsided and the Poiseaux were out of sight.

A Gole Globus apprenticeship was a coveted position for which the professor's most devoted followers yearned. Some of these Poiseaux had devoted their entire fledglinghood to becoming the ideal candidate, so the fact that he continued to choose Rhea the underage unknown year after year was not well received.

Rhea caught the brunt of the students' frustration and, unfortunately, an oblivious Globus was of no help.

“The LeBecs are of utmost importance to Hachtax. I have an agreement with the family and must provide Rhea with practicum until she is of age,” the professor explained over and over to a barrage of embittered pupils.

The agreement, of which Rhea was unaware, accelerated the LeBec males' trajectory, sending Micah skyrocketing into success and Jesh plummeting further into seclusion. Gole Globus controlled the Luxfaery trade and had provided a handsome reward to Micah and Jesh to allow Rhea's apprenticeship: a daily ration of elixir, free of charge.

Micah was already lead harvester at the time the arrangement was made, and its inception only widened the gap between him and his peers. Micah, who very rarely sipped elixir, stockpiled his supply and sold it to his edifier group. The price each Poiseau paid differed depending on

Micah's relationship with them, so it became rule to stay on his good side.

Micah was edified under Professor Rue-Baxter, who had a reputation for raising some of Hachtax's roughest and most insidious individuals who would pursue success by any means. A steady supply of Luxfaery elixir for this group (including mathematician Rue-Baxter) rendered them even more influential, which made for an Academy environment that felt military and cold.

Gole Globus seemed blind to any culture shift as he scurried around the Academy halls without making eye contact. He had become fixated on the secret Luxfaery cove Rhea had shown him seven years prior and gradually became even more reclusive than he had been during his carving hiatus.

Even his iconic presence in the Academy had suffered, as he would sometimes be spotted roaming the hallways looking frazzled in yesterday's attire.

The Globus-Snell brand, now primarily operated by Windsor Snell, still had plenty of fabulous, unreleased looks to remain the biggest name in fashion, but the professor's devotees dwindled as Rhea and research occupied his focus.

Easy access to elixir exacerbated Jesh's dependency on the fizzy yellow tonic he had already been overusing. One part Luxfaery essence to three parts sparkling water was the recipe that had most Poiseaux drinking a shot or two each morning for energy. Jesh averaged ten or more even on the

best of days and usually strengthened the mixture's concentrate.

He had attempted to consume it in raw form on a few occasions, but always found that his will was mightier than his gut (and that the vile substance tasted even worse in reverse). Once the delivery zeau began routinely dropping the two spherical glass bottles at the LeBec family tree's front door, Jesh routinely decided to top off his portion with about a quarter of Micah's whenever he was first to the doorstep.

When Jesh drank elixir, he retreated into himself, racing through the winding corridors of content neatly categorized within his brain. The right dose would keep him locked in his room for days at a time, scouring his brain for an answer he had yet to find.

He had never shared what he was looking for, but it was clear that the unknowing was consuming him. His straight, shoulder length auburn hair had become straw-like and hung scraggily and dull just below his earlobes. His once rich, olive skin appeared lackluster and parched, giving the impression that he was a Poiseau twenty years older than he actually was. Jesh had always been on the leaner side, but now appeared almost skeletal as his bones, veins, and capillaries appeared to bulge from beneath a thin blanket of fatigued flesh.

Although Jesh was rarely glimpsed outside of the LeBec family tree, physical manifestations on Hachtax were fast and frank. Micah's warrior energy provided their home with some stability, but Jesh's overwhelming angst gave the tree an even

gloomier air. Its overgrown root circle became home to thorny crawlers and menacing-looking critters who disintegrated upon contact with light, but always rapidly regrew in the darkness.

The tree's dark, decrepit appearance had fledglings warning new sprouts to avoid it at risk of becoming haunted themselves.

Rhea remained silent and tried to look determined as groups of fledglings would share the LeBec family rumors within earshot. She very much wanted to correct them, but she now feared confrontation with anyone.

“Rhea LeBec!” a deep, monotone voice beckoned from the Academy entrance, “Is that sulking I see? School’s in session!”

Rhea shoved the grimoire inside her satchel, dusting off her pleated jumper and sweeping away misplaced hairs as she quickly hopped to her feet. Her tailoring had greatly improved, but still had a long way to go before her apparel could pass as professionally made.

Gole Globus had gifted her several luxury garments over the course of their apprenticeship, but she refused to wear them as they seemed to attract unwanted criticism from other students.

The deep brown corduroy material she chose had come from a jacket Varna Pont had left behind after her LeBec sowership. She heavily debated whether to alter the outerwear that she had kept pristinely beneath a bedsheet on

the corner coat rack in her room, but as years passed, she determined it had been forgotten. After the first crisp cut into its sleeve with her heavy scissors, she felt a cathartic satisfaction that surprised her.

Rhea's enthusiasm continued as she hand-stitched the pleated skirt together while wearing it. She remembered admiring another pupil's jumper with the same silhouette, although hers was an original Globus-Snell, so it was illusorily fashioned from iridescent fish scales that changed color to match the time of day's hue.

When Rhea finished, she lengthily examined her simple, brown dress fitted on her imperfect frame. She thought she did an exceptional job pleating for it having been her first time.

“Rhea,” Professor Globus began disappointedly, “where are the stunning pieces I gave you? This looks like a sad knock-off!”

Globus continued beckoning her and she obediently obliged, pretending to disregard the defeat of her hope that he might have complimented her efforts.

She remained silent and reconsidered showing him the book crammed between the other papers and study materials cluttering her bag. Heavy and cumbersome, her cross-body satchel felt much more of a burden now than when Brie was tucked safely inside.

Brie was no longer allowed at lessons. She behaved erratically in the professor's presence and Rhea was unable to calm her down. After she nipped Globus's finger during an experiment, he demanded she be left at home and Rhea reluctantly complied.

"Cycle two, tempus six," the professor called out as they entered his empty classroom.

Rhea scurried to the sliding glass boards marked up with black ink, retrieved a marker from her bag, and began adding numbers to a table drawn beside some scribbled notes.

"Cycle four, tempus one, and cycle four, tempus three," he finished as Rhea recorded the next two lines of the table.

He had narrowed down the most likely orsange cycles based on the modest historical library in his classroom, but had yet to find the evidence for which he was searching. He began grasping for any clues he could find within the Academy's general library that would point to an encounter with Bubleu or the secret Luxfaery cove.

While the professor buried his nose in books, Rhea quickly recorded his data, tidied their workspace, and excused herself for field work. During their first two years together, the two shared many rich learning experiences in the forest behind the Academy, but now Globus rarely spent time working outside of his study.

Field study was Rhea's life. She felt claustrophobic when indoors for too long and always found a way to connect with the scents, sights, and sounds of nature.

She meandered through the rear courtyard and disappeared behind some firs lining the forest's edge. She sat herself amongst the browning needles littering the yellow-green ground plasma, tucking her skirt beneath her before plopping down. She placed her satchel in front of her and parted the wrinkled papers concealing the grimoire.

“Prof would just take it from me,” she thought, “how am I gonna read this?”

The book slipped from her fingers and back into her bag as Rhea lurched her spine upright. A small songbird had fluttered spastically in front of her face before landing on a nearby log.

“What is your problem?” Rhea viciously barked.

The plump little bird bounced agitatedly upon the mossy bark, puffing its white, fuzzy chest topped with a dapper black bib. Short, quivery bursts of its grey and black wings revealed soft, fawn feathers rounded along its sides. It chirped rhythmically, but sounded like its intention was to communicate with Rhea.

Varna's sweet sincerity suddenly slipped its way into Rhea's mind and she breathed a heavy sigh that calmed the churning atmosphere between her and the little black hatted bird.

“You’re cute,” she said aloud as she crawled over her bag towards his perch.

She extended her left arm towards the log and the bird quickly leapt aboard, his tiny talons clinging to the thin, white cotton of her long sleeve button-down.

“Have you been following me?” she asked sweetly but suspiciously.

A high pitched tweet that crested with the bird’s ascent served as an affirmative reply, his body lightly hovering beneath his forcefully flapping wings that invited Rhea to follow. She slung her bulky baggage over her back and trustingly trudged behind her new feathered friend.

She peered over her shoulder to ensure nobody was following and wondered if the professor would be looking for her soon. She hated to frustrate him with her absence when she was needed, but her curiosity outweighed her nerves and she continued farther into the forest.

Her chaperon cooed as they approached the Luxfaery cove concealed beneath rocks strangled by overgrowth. The vine curtains Rhea had peeled back almost daily as a young fledgling were now indiscernible from the heavy foliage obscuring the entrance.

“*It’s been this long?*” Rhea thought as she stoically absorbed the state of her beloved hideaway.

Rhea slowly peeled back a section of rambling lianas that jostled her slightly backward as they released their grasp surprisingly easily. She snapped off a twig from a nearby shrub and stabbed at the natural mortar that had caked around the boulder concealing the rock wall's opening.

Once she had sufficiently loosened its hold, she dropped her makeshift chisel and wrapped her forearms around the heavy stone. Pulling with all her might, she was sent briskly to the ground as the piece popped out, still wearing her startled expression as she eyed the marbled lime chunk that now rested leadenly in her lap.

Her stalker turned tour guide was now happily jumping atop the cove's canopy, chattering in Rhea's direction. Eager to see what all the fuss was about, she slid her legs outward into a wide V and let her lap boulder roll to the ground as she slowly rose to her feet.

As she placed her hands on either side of the entrance, an icy spray spattered her face and she was once again knocked from her feet.

CHAPTER 11

TRIPOD



Rhea trembled as she stood and wiped the cold, wet substance from her face. She feared returning to the cove's entrance and receiving another chilling blow, but her dapper bird friend seemed insistent that she continue. She wearily approached the gap, which was now emanating a visible, frosty haze.

Hachtax's temperature stagnated at a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius. Within the walls of the Luxfaery cove, the atmosphere had fallen below zero. Rhea had bravely ducked her head and upper body into the opening, but panicked as she realized she had grown too large to fit her midsection through.

The bitter cold stung Rhea's reddened flesh as she squinted her watering eyes to shield them from the abrasive wind whipping her feathery hair across her forehead. Her neck and shoulder muscles clenched in response to their frigid surroundings and her teeth chattered out shivers between clouds of condensation.

An attempt to wriggle herself backwards was met with painful scrapes against the rugged limestone, forcing her to continue her climb into the freezing, white atmosphere. She placed her elbows on the jagged frozen rock inside of the cove to pry herself free, but as the leather strap of her crossbody bag tightened uncomfortably on her throat, she realized there was more to the blockage than her squabby stature.

She grumbled in frustration at her lack of awareness and awkwardly cranked her head beneath the loop of the

constricting strap while the rock held her torso in place. Without the anchor dragging her down, Rhea easily pulled herself the rest of the way through, sliding through the powdery snow like an Arctic seal before flopping onto her back.

The canopy overhead appeared a deep, shadowy blue behind the millions of ice crystals dancing before her eyes. She held up her hands and watched the delicate flakes melt on the surface of her skin, a sensation she had never experienced (outside of preparing an icy beverage). Unlike star-obsessed planets whose atmospheres experience a range of chaotic fluctuations, Hachtax ebbed and flowed with the ever-predictable sky tunnels overhead who caused no inclement weather or precipitation.

Rhea rolled herself onto her knees and reached her arm through the opening to retrieve her fallen bag, pausing as she heard a gruff, breathy grunt behind her. She knew she should retreat, but nothing in this Luxfaery cove had ever harmed her. She quickly glanced over her left shoulder and saw an animal roughly the size and stature of a horse.

It was badly wounded and speckled the snow with bright red spots as it slowly hobbled towards her through the wintery valley. Rhea stood cautiously and placed her back to the icy wall, keeping her right limbs in contact with the entryway in case she needed to make a quick exit.

“I won’t hurt you,” she said calmly.

As the creature emerged through the blizzard, Rhea saw two giant, leaf-shaped ears covered in light pink flesh that oscillated like satellite dishes atop a narrow, elongated head. The white, coarse fur of its snout and right front leg were stained with its own blood. It heaved its exhausted body up the hill in one final lunge, sending a heavy *thud* through the eerily silent valley as its side met the frosty ground.

Rhea sat with the silence and realized the tormentors in her head had gone silent, too. The feeling was brand new to Rhea's adolescent mind but carried with it an inherent recognizability. She felt time as it was meant to be felt: millisecond by imaginary millisecond.

She had never felt so sure of her actions as the uncomfortable shivering in her limbs gave way to a surge of adrenaline that fueled her rippling muscles. As her legs supported her rapid descent like well oiled shock absorbers, she no longer felt the sting of the cold or the jarring thud of her soles on the ungiving terrain, she felt only the anguish of a friend in despair.

When she was within a few meters of the animal, she held out her arms to slow her momentum and stopped to listen for its breathing. She could see its round belly rising and falling while a distinguishing white scut periodically swatted at the falling snowflakes. Rhea knelt beside the debilitated doe and carefully placed her shaking palm on top of her head.

She pulled back her hand suddenly as she felt budding antlers growing from the deer's head. Although bewildered, she let her thoughts and questions subside as she examined

the poor creature's wound. There was an excessive amount of blood, but it was clear that its right foot had been entirely severed from its shank.

Rhea felt her stomach wrench while her shoulders shuddered uncontrollably at the thought of what could have caused such a grave injury. A frigid gust of icy shrapnel battered her stinging face while she fumbled to undo the buttons on her blouse with closed eyes.

As she untangled it from beneath her jumper, the cotton shirt was nearly swept from her grasp as it violently thrashed in the treacherous wind like a white flag in her outstretched hand. She pulled it to her chest and used her exposed arms and back to shield from the storm while she tied a crude tourniquet above the amputated appendage.

As she looked up at the deer's rustling head, she gasped as she watched its nubs mature into pointed ivory antlers before her eyes. The tingle of sleet on her skin quickly intensified into the stabbing of thousands of needles and she began running towards the exit. She stumbled every few steps on the slick slope, but never stopped as she dragged herself up the trail her footprints had created on the way down.

She didn't look back, but could hear some belabored movement and grunting behind her. The cold was becoming unbearable for her unprotected skin and she slowed drastically on the flat ground leading up to her way out.

“You’re gonna make it,” she thought to herself as she saw the flutter of small wings awaiting her.

THUD!

Rhea was knocked face first into the snow, her nose red and throbbing as she dizzily lifted her head. She quickly rubbed the wet snow from her eyes and watched two white hooves bounce forcefully to the ground followed by two more that sent the deer floating forward like an ethereal phantom.

She crawled the rest of the way to the rock wall while watching the beautifully endowed buck leap effortlessly out of the cove and into the forest. His sprawling rack was much too wide to fit through the narrow crevice, yet Rhea saw no signs of damage or scraping as she crawled through herself.

As she made contact with the warmth of the forest floor, her palms felt immediate relief followed by an intense burning sensation that made her reawakening hands writhe as she rolled onto her side. She buried herself in the dense overgrowth and huddled in the fetal position as her whole body underwent waves of convulsions. So intense was the crawling and biting sensation prickling her skin that she checked numerous times to ensure she hadn't chosen to warm herself over a mound of angry fire ants.

Her spasming slowed enough for her to breathe more regularly and review her surroundings. A golden yellow glow meant she would still have time to make it back to the Academy for lunch. She eagerly leaned on her swollen forearm to get up, but quickly realized she was in no condition to be making lunch plans as her exhausted muscles nearly buckled in the process.

She sat erect in the patch of knotted greenery, resembling a baby bird peering outside the confines of its nest for the first time. Her eyes wide and shining, she slowly placed her hand on top of her head and ruffled the mess of soaked strands drooping down her forehead. She still hadn't completely processed the emergency she had just encountered and she sat staring blankly for several minutes.

A fresh dose of panic coursed through her veins as she realized her bag and its contents were strewn amongst the sticks and leaf litter a few meters away from where she had left them. She staggered over using the rock wall as support and picked up her brown satchel. Its flap was open and several pages of notes rested crookedly inside.

“The book!” Rhea uttered through a worried gasp.

Her eyes darted over the papers and dividers decorating the ground until they landed on the plucky peeper who had led her to the cove. He tweeted and skipped excitedly along the pages of the leather bound grimoire that had once again fallen open to the unrecognizable map of Hachtax.

Rhea cracked a weak smile at the sweet winged gentleman safeguarding her prized belongings. She lowered herself to the ground and placed the book in her lap, tracing her fingers across the rich maroon ink used to demarcate the land into named territories.

Professor Globus had taught Rhea basic Hachtax topography and colloquial region names, but nothing regarding defined boundaries spanning multiple recognized areas.

“Our generation of Poiseaux have lived peacefully here for so many years that we have eliminated any need for the division of property,” echoed an extra boastful Gole Globus in Rhea’s mind.

One territory in particular captured Rhea’s attention: a mountainous landscape whose name included a character resembling a capital letter B.

Or maybe it was a figure 8? It was the easternmost territory on the map - a place in which she had never personally set foot. Graphite symbols were weightily handwritten into the beige paper next to its cranberry inked name that looked to be an important indication or warning.

As Rhea looked off to ponder its meaning, the tiniest *scritch-scratch* against the dry paper brought her attention back to the ancient drawing. Her stout, pewter-feathered friend was standing readily in the Eight Territory, his beady, black eyes assuredly gazing into hers to indicate he was ready to lead her there.

The pair retrieved the cluttered contents of Rhea’s bag and slipped through the evergreen forest to avoid being spotted on the Academy grounds.



Sower's Row

Rhea knew she needed reprieve before venturing out again, so she trodged home at a slug's pace with several rest stops along the way. She and the bird had kept their eyes peeled for the elusive white buck, but saw no trace of it.

Once they left the forest, Rhea didn't bother veering off the main path to conserve what little energy remained, so she became the hot topic amongst the sowers standing proudly along the roadside preparing for the day's pause.

“Little Rhea LeBec is looking absolutely anemic! You know I am not one to judge but I doubt there is even a personal care regimen there. Being sowerless doesn't mean you have to be... grotesque!” one sower triflingly declared to the others.

There were four sowers in arbonatal pause, each with a clique of two or three Poiseaux surrounding them. There was a glaringly obvious hierarchy that had quickly developed amongst them within two or three days.

Eustice Débordé emerged first and proved impossible to upstage. She had buttery blond hair pulled back in a tight pony tail that fell all the way to the ground in a luscious ribbon of waves. Her long, crane-like appendages were wrapped entirely in ribbons of pickled oarweed that her devoted doulas brushed generously with vinegar at each hue change.

Rhea had long given up aspiring for a place on Sower's Row. Even in her youthful dreams she hadn't strived to be on top,

but she now understood that, like many of modern society's mechanisms, it was a rigged game in which she was not allowed to take part.

“Tout à fait!” Jensen Crèche enthusiastically replied after glancing at Eustice and the other sowers to affirm agreement.

Jensen was significantly smaller than the others, but made up for her lack of size with a quick wit and tremendous ego. She had outwardly accepted that she was second in command to Eustice, but was quietly calculating upward moves. She had the build of a gymnast with cute, rabbit-like features and radiant, white skin that showed only on her face and neck.

Unlike Eustice's “anything for my uka” act, Jensen was about making headlines. Bluntly chopped bangs in pure white with staggered magenta stripes hung rigidly above a pair of sculpted jet black eyebrows. Her eyelids were painted black like a Blanc de Hotot and her plump lips were slick with a delicious looking mandarin orange gloss.

Three members outfitted in white mechanic's jumpsuits with “Crèche Crew” embroidered in black across the back surrounded her at all times during her arbonatal pause, remaining silent unless she requested that they speak. They were also tasked with ensuring her cherry blossom gown remained “effervescent, eye-popping, and impeccable,” in the words of Jensen Crèche herself.

Cardamime Fronds was the third ranking sower in spite of being the most famous Poiseau of the bunch. As a talented songstress, she was far too concerned with her album release

to be bothered with the group's superficial ordering. She had a regular range of Poiseaux passing through in hopes of hearing the unreleased melodies rumored to be shared live with a few lucky spectators.

Her stolid expression became animated in the presence of adoring fans but quickly relaxed into implacability the moment they parted. Her plump, brown, professionally maquillaged face possessed cat-like features that suited her mysterious and fickle nature. An artfully draped liquid silk gown in acid green flowed gracefully down her strong, muscular trunk and gathered neatly at her sturdy ankles.

Cardamime remained silent amidst the gossip and stared purposefully into the golden, diamond shaped mirror she kept close on the end of a chain sash that clung to her chest. The reflection of the diva's orange lioness eyes lunged from the shiny metal in a direct attack on Rhea's gaze, sending it forcefully to the ground as she hurried along.

The final sower standing for arbonatal pause was Stanza Parnassus, whose stiff posture wore the bitterness of fourth place like a tarnished copper medal. She had failed to develop any special talents of her own, but with plenty of inherited wealth and time on her hands, she had climbed her way to a noticeable status in Hachtax.

“Teacher’s pet has a new pet, it seems,” the pompous and well postured Poiseaux muttered aloud as she watched Rhea and the bird round the bend towards the LeBec tree.

Stanza thrived on the happenings of others (especially unfortunate ones) and could easily blackmail most of her peers. The dark pigment smudged around her petite black eyes and nose gave her face a deceptive ferret-like charm. On the rare occasion that she cracked a genuine smile, however, her pointed mongoose teeth and grizzly greyish eyebrows suggested an unscrupulous nature.

Recognized for her avant-garde style, a hat fashioned from a giant purple jellyfish sat audaciously on her head with its lappets and tentacles serving as a train of hair dangling behind her. She wore a structured capelet made of black snakeskin over her shoulders that shone as if it were reflecting pale, bluish moonbeams. Her lanky, skeletal torso was wrapped entirely in black leather bandages that gradually unraveled into a scrappy fringe of ruffles at her ankles and feet.

Eustice and Jensen continued to share their nonjudgmental concerns with one another while an uninterested Cardamime pretended to closely examine her bejeweled fingernails. Stanza slinked behind the trees to remain out of sight while getting a better look at the strangely behaving bird hovering over Rhea's shoulder.

Rhea had stopped to rest on a hillside once she believed she was out of view. Stanza watched quietly as the small songbird zipped back and forth collecting white carnation petals and placing them delicately in Rhea's frazzled hair. Rhea smiled pleasantly in spite of her wind chapped cheeks and closed her eyes to feel the ticklish tingle of the little stylist frolicking on her scalp.

“Those are Varna Pont’s flowers,” Stanza thought.

She had noticed that the Pont family garden was looking oddly supple in ruffles of abundant, white blooms despite Varna’s presumed death, but had no reason to investigate as Pont was a name long forgotten by the elite. Neither Varna nor her flowers had been seen outside of her home in two years, so it was assumed Hachtax would reroot the barren Pont family tree as it had done with her body.

Stanza continued spying as Rhea slowly rocked herself up from the grassy hill, the suspiciously intelligent black-capped chickadee tugging at her skirt to assist her as she stood.

The haggard pre-teen and her plucky pal staggered on through the wooded archway while Stanza stared dumbfoundedly at the frilly white flowers surrounding Varna Pont’s lonely tree.

As soon as the pair had walked away, the carnations enlarged and multiplied up the tree’s trunk, enrobing its sad, grey bark in an enchanting gown of pure white.

“That’s it,” Stanza said scampishly to herself through a toothy grin.

CHAPTER 12

THE RELUCTANT TENDER



Rhea crawled up the knotted root structure leading to her front door. She had never felt such a weakness as she struggled to reach the knob from all fours.

Once inside, she collapsed into the unlit hallway with a *thump!*

She was too exhausted to get up and felt her vision fade in and out as she slid her outstretched arm along the root floor. Her hand met the leather strap of her satchel and she pulled it closer to ensure her precious atlas remained by her side.

Just as the rigid floor had begun feeling comfortable, Jesh LeBec irritatedly swung open his bedroom door.

“What the Pruncc is going on?” he angrily shouted from the doorway wearing only his gloves, underwear and moccasins.

Bong-bum-ba-bong!

The wooden walking stick he had been gripping in his right hand bounced hollowly against the floor the moment Jesh laid eyes on Rhea’s sorry state. He hobbled forward and knelt beside her, hovering his gloved hand shakily over her mottled, weatherworn skin.

As soon as it was placed, Jesh’s hand was knocked away with a sudden *smack!*

He stood huffily and swatted his hand in the direction of the fuzzy, winged creature attacking him. Meanwhile, faint scuttling and the tinker of glass could be heard from Jesh's open door.

Jesh perked his ears and spun intently towards the noise like a bulldog to the crinkle of a treat bag. His wiry brows twisted inward towards his pale nose as he glared violently at the small bird rifling through his Elixir supply.

The little chickadee flapped with all his might in an attempt to pick up one of the small, spherical bottles that was a third full of the gooey, yellow medicine, but the smooth glass slipped out of his sharp talons and hit the floor with a *clunk!*

Thankfully, the bottle remained intact and rolled like a wobbly Christmas ornament towards Jesh's moccasins. Before the clumsy critter could rectify his mistake, Jesh snatched the wooden walking stick from beside his feet and began swinging wildly in his direction.

The chickadee easily evaded the rickety old Poiseau's belligerent bludgeoning and swooped back into the hallway where the initial winged agitator worriedly tended to Rhea. Jesh hurriedly exited his quarters and flung open the front door, abruptly pouring in the peachy yellow tones of late morning that sent Brie frightenedly flapping above his head.

“I should have done this a long time ago!” he loudly grumbled as he lifted his walking stick over his shoulder like a batter readying his swing.

His threat was enough to scare Rhea's winged friends into a quick escape to the outdoors. Jesh slammed the door shut behind them and headed straight for his fallen vile that had nestled itself safely into a fold in Rhea's dress.

He removed his brown leather gloves before clasping the clear container between his fingers, his knuckles grazing the ridges of Rhea's grubby corduroy jumper as he prudently lifted his drug of choice.

The Luxfaery essence glimmered calmly in its smudged glass dome while Jesh's eyes darted around his unkempt surroundings for a glass and some seltzer. He retrieved a sticky drinking glass from his nightstand and blew into it to expel any dust.

Popping open a fresh bottle of sparkling water, he filled the glass half full, speedily uncorking and emptying the round bottle of juice in after.

As he peered into the bubbling concoction and the mixture settled, he couldn't take his eyes off of the unrecognizable Poiseau staring thirstily back at him. Dark blue crescents puffed beneath his lackluster eyes that once sparkled with ambition and intent.

The deep indentations between his sloping eyebrows and beside his drooping frown belonged to a Poiseau burdened with the sadness of tremendous loss, not the warrior he had sworn he would be.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Rhea stirring as her animal companions noisily chatted at the front door as if hatching a rescue plan. As reality set in, each deafening thud of his pulsating blood became a crippling jab into his heart.

Ba-bump. Pets scratching at the door.

Ba-bump. Rhea on the floor.

Ba-bump. What are you doing this for?

His eyes welled with tears and his dry, flaking lips curled inwards as he trembled at the thought of what a monster he had become.

He carefully carried the Elixir through his mess and knelt at Rhea's side. He tried to pour some of the carbonated cure-all into Rhea's open mouth, but she briskly knocked the glass away in her half-delirious state, spilling all but a single swallow as she rolled her back towards Jesh.

Suppressing the anguish of wasted Elixir, he placed his grey, withered hand on Rhea's shoulder and shuddered at the chill of her lacerated skin. He rested his forehead upon his arm and began weeping, his tears feeling warm and salty against his flush cheeks as they plunged from his clenched eyes.

Rhea, who was having trouble discerning her dreamy hallucinations from reality, became slightly more conscious at the familiar feeling of heavy teardrops wetting her skin.

As she strained to peel open her eyelids, she realized she was no longer lying in the dim hallway of the LeBec family tree.

Well, she was, because she could feel her tender sobbing heavily upon her back; but the smoke-stained bark wall she was facing had been replaced with a long corridor that somehow jutted infelicitously from the trunk of the family tree while simultaneously meshing shapelessly with the outdoor Hachtax life surrounding it.

“The spirit realm?” Rhea thought to herself but heard her voice say aloud.

She could hear her tender’s muffled voice behind her, but didn’t dare attempt to move her muscles in fear that the realm would disappear. As he uttered his incoherent words, Rhea felt as if she were being hugged in a warm embrace, the kind a strong, proud tender wraps his fledgling in each day.

The corridor brightened and Rhea was overcome with confidence to explore it. She saw lettering above a lone doorway and excitedly pursued it, feeling startled as the corridor itself seemed to shift invisibly, snapping the door and its insignia perfectly into frame before her without her physical movement.

“Nice,” she heard her voice think out loud.

She quieted her mind for a moment before allowing her next thought to materialize.

“Ok, so, little brain narrator is public in here,” she stated like a sleuth solving a puzzle.

Her inner voice sounded much more nasally out loud than when confined to the tissues of her brain, so she thought of a more pleasant tone.

“Much better,” she crooned mellifluously in a Varna-like voice.

“Catalogue Raisonné,” she read aloud before the door opened and another corridor sprawled before her.

This time, there were thousands of identical doors lining its phantasmic walls, each with a unique description above it labeling a specific Poiseau or event.

“Opus Granger, Juniper Quinn, Uki LeBec...” she read aloud.

Rhea remembered the names well. They were etched into the forgotten upper limbs of the LeBec family tree that were ripe with mysterious artifacts she had visited many times as a sprout.

“These are my tender’s doors,” she said definitively.

THE CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ OF

JESH LEBEC



Thousands of identical doors shuffled across Rhea's view looking dull, dusty and unused until one froze in center frame. It looked like all the others, but this one was clearly well used and glowed with a layer of blue, translucent liquid.

“Uki LeBec,” Rhea read aloud before the door slid open and she was immediately immersed into a black, dream-like room where a theatrical work unlike any she’d ever seen played out before her astonished eyes.

Door 1: Uki LeBec

Through the door was... nothing. Rhea’s eyes struggled to make sense of it until they were drawn to the center of the immense black canvas where an unfamiliar and un-present male narrator’s story was being airbrushed as he spoke.

The colors were vivid but appeared watered down and ghostly against the pitch black as they disappeared, reappeared, and reshaped themselves throughout the exquisite reenactment.

“Uki LeBec intensively nurtured every inch of the LeBec family tree, fertilizing its roots with his own experiential knowledge. Uki possessed a primordial power preserved for the few fifth-cycle Poiseaux with the capacity for it, marked

by an unmistakable golden bioluminescent trail,” the narrator began as the LeBec family tree faded behind Uki’s prominent frame.

Rhea tried to speak, but had no voice within the invisible walls of Jesh’s memories. She knew he was talking about orsange - one of the subjects on the running list she kept of Jesh’s unacceptabilities.

“Uki’s ability seemed as fluid and dynamic as his charismatic energy. Anyone he encountered could feel it. He wasn’t conventionally handsome, but his chiseled, dramatic facial features were something to admire. He spoke with a playful lilt which was likely pieced together from his travels,” the voice continued.

Jesh had shared only basic information with Rhea about his tender, and none of it sounded anything like this. She wondered whose voice could be narrating her tender’s familial history.

“Uki’s first and only offspring, Jesh, emerged into Häctax one of the most capable pupils of his time. Most who encountered him suspected that his cadence would become strong enough to witness orsange.

The prospect of this phenomenon occurring multi-generationally was particularly exciting, as even a single occurrence of orsange marks an entire kuna cycle with peace and prosperity.

Unfortunately for Jesh, orsange would not be in his future. Uki was selfless, but not flawless. He devoted his life to passing on his inner library of wisdom, but carelessly neglected to instill in his own sprout love and embracivity.

Jesh carried this imbalance into adolescence, feeling isolated from his peers. He had learned to interact amicably, but found himself frequently frustrated by his fellow fledglings' foolishness."

The colorful animations dancing in the dark disappeared and Rhea was left in black silence. She felt the story was unfinished, so she waited a few moments for another spark.

When nothing happened, she determined the show was over and tried to identify a focal point within the vast nothingness before her. In the bottom right corner of her view, a pinhole prick of blue light no bigger than a grain of sand caught her eye.

As the dot grew bigger approaching Rhea, she saw it was a door just like the one she had passed through moments ago, but the name above it read "Perla Chron."

Door 2: Perla Chron

The strangely saturated door creaked open, bringing Rhea to another black room. This was not a Poiseau with whom she was familiar, so she listened attentively awaiting details.

The narrator continued his tale:

“One particular etching into the leathery exterior of the LeBec family tree suggests that Jesh was aware of his impending disappointment:

Sewn with bitter beet roots under Marjhenka’s moon.

Brimming with neurons, devoid of nurture.

No elegant harmony when my soul sings its tune.

Life’s golden cadence obscenely obscured.

Find solace in silence, orsange will not be heard.

It is likely Jesh’s sower, Perla Chron, who influenced him to turn to etching as an outlet for his inner torment. He had spent hours as a child watching her from afar while she elegantly etched and painted her branches, admiring her subtle beauty and grace so often unseen. From great pain is often birthed astonishing beauty, and Perla Chron knew pain.”

Rhea and Micah were sowerless, so Rhea assumed her tender was, too. She was astounded to hear that Varna wasn’t the only sower to grace the LeBec tree in recent years. How could he not have mentioned her?

She then began to wonder where her tender had carved his dark poem, but silenced her curiosity as the story revealed more about the long lost LeBec.

“Perla’s own sower was corrupt and callous in her presence. She planned to use sowership as a means of achieving

independence, which meant Perla was merely an obstacle. Each day, Perla felt she was an involuntary spectator frozen in a terrifying drama unfolding before her eyes.

She watched as her sower effortlessly transitioned between a wretched wardrobe of hatred and an ostensibly benign disguise, the latter only worn in the presence of Perla's tender.

Her sprouthood, typically a time of great color and creativity, was marred by insults, physical abuse, and discouragement," the narrator read woefully while the scene flashed painfully in front of Rhea.

She was unable to close her eyes or even pause playback for a brief respite from the terror she saw vividly unfolding against the blackness. Although she could not cry, she felt the sting all the same as she watched tears pour from Perla's innocent fledgling eyes.

The narrator continued:

"Perla became the star of a twisted telenovela that was her home and school life. Over time, she tried on the costumes of supporting roles, audience members, and even antagonists.

She eventually concluded that the only role to which she could not bear to fully commit was that of Perla Chron. For the rest of her life, she neglected her own story to shield her from its pain, ignorant to the fact that the agony would persist without its bearer's complete acceptance.

Jesh, an adolescent when her body rerooted, was by her side silently listening as she chipperly chatted to him like he was an old friend. He couldn't remember when he and his sower had last held a coherent conversation. Although he knew he was losing her physically, he had already accepted her spiritual loss long ago.

The moment she finally passed, a single golden tear trickled from the corner of her closed eye. Alarmed, Jesh hastily traced his mental corridors for an explanation, but to no avail.

He snatched a tiny glass bottle from his cross-body satchel and shook out its contents. He then gently wiped the gleaming tear from his sower's cheek with the rim of the bottle, slowly rotating the container as he brought it to eye level to examine the strange substance within.

He returned his gaze to his sower's body as it slowly liquified and dissolved into the ground, melding once again with the soft shimmery yellow plasma of Hachtax from which it came.

It had been so long since he'd seen Perla at peace. It was beautiful.

For a brief moment, Jesh felt a comforting warmth rise within him, forming a single tear drop that quickly cascaded down the sharp bridge of his nose. He wiped it with his bent wrist, grimacing as he looked down at the salty, transparent liquid in disgust.

Jesh felt an icy shiver trickle its way down his back, causing his shoulders to shudder.

‘The day I settle for mediocrity is the day I die,’ he muttered, the last words he would ever speak about his sower, Perla Chron.”

The blackness returned and Rhea silently tried to process what she had just witnessed. She suspected another door would soon appear, but was afraid of what may be on the other side.

As she hesitated, the caress of her tender’s hand and his soft weeping she still felt upon her back gave her the courage to continue.

Door 3: Cadence Day Morning

“Jesh momentarily admired his ladder-laced and bulled boots before firmly securing them on his feet. His hands shook as he tugged his laces tight,” the pleasant voice with a touch of rasp began as an airbrushed Jesh sat in his room inside the LeBec family tree.

Rhea was alarmed at how healthy and young he looked as an adolescent. He almost resembled Micah.

“No expectation, no disappointment,’ he faintly whispered to himself.

A fleeting moment of surprise jolted through him as his eyes locked onto another pair gazing back at him from the wall.

He paused and stared at the stranger in the mirror. It had been quite some time since he'd really studied his own face.

His eyes, although still a shade of oceanic blue, had lost much of their luster, shadowed beneath drooping eyelids. He raised his brows and eyelids to awaken his face, tilting his head to examine his profile. He noticed that his jawline now looked stronger and more mature. He liked his rigid features.

His imagination began to transform his reflection into his future self as a noble warrior, hair adorned with the golden ibis feathers plucked from the sacred bird only for an occurrence of orsange. The Poiseau looking back at him had achieved what he set out for, undeterred by weakness.

Before insecurity could sink its claws into him, he repeated, 'No expectation, no disappointment,' as his warrior-self vanished."

He took a deep breath and fastened his cloak, still staring at his reflection. He was very serious about matters pertaining to Hachtax Academy. Not only did he pre-enlist as an initiate well before any of his peers, he became a fixture there as an eager volunteer, willing to take on any menial task to establish a reputation of loyalty.

Uki never quite understood Jesh's devotion to the academy. For Uki, Cadence Day, Initiation, and Graduation were incidental stepping-stones on a well-constructed road to fulfillment. Naturally, he breezed his way through his academy days without so much as a second thought.

Jesh was not blessed with such certainty, which brewed resentment. This dark essence looming within him, so far easily stifled by a youthful, energetic body and a still curious mind, had long awaited its opportunity to surface into material existence,” the narrator finished forebodingly as Rhea eagerly awaited the next scene.

She had become enthralled in the story, rendering the fluorescent, glowing images so life-like that she felt she had traveled back in time. She watched Jesh nervously exit the family tree and quieted her mind to ensure she didn’t disrupt him.

The narrator spoke once again:

“Long, lean legs swung two narrow, chestnut leather boots like antiparallel pendulums as Jesh bounded across the plasmatic plain towards the academy. An idle effort to appear determined stiffened his posture and swiftened his stride, giving him a slightly frazzled and rushed appearance.

There was indeed a sense of rebellion and chaos in his faux militaire ensemble, but each perfectly tailored element was a testament to his sower’s impeccable style and skill; each pristine piece proudly projected the adoration of a meticulous master.

Like an anomalous azalea emerging from the ashes of catastrophe, Jesh’s garments, each created immediately following some of Perla’s darkest hours, were a better suiting self-exposé than he could have known.

Ancient tradition dictated that Poiseaux tenders pass on their Cadence Day regalia to their first born, although it was becoming increasingly more common to hand-select a Cadence Day outfit based on personality, interests, and future aspirations. Those who chose their own garb would often still incorporate a tender's garment to honor the contributions of the ancestral family tree.

The last five LeBec generations had dignifiedly donned the same simple wardrobe, stringently adhering to ancient practice. The day Uki presented the family's humble, white, brass-buttoned Cadence Day kurta, Jesh politely declined.

Jesh had carefully selected his favorite pair of perfectly fitted, woolen pants trimmed in an emerald green satin. A tan poplin tunic rested just off his shoulders, its collar regally lined with thickly braided, black and white horse hair.

Embroidered, amber webs formed a sash that cascaded from his left shoulder, as if lightning had struck there and crystalized itself in the sandy fibers of his tunic. An intricately crafted and polished anatomical heart of solid gold on a thin leather cord gleamed hopefully on his chest, partially shadowed by a deep brown, hooded cloak.

Orbs shaped from juvenile tree bark dangled from the cloak's billowing edges and appeared to float in a hauntingly elegant dance around him, their hypnotizing glow matched only by that of the Luxfaery's luminescence.

Although mostly obscured by his hood and long, auburn locks, an earring of petrified pomegranate seeds dangled

from Jesh's right earlobe. It was the only traditional element he chose for Cadence Day.

He didn't slow his pace upon approaching the academy's marble façade. Several fledgling Poiseaux gathered in various clusters in the courtyard, anxiously awaiting the annual coming-of-age event. Jesh spotted his favorite classmate, Opus, but avoided eye contact so he could sneak inside undetected and scope out the arena while the audience benches filled.

The arena, an enormous, oval clearing in the center of the academy, was nearly at full capacity hours before the ceremony's commencement. Jesh leaned his shoulder against one of the immense, black columns carved from volcanic rock, casually crossing his arms and legs like an old man admiring his former stomping grounds.

His chest heaved slightly, both a result of exertion and anxiety. His eyes followed the swirling mélange of intense black with deep tones of mahogany and redwood that painted the slick volcanite stage encircling a twenty meter plasma floor opening. The stark contrast between the familiar, faint chartreuse glow of the plasma and the ominous obsidian oval that encompassed it seemed to eerily draw his focus.

‘How’s my *Jesht* friend?’ exclaimed a voice behind him, snapping him out of his trance as two large, clammy hands reached around and cupped his eye sockets.

Jesh quickly ducked beneath the set of thick arms now embosoming him, his cloak's orbs gently clambering as he gracefully spun to face his assailant.

'On Cadence Day? Really, Ope?' he asserted, now locking eyes with his classmate, 'I could have knocked you out!'

Without moving a muscle, they slowly steered their eyeballs' gaze to the trembling fist clenched in Jesh's right hand. Opus was a solidly built Poiseau about twice the size of Jesh. Their eyes met as they simultaneously erupted in laughter, diffusing the tension.

"I ain't the time for a light bumpin' to death, *blinker!*" Opus benignly bantered.

Jesh's wide smile gave way to a stern, tight-lipped sneer as his eyes shot daggers into Opus's skull. He aimed an aggressive nod at his acquaintance while exhaling from his nose, then spun away with a pompous flick of his cloak.

He ignored the feigned apologies behind him as he marched towards the staircase leading to Professor Windsor Snell's study."

Door 4: Professor Windsor Snell

"If you ask Windsor Snell, he's the most cultured professor in all of Hächtax with, arguably, the largest alchemical library available. Culture requires pointing one's beak at something other than academic research from time to time, so the latter of his claims is the only one that deserves any attention.

Windsor was a whimsical zeau. He wore a bushy, cornsilk blonde mustache beneath his plump radish nose that dominated his round, porcupine-ish face. A mess of beads and white dread-locks somehow twisted into a single thick braid that traced down the back of his olive green, corduroy jacket, leaving a distinct pattern in the layer of dust powdered on the jacket's surface as it swayed.

Jesh stood upon the final step before Windsor's workspace, eyeing the crimson sheen of the cumbrous bookshelves spanning the dark slate walls. Ornately carved cherrywood arches descended an eight-meter vaulted ceiling's slope, dripping with a red decadence worthy of woeful Pruncc himself.

A cacophony of clanging glass and muttered expletives bounced clumsily through the study to alert Jesh of his mentor's presence. Windsor was a wobbly zeau.

Jesh caught a momentary nod of acknowledgement tossed his way as Windsor shuffled his slippered feet towards him.

“Fine day for a cadencing!” Professor Snell exclaimed, removing his goggle-like spectacles to reveal his small brown eyes.

“Yeah,” Jesh muttered sarcastically, “that yellow out there’s looking extra... yellow today.”

“I’m not talkin’ the day’s hue,” Windsor replied, “I mean my bones are aching for another orsangening!”

Jesh stared at him silently, feeling his blood run hotter as he mentally recounted the heart-to-heart they'd shared over a pint only days prior."



"It's not going to happen,' Jesh declared tearfully to Windsor.

'That sounds about eighty-nine point five percent fear and the rest, self-pity. Ya can' even say it without chokin'!' Windsor bellowed.

'Yup. I don't expect you to understand,' Jesh retorted, raising his eyebrows while gulping down the last of his brew to signal he was about to leave.

Jesh. How many stories ya heard without a protagonist who's been through some shite, eh? Patience.'

'And how many of those stories could have been happy had someone just spoken up when needed? Or simply did the right thing? That's not how life works. The rich get richer, Snell.'

'Yeah, they do. And so do the poor. And everyone in between. And even some dumb fuggs get poorer, my good zeau. But we're talking 'bout you, ain't we?' Windsor's face softened as he spoke. He paused and met eyes with Jesh to ensure he felt the warmth of his words.

'Fear is something still in us from a long time ago. Yeah, there are times it comes in handy, but usually it's just residual

fight-or-flight. We ain't got time for it now. Ya gotta be alright with just... being alright, ya know?’

‘I wouldn’t have gotten here without some level of fear. Our system is built on it, isn’t it?’ Jesh inquired.

The puzzled nature of Windsor’s raised eyebrow served as his reply.

‘Well. None of us are born with it,’ Jesh said and paused contemplatively. ‘We learn to fear.’

Before replying, Windsor stared at his hand as it seemed to involuntarily wriggle across the wet walnut tabletop. He knew he needed to carefully select his words with Jesh.

‘Answer me this: a hatchling, knowin’ nothin’ ‘bout the world... does he dream?’

‘Well, yeah,’ Jesh perturbedly replied.

‘So, the newborn, fear-free, learns fear in his wee dreams. Or from his good-for-nothin’ tender, or the other pupils, or his professor, maybe.’

Jesh nodded calmly in agreement.

‘So no matter from where it comes. What’s important is: what’s he do with it?’ Windsor continued. ‘Well that depends on who he is. Most of ‘em dumb fuggs... they’ll accept the fear and keep righteous by it. Sprouts spoutin’ shite they had

drilled in since hatchin': "*what's good for the tree is good for me.*" Perpetuatin' it without a wink of a notion.'

Jesh wrapped his black and white checkered scarf around his neck as he let Windsor's words ruminate.

'And the rest?' Jesh asked.

'The rest are the Greats and the Ain'ts,' professor Snell declared deeply after downing the rest of his drink.

He stood up from his chair and threw his fuzzy, oversized coat over his round frame, clumsily flailing his right arm to release the coat's collar from the giant bun of dreadlocks jutting from the side of his head. He rested his yellow tinted glasses atop his plump nose and tilted his head to peer down at Jesh, who was still gazing at him as if awaiting some kind of ultimate answer.

'That includes you, Jesh. You've got the Great in ya. But that means ya also got the Ain't in ya. Learn to embrace 'em both or...' he looked away as his sentence trailed off.

'Or what, Snell?' Jesh prodded.

'No matter what happens come Cadence Day, things'll end badly. There's no Greats without Ain'ts. Just be you. The *whole* you, Jesh.'



“No Greats without Ain’ts,’ Jesh solemnly stated, rubbing the silky kerchief in his pocket.

The study’s quiet immensity thickened the surrounding atmosphere as the pair daydreamed in each other’s direction for a few moments. The silence was broken in true Windsor Snell fashion as he furiously flopped his mitts along the sleeves of his jacket in an attempt to remove some of the dust embedded in its fibers.

Catching his reflection in a full-length mirror (a piece far too beautiful to be so carelessly propped against a small ottoman), he gasped and began motioning for Jesh to be on his way.

‘It’s gonna take more than a quick rug-beatin’ to prime this plum! Go on, now!’

Jesh grinned as he descended the staircase. Windsor was a wise zeau.”

Rhea’s view blackened once again, but this time the dusky hallway began flickering back into view as she felt her tender meekly sliding his hand around her jaw.

Her tongue began to tingle with a prickly popping until an overpoweringly bitter flavor coated her taste buds and trickled down her throat, causing her to retch and spit.

As much as Rhea fought to remain in the blackness surrounding her, the metaphysical catalogue raisonné

disappeared and she was back in the dingy hallway beneath her tender's troubled face.

CHAPTER 13

THE GLASS LIZARD'S SONG



“Rhea?” Jesh whispered.

She looked up at him through the small gap her heavy eyelids would allow, her dark eyelashes cutting through his blurry image.

“Wa-ter,” she choked out dryly.

Jesh shushed Rhea quietly through his teeth and poured a generous gulp of Elixir into her partially open mouth. Her throat swallowed half and dribbled out the rest while she rolled away from him in anger, coughing as she scuttled to a seated position against the wall like a cornered cavy.

Her heart raced as she felt a warm tingle rush through her limbs. It was shocking initially, but then became pleasant and calming. She gradually slowed her breathing, still staring skeptically at her tender who was gently swirling the remainder of the Elixir in its glass.

Her skin felt numb until her body had completely absorbed the Luxfaery essence and healed her minor scrapes. Her eyelids now weightlessly peeled back while she speechlessly watched the surface of her arm return to its natural smooth, pinkish complexion.

She looked up resentfully at her tender as she heard the pained scratches of her companions at the front door. She tried to get up but was still too weak.

“You’ll need more,” Jesh said as he cracked open the door.

Brie and the chickadee bolted into the hallway and perched protectively at her side.

“Feeee-beeee” the little bird sang.

“FeeBee,” Rhea said declaratively as she looked into her new friend’s tiny but dependable eyes.

Jesh closed the door on the late morning’s apricot luster and slowly knelt towards Rhea with his glowing glass in hand. Rhea grimaced at the thought of choking down any more of the vile drink that she watched her tender suckle all day like an infant mammal at its mother’s teat, but she couldn’t deny the remarkable recovery she had undergone from ingesting only a small amount.

Rhea calmed Brie and FeeBee as Jesh sat cross-legged in front of her. They obediently rested upon her satchel, but kept a close eye on the Poiseau who had threatened them only moments ago.

Firmly grasping the grubby glass in her right hand, she tilted her head back and tossed the shot of Elixir into the back of her throat, doing her best not to wince at its fizzy foulness. She handed the glass back to Jesh before slumping backwards against the wall.

The Elixir's hot rush rippled through her and mended the internal wounds she had sustained from her impact with the white buck. Jesh watched anxiously, holding onto his hope that the Elixir was working for his fledgling while beating down the animalistic urge to indulge in his late morning dose.

The return of Rhea's youthful aura and euphoric expression on her face were sure enough signs of the medicine's effects for Jesh to hurriedly scoot backwards into his room for a quick swig. He fiendishly partook in his habit amongst his dirty clothes, lighting a cigarette after downing a full glass.

When he returned to the hallway donning a dopey grin, he was met with six scolding eyes that sent him cowering back into his room to extinguish his cigarette and wrap a robe around his half-naked bones.

He returned with a humble smile and sat calmly in front of the trio, leaning in to examine Rhea's rejuvenated limbs.

“A Luxfaery dead saves a barb to the head,” Rhea recited monotonously with the bite of indignity in her voice.

Jesh stared blankly in response.

“Why do you say things like that?” Rhea asked frankly.

Jesh thought for a moment before his reply.

“There are pains no Poiseau should endure,” he said.

“But the Luxfaery should? I guess you can’t really hear their cries from in here,” Rhea said reproachfully.

Although inside she trembled anxiously, her voice rang confidently through the usually quiet family tree.

“You should stop. You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jesh answered sternly.

“I wish *you* would stop,” she pleaded while looking sadly into his eyes.

He stared back at her silently, still wearing the initial shock of her confrontation on his face. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

“I know you need more than what I can give you,” he said with shame in his voice.

Rhea pictured the healthy, determined Poiseau she had watched during her semi-conscious state and wondered what atrocities he must have faced to have become the dispirited tender sitting in front of her now.

“Micah too,” Jesh continued bleakly, “he’s better off without me.”

“No Greats without Ain’ts,” Rhea muttered saltily.

Jesh stood abruptly and retreated to his room, closing the door behind him. Rhea, Brie, and FeeBee waited patiently for his return. The three cuddled close while Rhea ran her palms over her new skin, still uncertain that it was real. She felt well-rested and energized even though she could still not stand on her own.

After some loud cursing and banging around, Jesh returned from his lair holding a red and blue handkerchief with ornate silver lettering embroidered near its outer hem.

“Read it,” Jesh instructed as he extended the wrinkled cloth to Rhea.

A closer look revealed the beet red splotches staining its eggshell blue fibers to be a spillage of some sort. Its edges were brushed with uneven smear patterns as if used to hastily wipe up the red liquid. Sure enough, the beautifully stitched lettering spelled out the Windsor Snell witticism that Rhea blurted out moments ago.

“How do you know that?” Jesh asked concernedly.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Rhea replied.

“Try me,” Jesh quickly challenged.

Rhea looked down at her fingers that were nervously rubbing the silky stitched loops and lines of the handkerchief's lettering. She thought carefully about her words before explaining herself.

"I saw your doors," Rhea said.

Jesh returned a vexed expression.

"Y'know when you go looking into your deep thoughts? I was *there*," she said with a hint of excitement in her voice.

Jesh remained silent and thought about what Rhea was saying. According to his vast encyclopedia of Hachtax literature, it was indeed possible for one Poiseau to traverse the spiritual plane of multiple individuals.

"What did you see?" he asked a bit skeptically.

Rhea did her best to explain the catalogue raisonné and what she was able to access through the blue doors. Jesh believed that what she was seeing was his inner library, but to be certain he would need to channel them both in.

Jesh's own tender had tapped in with him on a regular basis through his formative sprouthood, guiding the two of them through the immense philosophical and historical works housed in his brilliant mind.

Although less structured than Uki's approach, Jesh transferred loads of data and valuable Hachtax facts to Micah when he was young and eager to absorb as much from his

mentor as he could. As he grew older, he became less interested in what his weakening tender had to say and was often away from the family tree.

Without speaking, Jesh reached his hand towards Rhea's, putting Brie and FeeBee on high alert. Rhea patted their heads reassuringly with her left hand as she cautiously allowed her tender control of her right.

As Jesh flattened Rhea's palm against his, he was surprised at its rough texture and nearly adult size. It had been years since the two had had any physical contact. As he felt the first pulse of blood throb steadily through her warm fingertips, he remembered how much he longed for Poiseau contact and affection.

He fought the urge to drown his longing in Elixir by focusing on his breathing. He was eager to see if Rhea was capable of entering the Memorial Realm, but many years had passed since he had been the torchbearer and he was unpracticed.

Jesh seemed to be intently focused, so Rhea closed her eyes and tried to envision the vast corridor in her mind.

“Eyes open or it won’t work!” Jesh barked annoyed as he tried to focus on his posture and hand position.

Rhea opened her eyes and instinctively snapped into submissive mode as her present, enthusiastic energy sputtered out like a balloon punctured on its way to the party.

Jesh sat silently facing Rhea for about a minute as her eyes returned a lusterless look.

“You’re thinking!” he scoffed impatiently, “You’ve gotta stay with me!”

Rhea felt compelled to apologize but held her tongue. For the first time, she saw her tender’s bitterness for the silly disguise it was. In spite of his unparalleled intelligence and attention to detail, he remained willfully ignorant that the heavy burdens he chose to wear every day had made it impossible for Rhea’s love to get through.

Although initially she felt sad, she was strangely tickled by the irony that she and the glass lizards had been playing the same game all the while.

As a sprout, Rhea’s untrained eye had approached the wriggling reptiles as snakes, whispering slithery hymns that she knew to win over even the slinkiest of serpents. Glass lizards, who know nothing of their likeness to the noodly night stalkers or their recreant reputation, would hear the strange tune as a threat and scurry away, leaving a chunk of their body behind as a sort of sacrificial offering to their singing assailant.

A glass lizard is not a snake, and Rhea is not an assailant.

After ample time and effort, Rhea learned the subtleties in identifying the legless lizards from snakes and developed their song. Humming pleasantly in her best baritone voice, she rubbed a large rock in a circular pattern against the

ground plasma, sending a ripple of soft vibrations that would calm the anxious creatures.

Jesh was not a snake, but Jesh was not a tender, either. Rhea had been singing the wrong song.

She almost frightened herself at how sage-like she felt staring at the afflicted Poiseau before her whose expressions took on a fledgling-like innocence even as he agitatedly snapped at her.

To everyone's surprise, she firmly placed her left hand on the back of Jesh's right, sandwiching it between her palms. Then, with a certainty she had never shared aloud, she sang:

“Onward, chickadee,
My sweet chickadee.

Not by land,
Nor air,
Nor sea.

Go chickadee,
My sweet chickadee,

Promise to remember me.”

Jesh had no time to protest as they were swept into the Memorial Realm, their bodies remaining seated in the hallway staring into one another's eyes. Brie and FeeBee remained loyally by Rhea's side, keeping one eye on Jesh while the tentacles of his right hand intertwined with Rhea's.

THE CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ

OF

JESH LEBEC



“What have you done?,” Jesh’s voice echoed off of the hazy walls around them.

He muttered frustratedly before trailing off as he remembered that his thoughts would not be concealed like they were in material Hachtax. He tried to understand how Rhea brought them here, but was unable to ponder it aloud without feeling too vulnerable.

“I did it,” Rhea said proudly as she gazed upon the first door.

She tried to pass through it with her intention as she had done before, but it seemed now the catalogue raisonné entrance was locked.

“It needs both of us,” Jesh said condescendingly, “Your caprice won’t get you far in here.”

“I’m wearing a jumper,” Rhea thought aloud confusedly while the dark environment remained still and quiet.

“Catalogue Raisonné” they read aloud simultaneously.

The solid wood ingress opened to the immense hall of doors. It looked as Rhea had left it, endless rows of dusty, forgotten rooms with a single, eye-catching door covered in a dewy, glistening blue liquid.

“Should we count to three?” Rhea asked.

Jesh tried to remain silent but couldn’t calm his racing thoughts as he read his tender’s name mounted above the blue door.

“I’m afraid,” he blurted out.

Embarrassed, he immediately backpedaled into expletives and insults aimed at Uki LeBec.

“I am too,” Rhea loudly interrupted, “but I’m less afraid with you here.”

Jesh remained quiet until he felt the firm pressure of Rhea’s hands squeezing his intently from the musty hallway.

“Uki LeBec,” the pair read aloud as the door opened to the pitch black stage room.



Each story unfolded exactly as it had for Rhea her first time through. Her experience underfoot freed her typically anxious mind and allowed her to pay closer attention to details. She remained silent as Jesh occasionally muttered a snide remark or let slip a strange *mew* sound.

Rhea had checked in with Jesh at each door, and at each door Jesh had indicated he wanted to continue. They did not share commentary, but Rhea continued to hold her tender's hand firmly through the deeply personal scenes flashing before them.

They had just finished Windsor Snell's story, and Rhea searched for a speck of light somewhere in the blackness.

“I’m... the Ain’t,” Jesh said declaratively.

“Yes,” Rhea blurted out, feeling a hint of self-reproof as the affirmation’s echo cracked sharply around them.

They remained silent in Jesh’s numb realization as Rhea formed her next thoughts carefully.

“I know this is all being shown to us for a reason. I think we should continue,” Rhea thought aloud.

Jesh felt defeated, but his curiosity wouldn’t allow him to give up. As the next door approached their view, they read aloud its name.

“Cadence Day Brunch.”

Door 5: Cadence Day Brunch

“Cadence Day brunch was served in the Academy’s northernmost courtyard. Hopeful viewers stood beneath a web of purple, metallic liquid that spanned the entire area. Three softly glowing pillars of multicolored light formed a triangle around the arrangement of circular dining tables, each one overflowing with a cornucopia of the most colorful Hachtax fruits and flowers.

Jesh lingered by the pillar nearest the entrance and overheard the unmistakable arrogance of his former design professor, Gole Globus.

‘The liquid mercury, while extremely dangerous in the wrong hands, is the exact density of our atmosphere and thus, floats,’ he explained, flicking up his hands as if presenting a magic trick.

‘Its violet appearance, well, that’s my little secret,’ he winked.

He was surrounded by a small group of the school’s most fashionable pupils, each nodding overzealously at his every word.

For many Poiseaux, this event was the apex of elegance. Jesh found it painstakingly long-winded.

He let out a disinterested sigh and leaned on the sparkling pillar next to him, quickly pulling his hand back upon realizing it was completely covered in glowing beetles. He

shuddered as he pulled on his brown leather gloves and walked intently toward a table in the center of the courtyard.

To his delight, an empty chair sat next to Juniper at the center table. He quickened his pace, his lips slightly twitching as they struggled to hold back a grin.

Juniper was feeble and fair, with powder-pink, plumaceous, chunky strands parted atop a round, rosy face. Her short, lean legs propped up a well-proportioned frame, but the slight slump of her slim shoulders and downward gaze suggested she didn't feel that way.

She shyly glanced up at him and repeatedly swept the same lock of hair to the side of her forehead. There was a child-like innocence in her eyes that could always disarm Jesh.

‘My shining star!’ Jesh exclaimed with a smile, ‘Can I sit?’

Juniper smiled and nodded a few times before squeaking out a friendly ‘Sure.’

‘Always overstated,’ he exasperatedly uttered, raising his brows and eyeing the area’s decor. Before he could continue, a group of inattentive teens bumped into his chair as they passed, knocking him into the table and jostling his place setting.

‘Overcrowded, and overrated,’ he murmured through clenched teeth as the perpetrators continued without acknowledgment. Juniper smiled and nodded.

‘But you,’ Jesh said softly, ‘are nothing short of... overwhelming.’

Juniper looked down at her lap and bashfully smiled, slowly sweeping her fingers across the lock of hair on her forehead. The tiny bits of debris and glitter floating in the atmosphere stood still around them as they reveled in each others presence.

Suddenly, like a rock plunking into a placid puddle, the boom of a loud voice jolted them from their entrancement. They both snapped to attention and sat up straight in their chairs.

‘Welcome students, friends, and family!’ Professor Globus began. ‘During this blessed kuna cycle, Hachtax has seen some of its finest pupils blossom into the next generation of peacemakers, dream weavers, and - thanks to me - loquacious logicians.’

Gole’s admirers chuckled while Jesh rolled his eyes behind his glass of water.

‘A Poiseau’s cadence is said to be a blessing from Harmelodja herself,’ Globus continued ardently as he paced the courtyard, pensively furrowing his brow as if he were still thinking of his next words.

‘Many of you are familiar with my theatrical works. Many of them performed in the very arena in which we will gather later. Today, we gather not for divertissement, but to celebrate the gifts so graciously bestowed upon us by participating in our universe’s most *galvanizing* drama. An

electrifying display that serves as our species' accession into Hachtax's spiritual realm, thus solidifying our impermeable interconnection with her.'

He paused and scanned the room, which was silent apart from the tinkle of jewelry and the sound of giddy gushing at the Globus groupie table.

Jesh stiffened his posture as his gaze was met. As much as he despised the professor's bombastic behavior, he knew Globus was one of the few remaining believers in his ability. Before the professor's eyes moved elsewhere, Jesh blinked slowly to serve as a discrete nod of acknowledgement.

'In this fifth kuna cycle, a cycle during which we have witnessed our world's magnum opus: *orsange*,' Gole continued.

As if Jesh didn't already sense the audience's fixation on him, the very mention of *orsange* caused the stagnant bits of glitter and tiny bubbles decorating the space around him to break into a frenzied tornado, swooshing into his hood and causing the orbs on his cloak to clang.

The tiny tempest dissipated as those causing the disturbance bashfully studied their laps; it was beyond improper to allow emotional manifestations during a formal occasion. The few Poiseaux unfamiliar with the LeBec legacy looked on to witness Jesh's murderous regard. Globus knew he hit a sore spot.

‘Today marks the debut of our second tempus. Although not here with us this morning, our beloved Uki of the LeBec family tree was cycle five’s *first* orsange recipient, bestowing us with a beautiful, bountiful first tempus,’ Globus continued, raising his voice.

Jesh’s heart thumped forcefully in his chest as he battled alternating ebbs of anger and insecurity. He couldn’t have Globus placing that kind of expectation on him today. He closed his eyes and retreated to his mental corridors for a logical solution.

As he began his next words, the professor fully extended his arms so that one palm faced the ground and the other the sky. The blue-black silk of his draped sleeves resembled the wings of a swallowtail butterfly folding into rest as he slowly swooped his arms around him in opposite directions, his left palm circling above his head and his right below his waist until they met each other at his chest.

‘May our second tempus reflect the same,’ he finished as he closed his eyes and nodded his head, many audience members mimicking his hand placement and subtly bowing in their seats.

Juniper meekly placed her left hand on Jesh’s knee in a feeble attempt to comfort him. Having barely sensed the tickle of his pants’ woolen fibers, her hand was brusquely bumped aside by a sudden lurch to his feet.

‘The likelihood of two instances of orsange in a single kuna cycle is slim, Professor Globus. Last it happened was tempus

three of cycle one. Twin brothers shared a golden cadence,’ Jesh stated as if reading from an encyclopedia.

The certitude in his voice was slightly offset by a barely audible angst. Juniper clasped her hands nervously in her lap.

The professor stared smiling at Jesh for a few moments before he responded.

‘Jesh LeBec, star pupil. Astounding intellectual capacity. Let me ask you, do you know why I so adore fashion, decor, the arts?’

Without breaking eye contact, Jesh slowly lowered himself to his seat.

‘Neither beauty nor its creation require explanation,’ Globus answered, now approaching Jesh’s table.

Jesh returned a puzzled look.

‘Sometimes, you need to let go of the “*why?*” to enjoy the “*wow!*”’

Upon finishing his last word, he opened his hands at his sides and the courtyard erupted in a swarm of glow beetles. They had left their posts and spiraled upwards, dancing into a dazzling assemblage of multicolored blinking lights.

In awe, a majority of the brunch-goers leapt from their seats, the few fledglings present attempting to jump and catch the beetles as they quickly swooped overhead.

Jesh was not impressed and had remained seated in the midst of the chaotic display. He huffily pulled on his gloves before angrily shoving his chair backwards to stand.

Juniper, noticing Jesh about to flee, threw her cloth napkin over one of the pieces of butter cake she had saved for him and swept it into her bag with her forearm.

She attempted to keep up as he darted towards the exit, but neither her undersized stride nor her oversized shoes were of any help as his belit silhouette disappeared past the fence and trees lining the academy.

‘More to come, everyone! Eat, drink, enjoy! Cadencing at mid-day!’ Professor Globus called out cheerfully as he walked backwards towards the academy building with his devoted followers in tow.

Juniper stood alone near the courtyard’s exit, hand on her bag’s shoulder strap. Behind her, the pre-celebration’s laughter and excitement continued, seemingly ignorant to her predicament. Beyond the academy’s perimeter, the wake of Jesh’s torment beguiled her.

Just as she began to wonder how long she could remain there unnoticed, hovering in the blissful ambiguity of indecision, she saw the unmistakable twinkle of Jesh’s cloak sitting atop their spot: a naturally formed sculpture of granite, tree roots,

shrubs, and clay that remarkably resembled a common sheep.”

Rhea’s romantic side was fascinated at the prospect of her tender having a love interest. The macabre side of her was curious to know what must have happened to her since this was the first she had heard of Juniper Quinn.

The next door came on quickly and Rhea hoped Jesh was still able to continue.

“Ready, *père*?” she asked lovingly.

“No, but, we’re going,” he said determinedly.

The door slowly opened as they read its signage aloud:
“Sheep Rock.”

Door 6: Sheep Rock

“Juniper approached Sheep Rock at its flank and peered up at the ladder of footholds climbing its gravelly, flesh-like dimples. Wobbling only slightly, she reached behind her to remove her platforms, leaving them at the structure’s feet.

She slung her purse onto her back using its strap and breathed deeply before securing the ball of her foot into the first groove. She grunted as she strained to reach the next foothold; the steps were designed for a much longer legged Poiseau, and on every other occasion she had Jesh to boost her up.

As she felt her grip weaken, she considered calling out to him, but was determined to conquer the climb and come to his rescue.

Wisteria vines crept in all directions from the base of the sheep's spine, their soft violet bunches of flowers draping down its rump like a fleecy tail. The delicate fluffs of purple petals fluttered playfully just outside the reach of Juniper's outstretched fingers as she continued her ascent. She knew hidden beneath the flowers sat a ledge just big enough for her to sit on for a rest.

Using all that was left of her upper body strength, she began pulling herself onto the flat rock with her forearms, realizing half way through that its surface was much smaller than she had remembered. Before she could react, panic's icy claws dug into her brain and her muscles froze impetuously around the rock shelf holding her up.

She tried to choke out a cry for help, but her words failed her. She clenched her eyelids tightly shut as she dangled helplessly from Sheep Rock's rear.

As she tried to calm her breathing, the scent of smoldering meliora leaves tickled her nostrils. Its smell comforted her enough to carefully pry open her left eye and witness a wisp of soft, pink smoke pass in and out of view.

Suddenly, she felt the firm grip of hands at her waist as she was lifted to the safety of the sheep's back.

“Why does it seem like I’m always saving you from some asshole?” Jesh said with a grin.

Juniper feigned a scowl as she turned to face him, but couldn’t contain the wide, toothy smile that burst out as soon as she saw him standing heroically atop the mound of Hachtax he had pulled beneath his feet.

Jesh was one of the few Poiseau with the ability to manipulate the physical plane without a cadence. As a child, he had painstakingly mastered control of his tentacles in a futile effort to earn his tender Uki’s approval.

Before becoming an adolescent, however, Jesh had learned to keep this special talent to himself.

“How-” Juniper pondered out loud, the rest of her question coming out as a sort of prolonged, perplexed pip.

Fiercely concentrating, Jesh began walking towards Juniper as the plasma mound he had been standing on settled back into flat ground. With each step, thousands of metal appendages tugged the land to his feet, moving so quickly they were only visible during the brief moment prior to contact.

Although his entire face wore the beet red strain required to sustain them, the fluidity of his leg movements mirrored those of a cadenced Poiseau. Unlike a cadenced Poiseau, though, Jesh’s method left no trace.

He attempted to look calm and collected as his metal appendages retreated back into their internal sheaths and he felt the relief of solid rock beneath his feet. He tried to steady his heavy breathing as he stood facing Juniper, unveiling a warm, rosy glow on his cheeks as he brushed the disheveled auburn hair from his face. Shoulders still heaving, he crossed his arms at his chest and cracked a smile.

Juniper's face was stunned in bewilderment as she studied the now settled plasmatic plane that Jesh had apparently just bent to his will. She then stared back at Jesh, her eyes agape above shrugged shoulders as her palms flexed outward at her sides awaiting an explanation.

“You like it?” Jesh asked jokingly, “I’ve been able to do it since I was a fledgling.”

“How?” Juniper peeped a second time.

“My feelers. I practiced with them until I could move the ground like my tender did,” he replied.

As soon as he’d spoken, he noticed fuschia smoke puffing out from beneath his cloak and quickly retrieved a smoking, spherical thurible that was discretely clipped inside.

“Quick! Get in here!” he exclaimed to Juniper behind a haze of pink smoke as he held open both sides of his cloak like a canopy.

Still awaiting further explanation, Juniper reluctantly inched towards Jesh until he playfully lurches his arms forward and

encircled them over her head, covering her entirely with his cloak.

Although Juniper was head-over-heels for Jesh, his slightly awkward and, at times, vampirical nature sometimes gave her an uneasy feeling. This was one of those times.

Thankfully, her malaise dissipated as she exhaled the meliora smoke that had instantly engulfed her beneath Jesh's tent.

“Better?” Jesh asked.

“Better,” Juniper replied with relief.

Jesh lowered his arms and cupped the back of Juniper's head in his hands, gently caressing the porcelain skin of her jawline with his thumbs. She felt her skull warm and melt into his firm grasp, letting out a single, blissful chuckle as her body momentarily numbed and floated out of reach.

Gazing down at her, Jesh's eyes squinted with an earnest geniality she seldom saw from him. He closed his eyes and slowly lowered his head until their lips met, still cradling Juniper's head in his hands.

Juniper's eyelids collapsed at his resolve while an electric tingle buzzed through her lips and reanimated her limbs that passionately clung to Jesh's tall frame.

Their lips parted and they stood aswoon in their embrace for a few moments, unaware of the absolutely photographic instance occurring around them. Beneath lavender skylights,

the plasmatic plane glowed pleasantly with a hue of deep orange, casting a bronze sheen upon Sheep Rock's ivy-blanketed paddock.

Even the gristly green and yellow vines tying limb to land like ligatures were wearing their best, proudly peeling open white lace flowers that curled into bows garnishing the sheep's giant stone haunches. Atop a lush, green backbone, thin flower petals of purple and periwinkle danced unwaveringly through the dense, rosy cloud still surrounding the two lovers.

So intense was their aura that the feathery tree seeds and fuzzy bits of atmospheric debris floating around them slowed their descent to pay respects, meandering back to their original trajectory as Juniper took a step back.

“Start talking or no butter cake,” she quipped, holding open her purse.

Jesh silently emptied his thurible and motioned with his head for Juniper to follow him. They made their way to Sheep Rock's nape where Jesh had established a modest stone table and stools. As a ponderer, he had many secret sitting spots tucked within Hachtax's landscape. So far, the nape was the only one he had shared.

They sat facing each other and ate the butter cake straight from Juniper's bag, giggling through crumbs until Jesh felt unfettered enough to talk feelings.

“Jun,” he began with a sigh, “I’m scared.”

Juniper quietly shuffled through the cue cards in her mind until arriving at an acceptable response, curling her lips inward to fight the meliora-induced smile trying to burst out. She couldn't help but feel elated that he was opening up to her, but knew she had to choose her words carefully.

"Me too," she said empathetically, "Tell me yours and I'll tell you mine."

They spent the morning discussing Jesh's childhood and the difficulty he had feeling accepted in the shadow of his tender. Juniper, who greatly admired Jesh's intelligence and drive, was astonished at the depth of his insecurity.

She felt comforted by his candor until he suddenly became solemn.

"I hate him," Jesh declared.

Juniper remained silent and furrowed her brows in concern. Jesh stared blankly at his clasped hands and exhaled sharply through his nostrils before quickly jumping to his feet.

"Shall we get this over with?" he asked with a grin, extending his bent arm to Juniper.

Knowing the moments of Jesh's vulnerability had passed, she grasped his forearm and pulled herself up wearing a half-hearted smile.

As they descended Sheep Rock, the ground's glow was nearly at its brightest, so they would have to hurry back to reach the Cadence Ceremony in time. Juniper slowly slid on her shoes as Jesh eased backwards impatiently.

“You can go, I'll see you there,” she said with a smile as she glanced up at him.

He charmingly winked his right eye before spinning on his heels and sprinting towards the academy. Jesh was always punctual.”

Rhea could feel Jesh's salty tears dripping onto her skin as the voice subsided and the room went dark. She had known nothing of her tender's past and could only imagine the hurt he was feeling reliving it.

“Is this it?” she asked softheartedly as another door appeared before them.

“Yeah,” Jesh replied, “let's go before I back out.”

Door 7: Cadence Ceremony

“The open arena was packed with eager, noisily chattering Poiseaux; many of whom had, after all, been sitting several hours just to witness a few moments of excitement.

In the topmost ring of marble bleachers, tenders and sowers sat beside young fledglings who fidgeted with their

uncomfortable attire while the eldest excitedly identified ceremonial elements throughout the arena.

The middle section of bench seating sat current students of the Academy and was relatively quiet due to the presence of parents and professors. Earlier in the wait, a trio of emboldened undergrads had mouthed their way into a one-uppance in the aisles in which they gruelingly forced themselves upwards using only their tentacles.

The three adolescents had, unfortunately (but unsurprisingly), not considered the consequences of their ill-conceived competition. As soon as the spectating professors heard the plink of tiny spearheads on stone, they sprung from their seats to eject them from the arena.

By the time the teachers had squeezed their way through the rows of pubescent Poiseaux, the stooges were already groaning amidst the mounds of metal spaghetti they had created beneath them. No punishment was served, as the process of re-routing their mis-fired appendages was said to be excruciating enough.

Thankfully walled off and adequately spaced from the crowd's antics, a front row of fifty maple chairs upholstered in purple velvet was arranged attentively in a semi-circle around the bottom of the stage. Each initiate was afforded two seats for special guests, lovingly referred to by the students as *velvet pots*, typically filled by a tender and a sower.

When Jesh was handed his selection form, he quickly scratched *Juniper Quinn* beneath the first seat and handed it back to the attendant. Upon learning that he was required to enter two names on the form, he shrugged and jotted *Her Purse* beneath seat two.

Three ibis flew overhead, but veered away as Hachtax's Great Eye came into view. Its marbled iris of black and red neatly rimmed a glowing pupil that pierced the sky above the arena with the lustrous ginger of mid-day. Dotted along the eye's upper rim, the professors' wooden podiums served as stubby eyelashes protruding from an immaculately lined turquoise lid.

The Academy's five most tenured professors stood humbly at their chestnut stands: Windsor Snell the leftmost, whose podium was embellished with a squared circle; followed by Cortis Rue-Baxter, the academy's second best mathematician whose stand displayed a sigma symbol; Gole Globus, centered amongst his peers behind a podium bearing a phi symbol; Pare Gritz, the art master whose petit, thin frame was dwarfed by his lectern decorated with a symbol resembling an upside down 'Y'; and Doss Winterdel, a beautiful and sagely spiritual Poiseau of few words, who stood at the fifth and final podium adorned with the outline of a circle widely encapsulating a dot.

The first initiate stood nervously in front of his peers who were lined horizontally behind him. Strangely, the professors did not speak. They stared intently forward as if they were looking through him.

The arena hushed suddenly into silence.

Gole Globus bellowed, “Artis Clay, please approach the stage,” as he beckoned the initiate forward with the wave of his arm.

Exhaling deeply, he slowly took his first step, slightly picking up pace on the next two. He stood at the very edge of the center stage that was calmly glowing. Shutting his eyes, as some do, he leapt onto the plane, making it about two meters towards the center.

The attendees leaned forward simultaneously in their chairs to get a closer look. A few gasps popped out from younger Poiseaux as the oval of plasma before them turned a milky white. Translucent bubbles frothed from its surface, lifting the initiate a few meters before the entire mound beneath his feet froze with a puff of frost.

The arena remained silent enough to hear the slow, unmistakable creak of cracking ice just seconds before the frightened Poiseau was sent plummeting downward through the hollow mound.

The remaining ice melted around him in a splash, the water disappearing into the ground plasma below. The initiate sat trembling for a moment until he noticed a soft blue glow emanating from the soles of his feet.

He excitedly stood upright but kept his gaze glued to the action below, mystified by the cool, aquamarine light bouncing off the surface of his wide eyes. After reaching its

apex, the initiate's cadence subsided and he stood with tears in his eyes on the now perfectly still stage.

The spectators remained silent, awaiting the professors' signal that all was going according to plan. The five huddled in a circle to quietly discuss next steps.

"I feel confident in saying this is between Snell and Winterdel," Professor Globus stated as he made eye contact with each of the other four.

"It was undoubtedly elemental. Do you agree, Windsor?" Doss Winterdel asked softly.

"Agreed. An alchemy *Poi-zoo* through and through," Snell chortled.

The group nodded and returned to their stations, sporting stoic smirks as they faced the initiate and the audience who were anxiously awaiting their determination. After a few agonizing seconds, Windsor Snell broke the silence and exclaimed, "Well Arty I'd just love to have ya!"

The smile he had been muzzling burst from his mustached lips and creased his eyelids into crescent moons kindly nestling his rosy cheeks. He wholeheartedly loved being an edifier and felt genuinely connected to each of his initiates, even if some of them were slightly disappointed with an outmoded alchemical cadence.

Artis Clay, who was the first of his tree to attend the Academy, looked relieved to have been aligned with an

edifier who seemed friendly. He took a deep breath, straightened his posture, and walked towards Professor Snell with a hopeful, closed mouth grin.

As he stood beside his new edifier and faced the audience, the anxiously quiet arena immediately erupted into a frenzy of applause and whistles. Albeit rare, a failed Cadence is a depressing occurrence for all involved.

The spectating Poiseaux were put at ease by the initial display, causing the stiffness in the atmosphere to subside and sway casually alongside their hopeful gestures.

As the crowd chattered and the Professors extended their congratulations to Artis, Jesh peered over his left shoulder to see if Juniper and Her Purse were occupying their velvet pots.

There were only two seats unoccupied, but he was unconcerned. He was certain he would be used as Globus's "grand finale" and be last on the roster.

The arena gradually quieted as Artis took his place behind his new edifier and Professor Globus raised his arms to announce the next initiate.

"Terra Bonnet, please approach the stage."

A stout, mohawked Poiseau with teal feather earrings to match calmly stepped forward onto the stage's stone perimeter. Glancing down at the slowly stirring orange plasma below, they closed their eyes, took a deep breath, and

sprung high above the great eye of the arena with thick, muscular legs.

At the peak of their jump, the outwardly rugged Poiseau froze and began floating gracefully towards the pool below like an Olympian plunging from a high dive. Palms outstretched, Terra unsheathed their feelers but kept them retracted to pierce the ground plasma at the exact moment of contact. This was a clearly choreographed first Cadence.

The onlookers were still and silent as Terra remained frozen in a handstand atop the unresponsive plasma. Jesh, finding the stunt showy, drifted into mental exploratory mode and discretely recalled the number of Cadences that had failed due to an initiate's showboating.

The figure he calculated set the odds of success low enough for him to continue paying attention. He had no qualms finding comfort in the shortcomings of others when he felt insecure.

The handstand stood for what felt like an eternity before Professor Globus raised his right hand and requested an end to the ineffective display. Terra would be given another opportunity to Cadence once the rest of the initiates had made their first attempt.

While disappointing, the situation was not unrecoverable; Poiseau were given up to three attempts to Cadence on Cadence Day. Terra pushed off with their hands and landed upright on the stage's edge, elegantly bowing to the audience before returning to their place in line with the other initiates.

Jesh avoided eye contact but smugly studied Terra's simple, beige kurta and bare feet as they walked by. While difficult, Jesh managed to ignore the calls of encouragement from supporters as he quietly critiqued the small bald patches peppered along the sides of Terra's head.

As family and friends smiled at their loved one's appreciative wave, Jesh wondered why they would be proud of such an unmanicured mess and concluded that they must be pity-praising.

'Jesh LeBec, please approach the stage,' Professor Globus announced.

Jesh felt a sudden emptiness in his stomach and his muscles tensed. He was certain he would be called last. He glanced behind him at Juniper's still vacant seat.

He had imagined this moment thousands of times. The crowd, clothes, and conclusion varied, but Juniper was his constant.

'No expectation, no disappointment,' he unconvincingly recited in his mind before he cleared his throat, rolled his shoulders back, and forced a semi-confident step forward.

Repeating his inner mantra with every step, Jesh continued his ghoulish march at an agonizingly slow pace. The arena buzzed with quiet gossip and commentary while Professor Gritz leaned conspicuously to the left side of his podium for a better view.

Windsor Snell, who understood that Jesh was unaware of just how bizarrely he was moving, made eye contact and raised his brows to gently beckon him towards the stage.

His mentor's acknowledgement was enough to steer his body and focus towards the Great Eye in a more direct manner and Jesh found himself standing on the stage's black stone perimeter.

The oval of deep orange plasma before him glowed with a welcoming warmth that nearly caused him to stumble backwards.

'Opus?' he thought to himself, puzzled.

He glanced subtly from side to side while removing his cloak to ensure he was alone on the stage. He then closed his eyes to re-center himself before stepping into its center. As his foot hovered over the glowing ground, he opened his eyes and felt the same sensation that had initially startled him.

This time, it swept over his entire body as if he had walked into a smoldering meliora field. It was unlike any feeling he had ever felt. It was euphoric and effortless and calm, as if he were once again a Uka cocooned within Hachtax's womb.

Completely overtaken, he energetically planted both feet onto the ground's surface and dashed around the oval's edge without hesitation. To his delight, his feelers melded perfectly with the Great Eye's plasma, creating an ornate, spiral staircase ascending behind him.

As he rounded the edge nearest the professors, still pumping with adrenaline, the playful sparks bouncing overhead an increasingly elated audience caught his eye.

He reached the peak of his ascent in the very center of the Great Eye, now facing the attendees atop an immense sculpture he had created with only his steps. Around its base, red-orange plasma morphed into tangles of ivy with feathery leaves jutting out like flames.

Beneath the thick foliage stood a giant, intimidating block; all of its faces were impeccably polished but its corners and edges remained rough.

Jesh peered down to admire his tower and caught a glimpse of Juniper's reflection on its iridescent face. Her fine hair was loosely gathered at her right ear, finished with a deep burgundy dahlia that boldly contrasted her blush locks and soft yellow dress.

At that moment, an unfamiliar but pleasant, weightless feeling overcame Jesh and he uncharacteristically laughed aloud. His face was a beam with bright, eager eyes and polished teeth as he lifted his head to share his blissful moment with the only Poiseau who meant anything to him.

To his dismay, he was instead stunned by a familiar figure standing beside his beloved.

Time slowed to a crawl as he studied the Poiseau in disbelief. Two thick, almond colored ponytails, once bouncing

boisterously from a head of neatly pulled back hair, appeared to levitate over an elegant, green robe.

Each ponytail was neatly secured into five equal sections with golden twine, the fifth section interwoven with the golden ibis feathers of orsange. Although undeniably beautiful, the feathers seemed to gloat at Jesh as they gleamed from his tender's cream-colored locks.

Only Uki's profile was visible as he cajoled with surrounding admirers, but Jesh was still nauseated by the perky nature of his pointy cheekbones that looked ready to pierce his pale, crinkled skin.

His narrow, squinted eyes were nearly hidden by a large beak-like nose that he pointed slightly upward to prop up his small, rectangular spectacles. From the opening of his oversized robe, Jesh could see the edges of the beige, familial kurta he had refused long before he had come of Cadence age.

Perhaps if Juniper could have found her voice in this one moment, her apologetic plea would have brought him to his senses. Unfortunately, Juniper was never successful in winning Jesh's attention over anger and pride.

Jesh and his resentment returned to the present in an explosion of fury as the obelisque cracked deafeningly beneath his feet. Chunks as heavy as the granite pillars lining the arena plummeted onto the stage, sending shards flying towards the initiates and front line audience members who cowered in fear.

Panic began to set in as Jesh realized the pure elation he had experienced during his Cadence had slipped away from him. The flawless formation he created, more perfect than anything he had dreamt, had been marred by his own tender.

He crouched on the still standing structure, frantically assessing the damage with his palms cupping the sides of his head.

For a brief moment, he recalled Windsor's words and thought he may have seen the faintest gleam of opportunity within its cracks. His moment of optimism was fleeting, however, as he heard Uki's voice dismissively declare, "Ah. Next time, then!"

A few audience members in the bleachers chuckled as the professors looked on in silence. Jesh felt a sting in his nose as tears welled in the corners of his eyes. Clenching his teeth, he turned to face the professors.

'Eject him from the arena!' he shouted angrily while pointing sharply behind him.

Apart from Windsor Snell's ever-telling eyebrows that furrowed sympathetically, the professors remained stoic against Jesh's rage. Cadence Day was always high in emotion, and there were few mishaps the edifiers hadn't seen.

'No ejection will be necessary,' Professor Globus calmly replied as he slowly began raising his right hand.

'YOU!' Jesh roared as he spun violently to face Uki.

As he yelled, darkened veins bulged from beneath his pale skin and a waterfall of dark red, viscous liquid poured from beneath his feet. His immense sculpture was immediately leveled as the thick secretion came into contact with its surface.

As the substance lowered, it appeared as if Jesh were riding a liquified beast, standing steadily with his feet still firmly planted on its glossy back.

Many of the arena goers fled as soon as the strange liquid appeared. The professors and the audience members whose curiosity outweighed their fear stayed glued to their places with wide eyes.

When Jesh finally lowered to stage level, fully prepared to tell off his tender, he instead heard a muffled cry coming from the left side of the stage.

In his ire, he had failed to notice that Juniper was tiptoeing in her mouselike way towards the stage. She had slinked beneath the low garland barrier and ducked out of Jesh's view to wait for an opening to reach out to him.

The pouring immediately stopped as Jesh was overcome with fear. He quickly ran to her while the liquid appeared to swirl slowly down a drain in the stage's center.

He lifted her onto the stage and sat with her head in his lap. He began to weep as he peered down at her. Juniper's glowing skin and doll-like hair were now painted blood-red.

She struggled to breathe through the thick substance but still peered up at Jesh and whimpered:

‘I’m sorry.’

Jesh held onto her tighter but her body began to melt away in his arms. He watched in horror as the beautiful Poiseau he had seen just moments ago dissolved into deep red sludge, thinning as she circled the drain before there was no trace of her left at all.

Jesh stood shakily and wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. As he brought his hand down, he let out a tiny gasp at the sight of the thick, dark red liquid smeared upon his skin. He turned to the professors and pleaded with them to bring her back.

‘We cannot. Cadence Day must come to an end. The professors must convene in private. Please go home everyone,’ professor Globus declared.

Jesh hopped off of the stage, picked up his cloak, and stormed off in frustration. He ignored Opus and the other audience members who tried to reassure him by assigning blame elsewhere.

As he approached the main entrance of the academy, he was once again caught off guard by his tender standing before him. He was holding something in his hand.

‘I... am so sorry. This was Juniper’s. Please take it,’ Uki stated sadly while offering her burgundy dahlia to him on his outstretched palm.

Jesh had no words for his tender. He silently scooped the flower from Uki’s hand and placed it in the pocket of his leather satchel. He then continued on his angry march towards Sheep Rock.

He did not speak to Uki again.”

The visualizations disappeared and the blackness returned for a few moments before brightening and dissolving into daylight.

Rhea, Jesh, Brie, and FeeBee sat silently in the dank hallway of the LeBec Family Tree; Jesh stunned in trauma while Rhea stared at her bloodied, white blouse resting enigmatically in her lap.