

*ode to a bromeliad*

We're standing on the precipice, balanced on the bent-edge of the leaf before it transforms into a slick, green slide into darkness. Below us is a winding organic maze made of the fat stalks of the plant, sticky inner sanctums and corridors enclosed by thin, white roots. It is massive, flowering, and in possession of several pre-columbian artifacts we mean to rope and lever back up into the damp air of our aboveground world. Faint light from an unknown source glazes the waxy leaves, punctuated by the shallow spikes running down their edges. It shines up through their chloroplast, illuminating the microscopic processes of the plant that is generally concealed to the naked eye. Above us, hardly visible in the oppressive darkness, hang the gently flowering bracts.

I am perched in one corner of the leaf, my hand pressed against its smooth skin, taking in the inexplicable scale of our surroundings. I squint up at the mouth of the cenote, characterized by a few petulant stars and the dim outline of a wall of dangling aerial roots. I wonder how we're going to get out again. Then a braided and multicolored rope whizzes past my ear, released into the depths. I look over and up at the group still talking.

On the edge of the cluster of scientists, Peregrine is clutching the rope in his fist, white-knuckled. Everyone else is ignoring him. He strikes me as a rabbit of a man, and by this I do not mean he is cute or approachable. Quite the opposite. He is lean and terrified, doggedly avoids eye contact, his body always pivoted away from the group in a way that makes me think he might bolt at any moment. Not that there's anywhere for him to go. His free hand twitches at his side in some sort of cryptic rhythm, index-thumb tap, ring-thumb tap, and so on. If you stand close, you are enveloped in a flowery soap-smell that emanates from him. I find this endearing. Telegraphing constant apprehension but with the aroma of an old lady's laundry. When he does speak, and it is rarely, it is abrupt and hooded in a kind of poorly-concealed castilian accent.

Now, I wave up at him. "Are you ready?" I shout. A few of the other scientists glance at me disapprovingly, their arms crossed over their field gear. Suna, the biologist, has twice now scolded me for speaking too loudly in delicate ecosystems, and I'm not exactly gunning for a third time. I smile apologetically, snap my mouth shut, and wait for him to come closer.

Peregrine picks his way across the slippery surface towards my spot, tracing the path I had taken earlier. He sinks down next to me easily, poised despite his nervousness. He hasn't really warmed up to me and I know conversation will be stilted and uncomfortable, so we just stare down into the pit that we're preparing to descend into. He's already wearing his heavy harness, the dangling carabiners creating a cacophony in the damp quiet. Both our ropes have been attached onto one of the thick spikes at the tip of the leaf.

Finally, *finally*, Nik makes some final pronouncement and the group breaks off. Suna and Nourhan taking long strides together across the leaf, deftly lowering themselves onto a different level of the gargantuan flower. I watch them, a bit nervous. I'm not used to this level of athleticism in scientists after spending the majority of my academic career in glorified basements, surrounded by people who majored in making Excel spreadsheets and left grad programs bent and atrophied.

Ix strides over to us and hands me a walkie talkie. "We're off. You know what to do." He is tall, heavy, and self-assured, standing over us with an ineffable kind of calm that doesn't seem to be able to permeate Peregrine's standoffish silence.

I take it from him tentatively, snapping it onto a harness loop. "Yup."

He nods. "Channel five. Trust the system." Then he walks away, rejoining Nik. They click their helmets on and let their ropes fall far and fast beneath them, twirling hypnotically in the air before straightening with a bounce, ready for descent.

Peregrine doesn't really look at me, just presses at his system's clips in practiced caution before slipping down into the depths, his neon helmet winking out of sight. I let out a slow breath, go through the safety steps, and then let myself fall.

It's darker than I had imagined, and we drop into knee deep water, condensation collected from above. I am now blindly thankful for the treated moisture-resistant canvas overalls, which I had been loath to put on in the stifling heat of the jungle. I hear Peregrine splashing around next to me. Then his light snaps on and he starts feeling for an opening into the arteries. Within seconds he's found one and we push through.

The walls of the innards are almost plush. Spongy and easily bruised. I peer in fascination at a series of drawings that we follow through the tunnels. They are rendered in ropy scars that I can only imagine had been made by some kind of knife or machete. Depictions of dog-headed deities, Santa Muerte, a string of glyphs I cannot yet parse. My Nahuatl is rudimentary at best. Peregrine lingers on one of some kind of bird, tapping it in that same motion as before. Index thumb ring thumb.

We crawl through more roots. Occasionally, the radio will crackle with short messages that don't concern us. Nourhan laughing with Ix about something I miss. Peregrine maintains thin-lipped composure. We slip past glassy-eyed salamanders as big as me that are propped in the basin of the leaves, letting water drip onto their bumpy flesh. Their breaths shush across the shallow space.

After a while of the same terrain over and over again, I begin to lose myself in the monotony, letting my mind off leash. I think about Laila, who I wish could have come with us, how she would have kept her white lab coat on and laughed heartily at my stupid jokes, unlike the people I'm actually here with. Her braids would have still been so carefully done up into bows and loops, even accompanying me

through the bowels of this alien. I get so wrapped up in this thought that I startle quite spectacularly when Peregrine clears his throat and asks shyly:

"So... How did you end up on this trip?"

Evidently he has grown tired of or too awkward in the silence, so I humor him and respond, "My university received a grant to send someone and they selected me."

I feel his surprise even though his face is pointed away from me. "You're still a student?"

"Yes. Anthropological archeology and ecology."

He stops, stooping, and picks up a huge spine that must have died and tumbled down into the abyss, testing it in his hand like a sword. "Hm. I do biological research in the Arctic."

I almost laugh in confusion. "What are you doing here, then?"

"I study Nahuatl. They knew there were going to be relics and invited me."

"*Invited you,*" I breathe out. This is especially shocking, considering the rest of the group hasn't really acted like they know or are friends with him. "Who do you know?"

There's a beat of silence before he clears his throat and mumbles, "Nik and I... have a friend in common."

I study his face in the semi-darkness. His eyes refuse to meet mine, staying stubbornly ahead of him, darting from place to place as he speaks. He has long, dark lashes, like a giraffe's, that he hides behind, although I suspect he does not do it knowingly. I am amused by this behavior from someone with what I would call academic seniority over me, the measure for pecking order in this context. I'm tempted to pry, tear into his story like an overripe fruit, but his face has shifted and become remote in a way that makes me not want to press.

Neither of us say anything else. The bromeliad tightens around us.

After a few hours, sweaty and covered in various genres of goop, we find Nourhan and Suna in a lower chamber. They're sitting on the ground. Nourhan beams at us as we enter, her dark skin shiny from the heat, smiling in a way that makes me think that she's made for this kind of work. That she relishes it. Suna is less enthusiastic, falling back on the floor with a sigh and ignoring us as Nourhan smiles over her, petting her head. She has her hair out of its braid and is raking her fingers along her scalp, aerating.

Peregrine follows Nourhan's example as we enter, pulling his helmet off and shaking his head with vigor, trying to expel the humidity from his hair, no doubt. It's shaggy and run through with gray and looks like he cuts it himself. I watch him from the corner of my eye as he situates himself a bit further from the group than I do.

Nourhan and Suna begin to chat quietly, Nourhan re-braiding Suna's slick, black hair with ease as they speak, her fingers moving deftly. They are considering the passages they've encountered so far. Peregrine watches them with detached interest. I look around.

To the left of me there's a kind of opening I haven't seen before. A breeze I can feel on my bare wrists is pushing through it. I crawl over and examine it, sticking my head through the gap and letting out a gasp as I do.

Outside is simple, yawning darkness. I duck my head downwards, peering below as a huge, shiny creature of indiscriminate origin slithers through the dangling root system. Epiphytic. I want to reach out and touch it, but I resist. It smells like rain and growth out here, and it's cooler than it is inside the plant. Something flutters far below me, steady wing beats that seem to be the source of the breeze. In that rustling air, it dawns on me that this is an ecosystem completely unavailable to us, to *me*, wholly beyond lowly human comprehension. The frustrating limits of my knowledge revealed to me all at once, anvil on head, leaving me scrabbling for some nonexistent reassurance that the world doesn't exist beyond our confines. But it does, and it will continue to do so indefinitely.

Then from behind me I hear a sudden bark of laughter. Peregrine guffawing at something Suna has just said, the unlikely sound pulling me away from the darkness and back into the chamber. I turn around, still sitting on my heels, and watch as Suna and Nourhan join him, chuckling, their faces cracking open with mirth. Suna's freckles scrunch delightfully.

I glance back through the hole just in time to see whatever was crawling around the roots tumble into the darkness and disappear.

After our brief respite, we continue. Nourhan and Suna, significantly more amicable now, wave at us as they trek off into one of the spiraling passages leading even further down. Peregrine shoulders his rope with a huff of satisfaction. He too has flourished, his demeanor warmer than before. We still walk in mostly silence, but now he occasionally makes didactic and entertaining observations, trailing his fingers along the scar-tissue images. Translating. I smile quietly behind him, absorbing his halting monologues.

We are eventually deposited into the acrid stomach of the beast, a chamber littered with fat, rotting bugs as long as my forearm. Bright juices seep up and around the things, decomposing them. It smells like death. Our boots make sucking noises as we navigate the soft, damp floor.

In the center of the chamber is a sort of organic altar, a smooth white bulb with a depression in its center that emanates gentle light. Peregrine squelches his way towards it in transparent fascination, letting out an "*oh*," under his breath. Then for the first time in the forty-eight hours this endeavor has lasted so far he turns to look at me, his gaze briefly bouncing off of the side of my face, and gestures for me to come over. I comply.

"This is one of the caches," he says, leaning like an excited child on the thing, the cool glow licking over his face as he beams down at it.

From afar, the thing looks empty. But up close I can see that the dip in the bulb pushes the material towards something that's been embedded inside of it. A piece of pristine pottery that's sunk in and trapped, suspended in the transparent thing. Only a thinly stretched skin between us and it. The face of an ancient effigy looks back at me; high cheekbones, broad nose, unsmiling. Features I recognize in my own face – in my family. The organic dip of its eyes makes it seem pliable, skin-like, even though I know it is made of clay. Peregrine and I stand shoulder to shoulder, rapt. That clean-laundry smell envelopes me again, and it is quiet except for the sound of dripping water in other nearby corridors. It feels like I am communing with the dead, my hard-to-reach ancestors standing reassuringly over my shoulder.

Then Peregrine reaches down, pressing the tips of his fingers into the membrane until it rips, gurgling, and accepts his hand. He reaches in, gently smoothing his thumb over the cheek of the thing, then fastens around it, pulling it up and out with a slurp that makes my stomach turn a little bit. It seems to stare at me as it is released, blank eyed yet insistent and suddenly I'm moved to shove my hands in my pockets and back up. It seeps undiluted power, no longer trapped.

As we walk away I begin to wonder how these items might have ended up here in the first place. Who put them in? Did the flesh of the plant seal around them again without any sort of scarring? I'll have to ask Suna once we find them again. I watch Peregrine tuck the little thing into his bag with excruciating gentleness, his gaze lingering. He must feel some kind of peculiar kinship with it too.

I'm about to radio the rest of the team to let them know we'd found something when there's a shout from somewhere nearby and the sound of roots being wrenched apart. Peregrine takes off like a shot and I'm hot on his heels. We crawl up the strange, vascular throat of the flower, the fleshy walls pressing against us, coating our hands and faces and clothes with thick mucus. I watch my hands disappear into the tensile material, like they are being swallowed, like it's gulping me up. Peregrine clambers out and then reaches back to haul me with him.

Ahead of us, in a dimly lit and recessed area, Nik is crouching, her hands traveling her face in panic. Ix and Suna are bent over her in concern while Nourhan snaps open the first aid kit. When we get closer, I can see that Nik's face has been pressed with pieces of jade. Flat, opalescent green stones shoved into her skin. They are sporadic but centralize around the bridge of her nose. Burnished red rocks intersect them, creating square spirals radiating from her nostrils. We all watch as she touches them gently, trying to pull them off, only for the skin beneath to come up with them. A speck of blood appears. Her eyes, once an uncanny beryl color, have darkened and hollowed. Her sclera shimmers like abalone. She looks terrified, the expression chiseled into her gemstone face.

Behind her, the broken roots reveal a stone relief, softened by time and humidity but still clearly legible. Peregrine walks past her, about to reach up and trace it with his fingers, but Nik grabs his leg from where she's crouched, dragging him back. "Don't touch it."

Something unseen behind the dangling roots rustles, making a slow path past us. The wall raises, sighing, as it passes beneath. Peregrine recoils, grimacing. "Okay."

Nik is crying tiny, hot tears now, they're trickling down her face, making the stones glisten in the beams of our headlamps. Whether she is crying from pain or fear, I'm not sure. We help her up and lead her to the throat, seeing as everyone seems to have implicitly agreed that it's time to go. I am second to last in the elevator-organ, and when I stop to look back I see Peregrine still standing in front of the relief, his head bent over the relic. He's tapping its face. Index thumb ring thumb index thumb ring thumb. Then he sets it down in front of the wall, brushing the last of the now dry mucus off of it. He adjusts his helmet, then turns. When he sees me, he shrugs and looks down. "It didn't seem right to take it," he whispers as he passes me and begins to hoist himself up the canal again.

I stare at it. The squat figure stares back. He's right, I know this. Some things are not ours to have or understand. I wipe my nose on my sleeve with finality and turn to leave. I'm about to step into the soft organ when I remember the picture of Laila I keep in my breast pocket for good luck. It's her in a huge, poofy dress, grinning into the camera with simple joy. I tug it out and then stride over, propping it gently at the foot of the little figure. If we cannot take something from this place up into our world, I will leave a piece of ours with it.

And so they stand alone, a cairn, a marker of our biochemical limit, the final symbolic human beings at the end of the conceivable world. They'll live here, consecrated in the divine rot, amongst the curling roots, presiding over an uncaring maze and myriad unknown and unknowable creatures with their flat, lifeless eyes. I don't look back again.

Nik doesn't talk again for a long time after that day. She stares blankly out of the van window the whole way home, entirely removed from her body, oblivious to our worried glances.

The shards of jade and stone never come off.

I eventually see her again, years later, in the city, and find that she has filigreed herself with dull gold; gauged her nose and ears, an effort to reclaim her face. It makes her look like a piece of art, her black hair swept up by the wind, getting caught in her jeweled scales, wry grin. Almost a relic herself. Her eyes are still darker, pearlier, but they are soft now, human again.

I'm with Laila at the time, my hand clasped in hers. I never told her that I had left her face down there, never explained my reasoning. This dawns on me as I tap the back of her hand with my index, thumb, ring, thumb, in honor of Peregrine and make introductions. They smile strangely at each other as they meet and I am unnerved, remembering the hot breath of the bromeliad and the effigy's

smooth clay skin, against which that little image of Laila is curling now. Her wide smile wilting on the periphery of hospitable.