When the spell plants of Montaep Coast meet the force of a tropical storm, the plants give way. Magic is no match for hurricane winds. And when that hurricane is so powerful the survivors name it Taepel's Eye for the father-mother deity of the coast, then the devastation is extreme. Gardens that have grown the spells of coastal kings lie fallow. Salt poisons the inland gardens a day's walk from the sea.

And the people flee, with only false hopes of ever returning, though they tell each other otherwise.

Leehm was no gardener. His knowledge of spells came only from the minor plants grown by his parents and neighbors, simple seedlings of luck and health. He'd never known the coast itself, only the stories told by other refugees in the camp outside the city of Ormenna. Yet he had always been told that he had the salt of the coast in his veins, and the stories his parents told—though never enough to satisfy him—always quickened his heart.

Nearly thirty years after that terrible storm, here he stood at last, in an abandoned garden, looking down on the coastal homeland of his elders.

Not quite in the dramatic homecoming they no doubt would have imagined. Not a return to settle again in the old buildings, but only a visit. And him merely brute labor, a porter for a scientific expedition.

The land, high on an escarpment over the coast, wasn't obviously ravaged, not as far as Leehm could see. Many of the trees were bent near the base, as if the strong wind that nearly felled them years ago still blew, and none were big or old. The coast below would surely show more signs of the damage, but even here abandoned buildings dotted the thinly wooded land. Land that had been fields was bare except for a covering of patchy weeds. The bleached wood of ancient trees lay here and there, each facing inland with their roots toward the sea, those at least standing high.

Professor Wayel, their leader, took samples and measurements whenever they paused, discussing the results with the other important member of the expedition, the gardener Dalochs, one of those celebrated citizens of Ormennan society whose spell plants and seeds were the city's fame, its might and protection.

"Seven… three… still very salty in here." Other numbers followed, arcane figures that Leehm didn't comprehend as the professor and the gardener debated over the soil of

the escarpment—but he wasn't expected to know. Or to interrupt, regardless.

The professor had the porters pack up his instruments. "How do your spells fare?"

The gardener also gathered up her things, though she carried most of them herself, stowing seeds in her pockets and hand tools at her waist. "Seedlings take well enough, despite the salt. Enough to cleanse the garden, in time."

The professor nodded. "Good. We'll be on our way down, then."

He gestured to the crew without really seeing them. They lifted their packs and fell into line. Like Leehm, they came from Ormenna's refugee camp. All had been anxious to return to a place they barely remembered or had only heard of, willing to endure the light pay and heavy work of a scientific expedition so they might see their parents' land.

Not so the professor and gardener. They were Ormenna-born, interested in the coast for reasons that had nothing to do with ancestry.

As they began their descent, Leehm noticed a frondy plant growing beside the trail. A good luck plant he knew from the camp. He gathered a handful at the roots, plucked a frond to chew as they descended. Luck for his balance, if nothing else.

The path, at last, led them down the steep incline toward the coast. A mud-slick track cutting through a line of larger trees. The slope must have protected them somewhat from the storm. The air grew thick, the smell of old forests rising up. No hint of salt, for now at least. As they rounded a switchback, the lead porter stopped. Leehm leaned out, careful not to lose the balance of the top-heavy load he carried, so he could see around the porter in front of him.

A creature lay across the trail.

At first glance it had the look of a massive leech, though the thought of one that size made Leehm's stomach seize. Its flank came as high as his chest, and the woods to either side hid its front and back. Its sides glistened brown with the mud of the trail. Then it twisted the front of its body with surprising speed, and its salamander shape became clear. Its puny front legs lifted its bulk up, and a fringe of skin marked with greenish-blue specks flared out around its wide mouth.

Even two people behind the lead, Leehm stumbled backward. His pack threw off his balance, and he dropped to one knee to avoid a full-length spill.

The professor came around from behind. "What's the hold up?" By the time he got the question out, he saw the creature. No answer required. "Dalochs? Any spells for this

thing?”

The gardener hurried up beside him. “What is that…? Give me a moment to think.” She pulled out a variety of powders and seeds, arranging them on her hand.

Leehm knew only the simple charms of the refugee camp, backward spells compared to the gardener’s, so he shifted in place to better watch what she did. She came up beside the lead porter and blew across the arrangement with something that looked like a reed-whistle.

A bubble of distorted air floated toward the salamander. The creature pulled back but made no effort to avoid the magic. When the bubble exploded, a wave of fear swept over Leehm. They had to leave, to back up or turn aside, find some hollow to hide in. A mud wallow or a shallow creek.

The thought only seemed logical for a moment. His legs scrambled to get away even as he realized the absurdity. Mud? A stream? Clearly suggestions meant for the salamander. He stopped scrambling and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet so he could see the spell’s effects.

The salamander reacted in fear. But it didn’t flee. It thrashed and flailed and knocked down the saplings to either side of the trail. And then it flared out the skin around its head once again.

Wayel removed his hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “Have anything else, Dalochs?”

The gardener shook her head. “Nothing quick. Plenty that would do the trick, if we want to wait here a month for something to grow.”

“Hardly. And this is the only good route without going days out of our way.” He raised his voice. “Porters. Packs down and spears out!”

Oh, the spears. Leehm lowered his pack carefully. Maybe if he was slow enough the salamander would shamble off on its own. Spears were not a weapon of the camps, and they never felt natural in his hands. He spat out the mash of chewed luck plant—some luck.

The other porters looked more excited by the prospect than he felt. One twirled her spear in a circle and set it as if to charge straight in. Where would the best place be to wound a creature like this? As the rest of them prepared, Alshen, an older porter said, “Did your spell include blue aloe, ma’am?”

Dalochs cocked her head. “I don’t know that one.”

Leehm withdrew his spear and checked to make sure the head was on tight.

Wayel pointed at the animal as if directing a charge in battle. “We don’t have time to discuss plants—”

“We have time.” Dalochs gestured for the porters to lower their spears. The animal was holding its ground, but didn’t look like it was about to attack. With a glance at the professor, who was technically in charge, Leehm obeyed. Wayel frowned and tapped his foot impatiently.

“I want to hear this,” Dalochs said. “We’re in their land, best learn the spells that grow here.” She gestured for the porter to speak.

“I’m not a gardener, ma’am. But I’m older than some of these others, old enough to remember the storm. When the Eye came tearing through.”

“What’s that have to do with aloe?”

“Blue aloe, ma’am. We used to grow it outside our door. My mother always said it was to keep animals calm and drive them away. Mice, mostly, I guess, but I thought maybe bigger animals might react, too.”

“Does it grow up here?”

“All along, ma’am. That’s what made me think of it.”

So Leehm set his spear back down and helped gather the plant. Not something grown in the camps, so nothing he recognized, even though his family had tried to preserve what folk spells they’d once grown. But once he was shown one, he could easily identify more, found them amidst luck plants, in fact. They soon had plenty.

Dalochs laid the gathered stalks of aloe on the path in a complex pattern. A model of a zigzag fence. He’d seen something of the sort when they left Ormenna to come here. Then she arranged the seeds on her hand again, this time adding a tip of aloe to the mix.

She positioned herself right behind the tiny fence of aloe. This time when she blew, the salamander reared up. It would smash the puny fence. Probably smash the gardener as well. Leave them with just the professor for company. If even that.

It swung from side to side, slid closer to the crew, and even Leehm brandished his spear freely at the prospect—but after looming there for a moment, only a few hand spans from Dalochs, it swung aside and slithered off into the wet woodland. The dull

thud of it smashing through rotted logs came from the hillside below.

“Very well,” Professor Wayel said, his sole concession to the gardener’s success. He swept up his own small pack and jerked his arm at the porters. “Let’s move on out.”

Halfway down the next descent, Dalochs lost her balance and fell into the porter in front of her, who just avoided falling into Leehm. As she stood up, he offered the whole group leaves of the good luck plant. The porters took them with enthusiasm, Dalochs more hesitantly. Wayel abstained, aloof.

No one fell the rest of the way down. The professor muttered about the superstitious.

The expedition was small—only Professor Wayel and Dalochs the gardener, along with more porters than Leehm would have guessed they might need. The gear they dragged along seemed the entire contents of a school laboratory, as far as Leehm could imagine such a thing. What need for so many containers, so much paper, such strange devices for heating and mixing the samples they found?

When they stopped at the base of the escarpment, though, the use became clearer. The coastal plain marked a sudden shift from the humid slopes to much sandier country. Their leaders wanted to spend time studying that change.

Few trees grew here, and those that did were thin. But it wasn’t like the land above the escarpment. Here there were no fallen giants to hint at a different past. Instead, everything was as it might have always been. And yet...at the same time, it wasn’t. Through the smaller trees, Leehm caught glimpses of old walls that must have marked off fields. A hint of a cart trail disappeared into tall grasses. A feral chicken squawked and half-flew away, no doubt the distant descendant of some coop that had survived the storm and broken free to live wild.

Professor Wayel set to work sampling the soil at precise intervals, marking the slope of the land for the different soils types. The tests he ran involved a good deal of equipment, with flasks bubbling here and watered soil settling into layers there.

He corralled the porters into the tests with simple tasks. Leehm spent a good chunk of the morning monotonously turning a crank to spin sample after sample through one device. Every few minutes Wayel called out his findings for one of them to write down for him. Numbers that basically boiled down to ‘very salty’ as far as Leehm could tell.

By contrast, Dalochs wandered. She took samples, of the bark of the scraggly trees, the dune grass, the multi-colored lichen which shifted seamlessly into the moss of the hillside. She made no use of the porters, and kept jealous guard of the notebooks in which she cataloged her findings, more from Wayel than them, but the two largely ignored each other, each focused on their own tasks.

When the porters were able to snatch a break from these tasks, they rested in the shade of a clump of low bushes, stretching out on the ground to keep below the edge of the shadow. Leehm massaged his crank arm as he joined them.

“…not so far from where my parents lived, I think,” the porter Alshen was saying. “They must have been somewhere around here.”

The others nodded, as if they could see the old homestead right there. Timan, who was as young as Leehm, asked, “Will we see much, do you think? What should we look for, streets and fallen walls? Or what?”

Leehm listened close. His parents had talked all the time about the coast, but never in a way that let him imagine what it must have been like.

“Probably not. I mean, not like you might be picturing,” Alshen said. “Nothing like the city walls around Ormenna, anyway.”

“Right,” Mishnar continued. She was younger than Alshen but old enough to remember some things. “There were a lot of us living there. Here. But no cities really. Not even villages exactly. Just scattered houses.”

“And the real city was the sea,” Leehm said without thought. When the others looked at him questioningly, he added, “Sorry, just something I remember my parents saying. That the sea was a city, or something like that.”

“Where were your parents from, Leehm?”

He shrugged. “Right on the coast, somewhere. They were pretty simple folk, fishing and clamming.” He trailed off. No skills that got them solid work in Ormenna, that was for sure. Only a tent in the refugee camp, and eventually a little shack.

Well, at least being a porter might earn him enough money to step up from that.

The expedition lingered for several days, testing—or so it seemed—every possible plant, checking each foot of soil. Finally they left, heading toward the shore itself. Salt became directly visible, until it became a layer of white on the ground that grew thicker the closer they drew, choking out more and more of the plants. Vast stretches of lichen lent their pale green to the ground. Soon they could see far ahead as they walked, with so few large plants to block their sight, but they often had to search for a good while to find any usable water.

They paused when they came to a large group of interwoven gardens, circles of rock borders that intersected each other. Nothing grew within. But once, magic had.

This barren soil hit Leehm as the empty land hadn't. The great city of Ormenna was known far and wide for its plant magic, but the coast had once held a reputation second only to that city, perhaps even its rival. Where were the famous spells now? Where were the glorious plants even simple fisherfolk like his parents spoke of with such pride? The hurricane had destroyed not just their homes, but their heritage.

Dalochs took charge. "Take your samples and all that, but we'll find there isn't much here to work with. I do have one plant that will grow anywhere, but its effect is powerful, so everyone will have to stay back once it's planted."

"Not what you wanted to see, was it?" Wayel asked Dalochs.

She shook her head. "No, but it's what I expected. Some of the gardeners back home were hoping to find some surviving plants. They think we need to learn from what was here, or our own magic might begin to weaken." She shrugged, noncommittally. "I'm not optimistic on that count."

The professor moved briskly off, observing the condition of the walls, mapping out the types of rocks used to build them. Dismissed to rest, the porters unburdened themselves, then poked around the periphery of the site.

"This was a great garden once," Alshen said quietly. Everyone felt the same gloom of loss, with a hint of fear, that the hurricane could still leave such devastation behind, after so many years.

As the others stretched out tight or tired legs, Leehm unloaded supplies and watched Dalochs. She dug a shallow trench in the garden soil. The dirt flaked away in her fingers and a harsh smell rose up, carrying all the way to the porters. Not salt, not rot, but something more chemical, like the thick air in an apothecary's tent. She sprinkled some pollen into the trench, spat upon it and walked away.

Leehm organized the objects of his pack, setting out the various beakers and jars—the professor would be irritable should he want something and not find it to hand, and his mood would be improved by the opportunity to order them to pack up when it was time to move on. To his left the trench began to sizzle, gave off a thin line of what looked like smoke. He hesitated, then edged for a closer look. The soil at the bottom was turning black, but without any scent of charring. It had the look, rather, of long rotten wood. Leehm chewed a good luck leaf as he stood over it.

After the smoke had stopped rising, Dalochs returned and knelt down. When she noticed Leehm watching, she gestured for him to kneel beside her. Another porter stood on the other side of the low wall, directed to pick from an array of plants at her order.

She handed her loaded workbelt to Leehm. “Hand me the tools I indicate,” she said, and he bowed.

The spell she cast was a complicated one, so far as Leehm knew gardening. He’d always pictured spell growers as earning their reputation by knowing the right seeds to plant and sitting back to let the spells work. Maybe a muttered word or two, but the rest was waiting. The work Dalochs had done on the escarpment and before had reinforced this notion.

Instead this involved real physical labor: a complex scouring of the soil, patterns scraped, smoothed over and then repeated. She planted a seedling, made a precise count, then yanked it back out to repeat the process elsewhere. Leehm looked up to see the other porters and even Professor Wayel had approached to observe.

Dalochs scooped soil from a bag the other porter held open over her original trench. Last, she laid a fibrous network of thin roots over the trench and the plants that remained, pulling the roots out as far as they would reach as all three of them moved away.

“What will that do?” Leehm finally dared ask once Dalochs dropped the last of the roots.

“Restore the soil completely.” She muttered something else under her breath. He thought it was, “I think.”

He stared at it, lying there over the lifeless ground. So simple? Such power, and she’d had it all along? “That’s…that sounds like a great spell. You can use it anywhere there’s been some sort of problem?” He was silent for a moment. Did he dare to ask the question that was on his mind, he a simple porter? To think, he might have been able to return as a child, might have grown up here and scarcely known the refugee camp. Wonder warred with anger at the loss.

He struggled to keep any bitterness from his voice. “Why not just do it all over the coast, years ago?”

Dalochs wiped the sweat from her head. “First, I only recently discovered how to use the roots to spread it over a bigger area. Before that, it was too localized. But second…” She paused to glance at the face of her timepiece. “Second, it’s an extreme measure. All things already managing to grow here will die, healthy or not. Plants, worms, the fungus that lies underground. It might take a year for anything to grow at all, a generation for the gardens to be truly healthy. I wouldn’t do it if it were recovering on its own.”

Dalochs snapped her watch shut and stepped hurriedly around the mat of roots, sprinkling it with some powder. When she'd made a complete circuit, she called, "Now everyone back. Quick."

Leehm scrambled back with the other porter and took shelter behind the pile of packs and gear. He peeked over the bags in time to see a sudden cloud of spores explode outward. There was hardly a sound but the professor, hiding beside him, pulled him down before the spores could reach them. "Don't breathe it in," he snapped, then muttered something dismissive about magic, though Leehm couldn't catch the exact words.

After a dozen heartbeats, Dalochs called from behind another pile of gear, "Should be all clear now." She stood up and approached the gardens. "Come on out."

A shimmer of light lay over the network of roots, an odd glow that somehow repulsed Leehm. He edged as close as he dared and looked at the strange movement of that glow. It pulsed, shifted, as though emanating from something unseen that moved between the roots and under the soil. He turned away.

"Well," Wayel said, "I suppose that's all we can do here. Let's head closer to the ocean and see what we find there."

After two more stops at inland gardens, each of which needed and received Dalochs's extreme restoration, they came at last to the sea. Leehm could only stare. He'd seen the ocean from the top of the escarpment but it was different from this close, with the smell of salt so strong it impinged on the other senses, prickling in his eyes, flavoring his tongue. The sound and sight of the waves bled into each other, and the dim line of the far horizon opened up his mind to things he'd never thought. The world was bigger and stranger than he knew.

Had his parents truly grown up with this view every day? The salt made his lungs feel heavy, more full of air than they'd ever been. Or something more than air.

Here at last were identifiable buildings, or identifiable remains. They spent several days examining the structures, sifting through the debris for the details of life on the coast, things already forgotten or distorted only a generation later. When he had free time, Leehm searched in vain for smaller buildings that matched the stories of his parents. Not that he should expect to find any. There must have been a hundred miles of inhabited coastline that took the full force of the storm, they might have lived anywhere along that stretch.

When he wasn't wandering on his own, Leehm kept close to Dalochs to see what she would do. She spent most of the early days exploring the spell gardens, always on the inland side of the buildings. Noticing his interest, she had him assist her with the

spells and other work, though she still kept her notes to herself, never dictating as was Wayel's wont. They cast several restorative spells, each one taking longer to set up and get right because of the depth of the damaged soil.

After a few days, she finally approached the sea itself, took the winding, corroded metal staircase Wayel had found down the last bank to the water's edge. Now, unable to deny his own nervous interest any longer, Leehm approached as well.

The gardens beside the water were even deeper in salt than the inland ones, a full finger's depth covering the soil, and even then the dirt itself was a mixture of salt and sand no matter how deep they dug. Nothing would grow there—he didn't need to wait for Dalochs or Wayel to do any tests to know that.

Dalochs considered. "This will take more than I have prepared. Maybe even more than I can set up. We'll see. I'll have to take a couple of days just to see what I can pull together."

While she worked, Leehm explored the salt gardens alone. They were more extensive than they first looked, winding and twisting along the shore, between rocky outcrops and islets. The further he went, the deeper the salt became, and the more the surface of the salt was rippled with something like waves.

He walked until the tide's return forced him back—something else his parents had described and he'd been unable to credit, that waters of such volume could not only exist, but could leave and return. It rose quickly at first, followed him, growing more shallow step by step, until only the slightest sheen lay over the salted sands like glass.

On the second day, Leehm went farther, around a grouping of rocks. The high tide filled part of the ground between them, so while it was out he rushed around. The salt crunched beneath his sandaled feet. On the far side of the furthest rock, he found another garden extending out into the deeper, permanent sea, an arc of protected beach several paces wide.

What he found made Leehm catch his breath. This arc was not a flat space of salt. Not even an expanse of rippled waves of salt. Instead, complex structures of crystallized salt filled the area between rock and garden wall, not quite tall enough to be seen from beyond the rocks but rising over the garden's edge.

Inside, they were an iridescent mesh of delicate crystal forms, criss-crossing the garden like the guidelines of a tent, or a spider's silk, then combining with geometric precision to form miniature spires and obelisks that glittered in the sunlight. From outside, their walls were featureless, yet not so sturdy that dragging a fingernail across them didn't break away crystal clumps to fall onto the salty sand—how could the returning sea not wash them away in minutes?

And, if it did, how could they have been rebuilt only an hour or so after the tide went out? And by whom? What kind of creature constructed buildings such as these?

Not daring to walk in among the salt for fear of knocking something over, Leehm climbed up onto a ledge of the rock outcropping. He scooted along above the salt to get a better view.

The more he looked, the less they seemed like buildings. Rather they had a plant-like aspect, stems and branches and flat planes of larger crystals reflecting the sunlight. A faint smell rose up—not salt, or not only that; nor dead sea-life, though such natural smells came from all around too.

What did it remind him of? He took a deep breath of it…and then he knew.

Good luck plants.

Or rather not the plants themselves, but the taste of them taking effect when he chewed. The smell that hung over Dalochs when she planted her spells.

Dalochs dug her trench in the salty sand, so close to the water's edge that it seeped in to fill the bottom. Leehm again assisted with the tools. His supply of the good luck leaves was running low, so he decided to preserve what remained. He'd done the work enough now that he shouldn't need any magical help.

His thoughts were full of the salt structures on the far side of the rock. What did they mean? Did someone live here, and build them? Then where were they hiding? Could such fragile looking shapes have withstood the hurricane itself as well as years of tide and waves and wind? He wanted to accept that they were a connection to those who'd lived here before, but he couldn't believe it. Such delicate things couldn't have withstood the elements for years. But then what? Did the wind blindly build them, or did they grow by themselves? Were they salt, or plants, both, or something else entirely? The scent of magic surely implied something far beyond what he could even think to ask.

Dalochs sprinkled in the first powder, and the pooled water smoked and fizzed—he realised that she had prepared for a much more powerful spell than before, one that would not just combat the contamination of the garden but extend well beyond its border. What would Dalochs's magic do to the salt forms? If they were plants of some sort, or even just like plants, this spell would destroy the structures. The garden would be restored, eventually, able to grow the plants his people had once grown, but…

Much had been lost here. No doubt there were all kinds of spells even the people of mighty Ormenna didn't know, plants they might learn of from the spell growers among

his own people before they grew too old to share their lore. He'd overheard Dalochs talk about that very thing. What might they learn by planting new varieties here on the shore? That was a noble and important goal.

But what they were doing now might mean sacrificing any chance to learn from the salt structures, if there were something to learn. That wasn't right, couldn't be right.

Maybe, if he dug a trench further out from the garden, it might keep this spell from harming them. A border, seashells and driftwood and wave-smoothed stones, sunk deep to block the magic's progression. That might be enough by itself. If not, he could talk it over with Dalochs, see how it might be preserved.

If she agreed with the necessity. Surely she would. She had to. And he had to do it now, before it was too late.

He stepped forward to build the wall—forgetting that Dalochs was in the middle of her spell. He stumbled into the hissing, fizzing trench. Water splashed around his foot, and the gardener shouted for him to get back.

The powder in the trench rose up his leg, the smoke coiled around him, squeezed his calf muscles, pulled him down. As he pitched over he just had the presence of mind to throw himself forward, landing in the undisturbed garden instead of the trench itself.

Dalochs dashed around the trench to check on him. As he pushed himself up, his hand closed around the sandy salt, and an image of— of— salt flowers sprang into his mind.

He imagined picking one, blowing seeds of salt, as if from the head of a flower past its bloom—and without warning a wind whipped around the rock and lifted Leehm up, setting him just outside the garden.

Dalochs batted at the windborne salt, lips and eyes tightly closed. It pelted her face until she scrambled away from the trench to fall on the ground near Leehm. She coughed as the hail ceased, staring angrily from her compromised spell to the person responsible.

Leehm ignored her look. He saw only the crystal granules, crumbling in his hand, drifting from his palm on the ebbing breeze.

"What desert were you raised in?" Dalochs paced in front of Leehm, while he was still coming around. "You knew I was planting a spell. Why would you step into that?"

Leehm held his head as he struggled to sit upright, struggled to remember. He'd stepped into the trench? "I don't know. It was…you were…"

Dalochs stopped pacing. “Sorry, I shouldn’t…do you need anything? Water?”

“Water, yes.” Saying it made him see the water before them. The sea, with its saltwater and…the structures. That’s what he’d been thinking about, trying to protect the weird formations on the beach. And her spell had struck out at him when he tried to do so. And something more, a wind… But already that memory was sifting away from his mind.

What would her spell do to him, if it destroyed plants so thoroughly? “Will I… live?”

“Lucky for you the spell hadn’t reached its final step. You’ll just be sore for a few days, and I’ll have to redo the entire thing. Which means gathering more leaves and fibers. Again. But yes, you’ll survive.” She gave him a look, stern but faintly mocking, as she added, “As long as Wayel doesn’t hear about it, that is.”

He released his breath. One less thing to worry about, at least. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t strike me as a clumsy one, Leehm,” she continued, “but you kicked up a fair cloud back there. Thought I’d be eating salt and sand for a week…”

Details filtered back—with the awareness that Dalochs had not witnessed all she could have. Should he explain what he’d seen, and its seeming effect, or keep it a secret?

“I don’t remember,” he said, and as she helped him up she began to speculate aloud about what effects human exposure to her spell might cause, none of them good, fortunate he decided to get in the way sooner rather than later.

He nodded, half listening. Maybe he could still build some sort of protection later, nearer to the garden beyond the rocks, and no one would have to know about the salt structures at all.

For several days, Leehm pushed aside the pain as well as he could and did whatever light work was asked of him, often cooking for the team. Dalochs dug a new trench, but this close to the ocean, with this saturation of salt in the soil, the components of her spell there to be collected were too few and too feeble to replace what had been lost. She sent Alshen to gather fresh supplies from back along their route, and contented herself with hunting down unfamiliar varieties of local fauna, sketching and preserving them for later study when they returned to Ormenna.

Professor Wayel had, of course, found out about what happened—his was the academy funding the expedition after all, and any unanticipated cost of money or time was a red flag to him. He levied a small fine on Leehm for his misstep, but afterwards it seemed that he spoke to Leehm more often, and seemed almost pleased that Leehm had disturbed Dalochs’s spell.

The porters kept busy keeping the camp and following their errands, but as much time as they could spare, they talked about the coast and the old stories they'd grown up hearing. Leehm wearied of their stories, felt uncomfortable in Wayel's company and awkward in Dalochs', so he kept to himself whenever he could.

In the quiet between jobs, the noise of the waves burrowed into his ears, into his mind, until he could hear it even when the sea stilled. He'd never thought of salt as having a sound before, except perhaps the quiet rasp as it poured from a shaker, but the waves were salt turned into sound—granular, crystallized noises that built themselves into aural structures. He felt no need to seek out the physical structures beyond the rocks. They were there, he knew, even when the tide came in, even though he couldn't see them. Speaking to him, soothing the pain from the botched plant spell.

On the third day, the sound of salt changed, as if it jumped in volume or rose an octave in pitch, though neither quite expressed the sensation. Leehm had been cooking, but dropped the ladle he was using to stir clam soup into the pot and ran toward the beach, still hobbling on his tender leg. When he reached the sand, he could hear the professor's shouts. From beyond the rocks. Leehm paled.

Dalochs joined him as he rushed toward the rocky sea mount. Leehm tried to outdistance her but failed, so they rounded the far side together.

Wayel was on the beach garden, among the odd formations. He waved his arms at them and cried, "Help!"

Only then did Leehm realize that the professor's leg was encased in salt. More, he seemed to be sinking down into the salty sand. Dalochs dashed to his aide, not noticing or not caring about the structures.

Leehm went slower, and noticed a shimmer of movement among the more distant salt formations. An animal? He looked harder and saw nothing but was left with the impression that the salt itself had been moving, shifting, leaning toward Wayel's shouts for help.

Was the salt like a carnivorous plant, luring in prey to seize and devour them? That didn't seem quite right—he had felt no urge of entrapment from it when he made his discovery—but he couldn't shake the image either. For now, best to get away as quickly as they could. He hurried to the professor and took one arm, opposite the one Dalochs already held.

"Seems to be some sort of quicksand under me," Wayel said through gritted teeth. "Pull hard."

Dalochs counted three, and they pulled together. The sand held for a moment, then released him, and they stumbled away to sprawl on the ground at the foot of the rocky outcropping.

As they caught their breath, the professor and gardener looked around with suspicion and interest respectively. So much for Leehm's hope to keep the place a secret. Finally Dalochs said, "So what is it? Are there survivors here somewhere, avoiding us?"

Wayel squinted at the beach. "Must be, something like that."

Yes, Leehm thought, let them think it was something people had made. Then they might leave it all alone. Or at most, keep a watch for people to visit. Surely they wouldn't want to disturb the beach, if they thought someone would be back.

He closed his eyes and felt the pulsing of the salt structures in his veins. But then the professor added, "Except…"

"Except what?" Dalochs's voice was sharp, curious.

"It felt, well…I think you should check it out, Dalochs. There's a feel of your kind of magic down there."

Leehm opened his eyes. "Won't it be dangerous?" It was spoken out of turn, for a mere porter, but they didn't react to that. "I don't know if we can pull her out, too, if we had to."

Dalochs got to her feet anyway. "I'll just get a little closer." She was back almost immediately. "Definitely magic, of some kind. I don't like it." She put her hand under Wayel's arm. "Let's get away for now. Can you walk?"

"What does it mean?" The question hung in the air.

If he'd have dared speak to the two leaders at that moment, Leehm would have answered, We need to leave the garden alone, that's what it means. There's something growing here. I don't know what it is, or even if it's exactly a plant, but it's a plant spell, just like the ones you grow.

Instead, he played the porter role, standing with the other porters, while Dalochs and Wayel debated. Even his history of assisting the gardener with the spells and helping rescue the professor gave him no voice in a vital matter like this.

Both fell silent. Dalochs ran her fingers over her last collection of root fibers, as if getting it ready for one final spell that would cleanse the entire beach. Wayel gazed back toward the rocks and the sea, toward where the salt structures were hidden. His

leg was propped up on a driftwood log and grossly swollen.

“It means this beach warrants study,” he said. “The entire region does, and I can’t do it all myself. We should call for a team from Ormenna, a whole squad of professors and trustworthy students. It might take years, even then, to study the salt out there. Get samples, dissect the crystallized formations. Try to understand what process creates them. Sedimental deposits from the sea, erosion by the wind—”

“Was it wind erosion that trapped you, deposits dragging you down? Are you forgetting the magic we both noticed?” Dalochs laid down her bundle of roots and stretched her back, gearing up to fight. “Science and studies might be your expertise, Wayel, but magic is mine. Best to destroy it, before it can invade other gardens.”

Leehm lowered his head. He couldn’t bear to have the salt destroyed, but what was left for him to do? Her words sounded certain, but her face looked much more doubtful. Was she remembering what she had said before, about learning from the magic of the coast? Knowing that the professor’s seniority would ultimately overrule her, anyway? Or was it simply that she didn’t like the idea of destroying something before studying it, any more than the professor did?

“Even magic can be studied.”

“Do you imagine I don’t know that? My entire career is the study of plant magic! And we are here to begin to recover the full potential of this land, the historic processes and forms—”

“Using techniques that would destroy this unknown form, dangerous though it might be, before we can assess its value—that may be the way of gardening, but it is not the way of science and research. And we are here on my penny, Dalochs, from the academy’s purse.” He didn’t make eye contact as he murmured, “It will be my decision.”

Dalochs didn’t answer the professor for a minute, and then only nodded and turned away. Over her shoulder she said, “But note in your reports that it’s against my advice.”

The next day Wayel ordered the porters to help set up a preliminary study. Leehm cringed with every new task he was assigned, but the salt appeared unharmed by the samples and scrapings they took—and better this than its utter destruction.

As he was helping to stake down a drop cloth where the samples might stay uncontaminated, Alshen pulled him aside for a moment. “Be careful, Leehm. You’re getting awfully close to involving yourself. I’ve seen how you’ve worked with those two, saw how you watched them last night. Remember your place, our place.”

Of course he would. When had he ever done otherwise? But rather than argue, he simply nodded.

“Just remember, any problems might mean that next time they avoid taking our people as porters. Maybe bring in more strangers like themselves, who don’t understand a thing. People born without salt.”

Though they worked near each other other times that day, Alshen said nothing more about it. But his words stayed in Leehm’s mind. Strangers who understand nothing. People without salt.

Late in the day, Leehm carefully peeled back a sliver of crystallized salt from one structure, under Wayel’s close watch. As he did so, the ground under him shifted. The knife flew from his hand, and as he flung his arm out for balance it came down along the structure’s opened edge, slicing the flesh from elbow to wrist.

Surprise blocked the pain for a moment. He lifted his arm and saw a flap of skin hanging loose, the sliver buried deep. Only then did the pain arrive, an agony that bent him double. He fell into the sand and lay there, twisting, the pain only growing worse as more salt ground its way into the wound, adding its terrible sting. He clung to consciousness, only barely.

Someone tried to pull him up off the ground, someone else stopped them, had Leehm stay lying there but helped him into a more comfortable position. As if he cared about a comfortable position when his whole arm burned with agony. Someone—it was Wayel, calling—went to fetch other porters to help him off the beach.

In the moments they were gone, Leehm opened his eyes to see new shapes forming in the salt around him. No beings came to build them, and yet it had none of the vegetal slowness of growing things. It was something else, some tideline thing that had no name yet, no word to explain it—like the stirring of wind across a field of high grass, a movement imposed by an unseen participant but which could only exist in the coming together of the two. Leehm found himself mesmerized by the motion. The salt in his open wound moved in time with the growing structures.

He passed out with a pounding in his ears like the returning tide. When help returned, trampling feet erased all sign of the patterns before they could be noticed.

“Surely you see that it is dangerous, now. Science is not more important than our lives.”

Leehm lay on his back, nearer the old human settlement but still on the beach. The sand crunched beneath him as he shifted to get a better view of the expedition’s

leaders talking.

“Science embraces risk, and lives have been lost in its pursuit. Even when it has nothing to do with magic.” The professor looked toward Leehm, met his eyes, then looked away. “But this time I think you’re right. Perhaps enough will survive your spell to study. Safely.”

Dalochs gave a curt, satisfied nod and went to retrieve her plant spell supplies.

No. They were both wrong. Leehm was done staying silent and letting these two decide things for his parents’ land. What did they know of the seashore? The structures didn’t need sterile study, and they certainly didn’t need to be destroyed. They needed to be learned. Both professor and gardener acted as if there was no difference between knowing and studying something, but surely there was. It had never occurred to him before, but now he knew it.

How to convince them, though? He was only a porter, not someone they would listen to. Only one thing might shock them into listening.

As Dalochs prepared, Leehm pushed himself to his feet. He swayed a moment, but then found his balance. In fact, a better sense of balance than he’d ever had.

The other porters noticed him first. “What are you doing?” Alshen said. “You should still rest.” He ignored them.

Leehm walked back up the beach to the strand of salt structures. Wayel noticed Leehm, shook himself from his thoughts on the structure of crystals and the nature of his truncated study. “Here, where are you going?” Leehm ignored him too.

The air shimmered and wavered before him. The questions behind him turned to shouts—he somehow knew Dalochs was running after him, but she was too far away, encumbered with root fiber and other bits of plants. She would not stop him.

Leehm rounded the outcropping and faced the strange beach.

A low growth of salt crystals twined toward his feet—but something in his blood told him it would be right. He broke off a small piece of crystal…and popped it in his mouth.

“What are you doing?” Dalochs cried, somewhere.

At first it tasted like the luck plants, but a far richer, more complex form, one that tasted also of the sea and hurricanes and a people who have fled. Then the saltiness struck, a shock like a monster wave. It sent him falling to his knees, so hard a cloud of

salt rose into the air.

A shimmering uncertainty grew in his vision, until he couldn't be certain of anything—but see things he did. The voices from the beach were just as wavy and impossible to identify. He climbed to his feet, swayed in place until the first of the porters reached him. It was Mishnar. At her touch, he came back to his normal senses. She let go, and once more Leehm found he had no trouble keeping his balance.

Before anyone could say anything, Leehm addressed Wayel and Dalochs, both masters watching him with fascinated indecision. "You're right."

Wayel shook himself out of his stasis. "What have you done, porter? Don't you see how dangerous it is there, even for those like us who have studied and learned things you can't imagine. Far more for you." When Leehm didn't answer right away, he gestured to the other porters. "Get back. We don't know what might happen next."

Mishnar and the others drew away, some quickly, others reluctantly.

Leehm clenched a fist and lifted his chin. He'd been so close to explaining, only to be dismissed as uneducated. "Dangerous? Yes, but not like you think. I'm not going to explode, and I don't need your learning to—"

"No." it was Dalochs who interrupted this time. "Learning is exactly what you lack. Understanding of what you've got yourself into. But I don't think you're a danger to us, yet."

She looked like she was about to send the other porters after him, to tackle him and take him away. When she added, "But we need to stop you before you are," he was sure of it and shifted his focus to them, trying to be ready for any of them to come charging his way.

Instead Dalochs rushed at him. She lifted her hands and opened the web of root fibers into a net and threw it. All the power of plants seemed to lie in that throw, the magic of roots and seeds and spell-growers, of tradition and the unstoppable momentum of years of new discoveries. It rose and grew in his sight, seemed to blot out all other things.

But then he saw how its flight followed crystalline lines, vectors and planes that were just as ancient as any plant, or even older.

Leehm lifted his hands, and new vectors rose into the path of the net. Salt leapt from the sand, intercepted the roots, snared and halted their flight. More salt sprang up, not from the beach but from the soil all around, as if it had only been waiting for him. Delicate-looking lattices wrapped around Dalochs, then Wayel and the porters as well.

The beach created a vortex of salt that lifted Leehm into the air before them, building beneath his feet. He wanted to shout and cry out with the swelling strength inside him, but he kept his voice calm and spoke the words he'd been meaning to say.

"You're right that this is not some plant, it doesn't need gardeners. But it doesn't need to be destroyed, either." The salt itself seemed to speak through him, his cadences becoming almost religious. "It needs something new, caretakers, people with salt in their blood and strange seeds in their stories. Refugees like me to prepare the salt for the others to return."

The web of root fibers fell to the sandy shore, and moments later the salt released the others, the lattices crumbing on the air. No one said anything as Leehm was set back down on the ground. Wayel dashed backward, as if afraid Leehm might send spears of salt against him. But when he reached the top of the beach and no attack came, he paused to stare at the beach for a moment, as if to study the view one last time before he hurried away.

Dalochs flinched as well, but didn't flee. She crouched by the roots she'd thrown, touched them, then with a shudder gathered the tangled mass around her shoulders and left as well.

The porters sat down to watch what would happen next.

Leehm began to move among the crystals, touching them lightly, disturbing nothing, learning by touch what each form and structure might mean and how he might learn to use it, as a spell-grower does her plants.