

Prologue:

It was the glow of the orb that stole her. A perfectly circular egg nestled snugly within the crook of a leaf. More than twenty eggs in fact, camouflaged, a safeguard of utmost importance for the entirely vulnerable. No doubt, their mother had flown great lengths to hide them, a lifelong clandestine operation executed by a traveler they would never meet. A difficult mission that would soon prove unsuccessful. Sometimes one simply chooses the wrong leaf.

The golden bunch of pearls reflected the day's first beam of sunlight, as a prism might. The ray passed through the distant evergreen forest and found the eggs before anything else, as if it chose them specifically. These specific eggs, in this exact spot. Fate.

A middle-aged woman laid a wicker basket, over-flowing with fresh-cut flowers, down to rest on a dewy stone. She felt a stiffness seize her lower-back as she knelt to inspect the wonderful, golden beads. To examine a natural marvel such as this was easily worth a little suffering later. She should return to her own family, yet this fascinating discovery held her interest. They could wait.

Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one in total, the woman counted. Clearly belonging to a lepidoptera insect of some kind, what might the caterpillars look like when they emerged transformed? Spotted? Emerald? What a beautiful sight their births would be. The golden glow of the eggs mimicked the veins of the maple leaf that housed them. This was the mother's design. A very intentional choice to lay the eggs on the underside of this type of leaf. A thoughtful mother no doubt. Perhaps there had been more eggs at some point, thirty or thirty-five. Conceivably eaten

by a predator or whisked away by a particularly violent storm. Even the most protective of mothers cannot prevent every evil of the world from reaching her children.

A weak tremor in the air caused her to unconsciously reach out and stabilize herself on the plant's stem. She gazed toward the clouds in the distance. That was no ordinary gust of wind. Perhaps a storm was blowing in. Or something worse. Something she had only felt once before.

The woman clutched the basket of flowers draped over her forearm. She managed to track down her empty mug near the frostberry patch. It was shaping up to be a particularly good harvest this year, if the weather remained pleasant. She started towards the quaint cottage off in the distance, shooting darting glances to the horizon as she moved. The next tremor had been withholding itself for now.

A worn log cabin came into view. It, no the entire property, would be overrun by evergreens if it weren't for a large garden patch that her husband had cleared. She knew he had improved the recessed pond at the centre as a special gift just for her. A self-sustaining farm was the main attraction in moving out here. The pond's fresh water satisfied the self-sustaining part. 'Rural' and 'self-sustaining' were the words she used to eventually convince him to leave the Order. The sun's warmth kissed her cheek like an echo of her husband's lips. It crossed the woman's mind that the move to this secluded property was worth it after all.

A lamp flickered from the corner of the sitting room as the woman closed the large, wooden front door behind her. A newspaper was strewn across the sofa. 'Three More Sightings!' the headline read. Her husband, nowhere to be found, must be fetching a canister of lamp oil for that godforsaken thing; one of those trinkets you always mean to replace but never prioritize.

The woman whisked herself into the kitchen, anxious to get the not-so-newly cut flowers into water. She turned on the tap, filled a glass vase, and after a few quick trimmings here and there, slid the bouquet in for a perfect fit. Her daughter was obviously still sleeping; she would certainly be running amok otherwise. The woman quickly pieced together a small fire in the wood stove. Breakfast could not wait any longer. She muttered a short prayer to herself, “thank the Maiden for today’s bounty, may she grant us health and safety.”

In the years since her daughter’s birth, the Maiden had granted them prosperity. A simplified life had allowed the housewife to be just that. Fewer external pleasures and a renewed appreciation for the dignity of hard work, had provided the couple a new sense of pride. In their shared space and in one another. More time with their child was the shining star on top. Thank the Maiden indeed.

The wood stove was hot now, too hot in fact. The starburst shaped pieces of food were out of the cupboard and anxious to find a pan. At this heat, they would require mere seconds to warm through. The woman’s husband was yet to return from the woodshed. He never took this long. She knew she should verify his well-being but elected to give him another minute. As she gazed upon the old lamp, still flickering in the sitting room, it occurred to her how incredibly dark the cabin was, even on a day as bright as today. It was heavy, eerie all alone. A consequence of buying a residence formed entirely of wood, she supposed.

The woman’s gaze was abruptly broken away from the flickering lamp. A creak in the floorboard down the corridor to her left. Perhaps her child was beginning to wake. That was not another quake. She noted that the front door was still closed, just as she had left it. The cabin was quiet, unusually quiet. It was a modest space, especially for a family of three. One of them was almost

always filling it with a sound of some sort. Right now, it was only her, listening, silent. She turned back towards the old wood stove, its heat causing some discomfort against her bare flesh. She grasped the handle and flicked her wrist, which made the starburst foods jump excitedly. The pan sizzled back at her like a protective mother goose who'd had enough.

A cold shiver began to crawl up the back of the woman's neck. A shadow crept down her arm. She sensed that she no longer alone. Her body went rigid. It took an extra second to coax courage into herself. Holding her breath, she quickly swung her body around. A face was inches from her own. She flung her head back, nearly smacking it against the cabinet behind.

"Oh, I'm sorry dear," her husband said with a laugh. "Suppose I shouldn't startle you near the hot stove."

The woman smacked her husband on the arm and let out a relieved giggle. "Do you suppose you chose the right container of lamp fuel this time?" she teased.

"Well, I suppose you can choose the right thing and still not feel entirely confident about it. So here goes," he responded sheepishly.

"Breakfast is ready in five minutes you devil."

"Thank you dear," he responded with a playful grin. The fellow turned towards the sitting room, non-descript canister of liquid in-hand.

The woman shook her head and resumed the cook. "Good thing he's handsome," she jested to herself with a smirk. She gave the pan another quick toss and took a moment to admire the vase of flowers boasting nearby. A very tasteful collection of pastel pinks and blues, *befitting this time*

of year if I do say so myself. Hopefully the butterfly's breath will produce soon, they would have made this lot a perfect one.

The breakfast had to come off the heat. Now. The tips of her fingers crawled along the counter and found a cold, ceramic receptacle. Steam wafted from the dainty starbursts as they fell in. Then a loud thud came from down the corridor. She turned towards the sitting room; the noise had grabbed her husband's attention as well. Something told her to start towards her daughter's bedroom. The woman moved briefly until her eyes found the latched door at the end of the hall. She began to advance again but stopped abruptly. The family portrait on the wall next to her was vibrating. Confused, she explored how this could be. Was the room moving, or was she? Perhaps she did hit her head on the cabinet after all. She looked back at the trembling bowl of food. She slowly brought herself closer to it. Her eyes crept over the bowl's edge, her gaze freezing upon the golden starbursts. They were rumbling like a tempestuous ocean. A confused hesitance swept through her; this was certainly not happening in her mind. Whatever this tremor was, it was real.

The vibration intensified and a loud crash came from across the kitchen. The woman let out a startled scream at the sound. The vase of flowers had slid off the counter and shattered on the floor. Her husband rushed into the kitchen to find water and glass strewn about. He noticed dark red trickling down her cheek where a piece of the vase had lodged. Before a word of concern could leave his mouth, a deep boom came from out in the yard. The sound was just as much felt as heard. It was a sensation like a boulder falling to earth might cause. The entire foundation of the home shook.

Terrified shrieks rang out from the bedroom at the end of the hall. The rumbling intensified. The woman sprinted towards the corridor, expecting her husband to already be well ahead of her. As

her glance met the front door, she noted that it was no longer closed. A dark silhouette stood in an otherwise sunlit entryway. She recognized the silhouette as the backside of her husband. The shadow stood frozen, staring at something outside. A trail of smoke began to rise from the pan on the stove. She stopped moving as her daughter appeared. They each remained silent. The mother's gaze met a pair of perfect, emerald eyes. The rumbling abruptly ceased.

"Hunn-," she began to cry out but was immediately silenced.

In an instant the ceiling crashed down upon the family. Windows shattered and dishes crashed. Wood splintered and logs piled up haphazardly on top of one another. Insulation and dust from a desolate attic piled on. Every unseen material was entirely exposed now. There was no time to cry out, nor for pain to register. It is truly amazing the amount of weight a home can bear. It could not support this.

A cloud of dust filled the air where a pile of rubble now lay. The rumbling gradually dimmed, moving off into the distance. The dust settled. A thick fog, the colour of the most vibrant leaf, hovered over the property. The sections of garden that were not flattened were, instead, wilted and black. A young deer lay lifeless at the edge of the tree line, within eyeshot of where the cabin once stood. Within the rubble, a mother's pale hand rest among a mound of shattered memories. The fragmented logs and debris were now kindling for a mutilated, but smoldering woodstove. The entire property was now merely a stain, a fossil in a crater. The depression was cylindrical in shape. It did not resemble a boulder fallen to earth. One could say it resembled a footprint.

Chapter 1: Eventide Grow

Eventide Grow was a relatively new creation, as gardens go. Most of the plants within it were only a few generations old. In their time, they had only known the sound of a trickling stream and the tranquil light of the moon. The flora and fauna that resided there had come to expect these sights and sounds, as a child expects to wake each day to a parent's smile. In fact, the entire allotment had never known any dissimilar experience.

The trees that enveloped the property had altogether different memories. They remembered a time before the garden's existence. A time without a gentle guiding hand. Those old trees saw many things, some good, some strange, and some utterly evil.

At present, the garden consisted of great swathes of flowers of various varieties. Pastel pinks and blues were dotted in amongst a great sea of white. After years of gardening strictly under the light of the moon, white-colored flowers had consumed most all the others. This tended to happen with lunar-flowering plants, and their beautiful advance had was not unwelcome. In modern times, any plot of land that grew plants commercially was known, in slang, as a 'grow.' Hence this space was widely known to the townsfolk of Order 13 as Eventide Grow.

The garden was primarily a commercial flower garden. The intoxicating fragrance of the twilight flowers was delightful. So delightful that their scent was beyond replication by even the most enthusiastic of daytime flowerers. The most enchanting of these plants were *Ipomoea alba* and *Trientalis borealis*, the moon and star flower. These varieties were not particularly rare but were the crown jewels of this plot. Some plants here produced fruit, but the majority in Eventide Grow existed simply to produce spore, a dust-like substance that was housed within its flower, and the essential ingredient in creating food.

The rolling plot sloped gradually down to fulfilment at the shore of a babbling stream which filled the night air with a peaceful hiss. The creek housed a variety of aquatic creatures. A family of raiju could often be seen leaping from the water. They were substantially spritelier than their relatives, the koi fish. On especially blustery nights, waves of golden spore would settle and dance upon the surface, creating a hypnotizing sight to even the most disinterested eye. Often, on a particularly bright night, a playful raiju would erupt from below the surface, taking centre stage for a but moment, bathing in the spotlight of the moon. An unencumbered artist creating an altogether new design within the rolling current of spore.

Rosy Ikarita considered herself a friend of the garden. Her dainty hand had planted the first flower seed in Eventide Grow nearly a decade ago. At the time, the property was an overgrown, abandoned gravel tarmac. Weeds thrived above all else as the rocky soil was coarse, leached of any nutrients. Nature would have eventually boomed, but Rosy had been happy to accept the job offer and assist in guiding the process along. Tonight, like most, was not dedicated to enjoying the garden. It was another night of work.

A long, needle-like, probe scraped along the gravel path. Rosy, realizing she had been lost in thought, quickly flung it over her shoulder. The device snagged in her salmon-coloured hair. *That's why I cut it short in the first place*, she thought as an alabaster hand attempted to painlessly coax out the spore's tip. She folded her petite, feminine ear downward to provide a less irritating escape from her wavy coiffure. She could not afford another hour wasted on repairing a damaged spore siphon. Spore numbers in Order 13 had been down each of the last three phases. A fourth lackluster delivery would not go over well.

Tonight's agenda featured an exceptionally exceptional bed of *Trientalis*. Rosy lifted the siphon to shoulder height and inserted it into the star flower, extracting spore from its anther. After a second, she removed the device and pointed it vertically towards the night sky. She watched as the shimmering golden dust traveled down the transparent shaft into the glass storage hilt at the base. She found herself, once again, awestruck as her gaze analyze the spore's dance as it descended. Even though she repeated this process thousands of times every night, the beauty of it never diminished. 'A sword that's prettier and far more useful,' someone had called the siphon. She found that description to be apt; the hilt wrapped around the user's hand like the guard of a cutlass. Rosy side-stepped to the next flower, a petal as big as her head brushed against her pale cheek as she leaned in. The siphon slid in with a deft, mindless precision.

Eventually, the monotony of the task began to set in, as it typically did this time each night. Working under a moonlit setting was far more enjoyable than the scorch of day. Yet lately the night tended to fade from significance; the inescapable reality of prolonged exposure to something, she supposed. A day shift would provide a curious change of scenery should the day's become safe once again.

Her view of the siphon blurred as brown, middle-aged eyes drifted out of focus. In that realm of moony inattentiveness, in fatigue, Rosy could see the countryside of her past, the landscape before she joined the Order. The shrubs and flowers faded away. With nothing to buffer it, a powerful, cold wind swept across a barren grassland. It stole her breath. The wind's howling allure was more prominent back then. She remembered not knowing where to begin. In building a garden and rebuilding her life. A blank canvas, weathered, not new, but full of potential. *Start with the soil.*

The sheer volume of insect chirping and bird song was an unexpected, but delightful benefit of the garden's development. Despite the beauty of the flora being entirely expected, the significance of their changes season to season, had been a pleasant surprise. A leaf brushed against Rosy's hand; she allowed her palm to rest upon it. How nice it was to have something alive to brush against. Her thought was interrupted. She felt something else against her skin now. Knowing precisely what, *who* the sensation belonged to, she paused for a moment before glancing downwards. She found another hand, undeniably female, resting on her own, as if the leaf had never been there at all. She analyzed the chips in the vibrant yellow nail polish before slowly glancing back up to eye level. *You aren't her*. A pretty female with welcoming eyes smiled back at her. *But your smile always feels so familiar*. Wavy, blonde hair rested at shoulder height. Flawless, tanned skin gleamed in the moonlight. Rosy stared into those ocean-blue eyes for another moment before yanking her hand away. *Not tonight*, she thought as she snapped out of the reverie. The leaf stirred and she hurried back to work.

"Remind me why you wear that on your face," an old military man scorned.

"We're at war, so I wear warpaint. You should read the recommended dress guide sometime. It's not that complicated," a young soldier responded.

"Oh really, I've been at this for nearly twenty years now, how many battles have you been in Hawkie?" the older man paused, not long enough to hear a response. He snickered, and left the room.

The young soldier huffed and returned to his meal.

Crass old Blackburn was impolite, but he wasn't wrong. In the six years since Hawk had been old enough to enlist, not only had he never seen battle, but he had never heard of one occurring in the territory. His territory contained Orders 8, 13, 15, 19, and the long-ruined 20. The randomness of the numbers had bothered him, until he learned they had been named in order of when they had been founded, not for their geographic proximity to one another. The elder soldiers would often remind him that a lack of action was obviously a good thing. Regardless, young men like Hawk did not join the military wing to spend every shift gossiping in the break room. It wasn't hard for him to stay motivated though, the internal memo was always providing updates, usually unfavorable ones, from the front. The war was out there. It was coming to their doorstep sooner or later. He was certain of it.

Hawk could not remember if the war began when he was young, or if he had been born into it. He had never conducted much of his own research into how it started. In school, he was taught from an early age that the giants had simply appeared one day. Growing up, none of the other residents of Order 8 had ever offered him a more logical solution. For years, the education wing was adamant that most of the fighting was contained to the front, and that giant sightings at other locations were few and far between. He found himself questioning those lessons shortly after he was shipped off to his current and only posting. This station was located not far up the mountain, roughly in the middle of the five Orders. Of course, the government would tell little kids that the fighting was contained. What else were they supposed to say? Hawk enrolled on the first possible day. Not to throw away his adolescence. Not because it's what his father wanted, but because *he* wanted it too. Every childhood experience had prepared him mentally and physically for this occupation. His resolve had been strengthening his entire life, for this very purpose.

What he knew for certain, is that the giants could be beaten. He was absolutely going to take one down.

The young soldier rose from the thick, wooden table, dishes in-hand. Blackburn's words still nagged at him as he thoroughly scrubbed his plate. There had not been a suspected giant sighting in a few weeks, an unusually long period of time. It would be hard to see any action without so much as a sighting. Typically, every few days a telegraph would arrive from a concerned citizen who swore they spotted one of the beasts somewhere off in the distance. The military wing would investigate and inevitably come to one of three conclusions; it was a large animal, a larger cloud formation, or the citizen was downright insane. Hawk, desperate for action of some kind, would typically scoop up all the dayshifts in which these telegraphs tended to arrive. This evening, the young soldier found himself working a rare nightshift.

With his dishes scrubbed and neatly filed back in their places, Hawk ventured down the dimly lit corridor to the fitness room. A post-meal training session was a welcome, albeit recommended, part of any military shift. The fitness room also happened to be the biggest and brightest chamber in the station, which, for an underground base, was a lovely place to spend time. Moonlight spilled in through a large, tubular window in the ceiling; a thoughtful design to have it stretch up to ground-level. The sun and moon always seemed to pass directly over this spot, it was satisfying, whether intentional or not. The older soldiers preferred the stillness of the nightshift, if for no other reason than the opportunity to gossip. The veterans did not tend to set foot in the fitness room anymore. It seemed, to his unsurprised delight, that Sergeant Hawk had the space all to himself tonight. *Push day*, he thought, before reaching for a large, stone weight which he thrust over his head.

Faint laughter could be heard from the other end of the dingey corridor. The sound exploded as the door to the break room swung open then abruptly dimmed as it shut once again.

“You put nine chips down on Duponchelia to win the RBA scoring title!?” an old male soldier shouted. The room erupted with laughter once again.

“At least I have some chips left to bet with!” another soldier responded, raising his voice over the merriment.

“Hey, you better watch out, that charming mailman is coming for your wife too,” the roar grew.

A young, female soldier planted herself in the centre of the amusement.

“Excuse me, sir,” she muttered, going completely unnoticed by the general who was still doubled over.

“Excuse me, sir!”

The white-haired, male soldier sat up straight, a smirk still lingering, “yes what is it Phereoeca?”

“Sir, we’ve not received check-in from Order 8,” she announced.

“How long overdue?” the general responded, half-interested, brushing crumbs from the accolades on his uniform.

“Ninety-minutes, sir.”

“Thank you Phereoeca, update me in another ninety.”

“But sir, Order 8 is only twelve kilometres from-.”

The general promptly interrupted the young female. “Order 8 must have a new recruit running the telegrams, they were delayed all last week. Update again in ninety minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” she responded, lurching out of the room.

The room held a brief and awkward silence. A few soldiers fidgeted and picked at the object nearest them. They were used to Blackburn’s outbursts. They knew better than to speak next.

“Hey Xyle, can I borrow nine chips?” the general jested, causing the room to erupt with laughter once again.

Down the corridor, a heavy, stone weight slammed to the ground, drops of black and red-coloured sweat dropping abstractly upon it like toxic rain. Hawk breathed heavily, ingesting the dank, mildewy air. *Nice lift*, he thought, as he wiped the streaking warpaint from his eyes. The smell of wet soil and taste of partially decayed wood absorbed into him with each strained breath. *I better make an appearance in the break room after this*, he thought, his hand resting on the hard, mud packed wall. *Another hour at least*. He reached down and grabbed the large weight once again, then thrust it above his slender body. A determined smirk appeared once more.

A muted, brown chaff now bordered the stream in Eventide Grow. The wind had died. The great swathes of spore were tired after a night spent frolicking on the water’s surface. Having harvested spore from well over one thousand flowers, Rosy now took rest upon a large stone.

She looked out beyond the stationary water. In the distance, dark shadows loomed where the Fuscella mountain began. The gardener had explored that direction a handful of times, yet but she knew better than to venture too far. She had never craved the climb with enough thirst to test what would happen if she did. Rosy dreamed that her garden would, one day, touch the foot of those hills. When that day came, perhaps the ban would be lifted and a trek over the Fuscella would be a meditative part of her routine.

The pressure that the spore siphon applied on her shoulder blade, sent Rosy into a momentary, dehydrated panic. She could not remember off-hand where she had left the hilt containing tonight's harvest. It would not be the first time she misplaced a night's labour. Rosy whipped her head about and quickly located the detachable storage container, now heavy with spore shimmering within, on an adjacent rock. She held the tear-drop shaped object up to the moonlight, which now appeared much lower in the sky. Her gaze focused intensely, dissecting each drop of the evening's yield. The odd bit of black or green plant debris could be seen, but for the most part, tonight's batch was as pure as one could hope. *The Order will be happy with this*, she thought, rising from her perch.

The slow trudge back up the sloped property caused her head to droop. She lazily focused on individual blades of grass as they slowly rolled by. Her lips had never been particularly plump, but now they swelled in desiccation, her mouth mimicking the fullness of the low moon. The back of her tan, chambray shirt stuck to her uncomfortably. It would be a quick shower and off to bed when she reached the top of the hill. A relaxing, well-earned reward for a productive night in the garden. She came to a bend in the path; it was lined by a short rock-face. She knew that the path would transform into stone when she passed around the next corner. Her home would soon

come into view. Rosy lifted her head as she rounded the bend, as expected, the large brown chimney above her bedroom window appeared. However, at that moment her pace slowed, and eventually came to rest behind a shrub. She stared intently at the bits of the home that weren't obscured by various greenery. A cold chill came over her, perhaps from her soggy shirt. It could just be the fatigue, but she could swear that something big had moved near her bedroom window.

Rosy told her body to start moving again. It stuttered nervously and began to carry her up the hill. Nothing dangerous ever ventured this far from the Fuscella. Her eyes remained fixed on the location of the movement. She didn't detect anything. Her heartbeat was not satisfied; it remained quick in her chest. *Perhaps just an animal passing by.* Her hand grazed against a large, pastel pink clump of *Echinacea pallida* flowers. They gave her a significant scratch, which went completely unnoticed in her apprehensiveness. Rosy's unsteady palm crept up her back, entered the opening in the bottom of the siphon's hilt, gripped the handle, and began to slowly unsheathe. Imagine having to stab someone, especially with a blunt tool. She could act threatening at least. Her breath caught in her chest. A few more moments and she would arrive at the house, at the source of the anomaly.

There seemed to be no one else here. Nothing stood out as unusual. The house stood exactly as she had left it many hours ago. The bedroom window was intact, and the back door was shut securely. *Probably just exhausted,* she thought as she began to exhale.

"Hello Ms. Ikarita," said a voice over her left shoulder.

Rosy jumped and swung around to face the voice. "Bogong!" she said, enthusiastically popping the spore siphon back into its sheathe. "Mr. Segunda. You gave me quite a start."

“My apologies,” the short, middle-aged man began. “I’ve been wandering around for a little bit. Figured you were here somewhere. Always get so turned around, not many folks choosing to live on the outskirts anymore. I guessed you were probably down at the spore field but didn’t want to wander too far in, with it being government sponsored property and all.”

“It’s no problem,” Rosy said, “I’m just finishing up actually. Good harvest today at least. Hopefully the Order is happy with this one. How are things over at your restaurant?”

“Fairly steady actually. Although with the amount I spend on spore, perhaps you will throw some of your special varieties into my shipment sometime. I would look good with silver eyes or a rock-hard abdomen, wouldn’t you say? I know you have something special from the old days out there somewhere,” Bogong said, before giving a twitch as if he had just remembered what she originally asked. “We’ve had to reduce the number of dishes by a bit, with the low spore supply and all-,” he quickly cut himself off. “I figure we can become experts at the few meals we *do* make. Not that I’m solely blaming you for the actions of the Order’s council. Nothing but tyrants, they are.” To Rosy’s delight, he cut his rant short before he said anything truly offensive.

“I’m sure you’re working very hard” the little man relented.

Rosy swallowed what she really wanted to say. “You don’t need to worry about me Mr. Segunda. You’re the only restaurant in town, so if I don’t sell to you, who am I going to sell to? Besides, if my little garden is single-handedly responsible for the spore shortage across the territory, then we’re all in trouble. But don’t worry, you’ll be the first person I think of if the law changes and growing something truly...exceptional ever becomes an option again.”

Bogong's shoulders relaxed which caused his belly to stick out beyond his jacket. He had gained some weight since she last saw him in his restaurant.

"Indeed, I'm sure you would make quite the sporechemist, like a shaman of old. Perhaps, as thanks, I will even swap the water out for something stronger when I refine your next meal," Bogong said, giving an awkward chuckle.

"Look at us living dangerously," Rosy said. "So, what brings you all the way out here to Eventide Grow Mr. Segunda? It must have been at least a couple seasons since you were here inspecting my product last. Not an impromptu inspection at this hour, I hope?"

"It most certainly has been a long time, and please, you may call me Bogong. No inspection tonight, next one isn't mandated for a few more cycles. Actually, the main reason I came out this way was to give you this." A brown hand containing a square of paper reached out towards Rosy. "I wanted to invite you to a little soiree I'm having. I've been telling people I'm throwing it to celebrate the end of the season, but as you know, the Order nominates one of us to host each year in lieu of the old harvest party.

Rosy knew this was more of a 'voluntold' than 'volunteer' type of situation.

"Please forgive the officialness of the invitations. My nephew begged me to allow him to make formal invitations, and suffice to say, I was convinced."

"What an excellent idea on his part," Rosy said, studying the extremely amateur looking invitation. "So, it's this weekend then, is there anything I can bring?"

“Oh no nothing,” Bogong replied. “I own the best restaurant in the territory, I wouldn’t dream of offending my guests in that manner. Actually, you know what you can bring? You can bring a few of those lovely flowers I saw when I approached the house.”

“Oh, the ones out front, *Ipomoea alba*, the moon flower,” Rosy said. “Yes, of course, no problem.”

“Lovely. Hope to see you next weekend then,” Bogong said. “And perhaps an *informal* tour of my products again sometime,” he added. He looked like he wanted to add more, but glanced over her shoulder, towards the horizon, and stopped himself.

Rosy turned slightly to peek at the sky beginning to lighten in the distance. “Ah yes, another time, certainly Mr. Segunda.”

With a nod, the man turned, revealing his thinning, dark hair, and left the property. Rosy rolled her eyes as she remembered the tone he had used when he said, “I’m sure you’re trying your best.” She was trying her best. Evidently, at least one member of the Order didn’t agree. She wanted to say that his demeanor worsened after his wife died, but in truth he had always been crass. Lately, he always seemed to have various acquaintances and extended family members dining in his restaurant. She imagined his family was making more of a concerted effort after he became a widower. Nice that he had loved ones to go through it with.

A party this weekend... It had been some time since Rosy attended a party of any kind, years perhaps. She had visited Bogong’s home on a couple occasions to drop off emergency ingredients for the restaurant but had never actually stepped foot inside. One excuse or another always seemed to crop up. She tended to avoid uncomfortable conversations. It had always been

easier to return to the safe independence of Eventide Grow. Not that he had ever seemed particularly excited by her presence. Perhaps it would be wise to make an appearance among the other members of Order. Just ignore the fact that he had been forced to invite her. At least it had not been her who drew the short stem in hosting the harvest party. With all the liquid courage that would be present, it may be a suitable environment to get some answers regarding the shortage of spore. After months, no one had bothered to explain to her *why* the numbers were down overall, not that the Order would divulge that information to the lowly gardener. *We'll see how I feel this weekend*, Rosy thought, as she headed inside for that shower.