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**The Matriarch's  
Remedy**

*A Novella*

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*A Novella*

*By S.C. Eston*

*Thank you for reading my story.*

*- Steve*

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

## THE MATRIARCH'S REMEDY

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## Reminiscence

The inert form of Izera's grandmother was resting on the floorboards. Grey wisps of hair partially covered the old woman's face. One of her bony hands lay upturned while the other was hidden under her body. Her round stomach, which always seemed too large compared to the rest of her body, protruded and lazed on the wooden planks. The matriarch looked so small and fragile.

Izera was rooted in place, a hand on the knob of the open door and a foot still dangling outside the house. The sight of her motionless grandmother paralyzed her brain's ability to function. Izera stared. A low mechanical sound attracted her attention to the water clock on the fire pit's mantle. The cogs were turning, pushing time forward, uncaring. The clock was a complex device and her grandmother's most prized possession. It came from Mah'Sinéa, or so her grandmother was proud of saying. The intricacies of the device certainly supported this avowal. It seemed unfair that the clock continued working when her grandmother didn't.

A few moments ago, Izera would have believed she didn't much care for the elderly woman. That was not the case. The sobs shaking her body proved that she cared very much. More than she would have thought. The feelings might have been spurred by the fact that her grandmother was the only family Izera had left.

The sudden solitude was not easy to accept.

It had all started nine years ago, with Izera's younger brother. Tanar was the first to leave, swallowed by the water of the Ariam Bay. Izera, nine, had been in the city on an errand with her mother when the tragedy happened. Tanar had always been scared of water. It was the darkness of the bay that frightened him, as if the deepness hid dangerous and horrifying monsters. The boy of five never worded it quite that way, but it was how Izera remembered him now. She also had memories of trying to teach her brother how to swim, of teasing him and making fun of his fears. He never wanted to learn. Izera wished she had been nicer to him.

Tanar's departure changed her father drastically, stealing his smile and dimming the glow in his eyes. He blamed himself, and the sentiment was relentless, pounding on him every day. It eventually wore out his heart, which stopped three years later.

This left Izera and her mother. They had no time to mourn. One week after her father's premature death, they were evicted from their home and had to leave the Shipyard District. The

house had been lent to their family while her father worked in the shipyard. Now that he was gone, the place would pass on to the next worker. The only explanation they received was that times were hard in Karo. As leniency, they got two extra days to leave the premises.

They had only one option, and it was to move in with the matriarch of the family, her mother's mother. Keina was her name, but Izera could not remember ever using it. The old woman was the only relative left to them. She lived alone in a house on the other side of the bay, between the Artisan and Lighthouse districts, close to the water yet far from the road, isolated.

Even though it was the only choice, it was still not an easy one. Izera's mother and grandmother did not get along. The elderly woman never cared for her own daughter, and Izera's mother never forgave her for it. While she had certainly been there in body, she had never been there emotionally. Or so said Izera's mother. At that time, Izera didn't know much of her grandmother, as visits were nonexistent.

Shortly after they settled in the matriarch's house, the inevitable happened. Old grudges reawakened. Over the next few years, the arguing and bickering grew and grew until the two could not even look at each other. It was a difficult time for Izera. She was thirteen going on fourteen, and she ended up spending most of her days in her bedroom, often under her bed, pillow over her head.

Izera's mother always promised that she would never do to Izera what had been done to her. The vow became a nighttime ritual. After wrapping Izera tightly in blankets, her mother would kiss her on each cheek and whisper in her ear.

"No one loves you like I do," her reassuring voice would say. "I will never leave you."

Yet that was exactly what she did.

One morning, Izera was awoken by a bony hand, fingers digging into her shoulder.

"I am sorry, child," her grandmother had said, looking down on her with eyes deep in a valley of wrinkles. "Your mother is gone."

There had been no explanation. Her mother had simply left.

Half a year later, Izera received an envelope originating from the village of Brais. It contained a brief note and a letter sealed in a protective case. The note informed her that the body of her mother had been found at sea, floating along the coast. The letter had been recovered from her body, and it was addressed to Izera. She never opened it.

Now, as she stood looking at her grandmother lying on the floor, the sealed letter rested under her pillow, untouched. Izera had a hard time accepting that she had no one else, that she was the last of her family.

Izera didn't know what she was supposed to do. She felt completely numb.

She should step inside the house and cover her grandmother's body. The elderly woman deserved a little dignity. Yet Izera didn't move, her head swirling with questions.

Was the house hers? Would she be allowed to keep it, or would history repeat itself? Would someone come and take the house away, sending Izera out on her own? Would she be able to continue with her lessons? Lessons her grandmother had organized for her. What about her work at the inn? What if she lost that too? What then?

A light tap made Izera jump. She looked at the water clock, but the gadget had not moved and its noises were the same.

Izera refocused her gaze and noticed that her grandmother's hand was now facing down. One of its fingers was moving, twitching up and down. Nail on wood.

Tap. Tap.

The clock ticked a few more times before Izera realized that her grandmother was still alive.

## Bedridden

Izera's grandmother was now recuperating in her bed, asleep. As delicately as she could, Izera had lifted her and brought her here. The old woman was surprisingly light, even with her round belly. Standing beside the bed, Izera touched her grandmother's forehead with the back of her hand. She had a fever.

Izera could only think of two courses of action. She could stay with her grandmother and care for her as best she could. Or she could leave her grandmother in the bed and go to the city to get help. The only medic Izera knew lived far into the Artisan District. It would take more than an hour to reach his office and come back. Longer if he needed convincing. On top of which, there was no guarantee he would be there. Medics tended to move around, some days in their office, some days at one of the healing houses. Izera could ask around, but who could say how long that would take?

Looking at her grandmother, Izera was shamed once again. How could she have thought the old woman was dead? She suddenly didn't want to abandon her. What if the matriarch awoke alone or passed away for real this time? All by herself, with no one around? Izera hated the thought and knew it was irrational, but it came anyway.

If only the house was not so isolated from the city.

Sweat now covered her grandmother's skin. Izera got up and made her way to the well, located on the western side of the house. It would have been quicker to get water from the bay, but Izera did not like the idea of using salt water. She brought a bucket of water inside and soaked a few rags.

Izera placed one of the rags on her grandmother's forehead and the others on the night table, near a wooden owl. The owl was another strange gadget that her grandmother had acquired over the years. It was made of polished wood and had many cogs on its side and back. You could wind it up using a small pin and the wings would unfold and fold, mimicking flight. It didn't work very well, probably because it was not of Sinean origin.

After a few moments, Izera lifted the rag and touched the forehead. It was cooler. The rag was helping, so Izera flipped it so the cold side would be against the skin.

Her grandmother's respirations were shallow, but regular. A few times, it seemed she would awaken, but didn't.

As the evening passed into the night, Izera continued to soak, flip, and replace the rags. It was well past midnight when her grandmother's temperature finally dropped.

Until that moment, Izera had sat on a small stool borrowed from the kitchen. Her back and shoulders were terribly sore. She returned the stool to its proper place and went outside. The water of the bay was calm. Far away, Izera could see the lighthouse at the entrance of the bay. The calmness of the night made her realize how tense she had been. Taking a long breath, she grabbed her grandmother's rocking chair; the one on the porch. She dragged it inside and set it by the bed. She then went to the second floor and picked up the blanket from her bed.

Back downstairs, she pushed the rocking chair as close as she could to her grandmother, wrapped herself in the blanket, and tried to get some rest.

But then, the waves came to her.

\*

The note about her mother had come just as Izera was starting work at the Grey Harpoon Inn. For the next few months, she submerged herself in her duties, working all day and often late into the night, serving, cooking, and cleaning. The owners were good to her, although it was possible they did it out of pity. Now Izera mostly worked the afternoons, but back then she had practically lived at the inn. It was a time when she appreciated being away from her grandmother and the house. It was during that time that the waves had started to echo in her ears.

When she was six, Izera started to hear a strange pounding when going to sleep. It only came certain nights and was not consistent. After it happened a few times, it began to scare her. When she mentioned it to her father, he explained that it was the blood pumping from her heart to her brain. By moving her head slightly on her pillow, she could make it go away.

The waves that started while she was working at the inn were different. Their singing reminded Izera of the resonance she could hear by holding a conch shell against the ear. Except it came unexpectedly, at any time of the day, and was often accompanied by flashes of nausea.

As Izera kept an eye on her grandmother, the echoes started to pound in her head. They were volatile and followed by a warm feeling in her chest. The sensations came in oscillations, as a wave hitting the shore.

This time, it was gone quickly. It rarely lasted longer than a few breaths.

\*

Izera pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, closed her eyes, and let the moment pass by.

When she opened her eyes again, her grandmother seemed serene in her sleep. Izera realized she didn't know how old the matriarch was. The elderly woman never divulged her age to anyone, but Izera estimated it at over sixty, if only because her mother would now be forty. It seemed a fair guess.

It was sad to think that they were the last of their family. Life had been unjust, but lately Izera had almost been able to convince herself that the worst was behind her. The waves were benign enough, and the weekly lessons her grandmother had set up for her had opened many opportunities Izera didn't think she had. In fact, since she had started the lessons, it seemed the flashes had diminished. Her relationship with her grandmother had always felt dysfunctional because of her mother, but today had made Izera realize that she had started to care for the old woman, if not like her. Izera felt a pang of guilt, as if she was betraying her mother. On the other hand, her grandmother was providing a roof for her. And when she thought about it, the elderly woman had never done anything to hurt her directly.

It was enough for Izera to think that life was being good to her. Finally.

Then today happened.

Izera pulled a hand out of the blanket and touched her grandmother's forehead. The temperature was normal. Izera lay back in the rocking chair and continued to evaluate her life. Only when her mind realized it would not make sense of it all did sleep finally catch up with her.

## Morning

Her grandmother's raspy voice woke Izera.

"You have done well, girl."

Izera opened her eyes and smiled when she saw that her grandmother's face was the only part of her visible on the bed. The sight was amusing, and comforting. The old woman had her eyes closed, and some colour had returned to her skin. Izera reached out and touched the wrinkly forehead.

"What are you doing?" snapped her grandmother, without moving or opening her eyes. "I said you did good. You should go lay in your bed for a while. I doubt you got any sleep in that old chair."

"Actually, I did," answered Izera as she stretched her arms over her head. She had slept, but her body hurt all over. "Do you remember what happened? I found you on the floor when I came in. You were very warm and had a fever."

Her grandmother didn't reply right away. Izera was starting to think she would not answer at all, which was typical of her, when the old woman opened her eyes and tried to sit up. Izera helped her, then walked to the window and opened the curtains. She was surprised to see it was midmorning.

"I had a fever, did I?" asked her grandmother.

"Yes," said Izera, sitting back in the chair, under the blanket. Her grandmother was looking out the window. From here, it was possible to see the Tower of Arh, tall and strong at the top of a cliff. It was the governing seat of Karo and a sight to behold. From under it gushed a powerful current, forming waterfalls that tumbled all the way down to the bay below. "That does not seem to surprise you," added Izera. "Has this happened before?"

"No, no it has not." But her voice held no conviction. "It was a simple fall," her grandmother said, looking at her for the first time. "Not eating and exerting too much can have drastic effects at my age. It is nothing to worry about."

But Izera was worried. The feeling of being alone was still strong. Maybe she could try to get a medic later.

"Don't you have a lesson this morning?" her grandmother asked suddenly.

Izera got up and rushed into the main room to look at the water clock. Every time, the gadget surprised her with its intricacies. The hour digit was approaching ten.

“The lesson has already started,” said Izera as she returned to the bedroom. “Not that it matters,” she quickly added, realizing how disappointed she had sounded. “I am not going anywhere today. You need me.”

\*

After her mother’s passing, Izera’s grandmother had started to worry about her. Izera noticed it in the way her grandmother would steal glimpses at her, from behind a doorframe or through a window. Never once did she actually ask Izera how she was doing. The elderly woman’s silent concern irritated Izera and only made matters worse.

A few weeks later, Izera was removing weeds from around the house, trying to keep the flowers alive. It was a task her grandmother had appointed to her the day they moved in. The old woman rarely came to look at the garden, but she was adamant its upkeep was not to be neglected. That day, her grandmother suddenly appeared at her side, leaning on her walking stick.

“I would like to introduce you to someone,” she said. “Come.”

“I am not done,” returned Izera. During those early days, she was often defiant when it came to the garden, showing her annoyance with the task.

“Not this time, girl,” said her grandmother. “Humour me. You won’t regret it.”

Sighing, Izera removed her gloves and put down her trowel. She took her time, making her grandmother wait. To her surprise, the matriarch didn’t say a word. She walked away and disappeared into the house. Now curious, Izera followed.

The back door opened into the kitchen. Izera could hear voices. She was surprised and terribly intrigued by the visitor’s voice. It was a woman’s and sounded cultivated, with an exotic accent. Quickly now, Izera made her way to the house’s main room and stopped at the sight of the visitor.

She was a Sinean!

Dressed in white, the woman wore a light and airy shirt with open sleeves ending in intricate lace. Her pants were baggy, yet tight at the leg where they hid in high dark leather boots. Her most striking features were her dark skin and her captivating hair, which reminded Izera of a large bird’s nest. The woman was small, but her presence made Izera feel tiny and insignificant.

“Izera, dear, I’d like you to meet Sinea’Aradel.” There was deep respect in the matriarch’s voice. “She is a teacher at the Era Academy and recently started giving lessons at the library. She has kindly agreed to take you on as a student.”

The visitor went on to talk about empowerment and freedom, about the importance of education and the lack of it in Telfira, about the possibilities of life and the recent advancements and discoveries made by the researchers of Mah’Sinéa. Through all of it, Izera was in awe.

The next day, under a beautiful cerulean sky and seated on the grass, in the shade of the library, Izera had her first class. There were only six students that day, but over the next few weeks the group grew rapidly to more than thirty.

The lessons opened the world to Izera.

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Looking back, Izera could see that the start of the lessons also marked a shift in her relationship with her grandmother. Her education had formed a bond between the two of them, something to talk about.

“Nonsense,” said her grandmother now. “There is no need for you to miss a lesson. If you leave now, you will catch most of it. Then you go on to the inn.”

Weakly, Izera shook her head.

“I can’t leave you,” she said.

“You can and you will,” said her grandmother, looking hard and long at Izera. It made Izera feel self-conscious. It seemed the old woman was scrutinizing her, but for what, Izera could not say.

Then her grandmother seemed to reach a decision. “Tonight,” she said, “I will need your help. There is a remedy that was prescribed to me by a medic, a long time ago. I stopped taking it, but I believe I should start again.”

“A remedy?”

“Yes. Will you help me make it?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. Now go, girl. Sineans are not known for their patience.”

Smiling, Izera nodded, got her backpack from her room, and was on her way.

## Waves

Her lesson and work done for the day, Izera was making her way back toward her grandmother's house. The road wound up, down, and around low hills, trying its best to stay away from the bay. Trees adorned it on both sides. Between leaves, hills, and houses, Izera could get glimpses of the water far to her left. The bay was protected by a long peninsula, known as the Lighthouse District of Karo. This protection meant that the bay's surface was mostly calm, often mirror-like. It was so today, with the sun high in the sky and no clouds to be seen.

Karo was said to be a good place to live. It was the heart of Telfira, itself one of the most powerful countries of the Ten Duchies and the Western Realms. Karo was an extremely large city. In her eighteen years, Izera had only seen a very small portion of it. Her grandmother's house was located in the forgotten stretch between the Artisan District and the Lighthouse District. Her parents had often said it was one of the best places to live, away from the chaotic streets and large buildings. Izera had to admit that she liked the serenity of sitting on the porch of her grandmother's house and looking at the heart of the city, with its numerous streets and buildings hugging the climbing hills around the Ariam Bay. The downside, as Izera had learned the day before, was that it was terribly inconvenient when your grandmother was not doing well.

Her day's work had been like any other. Busy. Every single day, people came and went, in and out of the inn, in and out of the city. Some faces returned while new ones kept popping up every day. All very predictable, in a way.

On the other hand, the morning lesson had been very intriguing, as it always was. This was a predictability Izera could live with. All the students were disappointed when the lesson ended. Today, Sinea'Aradel had talked about a great many things, but mostly about the stars and the moons. In the Western Realms, most people believed there were three moons: Ro, Siral, and Uri. Sinea'Aradel told them there were four. The second farthest, known as Daara, was only visible in their sky once every fifty years or so. In Mah'Sinéa, Daara was visible more frequently and had a faint red glow. It would be visible in Telfira again in about ten years.

Izera could not complain about the walk home. She used the time to revisit the lesson and what she had learned that day. She was the only student who had a long walk home. The other students lived in the Artisan District, many close to the library. Sinea'Aradel also had to travel

several hours, as her home was located outside of Karo, inland, on a ridge along the Ariam river, far in the west. It was the complete opposite of where Izera lived. Sinea'Aradel seemed to agree that having a house far from the chaos of the city allowed for a better work-life balance. She taught three days a week at the Era Academy and came to the Artisan District twice a week. She rode a splendid horse named White Zephyr.

“But why do you come so far?” a boy had asked during a previous lesson.

Izera had wondered the same. The Sinean was volunteering her time to teach them. None of their parents had the means to pay her for the lessons.

“Everyone deserves a good education,” Sinea'Aradel had answered. “Everyone deserves to have the tools to think and make an informed decision as to their path in life. In Mah'Sinéa, education is provided to all equally.”

Sinea'Aradel didn't have to mention that Mah'Sinéa was more advanced than Telfira, or any of the other duchies of the Western Realms. All knew that. While Izera revered Sinea'Aradel, many disliked Sineans just for this reason.

During her initial visit to Izera's grandmother's house, Sinea'Aradel had given the same speech or something close to it. The answer would have to satisfy, although Izera could not say she grasped what it really meant yet. She also had a hard time understanding how someone like Sinea'Aradel could care about those like her.

It was one more detail that spurred Izera's admiration for the Sinean to grow. Yet Izera could not help noticing that Sinea'Aradel did not smile very often. Izera had only seen her teacher smile once or twice. She had never seen her laugh. It was hard to say how old Sinea'Aradel was, but Izera thought she must only be a few years older than she was, which meant she was extremely young, as Sineans lived a long time. Still, the woman's knowledge was without bound. Sinea'Aradel knew everything, and even though she did not come from the Western Realms, it seemed she understood the history of the Ten Duchies better than most people Izera knew.

As she left the Artisan District behind, Izera realized the lessons provided more than knowledge. They gave her hope and confidence in the possibilities of life. The determination she got from the lessons was almost as important as the knowledge. Izera could find interesting work. She was not limited to helping at the Grey Harpoon Inn. What that profession would be, Izera had not yet decided. She was fond of gadgets like her grandmother's water clock, but doubted Sinea'Aradel would have time to show them how to build one. Choosing a profession was an

option she had not realized existed before the coming of Sinea'Aradel. Maybe that was one of the reasons why the Sinean wanted to teach, so she could open life for them.

There was always the garden, flowers and plants. It had taken a while, but Izera had become good at keeping her grandmother's garden alive. She liked the moments spent alone with the flowers, caring for them, even talking to them. She had started replanting and moving some of the flowers, combining colours into interesting patterns along the house and porch. Her grandmother had fairly strict rules about some of the plants, but for the others, Izera could do as she pleased.

As the trees along the road gave way to open hills, Izera noticed a moon blossom to her right. The pale white flower stood out, a perfect sphere in the long grass. Izera decided to take a closer look. Maybe she could even bring it to her grandmother as a surprise. She left the road and knelt by the flower, pushing aside the blades of grass. The flower was beautiful, healthy and tall. Izera hesitated in taking it.

That was when the waves returned.

At first, the sound was far away, almost as if it came from the Ariam Bay, floating to her on the winds. But Izera knew no one else was hearing the oscillating noise. It was in her mind. She bent her head forward and put both of her hands on the ground, knowing it would pass rapidly.

But it did not.

The sound grew and with it the warm sensation came. It started in her knees and hands and spread quickly. It enveloped her chest and continued to climb. As it reached Izera's head, she started to sweat. The sensation had never been this intense before.

Panicking, Izera pushed herself up and opened her eyes. Colours were suddenly overwhelmingly vibrant, the light from the sun too bright. She took a few steps and reached the road, where she had to put a knee down so she wouldn't fall.

"Miss," said a voice. It was that of a young man. She could hear his steps as he approached. "Are you all right?"

He appeared to her left. Izera had crossed paths with him before. She assumed he lived somewhere in the Lighthouse District.

"Yes," she said, "I am better." The rush was receding, as if the voice of the young man had scared it away. "Just a moment of dizziness."

A woman materialized to the man's right. She grabbed his arm and pulled him away. She never once looked at Izera, but instead kept her gaze on the ground in front of her.

"Come," she said, her voice firm, tainted with panic. Or fear.

The young man followed, but not before giving Izera a brief smile and a nod.

Izera looked down at her clothes and hands. Everything seemed as it should.

What had just happened?

Why was that woman scared of her?

## Ingredients

When she reached the house, Izera was still disturbed by the events that had happened down the road. She went right to her room and knelt by the bed, pulling out the mirror hidden underneath. The mirror had been a present from her father when she was six. Even though its surface was not as clear as it used to be, Izera continued to use it every time she wanted to look at herself.

There was nothing wrong with her face. Nothing out of place. Izera had thought that maybe she looked as if she had a sickness. The woman's reaction had certainly hinted at something of the sort.

The strength of the episode also bothered Izera. This time, the waves had almost been too much to bear and she had felt very close to losing consciousness. She wondered what would have happened if the man had not come to her rescue. She was not certain his attention had made a difference, but she could not help but feel grateful nonetheless.

Izera hid the mirror and sat on her bed. She felt no trace of the palpitations now, but that moment on the road had been by far the scariest experience she'd had so far. Maybe she should mention it to someone. Telling her grandmother was not a good idea, given her current state, but maybe Sinea'Aradel? The Sinean would most likely know something about her condition, but Izera was not certain she felt comfortable enough bothering the Sinean with her health problems. In any case, how serious could it be? The episodes were farther apart than they used to be. Now, there was nothing left of the recent weakness. Izera felt great. In fact, she could not help but feel a bit silly about her worry. The only certainty was that she was uncertain if this was becoming a problem. Even if she talked to someone now, what proof would she have?

In any case, now was not the time to sulk. Izera's grandmother needed her.

She made her way to the elder woman's bedroom and found the bed empty. This could only be good news. Izera then proceeded to the back of the house. Her grandmother had brought the rocking chair back outside and now sat facing the Tower of Arh. The building stood far in the distance, north of the heart of Karo, as imposing as ever.

"You seem better," noted Izera.

Her grandmother took a sip from the cup in her hands and nodded. "They say that the whole valley was just trees when Arh decided to build the city," she observed.

“Did you know that Karo was the name of Arh’s oldest son?”

“I didn’t,” admitted her grandmother. “That must be a good story.”

“Sinea’Aradel told us the story,” said Izera as she took her usual place on the steps. “The duke Arh planned to rule Telfira from the island of Sondas. He divided the duchy in four counties, as he had four sons. Each was to govern their county and report to him. There was a dispute, as the sons wanted to choose the city where they would themselves govern. Arh would not have it. He chose the cities of Isra, Mara, and Rafil, but when he told his oldest son that he would govern from Arnisto, Karo said he would do no such thing. His mother, you see, had died in Arnisto. It was well known that Arh had a weakness for his oldest son.”

Izera looked at her grandmother.

“What are you drinking?” She had not forgotten about the remedy. Maybe her grandmother had prepared it on her own?

“Tea, girl. Only tea. Go on with your story.”

So the preparation of the remedy would come later. Izera made a note not to forget about it, if her grandmother did. She continued.

“The argument was not yet settled when Karo left to lead one of his father’s armies in the north. During his absence, Arh was inconsolable and torn about what to do. Finally, his adviser Eldamyr—a very interesting character by the way—made a suggestion. Eldamyr had a lot to do with the duchies as we know them, maybe more than Arh. Anyway, Eldamyr suggested that because no city was good enough for Karo, they should build a new one. It was a very ambitious proposal and not very popular. Which might be why Arh liked it so much. Arh vowed to find the perfect spot and propose it to his son when he returned. He chose the Ariam Bay area.”

It was easy for Izera to imagine the bay without Karo, with only trees and greenery. What a sight it must have been.

“I assume the story does not end well?” asked her grandmother.

“It does not. The son was killed in the last battle against Urum. He never made it back. His body was not given back. Arh was devastated and proceeded with the project anyway. He called the city Karo, and the first building to be built was his tower. Arh moved into the tower long before the city was completed. He never left it and died there. That is our version of the story, the Telfiran version. Sinea’Aradel said she doubted that was true.”

Her grandmother was nodding.

“What does Sinea’Aradel think?” she asked.

“That our history seems to have a liking for melodrama. There is no disputing that Arh spent a lot of time in Karo. There is enough evidence there. But ruling from Karo at the time would have been very impractical. To her, it seems more logical that Arh retired in his tower at a later age. He most likely ruled from Sondas for many years before moving his seat to Karo. There is evidence for this too, although our history seems to ignore it.”

Her grandmother was nodding some more. Izera was always surprised when seeing this facet of her grandmother, her interest in history and knowledge. There were not many opportunities to notice it.

“The lessons are good then?”

“Very,” said Izera. “I enjoy them greatly.”

The discussion ended there. Her grandmother returned to her tea. After a while, Izera stood and went to check on the flowers. When she returned, her grandmother was inside. She found her in the main room.

“Do you think I forgot what happened yesterday?” Izera asked. “You wanted help with a remedy.”

“Why do you think I am preparing the fire?”

Izera tried to take over, but her grandmother would not let her.

“What do you need me to do?” asked Izera, letting impatience ring in her voice. It seemed the good moment on the porch was gone and they were back to bickering.

“It is good that you ask,” mocked her grandmother, standing up, her round stomach popping out as she did. The fire was now alive in the pit. “There is a man in the Lighthouse District. You will find his shop by Rendil Creek, up on the ridge. It is an old house, hard to miss.”

At the inn, Izera had heard people talk about a man living in an old abandoned house, a merchant of sorts.

“You don’t mean Nantar, do you?” she asked.

“I do. You know of him?”

“Everyone knows of him,” said Izera, exasperated and nervous. Everyone warned against him. “He’s a crook, selling talismans that do not work, taking advantage of anyone he can.”

“That is him, yes. Since you know who he is, you should have no problem finding his place.”

“We can’t deal with him, Grandma,” said Izera, not mentioning that she’d never actually seen the man. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am, and it is what it is.”

At this, her grandmother put a hand against the wall. She looked particularly frail. Izera didn’t know if her grandmother truly had a moment of weakness, or if it was an act. She would not put it past her grandmother to fake it so she had her way.

“I will find him,” Izera said.

After all, she had said she would help make the remedy.

“Good. Take the purse on the table and buy all the vertex salts he has in stock.”

“Vertex salts?”

“An ingredient, girl. For the remedy.”

“And you want everything he has?”

“You heard right. Now be quick, or we won’t be done before midnight.”

Shaking her head, Izera made her way to the kitchen table where a small bag rested. She picked it up to find that it was terribly heavy.

“Where did this come from?” she asked.

“Just go,” said her grandmother in a voice similar to the one she had used with Izera’s mother. It caught Izera off guard. “And remember,” she added, “buy all the vertex salts he has.”

## Merchant

Nantar's house was exactly where Izera's grandmother had said. The shanty was placed on the top of a low cliff, hidden by thick branches, as if it didn't want to be seen. It was uninviting and shady, like those at the inn had said. A path left the main road and disappeared behind an outcropping of rocks.

Izera stood by the side of the road, uncertain what to do. From where she was standing, she could see the heart of Karo far to the west. The Artisan District was closest. Farther away was the heart of the city, formed by the Merchant and Militia districts. The Tower of Arh came next. The Shipyard District was last, located on the northern coast of the bay. Izera had a momentary pang as she remembered her father and how proud he had been of working there. He would bring her and her brother to the docks and point out which ships he had helped build. Her brother had been too young to understand, but Izera had been very impressed. Now the Shipyard District seemed part of another life.

The heart of Karo seemed far away. It certainly was a long walk and why some said the Lighthouse District should be its own village. Izera guessed the same could be said of the Shipyard District, although that was already mostly true, as the district tended to govern its own.

"Why are you standing there?" asked a raspy voice.

Izera twisted around and looked up. Just above the rim of the cliff, an old face looked down on her, pipe in mouth.

"I said, why are you standing there?"

"I am looking for the merchant Nantar," said Izera.

"What are you waiting for then? Come up."

The face disappeared, leaving behind a trail of smoke.

Izera left the road and followed the path. It was very narrow, overtaken by grass and long branches. Unkempt. At one place, Izera had to climb over rocks that had fallen from the cliff.

Finally, she reached the top and stopped. The path had been neglected, but the house was even worse. The shack was surrounded by an impressive amount of rubbish, some of which looked as if it had been placed there recently. The rest was covered by grass, moss, and mildew. A

powerful odor hung in the air, as if the whole place was rotting. It was mixed with the smell of tobacco, probably from the pipe.

“Come in,” came a voice. A hand was waving Izera in from an open doorway.

The place was terribly small, and Izera could not imagine someone living here. Maybe the shanty was mainly used to perform his shady business. The old man must have another place to sleep.

Izera hugged the heavy purse against her chest and made her way forward.

The stench was worse inside, assaulting the nose. The floor’s planks were rotting and falling in. Izera had to be careful where she stepped. Light streamed in from outside through a single opening, no window. A breeze came in and brought fresh air, which mildly helped.

“I have not been called a merchant in a long time,” said Nantar. He was seated behind a counter at the back. Along each of the other walls stood shelves filled with jars, containers, and small bags. Corners were infested with insects and cobwebs. Under one of the shelf, Izera was certain she saw a mouse or a rat. Its size hinted at a rat.

“I can’t stay here,” she heard herself say while she took a step back.

“Wait a minute,” the old man said. “You are Keina’s granddaughter, are you not?”

She stopped and looked at the man. Then she nodded.

“Your eyes gave it away,” he added.

There was something that sounded disturbingly like longing in his voice. Izera decided to let it go, but she wondered what relationship her grandmother might have had with this man in the past.

“She sent me to get vertex salts.”

“I suspected as much,” he said.

Without waiting, he disappeared behind a door that Izera had not noticed before. He came back out momentarily, a small bag in his hand.

“The usual,” he said, brandishing the bag toward her.

Izera didn’t reach out. Although her grandmother might trust this man, she still had reservations in dealing with him.

“Where are the salts coming from?” she asked.

Nantar looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“You don’t trust me, do you?”

Without saying a word, Izera continued to stare at the man.

“And you shouldn’t,” he said with a twisted smile. For the first time, Izera realized Nantar might not be as old as he looked. Life had not been good to him, leaving marks on his body and face. Izera hated that she felt a strange kinship with the man. “It is not important where the salts come from,” he continued. “Your grandmother needs them, and I am willing to let them go. That is the only thing you should be interested in.”

Still, Izera did not reach for the bag.

“Look,” he started and stopped. He put the bag of vertex salts down on the counter for her to pick up. He thought something over and his face changed. Gone was the cold and indifferent front. His features relaxed and he instantly looked like a very frail and vulnerable man. “Look,” he tried again, showing his hands in defeat. “I was once fond of your grandmother. I respect her still, probably more than I should. It is not healthy, you know. No, you wouldn’t know, not that it matters. This”—and he opened his hands to indicate the shanty around them—“is not really who I am. It is, yes, but...just take the salts.”

His voice had warmth to it, mixed with something new, something that felt like concern. The change in Nantar was shocking, and Izera thought this was the real him, whom most people never got to see. Nantar probably lived a very lonely life.

“This is not a place for a girl like you,” added Nantar. “Let’s get this trade over with.”

“All right,” Izera finally conceded, stepping closer to the counter, on which the pipe had been seemingly discarded. “But this will not be enough. Grandmother said she wanted all the salts you have. I doubt this is it.”

Nantar looked at her for a moment.

“All?” he asked.

“That is what she said.”

Slowly, he bowed his head and disappeared once more. When he returned, he had a small chest. He deposited it on the counter and grabbed the small bag. He emptied it into the chest. Izera caught sight of the falling grains; crystal-like, purple and white, sparkling strangely. Nantar turned the chest around for Izera to see. It was three-quarters full.

“This is all I have,” he said. “Take it.”

Izera reached for her purse.

“How much?”

Nantar looked down at the chest, then up at her. There was sadness on his face.

"I...do not worry about it," he said.

"No," protested Izera, "I can pay."

He shook his head and pushed the chest to her side of the counter.

"Take it," he said, his voice firm.

At that moment, darkness enveloped the room. Izera turned and saw that a large shape had appeared in the doorway, blocking most of the outside light.

A hand grabbed Izera's shoulder. She turned back toward Nantar.

"It is best you leave now," he murmured, hunched over the counter, his lips close to her ear. "Please, just take the salts. A present from me to your grandmother, for old times' sake. Now go."

He pushed the chest against her and came around the counter, putting himself between her and the customer. His demeanour had completely changed once again. His face was severe, his features sharp, almost angry.

"I will be right with you, Xander," he said. "I just need to complete this transaction."

The silhouette was impressive, and Izera felt scared. She could see he had a patch over one eye. Long thick hair fell over his shoulders. An axe hung from his belt, the light reflecting off its uncovered blade.

"Be quick," the man said. He stepped out and disappeared. Light returned.

Quickly, Izera took the chest. It was surprisingly heavy.

"This way," said Nantar, pulling her aside. "There is a side door."

Izera followed, the chest in her hands. A small door opened and Nantar stepped outside. Izera was more than happy to exit the place. The smell was starting to make her nauseous.

"Go," said Nantar, pointing toward the path. There was no trace of gentleness left. "Do not look back."

Izera took a step and then stopped.

"I can pay," she repeated.

Without a word, Nantar pointed down the path. Then he disappeared inside the shanty. Once the door was closed, it was as if it had never been there. As she started down the path, Izera could not help worrying about Nantar. Deep down, she also felt sorry for him.

## Potion

Back at her grandmother's house, Izera placed the chest on the table and set the purse of coins beside it. Her grandmother looked at the purse and sighed, trying to hide a frown. She was obviously bothered that Nantar had not taken the money. More like disappointed, yet not surprised. Just like the man had obviously cared for her, Izera's grandmother seemed to care for him.

"He said the salts were a gift for old times," said Izera.

"He would say that," said her grandmother. Slowly, she sat down on one of the kitchen chairs, her round belly looking larger than usual. She seemed particularly interested in the chair, taking her time, moving it just so. Was it possible she was embarrassed? "Start a fire," she said.

Izera knelt by the pit.

"I am curious," she insisted. "How did you two meet?"

Her grandmother looked away, and Izera expected her to brush the question aside or berate her for meddling. To Izera's surprise, she did not.

"A very long time ago," she started, without looking at Izera, "I had to choose between your grandfather and Nantar. It was obvious who had the brightest future. Poor Nantar. Even back then, he was lost. In those days, ships were built one after another, sold to the other duchies, including Varez and Urum. Nowadays, Varez's ships are superior to ours by a long mark. Your grandfather would be disappointed. He was a proud shipbuilder, just like your father. Nantar, on the other hand...let's just say he always attracted the wrong people. He still does. He used to say I was his only decent customer."

"If the shipyard was so successful in those days, why didn't Nantar work there?" asked Izera.

"He broke his knee when he was sixteen, during a horse race. There used to be a track north of the Tower of Arh, up in the fields. It is gone now, overgrown. Bets were at play during the races, obviously. Even then, dear Nantar was looking for quick and easy coins." The fondness in her grandmother's voice was uncanny, but Izera liked it. "The injury cost him everything. You couldn't work at the shipyard without a strong body."

"You still can't," Izera added bitterly.

The fire came to life.

“Hang the kettle,” her grandmother instructed. “While the water heats, get a red mandragora root, three nettle leaves, and a lily.”

Izera did as she was told. It was interesting that most of the ingredients were present in the garden. Maybe it was one of the reasons her grandmother was so particular about the flowers.

When Izera returned, her grandmother had not moved. She was lost in memories. The water was starting to steam. It took a few moments before the elderly woman escaped her past. She gave a brief smile and started to explain how to wash and prepare the ingredients. It was more complicated than Izera would have thought.

“Each step is important,” her grandmother kept repeating, criticizing how the root was cut, how the leaves were washed, how the lilies were ground. Seated at the table, Izera rapidly became frustrated with her grandmother. She wondered if the snappy remarks were a retaliation for bringing back a past her grandmother wanted to forget.

“I’m doing the best I can,” Izera said at one point.

“I know,” said her grandmother. “It will take time and some practice,” she added with a sigh. “That is good enough for now. Give me the water clock.”

Izera did so. The gadget in hand, her grandmother timed when each of the ingredients needed to be added to the boiling water. It started with the mandragora root. Then the nettle was added, followed by the lily a while after. Then, last, the vertex salts were added. Violet and white sparkles. From that point on, the water needed to be constantly stirred. By the time her grandmother told her to stop, Izera’s shoulders and hands hurt. The concoction had a poignant smell.

“Let it cool a bit, and add a tea leaf. It is more potent without, but at my age I don’t have the strength to stomach the taste.”

Izera complied, although the tea leaf did not seem to do much to improve the smell.

“What is this drink for anyway?” She had been wondering for a while now.

It took a moment for her grandmother to answer. She was still distracted, or maybe the weakness was returning. If that was the case, her grandmother was trying hard to hide it. Izera hoped the remedy would help.

“It is derived from an old tonic,” she explained. “The salts are a new ingredient, difficult to come by. I don’t know if it is true, but Nantar once said vertex salts are formed during blizzards in

the far north. He mentioned the Arctic Plains. In any case, the liquid invigorates, gives energy. I personally find it also helps me sleep better, but the medic who gave it to me said that part was in my head.”

Her grandmother pointed at the liquid, saying it was ready. Izera poured it into a small cup and passed it to her grandmother.

“Now, the moment of truth,” said the old woman as she brought the cup to her lips.

She took a small sip and instantly shook her head.

“Let’s try again.”

## Mixtures

It was long dark when Izera entered her bedroom and dived into bed. Her arms and hands hurt so much she wondered if she would be able to sleep at all. Her index finger hurt too. She had burned it in the steaming water.

Izera had tried to create the remedy three more times after the initial failure. Each time, it took almost a full hour to get the water boiling, the ingredients cut, and the mixture ready. Each time, her grandmother took a single sip, shook her head, and threw away the liquid.

“Why don’t you do it?” exclaimed Izera after the third try.

“I am too tired,” replied her grandmother. “Too old and my vision is not as good as it used to be.”

Excuses. Yet, to Izera’s dismay, her grandmother did look weak and pale. So Izera swallowed her anger and tried harder.

To no avail.

Thinking back, the most frustrating part was that Izera had no idea what she was doing wrong. Was the mandragora root not cut properly? Did that make a difference? Was it the quantity of the nettle? Or maybe the lily was not ground small enough? Was it the short breaks she took during stirring?

When she asked her grandmother, she only got vague answers. On the fourth try, Izera mistakenly added too much of the mandragora root.

“That is enough for tonight,” her grandmother had exclaimed, obviously frustrated herself by that point.

Without saying anything more, she stood and went to bed, without Izera’s help. She did not look ill at that moment, but then, maybe the frustration gave her extra energy. It took Izera several minutes to put everything away, after which she went to bed.

Now if only sleep would hurry and take her away.

\*

The next day, Izera worked at the inn until dusk. It was a particularly hectic day. The darkness of night surrounded Karo when she reached the house.

“Get the kettle ready,” her grandmother ordered as soon as Izera had one foot in the door.

“Can’t it wait until after supper?”

Her grandmother’s eyes held a shadow of sympathy. She was seated in the same chair as the night before. Her complexion seemed better, although it was hard to say. Her skin had always had a pale tint to it.

“Let’s try one time and then eat,” said the matriarch.

Sighing, Izera got everything ready and went at it once more. She sped through the steps and preparations, remembering almost everything from the night before. She only had to ask about the ratio of the vertex salts at the end of the process. Once it was done, she poured the contents in a cup, gave it to her grandmother, and let herself fall into a chair, taking a long respiration, not hiding her annoyance at having her supper thwarted.

“This is better,” said her grandmother.

“It is?” asked Izera, leaning forward, now excited.

“It is. There are still some small adjustments to make, but it is better. I feel better. Thank you.”

Izera went about preparing dinner with a jump in her step. She insisted her grandmother take a seat on the porch while she got everything ready. Her grandmother acquiesced, a twinkle in her eyes. It made Izera happy.

“Let’s try again,” said her grandmother as soon as the last bit of food was gone from her plate.

“Now?”

“I need more.”

“But there is still some left. I can heat it up.”

“No. It has to be freshly brewed.”

This was new information. Was the woman making this up as she went?

“Why?”

“It just does. Finish your food, and let’s try again.”

That evening was more gruelling than the first. Izera disliked this version of her grandmother. It helped Izera sympathize with her mother, providing an understanding of how impossible the matriarch could be. She herself had rarely had any major conflicts with the elderly woman, mostly because they stayed out of each other’s way. But if this continued, who could say?

Izera went through the whole process six times. She was getting quite efficient at preparing the ingredients. By the time she was done, it was past midnight.

“Why isn’t it working?” she asked at one point.

“I don’t know,” said her grandmother.

“Why don’t you want to try? Or at least get closer, so you can tell me what I am doing wrong.”

“You’ll get it right eventually,” had become her grandmother’s favourite answer.

But Izera didn’t get it right. When she asked what had been different with the remedy she had prepared before dinner, her grandmother said maybe it had not been right after all.

Later, exhausted in bed, Izera was starting to think that preparing the remedy was harder than the tasks she had to do at the inn. She was truly perplexed about what she was doing wrong. She was upset with her grandmother, but more importantly, she saw the whole situation as a challenge, one she was determined to conquer.

Could it be that her grandmother didn’t know what the remedy was supposed to taste like? Or that she had forgotten a step in the process? An ingredient? Maybe the quantities were off. Or worse, maybe the remedy was simply not what her grandmother needed. Maybe it didn’t work for her any longer. Her old body had somehow become immune or something.

Izera decided she would try one more day before questioning her grandmother further. She fell asleep thinking each step over, trying to find what she could do to make the measurements more accurate. The last thought she had before succumbing to sleep was that maybe the problem was not the preparations. Maybe it was the clock.

\*

Izera was up with the sun the next morning. She had another day at the inn coming, a full one, but she wanted to try the darn remedy at least once before leaving the house.

The first thing she did was inspect the water clock. She did not know much about its mechanism, but it seemed one of the levers didn’t move as well as it should. She found some cooking oil and rubbed it on the cogs. It was the only thing she could think of trying. If the clock was Sinean in origin, most likely it was working fine.

She got the ingredients ready. It was a good thing that each concoction didn’t require a lot of each component. It was also a relief that the vertex salts had not cost anything. The small chest

was still more than half full, but everything Izera had used so far had been wasted. It seemed her grandmother had known she would not be good at this.

She was in the final step, stirring the broth after adding the salts, when her grandmother appeared beside the table.

“What are you up to?” she asked.

“Preparing you a cup of remedy before the day starts,” said Izera.

“I see,” said her grandmother and started moving toward the back door. “How is it going?”

“Good, I think.”

Her grandmother nodded and went out.

A few minutes later, Izera brought her the cup. A light mist hung over the bay’s surface, and to the west, it seemed Karo was floating on clouds.

“It is good,” said her grandmother. “Thank you. You are getting better.”

The compliment was a good start to the day.

\*

It was another frantic day at the inn and Izera came home tired. Although the clock might have fixed her problems, Izera did not look forward to an evening of brewing.

“Same as yesterday,” said her grandmother. “I already have the water boiling, to give you a head start.”

“Not tonight,” said Izera. “Please...”

“I am not feeling good,” said her grandmother.

“You look all right.”

There was no sign that her grandmother was any different than she had been in the morning, or the day before. She seemed her usual old self.

“Are you saying I am lying?”

Izera put her head down and went to work. She reminded herself of the morning success but could not stop the frustration from returning. Her arms and the soles of her feet were tender. She needed a good night’s sleep. No matter what her grandmother said, she was going to bed early tonight.

She went through the preparations automatically, almost without thinking. She had a hard time concentrating and dozed off while stirring the salts. To her surprise, she realized that she was

starting to like the smell of the concoction. That could not be a good sign, although it made Izera smile.

She poured the mixture in a cup and went out the back door. Her grandmother was seated in her chair. The sight of her being there suddenly filled Izera with emotion. She could not say why.

“Here,” she said gently as she passed the cup.

Instead of going back to the steps, Izera collapsed in front of her grandmother, sitting on the porch, one foot dangling over the side, slightly touching the flowers below. She started to swing it back and forth, liking the tickle of the grass and flowers.

She kept looking at her grandmother and was taken aback by how close she felt to the woman.

“What is it?” asked the old matriarch.

“Nothing,” said Izera, but she was smiling.

“Don’t look at me like that. All weird.”

“I am not,” Izera said, turning to look at Karo and the bay. “This is good,” she added. “Life is not so bad.”

“I am happy to hear you say so,” said her grandmother.

Izera heard her grandmother take a sip and...the waves hit her.

They came suddenly, with a vigour that was instantly debilitating. The sensation shot up through the sole of her hanging foot, and Izera could almost give it a shape; a snake slithering inside her leg and all the way up to her chest, burning as it moved. Breathing became difficult, and Izera felt like she was going to vomit. She tried to stand, her foot now in the dirt, her hand pushing her up and away from the porch.

Then her grandmother appeared beside her. A hand, surprisingly strong, grabbed her shoulder. With the other, her grandmother brought the cup to Izera’s lips.

“Drink,” she said.

Izera started to shake her head.

“Drink!” repeated her grandmother, more forcibly.

She didn’t want to, but Izera slowly opened her mouth. The liquid rolled in, sloshed over her tongue. Izera swallowed.

Instantly, the pain and the nausea receded.

## Revelations

Silence had come to the porch of the house by the bay. A light breeze passed by, not daring to linger.

Izera was looking at the cup she held with both hands. She was shaking badly. It was difficult to grasp the significance of what had just happened. Slowly, she turned toward her grandmother, who was once again sitting in her rocking chair. Her grandmother's calmness was disturbing. The matriarch simply sat, looking away toward Karo, as if nothing had happened. Izera noticed that she had not used her walking stick to come to her or to get back to her chair.

"What...just happened?" Izera asked.

Her grandmother didn't seem to have heard the question. But Izera knew she had.

"Do not...be like that," Izera added, not liking the breaks in her voice. "What happened? Just now. What was that? How did you know?"

The old woman lifted her head high and grabbed her walking stick. Then she pointed it toward the floor, at a spot beside her rocking chair.

"Come closer," she said.

Wanting answers, Izera did as she was told. She was in a daze, her world once again unstable and on the verge of crumbling. The cup in her hands provided stability, and she kept holding on to it. Izera was just starting to develop a relationship with her grandmother, and now...this. A single event, and Izera felt like her grandmother was a complete stranger again.

As she took her place on the planks of the porch, Izera finally put the cup down. She could not help but feel like she had just ingested poison. Her grandmother was staring at her. In that moment, the elderly woman had an air to which the word *matriarch* seemed particularly appropriate.

"It is our family's curse," she said, her voice so solemn it gave Izera chills.

It was a powerful and disturbing statement.

"What...what are you talking about?" Izera asked.

It didn't make sense.

"It is only a passing dizziness," Izera quickly added. "It is nothing. It comes and goes. It always goes." Izera didn't know who she was trying to convince.

“Deny it as much as you want,” said her grandmother, “but it will not go away! It will only get worse.” Here, the old woman seemed to realize how bitter she sounded. She stopped and closed her eyes momentarily. When she opened them, she seemed calmer and apologetic. “Come, let’s be honest with each other. It is the least we can do. It is a great thing, honesty, and far too rare.”

Izera only stared at her grandmother.

“Do you really think these are flashes of dizziness?” the matriarch asked.

“I..” Izera had certainly tried to convince herself that the swells were nothing serious, nothing out of the ordinary. Her body telling her she needed more sleep. Better food maybe. It always passed.

Yet, Izera had had doubts. There was something about the way the episodes came, the way they invaded her, that felt like it was completely out of her control. *Invasion* was a good word. Izera realized she had attempted to bury those thoughts.

“I see this is difficult for you,” said her grandmother. “There is no shame there. I have been where you are. It started for me when I was six or seven. Maybe eight. I don’t know. What I remember is the fear. A powerful feeling of helplessness and of being alone in the world. The surges rapidly grew worse, and it became hard to hide them. At seventeen, I left the house and ran away. I had to move out, you see, because unlike you, I had no one I could talk to about my situation. You will not have to go anywhere, let me assure you. You are safe here, but in my day, you could get stoned to death if someone found out.”

Her words were like sharp knives piercing Izera in the chest.

Stoned?

Automatically, Izera thought of the woman on the road, of the fear on her face. *Terror* would be a better word, as if Izera had been afflicted with a plague. The woman had known what assailed Izera, if Izera herself had not.

She had heard stories about stoning. Izera tried to keep them at bay, but they would not be stopped. Not now. Stoning was banned in Telfira, in most of the Ten Duchies, although who could say what happened in the darkest streets of Karo at night? In Urum, it was still openly practiced, or so told the stories from merchants and bards who had been there.

The link between people being stoned and what was possibly afflicting Izera was a difficult one to admit. It meant... It made her... Could there be another explanation for her grandmother's words?

Izera did not want to ask, but had to.

"We are...witches?" she asked in a cracking voice, a voice she did not recognize.

"Oh dear," replied her grandmother, reaching out with a hand and caressing Izera's cheek. "We are not," she said. "Truly, we are not."

"But...what other explanation is there? I see it now. It comes from the ground. It creeps up even if I don't want it to, some kind of energy. Maybe...maybe it is only a question of time before it bursts out and scorches whatever I am touching at that moment." Izera stood, lifted her hands, and looked at them as if they were not her own. She started to walk away from the house. Her grandmother followed. "Is that what this is?"

Izera knew she was right. Earlier, her feet had dangled over the side of the porch, touching the flowers and the dirt. The rush had reached her through the soles of her feet. And on the road, she had stopped and knelt on the ground and reached for the flower. And...

The woman on the road must have known someone who had the same flashes of dizziness. A relative maybe. A friend. Someone she had most likely banished from her life. That was the only explanation as to how she could have known what Izera was experiencing.

The energy had never manifested itself outside of her body. If it had, the link to witches would have been so easy to make.

Witches...

They burned stuff; they altered things. In one story, those around the witch randomly started levitating. In another, a tree bent and broke because the witch was angry. The stories were rare and often dismissed. Izera was not aware of witches having flashes of weakness. Maybe because there was nothing particularly spectacular about the waves.

There had been no way for Izera to know, but it was different for her grandmother.

"You knew!"

Izera pushed her grandmother's hand away. She was now standing on the grass, her grandmother beside her. The world was spinning, the surface of the bay curving up on the horizon, the buildings of Karo pushed into the valley, the Tower of Arh about to tumble down the cliff.

In the chaos of her mind, another thought came to Izera, unbidden.

“It is your fault!” she exclaimed, pointing at her grandmother. “You...you insisted I take care of your garden. You forced me down there, to the ground. You awoke it in me!”

The accusation hit the elderly woman hard. She stopped, putting a hand to her mouth. The pain on the matriarch’s face was enough to pull Izera out of the daze she had been lost in.

“I believe... you may be right,” she said. “I did not know. I...did not think...” The old woman looked at her, a plea in her eyes. “You have to believe me that it was not intentional. I had hoped you would be like your mother, convinced myself you were.”

“Mother? What about Mother?”

“It is passed down, generation to generation, at birth. Sometimes it skips a generation. Your mother was spared.”

Her grandmother paused, as if the words had completely drained her. She looked terribly frail. Izera’s mind was clearer now, and she quickly guided her grandmother back to the porch, to her rocking chair. She herself stayed on the porch, looking down at the flower bed with distrust. She was disappointed. She liked gardening. It was reassuring, a place she could be by herself, a hobby she enjoyed.

“I just said we would be honest,” said her grandmother, “so I will be.” Izera turned around. The elderly woman was sitting up, her back straight. She was the matriarch again. “The truth is, for a while, I had convinced myself that you were also spared and I was terribly jealous. I liked the irony of you taking care of the plants required for my remedy. I had not made the association with the ground, although I admit I should have. Like I said, I never told anyone, including your mother. Keeping it to myself might not have been the best of ideas. It made me bitter. I am now trying to change that. I believe it is not too late. But you see, for the longest time, I believed the curse could be passed on by contact or proximity. So I stayed away from your mother.”

It was hard for Izera to reconcile what she was hearing with what her mother had told her. Yet the words explained much. Most of her life, Izera had felt resentment toward her grandmother, for wrongs she had never truly understood. In fact, she had continually fought against liking her grandmother and forced herself to hate her, based on her mother’s accusations. Now she had the other side of the argument. It didn’t make things easier. She understood her mother’s pain, and now she understood her grandmother’s actions. It had been an impossible situation, although it seemed her grandmother did not want to repeat the scenario once again.

“I recently learned it is not possible to pass it on that way,” said her grandmother. “For most of my life, I was scared and tried to ignore it. With old age, I either got braver or I didn’t care as much. You see, for many years now I have been trying to find answers. That is why I visit the library from time to time—or used to, I can’t walk as much anymore. But the books with the information I sought were not accessible to me. They are kept in restricted rooms, and as hard as I tried, I was never able to get access. Until Sinea’Aradel came, that is. She was of great help.” Izera had often wondered how her grandmother had come to know a Sinean. “Sinea’Aradel was not obligated to help. Even in Mah’Sinéa, our condition is not necessarily accepted. It is not feared as it is here, but rather they see us as children, untrained and ignorant. When the Vita comes—it is called Vita, the energy that comes to us from the earth—when it comes to us, we do not know what to do with it. In Mah’Sinéa, any newborn is trained to handle the Vita from the moment it leaves the womb. Here, there is no training, almost no knowledge. It is the fear, you see. It stops us from understanding it, from accepting it.”

The explanation brought the image of the woman on the road back to Izera. The woman had been scared, and although this was all terribly new to Izera, she was fairly certain she would not have been able to hurt the woman. She surprised herself by believing her grandmother’s claim that it wasn’t too late to erase her bitterness.

“So, Sinea’Aradel knows about you?” asked Izera.

“She does.”

“Does she know about me?”

“I never told her, but then, she must suspect.”

Indeed, there was not much Sinea’Aradel didn’t know. Izera’s first thought had been that if the Sinean knew, she would not continue teaching Izera. That had been her fear. But it was obviously unwarranted. The fact that someone like Sinea’Aradel would accept her, with the curse, went a long way in convincing Izera that maybe the situation was not as bad as she had initially thought.

“The remedy, it always works?” asked Izera.

“It does, especially since Sinea’Aradel changed the recipe. And you do not have to drink it when it is still hot.”

“I don’t?”

“No, not really, it is...” Her grandmother seemed ashamed to continue.

“Honesty, remember?”

Her grandmother sighed.

“Yes, yes, honesty. I might come to regret those words,” but she smiled as she said it. “I just wanted you to learn how to make the recipe. In case...for when I am gone.”

“Thank you,” were the only words Izera could think of saying. They were followed by a pang of annoyance, which Izera quickly replaced with a smile. “All that work!” she exclaimed. “I think I learned it. I dreamt about it just last night. I can’t get the smell and the whole thing out of my head!”

“Good,” said her grandmother, smiling herself now. “That is good.”

Then Izera came to another realization. Her grandmother had asked for all the vertex salts the merchant had. It might have been because she didn’t want Izera to have to deal directly with Nantar too often. Also, sending Izera showed her what to do in case more salts were required. All the other ingredients were in the garden, and Izera had maintained that for a while. So, really, she could go on and prepare the remedy for a very long time.

“How long have you known, for me?” Izera asked.

“Not long. A few weeks now. One night, I was checking on you—”

“You check on me? While I sleep?”

“I...do. Yes. You probably have no idea how close an eye I keep on you. After all, you are the only family I have left.”

How was it possible that until now, Izera had doubted if her grandmother cared for her? It was strange, really. All her life, this person had been almost a stranger, someone she practically liked to hate, someone she had labelled as the enemy. After all, this woman had ruined her mother’s life.

But now, here was another person entirely. Someone who cared. Someone who had sacrificed much to protect her daughter. Someone who had probably been misunderstood all her life.

“Go on,” encouraged Izera.

“One night,” continued her grandmother, “I went to your room and the Vita came while you were asleep.” It was good to have a name for the waves, thought Izera. “When it comes while you are asleep, it doesn’t wake you. Actually, most times, you will not even know it came.”

“How did you know, then? How could you tell?”

“When it comes to you, I can feel it. When it reaches out to you and I am close, like it was a few moments ago, the Vita reaches out to me also.”

Izera had so many questions. If her grandmother could feel the Vita when it came to Izera, would the opposite be true? Would Izera eventually be able to feel the energy when it came to her grandmother? Also, if it mostly came from the ground, how could it reach her in her sleep?

“Why does it do that, come to us, reach out to us? What is the Vita?” she asked.

“I do not know. I wish I had all the answers, girl. You will have to do some research on your own. What I know is that we are all part of this world and the Vita is a manifestation of our world. It reaches out to everyone, or so Sinea’Aradel told me, but not everyone is listening.”

It was a lot to take in, and although she felt better now, Izera could not quite push the fear away. There were so many unknowns.

“You now have a decision to make,” said her grandmother, as if she could see her hesitation. “The Vita is now only awakening in you. It will get more persistent, and the moments of dizziness will become stronger and more frequent. Some people will stare at you. Some will judge you, throw insults at you. Many will fear you. But here, in Telfira, in Karo, under my roof, you have a chance at a normal life.”

Her grandmother reached out for her walking stick and stood.

“You can let it rule you,” she said, “or you can take the remedy, take whatever help and advice I can provide, and build a life for yourself. The choice, and it is a choice, is now yours. Sleep on that tonight.”

Her grandmother started to make her way toward the door. Something suddenly occurred to Izera.

“Grandma,” she called. She could not remember the last time she’d used that appellation.

Her grandmother stopped by the door.

“How far did you go, to teach me the remedy?” Izera remembered the evening when she had come home and found her grandmother lying on the floor. More specifically, she remembered how her grandmother’s finger had tapped against the wooden planks. “How serious was that weakness you had a few days ago?”

“Well, I had a fever, didn’t I?”

And with a smile on her face, the matriarch disappeared into the house.

## Ending

Izera stood by the small window of her bedroom, still absorbing the shock of the revelations. Outside, night had fallen a while ago. Far away, Izera could see the bright beacon of the lighthouse that gave its name to the eastern district of Karo. Izera remembered that the warning fire used to be located on top of a hill. The hill itself was located too far inland and was deceiving. For that reason, the previous duke of Telfira had the lighthouse built. It was supposedly an imposing building, which Izera had never even seen. Maybe one day.

“I am a witch,” Izera said, unbelieving.

Saying the words out loud made her shiver. Yet, part of her liked the word and the fact that people were scared of witches.

For some reasons, Izera felt betrayed by her mother, her father, and all of her ancestors, but not her grandmother. There seemed to be no logic to her feelings. Maybe it was because her and her grandmother were the only ones left. The past few days, Izera had developed a new respect for the matriarch of her family. Probably even something akin to love. It still felt like betraying her mother to admit it.

All those years, the elderly woman had lived with the secret, taking the insults thrown at her by Izera’s mother, never saying a thing, never once slipping. It was a remarkable achievement, if not commendable. Izera preferred to know. She believed her mother would have too. She saw it as a privilege, but also, it was easier to know she was not alone. It was a terrible weight that her grandmother had shouldered.

Yet, a normal life, or the semblance of one, was possible. Her grandmother had done it, and the old woman’s words had been encouraging. It surprised Izera, but she felt as though she was now a step ahead of the previous day, even with the knowledge of her affliction. Her grandmother said she had a choice. She had insisted it was a choice.

“Sleep on it,” the old woman had proposed.

Izera doubted she would be able to sleep at all, but she agreed with her grandmother. After all, Sinea’Aradel taught the same. One could make of life what one wanted. Maybe it would not be an easy life. Maybe Izera would not be as happy as others. But her grandmother had lived a long

life of her own. She would have to ask about it—what was easy, what was hard. She felt she could ask now.

If Izera could improve on what her grandmother had, even a little, it was certainly a life worth living, wasn't it?

And Izera had a few distinct advantages. She had her grandmother, who could instruct her. She had her lessons, which provided knowledge and a new view on life. She had the remedy, improved upon by Sinea'Aradel.

The remedy.

Izera could only smile when thinking of the ordeal her grandmother had put her through. Earlier, Izera had been annoyed at the extent of her grandmother's ploy, but it didn't seem to matter so much now.

Putting her forehead against the window, Izera continued to look outside. Clouds now formed a floating, opaque canopy and promised a night of rain. Still, there was a hole in the clouds where stars were shining bright. There was a moon out there she had not even known existed.

Things changed.

Izera felt different, like a new person. She felt better than she would have expected. Maybe she didn't have a right to feel this good. But then, why not?

She had made her choice.

Tomorrow, she had another lesson with Sinea'Aradel. Izera was looking forward to it.

*Life goes on*, she thought.

The End

## About the Author



STEVE C. ESTON grew up in the small village of Trudel, in the province of New Brunswick in Canada. He is a manager in technology services for the federal government and currently lives in Fredericton with his wife, Leigh. For behind-the-scene info, excerpts and free short stories, you can visit him at: [www.sceston.ca](http://www.sceston.ca).

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