

Wind Algae

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April 2019

Dunes like waves all around.

Sand, sand everywhere.

Red like rust, or maybe white as snow.

How long have I been here? Was there even sand to begin with? I don't know. But the sand hills and dales are imprinted on my retina, carved in my memory. I know the sand, and it feels like it has eroded everything else.

Sand in my eyes, nose, mouth. Sand on my skin.

There is sand on me, in me. Slowly absorbing all that's left of my body.

I felt the heat of the sun once. I remember how it roasted my entire body, drawing the tiniest drop of water out of me. This pain is now but a dim memory. Was it so long ago, though?

Sometimes it seems like my presence is slowly fading, blending with the sand.

Mostly, I walk. Or maybe the dunes are just drifting around me. A lingering flow, so constant it could as well stop. I used to look at the sky, too. At the small holes in the veil of the night. But now, I just can't take my eyes off the sand. I can barely notice the difference between day and night anymore, if at all.

Sometimes, I perceive other things. Unsandy things. White foam floating in the blue desert of the sky. The smell of tiny living things – musky and sour. The echoes of a distant cry, weirdly pulsating in the white silence of the hills.

And I walk.

I walk.

Dunes like whales all around.

It strikes me suddenly,

They are alive.

How could I miss that? And for so long?

Now I see them, very clearly. The dunes are great whales, swimming in an orange sea. They have been here forever. I can sometimes see their fins, dripping dust, in a glimpse. They are magnificent.

The more I look at the whales, the more tangible they become.

I can now sense their soft smell, and hear their clear tunes, like a lullaby.

I can now feel them gliding alongside with me.

Isn't it what I was looking for in the first place? Somewhere to drift away, forever.

I feel like joining them, but the more I try, the further away they move.

So I open up to the sand. I let it in. I eat the sand and drink the sand, embrace the sand. I become the sand and the sand becomes me.

I am the sand.

I am.

–

I remember the day I turned thirteen.

I had an odd dream, from which I woke completely parched. I would have drunk the whole bucket of water of my room, still half-asleep, hadn't Qia heard me and brought me back to reality.

We then had a very silent bath – the two of us. Maybe because it was still so early, or because we both knew how decisive this day was going to be. I was becoming an adult. I was to leave the house alone. I think Qia was very worried about it.

The sky was clear outside – some stars still visible above the mountain tops.
I was barefoot, and I have a vivid memory of the moist sand against my skin.

I also remember imagining what it would feel like to climb up one of the wooden pillars in the Lake. Down beneath, I would have seen the village: the Tortuous Tree in the middle, the clay houses – minuscule piles of silt on the lakeside. It was lost in a valley – dark mountains carrying shreds of white mist.

Far away, where the sun rises, I would have seen the Spirit Isle, a green islet surrounded by bright turquoise sea. Just thinking of it filled up my nose with the smell of the forest – the zesty fragrance of the spirits' magic.

In the opposite direction, I would have seen the Mountains-Beyond, resting behind stretches and stretches of forest. Right beside them, the blue plains, with their unique azure tint. And even further behind the plains, there would be like an orange shade to the horizon: the Juhu desert.

Just imagining this splendid view made me euphoric.

I was thirteen, and by the end of the day, I would become a gaetherer: everyday, I would climb up the pillars and gather the algae that fed, covered and healed everybody in our village. I felt my stomach simmer with excitement. I had been waiting for this day since I had been three years old.

It was the first unclouded morning of the Wake, and nature exuded a warm, leafy smell. The passage ceremony was very sober. I was to meet with the fifteen gaetherers of the village, when they were about to climb. An elder was there: Eqion gave me my outfit. Bai, a gaetherer, helped me adjust it.

Bai was quite tall, and had the very blond, almost white hair characteristic of all the native villagers. As the oldest gaetherer, she was to be my mentor.

When the sun started pouring a white light over the trees on the hills, all the gaetherers stood around Bai, Eqion and I, in a circle. They knelt to the ground.

Eqion pronounced a prayer in an ancient tongue, so ancient even spirits can understand it. I think it talked about how gaetherers are the link between Ae – the earth – and Ea – the Lake. I was facing with Bai, and had trouble keeping my eyes on her steady, silver irises.

Once the prayer was over, everyone remained silent. Nature had never been so loud. The Lake's whispers turned into a distinct – inhuman – voice, birdsong seemed to resonate through the whole valley, and every forest crack became ever more intense. I couldn't help startling a few times, and I remember noticing the light of a smile in Bai's eyes when it happened.

After the sun became visible above the mountains, Bai put her left hand on my shoulder, and bent. We pressed our foreheads against each other. And so, our bond was sealed. Without a word, everyone stood up. Bai whistled, and all the gaetherers headed to the Lake, except for us.

The outfit I was given was a bit too large: I was shorter than any thirteen year old in the village. Qia told me children from the South were often smaller. Such details almost never bothered me, but that morning, it made me feel like I was not in the right place.

All gaetherers wore long and close-fitting sleeves, made of a dark fabric, impervious to water and algal toxins. Since mine was a bit too big, I had strands around my wrists, neck and ankles, to prevent any liquid from getting in. Over this protective coat, we had traditional short-sleeved kimonos, with very large canvas pockets on either sides of our belts.

Bai handed me a pair of gloves. “You are allowed to wear them for your first week,” she said, with a faint smile. “After that, you’ll have to get your hands used to the poison. Some of us just never remove them, because their skin can’t take it. We’ll see how it turns out for you.”

She then sat on the ground, inviting me to do the same. It took me seconds to understand, because I was so captivated by the other gaetherers – dark silhouettes crawling up the slender pillars.

Once I had imitated her, she picked a wooden recipient out of her pocket.

“This is a dry ointment, for your feet. It’s gonna protect them a little. But it will still hurt a lot, for days at least,” she said in a very neutral voice. “Never wear anything on your feet, even when you’re not climbing. It would prevent the toxins from evaporating.”

I remember being very surprised by how cold her hands were when she showed me how to spread the balm. She explained lots of things, but I kept missing details because I was both so excited and so nervous.

When we started to climb, after swimming a few minutes in the frozen waters of the Lake, I felt a little bit dizzy. Bai said we wouldn’t go very high for the first few days – there were fewer dangerous flowers near the surface. She taught me how to avoid slipping on the broad wooden rings that allowed us to ascend. I already knew most of the species that were collected by the gaetherers, but she found countless minutiae about how they had to be cut off, where you shouldn’t touch them, how they reproduced, how they were supposed to smell...

I was literally overwhelmed, and avidly absorbed all of her knowledge.

I have very lively memories of everything that followed. All the algae seemed ever so colorful to me. Down in the village, we would only see the “interesting” part of them, often dried up or torn apart by the transportation. I was also stunned by how life was thriving up there, behind every leaf and shoot. There were small insects, all sorts of snails, and myriads of swift shadows I couldn’t identify. I asked Bai about them. “Spirits,” she said, with no further explanation.

I would later understand that I had to take in such a great amount of information in a few weeks, I couldn’t have any distraction such as learning about spirits. I could not really see them anyway – very few people have this ability. Bai ensured to keep the flow of knowledge steady and high, even for my first morning. I think she didn’t want me to have any bad surprise later on.

At some point, something strange happened. I was looking at the blue plains far away, and suddenly noticed how visible the desert had become. Its ochre tint was glowing on the horizon.

I can hear it. Somebody is calling my name.

An inner voice from afar.

I snapped back to reality. I had let go of the handles Bai had exhorted me to keep my hands on. I gasped, and caught them back. Bai was way above me, and seemingly hadn’t noticed anything.

I had no clue about what had just happened, and considered telling my teacher I wanted to go down for today. I was about to do so, when she urged me to join her.

A thought hit me in the guts. If I told her I wanted to stop, would I be able to continue as a gaetherer? Wouldn't I be considered as too weak? My blood was thumping in my ears as I ascended toward my master.

"Are you alright?" she asked, after minutes of explanation about grilids and their burn healing properties. "Are you in pain?"

My feet did hurt a great deal. No matter how I stood, the part that was in contact with the wood felt like it was on fire. Despite my gloves and the headscarf that protected my face, my hands and lungs also stung a lot.

"I'm fine," I said. "It does hurt, but I can continue."

She stared at me for a while. Was it how I was to be tested today? Did I have to endure the pain without complaining?

"Don't dare to act boldly, little thing. The Pillars won't forgive such behavior."

The gray look she gave me released a frozen flow that ran through my entire spine. I tried my best not to shiver, and nodded. But what did she mean? If I was too weak, would the Pillars still accept me?

The sun was at high noon. We usually were to stay up until dusk, but Bai had told me that as a new gaetherer, I could go down for the Temple hour, in the middle of the afternoon. I didn't know what had happened earlier, but I decided to go on. I had been disoriented for a few seconds, that was all. Now, I was fine, and perfectly conscious.

I didn't black out anymore during the few hours that followed. I avoided looking at the horizon as much as possible, especially the desert. Sometimes I was almost hearing a voice in my head, like it was right there in a corner of my mind, but muted.

When I climbed down, with Bai, I was exhausted. Once we reached the lakeside, my whole body was both on fire and numb from pain. The ache had propagated from the soles of my feet to my whole legs, and the bottom of my back. Had Bai not been there, I would have just crashed on the sand after swimming back to the shore. She helped me sit back up, and I think she talked to me a bit. I was feeling lightheaded, and had trouble staying awake. Strange images and sounds appeared to me, intertwining with reality. Almost like a dream.

While Bai untied my kimono, the dark sand beneath me got hotter and hotter. *Orange, everywhere. Can you see it? Can you hear it hum? I never get sick of it...* "nd always let an experienced gaetherer check it for you," said Bai's voice, almost inaudible. "If it is too loose, you might hook yourself on some objects by mistake."

She had finished removing all my clothes, and she handed me a dry kimono. With her help, I stood up, and started putting it on. It was made in a light-colored fabric, and had fine green embroideries to it. Gaetherers always wore delicate clothes, especially once the Wake wiped out any trace of cold or snow. I was standing still, but had the curious feeling that I was floating.

"How are you feeling?" Bai asked.

I tried to answer, but couldn't say a word. I looked at my teacher. Her features suddenly faded. Her face eroded to a red, stone-like oval. It seemed to crumble in the wind, releasing dark orange waves. An oddly strong tone resonated through my skull. *Everything around you is the Sand. Don't fear it; the Sand is in you too. The Sand will never let you down, even if the entire world does.*

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It has been two years now. My memories of that time are not as vivid as they used to be. After the odd images that came to me that day, I fainted, only to wake up a few days later. I just remember having strange and strong dreams, but I completely forgot about them. All I can recollect is an orange sky, and the taste of salt.

I am fifteen, since yesterday. I am now a real gaetherer; the equal of Bai, and all the others. I don't wear gloves anymore, and I always go barefoot. Four days out of five, I climb up the Pillars before sunrise, only to descend at dusk.

I am very happy with how I live. I spend my days in the open air, in close contact with the algae and its inhabitants – with life. I've turned out to be quite solitary as a gaetherer. Most of the time alone on the Pillars, I relish nature swarming around me.

On Restday, I often see Ai, my childhood best friend.

Ai is now a braider, and crafts fabrics of all kinds, with algal fibers as a base. The coarse plants used for this purpose are not found on the Pillars, but rather in the shallow waters of the lakeside, so I don't know much about them. Ai is still glad to hear anything about the Lake's flora – especially if it is a story or a precise depiction. We have both always felt very close to nature, since we were kids. We used to play in the woods a lot, near the Great Gravel – our favorite spot.

I was the one who knew all the names, while Ai was the best at disappearing in the woods, and at predicting how the Forest would react to things. In fact, I always thought of Ai as some surprisingly human-looking Tree Spirit, rather than as a proper human.

But this Restday, Ai has no time for me. The Wake Ceremony is approaching, and requires lots of new outfits each year. A few days from now, all the villagers will celebrate the end of the mists, and the beginning of months of sun and abundance. This event usually fills my heart with a warm feeling. Today, it makes me kind of melancholic.

I remember how simple all of this used to be. I was to become a gaetherer, so close to the Lake and Nature. The stories about our ancestors fascinated me. About Elder Tzov – the person that had discovered the first edible algae, and started to live on the shore where the village currently stands – or about Migha – the first gaetherer, builder of the first Pillar. I wanted to be like them.

Now, I find it harder and harder to keep seeing things this way. The connection of most gaetherers to the Lake is very different from mine, and from my feeling for the Forest. When I walk in the woods, or stay all night on the Pillars, I am where I belong. I would spend my life up there if I could. The people that I now admire are the Great Hermits, a dozen of villagers that left the village to live with the Spirits.

There is Gia, a powerful wooddress who crafted incredible tools – some still in use today, a hundred years after she made them – and who vanished in the Forest. “To prevent the Darks from swarming, I shall leave for the Mountains-Beyond,” is what she apparently said before leaving. She had already spent months alone in the Forest, when she was still a child, and no one doubted her.

There is also Eqiba, who was found in the woods, at two years old. He was always very close to the Spirits, and while he was here, unexpected links emerged. Spirits showed up to exchange goods with him, the gaetherers' and woodresses' techniques were improved to be less destructive, unknown plants and magic were discovered. He left the village forty years ago, and returned many times. The last time he was here, nine years from now, he was on his way back from the Juhu desert.

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For a few months now, I've been worried by my mysterious dreams. Most of the time, they are very simple: I walk, seemingly forever. Everything is orange around me – orange and liquid. And there is this music, a faraway hum that still haunts me hours after I woke. The dreams sound very real, so real they sometimes blend with actual events in my mind. I'm very afraid of spacing out, especially when I climb. It happened to me on a few occasions during the last Mists, but never on the Pillars.

I have this other dream at times: I am on a Pillar, and a spirit comes to me. I don't understand what it says, and start panicking. The image then blurs, only to sharpen while I'm falling, straight to the tough surface of the Lake. I then descend slowly in the dark freezing waters, entangling in the weeds, and remain there for hours, still fully awake.

These dreams don't feel like mere dreams, but I don't have any idea about what else they could be.

One day, I mentioned them to Ebilion, an Elder with a great knowledge of the spiritual world. He chuckled, and told me that it was common for spirits to send messages through dreams, and that I shouldn't be frightened. "Well, except if you repeatedly die or see people die in them," he added while I was leaving, which didn't reassure me.

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And who are you, little sparrow, flying above these deep waters? Trying to belong in the flow, among these northern villagers... How long will you cover your eyes, lose yourself in their hopeless ties? I sometimes wish you'd finally see... Come with me and walk on the Sea.

—

I see you in my dreams each night, climbing up the giant dead trees of your Lake. I see you, little bird from the mountains, whispering to the Spirits of Light in the darkness of your valley. At times, I can also notice that you're here – a somewhat liquid presence, and the feeling of faint strands of grass brushing my hands and feet.

And I'm curious: what is it that you're thinking, what is it that you know? Am I just a dream, an illusion to you? What about this sad lullaby you're humming when you're climbing, alone, on these stark columns of wood? Do you hear the Spirits' voices when you glance at them with this wavering smile of yours?

I think I remember the day I met you. I was in the sharp light of the Sea, and you were a dim, damp corner in the back of my head. Was it just a hallucination? Are you a ghost, gaetherer of Algae?

—

I wake. I am awake. Am I?

I open my eyes and listen.

Cold and damp underneath. Dark lace of branches above.

Where...? In the Forest? My head hurts. A distant tone remains in my temples. I recognize the music of the visions. It has been part of my daily life for a moment. Still, I can hardly recollect anything of what happened before I just woke.

I try to sit up, but the pain in my skull starts narrowing my sight, and I lay back down. Hopeless for now. I start paying a closer attention to my surroundings.

Judging by the outside light, it is probably noon. It looks like I'm in a rather dense part of the Forest; probably low in the valley according to the gigantic trees around me. The smell of magic is very strong,

almost pungent. I've never been to such a place before, and I know how hazardous it is: I've been told fairytales about people dying in the Forest since I was a toddler. In fact, my survival solely depends on whether the Spirits that I meet like me or not.

Suddenly, it strikes me how vulnerable I am. There are these immense trees around me, the trunks of which teeming with life: green ants, giant cockroaches, dragonfly flocks, blazing mosses, vapor slimes – more species than I could ever retain. These trees are thousands of years old. They are the fingers of Muqa, the most powerful Spirit of all – the soul of the Forest. And I, Niqao of Algae, foundling of the South Wind Clan, Gaetherer of Ea's Lake... am just a minuscule assembly of flesh and bones, a bug lost in the sea.

I've been walking for some while. I think animals and Spirits have been hiding from me, fleeing whenever they perceive me. At times, I hear leaves rustling, in the distance. For the rest, only silence. Unrelenting silence filling up my ears. Sunlight is always very dim in dense parts of the Forest. During the Mists, even on clear days, you can only see what's ahead for a few hours near noon.

I have reached the lowest point in the valley, but there's no water stream. This is bad. How am I going to decide in which direction I have to head? After much wavering, I follow the hotwind, to the right. It is rather uncertain, but such winds usually come from the desert. Between the desert and my village, there's nothing at all, so it is more secure this way.

The shapes around me slowly tarnish in the rising night. My throat feels dry, and my stomach cries for food. Tomorrow, I'll have to lose some time mushroom-picking. I huddle among huge roots, covering myself up with humus and mosses as much as I can. I might die of hypothermia, but I'm not scared.

"I feel you," says the voice. Her voice.
"Bai?" I hear myself asking.
The name reverberates between the trunks. Everything is still pitch-black, except for the few luminescent plants, growing here and there. A dream. I lay back down. At least I'm not dead yet. But it comes back.
"I feel you, Niqao," it says, *"don't hide from me."*
I close my eyes and try to fall back asleep.
"I know you can hear me. It's the first time we have got this close."
"What do you mean, this close?" I whisper.
"I mean we were never connected that well."
"Are you the one who did this to me?"
"Who did what?"
"I am lost in the Forest. I'm probably going to die."
As I say those words, a lump forms in my throat. Maybe because I hadn't quite realized what it meant before? I won't see the Lake anymore, the Pillars, Ai, Qia, Bai, the other gaetherers. I might never come back home, my soul never being given to the Lake.
"Calm down, algae bird. Why would you die? Can't you take care of yourself, where you are?"
"It's the Spirits. They're going to kill me."

A laugh resonates in my head. In a flash, I see her. The person behind the voice. Her skin is dark and her eyes blue-green, just like mine. She looks old. Her clothes are very different from anything that I know. Warm-colored, bright, coming in a complex entanglement of fabrics.

“Are you serious?” she asks.

Her image fades out, leaving the dark sky of the Forest in front of my open eyes.

“You come from here, Niqao. Your parents lived in the Shonger Forest, in the South. They were raised in the woods, under the branches of giant trees. Your blood is filled with Spirits’ magic, and none of them would hurt you. Stop closing your eyes, little sparrow. Do you really not see anything in front of you?”

To stop closing my eyes? What does she mean?

In front of me, there’s only night.

“Forget what you were told about Spirits. Forget what you think you know about them. Keep nothing but the warm feeling you have, when you look at the ones who live on the Pillars.”

I stare at the darkness. This place is so different from the Lake... But I am in the Forest, right? The Forest I love running in, with Ai. My Forest.

Suddenly, a red light turns on in front of me. So feeble, it seems like it is flickering.

The presence is getting stronger. I can almost see the aura.

The ground under me toughens gradually. What is happening? It’s as if I were falling asleep, and dreams were slowly pervading the real world. The light intensifies, and a stone wall appears. The wall grows until it surrounds me entirely.

Everything looks red, orange and brown.

The aura of the child slowly appears in the middle of the room. It started with just a few blue shreds of light, that now assembled to create a human body shape, lying on the sandstone.

She is there. The voice.

Niqao is not like I imagined. Small, slender muscles, and a very serious, almost stern, expression. But the blue light dancing beside my bed is wonderful: this child’s link to the spiritual world is strong.

It is the woman I’ve seen in a flash, a moment ago. She is still wearing this strange outfit of hers, seemingly made out of dozens of pieces of fabric. She is looking at me. Her green eyes stand out in the dim red light, amidst the dark wrinkles of her face.

She is sitting on a heightened couch, like a bed on a table. I can’t take my eyes off her silent stance. Who is she? I realize this person has never been a dream to me, and that deep down I’ve always wanted to know where she came from, and why she had appeared to me.

The light wavers a little. Our link is probably going to weaken soon.

“Listen, Sparrow. There’s no time for explanations now. All I can tell you is that you are not bound to perish in the Forest. At least that is not what the Spirits want. Open your eyes and ears and skin and nose, and feel the Forest. Trust yourself. Trust what you know.”

I approach the aura.

“But who are you?” I ask, as she walks towards me. My hearts starts pounding in my throat.

I smile. I only realize now how stressful all of this must be for this child.

“My name is Jal. Jaleen, Daughter of the Southern Winds.”

She puts her thumb on my forehead. Although my eyes were already open, I open them again, on endless obscurity.

—

When I wake up the next morning, everything has changed.

I am still in the same place, I can see it: the same two giant roots stand beside me, the ground is tilted the same way, there is this same red mushroom on the trunk that is on my right. But everything else has transformed. The mist has lifted, and the air is lighter, as if it flowed better.

And, more importantly, the Spirits have left their hides.

Floating far above me, myriads of little flames, illuminating the dark woods. I can't help smiling; it's the first time I've seen Spirits, and I used to think I wasn't gifted with this ability. I have read about them, studied all the documents we have at the village about how they live and what we know about them. No description was even close of what it is to come across such a landscape.

Most of them look like colorful fireflies. We call them all "snippets", although each of them is quite unique – in size, color, smell, and voice. When they float, they emit a distinctive crackling. A flock of snippets passing near you sounds like a flying bonfire.

There are also giant winged snakes. Their pale, ethereal silhouettes slither silently between the trunks. I have never seen any drawing depicting such creatures, but they are probably the nacre dragons Hermit Eqiba said he loved following. He reported that everything gets colder around them, and that, when they die, humus freezes around their corpses for days.

Something tickles my ear.

A mushrymp has crawled down from the tree and now stands on my shoulder. Mushrymps are small translucent animals that are also found near the village. They have a round, headless body that can be held in the palm of a hand, and up to eight legs. Their grey and brown skin is very soft, like a pebble.

I try to catch the creature to put it back on the tree.

"Human is eyes," says a voice in my head.

I startle. Is this a Spirit talking to me? It is not Jaleen's voice.

"Eyes is blind."

The mushrymp taps my upper cheek with one of its legs.

"See is learn."

"Is that you, talking?" I ask.

"Mush is yes." the voice answers – or, should I say, the mushrymp.

I have never heard of talking mushrymps, not even in the Hermits' records. What on earth is happening to me? Does it have a link with what Jaleen said about my origins? I've been taught that the people of the South lived in the Forest, and I know that my parents came from there. But I never met them, and somehow, I never put these two facts together to deduce that my direct ancestry probably had a very different lifestyle from mine. How come I've never asked the other Southern villagers about all of this? Are they all able to hear the animals' voices?

I shake my head and sigh.

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I start walking again, in the same direction as yesterday. After a few steps, the mushrymp tells me *"There is home,"* and it wipes out the remaining fear in my chest.

–

I walked in the Forest for a few days. I tried to talk to Jaleen, many times, but it didn't work.

I still have visions during the night though – they have even gotten stronger since I've been here. Is it the ancient magic that lies in here? It is hard to say, because a lot of things have been changing about me. My senses have sharpened dramatically. I can now detect Spirits very precisely, just by the smell. My muscles have gotten longer and thinner, and my skin much paler. I have also recovered sensations in my hands, that used to be numb from the algae toxins.

I have discovered dozens of new species of animals and plants – some still unrecorded at the village. And every day, I spot animals doing things I had never heard of, or notice a very common plant in an

unlikely place. Once, I came upon a huge bald deer, sunbathing in a narrow clearing. Its antlers were adorned with an ample coral-like lichen that shimmered like crystal.

The mushrymp is still sticking along with me. His name is Mush – or at least this is how he calls himself. I now grasp what he says pretty fast, despite his odd sense of grammar. He sometimes disappears for a day, refusing to tell me where he went. “*Mush is back*” is his only answer. He also doesn’t want to talk about why he has been following me all this time. Once, he said, “*Niqao is need*,” but I couldn’t tell what he meant.

I still can’t figure out how I ended up so far from the village. I have been stepping on dead leaves for nine days now. This means that either someone carried me to this distant place, or I walked this far without remembering any of it. If only I could ask Jaleen, she would tell me whether something strange happened before the incident...

I try not to dwell on this mystery. All I can do is walk, anyway.

At some point, I discover two red roaks – red-leafed shrubs planted by couriers to find their way in the woods. The closest ones that point to my village are a week’s walk...

It has been six days since the roaks. I have been praying Ea all the time, muttering the mantras of the Lost Ways. Mush sometimes complains about it, repeating things like “*Silence is good*,” or “*Fear is loud*.” It makes me laugh, every time.

If my estimations are right, I should reach the village by the end of the day.

The water stream that runs down the valley is getting larger. All my dark thoughts evaporate as sunlight strengthens: the trees around me are spacing out.

“*Here is home.*”

–

The sand, all around.

Today, the Desert smells like iron. The next whistlewinds will come today, or tomorrow.

I am reaching the village. It is so low below the ground level that, from here, it just looks like a white stretch in the hills. A mirage.

The masons started building back the counter walls that got broken during the last windstorms a moon ago. They look like small ants, bustling a few millimeters away from the roofs.

This was a good day. I caught two sulfur-tailed scorpions, and a young sleep snake. Sleep snakes have become very rare these years, and the ones we breed don’t lay as many eggs as they used to. I think it is because their father Spirit has disappeared – I haven’t seen him in at least five years.

I climb down the ladders, slowly. Children are playing a block away. I recognize the laughter of Nena’s daughter, reminiscent of her father’s. When I arrived here, almost dead, I spent days and days in a bed, unconscious. I was at the house of Nena, an apprentice healer at the time. Nena is a very joyful man, always looking on the bright side of things. And his laughter... you can’t have a conversation with him and not hear it at least a few times. This sound is one of my first memories here.

I reach my home, on the outer skirt of the village, in the upwind part of it – the part that takes in the bigger damage when the storms come. I don’t care much about that anymore. I know I will always be a stranger to loads of people here, and have accepted it.

Sand villages regularly get completely ravaged by the tempests, but this one has been there for a few decades now, never being completely wiped out. People still pray every day for the Desert not to change its mind.

I love my house a lot. I have achieved growing a lot of plants over the years, and it sometimes feels like a chunk of Forest, right here. There are no Spirits, though: no desert Spirit would be satisfied with such a cramped place.

Today, Niqao hasn't talked to me at all, which is quite unusual. Since we first met and saw each other a few moons ago, when he got lost in the woods, we have developed some kind of friendship. Our link got stronger. We can now have long in-mind conversations, and in-dreams ones when the Winds meet the Moon.

I think Niqao missed something important. I could become this figure for him. Maybe because at the Algae village, there is no strong parenting system. Or because we are both lost people from the South.

The last time we talked, Niqao told me about Erlinien, a Spirit he had just acknowledged. He explained she was a Claythorn from the West Shaouf Forest, and that she was shaped like an old bald deer with all kinds of mushrooms and lichens intertwined in her hair and antlers.

The discovery of the Spirits' world was something very important to Niqao, I can feel it. As if the child had become more balanced, and more complete. Am I assuming too far? I have been in such a pain when I had to leave the Shonger Forest. I was devastated for years and years of drifting. And then, to forget the grief, I took root in here – a place with no tree.

Still, it's probably a good thing we met and he opened his eyes. The spiritual side of Niqao was in such distress, before we met. It even took over him, losing him in the deep Forest. Whereas now, when I see him at night, he chats with mushrymps, races with lullaflies, dances with snippets.

And every morning, when I wake up in the dry colors of my sandstone basement, my dreams leave me with some green wetness in a corner of my eyes, and a luminous, zesty smell.