

MYRISTICA FRAGRANS

The herbs are gone. Obliterated. So are his mother tinctures. His apparatus, the aludel for condensing vapours, his moor's head stile, the bronze mortar and crucible, his copper alembic, all his glass, flasks, pipets. [add to Weeds and Worries] Everything. Gone. Jonathon is sitting in bed. Nestled in among eiderdown pillows and doona; a warm shawl around his shoulders. Rose sits with him. She's told him about the explosion, that his house is completely destroyed. Told him about the crater where the herb beds once were. Quietly, calmly, in simple words as clear as spring water, she speaks of death. Carol-Ann. Martha. Campbell. Harriett Allelon. Ashes and Dust.

We are waiting with her, letting him take his time. We are closer to him now that he so nearly crossed the slim threshold between his world and ours. He is still so pale and thin. His grief is so strong it nearly tears sinew from bone.

His voice, grave and grim with sorrow strains, stretched thin under the mass of grief, his words brittle, his breath broken. And still his burning sense of responsibility drives him beyond his own loss. How can I help now, he asks, how can I heal the hurt, calm the panic, the darkness that will shroud their hearts once they find out the truth, how can I lift it? How? We draw back. We have no answer. Jonathon's eyes brim and tears and spill. Rose doesn't go to him. Her gift is space for his sorrow. We wait. He weeps.

We know better than to harry Rose. She has kept her thoughts to herself since they rescued the old man, since he started, in frantic, fevered, half-conscious ramblings, to speak of that place. The cold haunted sense of it, the smell, like rusted iron, he'd say, like rusted iron, over and over, until he regained consciousness. Then he'd beckoned Rose to lean down and whispered *blood*.

We were with him when he found the strength and the words to describe how he'd followed Fitcher. To the edge of the chasm. How he'd returned after the barbeque ... Rose had asked him to stop. Wait till tomorrow, she'd said. Just one more day of rest. Wait. If you are strong enough, we'll call the others. We need to hear this together. In human time that was yesterday.

Jonathon wipes the palms of his hands over his face. Draws a shuddering breath and turns to Rose, asking what am I going to do? There isn't enough time to regrow the herbs ...

Tell them, she says.

What, he asks, tell them what?

Jonathon looks so perplex she nearly laughs, tell them herb stories, tell them why they heal ...

Rose has gone out. For a while he sits very still. Then he rings the small brass bell she left by his bedside. Very gently at first so that it only tinkles. More confidently after a polite wait and then, when no one comes, vigorously, cling-clanging until Marg, hands over her ears, rushes into the room wanting to know where the fire is.

Jonathon has nearly spent what little energy he has, but he's asking for pen and paper and immediately starts writing telling Marg it's only a start, but she needs to get the spices from Tam's house, that's where he'd taken them before. She knows what he means, before his offspring came, before he fled. And the other ingredients, he is saying, urgency in his voice, make them, he says, make lots of them before everyone comes.

Get what, Jonathon, make what, she wants to know.

Myristica fragrans, he murmurs. Its nutmeg, we whisper, it opens the heart, cleans the senses to gleaming sharp-wittedness, even bordering on genius. Same amount of nutmeg and cinnamon bark, he insists, has to be precise and a lesser weight of cloves, only a fifth. Cloves they are very powerful. Tell Pam to pound them in the mortar. To a fine powder. Very fine. It will help us all end the bitterness of the heart that will come, calm the mind, work against the descending gloom; purify the blood, detox. You all need to ward off fatigue, burst through the fog. Bake many, as many as you can ...

She asks again what he wants them to bake. But all he can do is give her a list scrawled in his spidery, shaky hand before he extinguishes like a spent candle, sinking like a consumed wick into wax. Pulling the doona over his ears.

Marg reads, butter, honey, eggs, spice mix [nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves gently blended], lemon rind, Dinkel wholemeal, white Dinkel, almond meal, baking soda/powder. He's crossed out Dinkel and has written spelt. It takes her a moment longer ... then she gets it, it's a cookie recipe. Laughing quietly, for a moment she thinks Jonathon must be craving sweetness after all the exhaustion and wants to make sure there is enough for everyone else as well. But as she sets off to get the spices from Tam, she realises it can't be true. His urgency, the insistence they had to be ready when everyone comes, the darkness behind his words, how he'd stressed it was important to bake many.

Some time during the evening Jonathon wakes to kitchen sounds and the bubbling flow of chatter and laughter. He lies still, drifting on the sound ripples. Gradually taking in the scent; spices, honey too, the warm aroma of baking wafting through the house. Relief bathes him and at the exact same moment dread. Who is he to stem the weight of what is coming. His pulse pounds in his throat. Panic. We tell him, slow your breathing. Slow. In dandelion. Pause thyme. Out dandelion. Pause thyme. We know this dread so well. We still slip into the quicksand horror that lies in our memories. The pain. Walk, we tell him, remember a walk you took ... one that filled you with joy ...

And Jonathon forces himself to remember walking through a forest. Spruce. Pine. Fir. The resin filled air. The wind sighing, singing, souging and shushing like the sea. Remembering the story of the first Pine filled with yearning and love for the ocean. Stretching, higher and higher, until he can glimpse the rolling blue expanse, the white tipped waves. Jonathon's thoughts run along paths soft under foot, carpeted with fragrant needles. And the warmth. Pine warmth. Spruce warmth. Fir warmth. He's remembering Walter Pelican's words about warmth when all else around you is cold. The magic of conifers, midnight suns and white nights. Saturn trees. The Ancient Ancestors.

He feels calm now. Clear. Understanding what Rose meant. Tell them about the herbs, she'd said. He leaves the forest, climbing higher until the trees thin. Light streams in, in perfect geometry of diagonal shafts as only light can create. Each filled with minuscule multitudes of insects, dancing in flashes, glimmers, motes, glittering white, silver and gold. Where the light touches, the forest floor is verdant with moss, ferns, spiralling life. Then, together with Jonathon, we surface rising from the deep-greens of Pine, Spruce, Fir. And there ... there as far as sight reaches, the sun-yellow, orange-yellow flower heads of Arnica Montana. The sun's light becoming petals and pistils while the flowers, in chorus, melt into the heliacal blaze. It is no wonder they help with pain, stress, trauma, see how they glow and thrive in dry alpine meadows, on hard clay soils, in silica soils, on sparse high moors, on heaths that offer them so few nutrients

It's a daisy cousin, Jonathon says softly, it helps with injuries of any kind. Like you, he says, like all of you, it can take the extremes overwintering. Its wise, he says, growing in two ways at once, in two-year cycles. When the sun's path declines, and darkness and cold are approaching, it begins to work, fostering its own underground life. Rhizomes. He says. Rhizomes grow underground in roots and shoots. Very wise, he murmurs, Arnica Montana teaches us about existence and growth that never come from a single central point of origin. How can you kill such an intelligent organism of interconnected living fibres? No starting point. No endpoint. Same potency everywhere. Very difficult to uproot, nearly impossible to destroy. That is resilient, he says softly, and smiles for the first time in many days. Midsummer's Eve, he mutters under his breath, best time to harvest. Its other name is Wolfsbane.