

Character: Brenna of the Mountainborn  
21 year old herbalist apprentice  
Grandchild of Riecha, wise woman from The Mountain  
Born at the northern Greenlake camp.

## **-Prologue- Five years ago. My first mission as an herbalist.**

The calm sounds of the lake reverberate in the air; bats, dragonflies, the breeze rippling the waters, and its whisper between the reeds. If you listen closely, the distant humming of the Mountain echoes inside you, bringing a very particular warmth, as if its song told of the most ancient stories and the most beautiful sights the Mountain has seen over all its ages.

There are other melodies joining this song, like the familiar sounds of the camp residents getting ready for their evening meal and gathering around the bonfires. Niko snores softly on my lap, all his whiskers full of candlegrape juice. A basket full of radishes and other roots is hanging from a twig by my side as I sit on the comfortable low branches of a tree.

'Brenna! Bring those roots to your mother and stop lazing around! You must have dinner and go see your grandfather, he has been asking for you.'

'Ouch! Niko! I have to go! Don't bite me! I promise you can have a radish when we get back to the camp.' –I tell my scroff, who groans and makes a resigned 'nyeh' as I puts him onto my shoulder and stand up. - 'I'll be there in a moment!'

After stopping at my family's tent to drop the roots, I turn towards the bonfires in the centre of the camp. Several bonfires are lit and smelling of meat and vegetables cooking, and the cooks always joke about making even the watchmen up in the Redstone Outlook hungry with the carrying smell of their stew.

I find my grandfather around a smaller bonfire, drinking flowers infusion with other elders, whispering hesitatingly to the woman by his side. They still haven't seen me, but I can hear them whisper about how Drechi is too proud to take any medicine and how dangerous the bog where it grows is.

'Hello, grandpa. Were you searching for me?'

'Yes, Brenna. Your cousin Drechi in the southern camp is having some trouble. The herbalist in their camp has left to the Mountain, and since your grandmother isn't here anymore, we were wondering if you can recognize sleepweed.'

'Sleepweed? Isn't that a poison? Why would Drechi need that?'

'She returned a few cycles ago from one of her journeys. She must have met some foul creature, or perhaps she has been poisoned, but she cannot get any rest during the days, and she falls into hysteria every time the sun sets... Your uncle is really worried.'

'Well, I have seen some dry samples in granny Riecha's scrolls, I am sure I could find some. Where are they?'

'Hold on, Brenna, the journey is dangerous and the bog traps unwary travellers. Are you sure you can do this? The bog is a few days away as well.'

'I think the eastern marsh has some. Granny Riecha always told me to never touch the white warning bells if I ever went there. I shouldn't need to go to the bog for those.'

'Alright, go fetch some tomorrow and take them to your uncle. The marsh isn't as dangerous as the bog. We will be waiting for you back for dinner, so don't get sidetracked!'

## **1. Reaping season, second month, third day. 389.11.03**

I have been reading my old notes to see all the herbs I have ever used. I have never found any herb that could hold a wound together long enough to avoid heavy blood loss and get safely to a healer, body sorcerer or herbalist.

I've heard terrible stories of the war we Mountainborn tried so hard to avoid taking part into. My granny, Riecha, worked very hard to heal those soldiers that abandoned the battle lines and ran north towards the mountains. Some found our settlement, when the changing mountains guided them here. Those who made it to our camps told her that many others wouldn't make it because of their open wounds.

A couple of days ago, thinking of granny's stories I thought that if only I could find a way to keep wounds from bleeding I could help a lot of people, and even little cuts and blemishes would not get plagued with sprout wound or other terrible pests.

When I get to granny Riecha's herbalist workshop tent, Niko (the third scroff I've had, the grandson of my first Niko), is balancing on the chandelier. I try to grab him, but he jumps to the top of the bookshelf. He tosses the biggest book to the floor. I startle as I see granny's herbarium fall open on the floor. I promised grandpa to take care of all her belongings while I work here.

'Niko! That's granny's herbarium! You can't get there! Bad scroff! Oh no, it fell open on the pages and ruined a dried plant!'

I pick the book up, and see that it is just the entry for the soothing effect of mint when burnt. I'm so relieved. I pick up the cracked mint from the floor, and I can't help thinking of a young granny Riecha collecting that mint from our garden and putting it to dry many years ago.

'Every herb is special', she used to say. I start flicking pages, and get to a section of plants used in everyday tools in other parts of the world. I have never been outside the Great Barrier, so I wonder how she got those samples. Perhaps she went outside, perhaps she travelled the world. Grandpa never speaks about her.

I keep on flicking pages. In that same chapter there is a section for 'Glues, Acids, Soaps and other utilities'. I had never paid it any attention. I start having a look, browsing through the plant samples and softly running my fingers over the delicately dried leaves and flowers, humming a familiar song.

I get distracted, petting Niko with one hand as I turn pages mindlessly with the other hand. I have a sip of my tea and continue till suddenly my finger gets trapped close to something looking like a net. A side note in quick handwriting reads 'Careful, if the glue sample gets wet it will work again'. Well, great, my finger is stuck to a coin sized glue dab that got wet from the tea mug humidity on my finger. I'm glued to the book, and I don't know what to do.

I get nervous, looking impatiently for some tool I could use to cut me loose from the page without damaging it. Niko jumps away from my lap, sensing that something is not alright. I can't see anything I could use. I close the herbarium around my stuck hand, holding it in place as I can and standing up. I leave the workshop tent and head towards the kitchen cart.

'What's up Denna?'

It's my older brother, Garek! If he hears that I've got into any sort of trouble in the herbalist workshop he will mock my job again.

'Nothing, I got hungry and I'm going for food to the kitchen cart.' I reply, and I speed up towards it.

'Why are you carrying that book like that? Hey, wait, Denna! No food can be that urgent that you have to run away rudely like that!'

I sneak in the kitchen cart and find a fishing knife. I glide the sharp and cold blade under my fingertip skin to free it from the glue. Suddenly, there is a lot of blood running from my fingertip, and I scream.

'Denna! Are you alright?' Garek runs right into the kitchen, and finds me sitting on the floor, holding my hand high to try and stop the bleeding.

'N-nothing, it's just a cut. It stings. Oh no! The herbarium got stained with blood! How can this have happened! I was just cutting my fingertip loose from some sort of glue...'

'Let me bandage that.' -He reaps some cloth of a clean napkin and ties it around my finger. - 'Ah, always so clumsy! How do you even get things this weird to happen to you all the time! There, that should be better. Food, hum? Tell me the truth.'

'Well, I was distracted flicking pages and I got glued. That's all the truth I know. What is that thing? It got glued to my skin so hard that the knife cut my skin instead of the glue! Spiderweb fungus...'

'Hahaha, who knows what granny Riecha put in that book! You'll have to be more careful! Apparently there is some adventure in boring herbalists' lives, isn't there?'

I get back to the workshop tent, still shocked by what just happened. So strong it held my skin to the paper like that... I stare at the spiderweb fungus again...

That's it! This could be the key! Maybe I could use this fungus for my remedy!

\* To be continued... \*