

Brain Freeze and Hot Water

by Kolik

"And whosoever of them ate of the honey-
sweet fruit of the lotus . . . were fain to abide
among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus,
and forgetful of their homeward way.

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

I

Sheebe jolted awake in her seat as a metallic rattle cut through the hum of the truck's cooling systems. The dashboard warning lights flashed a familiar angry orange: **warning (!)**, the label said, **seek assistance immediately (!)**.

"That's what *Hux* is doing," the shiba woman muttered to herself. She frowned as the metal rattling upgraded to a worrying series of clanks. It was one thing for the truck's engine to have broken down at the worst possible moment, but if the cooling system went then they could kiss their summer vacation goodbye.

Sheebe gulped. Probably a lot *else* too, considering how important this was to her boss. "Better check on the goods, just to be safe." She stood up from her deep slouch in the passenger seat, which was no small feat given her plump body. The dog woman wasn't exactly fat, but there was a lot of her to go around, especially around her waist and hips. Her short black hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore a simple green shirt and black shorts with green trim. A sliver of her beige fur peeked out from the bottom of her shirt and her shorts clung tightly to her thighs.

She stepped from the cab into the refrigerated back section of the truck. Her green eyes scanned for any problems but she was quickly distracted by the wave of delightful coolness that washed over her. "Mmm," she hummed.

It was an ice cream truck, after all: a panel along one side would flip up into a metal awning when they parked it to serve customers. Beneath that stood a counter with two dozen containers of ice cream, each several gallons deep. Across from them was a row of waist-high freezers packed solid with popsicles, frozen yogurt, syrups, sauces—

Sheebe shook her head. "No, no, gotta focus." She had a bad sweet tooth, which had more than once gotten her into trouble for eating something she was supposed to sell. She looked around. Nothing out of the ordinary. The clanking sound was barely audible back here, which implied it wasn't coming from the refrigeration system.

Sheebe stroked her chin with a finger. “So if it isn’t the fridges and it can’t be the engine, then it must be . . .” She poked her head back into the truck cab just in time to hear the clank turn into a wheeze before cutting out. The steady drone of the air conditioning cut out with it.

“*Great.*” Sheebe sighed and shut the door before leaning back against one of the freezers. “Ah!” The cold was shocking against the backs of her thick thighs. “Ah . . .” She rubbed her butt back and forth along the icy metal but stopped before she got too carried away. It was much cooler in here than the truck cab, but she knew it would be a bad idea to surround herself with sweets for goodness-knew how long until Huxley returned.

Speaking of which, why don’t I have a look for him? Sheebe walked a hundred heart attacks’ worth of ice cream and stepped out the back door. She was immediately reminded why she had been waiting inside the truck: before her foot touched the dirt road, a wave of hot, muggy air rolled over her like a rancid blanket. She was a beige speck on a russet dirt road, completely at the sun’s mercy. Dense trees and bright green foliage leaned in from the road’s edges like greedy fingers.

More importantly, Huxley was nowhere to be seen. Sheebe looked up and down the road, but there was nowhere she could have missed him. He just wasn’t there.

Sheebe sagged against the side of the truck, then jumped back with a yipe as she touched the searing metal. She decided to sag on her feet. “This is *not* how I wanted to spend the summer at a tropical resort,” the shiba woman muttered to no-one in particular.

It had been simple enough: the ice cream store Sheebe worked for (**Cones & Creams – Thick and Tasty, Guaranteed!**) was expanding to a resort that had opened just outside the city. Sheebe’s boss had sensed a good business opportunity to put hot, sweaty, rich people and cool, tasty, expensive food together.

But Cones & Creams was a small company: Sheebe loved that, and she knew firsthand their snacks tasted better than mass-produced slush, but it also meant they couldn’t just have a few thousand ice cream bars delivered on someone else’s dime. Thus, Sheebe had enlisted the help of her hubby

Huxley to drive the company ice cream truck out to the resort. They would use the truck as a luxury snack store until their supply ran out, then drive back to the main store for refills.

In the meantime, they'd take advantage of the resort's amenities if they could ever tear themselves away from each other.

Things had been going smoothly until they weren't: the truck had shuddered to a halt, belching black smoke, and refused to budge an inch. Huxley had taken one look at the engine, sworn under his breath, and started the long walk back to the nearest garage. "It'll be fine, babe," he had said. "I just need a double-flanged inverse Johnson rod recombobulator. They're a dime a dozen."

Sheebe, who got dizzy if she ever so much as looked at an engine, had waited patiently in the truck. And waited. And waited some more until the AC had gone out and here she was standing by the side of a truck that would burn her if she touched it, guarding a horde of goodies she couldn't eat.

"Hmph." Sheebe tromped up to the truck cab and flung the door open. The air inside had already gone from tolerably cool to stuffy, and if she sat down she would only get stuffier. She fished a paper road map out of the glove box and consulted it.

"It isn't even 10 clicks to the end of the road," she said to herself. *Huh. I could probably walk that.* There was a pregnant pause.

"If I'm going to melt, I might as well melt doing something productive." The dog woman reached for a thermal duffle bag under one of the seats, then went to the freezers. She scooped some water bottles and a sampler of their specialty treats into the bag to help make a good first impression. She zipped the bag tight and scribbled a quick note to Huxley on a scrap of paper, which she left on the dashboard before starting down the road towards the resort.

She turned a corner just a few seconds before the truck's AC coughed back to life. She did not see the rush of cold air dislodge her note. She did not see it tumble to the bottom of the cab and come to rest atop a layer of ice cream wrappers and dust bunnies.

II

A short while later, Sheebe was beginning to think that melting in the truck cab might not have been such a bad idea after all. After the corner, the road zig-zagged down some switchbacks before climbing up the other side of a stout valley. Sheebe was not built for hiking, and the heavy bag hanging from her shoulder made things even worse.

The jungle out here was pretty in a wild sort of way: flashes of brilliant golden sunlight flickered through the tree trunks and thick tropical leaves on either side of the road, punctuated by lush wildflowers. It hadn't rained recently, so at least Sheebe didn't have to contend with swarms of bugs or a muddy road – she just had the raw, baking heat of the midday sun.

Finally she crested the hill. There was a short, flat boulder on the right side of the road, and she wobbled over to it before sitting down. Her shorts strained around her ass but admirably did not break.

“Okay,” panted Sheebe as she fished a water bottle from her bag. “Maybe this wasn't such a great idea.” She gulped down half the bottle. “Maybe Huxley was right and I should have just kept my fat butt in the truck.” She grinned ruefully and glanced down at herself. “Maybe making it a little *less* fat wouldn't hurt. Although Hux always *did* like . . .”

Her train of thought sputtered into smoke as a sweet scent played across her nose. Sheebe glanced at the bag, but it was shut tight. Where was it coming from? She sniffed the air, leaning this way and that and scanning the nearby brush. After a minute she looked over her shoulder: the sweetness was coming from the jungle.

The shiba woman huffed to her feet and stood on the rock, trying to see anything. The smell was sweet, but not sickly sweet like rotting fruit. It clung to the bottom of her lungs in a cloying pool unlike the air it rode in on. Sheebe had smelled a lot of confectionery in her time, but nothing like this. *Icing sugar? No. Dried fruit? No. Honey? No. Man, what is that?*

Sheebe stepped forward and leaned past the tree line, bracing herself on a low branch. The canopy was low here, and the jungle was darker except for a few brassy patches of sunlight that

bounced off low ferns. She still couldn't see anything more than a stone's throw away, but the scent was just a little bit stronger now. Sheebe glanced back down the road. Still nothing. She couldn't even hear the distant roar of the truck's engine.

Sheebe turned back to the mysterious scent. Her inner chef wanted to know what this was. She had time, right? The dog woman inhaled again – succulent, full, heady. Yeah. Yeah, she did. If there was some strange native fruit growing around here, it would probably go great on a vanilla sundae. “Maybe chocolate,” she said, absently licking her lips.

Sheebe drew a pocket knife from an overstretched pouch in her shorts and flicked it open. She knew this was probably a stupid idea, but she wasn't *that* dumb. She carved a notch as big as her hand into the tree by the road, then stepped into the jungle.

The difference was instant: instead of the sun browbeating her into the ground, the heat came from all around her. There were no squawking birds or buzzing insects, so Sheebe kept moving forward, glancing back and forth alertly. Every few paces she stopped and carved another notch around eye level.

The scent floated around her head. She breathed in and let her mind wander. *Bake it into a tart? Maybe. Strain out the juice and freeze it? Could make for a good sauce—*

Sheebe stopped, then blinked. She looked behind her and found she had walked almost thrice as far as usual without notching a tree. Sheebe shook her head as she notched the tree next to her. *Get a grip, Phoebe*, she thought sternly enough to use her real name. She was about to continue admonishing herself when another cloud of that blissful smell drifted by. It was stronger and smelled like berries.

Sheebe turned like a doll and started walking again. *Too bitter to be strawberry. Too sweet to be blueberry. Blackberry?* The next time Sheebe passed a tree, she just slowed down instead of stopping. The notch was half as large as the last one. She snuffled, leaning forward like someone had tied a string to her nose. It wasn't blackberry, but what was it?

She had no doubt it must be edible. Something that smelled so good – she inhaled another lungful of rich, lustrous air – would naturally be edible in order to attract animals and insects to pollinate. The dog woman looked left and right only to find the jungle was still quiet and empty, with only the soft swishing of her boots through the undergrowth. Her knife arm drifted out to scratch at a tree trunk as she passed it.

Maybe she had scared the other animals and bugs away. Yeah, that was probably it. Sheebe inhaled and licked her lips. Her mouth had started watering at some point. It felt nice. The smell was very strong now. Even when she exhaled, she could feel it pooled thickly in her lungs, just waiting for another breath to flush it through her system again.

She obliged. She giggled. It was funny how the air tasted good. Air didn't have a taste, even when you mixed it with ice cream to make it spongy. She liked ice cream. Did any of the flavours taste like the air here? She dropped the thing she was holding and looked down at her hands.

“Vanilla, mint, st-straawwbrry,” she panted, extending her fingers one at a time. “Ch. . . *chawklit* . . .” Inhale, exhale. Air, ice cream. Taste good, taste good. Her eyes crossed as she brought her hands near. “C-c-c . . . *coo* . . . *cooooookeezncreeeeeem* . . .” Man, this was *hard*. Why were there so many kinds?

The dog woman's next step was harder than the rest. She looked down with glazed eyes to find a vine had wound itself around her ankle. She bent double at the waist and leaned down but her fumbling fingers couldn't pry under the thin, thorny vine cutting into her fur. She tried to think if that was bad or not but her mental gears were swaddled in cotton candy.

Inhale. Rich, sweet air poured through her mouth and nose. She felt it slide down her windpipe like warm fog.

Sheebe rose to her feet again. The vine was forgotten. She wobbled forward even as it got harder to walk, even as a second vine crept around her other foot. Thorns dug into her fur and pressed against her skin. It was very quiet around her except for a low rustling sound that she couldn't place.

The dog woman blinked. She could see something through a cloud of pink smoke just up ahead. No, no, it wasn't smoke, it was – she leaned to the side and took a big breath and her eyes rolled around in her head from the rush of sugar air – more like some kind of haze that clung to the ground. It was thicker around this part and the smell was *so sweet*. She wanted more.

Sheebe panted softly, straining to fill her lungs with the syrupy air. The jungle disappeared around her as she walked into the haze. The scent was so thick that she felt it collect on her fur. Absently, she glanced down at one of her hands. It was covered in pink dewdrops. *Smell good. Taste good?* She shoved her fingers into her mouth. The raw shock of so much sugar made her choke. She stopped to gag.

Or, she tried to stop. There was a tug on her legs and she felt herself stumble forward. The thorny vine around her ankles had wound its way up past her knees. In fact, there were three or four vines covering each of her legs up to her thighs. She stared dumbly as one vine crept upwards and under the hem of her shorts, one green inch at a time. Sheebe's brain tried to find words but the only ones she could put together were *sweet* and *more*.

More vines rose from the ground like silent cobras. They slowly, gently circled her arms and waist, binding her snugly and poking her with thorns and crawling under her shirt – but they didn't hurt her. Each one was only about as thick as Sheebe's pinky finger, but they were cinched snugly. They tugged her again and she toppled to her knees.

A new wave of sweetness got her attention. Sheebe managed to raise her head and finally saw the source of the scent. A few metres in front of her, a giant pitcher plant rose from the ground like a hideous brass instrument. It was at least three metres tall, with the base of the pitcher bulging out like a fat beer gut. Wrinkled green leaves stuck out from its base and ran up the side as pink fog poured from the pitcher's mouth and cascaded to the ground in softly rolling streams.

It was the best thing Sheebe had ever smelled. "Sweeeet," she muttered dumbly as the plant's vines dragged her closer. She couldn't have walked even if she had been free.

The plant remained silent as it dragged its prey near. It had done this a thousand times before without the need for higher thoughts.

“G-gonna make you—” Sheebe hiccuped, “—inta ice *creeeem* . . .” her words turned into a slurry of giggles. The vines pulled, implacable and indifferent. The dog woman’s delirium reached higher and higher as she squirmed and tried to cover herself in the scent. It was everywhere around here: condensing on her fur, baked into the leaves on the ground, woven into the vines that cradled her.

There were quite a lot of vines now, sinuously creeping around her meaty legs and body. A pair of them writhed under her shirt, settling themselves into the soft flesh of her tits.

“H-hey,” Sheebe stuttered as her head bobbed forward and back, “Don’ get *too* f-frenly, Mr. Sweet . . .” She tried to lift a hand to her shirt, but couldn’t. Her head turned with dizzying slowness. Her arms were both being pulled out in front of her next to her legs. She was like a marionette with her strings all tangled around the paddle. “Oh?” she asked, dazed. “Where you pullin’?”

Another gentle tug was the only answer she got. The plant softly wound her into its embrace like a spool of thread.

Sheebe reached the base of the plant and the scent was truly overpowering. Breathing in and out were just different shades of the hazy tapestry hanging in the air. The dog woman’s wiggles stopped completely, but she could feel the vines loosen.

R-right . . . gotta climb t-to sweet . . .

She struggled into a crouch. Her shirt and shorts bulged under her weight and the slithering motion of the vines underneath them. Sheebe mumbled something but it died in her throat as she took another sweet-smelling breath. She began to climb, pressing her hands and knees onto thick leaves. They held her weight like a morbid staircase, and after a dozen clumsy steps she was nearly at the pitcher’s mouth.

The plant knew its prey sometimes had death throes of blind panic that broke free of the vines, but this fat one was no threat. She had barely resisted. The plant eased its grip around her and started to unwind its vines.

“Wh-whoa,” said Sheebe. She could feel the vines slithering off of her body, and finally their thorns began to do their work. “Ah!” She swayed as jagged holes appear in her clothing and the sharp pinpricks jolted against her skin. It felt like her entire body had fallen asleep, but the desire to climb forced her into a drunken stance atop the highest leaf as her shirt and shorts were reduced to shreds. The pitcher’s lip was about even with her large breasts, and she tried to lean forward into it because that’s where the sweetness was coming from – but something stopped her.

“Mmm?” Sheebe asked, looking down and behind her to see a black lumpy thing with some smaller green things around it hanging off her shoulder. After staring at it, the shiba woman realized it was the duffle bag full of ice cream and sweets she had been carrying. A handful of vines had sunk their thorns into it after drifting away from her. “Suh-weet,” she droned, reaching down for the bag and fumbling with the zipper.

The plant had waited too long. It gathered its “breath” to prepare another wave of intoxicating pollen to remind its prey where she belonged.

“Gotchaaa.” Sheebe finally had the zipper in her fingers. She pulled, eager and hungry. The bag split open and a handful of ice cream treats tumbled out. Sheebe reached in and grabbed something in a paper cup, not that she would have been able to describe it. She lurched it to her mouth and squeezed out two handfuls of cold, tasty goodness that she gobbled down as quickly as they came.

The ice cream was a frigid shock all around her lips, tongue, and mouth. “Ahh . . .” she panted, feeling the sweetness in her throat and a very different sensation on the roof of her mouth. “Nnn,” she whined, pressing her hands to her temples. “Hurts . . .”

The plant poured out another wave of pollen. Sheebe breathed it in.

She turned back to the pitcher, but the frigid feeling from her mouth finally reached her brain. The pain lanced through her head before cracking open like a glacier and flowing over the rest of her senses. “Ah!” Sheebe cried.

The painful clarity was enough to snap her trance to an end, blocking out the cloying pollen for a moment. She blinked and looked around, stunned. “W-what the heck?” was all she could manage. Vulgarly just wasn’t in her nature. *Brain f-freeze? Where . . . ?*

She reached for the nearest thing for balance, which happened to be the pitcher, and her hand slipped on the slick fleshy edge. She fell forward onto her armpit. Sheebe now had an excellent view of the inside of the pitcher.

The top was exactly what she expected: a thick ring whose walls were at least the width of her hand. The plant was translucent, and she could see a sunbeam through the other side near the top. Lower, the jungle’s colours were smothered to dying smudges, and the liquid at the bottom was opaque. A ripple wavered out from the walls as the plant bent slightly under Sheebe’s weight.

“Huh,” Sheebe said, still not really processing what she saw. The charm of the pollen had faded down here – the pitcher smelled sweet, but it was so saccharine she wanted to gag, and there was an ugly odour underneath it. She coughed, shaking the plant again.

Something round and white jostled to the top of the liquid. Sheebe stared at it, puzzled, as it floated and spun in the plant’s juices. Two dark holes rotated upwards, followed by two rows of small white nubs. She blinked. Eye sockets. Teeth. Skull.

Her blood ran cold.

That smell is rotting meat. This plant is going to eat me.

Sheebe screamed and threw herself back from the pitcher, tumbling head over heels down the leaves as the vines embracing her snagged tighter and tighter. Numbing pinpricks turned into painful scratches winding around both her arms and legs. Sheebe strained, trying to roll over the edge of a leaf, until finally the vines snapped and she whirled to the ground in a painful heap.

“Hff!” The fall had knocked the wind out of her but she stumbled to her feet in a blind panic and frantically looked around. *Notches!* There were no notches. She couldn’t see her knife. She didn’t know where her clothes were or why her arms and legs hurt so much or where all the pink haze had come from—

Oh, but she *did* know that. “No, no, no . . .” Her panic swelled as the memories of the last few minutes flowed into her mind’s eye like melting wax. The pink haze had tricked her. It was going to kill her. And now it was all around her, pooling around her legs and arms and sticking to her fur like candied icing.

Something pricked her foot. “*Eeeek!*” She turned and ran.

III

Time flew away from Sheebe as she ran in a blind panic. She had no goal but to escape the insidious fog. A dead sprint should have been impossible for a woman of her size, but that's exactly what she did. Her boobs, belly, and butt jiggled as she tore through the jungle in her underwear, leaping over fallen trees and pushing through thickets of ferns.

Her route took her almost exactly away from the road, not that she knew that. It was just as well – if she had know how much she was endangering herself by taking a wild, zigzagging path straight towards the heart of the jungle then she'd have likely fainted on the spot.

“Whoa!” Sheebe's carelessness caught up with her and she tripped. She careened forward with no time to break her fall, but luckily she fell onto soft grass. “Oof!” Her belly took most of the impact and she crumpled into a heap as her manic strength left her. After a minute, she managed to raise her head out of the dirt and get a decent look around.

She was in the middle of a small clearing. Thick, soft grass grew about as high as her knees. The shiba woman pushed herself up to her elbows and saw that the jungle around her was much brighter than the gloomy canopy surrounding the pitcher plant. The usual riot of jungle flowers dotted every tree trunk and bush, and the sun glowed like molten gold through gaps in the leaves. There was a particularly sunny spot in the middle of the clearing.

It almost looks normal. Sheebe rolled into a sitting position with her legs splayed. She looked down at her body to assess the damage.

Her fur was still matted by pink droplets, but they had dried and stopped airing off the deadly scent. She took of whiff of one hand and found it normal except for a dull sugary undertone. Her clothes were gone: where her shirt and shorts had covered her plump breasts and big ass, now only her underwear protected her modesty. It was black lacy lingerie. Huxley loved it. She had worn it for him to see once they arrived in their room.

“Hux . . .” She whispered. The thought of him sent a dull dagger into her heart. There was a very real chance she’d never see him again.

Sniffing back tears, Sheebe looked at her arms and legs: there were a few diehard vines clinging to her ankles. She unwound them, hissing as the thorns slid painfully out of the divots in her skin. Her socks had been torn apart above the ankle, but her heavy boots were intact, so she could walk without stepping on something sharp. But if Sheebe were to walk, she’d need to know where she was headed in the first place *and* she’d need to make sure she didn’t collapse from exhaustion.

The dog woman turned to the duffle bag strapped haggardly to her shoulder. She peeled back the top flap and found an armful of luxurious, smushed, ice cream treats. There was a single half-empty water bottle sitting in the middle of them: the one she had drunk from before getting the stupid idea to follow the sweet smell.

That was it. She had an armful of melting ice cream and a few mouthfuls of water. She was naked, afraid, lost, and alone.

Sheebe’s heart caught in her throat. The tears she had been sniffing back welled up, hot and tight. It wasn’t fair. It just *wasn’t* fair! *How was I supposed to know there were giant maneating plants around here!?* *Does the resort know about these!?*

The poor woman clamped her hands to the top of her head, trying and failing to contain the shakes she was getting as the adrenaline drained out of her system. *Not fair.* She felt one angry tear drop down her cheek. *Not fair!* Her jaw clenched. *NOT FAIR!*

“Hello?” came a nearby voice. Sheebe blinked. Had she imagined it? All she could see through her tears was a warped, watery distortion of the clearing and all she could hear was the rush of furious blood pounding through her ears. “Um, Miss . . . dog?” She hadn’t been imagining it.

Sheebe quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, not quite believing her luck. *A worker from the resort, or a truck driver, or a giant snake, or—*

IV

A giant snake? She blinked again. There was a very large snake right in front of her. Its head was half again as large as Sheebe's, hovering at eye level while its body lay in the grass.

The snake's body was a dark purple that reminded Sheebe of smoke, slightly lighter on the belly. Its pupils were black slits bisecting light amber eyes, which themselves seemed to glow against the dusky purple scales. As Sheebe looked down, she saw the snake's body got wider where it touched the ground – almost as thick as her leg at the widest part. The snake's body was covered in lustrous scales that sunlight sunk into, shining with a dull waxy look.

The snake flicked out its bright pink tongue. It looked at Sheebe the way a child with a magnifying glass looks at an anthill. "I'm sorry if I startled you."

Scratch that, it was a giant *talking* snake.

Sheebe fainted.

Setra looked curiously at the dog woman in front of her. Most of her meals were four-legged and put up quite a fight, but this one had barged into the clearing on two legs and fallen down while kicking up an awful racket. She looked vaguely similar to a couple of wolf tribeswomen Setra had encountered before, but this one was fatter and didn't seem to be capable of defending herself at all. Setra smacked her lips. *Much* fatter . . .

Case in point, Setra had gotten within striking distance of this one without her even seeming to notice. When Setra's curiosity had won out and she introduced herself, the tubby little thing had keeled over. "Very *curiousss* indeed," Setra said to herself as she watched the dog woman bubble up from unconsciousness into a rough sitting position.

"Wh-wha?" mumbled Sheebe groggily. *Right. Talking snake. Sure, why not?*

"I was remarking how *curiousss* it is for you to be here," Setra said, staring. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone like you in this jungle before." She leaned to the side, puzzled.

"Really? Do you at least know how to get back to the road?"

Setra did. “I don’t think I’ve seen any road around here.”

Sheebe’s heart sank. She slumped back onto the ground. “Figures. Maneating plant, giant talking snake – but no info booth to point me back in the right direction.” The shock of her situation had settled over her like a sheet and she was just too tired to panic anymore.

Setra perked up. “Maneating plant? Oh, you mean that big thing that gives off the pink haze?”

Sheebe nodded from down in the grass. “Yep. That’s where all *this* came from.” She held up an arm and pointed to the pink droplets matted into her fur.

“I see,” Setra said, nodding as she took in Sheebe’s body. “And where all *these* came from as well.” She flicked out her tongue against some of the small punctures in the shiba woman’s leg.

“Ah, that stings,” said Sheebe. She tried to pull her foot back and found that her leg had gone numb below the knee. “Wait, what?” She tried to bring her knee up to her chest, but even with her entire leg flexing she couldn’t get it past her waist. “Oh. That’s not good.”

Setra was enjoying the sight of so much meat wiggling around in front of her. “Looks fine to me,” she said absently.

With effort, Sheebe rose into a kneeling position. “No, no – it *feels* bad.” She gulped. “My arms and legs are going numb.” There was a tremor in her voice and her brow was knitted in worry. “It h-hurt when you touched them just now.”

“Numb and painful? How strange.” Setra leaned closer, looking up and down Sheebe’s thick legs and flicking her tongue out inquisitively. Sheebe braced for more needling contact, but the snake didn’t touch her. “Yes, I’ve seen this before,” said Setra. “The vines of that plant you met have a strong poison. In small doses it’s just painful, but it looks like you got quite a lot.”

Sheebe gulped. “H-how do you know all this?”

Setra looked away. “Well, I, um . . . *rescue* victims of that plant.” She blinked. “Yes. Rescue. That’s the word.” She turned back to Sheebe. “You’ll need to get the poison out of your system if you want to survive.”

The dog woman shivered. “S-survive? You mean it’s gonna . . . g-gonna . . .”

“*Husssshh*,” said Setra, tapping her tail against Sheebe’s stammering mouth. She leaned in comfortingly, snaking softly around Sheebe’s shoulders. “I can help you. I know of a place that can heal all poisons,” she said in a voice like syrup.

“Really?” Sheebe’s eyes were wide and pleading. “P-please . . .”

Setra chuckled softly. “Don’t you worry one bit. The pleasure is all mine.” She slithered forward and brought the rest of her impressive purple body into the clearing. “Oh, but where are my manners?” The snake ran her eyes up and down Sheebe’s body in a mockery of concern as her own body flowed around Sheebe in a casual loop. “I haven’t even asked your name.”

“M-my name’s Sheebe. Phoebe!” Sheebe’s heart skipped beat when she saw the wealth of dark, muscular scales ripple forward through the lush grass and over her legs. She stammered, trying not to let Setra’s imposing stare bother her. “That’s, um, my real name, but my friends c-call me Sheebe, so you can call me Phoebe or Sheebe— not that we’re friends— not that I don’t *want* to be friends—”

“*Sssheebe*,” Setra hissed softly. “My name is *Sssetra* and it’s very nice to meet you. I get the feeling we’ll be very close soon.”

Sheebe nodded, eager to please. “I hope so, Setra!”

She was about to continue when the snake’s coils tightened around her, lifting her up. She huffed in surprise as she rose to her feet. “Can you stand?” said Setra, relaxing her grasp and leaning closer.

Sheebe held onto Setra’s coils for balance like a hula hoop – a very strong, thick hula hoop – and found that she could stand, just barely. “Um, yeah. B-but I don’t think I can walk like this.” She leaned down stiffly to pick up the duffle bag, clenching her fingers around the strap like the branches of a sapling quivering in the wind. “*Hrr* . . .” Standing up was just as hard.

Setra leered and felt her stomach tense as she watched Sheebe straining herself. Oh, there was *barely* any stringy muscle under all that wonderful fat and meat. “Just let me take care of that,” the snake said. The lower half of her body swirled up over Sheebe’s legs and waist.

“Eep!” breathed Sheebe as she felt Setra’s purple body cover her own pale beige fur. She looked down to see her feet poking out from underneath a serpentine tube. Her arms were free but her new friend had an unbroken grasp on her from her belly to her ankles. “Oh,” she said in a small voice. The ground was about a metre under her feet but Setra clearly wasn’t going to drop her.

Setra’s head floated next to Sheebe’s, amber eyes like searchlights in a fog. “Comfortable, my little doggy?” asked Setra. Sheebe nodded, dumbstruck and a little nervous at the serpent’s power. “Then let’s not waste any more time!” She slithered deeper into the jungle with her prize in tow.