

*Stranger* is a story that presents several puzzles in its telling. If you attempt to uncover their solutions, feel free to use the contact information at the end of this document to reach out either to check your answers or request assistance.

Enjoy reading!

# STRANGER













A Gossamer Summit Project

Copyright © 2021 Gossamer Summit  
All rights reserved.

# STRANGER

by  
Nathan Smith

## **PROLOGUE**

I'm walking down a particular forgotten road in my mind that winds way out past even the furthest outskirts of the other memories. This is the farthest I've ever been down it. It's taken a while to get all the way out here, but a little progress each day has added up.

For a long time, the road was dusty and gravelly, and, as I strolled, I passed crumbled farms and broken, wooden fence posts that outlined the perimeters of fields that have gone unused for ages. The route has led me through hills and forests and required me to cross shallow creeks and step over fallen trees. Today, I find myself wondering if I'm even still on the road and not just a path worn down by browsing wildlife.

As midday approaches, I come up on the edge of a pond. Bright damselflies dart between the reeds like sunlight glinting off of windblown strands of spiders' webs.



*August 4*

It feels like forever, but I've finally returned to the pond. I see the damselflies again, blue splinters darting intelligently over the still water. I hear the song of cicadas in the canopy. A branch snaps loudly somewhere else along the bank. I peer through the reeds and see another hiker just as they look up towards me.

"Oh, hello, nice day for a hike!"

Their voice speaks in the friendliest of the trail dialects. I express my agreement; it is a perfect day to go walking.

"Did you come from Southspring?"

I explain that I don't know anything about a place called Southspring and that I just came up through the woods, pointing to the vague path through the underbrush that I had been following.

"Ah, so that is part of the trail! I've come here quite a few times, but I've never gone any further than this spot. I get here with a path on the other side of the pond. It's nice to come out here and get away from the bustle of Southspring sometimes. What brings you out here?"

The question catches me off-guard, and it's hard to come up with a good reason. I try to say that I'm just hiking too, trying to get away from the noise back home, but I feel like I sound like an idiot. I couldn't say that I came all the way out here just because I felt drawn to, right? That sounds creepy.

"Well, whatever reasons we came out here for, we should probably be heading back soon. It's going to take the rest of the afternoon for me to return to Southspring. Where you're from can't be too close either, I haven't even heard of any towns in the direction you're saying you're from. Can you get back in time? You don't have any camping gear."

Again, probably sounding like an idiot, I admit that I'm very far from home and completely unprepared to either return or make camp before nightfall.

The hiker blows air over the pond, their lips formed just outside the edge of a whistling tone. Two damselflies lazily zigzag toward the shore and land on the hiker's raised left arm. They look huge all of the sudden; the wings alone on these insects are about as long as my arm from fingertip to shoulder.

"Do you want to hike back to Southspring with me and my two friends? Guests are given food and shelter for the night at a lot of places around town."

*August 5*

It's difficult to explain the nature of my approach to the remote pond. It's even more difficult for me to explain why I must continue to make an approach at all. I pass quickly from the abandoned farmlands, through the forests and clearings, and up to the banks of the still pond, spooking a choir of frogs into submerging themselves.

I meet the hiker, and I take them up on their offer to visit Southspring. As we begin to make our way around the pond towards her path, the hiker turns to me and offers a formal introduction. She seems open and trusting, but there's a keen glint in her eye and a cautious draw in her manner. It's clear that, to her, I am as unexpected an encounter on this lonely trail as she is to me.

As I introduce myself, I feel very self-conscious in how curious I am about her large bug companions. She hasn't acted as though they were an anomaly in the least. Every second that goes by makes me feel weirder and weirder for considering them remarkable at all. We turn onto her footpath and begin walking away from

---

## STRANGER

---

the pond down a shallow incline through the forest.

"I don't know if I would go on these long hikes without these two to take care of and keep exercised."

I feel relief.

"These two *darters* have been with me for a while now, they love dancing in the air above the pond back there. I couldn't help but notice that you don't appear to be traveling with anyone."



\*\*\*\*\*

I find myself hurrying down the old road in the country once more. I'm looking for something or someone. I'm traveling toward the pond, to the hiker, and to Southspring, it seems, but, first, I need to find...what do I need to find?

A golden-bellied oriole alights on a fruit tree with burgundy leaves growing in the middle of a broken fence by a crumbled farmhouse. It hops from branch to branch for a minute before flying out again towards the road and landing near a swampy gutter. The oriole sticks its beak into a shallow puddle where some river grass is living and then flies away. I walk up to the spot where it had landed.

Peering down over the small puddle, I spot my reflection in the water; the grass appears to emerge out from my face.

I look forward down the road, and notice river grass in patches along its entire length. I walk through the woods and all the way back up to the pond seeing this grass the whole way. There is something about the plant's prismatic shade of green and mathematically regular stripe pattern that I think cause it to stand out to

me on this hike.

As the hiker and I become acquainted and start on our way to her town, she asks me where my companions are. I look down at the ground and see the river grass growing next to the trail. I tell her that the grass and I have been traveling together for quite a while. She looks thoughtfully at her two blue *darters*.

"I imagine it must be pleasant to keep company with so reliable a friend as the *puzzlegrass*. I believe there are very few people in Southspring that travel with plants nowadays."

I ask her if most people travel with overgrown bugs in Southspring.

She seemed to prickle at "overgrown bugs."

"People travel with all kinds of creatures in Southspring. It's just like anywhere else; we share our path with those who walk it."

I hear the frogs begin their chorus again as we leave the pond behind us.

August 6

"You sure come and go a lot."

The hiker is waiting for me by the pond this time as I approach from my lonely trail in the woods, her *darters* playing above the water. I don't know how to respond. Does she know why I repeatedly find myself traveling to this place over and over again?

"I can't deny it, it's bizarre the way that we can't seem to just pick up our feet and actually make it all the way back to Southspring."

I had been imagining that perhaps I was getting lost in a dream or something like that, yet here she was, caught up in it with me somehow. I tell her that this is strange for me and ask her if she's ever experienced something like this before.

"No, not in my waking life."

She blows her airy, half-whistle call, and the two *darters* fly up and perch on either of her shoulders.

"Let's just start right off, I'll bet we can actually get you to town on this pass if we stop wasting time here!"

I agree, and we set out immediately. We walk around the pond, begin down the shallow incline through the forest, and march purposefully onward. I look to the sides of the path, and I see that the *puzzlegrass* is still with me. I smile.

The hiker and I don't speak as we hike. I think we're a little afraid of starting over again. At least, I am, and keeping my attention focused on getting to Southspring feels like walking on eggshells. Each misstep, rustling noise, and flash of sunlight through the trees threatens to reset me for another go-around, and conversation somehow seems particularly dangerous to the status quo at the moment.

Suddenly, the other hiker stops, raising her arm as if to signal me. Her *darters'* wings flick nervously as she looks at me and then slowly points ahead towards a large shape that is crossing the trail in front of us. She shushes me and whispers excitedly to me.

"It's a *moidon*!"

A hulking, antlered creature emerges from a grove of pines and steps onto the trail. I can feel the weight of the animal with each of its footfalls, even from as far away as we are. The soil brown fur of its legs and torso gives way to a striking trail of bright feathers along its back that stretches from its head to its tail. A pair of



---

## STRANGER

---

cardinal-like wings, which appear far too small to possibly be used for flight, flap against the *moidon's* sides shooving away insects. The *moidon* opens its bird-like beak and calls into the forest, producing a deep, warbling voice that sounds more like gurgling than singing.



“So cool!”

Moments later, a far-off voice answers the *moidon's* call, and the giant creature hoofs it off into the woods. The hiker and I watch it disappear into the foliage before tentatively continuing forward. She looks at me with light in her eyes.

“Unbelievable, I can’t believe we saw a *moidon*! And we heard it call another one no less, how awesome! *Aroo-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh...*”

Her attempt to imitate the sound of the *moidon's* call is hilarious. I also try, but I can’t keep from laughing. It’s a funny sound to try to make, and we are both fully occupied for a few moments trying to get it right as we move closer to Southspring.

\*\*\*\*\*

Time seems to rush away. I worry that I’ll blink and find myself at the beginning of the country road again, surrounded by abandoned homesteads and doomed to another beginning. But that’s not happening.

The hiker and I have walked for hours, and the dirt trail has turned into a wide, well-traveled path. We’re coming up on a ridge that the hiker says is our last before being able to see Southspring. My legs are aching and the sun is getting lower in the sky, but I do not feel tired.

“Just a little bit farther. We’ll be able to see the whole town from up there, and then maybe we can get something good to eat!”

She points out something near the corner of a farm we are about to pass.

“See that? Windsocks like that are our town’s standards. Basically, if you spot a pole like that, you’re in Southspring.”

As we approach the vista, I catch the smell of hay and something sweet on the warm breeze blowing past us from ahead. I also detect the faintly rumbling splashes of a distant river, in turn recognizing the sweetness on the air to actually be

the smell of fresh fish. The hiker runs up ahead of me with the *darters* hovering closely behind her.

“Oh, perfect, the sunlight is glistening off of the waterway!”

I step up and take in the sights: Mountains, trees, blue-roofed buildings, a sparkling river, farmlands, a waterfall, roads, cargo boats, and the low-lying, dusty haze of crowded living. It is a beautiful view. The town reaches all the way to the top of the mountain it is growing on and is crisscrossed with roads on the sloping side and stairways on the sheer side with the waterfall.

“There’s a spring on top of the mountain that the waterfall comes from. We have a famous resort near the summit that you should check out while you’re here!”

She points down towards some docks by the river.

“We should go over there and have *tsupan* by the waterway first! The dusk market will just be setting up. Afterwards, I’ll show you a place where you can rest for the night, does that sound good?”

It sounds great, and I tell her that I am excited to explore her town. I’m nervous, though. I think she can see it on my face, and I look to the ground.

“I cooked up a theory while we were walking, do you want to hear it?”

The *puzzleglass* beside the road sways in the winds here on the top of the hill. I nod and ask her what her theory is.

“I think that you haven’t started over again this time yet because you’re still enjoying it.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The grassy bank of the river is just a short distance from the brick waterway that we are walking along. The quiet, dusty road turned into a colorful, friendly avenue almost as soon as we started passing the blue-roofed buildings of the town, and people traveling with all kinds of creatures offer us pleasantries as they finish up their afternoons.

Most of the houses, businesses, and governmental structures that we are strolling past appear to be built out of bricks and coated in an old, flaking plaster. Signs in their glass windows advertise merchandise and services, some familiar and some odd, but all of the buildings are currently closed.

“The dusk market only happens every so often, and the companies usually close up shop on these evenings to allow the town’s vendors to sell their wares. We can take a look around after we grab a bite if you want!”

I admit to myself that I feel apprehensive about this place. I’m in a strange market with someone that I’ve only met in the woods, and our day’s plans seem to be getting more and more involved. I wonder why I shouldn’t just wake up again, go back to the country road, walk in another direction, find a different town, get to know someone else...

No, this is that other town for me right now. I decide this right as we walk under the shade of one of the food vendors’ carts.

The hiker and the vendor hail each other, and then I am introduced. The buttery odor of fresh fish mixes with the crackling of bread frying in oil, and I am overcome by a hunger that I didn’t realize I was harboring. The vendor’s cart sways while she flips dough around in the oil, and a cluster of shiny, red fish tied up from









their tails swing and bounce against the pole underneath the center of the heavy umbrella.

"I caught these *firefish* this morning. You two can have first tastes of the evening if you'd like."

She holds out a broad knife with two small cuts of orange, translucent meat resting on it. The hiker quickly snatches one and throws it into her mouth, chewing slowly with her eyes closed. I follow suit, thanking the vendor.

It's delicious, and, before I realize it, it's gone. There's a forlorn ecstasy on the hikers face as she swallows her cut.

"Ugh, that's what *firefish* is supposed to taste like!"

She starts going through her pockets, furiously counting richly colored pieces of paper. In a second, she has a crumpled wad in her fist of what I assume is Southspring's currency and thrusts it forward enthusiastically.

"Two baskets of *tsupan* please."

The vendor accepts the hiker's payment and begins cutting slices of meat from the body of a fish lying on the cutting board in front of her. She removes a few thin, round shells of dough that have been gently rising on a hot stone sitting above her fire and makes a stack of alternating fish and bread layers. After coating this lightly in batter, she dips it into the hot oil using tongs. In a minute, she holds up a sizzling biscuit about the size of the palm of my hand. Quickly ducking behind her cart, she produces a small, hand-woven basket that she places her creation into. It's still dripping with oil as she hands it to me.

"*Tsupan*, Southspring-style. Careful not to let the oil drip on your clothes, just hold the basket out in front of you for a bit while it cools down."

The hiker looks towards me enviously before turning her attention to the vendor who has already begun preparing the second basket of *tsupan* that was ordered. I try to pick up the *tsupan* that I was given.

It's not as hot as I thought it would be, so I bring it up to my nose. Heated columns of air float up my nostrils carrying the flavor of the *firefish* and newly prepared bread with it. I take a bite.

Again, it's delicious, and, again, I find the food gone all too soon. The hiker, now with her own basket of *tsupan* in front of her, looks at me smiling. I realize that I have the same expression on my face that she had when she had her cut of the *firefish* a moment ago. We both start laughing.

"I'm glad we came here first. It's good stuff, right?"

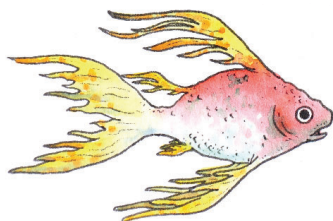
I can't deny it; it tastes amazing. Once the hiker finishes her *tsupan*, the vendor asks us to return the baskets. As I hand it back, I see a small creature with auburn fur hunched over behind her. It appears to be cleaning the last few bits of meat off of some *firefish* bones. I ask her if that's her traveling companion.

"Yes, the past six months with this little *roxo* have been great, she's actually a big help with the cart's refuse."

She turns and makes a *ts-ts-ts* noise at the fox-sized animal, squatting down and scratching its head between its ears. Its concentration doesn't appear to break as it continues to eat the *firefish* leftovers. The vendor starts to talk to it quietly.

"Yeah, you really enjoy eating all of those little fishy bits, yes, you're so adorable..."

The hiker nudges my arm, motioning with her head that we should



continue on our way. I nod my acknowledgment as she peers over the top of the cart to address the vendor, who is still coddling her *roxo*.



"Thanks for the *tsupan*, we're going to continue our tour of the market now."

The vendor stands up again, thanks us for enjoying her food, and wishes us well. Just as I turn to follow the hiker, who has already started to leave, the vendor shoots me a question.

"Have you been traveling out there alone for a long time?"

Her question catches me off guard, and, for a moment, I feel something like dizziness. The hiker is still walking away. I try to point towards the reeds by the riverbank to explain that the *puzzlegrass* has been traveling with me, but I feel like my mouth is moving slowly and my words are slurring. Despite sounding incoherent to myself, the vendor seems to be paying attention and acknowledging what I say.

"Ah, I see, that explains it! It seems like you have a fun evening ahead of you. I hope that you enjoy your time here, Southspring is a nice town."

She has a weird focus in her gaze; I can see something watery and hopeful in it. I thank her awkwardly, wish her a successful night, and then run to catch up with the hiker.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come on, you're being dumb!"

I can't tell if the hiker is actually angry or just being very playful.

"I'm only saying, there isn't any actual magic involved, it's just a skill that you can learn."

The man we're speaking with is sitting behind a table of pamphlets advertising a wide range of services: Roof cleaning, package delivery, wall painting, fruit picking, pet rescue, and many more. I still hadn't figured out the nature of the business he was representing (other than that it was called the "Ladder Mage Company") when he and the hiker started in on a discussion that was clearly a continuation of a prior conversation.

"How can you say that when the only people flying around this town on ladders are ladder mages like you? You have a special ability, why don't you own up to it?"

"Just because I work for the company doesn't mean that I'm a ladder mage. That's something the other employees stand by to garner attention. Literally anyone can come in to our headquarters and learn how to fly around on a ladder. Calling myself a ladder mage is just company lingo. It would be like working as a chef at a restaurant and calling yourself a 'food mage.'"

"Except that the food doesn't come out on flying plates."

"Well, maybe it could if the chef practiced a little bit harder."

The hiker threw up her arms.

"Whatever, you're the worst."

Dusk has set in, and the brick waterway is bustling with shoppers, food vendors, sellers of handmade goods, and people like this ladder mage who are advertising local businesses. Folks seem to be in good spirits, and they're walking

around excitedly, talking and buying things. Energetic music is playing somewhere ahead of us near the bottom of the large waterfall that I spotted earlier from the trail on the ridge. The hiker seems to personally know many of the individuals running the dusk market, and the steady stream of introductions doesn't tire me. I am fascinated by everything I am experiencing.

"What about you, do you believe that the fliers have some kind of secret, special ability?"

He starts his question looking at me and ends it handing his isopod companion a small cracker to nibble on while it crawls from one shoulder to the other, feeling it's way with two long antennae sticking out of its head. I explain that I've never seen anyone flying on anything before. The ladder mage looks smugly at the hiker.

"See, if no one flies around where your friend comes from, then it can't be an innate characteristic of a person. Ladder flight must just be our little Southspring secret."

The hiker folds her arms and looks up into the sky, which is rapidly populating with constellations that I have never seen before tonight. She sighs.

"Think what you want, the only reason we're still standing here right now is because I want to show off your girlfriend's handiwork."

"Well, she should be back any second."

The two of them continue to talk about less opinionated matters having to do with people and places that I am unfamiliar with as I continued to peruse the literature at the Ladder Mage Company table. It appears that, in Southspring, there are people, ladder mages, who fly around on wooden ladders getting paid to do work in hard-to-reach places. It definitely sounds magical. Is it real?

I suddenly feel a small, beating breeze against the side of my head. I look to my right to see a frog with wings like a butterfly's flying in the air beside me. It belches out a *mmmarrep* sound in a low tone. Next to it, a person is floating in a colorful tote bag bedazzled with pins and buttons.

"Hello, everyone! Is it a perfect night for dusk market or what out here?"

The bag slowly lowers to the ground, and the person scrunched up inside of it stands up and steps out, folding up the canvas sack and holding it under their arm. The ladder mage starts scooting his chair over to make more room behind the table.

"I figured you died."

"I couldn't remember where I put all of the finished spoons."

They settle in behind the table, catch up briefly with the hiker, push a few neatly arranged fliers off to the side, and lay out a collection of wooden spoons. The hiker turns to me gesturing at the hand-carved utensils.

"She makes each one herself, aren't they cool?"

The bowl of each spoon has been whittled into a face. The façades portray varied emotions while also capturing a sense of whimsy, like relics from a cursed fairy tale. I tell her that I think they are really cool.

"Aw, thank you! You must be the one who travels with *puzzleglass*. Are you enjoying Southspring?"

I'm surprised that she knows about the *puzzleglass* until I notice her hand





the ladder mage a basket of *tsupan*. Word must travel pretty fast in this small community. I let her know that I'm having a lot of fun; the town is beautiful. The hiker interjects sharply towards the ladder mage.

"Okay, so, what about her? Being a ladder mage might be a learned skill, but is that also true for a tote witch?"

The tote witch's eyes dance back and forth between the ladder mage and the hiker for a moment.

"You two are still on that? What is this, the school playground?"

"Hey, she started it. All I'm saying is that anyone can learn to be a ladder mage."

"And, can anyone learn to be a tote witch, babe?"

The ladder mage slouches, defeated.

"No, I suppose not."

The tote witch sits back in her chair behind the table with a triumphant expression on her face. In an instant, though, her expression shifts to one of horror.

"Shitspring..."

"What's wrong?"

"I think I might have left the front door wide open at home, I'll be right back again."

The tote witch quickly unfolds her bag, places it on the ground, steps inside, and squats down. As the canvas tote rises up with her in it, she bids the hiker and me farewell.

"Don't wait around for me, keep exploring the market! It was nice to hang out for a second, maybe we can all chill again soon when we're more relaxed. Bye!"

With a silent whoosh, the tote witch and her flying frog companion disappear into the evening sky. The hiker and the ladder mage begin to say their goodbyes as well when the ladder mage stands up and hands me one of his table's pamphlets.

"I don't know how long you're planning on staying in Southspring, but, if you need work, the Ladder Mage Company is always hiring. Honestly, even if you don't find yourself needing employment, you should still come by headquarters. The address is written right there on the paper I gave you. I'll be holding down the fort there for the next few days, and I would be happy to show you the operation. I'll bet I could even teach you the basics of being a ladder mage if you want. Anyway, feel free to come around!"

The hiker grabs my arm and starts pulling me away.

"Okay, bye bye mister magic-isn't-real-unless-it's-my-girlfriend's-tote-bag."

"Shut up and have a good evening."

"You too!"

As we leave, I consider what the ladder mage said. If, by some miracle, I'm still in Southspring tomorrow and not walking up the old country road again, I think I would like to check out his company.

"Hopefully, I can take you to see their home sometime. They have a lovely house further up the mountain that always smells like sawdust on account of all the spoon carving. They're great people, even though one of them does have a penchant for arguing the most infuriating positions in almost every conversation."

The hiker lets go of my arm as she beckons her two *darters* back onto either shoulder.

"Let's go to the waterfall to hear what's playing tonight. Then we can make

our way uptown to get you a place to stay.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The music is so loud in the plaza that it drowns out the roar of the waterfall’s crash into a small creek that leads to the main river. Wooden columns of various sizes hang from ropes between two of the buildings near the water. Some of the columns appear to be whole trunks of tall trees with the bark removed. People in gray outfits are whacking different parts of each hanging log with mallets in coordination producing a complicated, frenetic rhythm. A band of musicians wearing red capes who are interspersed among the crowd are blowing into long reeds, making a sputtering, horn-like sound. There must be over twenty performers all together. The hiker and I watch the townsfolk and their traveling companions dance in the light of the market for a little while before one or the other of us starts yawning.

“We did a lot today, I think we ought to get you set up somewhere, what do you say?”

I agree, and we start uphill along the avenues that wind up the sloped side of the mountain. Lanterns line the earthen road, and, as we walk, our shadows creep up behind us, swing around, and then stretch forward until we arrive at the penumbra of the next lantern’s light and our shadows materialize behind us once more. It goes on silently like this for a while.

“Wow, I’m more tired than I thought I’d be.”

So am I; the day really has caught up with me.

“Just one more block, and then we’ll be there. It’s actually a library, but there are some dormitories on the second story. We would normally have to get the librarian to approve you before we go up there, but I wouldn’t worry about it, I’ll bet she’s not even there tonight.”

Before long, we’re walking through windowed doors into a candle-lit room filled with bookshelves displaying thousands of colorful book spines. It’s very quiet except for our footfalls on the creaking, hardwood floor. It smells like vanilla and dust in here. The hiker whispers to me.

“I’ll bet the librarian is either asleep or at the market.”

I ask her why she’s whispering. She looks incredulously at me, but then an expression of realization comes over her face.

“I keep forgetting that you’re not from around here. In Southspring, it’s tradition to be as quiet as possible in a library.”

I suspect that there may be other reasons she is trying to remain quiet but continue to follow her through the labyrinth of books. As we tiptoe from floorboard to floorboard, I notice we’re heading towards a spiral staircase leading to the next level. In moments, we’re there.

“Alright, just up here. There are always a few rooms available.”

We creep up the stairs. From the top looking back down at the library, I’m surprised at how small the room actually is. Quickly, we pass through the ceiling to the second story.

We exit the staircase into a short hallway. The stairs themselves continue upward. As we sneak down the hall, I hear a thump from in front of us, followed by a squawking noise and steps. Before the hiker and I can say anything to each other, a door opens, creating a sliver of light on the floor that fills with the shadow

of someone coming into the hallway.

A person in a night robe with a bird perched on their head emerges from the doorway. They step into the hallway and the bird starts flapping its vibrant wings as it looks towards the hiker and me making clicking sounds. I recognize that its striking, scaly head is more like a reptile's than a bird's. The person turns and sees us, a worried expression quickly passing across their face before recognition takes hold, greeting the hiker like an old friend.



"Oh, I'm so glad it's you! I was nervous that someone had posted up in one of the rooms up here without me realizing it. Who's your friend?"

The hiker introduces me again, but it's different from the times she did it in the market. She explains in more detail where we met, that I travel with *puzzlegrass*, how we encountered a *moidon*, and

what sorts of interactions we had at the dusk market. The other woman and her companion listen intently. Everyone is still whispering.

"You two really have done a lot today. Of course, you're both welcome to stay here; the library dormitory is always open to travelers. I'm staying up here tonight because I have family staying in my room below. They're getting older and can't walk up the stairs anymore. There are still three other rooms, though. Feel free to settle in, and I'll see you in the morning. I'm heading up to the roof to get this restless guy some night air before turning in for the night."

The hiker and I thank her as we shuffle past each other in the hall. I open the door opposite to the librarian's and step into a small, humbly furnished room with a bed, a desk with a chair, and a comfy seat by a large window. I peak past the window's striped curtains, but all I can see is the darkness of night. The hiker and I look outside for a moment together.

"Alright, stranger, I'm going to head down the hall and crash in one of the other rooms. See you in the morning?"

I try to explain that I appreciate her showing me Southspring, but, like before at the *tsupan* cart, I feel slightly light-headed, and it sounds in my ears like my words are uttering slowly. She doesn't seem to notice.

"I appreciate you coming along with me. I love this town, and it was fun to show you some of it tonight. There's a lot more we can do tomorrow if you want, but, for now, I'm about ready to pass out."

We say goodbye, and, as she and her *darters* walk out of the room, she turns once more to me.

"I hope you're still here tomorrow."

\*\*\*\*\*

As I lay on the firm mattress trying to let myself fall asleep, I feel my dreams arriving early. In the incomprehensible, timeless way that thoughts work, I loop through my journey over the past few days many times over, noticing new details each time. I don't know which loops take place before I finally lose consciousness and which loops happen after, but, as they progress, it seems that time is moving forward in some sense, each version of each interaction a sort of distorted echo

from the previous one.

*September 19*

I wake up with a panicked start, looking around, frantically taking stock of where I am. Yellow sunlight softly trickles through the curtains of the dorm room in the library. A heavy, gray blanket covers my legs. I am still in Southspring. Somehow, I know that it is not the day following my night out with the hiker. Kicking off the blanket, I walk over to the window and let in more light.

The view from this room directly overlooks the blue roofs of a few adjacent, single-story buildings that border the woods surrounding the town. The library must be at least halfway up the mountain as I can strain to see farmlands by the river in the distance below. By the position of the sun, I assume it is late in the morning. I check my pockets, remember that I haven't been carrying anything with me on this adventure, and then leave the room.

The hallway is quiet. The doors to the other rooms are all open, and I quickly peek into each one to see if the hiker is still around. Each one contains the same, simple furnishings, and each one is uninhabited. I decide to check downstairs.

Walking down the stairs, I can hear soft, unfamiliar music filling the library. It smells the same way that it did when I arrived, though the vanilla hangs more heavily in the air. The librarian and her traveling companion are stationed inside of a large, circular desk enclosure overwhelmed by stacks of books. She looks up at me from reading, angling her head to peer over her glasses.

"Look who made it back to Southspring. I hope you rested well?"

I assure her that I did and thank her for allowing me to stay in the room that night. She tells me that the hiker will be glad to learn that I have returned, though she has been going on longer hikes recently and isn't due back from the one she's on now until tomorrow. I feel that the librarian can notice a slight dismay in my expression at the news.

"You're welcome to use this library as your home for as long as you need to, there is no rushing anything in Southspring. Here, before I forget, this was on the desk in your room from when you first came by that night. You must have picked it up in the dusk market."

It was the pamphlet that the ladder mage handed me.

The song that was playing ends, and the librarian's bird-like companion starts to rustle on its perch beside her. The librarian swivels over to an ornate phonograph sitting between towers of books on the other side of her desk, turns over the record, and resets the pin. Eerie, lovely music begins to play again, and the animal calms down.

"My *archops* gets a little crazy if it's too quiet, especially when guests are here, and, besides you upstairs, my parents are still staying in the downstairs room. Music and *filigrass* incense seem to help."

She fixes her spectacles and turns to a pile of open books in another section of her cozy, all-encompassing desk. It's as if she's set up to remain inside this space for long stretches at a time.

"I was doing some research while you were resting. As I understand it, you travel with *puzzlegrass*, correct?"

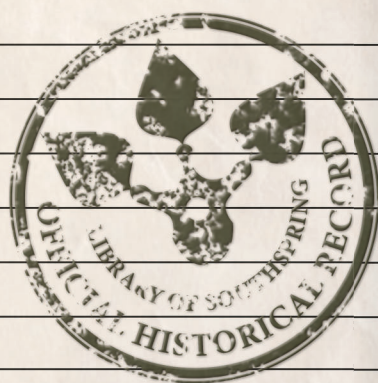
I do.

"As you may have observed, not many folks around here travel with plants. I know you're from out of town, so I figured that you didn't realize that it's

# Sumacean Catalogue:

## Plants

001	Melgrass
002	Daphlower
003	Curweed
004	Wilo-may
005	Sapwal
006	Gohana
007	Rutredge
008	Appovine
009	Birset
010	Fruttelia
011	Tungrass
012	Oakan
013	Rasplar
014	False Melgrass
015	Broad-may
016	Northlily
017	Bocksen
018	Mapesong
019	Riphe
020	Boxcrade
021	Paru-tine
022	Deli-tine
023	Reedflower
024	Puzzlegrass
025	Sweet-tine
026	Ashberry
027	Tallech
028	Ronpo





considered...well, pretty old-fashioned I guess you could say.

"The first people to discover the springs on top of our little mountain almost six hundred years ago are said to have traveled with plants. They seem to have been a very interesting group, but, really, not much is known about them. According to the historical records, they didn't begin traveling with animals until after they established the town, though it's hard to be certain of anything that supposedly happened so long ago. Am I boring you with this information?"

Honestly, it does seem boring, but I feel like I owe it to her to listen considering that I spent the night in her house. Or, rather, the past month and a half, however that adds up. I ask her to continue.

"They were called Sumaceans. Many of their traditions are still practiced in Southspring to this day. The other people that I've met who travel with plants are usually obsessed with the Sumacean aspects of our culture. They also usually live out in the forest and sleep in caves, but that's a different matter.

"When I learned that you traveled with *puzzlegrass*, I unearthed the Sumacean Catalogs."

She pats the open books in front of her.

"The Sumaceans obsessed over numerically indexing the world around them. They wrote volumes upon volumes of lists naming everything they encountered and assigning it a number. It is said that they numbered each thing they found in the world in the order that they encountered it from the moment they found the springs in what would become our town. When I was young, we would memorize large segments of the more widely known catalogs, but I don't think kids really do that anymore.

"Sure enough, when I took out the Sumacean plant catalogue, it was as I thought I remembered: *Puzzlegrass* is right on the first page!"

Standing up, she takes the book on top of the pile she was sitting in front of and drops it down in front of me. It is very old, bound with a thick twine, and extremely dusty. She points towards the bottom of the first page. Just as she said, there's *puzzlegrass*. It's listed as number twenty-four.

"Wild, huh? 'X' marks the spot!"

I nod. I don't really think it is too crazy. I'm more curious about what she meant about people who travel with plants living in caves, but, before I can ask about that, someone emerges from the back of the library. The librarian glances over and sighs.

"It looks like everyone is waking up late today."

"Aw, don't make me feel bad, your mother was having trouble sleeping again last night."

I suspect that this is her father. He's wearing a wide-brimmed hat and rubbery boots that go up above his knees. Under one arm, he holds a tin barrel filled with dark soil.

"I see you're taking the ensnarement out again?"

"The *firefish* are still biting, aren't they? Of course I'm going out again! You won't be complaining when I bring home some fresh food."

The librarian turns to me.

"An 'ensnarement' is a group of *canalurs*, like how a group of *moidon* are called a 'caravan.'"

She drops another book in front of me, a catalogue of animals, and points halfway down the page to where *canalurs* are listed as number twelve. I still don't

grasp the significance of these indexes.

"My father travels with five *canalurs*, and he insists on chopping them up bit by bit as bait. They regrow their arms, but I still think it's barbaric."



The man stomps over to the desk, puts his hand inside of the container of dirt he is carrying, and pulls out a squirming creature that looks like an earthworm but with three ends branching out from a central point, coiling around his fingers.

"Oh, come on, they don't care. We share a connection, these *canalurs* and I. I'd know if they didn't like it."

He puts his companion back into its house and looks at me.

"You must be the planty-person my daughter's been excited to talk with. Is she talking your ear off about the Sumaceans? She gets that from her mother, it's just a bunch of waste-of-time riddles if you ask me."

"For your information, I was asked to explain this stuff. I didn't even get to the poems yet."

"Well, you two enjoy yourselves, I'm getting down to the waterway before those market vendors nab all the good stuff. Nice to meet you!"

With that, he marches out the door.

"Now, where were we?"

I'm about to ask about the people who travel with plants when the librarian points above the door.

"Of course, the poems! It's an old Sumacean tradition that any institution be granted credence through its inclusion of a poem in its identity. *Some* people call them 'riddles,' which is partially accurate, but the beauty cuts a little bit deeper than that in my opinion."

I look above the front door of the library. There is a wooden plaque there with the words

*Some companions have leaves,  
and some companions have spines,  
but only one companion has both.*

carved into it. I think for a moment before it dawns on me. The librarian must see the illumination pass over my face as she holds up her finger to silence me.

"Ooh, you're quick, but you know how riddles work. We don't say the solution out loud, no matter how obvious. Maybe you should explore Southspring and take a look at some of the other poems? You probably don't want to listen to me going off about the Sumaceans any longer."

I agree; it would be fun to explore the city some more.

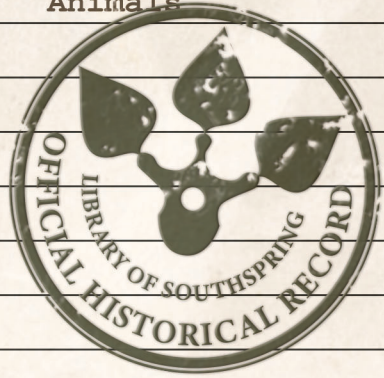
"Take a handful of berries from the bush on the eastern side of this building; they should keep you satisfied until dinner, which you're welcome to come back here for. Enjoy your afternoon!"

I thank her for her hospitality and step outside.

\*\*\*\*\*

I wander aimlessly for a couple of hours. It's an overcast day, and the stroll feels cozy for it. The berries have proven to be surprisingly filling, and I

# Sumacean Catalogue: Animals



001	Riddelrimer
002	Skipper
003	Golglium
004	Sunchaser
005	Archops
006	Whipchuck
007	Duelhorn
008	Flowerbat
009	Spelrank
010	Wissel
011	Lercraw
012	Canalur
013	Oniooss
014	Reperceus
015	Moidon
016	Twidg
017	Cloud-amei
018	Tatobug
019	Flutterhop
020	Water-amei
021	Roxo
022	Munwuf
023	Vish
024	Treestar
025	Darter
026	Nuchlot
027	Firefish
028	Delnine

regret picking as many as I did, though I feel more secure knowing that there are emergency rations in my pockets now. Aqueducts from the spring on top of the mountain supply each main road with its own source of clean, public water. Food, drink, a place to stay...what sort of place is this?

Despite all having blue roofs and plastered, brick walls, no two buildings are structured in exactly the same way. Each block has its own character, and I quickly feel that I have my bearings. Residential buildings and commercial businesses seem to be interlocked in a symbiosis of community. Does this all have to do with the Sumacean traditions that the librarian mentioned?

I haven't stepped inside any of the businesses to look at the poems that she described. It makes me uncomfortable to imagine popping in somewhere random just to read something hanging on their wall. I bring out the pamphlet that the ladder mage handed me.

The address is only one street up the mountain. I decide to make my way there to check it out. With some luck, maybe that ladder mage will be there, and then I won't feel awkward about looking around.

Walking up the connecting avenue, I see the silhouette of a person falling out of the bright, gray sky. I'm afraid for a moment, but then I notice that their descent is controlled and that the figure is holding onto a ladder. It must be a ladder mage! It looks as though they are about to alight on a tower up ahead of me. I quicken my pace.

By the time I'm standing in front of it, I can see that, indeed, this is the Ladder Mage Company. A ladder mage is just departing from a wooden dock affixed to the side of the tower behind the main building. A sign on the front door says "Accepting Work" in thoughtful script. I enter.

The inside is arranged more like a lounge than any business I've ever seen. Gaudy sofas, short tables covered in ring-shaped cup stains, and giant pillows fill the floorspace while most of the walls are set with book-filled shelves. In the corner, a small counter is covered in booklets and fliers advertising services like I saw at the dusk market. Behind this counter is the ladder mage from the other night.

"Welcome to the Ladder Ma-hey! It's you!"

I am surprised and relieved that he recognizes me. When he asks about the hiker, I explain the events of my morning.

"That's great then I'm glad you decided to stop by after all! Feel free to hang out, this is a pretty relaxed place even when we're busy, which we are not right now. We've mostly just been selling joy rides for the past couple of weeks."

His large bug companion is crawling on the counter flicking its antennae at my pockets. I pull out a berry and ask if it's alright to feed it.

"Oh yeah, *tatobugs* love berries, feel free."

I place the berry on the counter, and the isopod scuttles over to it, mashing it up quickly between its mandibles. I tell the ladder mage that I've just learned how each animal in Southspring has a number.

"Ah, yes, the Sumacean Catalogs. Between my girlfriend and I, we've got eighteen and nineteen covered, haha!"

I don't understand why that's funny, but I laugh with him and then ask about the poem for his company.

"Of course, the poem! The librarian must have really gave you the run down on how things work around here. Check it out, it starts right over there next to the front door."







## STRANGER

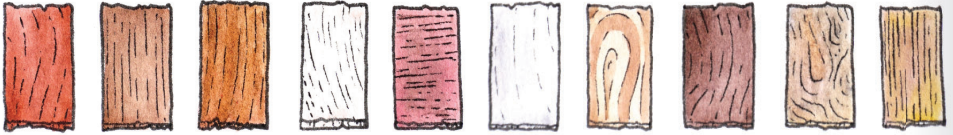
I walk over to the yellow door, and, sure enough, a tall frame housing an embroidered canvas hangs just beside it. The threads depict a ladder with lines of text forming a question along each rung. The work seems very old and is difficult to read, but I can soon make out the entire thing. It's titled "Who Is My Companion?"

*What color is their body?  
What is caught in their tail?  
What sound do they make?  
What color is their fur?  
What are three or more called?  
What color are their wings?  
What do they use their horn to do?  
What color is their head?  
What is on their head?  
What do they love to do above the water?*

I stare at it for a while. I expected that this would be fun to mull over, but this feels more like a quiz than a poem or a riddle. I look back at the ladder mage.

"Don't worry, no one gets that part right away. Every poem in town is solved in a unique way. This is one of the tougher ones in my experience."

A bit dejected, I step over to another spot along the wall beside the embroidered quiz. Over here, ten blocks made from different kinds of wood are mounted into the plaster, each with a piece of paper set behind glass beneath it.



"Those are the woods that ladder mages prefer for their ladders. Back when this company was established roughly one hundred and fifty years ago, the founder sought out which trees would make the finest ladders, and, being a student of all things Sumacean, he of course noted the date of each discovery in day-year notation."

I look at the papers displayed beneath each block of wood. Together, they seem to be a journal of discontinuous anecdotes. From left to right, they read as follows:

*Mapesong, 362-443: High carrying capacity but moves slowly through the air.*

*Paru-tine, 266-444: Rises easily, turns rough. Wood hard to cut.*

*Sweet-tine, 331-443: Wobbles above the snow line but flies very quickly.*

*Riphe, 20-445: Flies even faster than sweet-tine but breaks easily.*

*Broad-may, 104-444: Great characteristics at first, but rungs need regular replacing.*

*Gohana, 35-445: Remains perfectly straight no matter what. Frustrating.*

*Oakan, 119-444: Seems drawn to other oakan material causing drift when working.*

*Rutredge, 87-444: Gets warm while flying, good for winter.*

*Sapwal, 11-444: Doesn't fly higher than the clouds. Great for clear days.*

*Tallech, 93-445: Supply is way upriver, hard to come by. Weirdly flexible.*

"We've since learned how to properly harvest and treat each of these different woods to get the most out of them. Besides being a part of our poem, I think it's cool to have these first impressions from the founder. I use *broad-may* myself. It's really very reliable if you commit to the upkeep. Here, let me show you."

He runs out of the back door for a moment and returns with a ladder made from mauve-tinged wood. He pauses for a moment at the counter to allow his *tatobug* companion to climb up his arm. His enthusiasm is a little contagious.

"It's a classical ten-rung design, so I usually ride with my feet on rungs one and three and hold one hand on rung six for stabilization."

The ladder mage climbs onto his ladder in the way he described. I worry for a moment that he'll fall over as he puts his weight on it with the angle its resting at, but it bounces back towards him with a strange sort of buoyancy.

"Novice ladder mages will often spend weeks trying to balance on their ladders while standing on the ground like this. It's a perfect exercise for learning how to control your path through the air once you figure out the flying part. Want to try it out?"

I take him up on his offer as he steps down. Taking the ladder from him, I'm surprised by how heavy it is. Almost as soon as I try to step up onto it, it starts to fall away from me, and he has to help me catch it.

"Don't worry about it, try again. Remember, the sixth rung it where you hold your hand. Try to see if you can get your feet on the first and third rungs while you're holding onto it."

I try again in the way that he describes. As my second foot leaves the ground and steps onto the first rung, I can feel a sense of momentary balance before the ladder begins to tip toward me, and, again, I'm forced to dismount.

"You're a fast learner. I'll bet you'd figure out this whole thing pretty quick if you put your mind to it."

I thank him for letting me try to balance on his ladder. It does feel like I could get the hang of it if I had my own ladder to practice on for a while. I don't know how long I'll be in Southspring, but it seems like an interesting enough way to pass some time. I ask him where someone could get their own ladder.

He walks over to the corner and retrieves a booklet from behind the counter then hands it to me. "Making Your Own Ladder." Flipping through it, I can see that it contains detailed instructions for going out to a forest, selecting a tree, chopping it down, shaping the wooden ladder components, assembling it, and coating it against weathering. It looks like a very involved process.

"If you want to give it a go, I'll let you borrow my tools, just bring them back when you're done."

I'm getting deep into this whole ladder-mage thing a little too impulsively for my liking, but the promise of flying around on a ladder does have an allure that I'm willing to entertain. I thank him again, and take him up on his offer.



"Excellent, I think you'll find that you really enjoy the process!"

Again, he runs out of the back door. This time, he returns with a heavy bag of jangling tools. Before I get convinced to commit to anything else, I decide to try and make my way out. By this time, the afternoon has actually progressed enough that I can see the surrounding buildings' shadows covering most of the street through the front window. I tell the ladder mage that I think I should head back to the library soon to start reading the booklet and then eat dinner.

"Absolutely. Again, I'm glad that you decided to come around. We'll see you soon I hope. Don't give up on our company's poem, it's worth giving an effort!"

I leave the Ladder Mage Company with another booklet and a canvas bag of woodworking implements. As I do almost every few minutes that I get some alone time in this town, I ask myself what in the world I'm doing here.

\*\*\*\*\*

When I arrive back at the library, I see the hiker leaning over the desk speaking with the librarian. They both look over at me as I make a loud noise while struggling to get the wide tool bag through the front door.

"You're back!"

The hiker runs over to me and takes the bag from my hands.

"I worried that you were getting caught up around the pond like when we first met. I've been camping out there recently just in case you came through that way again, but I gave up early on this last trip. How exciting that you woke up upstairs this morning!"

It's inexplicable how much I believe the hiker. I think it's how she expresses herself, it just feels honest. I realize that I really missed her this afternoon. I tell her that exploring the city wasn't the same without her and that I could have probably used her help in deciphering the Ladder Mage Company poem.

"Ugh, of all those shitspring 'poems,' that one is probably the least poetic. I'm no artist myself, but I do know that 'poem' doesn't stand for 'pretty obvious encryption method' like all the Sumacean-heads in this town seem to think it does."

The librarian shoots her a glaring look that only I can see.

"But, for real, it's cool that you got the ladder-making tools. Want to make a camping trip of it? I'll bet we could get it finished in a few days, just you, the *puzzlegrass*, the *darters*, and me. What do you say?"

I say we should do it. The project will be easier with two people, and I genuinely like the hiker. It sort of feels like we both need the same amount of friendship, if that makes any sense.

"Perfect! We should head out first thing tomorrow."

I hope I'm still here tomorrow.

\*\*\*\*\*

Following having a delicious dinner of fresh *firefish* with the librarian's family and then sharing a few sweet, dessert drinks late into the night with the hiker, the librarian, and their traveling companions around the desk in the library, we all retired to our respective rooms. Once again, I'm completely exhausted and trying to fall asleep in the darkness of the upstairs dormitory.

As I drift off into dreams, I imagine everything that I've experienced in

Southspring as having a number assigned to it. The digits seem to float underneath it all somehow in my mind. It's hard to explain, yet it's also unnecessary to try as I lose consciousness.

September 23

Again, I had awoken with a start, worried about where I might find myself. Also again, it was the small room for travelers in the Southspring library. That was four mornings ago at this point.

The hiker and I are now well into our ladder-making camping trip. We had taken a trail around the southern side of the town's mountain and then ventured deep into the forest beyond the farmlands. The hiker seemed to know where she was going, so I followed her without question.

We ended up in a beautiful clearing surrounded by many different kinds of trees. It is perfect for the project. There is always a chance that I could wake up somewhere different, but, each night, I have gone to sleep in a tent that the librarian lent me, and, each morning, I awake at about the same time as the hiker emerges from her tent. For all of our hard work, it is a relaxing trip, though filling up on trail berries and edible bark for each meal is getting repetitive.

So far, we have selected a tree; chopped it up into the right sizes of material; and cut, hacked, or whittled each piece into its necessary shapes. On this, the last full day of our trip, just about all that is left to do is fine tune and assemble the ladder according to the manual. Today, we're joined by a group of slow, barrel-size critters that look similar to beavers but with long, rat-like tails raised high into the air as they graze in the field by our tents.

"Have you ever seen *whipchucks* before?"

I have not.

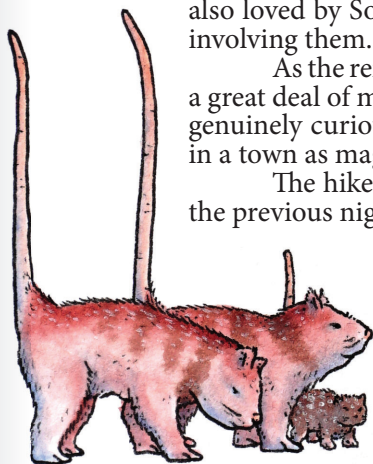
"They're stinky and a plague for farmers, but they are also loved by Southspringers because of a popular children's tale involving them. Would you like to hear it?"

As the remaining steps of this ladder project do not require a great deal of my concentration, I say that I would. Besides, I am genuinely curious about what kind of stories one grows up with in a town as magical as Southspring.

The hiker gets comfortable and pokes at the embers from the previous night's campfire.

"A long time ago, back when the *whipchucks'* tails dragged along the ground, a whole colony of *whipchucks* was foraging for food along an open road. They needed to stay close together and outside of the tall grass or they would get separated and lost. Food was scarce on the road, however, and they had to keep moving in order to increase their chances of finding enough sustenance for the entire colony. So move they did.

"For years and years, they traveled along the road until, suddenly, the road ended. Everyone was worried. Even the oldest *whipchucks* couldn't remember a time when there was no road. The colony suddenly found themselves surrounded on three sides by tall grass and flanked by a road that had been picked clean. No one





knew what to do, so they rested there, growing weak and hungry.

"Eventually, one of the younger *whipchucks* stood up as tall as it could and told everyone that they could enter the tall grass and still not lose each other if they raised their tails proudly into the air. That way, if any of them lost track of the colony, they could stand on their hind legs and look for the tails sticking out of the grass.

"The other *whipchucks* didn't like the idea. They said that it was ridiculous to walk around with one's tail raised in the air and that they would rather sit at the end of the road forever than go on traveling like that. The young *whipchuck* stepped down, humiliated.

"Eventually, however, more animals came up on the end of the road. First came a family of *wissels*, who had been foraging far behind the *whipchucks*. They were also too afraid to continue into the wild meadows, and rested at the end of the road. Second came a tangle of *wysprems*, who had been grabbing leftovers way behind the *wissels*. They also didn't like the idea of continuing ahead, and rested with everyone else.

"The last group to show up were the *winnebacks*, and their whole scurry was completely out of breath. Once one of them got their wind back, they explained that a pack of hungry *roxos* was coming up behind them, starved and ready to eat everybody. All of the animals went into a panic.

"Once again the young *whipchuck* stood up and asked the other members of the colony to lead the other animals into the field away from the road. The *wissels*, *wysprems*, and *winnebacks* begged the other *whipchucks* to help them all with their long tails, and eventually, the older *whipchucks* agreed to try it.

"Tails raised, they marched into the unknown. The *whipchucks* made a large circle around all of the other animals as they made their way quickly forward, standing every so often and looking over the top of the grass to make sure they were still with the group. They traveled like this for many hours.

"They eventually came upon an opening in the grass. It was the middle of a new road! Everyone looked to the young *whipchuck* for advice on what they should do next.

"The young *whipchuck* told all of the other animals to run down the road in one direction while they themselves stayed behind to deal with the hungry *roxos*. The other animals agreed and ran down the road.

"Soon, the *roxo* pack burst out of the meadow onto the road, snarling and drooling. They were about to eat up the young colony member when the *whipchuck* asked them how hungry they were. They said they were more hungry than they had ever been. The young *whipchuck* promised to tell the pack which direction the other animals went if the pack would allow them to live. A whole bunch of animals would be far more filling than one measly child after all.

"The *roxos* agreed, and the young *whipchuck* pointed them in the direction opposite to where their people ran. Crazy with *roxo*-appetite, the whole pack ran this direction. All except one nasty *roxo*, who chased the young *whipchuck* back into the tall grass. None of the other animals were eaten by the *roxos*, though they never saw the young hero again.

"To this day, the *whipchucks* still walk around with their tails raised, hoping to signal the savior of their colony who has been lost in the tall grass. That is why we have the saying 'the expectations caught in a *whipchuck's* tail' to help describe when we expect to find something or someone we have lost."

The hiker and I sit silently for a second.

"I should have warned you; it's kind of a bummer tale."

I thank her for telling me the story. If I'm going to be spending more time in Southspring, then I'll need to learn these kinds of stories, even if they're a little depressing.

"What do you think, are you almost done with that ladder?"

There isn't much left to do. We'll be able to pack up everything this evening and then set out first thing tomorrow.

"Great! So, do you think you're really going to be able to fly with that ladder?"

I say that I'm not sure, but I'm hopeful.

"Like you've heard me explain before, I believe there is magic in Southspring. Real magic. So I think that it could work out for you. The ladder mages will probably stress that the solution to their 'poem' is some sort of secret to their whole levitation trick, but...well, I've been with you for a while now, and I think that you may have a special, more powerful magic that is all your own."

I don't know how to feel about that. My own magic? Really?

"That's maybe a weird thing to put on you, but I think I have a way to explain it that you'll like. You're kind of into these Sumacean 'riddles,' right?"

Sure.

"Well, here's one that I've cooked up for you, tell me what you think.

*"The animals of Southspring that you've seen alive  
Line up before you in the order they were found  
Find where they are marked in the archaic archive  
To spell the name of who will get you off the ground."*

\*\*\*\*\*

Evening falls before I'm ready. We struggle for a short while to relight our campfire before giving up and calling it a day. We're both tired and retire to our tents.

As ever, I lie awake in the darkness, trying to fall asleep. I am preoccupied with the hiker's poem. Animals. Order. Name. It's too much, there are too many puzzles in my head right now. Too many people trying to get me to do too many things. I give up, and release my mind to thoughtlessness.

*September 24*

I am back on the old country road. The old farmhouses, the abandoned fields, the overgrown gutters. It's all the same as when I first got myself out here all those weeks ago. I feel so far away from Southspring. Am I really supposed to trek all the way back?

There is one thing new here, actually. Something is leaning up against the fencepost beside me. It's an ancient ladder consumed by mosses and lichens. I lift it up and set it before me. It's weak with age.

I grip one of the rungs with my hand and step carefully onto another with my foot. Looking through the gaps in the rungs, I can see the road stretching long before me. Looking to the ground, I can see the *puzzlegrass* stems swaying in the soft breeze, causing ripples in the puddles at their base. I close my eyes and think.

Thinking.

Thinking.

Hmmm...no...

I feel frozen. What am I not understanding?

I hear birdsong coming from the burgundy-leaved fruit tree growing in the broken fence. It's the golden-bellied oriole. It hops around in the tree for a second and then flies over my head. I lose sight of it against the sky.

It dawns on me.

I think I found what I was looking for!

I step onto the ladder with my other foot, and the ladder begins to tilt away from me. I lean back softly. For a moment, I feel like the ladder is alive, helping me maintain balance.

And then, suddenly, I feel weightless.

### AFTERWARD

I rise up into the sky faster than I could have imagined. Pushing forward, I rip through the clouds. Before I know it, I'm passing over the pond where I first met the hiker. A little further, and I can see Southspring's mountain by the river. I fly in low over the water, passing a group of people fishing along the bank. I realize that I'm laughing like an idiot, and it feels so good that I'm practically crying.

Climbing through the air up the mountainside, I see the library. The librarian is up on the roof with her traveling companion and a stack of books. I shout down to them, waving. She waves back, a bewildered expression on her face.

The Ladder Mage Company is just up ahead. I lower myself to look in the front window to where the ladder mage is sitting behind the counter with his *tatobug*. He looks up at me, shocked. I wave and rise again into the sky just as he runs out the door, waving at me with wide eyes.

I turn southward and survey the forest beyond the mountain. Eventually, I find the clearing where the hiker and I were camping. I can see her still packing up the site, her *darters* dancing in the field beside her. I lower myself to the ground right behind her.

She turns and looks at me, smiling. I think tears are in her eyes. She drops what she's holding and gives me a strong hug. I thank her and tell her that I understand.

"I believe that you really do understand. Go way up and take a look at the whole thing.

"Oh, and, welcome to Southspring!"

I get back onto my ladder and fly high into the sky, higher than I had been yet. As I go further and further, the whole world comes into view. All of the people, the places, the animals, the buildings...everything.

In the truest possible terms, I am no stranger here. I am a part of it all.





[illegible]





Thanks for reading  
*Stranger*, I hope you enjoyed it!

Feel free to send me a message at  
**[gossamersummit@gmail.com](mailto:gossamersummit@gmail.com)**  
if you're interesting in contacting me with  
regards to this project.