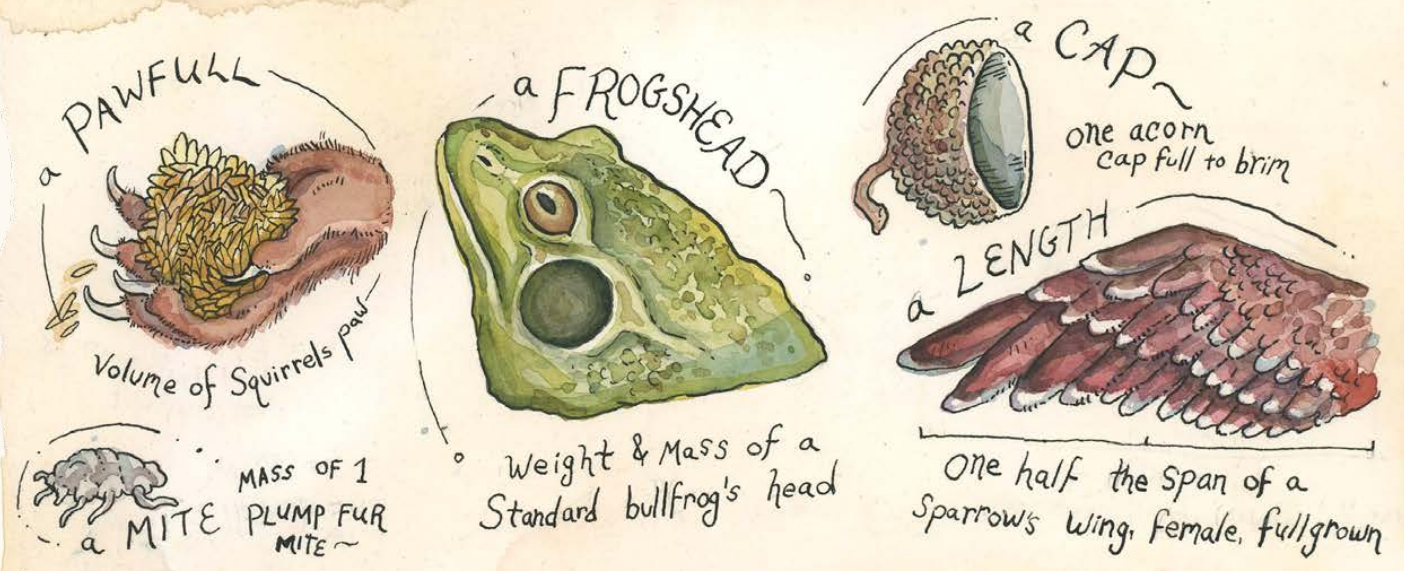


# STANDARD MARKET MEASUREMENTS



# STANDARD MARKET CONVERSIONS



## Chapter 1: Knot

### The Barterer

Before she became a master barterer and a knife-thrower, a traveler, a traitor, and a legend, she almost became breakfast for the local garter snake.

She arrived in town, somehow, with the spring storm. Just an infant, but her ear-piercing screams rose over the winds that raged through the night, tore dead limbs off trees, and covered the Hollow with a thin dusting of snow. The townsfolk rose before dawn to move downed branches from the roads and rooftops, investigating underneath each one for the source of the racket. It was Alderman Clark who found her, cradled in the roots of a fir tree and crying herself purple.

In no time, the townsfolk had gathered around her.

"Whatever that thing is, she can't be much bigger than my kits when they were born," said a rat, the town tailor. "Can you imagine how loud she'll be when she's full-grown?"

"Wait, I've heard of this species!" said a rabbit, the town idiot. "Hairless and gangly! They're called, ah, norms."

"Gnomes!" hissed the rat.

"But it would need claws to be a gnome," said Alderman Clark, hopping closer to examine the creature's stubby toes and fingers. He was a short-sighted old crow, and in all the commotion he'd forgotten



his glasses at home. “Perhaps it’s a subspecies.”

“Or an elf?” The rabbit jostled past the rat to peer at the creature’s ears.

“Elves’ ears are pointed, not round,” the rat, Sal, muttered. “You witless shitter.” Sal’s manners had taken a hit after he’d lost his tail to the local fox and started drinking. But the rabbit had, in fact, defecated several times since they’d gathered.

“Enough.” Alderman Clark ruffled his glossy feathers, and the others fell silent. Except the strange creature, who continued to mewl. “We don’t need to know what she is, or agree on what she’s not, so shut your beaks. What is plain to see is that she needs a home.”

“Hah! You’d never sleep again,” said the town dentist, a garter snake. “Let me take care of her, Alderman. With one swallow I’d restore quiet to the town, and she’d sate me for a good five days.”

Alderman Clark had lived in the Hollow a long time, long enough to forget why everyone always addressed him as Alderman (as it certainly wasn’t a role he’d ever campaigned for) and long enough to see too many small things die. Eggs thrown carelessly from nests by cold winds and smashed. The contents of burrows scattered by weasels, entrails of baby rabbits left for the scavengers. There was something compelling about this loud little being— he was impressed by her refusal to be ignored. What would she turn into, if given a chance to grow?

“She’s probably crying due to her lack of fur or feathers. She has no insulation, see? I expect she’s cold. Anyone have a scarf handy?” asked the crow. “That might hush her up.”

The crowd began to mutter amongst themselves. The rabbit lost interest and padded off.

“Well, if no one else is going to, I suppose I’ll do the charitable thing.” Berberta, a toad in a stiffly starched apron, stepped forward. She owned the town store, and her cut-throat haggling had run her afoul of half the town residents. The other half were still angling to get on her good side. “There’s plenty of room for her in my mercantile.”

“You can’t sell her, you know,” said Alderman Clark.

“Well, none of you are stepping up to claim her, so I don’t think you get a say in what I do. Look at her funny paws—bet they’d be great at tying things.” Berberta touched a gleaming white rock strung on a leather cord around the creature’s neck. “Wonder what kind of stone that is. Might fetch a pretty price.”

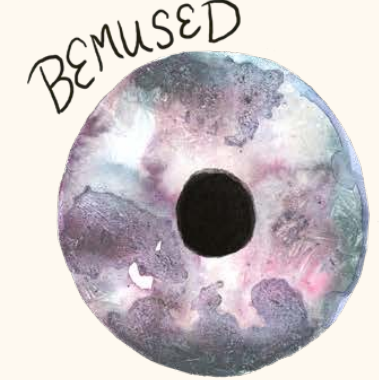
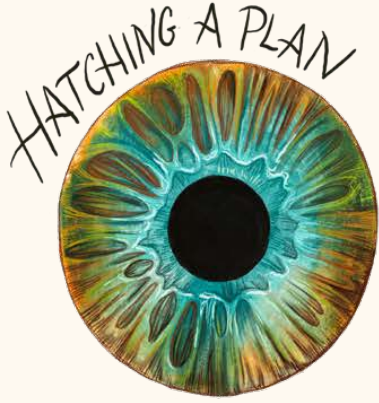
“Oh, let her keep it, Berberta,” Alderman Clark said, turning his head to study the toad with one

wary, black eye. “It’s all she’s got.”

And so the creature found a home in the town store, and quieted right down once she was given a blanket and some nut butter. Everyone traded theories about her mysterious arrival. Some said it must’ve been like that time a hummingbird had hitched a ride on a migrating goose, dozed off inside its down, and tumbled into a snowbank behind the mill. Others believed she’d floated downstream, buoyed by her fat belly. But where this strange being had come from was less important than what she was. Was she harmless as a milk snake, or would she grow up to have a bite as mean as a copperhead’s? One’s species carried great consequences.

Even the birds who’d seen the world outside the hollow had to admit they’d never come across anything remotely like her. They all took to lingering around Berberta’s store, debating origin theories, teaching her to mimic their calls, and braiding her wispy curls up into nest-like top knots. Because of this—or maybe because they could only agree on what she wasn’t— everyone came to call her Knot.

Seasons passed and Knot grew. Her eyes had the disconcerting habit of catching whatever colors she beheld, and, some muttered, turning the colors of her thoughts: moon blue as night



fell, amber when her temper flared. Her hair, too, changed colors with the seasons, molting from a twiggy green in spring, to burnt sienna in the fall. In winter, it turned the muddy gray of a slush puddle.

By the time she could speak, Knot knew the names of all the flora, fungus, and fauna in the forest; by the time she could count, she had memorized their going rates. Alderman Clark taught Knot the Ways of the Woods: how to haggle, and when to plant, which mushrooms were forbidden to trade, and which were good on toast. Knot devoured at least a quarter of the food Berberta tasked her with selling, but the toad always picked her investments wisely— by the time Knot had turned ten, she had proven herself a clever student and remarkably capable store hand. Berbetra taught Knot how to keep track of the store inventory and whacked her if she made any mistakes, but Knot was good enough with numbers that she earned more praise than whacks. Unfortunately, Knot misinterpreted Berberta’s praise for genuine affection. It fueled Knot’s tireless, unpaid labor.

And so Knot became the first of the many things she’d be: a barterer.

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Knot tugged the berry loose and bounced it in her palm, marveling at its weight. Its skin stretched taut over the flesh, blood-red and ready to burst. In the fifteen springs that had passed since she’d arrived in the Hollow, Knot had explored every corner, and this scrawny thorn bush tucked in a rocky outcrop was one of her better-kept secrets.

Knot had begun climbing at dawn, her hands seeking holds between the barbed thorns, gaps of sky brightening above. Now, almost at the top, her brow was beaded with sweat and her arms and legs were ablaze, thrumming pleasantly with the exertion. Knot edged one foot back on a horizontal stretch of stem, to better balance as she shifted her basket-pack to her hip.



Her heel settled onto a bead of dew and began to slide, first almost imperceptibly, then out like a shot. Knot hurtled backwards. Both her feet lost contact with the stem.

For one exquisite moment, she was airborne, weightless.

Then her stomach lurched into her throat and she began to freefall. She streaked past thorny vines on all sides, missing them by hairs.

As though it could think for itself, Knot’s hand grabbed a clean stretch of vine. The thicket jounced under her weight and shook loose a cascade of dew, the tendons on her forearm yanked on impact with a lightning-bright shock of pain. But her right hand held fast. She dangled for a moment, stunned, soaked, her bare feet swinging under her, her pack strap caught on her free forearm, its weight cutting against her flesh. Then, muscles trembling from the strain, she grabbed hold with her other hand, hooked her leg over, and yanked herself back up.

Knot sat straddling the vine. She shook out the sparks dancing through her arm and laughed, incredulous that she wasn’t lying dead beside the dropped berry below. Then she continued to climb.

At the topmost branch she paused and took in the view. It was one of those mornings just after the snows had melted when streams curled new paths through the trees and everything smelled clean. Her heart still pounded from the near miss and the world around her was sharper, brighter: clouds draped over distant green foothills and the river wove through the valley below, shining like a thread of gold. A cool wind heaved through the forest canopy, scattering brassy buds.

Knot had smelled hundreds of winds blowing through the Hollow: fresh cedar from a western mountain range, an algae-thick breeze from a southeastern lake. Each was a familiar visitor, moving with the seasons and storms and time of day. But this one was new. It came from the northeast, from beyond the mountains. She inhaled the gust deep into her belly. It smelled like movement, like earth being turned by wheels, dung, fragrances of flowers she couldn’t name and... puddles.

But it was getting late, and there was no time to wonder at its source. Knot cracked her neck and stretched, then began her descent through the thicket, barely glancing at her hand and footholds as she climbed from one dew-studded branch to the next. On the ground below she found the dropped marrowberry, slightly smashed. It made an excellent breakfast.

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Knot banged open the shutters and ushered Alderman Clark and Sal into the store, set in the base







of an old oak stump. The dim interior was crowded with barrels and various scales, its air thick with the clashing aromas of pickled and smoked goods.

“Up early to prep for your big day, Knot?” asked the Alderman.

Knot wasn’t sure what he meant. But the crow was getting old, and seemed a bit confused, lately.

“I’m always up early,” she said with a warm smile. Knot heaved her basket onto the counter and unpacked its contents: fresh braids of onion grass, fiddleheads, a jay feather, gobs of yellow jelly ear fungus, then, lastly, the berries.

“Marrowberries! But it’s so early, they’ll be sour,” said the rat.

“Not at all, Sal, not at all.” Knot sucked a sticky finger and smacked her lips. “I saved the best one for myself, and it was perfection.”

“You’ll give your oldest friends a good price, won’t you, Knot?” Sal asked.

“Oh, but look at the scratch on her muzzle, we’ve got to consider the cost of labor.” The Alderman ran a fore-feather along Knot’s cheek. She sucked in her breath at the sting. So, a thorn had gotten her after all.

Knot held a berry under the rat’s nose. “Sal, this one’s almost as big as my head. What’ll you trade me for it?”

He rummaged through his sack. “Here’s a couple nice ripe acorns. That’s a good swap.”

Knot suppressed a laugh. “A marrowberry is worth four acorns this early in spring, at least.”

The rat scoffed. “Four ripe acorns! You’re out of your tree—”

“Not two trees down the bank is an enormous oak that makes more acorns than we can eat. I’ve got no use for more, and besides, I know you’ve got better things to trade.”

The rat glowered at her, his eyes slightly bloodshot, as always. “If you’re after my oak leaf ale, you won’t get it.”

This time Knot laughed out loud. “Your bathtub brew? If I need to burn a wart off, sure. I was wondering about your fiddleheads— they’re always so sweet. I think nine of those should be fair for this berry.”

Sal spluttered. “You’ll have me work to death, child. Nine? With my trick paw—”

Knot held up a hand. “Alright, alright. Nine is too much work for you, even if it is a fair trade.” She

chewed her lip, thinking. “What about those Pleated Inkcap mushrooms I saw growing on your doorstep last night? Two of those.”

“You incorrigible snoop. I was saving them.”

“This berry won’t be here tomorrow. But there will be plenty more mushrooms this season, Sal, and they’re no trouble at all to gather.”

He began to protest, but his eyes lingered on the berry and he heaved a phlegmy sigh. “Oh, fine.”

After they shook on it, the Alderman burst out laughing. “You wanted those mushrooms all along, didn’t you, Knot?”

She gave him a crooked smile and shrugged. Sal yelped. “You relentless, scrooty little—”

“She drives a hard bargain, nothing wrong with that,” the Alderman cut in. “I’d wager that in her time under our tutelage, she’s become the best barterer in the land.”

“In the land? How would you know?” Knot snorted as she folded a birch leaf around Sal’s berry.

“In your entire lives, neither of you once left the Hollow.”

She’d always ached to leave the Hollow, probably in search of a relation. Though she’d spent her whole life imagining what her mother and father may be like, finding them was too much to hope for; all the beings she knew had sprung from eggs and left without a backward glance, or been one of a litter that scattered once they could walk. But a third cousin would suffice. Even a glimpse of her first home would be wonderful. She’d had a family, once. Berberta’s explanations of how she had turned up out of the blue never quite acknowledged that fact, but Knot wasn’t a damn child anymore— she knew animals didn’t pop out of the ground overnight like mushrooms, and besides, even mushrooms came from other mushrooms.

“Ah, but my father ventured far and wide,” said Sal. He took a pipe from his vest pocket and began to pinch tobacco into the bowl. “That good-for-nothing would come home every so often to re-impregnate my mother and tell me tales. He had endless stories of swindlers who called themselves merchants. You’re tough, but at least you’re honest, more or less.”

“You know I’m always honest, Sal, just crafty.” She grinned. “And I’m sure I’m not the only ethical barterer out there.”

“Well there’s a sure sign you haven’t left the Hollow. When you go, you’ll see for yourself this land is filled with crooks.” Sal took a drag from the pipe and burst into a wet, crumbly cough.



“When could Berberta ever spare me? Spring is for foraging, summer is selling, fall we’re prepping, and winter is when I balance the ledgers.” She handed Sal the berry. “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

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By the time a mouse, vole, and several prattling squirrels were attended to, the sun had risen high. Knot went out the backdoor to fetch a broom and found Berberta on the steps, signing for a shipment of crocuses and fly larvae.

“You’re in early!” said Knot. By now, when the toad stood on her haunches, they were the same height, but Knot couldn’t shake her childhood sense of Berberta towering over her. Knot squared her shoulders and picked up the broom. “I picked five ripe marrowberries this morning, you know.”

Berberta grunted in response.

Being more-or-less fluent in Berberta’s language of grunts, Knot interpreted this to mean ‘well done.’ Pleased, Knot asked, “What’s this shipment for?”

“For all the guests, of course,” Berberta said as she waved away the delivery newt without a tip.

“Whose guests?”

“Our guests. The toads of Long Bog are coming tomorrow. For the wedding.”

“What wedding?” Knot began to sweep the top step.

“For their son, Wember, and you. Bring the crates inside, I want to get those crocuses in water.”

Knot swallowed and swayed on her feet, abruptly lightheaded. Her vision popped with pricks of silver light. She blinked them away. “Who’s Wember, and when was I going to find out?”

“It’s in the town flier, for muck’s sake.” Berberta took a copy from the top of the stack by the door and thrust it into Knot’s hands. “No backtalk. This is decided.”

“But why?” Knot spluttered.

Berberta gave an exasperated huff. “I’m getting old and need a retirement plan, and Wember’s father offered the highest bride price. Once you’re wed, Wember will take over for me as owner of the store, and you’ll help him run things and tend to me in my dotage. You’re lucky I was able to arrange this all, really. Besides, what did you expect? Everyone gets married when they come of age, you know that.”

Knot had come of age last spring, with bleeds that seemed to always arrive on the full moon, of all days. She hadn’t realized that, all this time, her body had been betraying her. “But birds marry birds and

toads marry toads and I’m— I’m not anything at all!”

“Yes, that’s true, like always marries like, when procreation is the primary objective. Wember’s family has already made plain they don’t care about that detail. But just because it’s impossible won’t stop him from trying, I’m sure.” Berberta gave a crass laugh and slammed the door behind her.

Knot stared at the shut door in nauseated horror. Blood roared in her ears, and a sour, sickly sensation swooped through her gut. She abruptly heaved, turned fast on her heel and sped down the stairs. But she only made it to the bottom step before she bent double and vomited up her breakfast between the crates.

She wiped off her mouth with the back of her trembling hand, slumped into a seat on the bottom step and studied the flier in weak, furious disbelief. The wedding announcement was crammed between an ad for lye soap and half-off bone meal: *Berberta requests the honor of your presence at the marriage of Knot and Wember, on the next new moon, at the Hollow Mercantile. Light refreshments to follow. Presents mandatory.*

Knot crumpled the flier and hurled it away. Everyone but her had known? It was too much to bear. Her cheeks burned as she thought how she’d brushed off Alderman Clark’s comments about preparing for the big day; he must’ve thought she’d lost her grip.

This had to be some of Berberta’s slimiest work as a merchant. Wember got a live-in servant





and a store, and Berberta got a retirement fund and a nurse who'd tend to her until she croaked her last. Knot got a lifetime of servitude to the both of them. The thought of Wember pulling Knot to him in bed, his wet legs twining around hers, made the remaining bile churn in her stomach. She took a deep, steadying breath and shoved the thought away.

More than affronted, more than enraged, Knot was truly surprised. Berberta had never treated her quite like a daughter, but had she really considered Knot just another item in her inventory to be sold? Had all the time they'd spent together, training and talking and sorting seeds, just been grooming her for *this*?

Only birds left the Hollow; everyone else seemed bound here by an unseeable thread. But Knot had already felt the pull of other places. She'd grown up on the birds' folklore of long-lost empires and strange beings that could bend the laws of nature. If even half of it was true, there wasn't much Knot wouldn't give to see it.

She had decided. Tonight, she'd leave the only home she'd ever known, and make her own way in the world. It was high time she used her bartering skills to help herself, instead of whatever bargain hunter came and bid on her next.