

THE SINKING GARDEN

Campaign 2 · Session 11 · August 11th, 2026

Below the cellars of the Weeping Mercy, on the Dragonmere



The Weeping Mercy loses her impossible calm, and the sea remembers what she is.

The applause had not stopped. Above the glass, above the roots, one hundred and fifty pairs of hands came together in the same patient rhythm while the party stood in a room that breathed. **The Gardener** had shed the last of his human face: a jawless tower of pale braided flesh, sleeping faces pressing outward beneath the skin, several mouths making one voice. *"You think I do not understand,"* he said.

They told him no. They would not let him use the people upstairs. Behind them, the door had already sealed. To **Art**, softly, almost kindly: *"You are still sick. You leave anyway."*

The **Conservatory** was a body pretending to be a garden. The walls sweated. The floorboards swelled underfoot. Every stem sat too pale, too smooth, too deliberate, placed like veins by something that had studied a garden from the inside and drawn its own conclusions. High overhead, in a ceiling of stunning purple flora, one enormous bulb stayed closed, and looked as though it had begun to wake.

TOP LEFT

The corridor outside was narrower than anyone remembered. Water ran somewhere inside the walls. It smelled of wet soil, old roses, and the beginning of rot. Alone out there, Art reached for a patron who was supposed to be gone, and felt the old pressure at the back of his mind like a blade drawn halfway from its sheath. **Elaris**.

"I'm only visiting. Things are about to become very bad."

ELARIS, TO ART

Then, precisely: *"Top left."* Art moved. A thorn as long as his forearm tore through the space where his throat had been. The wall opened and unfolded into vines: a crowd of small grasping ones, and two prominent whip-tailed heads that squared up like boxers. The corridor became a fight for one man while three friends kept talking on the other side of a sealed door.

Inside, the Gardener turned to watch that door and stopped acknowledging anyone else in the room. He looked like someone who has seen this film before and knows how it ends.

FOUR THOUSAND NAMES

The others searched the laboratory while the vines waited. On the wall, drawn in patient pictograms, was the whole plan: a crowd of drugged stick figures, plus a sad little figure in a red cloak and a fedora labeled **ART**, plus a beautiful dagger with a **blue compartment**, equals the gates of **Westgate** thrown open while tiny people cheer.

Then the ledger. A single book in handwriting so cramped it fought back, every line a name, every name crossed out. Four thousand of them, best guess, on pages covered in blood.

THE GNOME HUNTERS' CLOSET

Bleeding and out of room, Art shook out **Mother Mord's Pocket Door** like a fold-out camp chair and fell through into somewhere with no business existing: a rustic hunting cabin, wallpaper and wooden shelving, enchanted crossbows and nets, and a library of appalling titles. *101 Ways to Catch Gnomes in the Wild*. *Gnome Hunters Quarterly*. *Gnomes? I Didn't Even Gnome Her*. On hooks, two hunting jackets embroidered with names the party last heard in Westgate: **Gary and Mary, Lords of Lister**, whose hunt invitation nobody ever accepted.



Whoever made this spell did not think any further than the closet itself.

The closet's ordinary inner door opened onto nothing at all. Not a room, not a night sky: an unformed blackness with no floor and no horizon. Art looked back at the vines, at the jackets, at the friends who disagreed with him, and jumped in.

He floated. He had never been so light, and for a moment he forgot the four months he has left. A voice called his name across twenty metres of nothing, and there was **Hot Rod** on the end of a rope, hurled in by someone who refused to leave him there. The rope

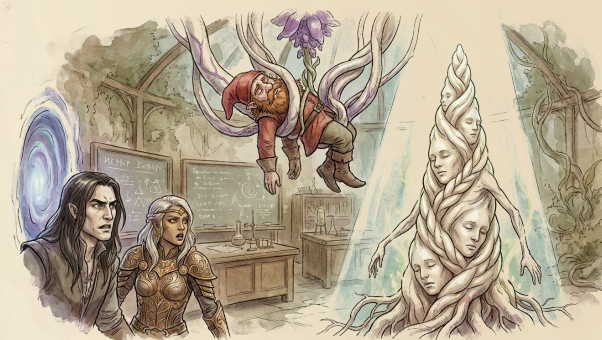
coiled uselessly. The mouse could not swim through thought. Art, it turned out, could move exactly as he pleased.

WHERE HE ACTUALLY WENT

- An airless **realm of thought between worlds**, recognized at last as **the Astral Plane**.
- Madness-inducing without a plan for getting out, which nobody had.
- The only exit was the closet door still hanging open above, and the open question of what happens if it shuts.

HIS PRESENCE IS GONE

In the Conservatory the Gardener's hand went up and every vine froze mid-strike. He looked worried in a way that frightened everyone more than the vines had. "*His presence is gone. Art, child, where are you?*" On a fleshy trunk nearby, someone found the print of a face slapped into the meat, nose and eyes pressed deep, blood beside it. It could have been anyone. It was recognizably Art.



Balbi hangs limp in a vine's grip while the thicket knits the Gardener back together.

I AM MY OWN PEER

While Art drifted, the negotiation happened. Asked for details, the Gardener gave them without shame: infect the selfish ashore, call them home to the ship, pay them at payday, tie them down, inject them, then open them up to see what the substances did to the organs. Usually they die. "*In our last batch, someone lived for four minutes.*" Asked about protocols and peer review, he answered with the line that will outlive him: "**I am my own peer.**"

A deal was struck. Fetch Art's blood, the last untampered **Westgate stock**; nobody stays, no friends die. "Deal." Then a paladin came back from the corridor having seen blood on the vines, and unmade it: "I've changed my mind. I think you tried to kill Art." He protested, and read as sincere. "His blood is too important. It must flow live." But he admitted he had tried to stop Art after saying Art could go. Weapons came out. Above, the great closed bulb cracked, and a gigantic purple flower bloomed.

IT'S ALMOST LIKE YOU NEED A FIRE WIZARD

Art hauled Hot Rod out of the void and stepped onto the top deck, where everyone was still clapping like a metronome. **Ferrick** arrived by pivot-point slideshow transition and found his friend bleeding, sad, and freshly done up in goth makeup applied during a moment alone. Ferrick argued pragmatism: one more negotiation, one volunteer, then kill him. Art refused to condemn a ballroom of people under a spell.



Thirty-four points of fire, and something at the center of the garden dies.

Below, two of them held a room built for four. Barkskin, poison spray, a **Moonbeam** hung to burn the Gardener and the flower at once, and it was not enough: pollen for twenty-five psychic, roots closing his wounds as fast as they opened, then two flesh lashes for twenty-eight and Balbi limp in a vine's fist. They teleported down into a surprise round. Art's blade caught fire against a vine and did unreasonable damage, which told everyone what the garden was afraid of.

Thirty-four points of fire went into the thicket. The vine disintegrated, the thicket burned away, and every one of them heard a high psychic scream as something central died: the hidden **root heart**. Every vine connected to the Gardener withered and fell apart.

YOU ARE THE KEY

He stood in the fire and sobbed, and put his hand up, and the vine laid Balbi gently on the scorched floor. "You are the key. I don't know if another will come after me, but if Westgate is to be saved, the secret is in you. My approach was cruel. My ask of you: do it. At all costs."

"You made a decision today. And while I don't agree, a decision has been made."

THE GARDENER

Ten seconds, he said, until his hold breaks and everyone upstairs remembers why they were brought here. With the root heart dead, the Mercy felt like a ship for the first time all voyage. He walked to Art, took his hand, said "I'm sorry," and sent him somewhere nobody can name.



The applause breaks into screams, and the garden goes under.

Water came through every seam. The Gardener sat down among his dying vines and let it close over one last sleeping face. Balbi went under with him. **Irofine** summoned her steed. Hot Rod is still on the top deck.

✦ NEXT SESSION: WHOEVER COMES UP FOR AIR ✦