Rescuing the Princess: Challenging Gender Ideologies Through Revisionary Parody

by

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of a creative artefact and theoretical exegesis and is primarily concerned with parodic practices and the revision of dominant gender ideologies. The creative artefact is a YA fantasy novel that employs parodic strategies, with the intention of subverting traditional gender roles and representations. It draws on fairy tale traditions to foreground and revise representations of female agency. The corresponding exegetical component analyses parodic adaptations of fairy tales across various mediums including literature, film, and video games, with a focus on revisionary practices and gender politics. The research is interdisciplinary, bringing together scholarship on gender, parody, intertextuality, adaptation, and fairy tales. The first half of the exegesis broadly outlines the practices of parody and its ironic tendencies using textual examples such as Neil Gaiman’s “Chivalry” (1998) to examine the subversive potential of parody in challenging dominant gender ideologies. It aims to contextualise the broad historical and sociocultural conversation that parodic retellings are immersed in by nature of their intertextuality and cultural borrowing. The latter half of the exegesis moves on to a gender focused analysis of parodic fairy tales. It deconstructs both conservative and revisionary adaptations, from Disney’s Frozen (2013) to Garth Nix’s Frogkisser! (2017), and Tale of Tales’ parodic video game, The Path (2009) and analyses how they challenge gender stereotypes through parodic practices. It also considers the kinds of stories about female agency and development that different media adaptations of fairy tales enable, contemplating the strengths and limitations of different mediums. In analysing the relationship between form and content, as well as parodic strategies employed within different mediums, this exegesis illustrates how a study of multi-medial adaptations can reveal subversive techniques for challenging gender ideologies.
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Introduction

In her comprehensive study of fairy tales, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner points to the cultural resilience of fairy tales, stating that “they are stories with staying power, as their antiquity shows, because the meanings they generate are themselves magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of their audience” (1995, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Acknowledging the adaptability of fairy tales, Warner readily embraces the “exchanges between voice and text” that “continually take place, adding, enriching, adapting, challenging, in ceaseless permutation of motifs and pattern” (1995, p. xxii). She observes that this process occurs across different media, with fairy tale retellings being perpetually transformative and offering an “arena of resistance” (1995, p. 410), ideologically speaking. This is the premise behind my research: that fairy tale appropriation, across a range of media, can be ideologically subversive, especially with regards to those retellings that engage in parodic practice for revisionary purposes. The creative artefact that forms part of this thesis, a young-adult novel, explores the potential for feminist parody of fairy tales through a creative methodology. This exegesis, which emerged symbiotically with the creative artefact, uses conventional scholarly methodologies and has an interdisciplinary bent. It begins with an analysis of parodic adaptation and intertextuality, outlining the heteroglossic, ironic and metafictive tendencies of parody, before moving on to a discussion of various parodic fairy tales, in fiction, film and video games, that work to revise gender ideologies.

Certainly, I am not alone in my contemporary interest in fairy tales. As Kevin Paul Smith states, “interrogating the fairy tale, examining the way in which formulaic stories hold a grip over the human imagination has become increasingly popular among novelists and filmmakers” (2007, p. 1). While I have been inspired primarily by the work of scholars such as Warner and Cristina Bacchilega, who have focused on gender politics in relation to fairy tale adaptation, other important work is also happening in fairy tale research, including the historiographic research of Ruth B. Bottigheimer on the origins and transmission of fairy tales. Jack Zipes’ extensive research is also key. I have also
drawn inspiration from a strong tradition of revision, especially feminist revision, of fairy tales, which might be traced to the publication of Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* in 1971 and, perhaps more significantly, Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979. However, it is important to note that the continuous recycling of fairy tales, as Jack Zipes suggests, “does not mean that all revised classical fairy tales are improvements and progressive” (1994, pp. 9-10). Disney, for instance, as the primary producer of fairy tales for the modern era, have appropriated many tales that, while unique in their retellings, arguably lean towards homage rather than revision. Animated films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), for example, are all relatively faithful in terms of their treatment of traditional tales. Whereas Zipes asserts that “the premise of a revision is that there is something wrong with an original work and that it needs to be changed for the better” (1994, pp. 9-10), Disney’s “classic” fairy tales celebrate many of the same conservative ideals as traditional tales (family, motherhood, innocence, heterosexual romance) without much critical attention. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, even modern fairy tales such as Disney’s seemingly progressive *Frozen* (2013), may appear to engage in feminist discourse at a surface level, but they continue to perpetuate alarmingly similar representations of women and gender binaries as their traditional counterparts.

Keeping in mind that parodic appropriation encompasses works of homage, pastiche-like repetition and critical revision, and acknowledging that fairy tale retellings span the entire length and breadth of a hypothetical traditional/revisionary spectrum, there are several key questions that guide my research: How are gender roles reconfigured and/or revised by parodic adaptations of fairy tales? What narrative mechanisms can be used to challenge stereotypical or pervasive gender norms and representations, especially in fairy tale adaptation? And are there certain mediums that offer greater capacity for ideological subversion than others? In answering these questions, this exegesis explores the production of gender, in relation to narrative, within parodic discourse and revisionary fairy tales, focusing on literature and media for young people, with that demographic understood as key consumers of fairy tales. As Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, Nike Sulway and Belinda Calderone argue, though
children’s literature is “often misunderstood as the proper or traditional realm of the fairy tale,” many tales “take a darker, more adult or experimental tone” (2017, p. 3). Indeed, in this exegesis I pay particular attention to those fairy tale retellings that engage with complex adult themes around gender and sexuality.

In the first chapter of this thesis I attempt to broadly define parody in terms of its discursive practices, including intertextuality, irony and metafiction. I begin with a summary of Julia Kristeva’s pioneering work on intertextuality, discussing intertextuality in relation to theories of meaning, language and reception. I then outline the heteroglossic aspects of parody as theorised by Simon Dentith and Graham Allen in Bakhtinian terms, before surveying Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualisation of irony as a parodic tendency, and Margaret A. Rose’s definition of metafiction. Furthermore, in a discussion of parody and how it relays meaning, I acknowledge the moments of interpretive ambiguity and double voicing that it encourages. These aspects of parody are key to parody’s subversive potential because they can foreground the relativism of meaning and ideological ‘truths.’

In Chapter 2, after an initial examination of parody as a revisionary practice, I turn to fairy tales, which have been widely repeated and adapted across various mediums, and which have a rich intertextual history that opens up parody’s potential for historical comparison and social critique. As Do Rozario, Sulway and Calderone point out, “new fairy tales always look backwards to engage with older tales, while simultaneously looking forward, or at least sideways, towards a new way of understanding or embodying fairy tale themes” (2017, pp. 1-2). They can be reframed to reflect shifting social values, reimagined to provide fresh gender perspectives, and transferred to various mediums, changing not only their message but the way that they communicate meaning. As Bacchilega observes, fairy tales can be “produced and consumed to accomplish a variety of social functions in multiple contexts and in more or less explicitly ideological ways” (1997, p. 3). It is precisely because fairy tales are popular with young audiences, viewed as a vulnerable demographic for media messaging, that they have become such a primary focus of parodic and revisionary work. My thesis, in both the creative artefact and exegesis, acknowledges the importance of positively
contributing to a gender-progressive social imaginary for young people through its feminist engagement with fairy tale texts intended for a young audience.

In Chapter 3 I examine case studies of young adult (or YA) fairy tale texts. I tease out the subversive practices of parody by examining works that adapt and revise traditional fairy tales in feminist ways. I have chosen texts for analysis that, as Marion May Campbell puts it, “might work to boost the critical and political power of intertextual allusion and transformation” and “draw attention to the violence that grounds representation and the claims to universality of the sovereign patriarchal subject” (2014, p. 285). These works include Neil Gaiman’s short story, “Chivalry” (1998), Garth Nix’s *Frogkisser!* (2017), and Catherynne M. Valente’s *Six-Gun Snow White* (2013). However, drawing on Astrid Ensslin’s research to make a case for the textuality of video games, I also introduce video game adaptations to my case studies. Video games, as a relatively new form of media, have received considerably less attention than conventional literary texts when it comes to fairy tale scholarship. This needs remedying since video games, uniquely combining ludic and textual properties, often adopt a revisionary approach in regards to existing genres. It is also the case that their popularity is growing exponentially, with the medium offering a uniquely engaging experience for players by virtue of foregrounding agency—a key interest of my thesis—in new and exciting ways. As my analysis of video games such as CD Projekt Red’s *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and Tale of Tales’ *The Path* (2009) suggests, this flourishing, interactive medium offers great potential for gender revision and ideological subversion. Players are given the opportunity to perform gender in dynamic ways, experience alternate perspectives, and directly experiment with matters of agency. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, gaming communities engage in various adaptive processes themselves, sharing and critiquing their unique gaming experiences in creative and often unpredictable ways.

As Maria Tatar argues,

> The transformative power of fairy tales can be approached from a variety of angles . . . the stories themselves function as shape-shifters, morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media (2010, p. 56).
The case studies highlighted by this exegesis parody, adapt, revise and transform fairy tale tropes and traditions in compelling ways and have been the inspiration for my own creative artefact. Drawing on the parodic devices that they exemplify I have tried to implement parody in similarly subversive ways, focusing on female experience and matters of agency in my own revisionary practice. In my decision to write a novel aimed at young adults, I was aware of the socialising aspects of fairy tales, which strike me as particularly powerful and problematic when they are presented to young readers or viewers with the authoritative status of “classic” texts for children. As Jack Zipes acknowledges,

> We have tried to ‘nourish’ children by feeding them literature that we think is appropriate for them. Or to put it another way, we have manipulated them through oral forms of communication and prescriptions in print to think or not to think about the world around them (2008, p. vii).

However, without critique, these fairy tale stories and their ideological encodings can become immortalised, being passed throughout the generations as a guide for children to learn the ways of the world and normalising certain gender behaviours, roles and representations. One way of introducing critical comparison and reflection is through the double-voiced strategies implicit in parody. Thus, my YA novel, taking its lead from the case studies examined within the exegesis, employs parody to revise some of the problematic gender messaging of traditional tales.

Recognising the acknowledged function of cultural media as a didactic force in young lives and the socialising role of fairy tales in particular, the overall intent of this thesis is to theorise the ways in which stories can produce, communicate and revise ideologies on a social and political level, by analysing and practising the discursive play of revisionary parody. I hope to show that the parodic tradition of “writing back” encourages transformative adaptation and is key to both creative renewal and ideological change.
Chapter 1—The Practices of Parody

She moved a rather threadbare fur coat, which smelled badly of mothballs. Underneath it was a walking stick and a water-stained copy of Romance and Legend of Chivalry by A.R. Hope Moncrieff, priced at five pence. Next to the book, on its side, was the Holy Grail. It had a little round paper sticker on the base, and written on it, in felt pen, was the price: 30p. — Neil Gaiman, “Chivalry,” 1998, p. 36

The above excerpt comes from Neil Gaiman’s short story “Chivalry,” in which an elderly widow, Mrs Whitaker, finds the Holy Grail in a charity shop and takes it home to place on her mantelpiece, “between a small soulful china basset hound and a photograph of her late husband” (p. 36). The story hinges on a collision of the mundane, domestic and feminine with the grandiose, worldly and patriarchal traditions of chivalric folklore, and reveals the instability of meaning through its parody of masculinist ideals. For Mrs Whitaker the value of the Grail lies not in its traditional symbolism, but in the way it forms part of a shrine containing a photo of her beloved husband, just as her collection of ornamental shells reminds her of her deceased sister and distant niece. The artefacts she surrounds herself with, holy or otherwise, are inscribed with personal meaning relating to her life, and preserve her memories. In contrast, the Grail holds a different significance for Knight of the Table Round Galaad, who provides a parody of the legendary Sir Galahad. Upon purchasing the artefact, Mrs Whitaker is hounded by the chivalric Galaad, who makes her several offers for the Grail, bargaining with other sacred relics and doing odd chores for the widow. Mrs Whitaker shows the knight great hospitality but repeatedly turns down his offers. Finally, Galaad brings her the Philosopher’s Stone, the Egg of the Phoenix, and a ruby apple of Hesperides, which promises eternal youth. Mrs Whitaker accepts the stone and egg, deciding that they’ll look good on the mantelpiece, but declines the apple of life, chastising Galaad: “You shouldn’t offer things like that to old ladies. It isn’t proper” (p. 47). Overall the dynamic between Mrs Whitaker and Galaad parodies and subverts a traditional narrative that invests men, their stories, their objects and their desires with sacred authority. Gaiman, by focusing on Mrs Whitaker’s point of view, offers the perspective of a woman who resists being wooed or seduced by Galaad’s self-important and self-serving vision.
Referring to Gaiman’s various works, Sandor Klapcsik observes their postmodern tendencies, noting that they “frequently double or multiply the narrative perspectives, lay bare the process of storytelling, interweave different language registers, and violate the narrative levels” (2009, p. 209). In these ways, Gaiman’s work challenges notions of universality and “grand narratives” by focusing on the plurality of discourses of meaning. This is true of “Chivalry,” which revolves around the blending of profane and sacred, past and present, mundane and fantastical. In this way, Gaiman’s story exemplifies the work of parody, which is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as “a mocking imitation of the style of a literary work or works, ridiculing the stylistic habits of an author or school by exaggerated mimicry” (Baldick 2004, p. 185). More specifically, “Chivalry” is an example of the mock-heroic, being “written in an ironically grand style that is comically incongruous with the ‘low’ or trivial subject treated” (Baldick 2004, p. 159). Gaiman’s story, as we have seen, parodies the seriousness of a masculinist tradition of storytelling in this fashion, having Galaad’s mythical narrative collide with the realistic story of Mrs Whitaker. Parody is always also intertextual and metafictive. As demonstrated by the above excerpt, Gaiman foregrounds the intertextual and metafictive aspects of parody to increase the ironic impact of the gendered dualisms he evokes and to invite critical reflection upon patriarchal heroics.

These dualisms appear frequently within “Chivalry.” The comparisons drawn between the mythologised Holy Grail and the other “relics” jumbled together in the shop that Mrs Whitaker visits is deliberate, with Gaiman assigning arbitrary values to the objects in order to point out the instability of cultural significance and meaning. As Klapcsik observes, “Gaiman’s description of the cheap antiques illustrates a postmodern attitude toward the fantastic and history” (p. 198), which involves revisiting and revising meaning and value. For instance, the sacredness of the Grail is diminished by its price sticker, which overwrites its long-held value as an object of the knight’s heroic quest. It is practically worthless. This evaluation is then subsequently challenged as Mrs Whitaker repurposes the Grail as an ornament for her mantel and the shrine to her dead husband, thus altering the value of the relic once again, which becomes a memento in a personal system of meaning. The overall effect of these parodic comparisons and re-evaluations is
to equalise, in terms that are distinctly gendered, the grand and personal, the masculine and feminine, points of view. By re-situating a mythic and masculine tradition in the context of the domestic and feminine, its meaning is implicitly offered up for critique and transformation.

This is a key function of parody: to take the old and make it new through re-contextualisation. For instance, the history and symbolism of the Holy Grail is not ignored or destroyed; in fact, Mrs. Whitaker thoroughly acknowledges the narrative attached to it when she tells her friend: “It’s the cup that Jesus drank out of at the Last Supper. Later, at the Crucifixion, it caught His precious blood when the Centurian’s spear pierced His side” (p. 37). It is, however, demythologised by its collision with the mundane. Mrs. Whitaker ironically inscribes the Grail with new meaning and value by repurposing it as a decorative piece that upholds the sacred—to her—memory of her deceased husband. As I will argue throughout this exegesis, the intertextual plurality and multivoiced nature of parodic strategies, of the kind demonstrated in Gaiman’s story, can be ideologically destabilising and transforming of the dominant ideological norms of our culture.

In this chapter, I will attempt to tease out a theory of parody in relation to key aspects of this cultural form, including intertextuality, irony and the possibility for ideological subversion. As demonstrated by Gaiman’s parodic short story “Chivalry,” the core element of parody is its intertextuality, with its relational dynamic between hypotext and hypertext contributing to an unstable plurality of meaning that, I argue, can be ideologically destabilising. Part of this plurality, as Margaret Rose has extensively argued, stems from the metafictional aspects of parody and its textual double-voicing. Drawing on Rose’s theory, Marion M. Campbell elaborates: “this double-voicing (or dialogism to use Bakhtin’s term) throws the viewer-reader into hyperawareness of the means of representation” (2014, p. 292). In other words, by foregrounding representational processes, by showing how meaning stems from differentiation and contextual awareness, the authority of a text is destabilised and becomes open to question. While the ways in which a reader interprets the parodic text are unpredictable, this exegesis, following the work of Linda Hutcheon, finds subversive potential in the ironic tension or “edge” (1995) implicit in the clash between intertextual systems.
Throughout this chapter and the next I will argue that the highlighting of intertextuality effected by parodic texts can serve to challenge social and cultural “truths,” specifically in relation to gender norms, by revealing the relativity of meaning and how it is produced historically and discursively. With this in mind, the overall intent of this exegesis is to demonstrate the political work that parody can do. However, let us begin by exploring the importance of intertextuality to parodic texts.

**Intertextuality and Parody**

To pin down intertextuality as a concept can be a challenging undertaking, but I will begin with a brief outline of Julia Kristeva’s pioneering work on intertextuality, derived from Bakhtinian theory and Saussurean linguistics, and move on to the work of Simon Dentith, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Chambers, and Margaret A. Rose, all of whom return to Kristeva in their discussions of intertextuality vis-à-vis general theories of meaning and language. Then, in the second chapter, I will turn to revisionary fairy tales as a form of intertextual practice.

First and foremost, it seems necessary to clarify that, while there are many different and commonly held explicit manifestations of intertextual relationships, such as allusion and adaptation, one might view all texts as intertextual. Simon Dentith’s initial definition of intertextuality is based on the assessment that “all written utterances—texts—situate themselves in relation to texts that precede them, and are in turn alluded to or repudiated by texts that follow” (2000, p. 5). Acknowledging the interrelatedness of all writing, Dentith links this basic principle of intertextuality to the tradition of being inspired by and responding to other artistic works as the source of creative practice. He gives the example of Sir Walter Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” (1600), which is a creative response to “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (1599) by Christopher Marlowe, and which announces its intertextual origins in the homage paid by its title to its predecessor. There are also more subtle examples of intertextuality, such as allusion, which hint at intertextual connections without being so explicit. Even slang, clichés, stereotypes, formulaic phrases, and other
cultural echoes may be considered examples of intertextuality, relying as they do on their relation to existing texts or discursive traditions. For Dentith, parody enters the intertextual relationship as part of a wide range of cultural practices which allude, with evaluative intonation, to other works:

All these linguistic echoes and repetitions are accented in variously evaluative ways, as they are subjected—or not—to overt ridicule, or mild irony… [and] this aspect of intertextuality is more visible in some kinds of writing than in others. (2000, p. 5)

Taking a more detailed approach, Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality derives from Saussure’s study of language as a system of structural relations rather than as speech acts—as langue rather than parole—and from Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic, which theorises discourse as inherently polyphonic as it happens in the world. For Kristeva, intertextuality derives from the “transposition of one (or several) sign systems into another” (1984, p. 59), which results in “semiotic polyvalence,” or the pluralisation of meaning on multiple levels. This intertextual transposition signals a key exchange and permutation within the sign system, altering the stance of the speaker in a new articulation of the thetic. As cited in Kelly Oliver’s The Portable Kristeva, Kristeva states:

If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural. (Kristeva 2002, p. 48)

In other words, intertextuality emerges from a dialogic and differential field of discourse.

Kristeva, as noted, draws upon structuralist notions of signification, which suggest that signs derive meaning from within the textual relation of signifier and signified, but her work was also foundational to poststructuralist theory, which further emphasised the relational dynamic between signs and texts. The implication of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches is that language does not passively mirror a coherent, meaningful, or singular reality. As Graham Allen puts it, “The meanings we produce and find within language . . . depend upon processes of combination and association within the differential system of language itself. This relational aspect of language cannot be avoided or overcome” (2011, p. 10). He also writes that “no sign has a meaning of its own”
but must be understood in conjunction with other signs. Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality extrapolates that texts also exist in relationship to one another. While structuralist theory led to formalist, new critical approaches to literature, which looked to analyse texts in terms of their shared formal or generic features, Kristeva’s theory demonstrates that intertextuality in fact implies not a narrowness of focus but a sociality. In fact, texts cannot be detached from the broader cultural or social discursive systems from which they emerge. This is something emphasised in Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. Bakhtin observes:

> At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth. (1981, p. 291)

Bakhtin also establishes dialogism—or heteroglossia—as a key component of every text. He states:

> Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions, but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated. (p. 324)

Allen outlines Bakhtin’s influence on Kristeva’s approach to intertextuality thus:

> All language is shot through with prior utterances, prior uses of the same words, and is always addressed toward other speakers. Bakhtin’s vision of double-voiced discourse is essentially intertextual, in that it recognises that all utterances contain within them the dialogic force of competing interpretations, definitions, social and ideological inflections and so on. (2011, p. 219)

As Allen puts it, “Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (2011, p. 1). This encompasses the complex relationship between the fictional world and the world outside the fiction, with both embedded in or understood through linguistic systems. From this perspective, existing patterns of meaning, along with various codes and conventions, inform all language acts. In addition, the dynamic emergence of discursive systems from cultures and societies, which are always marked by history (and thus change), continually prompt new evaluations. Intertextuality is
thus part of an on-going cultural and social process involving the multi-voiced construction of meaning which, according to Allen, derives from “society’s dialogic conflict over the meaning of words” (p. 36) or, perhaps, the meaning of the world.

Such a vision of meaning as dialogically generated and inherently heteroglossic undermines notions of unitary and fixed social truths. As Allen notes, Kristeva’s and Bakhtin’s emphasis on the intertextual, dialogic or heteroglossic quality of language and texts challenges “claims to authoritativeness, unquestionable truth, unproblematic communication and society’s desire to repress plurality” (p. 42). Whereas previous illusions of a stable relationship between signifier and signified reinforced dominant ideological frameworks, dialogism and its implicit potential for undermining monologism have proven useful concepts for understanding parody, particularly when it is politically motivated as it is in feminist revisionary or parodic texts. Such texts will form, as noted, the focus of the second chapter of this exegesis, but now I would like to turn to an explicit analysis of the role of intertextuality when it comes to parody.

In the parodic text, the inherent dialogism of all texts is typically foregrounded by the self-conscious and parodic referencing of other texts, highlighting the effect of multiple voices and clashing systems for meaning-making. As explored in relation to Gaiman’s story, the original text is preserved in the parodic one, which also simultaneously introduces a new context for its interpretation. This is a defining feature of parody: it is intertextual and multi-voiced, always expressing multiple and competing speakers, histories, discourses, ideological positions and intentions.

Dentith, evoking Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, argues that parody emerges almost naturally from intertextuality: “If we take seriously the contention that novels emerge from the linguistic and discursive competition of heteroglot societies, then we must recognise also the myriad possibilities for parody, and the diverse evaluative attitudes, that the form provides” (2000, pp. 92-93). Dentith also views the multiplicity of voices in parody, much like I do, as a potentially
democratising force and as the reason parody plays such a significant role in popular culture in our postmodern age. He argues:

The extreme relativisation of all languages—the refusal to grant final authority to any one way of speaking over another—which is a characteristic of contemporary popular culture, is evidenced in the pervasiveness of parody, and is testimony to its effect in dissolving the fixed supports of linguistic and cultural authority. (2000, pp. 23-24)

It is an important argument for this feminist exegesis that the multi-voiced, heteroglossic aspects of parody can lead to the relativising of dominant texts, discourses or ideologies, which are shown to be empty of ultimate authority. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the plurality of meanings that can coexist within the same utterance produces unpredictable interpretive outcomes, as the reader negotiates the various voices of the parodic text. As Hutcheon argues, ironic meaning manifests as a consequence of these relational and performative dynamics: “Irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets)” (1995, p. 56). Considering ironic meaning as relational, the tension between said and unsaid meaning can be both inclusive and differential, fluctuating between different perceptual states.

Hutcheon explores this notion of interpretive uncertainty and irony, which is a hallmark of parodic intertextuality, giving the well-known example of the duck/rabbit paradigm, which simultaneously depicts both the head of a rabbit and a duck. Depending on the eye of the beholder, one will interpret the image as either a duck or a rabbit, which Hutcheon sees as representative of the uncertain oscillation between the said and unsaid meaning in an ironic utterance (1995, p. 57). This example of fluid and perceptually dependent meaning supplements Hutcheon’s argument that “ironic meaning is simultaneously double (or multiple),” and that “both the said and the unsaid together make up that third meaning . . . called the ‘ironic’ meaning” (1995, p. 58). Understandably, the tension caused by competing voices in heteroglossic work problematises unitary views of signifying practices and of linear ideas about communication between author/reader. This lack of interpretive certainty means that ironic meaning can be considered constantly in flux.
Dentith similarly acknowledges the array of evaluative attitudes that parody can invite and that stem from the dynamic intertextuality of the parodic text, offering a definition that is flexible enough to allow for various intentions. He argues: “parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (p. 9). The scope of this allows for various art forms, including visual art, literature, music, sculpture, and performance, as well as for varying degrees of intention. He notes: “parody serves differing (and significant) purposes within the widely various cultural domains that constitute the contemporary world” (2000, p. 164). Here Dentith acknowledges that the subversiveness of parody cannot be guaranteed not only because of the instability of the interpretive scene, as Hutcheon argues, but also because of the different intentions of parodists, which are certainly not always critical.

Rose elaborates on the instability of parody in relation to intentionality, attributing it to its essential polyvocality. She asserts that the politics of parody are typically ambivalent:

Both by definition (through the meaning of its prefix ‘para’) and structurally (through the inclusion within its own structure of the work it parodies), most parody worthy of the name is ambivalent towards its target. This ambivalence may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new. (1993, p. 51)

The ambiguous relationship that parody has with its target is key here, as it is both critical and sympathetic, undermining and preserving of the original text. As such, parody’s inclination is never fixed as subversive, nor can it be wholly counter-subversive, as it is tied to this inherent dualism as well as to contextual interpretation.

Robert Chambers, though, analyses the multi-stability of the parodic text in a way that is arguably more optimistic about its unsettling and potentially subversive qualities. For Chambers, an individual’s inability to fully comprehend all the many differing levels of meaning at play within a text is typically constrained by the fact of the reader’s own unique standpoint and interpretation. However, the intertextuality of parody demands that the reader approach the text from different angles, understanding one text in socio-historical comparison to another, and
drawing upon various contextual codes during the reading process. This perceptual multi-stability can lead to ambiguity and uncertainty on the behalf of the reader. Chambers theorises:

> Ultimately, to perceive the multi-stable aspects of an image (or a text) requires a willingness to shift interpretations, successively, from one perceptual embrace to another, and such alterations will also foster the concurrent illusion that the design (and/or meaning) has transformed in shape and nature . . . The net effect promotes a sense of alternating meanings within a pulsating framework of interactive possibilities. (2010, p. 33)

For Hutcheon, as I have already suggested, this site of uncertainty and possibility is the site of irony. It is the moment, inspired by the parodic text, when the reader is caught in the relational nature of meaning systems, provoking discomfort in the face of such ambiguity. The result is the potential for an unpredictable sequence of shifts within the subject—the kinds of shifts necessary to the real individual and social change that is the ideal of feminist and other revolutionary parodic texts. I will turn now to a brief discussion of irony’s importance to parody and its potential subversiveness.

**Parody and Irony’s Edge**

*Irony may play on the edge, but it can also force people to the edge, and sometimes over it.* — Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 1995, p. 41

Though I have argued that the plurality of intertextuality within parody can potentially be used to destabilise dominant ideologies, I reiterate that parody is by no means inherently subversive; nor is irony. As Linda Hutcheon observes, “irony can be playful as well as belittling, it can be critically constructive as well as destructive” (1985, p. 32). Even if it aims to be subversive, in its intrinsic preservation of the original text and of polyvocality, parody can cut both ways, being both conservative and subversive in its double vision. In addition, there is the unpredictable nature of interpretive acts, also always grounded in the heteroglossic world of discourse. However, the ways in which Hutcheon links parody and irony is useful for considering how we might consider the double-voicedness of parody as potentially destabilising or, in Hutcheon’s terms, as having a socio-political “edge.”
Hutcheon’s discussion of “irony’s edge” develops from Bakhtin’s work on heteroglossic language and interpretive acts. It revolves around the idea that irony stems from dual meaning—as emblemised by the duck-rabbit image explored just above—causing a moment of hesitation on the part of the interpreter.

Interpretation, though, always emerges from particular discursive communities so that interpretation, and interpretive uncertainty, is inherently socio-political. Hutcheon argues: “Parody works to foreground the politics of representation . . . parody is a value-problematising, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation” (1989, p. 90). In other words, parody foregrounds not only different texts but also their different socio-historical contexts, creating an ironic and potentially discomforting tension when the original and parodic work communicate different messages simultaneously.

Hutcheon’s similar concept of ironic trans-conceptualisation asserts that parody is most “edgy” when it activates the political context of the hypotext or when it brings, as Marion M. Campbell elucidates, “the context of the hypotext and the context of the hypertext into critically productive dialogue” (Campbell 2014, p. 285). Drawing on Hutcheon’s research, Campbell argues that this intertextual process, along with the multiple coding of parody, can be potentially destabilising on a socio-cultural level, boosting the critical and political power of intertextual connections. Certainly for Hutcheon, this process by which irony is activated can be ideologically and corporeally destabilising in its ambiguity and unpredictability, as it diminishes concepts of textual authority.

For Hutcheon, “parody is both textual doubling (which unifies and reconciles) and differentiation (which foregrounds irreconcilable opposition between texts and between text and ‘world’)” (1985, pp. 101-102). She acknowledges that there is a certain amount of nostalgia implicit in the intertextual relationship between past and present forms expressed in parody, but notes that this is ameliorated by ironic distance. Parody’s paradoxical double-codedness sees it ironically working within the system it may seek to revise, oscillating between textual voices, both spoken and unspoken, past and present. In this regard, irony plays a significant role in the practice of parody and, in fact, lends parody its critical dimension. Hutcheon elaborates: “A critical distance is implied between the background text
being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony” (1985, p. 32).

Sometimes this ironic signalling and distancing is explicit in parodic texts, as in the superhero film *Deadpool* 2 (2018), with superhero franchises providing key examples of how intertextuality and parody enliven their renewal and revision of existing stories. Based on Marvel’s popular comic book anti-hero, the protagonist of *Deadpool* 2 is portrayed in a way that parodies other superhero traditions and franchises, both explicitly and implicitly, in an ironic fashion. In a promotional short for the movie, Wade, whose alter ego is Deadpool, is seen responding to a mugging by dashing to a conspicuous telephone booth in order to awkwardly change into his costume and save the day. In the background, dramatic theme music from the 1978 *Superman* film plays. This parodying of Clark Kent’s transformation into Superman is thus given ironic and distancing treatment. In fact, that previous vision of the superhero is rendered absurd when Deadpool fails to save the mugging victim because he takes too long to get changed. He also comments on the absurdity or anachronism of a telephone booth being present in 2018. Nevertheless, the film both re-installs and ironises that traditional superhero motif, mobilising the duck-rabbit double-voiced ambiguity described by Hutcheon as typical of irony. The *Deadpool* franchise is also known for frequently breaking the fourth wall by speaking directly to its audience and overtly acknowledging other narratives, and these exploitations of intertextuality and metafiction all intensify the edgy oscillation between codes, which for Hutcheon is a defining characteristic of irony’s operation within parody.

However, irony can also work much more subtly in parodic works, and without obvious intertextual references and metafictional nods. Dentith, who also recognises the importance of irony to parody, points to the opening sentence of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as an example of this ironic discourse: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (2013, p. 5). Here Austen, by a simple act of ironic inversion—suggesting that a man with a fortune wants a wife, rather than that a woman needs a man with a fortune—calls attention to the gendered inequalities of nineteenth-century English society, where it was not deemed
culturally acceptable for middle-class women to seek independent employment. In this way Austen’s ironic novel is, in Bakhtinian terms, “double-voiced”. As Dentith puts it, the use of irony “permits the reader to recognise that there are two distinct consciousnesses operating in a single utterance, and that their evaluative attitudes are not the same” (2000, p. 64).

Also drawing on Austen’s work as an example of ironic questioning, Claire Colebrook argues that

Not only does Jane Austen parody the way in which we take our local sentiments for universal truths, she also displays the blindness of those characters who believe themselves to be in simple possession of either a moral law or a social code (2003, p. 145).

In this fashion, Austen employs irony to critique monolithic or set conceptions of the human condition—in ways that continue, notably, to appeal to women in today’s world. This is an important observation, given that, when it comes to irony, “getting the joke” relies on the shared perspective of a discursive community or, as Ross Chambers puts it, of “an agreement based on shared understandings of ‘how the world is’” (1990, p. 19).

However, it is difference between interpretive possibilities, implicit in the double-voiced scene of irony, that generates the “edginess” which Hutcheon describes, and which is so important to this exegesis. For Hutcheon, irony’s edginess can be linked not only to interpretive ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning, but to the ways in which such an embodied experience of uncertainty occurs in affective ways to real readers in the social world. Her interest is in “the particular intersection in the communicative space set up by both meaning and affect” (1995, p. 196). She writes: “irony can also make you edgy, nervous about how to fix meaning securely and how to determine motivation” (1995, p. 36). Thus, irony can provoke emotional responses from those listeners who feel included or excluded by the “joke”: “irony has an evaluative edge [that] manages to provoke emotional responses in those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t” (1995, p. 3). Hutcheon here refers to the feeling of cognitive discomfort that stems from an awareness of irony and its interpretive uncertainty, drawing attention to the reader’s proficiencies or deficiencies in a particular cultural and linguistic
context.

Colebrook further examines the ways that ironies implicate and defamiliarise bodies as subjects constituted in history, while also tracing a cultural movement away from a notion of the communal self to an alienated self to a relative self, which is presented as congruent with modernisation. She states:

We can say, perhaps, that there is a literary-historical trajectory toward irony: from bodies collected in social space, to a sense of ‘man’ or human nature as underlying those bodies, until, finally, the notion of the subject who recognises himself as having existed all along in various historical contexts. (2003, p. 146)

In this way irony, as a speech act, develops in tandem with the creation of a body that is othered from the point of view of speech. The body and its subjectivity are revealed not as coherent wholes, but rather the sites of competition between differing ideologies and perspectives in a world of discourse.

Given the anxious uncertainty and self-alienation that irony can evoke, it can often be perceived, as Hutcheon notes, as elitist and invested in social hierarchies, in that there are those who “get it” and those who do not. Some participants of irony will engage with the numerous said and unsaid meanings, while others may simply recognise the said. However, such evaluative judgments of irony are more complicated than a simple exclusionary/inclusionary hierarchy, as Hutcheon counter-argues. She suggests that those who misunderstand irony are not victims of it or any less competent that those who do, but simply have different interpretations because of the fact that “everyone has different knowledges and belongs to (many) different discursive communities” (1995, p. 93).

For Hutcheon, ironic meaning always occurs in a social and communicative context, which means that irony is not simply something that exists, but rather something that is activated. According to Hutcheon, irony “happens in discourse, in usage, in the dynamic space of the interaction of text, context, and interpreter” (1995, p. 56). It is the complex, intertextual, interpretive acts of discursive communities that enable parodic irony to occur. She states:

In ironic discourse, the whole communicative process is not only ‘altered and distorted’ but also made possible by those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language in use. Irony rarely involves a
simple decoding of a single inverted message . . . it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings—and doing so with some evaluative edge. It is also, however, a culturally shaped process. (1995, p. 85)

This understanding of irony acknowledges the heteroglossic discursive world in which we all live and from which we all produce meaning. Far from being a straightforward transference of meaning from ironist to interpreter, ironic meaning is subject to the differing perspectives of discursive communities, and therefore its intent can never be assured. It is a problem I keep returning to, because it is a problem for my argument that parodic texts can function subversively. How can this be argued when the meaning of a parodic text cannot be guaranteed? However, one strategy that often accompanies parody—metafiction—can arguably help the reader negotiate the text’s irony and its intended implications, drawing attention to the parodic and ironic work of the text. It is to metafiction, as another key feature of parody, that I turn my attention next.

Parody and Metafiction

Another way that parody can challenge fixed social norms is through metafictive practices that explicitly invite moments of textual evaluation. Rose engages with parody’s relationship with metafiction in her important works, Parody//Metafiction (1979) and Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern (1993). She argues that parody is “a reflexive form of meta-fiction which ‘lays bare’ the devices of fiction to refunction them for new purposes” (1979, p. 14). While Rose’s comprehensive work on parody covers the ancient, modern and postmodern—as the title of her 1993 study suggests—she focuses on the particular subversiveness of postmodern parody, of which overt intertextuality and metafiction are key features.

Rose defines parody in terms of intertextuality and metafictionality, arguing that both contribute to the destabilising and subversive qualities of parodic texts by “provid[ing] a ‘mirror’ to fiction, in the ironic form of imitation of art in art” (1979, p. 65). According to Rose, “parody is, as metafiction, able to demonstrate critically the process involved in the production and reception of fiction from...
within a literary text, [and] is also able to show how a literary work exists both within a particular social context and a literary tradition” (1979, p. 66). As a result of such self-reflexivity, parody tends to challenge traditional concepts of art as mimetic and as reflecting nature, and thus, the universality of the embedded ideology is problematised. By drawing comparisons to other texts, parody reveals the historicity and artificiality of literary and ideological conventions.

Due to its intertextuality, all parody is arguably metafictive. Postmodern parody, however, tends to make this relationship more overt, self-consciously highlighting and exaggerating literariness through metafictional practices to de-naturalise the communication of meaning. According to Rose, both parody and irony complicate communicative processes: “parody by combining two codes (code B being familiar to the decoder, and code A which ‘estranges’ the message of text B, strange), and irony by juxtaposing at least two messages in the one code” (1979, p. 61). Through such double-voicing, ironised parody can encourage the reader to “reflect on the communicative function of literary language as a vehicle of the transmission of messages” (1979, p. 61).

Patricia Waugh’s comments on metafiction complement Rose’s. Waugh argues that metafiction is characterised by “writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction” (2002, p. 4). The self-conscious depiction of the text’s reliance on linguistic and cultural systems, she argues, can have a denaturalising effect, problematising the mimetic illusion of the literary text and the existence of an external point of reference somewhere beyond language. Metafiction thus troubles the relationship between text and world, text and truth. As Waugh puts it, “the language of fiction appears to spill over into, and merge with, the instabilities of the real world . . . Metafiction flaunts and exaggerates and thus exposes the foundations of this instability” (p. 5).

As Waugh suggests, the term metafiction covers a wide range of modes and practices, all revolving around literary convention and their construction. She cites omniscient narration (such as that evident in Lemony Snicket’s A Series of
Unfortunate Events, 1999-2006); parody that provides commentary on specific works and/or generic conventions (such as Disney’s 2014 film Maleficent, which retells the Sleeping Beauty tale from Maleficent’s point of view); unconventional formatting which both supports and disrupts the fictive narrative (as in Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of Leaves 2000); and any story that demonstrates metafictive features (such as Andrzej Sapkowski’s allusions to fairy tales in The Last Wish 2008).

Michele Hannoosh similarly draws attention to the metafictional aspects of parody, drawing on Rose’s theory to focus on self-reflexivity in fiction. Like Waugh, she acknowledges that parody is critically reflexive of its own conventions, practices, and contexts, as well as of its target, exposing processes of literary production, including its own. Hannoosh states: “In altering a work according to a different, usually contemporary and/or trivialised code, parody challenges the notion of fixed works altogether, and thus leaves itself open to the same playful or critical treatment” (1989, pp. 113-114). Parody, as Hannoosh recognises, shares a complex relationship with its target and with the literary conventions that bind them both. She argues:

Parodic reflexivity does not mean simply that the parody refers to itself as a text about texts. It has more radical implications than mere self-reference: the parody actually rebounds upon itself, calling itself into question as it does the parodied work, and suggesting its own potential as a model or target, a work to be rewritten, transformed, even parodied in its turn. (p. 114)

In this fashion, literary parody is open-ended, enacting revisions that call themselves into question as much as the original text being parodied, and that act as triggers for further revision and critique. According to Hannoosh, providing an alternative version of a story in this fashion “combines the reflexive and creative functions of parody, calling into question the authority of the parody’s account by having it anticipate a different one” (p. 124).

Catherynne M. Valente’s novella Six-Gun Snow White (2013), for example, is a Western and fairy tale mash-up that re-imagine the Snow White tale by blending generic tropes. As a metafictional parody it foregrounds its own provisionality by frequently calling attention to the transformative nature of storytelling as well as its limits. The narrator states: “By now I expect you are shaking your head and
tallying up on your fingers the obvious and ungraceful lies of my story. Well I have told it straight. A body can only deliver up the truth its bones know” (2013, pp. 9-10). Here the parodic text metafictionally highlights unreliability and polyvocality at the heart of its subversiveness. At the same time, it points to the connection between discourse and the body—“the truth its bones know”—to highlight the relationship between language and the construction of identity.

Jessica Tiffin’s work on the parodic and metafictional fairy tales of Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber (1979) is relevant here. Noting the extent to which performative gender is naturalised through discourse, and the ways in which it can be challenged through parodic metafiction, Tiffin writes of Carter’s stories that:

"The ‘trick’ of both gender and structure is recognised and examined by female characters who reflect on their artificially structured entrapment within the roles set out for them by fairy-tale traditions, and the limitations placed on their sexual identity by those roles and predetermined narrative outcomes. The often-experimental performance of roles embedded in fairy tale becomes a performance of structure, one which, through irony, exaggeration, and parody, insists on the artificiality of the system. (2009, pp. 73-74)

This type of metafictive parody is also evidenced in Six-Gun Snow White, which similarly highlights the “tricks” and “traps” of gender as congruous with the “tricks” and “traps” of storytelling. One of the characters tells Snow:

‘You’re in a story and the body writing it is an asshole. You had to know that, given the action. The story you’re in tells you like firing a gun . . . but we got free of story out here under the beeches and the Big Dipper. We had enough of things happening one after another and no end in sight. Of reversals and falling in love and tragic flaws, and by God if I see another motif in my business I will shoot it dead.’ (2013, pp. 116-117)

Thus, the heightened and ironised awareness of generic tropes and literary practice associated with parodic metafiction is represented as the key to liberation from patriarchal narratives and ideologies. On the one hand, Snow White’s parodic story is bound by fairy tale tradition, and yet through metafictive moments and revision she finds escape from the hypotext. The open-endedness of her story reinforces the liberation of the subject from ideology, celebrating the ways in which stories can be perpetually revised and reframed. Such a parodic text, as Hannoosh states, “remind[s] the reader of the relativism of any work of art, and also of the richness of creative possibilities in an allegedly limited single source” (p. 117).
The Parodic Subject

_I do not believe any person is born knowing how to be human. Everyone has to learn their letters and everyone has to learn how to be alive. A is for Alligator. B is for Beauty._ —Catherynne M. Valente, _Six-Gun Snow White_, 2013, p. 37

Having examined the intertextual, ironic and metafictive functions of parody, I would like to conclude this section with a brief meditation on the relationship between the parodic text and the subject as a kind of text formed and transformed through language, using techniques of mimicry or parody. This is something I already touched on in my discussion of irony, where I drew attention to how Colebrook theorises irony’s affect in terms of its destabilising of the text of human identity.

In theorising the social dimensions of identity, Colebrook adopts Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative, arguing that “language, through its system and regularities, creates or performs certain social roles” (2003, p. 127). These roles are normalised through literature and their narratives played out in behavioural acts, forming the basis of social identity. As Colebrook argues,

> For the most part we live our gender and our social identity as the linguistic or social construction of our ‘real’ selves. We imagine, for example, that women are constructed _as feminine_ through literary and cultural stereotypes and that there is a real sexual self somehow existing before cultural identity. (p. 126)

However, parody can challenge such assumptions by foregrounding the very language systems that perpetuate gender norms, and by calling attention to the performance of codes—of texts, of gender—that operate both in texts and in the real world. As I have proposed, parody reveals these texts, through the operation of irony, as unstable or uncertain, as marked by history, and in doing so undermines the fixity of ideological norms that may be perpetuated through repetition or uncritical representation.

Robert Chambers similarly evokes Butler’s theory of gender performativity in his discussion of parody when he argues that parody “bangs,” “binds,” and “blends” artistic conventions and when he cites as his example the performative acts of children. Children, he argues, practice parody from a young age, regularly and spontaneously, upending whatever order is present through parodying the identity performances of their parents and teachers. He states: “With their mimicry,
children seamlessly blend antithetical or disparate subject matter. With their uproarious moments, children bang such material together, and, with their mock adult performances, children bind otherwise dissimilar alternatives” (2010, p. 6). What is interesting about Chambers’ view of parody is its emphasis not only on subjectivity as parodic but also on transformation as inherent to parody. As discussed, parody always carries with it the possibility of a new iteration and this extends to notions of fluid identity performance. If parody invites perpetual revision and transformation, then performative acts of parodic mimicry can be similarly unpredictable and open-ended, allowing for experimentation with non-binary gender roles and identities.

Ultimately, though parody cannot be thought of as inherently subversive or conservative, its revisionary applications can still be destabilising of the authority or naturalness of social and textual conventions. Intertextuality problematises fixed notions of truth and, by extension, the ideological norms bound up with particular discourses; so do the metafictional aspects of parody, as they foreground literary practices and the processes of constructing meaning that underlie our understanding of ourselves and the world. The understanding of parodic practice articulated here will guide my analysis of feminist fairy tale parody in the next chapter.
Chapter 2—The Revisionary Practices of Parody:

Rewriting Gender Roles in Fairy Tale Retellings

There appears to be a certain propensity within human beings to reproduce some basic narratives, as though there were a “fairy-tale” gene within us... [making] us more disposed and susceptible to the formation of distinct stories about basic human drives and conflicts. These stories touch our instincts so deeply that we have cultivated them and passed them on from generation to generation to further the reproduction of our species in our own interests and to help us adapt to, know, and transform our changing environment. — Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre, 2013, p. 130.

As identified in the first chapter, one of the key strategies of parody is its intertextual focus on the dialectical juxtaposition between source and revision. I argued that the metafictional aspects of parodic writing, in particular, can play an important role in terms of helping parody work to unsettle ideological norms. With this in mind, the following chapter is dedicated to a specific practice of parody, appropriation, and more specifically the appropriation and revision of fairy tales to address issues of gender and sexuality. As this chapter will illuminate, feminist revisionary fairy tales are marked by parody in both looking back and looking forward, and in using intertextual and metafictional devices to challenge the normalisation of gender roles and ideology.

For the purpose of cohesion and clarity, I have tried to limit slippage between terms, for there are many different and overlapping definitions for fairy tale appropriation, including fairy tale adaptation, revision, reimagining, update, transfiguration, fracturing, retelling, and reworking. I refer to parodic fairy tales as retellings, and those retellings which demonstrate subversive tendencies or aim to amend problematic generic tropes I define as revisionary. Working within a critical and sociocultural framework, my focus is on the parodic strategies of postmodern revisionary fairy tales, such as intertextuality, irony, and metafiction. Notably, intertextuality in children’s literature can be problematic from a reader-response viewpoint due to the relatively limited cultural heritage and decoding skills of young readers. While adults will often seek to fill this gap in knowledge by providing clues to the intertextual context for children, as Bacchilega writes, fairy tales “exercise their powers on adults as well as children” (2013, p. 3). Thus,
my primary focus in this chapter is on fairy tale retellings aimed at adults and young adults (YA), and on the often-explicit ways in which they must employ parodic strategies to address issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. My interest is in the complex interplay between tradition and innovation that retellings demonstrate, and the sociocultural implications of this dynamic. I argue that parodic fairy tales blur generic boundaries to disentangle themselves from hegemonic genre and gender conventions, using intertextual pluralism, irony, and metafictive elements to challenge the authority of traditional texts—very powerful ones in the cultural imaginary—in the production of gendered meaning.

The reason I have chosen to apply a theory of parodic discourse to fairy tale appropriation is because of the continued cultural relevance and popularity of folkloric tales, as well as the multitude of ways in which they have, and continue to be, reimagined, revised, and retold to suit changing sociocultural climates. Having come from oral foundations, fairy tales are essentially provisional and intertextual, with many having uncertain and multilayered origins. As Judith Halden observes, “[f]or centuries storytellers have retold tales in their own ways, embellishing the storyline with details peculiarly representative of both the individual teller and his time” (1981, p. 145). Zipes similarly acknowledges the ways that fairy tales are shared and appropriated, noting that they are “rarely retold in the same way, always adapting to the environment and circumstances in which they were generated” (2013, p. 130). Even the most popular tales from Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, and the Brothers Grimm, which as Maria Tatar observes “seem to have a ubiquitous cultural presence” (2010, p. 59) and give the impression of being ‘definitive’ versions due to the power of their classic status, are in fact adaptions, being drawn from various stories within the oral tradition. Their transference involved what Kristeva would call a new articulation of the thetic, transforming essentially feminine tales into masculine ones, with a patriarchal “voice.” Such changes are an inevitable result of intertextual appropriation and transposition, where history and systems of meaning are constantly in flux.

Take, for example, the story “Little Red Riding Hood”, which Sandra L. Beckett describes as an “age old tale [that] has an amazing capacity to adapt to new social
and cultural contexts, and . . . has been refashioned and reworked to reflect those changes” (2002, p. xvi). In fact, the story of Red Riding Hood has traces in story traditions all over the world. Most are familiar with Perrault’s and Grimm’s versions, which tell of a girl in a red cloak (or red cap in Grimm’s version, reflecting folk traditions in Germany) being tricked and eaten by a wolf disguised as her grandmother. However, similar versions can be traced back to Asia and Africa, the Middle East, Europe and even ancient Norse mythology. For example, Italy’s “The False Grandmother” tells a familiar story of deception, calamity and restoration. Popular in Europe and the Middle East, “The Wolf and the Kids” depicts a wolf that impersonates a nanny goat in order to eat the children. Perhaps the best-known contemporary revisions of the Red Riding Hood story are Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf Alice,” which are widely acclaimed for their feminist reimagining of that tale. Still, retellings of the Red Riding Hood story continue to be produced in various forms, with contemporary versions including the animated film *Hoodwinked!* (2005); Tale of Tales’ 2009 video game *The Path* (which I will analyse in Chapter 3); Rooster Teeth’s animated series *RWBY* (2013 —); and Angela Parkhurst’s novel *The Forgotten Fairytales* (2014). All of these versions of the Red Riding Hood story demonstrate the rich intertextual history of fairy tales, their cross-media adaptability and their cross-cultural appeal, as well as the seemingly limitless possibility for appropriation.

There has been much written on the matter of why fairy tales resonate with so many varied cultures across the world and throughout history—a matter evoked by the quote from Zipes’ study that begins this chapter. Most scholars writing about this issue acknowledge the generic themes of fairy tales—love, family, death, justice—that seem to transcend social and cultural boundaries, making them so available for retelling. For instance, in *Adaptation and Appropriation* Julie Sanders attributes the popularity and adaptability of fairy tales to their universal stories and characters: “What they offer are archetypal stories available for re-use and recycling by different ages and cultures” (2006, p. 82). Similarly, for Zipes, “With each retelling [a] tale touches on basic instincts and moral codes and also adapts itself to the environment in which it is proposed” (2013, p. 131). Through appropriation, fairy tales have become more widespread, adapting to suit
the needs of changing times and cultures, and thus maintaining a strong presence. However, as per the Janus-faced theory of parody articulated in the last chapter, such evolution enables both the preservation and transformation of fairy tale tropes, themes and characterisations, which is to say that they retain—even as they simultaneously refashion—the distinct cultural mores that reflect the socio-historical context in which they were previously created. As Hutcheon puts it, “Postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representation it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past—by time and by the subsequent history of those representations” (1989, p. 90).

In a broader social context, in which fairy tales are often perceived as cultural fare for children, fairy tales are also understood by scholars as a widely accepted tool of socialisation, revealing strong moral and political agendas. Zipes has written extensively on this topic: how fairy tales not only often provide one’s earliest experience with storytelling but also have an overtly didactic function. They teach us right from wrong, offer moral guidance, warn of dangers, establish boundaries, reinforce social taboos, and provide role models we might wish to emulate. Notably, socialisation through fairy tales, when it comes to gender, is often said to work through a kind of embodied appropriation or parodying of story characters. In one of his many publications, Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre, Zipes links the socialising function of fairy tales to their social adaptation: “writers borrow consciously and unconsciously from other cultures in an endeavour to imbue their symbolical stories with very specific commentaries on the mores and manners of their times” (2013, pp. 41-42). Perrault and the Grimms certainly adapted their works to suit the social and political climate of their times, borrowing from various oral and literary traditions and imbuing their fairy tales with historically relevant ideology.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is relevant here. For Butler, gender politics can be linked to cultural products, as she posits that gender norms gain validity through constant cultural repetition and by becoming embedded in the day-to-day gestures, acts, and behaviour of all individuals, until they are
accepted as “natural” (2004, p. 900). David Buchbinder makes a similar argument regarding performative gender, stating that

> behaviour characterised as masculine or feminine, in the first place, is learned; and, in the second, it is what we do in order to be acknowledged as men/masculine or women/feminine . . . Masculinity and femininity thus are not inherent characteristics. (1994, pp. 2-3)

Following this theory of identity as performance, we can see how children, dressing up as Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, embody and enact the feminine role models idealised in fairy tales, exploring ways of seeing and being in the world defined by story characters, and sometimes carrying such behavioural patterns into adulthood. As Zipes suggests, ideology can become ingrained through such processes of naturalisation, as “we respond to these classical tales almost as if we were born with them” (2013, p. 1). This becomes problematic when considering the gender politics within traditional fairy tales, as the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray acknowledges in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985). Irigaray identifies three persistent female archetypes—mother, virgin, prostitute—as “the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorisation of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of man’s ‘activity’; seductiveness” (pp. 186-87). Similarly, as theorists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Shauna Pomerantz, and Alexandra Heatwole have explored, the concept of girlhood is often understood in dichotomous terms, with binaries such as passivity/power, virgin/whore, angelic/demonic being normalised through equally stereotypical representations. For instance, Heatwole observes that the female characters of traditional fairy tale are often polarised, being coded as either “good” or “bad.” In her examination of Disney’s fairy tale adaptations (which for many are synonymous with fairy tales), she states:

> Girlhood is opposed, in the Disney films, to both masculinity and older women . . . Compared to the pale, shapely, virginal young heroines, [alternative] female figures are clearly meant to present an image of “bad” femininity: femininity lost with age, femininity oversexualized, femininity gone wrong. (2016, p. 6)

Such binary models of femininity are not limited to Disney versions, but are ubiquitous when it comes to traditional fairy tales in general. Take, for example, traditional versions of *Snow White*, which present the ambitious and assertive
Queen as a villain, while championing the virginal, passive Snow White; or Perrault’s Cinderella; or, *The Little Glass Slipper*, with its negative portrayal of the determined and forward stepsisters in contrast with the patient and mild-mannered Cinderella. However, as Heatwole argues, Disney has commodified the objectified feminine archetype, successfully selling “princess culture” to girls and even women. She notes the myriad of games, clothing and toys that capitalise on fairy tale trends, with their specific marketing aimed at girls. For instance, girls can wear authentic Disney branded dresses and accessories and play as their favourite fairy tale princess, and when they grow older, they have the option to indulge in a full fairy tale wedding at Disneyworld, complete with castle, chariots and a gown befitting of Cinderella herself. According to this model of gender, girls need never grow into assertive and dangerous women, but can remain objects for the passive display of beauty. As Heatwole argues, “Disney sells visions of youthful girlhood to women of all ages, constructing girl identity as a set of clearly identifiable ideals that operate along the lines of contemporary norms” (2016, p. 1). As individuals enact these gender behaviours, Butler argues, the illusion of a “true gender” is sustained by “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions” (2004, p. 903). In summary, individuals gain an understanding of the kinds of behaviour valued by society by observing the dominant portrayals within cultural products, such as fairy tales, and model their own identity accordingly. In this way, gender ideology comes to be naturalised through performance.

Because of the patriarchal values and cultural impact of traditional fairy tales, fairy tale revision has been widely practiced by feminist writers. As Zipes suggests in *Don’t Bet on the Prince* (2014), fairy tales have become an ingrained part of childhood, leaving impressions that are carried into adult life, in ways that are inseparable from the patriarchal values of those men who originally transcribed an oral tradition of storytelling, and of those who continue to dominate the American film industry that makes and markets fairy tale adaptations. He states:

> [Many] feel that the fairy tales of their childhood stamp their present actions and behaviour in reality. There are certain fairy-tale patterns, motifs, and models which
constantly arise in our life and in literature which appear to have been preserved because they reinforce male hegemony in the civilisation process. (2014, p. 9)

However, this is precisely why significant revisionary work has also been done. As part of a broader cultural challenge to patriarchal ideology, feminist fairy tales revise the limited roles and representations typically found within the genre, seeking to offer alternative ways of understanding female gender identity. As Zipes puts it, feminist writers have “tried to reformulate sexual arrangements and aesthetics to suggest that we have choices as individuals with regard to the development of gender qualities and characteristics, social values and norms” (2014, p. 11). In Carter’s ground-breaking collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), for example, the author reconfigures gender identities and introduces a baroque literary aesthetic, transforming the facile binary portraits of gendered subjects into psychologically complex and ironic fields of structural play. Similarly, Anne Sexton gives fairy tales the revisionary treatment in *Transformations* (1971), employing hyperbolic parody to re-characterise fairy tale archetypes such as the lovely, patient princess. These works will be discussed at greater length in the latter half of this chapter to outline some of the specific ways that feminist fairy tale revision has used parody and adaptation to address the sexist, oppressive and limited roles evidenced in such tales as *Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, The Frog Prince, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood*, to name but a few. They give voice to those female characters who were previously silenced, reanimate those female characters who were rendered passive, and highlight the discursive construction of identity within sociocultural spaces.

Ultimately, I argue that at the heart of such revisionary writing is transformation: of narrative and generic traditions, of socialising practices, and of gender identities. As feminist and postmodernist theory has demonstrated, and as the LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex) community shows, gender is not immutable or fixed as a universal truth, but rather is fluid and revisionary. With this in mind, I will now compare the various ways that feminist writers have used the revisionary practices of parodic fairy tales to address gender politics, in contrast to more conservative fairy tale adaptations such as Disney’s. In attending to different media, such as film, television and video games, I would
like to pay particular attention to how different mediums allow for different levels of revision.

**Giving New Life to Old Stories—From Homage to Revision**

Here, it is worth noting again that appropriation is not always revisionary or subversive. While Zipes argues that “the purpose of producing a revised fairy tale is to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences” (1994, pp. 9-10), the extent to which fairy tale adaptations challenge generic traditions, particularly in regard to gender models, varies significantly. Even with altered patterns, themes, and imagery, many fairy tale appropriations convey similarly conservative ideals and characterisations as that of their predecessors. Take, for example, Disney’s popular animated film *Frozen* (2013), inspired by Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen* (1844). *Frozen* is widely considered to be one of Disney’s more revisionary and female-oriented films, celebrated for its focus on sisterly bonds over romantic love, and its purportedly transgressive themes. As one critic put it, *Frozen* “slams the door on the concepts of ‘perfect princess,’ superficial romance, needing a prince, and the morally perfect hero” (Feder 2014). Another critic generously proclaims it to be “the most progressive Disney movie ever” (Luttrell 2014). However, rather than effecting any significant ideological transformation, I would argue that overall the film reinforces the patriarchal status quo and holds its female characters to severe cultural norms. For, as Maja Rudloff observes, “On the surface *Frozen* promotes a narrative of feminist ideals of equality, empowerment and female agency, but conflates them with postfeminist ideals of appearance, self-discipline and strongly gender stereotyped depictions with regard to how the characters look and act” (2016, p. 1).

It is also the case that the sisters, Anna and Elsa, are juxtaposed against one another in a way that polarises them in terms of their femininity. Though both princesses are stereotypically petite, pretty, modest and fair-skinned, the frosty Elsa is frightening with her untamed magic and desire to “let it go” by freeing her body and behaviour from social regulation, whereas Anna is presented as
innocent and bubbly, mirroring the gaggle of “good” Disney princesses that precede her. She is sociable, romantically naïve, and completely non-threatening because she possesses none of Elsa’s magical and unruly abilities. Nor does she design to rule the kingdom. Unsurprisingly the film spends most of its time with Anna and her male companions, Kristoff, Sven and Olaf. By the film’s end, the contrasting models of femininity that Anna and Elsa embody are prioritised by way of interpreting their fates. Elsa is reined into a position of service and obligation, occupied by the monotonous matters of state. She has given up her freedom by conforming to societal norms, learning to police her body and her power (that is, to barely use it at all). Anna, on the other hand, is paired with the chivalric Kristoff, and unburdened of responsibility, achieving a fairly traditional “happily ever after” ending. This comparison of outcomes for Elsa and Anna reveals the value assigned to both representations of femininity. If Elsa represents action and power, then her apotheosis into a figure bound by duty would suggest that feminine agency must be properly restricted by patriarchal convention. Thus, Elsa no longer builds grand castles of ice or sings about freedom, but instead timidly produces harmless puffs of snow and allows herself to be guided by a council of men. In comparison, Anna is rewarded for demonstrating an idealised model of femininity. She regains her sister’s affection, enters a heterosexual relationship, and is granted the freedom to choose her own path (presumably in a purely rhetorical or at least unthreatening way). Through such binary representations, dominant gender roles and norms continue to be naturalised under the guise of progression and female empowerment.

Frozen, with its conservative treatment of traditional gender roles, serves as an important reminder that not all contemporary retellings are automatically revisionary in terms of gender ideology. Intertextual and parodic play, as guided by the intentions of the creator and medium, can enable or suppress a feminist agenda. In the case of Disney and its approach to fairy tales, I agree with Heatwole’s assertion that Disney, though engaged in a dialogue with feminist discourse, is driven by commercialism, and their “selling” of princess culture is “part of that continual process of seduction, and, by association, part of imagining . . . a universal girlhood that can continually be accessed again via consumption” (2016, p. 9). In contrast, I would argue that feminist revisions in other media—
and particularly literature—unconstrained by commercial imperatives, tend to offer some of the most subversive examples of parody and appropriation, reminding us that critical reflection need not be, as Do Rozario, Sulway and Calderone put it, “merely nostalgic, but also critical and political: conscious of the ways in which these pervasive tales informed contemporary culture and identity” (2017, p. 1). There have also been, as the final chapter of this exegesis will detail, some genuinely destabilising applications of fairy tale parody in indie gaming, which rigorously challenge the sexist ideologies and passivity promoted by traditional fairy tales, both through their form and content.

Thus, revision (as a form of parody) can be enacted in many ways, to various degrees, and for different reasons. It is not, as this exegesis has already asserted, always revolutionary, bold, or critical. However, feminist appropriations of fairy tales show how parody can function in powerful ways to invite a historical interrogation of traditional gender ideologies that is profoundly rooted in the contemporary. As Julie Sanders argues,

>The study of appropriations in an academic context has in part been spurred on by the recognised ability of adaptation to respond or write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position, and by the capacity of appropriations to highlight troubling gaps, absences, and silences within the canonical texts to which they refer. Many appropriations have a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject-positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original. (2006, p. 98)

This is a crucial aspect of parody: it allows us to look both backwards and forwards, reflecting on past, present, and future. It also ironically works within the system it seeks to revise. That revision simultaneously preserves and transforms fairy tale traditions, allowing us to reappraise traditional tales from a different vantage point and pointedly reimagine aspects of them. Challenging idealisations of passive femininity has proven key to the revisionary work of feminist fairy tales, given the ways in which the women of fairy tales are frequently represented in passive, long-suffering or patient roles and encouraged to quell their desires. For instance, in Perrault’s *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* and *Cinderella: or, The Little Glass Slipper* the female characters are admired for their beauty, grace and charm, and rewarded for these virtues with offers of marriage. Feminist writers have sought to re-write this depiction of the feminine ideal. Veering away from the passive, domestic damsels of the traditional fairy
tale, there is a focus on active heroines, who drive the plot with their journeys of self-discovery and independence. From parodic YA fictions, such as Valente’s *Six Gun Snow White* and the animated film *Hoodwinked!* to more adult fare, like Sheri S. Tepper’s *Beauty* (1991), or Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride,” traditional fairy tale motifs and roles are transformed to give the heroine greater agency than was previously afforded to her, with power relations between men and women being critically foregrounded.

In her analysis of revisionary fairy tales and feminist discourse, Veronica L. Schanoes traces the importance of revision to the cultural disruption of gender ideologies:

> fairy tales encode social and political ideologies that influence the way we look at the world. To rewrite such tales is to re-examine a world-view entrenched from childhood, and thus to intervene at a highly charged source of our ideological outlook. (2014, pp. 15-16)

In contrast to theorists such as Adrienne Rich, who argues that new stories are required to replace their patriarchal predecessors and undermine their power, Schanoes suggests that the potency of parodic revision depends upon the comparative relationship between source material and its revision. She states:

> A revision does not replace the traditional tales from which it springs, but rather it revivifies them, gives them new life, both incarnating the original tale in itself and re-animating it by providing new perspectives, new understandings, and thus forcing an old tale back into consciousness and making it once more the subject of thought. Revisions derive their effect partially through the invocation and disruption of earlier tales; therefore, they require the persistence of the earlier tales in order to achieve their full effect. (pp. 61-62)

In other words, revisionary parody “works” because we are able to engage in intertextual comparisons. Encouraged by an ironic and critical distancing of the source tale, readers can productively contrast the values represented by the revisionary text with the traditional text. This allows an old story to be pulled into the present, revealing its provisionality and its openness to critique and transformation in our contemporary socio-political and cultural context. As Schanoes puts it, “revision has the potential to expose the ideological underpinnings of the stories that shape our lives, not in order that we surrender to them, but in order that we can shape them in turn” (p. 57).
By reclaiming the fairy tale, revisionist authors and other cultural practitioners, in dialogue with feminist discourse, give voice to a host of new perspectives and re-imagine gender roles and configurations. According to Schanoes, this sort of revision disrupts the normalising practices that reinforce ideology by making apparent the symbols of myth and fairy tale and transforming their signification and meaning. This can have an impact on the cultural and historical bearing of such tales, as these points of revision reflect back on the original source material. As Schanoes states,

> When the symbols and regalia of myth (the glass slipper, the pomegranate seed, the magic mirror) are rethought and imbued with different meanings, they retain those new associations when read in their earlier, mythic context, providing new layers of meaning to the older myth as well as to the newer revision. (p. 61)

As Schanoes presents it, the relationship between traditional tales and revisionary work is thus one of mutual creation: traditional fairy tales give life to their revisions, and the revisions reconceptualise and revitalise the works that they’re derived from.

Vanessa Joosen similarly points to the ideological potency of the intertextual relationship between traditional and revisionary fairy tales, arguing that “by critically distancing themselves from the fairy tale, retellings invite readers to reconsider the traditional texts” (2011, p. 16). As discussed in the previous chapter, theorists of parody and intertextuality have put forward similar arguments, observing how the plurality of meaning that stems from a collision of texts can be ideologically destabilising. Bacchilega draws on Kristeva’s and Bakhtin’s work to theorise the polyvocal and subversive interplay of parodic intertextuality in fairy tales. Conceptualising a “fairy tale web,” defined as an interconnected cross-cultural network of fairy tales and strengthened by the internet, she points to the plurality and ambiguity of such complex intertextual relations and engagements to argue: “We cannot fully predict or control which stories mingle with, influence, anticipate, interrupt, take over, or support one another because every teller and recipient of a tale brings to it her or his own texts” (2013, p. 19). Feminist interventions, though, seek to frame fairy tale intertexts in specific and explicit ways for a didactic purpose. According to Joosen, “the critical evaluation of the traditional fairy tale is ‘performed’ in two
ways: first, through exaggeration and exposure and, second, through the correction with a more positively valued ideal” (2011, p. 47). Joosen gives the example of Linda Kavanagh’s satirical “Princesses’ Forum” (from the collection of feminist fairy tales *Ride on Rapunzel*, 1992), in which several iconic princesses remark upon traditional fairy tale notions of happily-ever-after and the limitations placed on them by society. Together the princesses make quips about the calibre of the men who court them, and muse about being independent and single: “‘I think we’re all victims of stereotyping,’ said Red Riding Hood. ‘Everyone assumes that in order to live happily ever after, we must each have a prince in tow.’” (1992, p. 36). The characters here are aware of the stories written for them, and openly discuss ways of changing their fate. The self-awareness of this metafictive parodic engagement aims to directly engage the audience in a dialogue with feminist discourse and the ideologies of fairy tales, making explicit and questioning the oppressive patriarchal values of traditional fairy tales and offering alternative viewpoints.

Prompting such an interrogative spirit is a narrative strategy that itself works to challenge the acculturation of women into submissive positions. As Angela Smith writes, women have been historically socialised into passive roles in a way that has been mirrored in their cultural objectification and sexual glamorisation as the ‘weaker sex’: “This tendency to ‘naturalize’ gender inequality in society resulted in women being both denigrated (as powerless and weak) and, simultaneously, idealized (as ‘domestic goddesses’)” (2015, p. 428). However, inspired by second-wave feminism, which focused on the importance of cultural as much as political agency, writers have challenged the fairy tale myth that, as Zipes puts it, “the male acts; the female waits” (2006, p. 25). Many revisionary fairy tales portray active heroines struggling for control of their destiny, often in conjunction with more passive representations of masculinity. For example, in Garth Nix’s *Sabriel* (1995), the heroine of the same name leaves her boarding school, with its traditional lessons in feminine civility, to rescue her father and banish the walking dead that have arisen in his absence. Parodying the traditional narrative of *Sleeping Beauty*, Sabriel awakens a slumbering prince with a kiss, rescuing him from an enchantment. The insecure prince is reluctant to embrace a heroic,
leadership role, and instead follows the pragmatic Sabriel on her quest, supporting her where he can.

Another retelling which offers more empowered models of femininity and affords its heroine greater agency is Tepper’s *Beauty* (1991), which makes a heroine of Sleeping Beauty. While everyone else sleeps, she travels through time and across the multiverse, addressing various challenges and rallying against the abusive male forces that plague her extraordinarily long life. Throughout her journeys, men repeatedly try to make her passive. She is raped, objectified, sacrificed, and neglected in ways that highlight the original Sleeping Beauty’s victimisation. As Joosen puts it, “these retellings bring to the surface the repressed, unconscious meaning of the tale; in feminist terms, they reveal the patriarchal ideology that is implicit in the traditional versions” (2011, p. 219). However, Beauty fights against her victimisation, liberating the character from feminine passivity and fairy tale gender convention.

Such portrayals are common among feminist revisionary fairy tales: driven female characters, who are not content to be rescued, bought or bartered, and who don’t rely on men for their happy ending. In parodic and metafictive fashion, the heroines of feminist revisionary fairy tales are also often aware of the limitations placed upon them by fairy tale tradition, and actively resist stereotype. In this self-reflexive manner, writers directly address issues of gender inequality and power relations, by drawing attention to the intertextual space of difference between the two texts and, as Joosen puts it, “filling the gap with an active heroine who chooses not to conform to stereotypical gender patterns” (p. 47).

As Schanoes and Joosen have both suggested, fairy tale retellings disrupt readers’ expectations by altering or rearranging elements of the traditional story, thus shedding new light on familiar tales. Most importantly, though, the texts self-consciously remind readers that social values and gender ideologies are constantly changing, and that identity and the socialisation process intrinsic to identity formation are open to transformation and critique. In so doing they not only thematise but provide material opportunities for reader agency in encouraging such critique.
In the next section of this chapter, I will refer to the work of Zipes and, in particular, his identification of two types of fairy tale revision—transfiguration and fusion—in order to elaborate further on the relativising operations of feminist fairy tale retellings and on the opportunities for agency they can facilitate. Zipes’ categories are useful to introduce at this point because they allow us to engage more closely with different types of feminist parody, which range from uncanny aesthetic approaches to more overtly comic ones. Additionally, transfiguration and fusion relate to socialising practices, with Zipes arguing that as modes of experimentation they have “direct bearing on cultural patterns in the West” (2006, p. 178). Therefore, I will draw upon his theory in my analysis of various parodic fairy tales, outlining the strategic ways in which such texts engage in feminist revision.

**Breaking the Fairy Tale Spell—Feminist Revisions**

In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (2006), Zipes identifies two different types of fairy tale revision that writers might use to “transform the civilising process” and “provoke the reader to reflect critically on the conditions and limits of socialisation” (2006, p. 177). He calls them transfiguration and fusion. Both types of revision rely on intertextual play and the activation of irony to some extent, foregrounding the relationship between hypotext and hypertext in different ways. Transfiguration tends to allow for more subtle engagement, relying on the uncanny, and is therefore more commonly used in “adult” fairy tales. Fusion on the other hand appears more in YA fairy tale revisionism, as it allows for more explicit metafictional engagement with the source text. Both are nevertheless consistent in challenging genre and gender conventions associated with the fairy tale. According to Zipes, “the narrative techniques of fusion and transfiguration are aimed at disturbing and jarring readers so that they lose their complacent attitude towards the status quo of society and envision ways to realize their individuality within collective and democratic contexts” (p. 178).

Zipes describes the transgressive strategy of transfiguration as follows:
Generally, the author assumes that the young reader is already familiar with the classical tale and depicts the familiar in an estranging fashion. Consequently, the reader is compelled to consider the negative aspects of anachronistic forms and perhaps transcend them. The tendency is to break, shift, debunk, or rearrange the traditional motifs to liberate the reader from the contrived and programmed mode of literary reception. Transfiguration does not obliterate the recognizable features or values of the classical fairy tale but cancels their negativity by showing how a different aesthetic and social setting relativizes all values. (2006, p. 178)

This transfigurative mode of parody, as Zipes describes it, employs the uncanny to denaturalise motifs and ideals within recognisable fairy tale traditions. Familiar characters, plots and tropes are presented in new ways, which invite comparison with the hypotext while also offering subversive perspectives and new configurations. An example is Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride,” which repeats but also profoundly unsettles the Beauty and the Beast tale. Firstly, the story is narrated by the heroine, in an act that reclaims agency over the narrative process and the voice of female experience. Secondly, Carter exposes the brute commodification of Beauty, who is gambled away to The Beast by her father like one of his possessions. Ultimately, instead of presenting the redemption of The Beast into a man, the narrative portrays the heroine’s embrace of herself as beast with her own sexual desires and her own physical animal power. The narrator unforgettably reflects, in what has become a rallying cry for feminist agency over traditional female submissiveness: “The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers” (2006, p. 71). According to Kristine Jennings, “Carter’s appropriation of the fairy tale form is a conscious infiltration and disruption of western patriarchal ideologies and the binary modes of thinking traditionally embodied therein” (2014, p. 89). While this involves ironising and undermining dominant patriarchal representations of the body to reveal its politicisation, Carter also moves beyond gender binaries to question human-animal oppositions. As Chiara Battisti argues,

Carter offer[s] ‘in-between bodies’ . . . which call attention to the contingency and unnaturalness of gender normativity. The Beast and Beauty opens an epistemological dialogue in which the ‘body beyond the norm’ becomes a strategy of resistance for the contemporary subject. (2016, p. 105)

Alongside Carter, Anne Sexton was one of the earliest feminist writers to explore revisionary fairy tales as a medium for reflecting on the oppression of women in patriarchal society, and the poems of Transformations (1971) similarly use the
uncanny strategies described by Zipes as transfigurative. Whereas some of Carter’s revisionary fairy tales such as “The Tiger’s Bride” offer the opportunity for their heroines to assert agency, Sexton’s stories exaggerate her characters’ lack of agency to expose the sexist undertones of traditional fairy tales. The female characters she presents are drawn from various Grimm’s fairy tales and are presented as commodities, who are valued for their purity, beauty and youth. Their passivity and fragility are consistently and ironically exaggerated in contrast with male dominance. Sexton presents her protagonists as having very little opportunity for self-expression or agency. Their constructedness and their sterility as models of femininity are powerfully portrayed in poetic language. This is evidenced in Sexton’s version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves:

No matter what life you lead / the virgin is a lovely number: / cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper, / arms and legs made of Limoges, / lips like Vin Du Rhone, / rolling her china-blue doll eyes / open and shut. / Open to say, / Good Day Mama, / and shut for / the thrust / of the unicorn. / She is unsoiled. / She is as white as a bonefish. (1971, p. 3)

Here Sexton presents Snow White as doll-like, empty, and desireless in ways that hyperbolically foreground her fragility and aesthetic value. As Karen A. Keely states, “Snow White is entirely passive in this rendition (as in the original), and Sexton is clearly critiquing the society that transforms women into china dolls and that makes beauty so central to their identity that aging becomes disastrous” (2008, pp. 71-72). Notably, though the language and imagery are implicitly sexual, Snow White exists outside of desire. Such objectification is tied to a lack of female agency, as the female subject is envisioned, according to the patriarchal imaginary represented by fairy tale tradition, as a construction akin to Frankenstein’s monster, waiting to be animated by the desire of men. Sexton reinforces this by writing in third person, creating an out-of-body perspective that highlights the woman’s powerlessness. She is spoken for; she does not speak.

To explore Zipes’ second form of feminist fairy tale revision, fusion, I turn now to modern fairy tale retellings in the form of film and YA fiction. The second type of experimentation that Zipes observes fuses traditional generic configurations with contemporary references in often ironic or unsettling ways, thus highlighting anachronism and encouraging reflection on the historical disjunctions between the traditional setting of the hypotext and the contemporary milieu in which the
parody has been produced. Overall, revisionary works that fall under Zipes’s category of fusion tend to be more explicit about their intertextual borrowing and more overtly metafictional in ways that break the “fourth wall” and directly engage the reader’s or audience’s agency in interpreting the retelling.

An example is the animated film *Hoodwinked!* (2005), which critiques fairy tale traditions through the lens of modernity, parodying various fairy tale tropes and stereotypes in ways that foreground matters of perspective and interpretation. The film is also a mash-up of the fairy tale and detective genres. Told from multiple points of view, the film draws on the Red Riding Hood tale, presenting the different perspectives of various characters in an effort to uncover the truth surrounding an elaborate plot involving the Goodie Bandit. The story involves a lot of ironic misdirection and plays off viewer assumptions regarding generic traditions and stereotypes. Ultimately, characters are revealed to be more than they seem as Detective Nicky uncovers their various and unexpected roles in the plot. Overall, the film demonstrates the elusive nature of truth, which is presented as a “problem”—as per the detective genre—that must be attended to and solved. The relativity of truth also becomes apparent, as the film suggests that there are multiple ways to tell a story based on differing perspectives and experiences.

From the very beginning of this explicitly metafictional film, *Hoodwinked!* invites critical and revisionary thinking. The opening dialogue of the film, breaking the fourth wall, states:

Red Riding Hood—you probably know the story. But there’s more to every tale than meets the eye. It’s just like they always say, you can’t judge a book by its cover. If you want to know the truth you’ve got to flip through the pages.

Here the narrator is explicitly acknowledging the preconceptions that the audience will have about fairy tale traditions, warning that such assumptions will prove misleading. The implication is that the repetition of certain stories, such as fairy tales, can lead to stereotyping, which in turn normalises characterisations and traits at the expense of individual difference and at the expense of the truth. However, this film calls for greater attention and critical reflection on the part of the viewer, as it seeks to challenge these stereotypes. Granny, for instance, turns out not to be a vulnerable victim of the wolf, but rather an outgoing, charismatic
thrill-seeker. Red is similarly active, eager to uncover the truth about her family’s business and forge a new path for herself beyond the “goodie” trade. She is far from the naïve character presented in past versions, instead demonstrating cleverness and confidence. Their stories, as they develop, challenge expectations and reveal the way that language can mislead or misrepresent. Or, as Zipes puts it, their parodic transfiguration “demonstrate[s] that reputations, spread through rumours of old tales, no longer hold true and should not be taken at surface value today” (2006, p. 180).

This film demonstrates the hesitation that parodic strategies of fusion create between familiar and unfamiliar, and the ways that it can be disruptive to dominant ideologies by way of questioning the production and interpretation of meaning. It is also arguably the case that fusion, rather than transfiguration, has emerged as a more predominant form of parody in YA culture, perhaps because of its scope to be more explicit about intertextual references, and its metafictional ability to overtly thematise audience engagement.

**Transforming Frogs—A Case Study**

To conclude this chapter, I would like to now turn to Garth Nix’s YA novel, *Frogkisser!* (2017), as a contemporary parodic fairy tale that exemplifies Zipes’ category of parodic fusion, as well as some of the most subversive practices of parody that I’ve outlined, including intertextual pluralism, irony and metafiction. Nix’s treatment of fairy tale, folktale, and fantasy-genre tropes is both homage and clever subversion, written with wit and ironic perspective to deliver something that is acutely familiar, yet provocative and fresh.

*Frogkisser!* revolves around the young princess Anya and her quest to fulfil a ‘sister promise’ and, consequently, thwart the plans of her dastardly stepfather. This involves kissing a host of individuals who have been transformed into beasts in order to rescue her sister’s prince and return him to her. Anya ends up relying not on love, nor the purity of her kiss, but on magical lip balm to turn them back into their original forms. What is subversive about this heroic tale is Nix’s treatment of fairy tale stereotypes, as he both installs and ironises familiar
representations in a way that opens them up for unsettling and revision. As I will elaborate, *Frogkisser!* emphasises the fluidity of identity, and the novel’s key theme of transformation is central to fairy tale retelling and parody in general.

As the name suggests, *Frogkisser!* draws on the story of The Frog Prince, popularised by the Brothers Grimm. It deviates significantly, however, from that tale, playing on various folkloric conventions, structures, and motifs in a parodic fashion. Firstly, *Frogkisser!* is ostentatiously intertextual, demonstrating its familiarity with folkloric traditions by establishing and ironising a multitude of fairy tale and fantasy stereotypes. It openly challenges readerly assumptions about these gendered characterisations in its metafictional deployment of intertextual material, targeting binary fairy tale stereotypes for revision. For instance, the anticipated wickedness of the stepmother is questioned: “They had a stepmother, who was expected to be quite evil but mainly turned out to be a very enthusiastic botanist” (p. 5). The novel also challenges the passivity of princesses—with the heroine insisting “I’m not kissing a frog!” (p. 19)—and the bravery of princes: “The recently frog-shaped prince made a kind of bleating noise and ran away” (p. 23). In addition, familiar characters are pluralised and revealed to be performing particular “identities.” For instance, Gerald the Herald is not a single man, but rather a collective of individuals all disguised to give the illusion of a single herald who is always watching and reporting on events. Similarly, the identity of the Good Wizard is ambiguous, with multiple people dressing up to perform the role. Such ironized portrayals of generic stereotypes call into question matters of authenticity.

Following the theme of identity and its fluidity, Nix uses intertextual comparison to revise the stereotypical model of feminine passivity that is so common in traditional fairy tales. During an encounter with an angry giant, Anya learns to stand up for herself by taking action to save herself and her friends. The following exchange between Anya and the giant directly addresses fairy tale stereotypes and the assumptions they make about gender, before directly challenging such limiting roles.

“I HAVEN’T GOT ALL DAY TO GET MEASURED. I HAVE TO GET YOU BACK HOME AND COOKED UP. PRINCESS SURPRISE—MY FAVOURITE MEAL!”
“Why do you call it ‘Princess Surprise’?” asked Anya. She tied a loop in the other end, also with a slipknot.

“BECAUSE THEY LOOK SO SURPRISED TO BE EATEN UP!” guffawed the giant. “PRINCESSES ALWAYS EXPECT TO GET RESCUED.”

“Do they?” asked Anya mildly. “Better they should rescue themselves!”

She threw one loop over the giant’s left toe and the other over his right toe, pulled both loops tight, and ran away with Ardent close at her heels. (2017, pp. 121-122)

Such metafictional parody is, as I argued in the first chapter, of significant importance to the parodic text’s ability to facilitate reader understanding of its subversive feminist agenda. As suggested, metafiction intensifies parodic intertextuality in the way that it reveals genre and gender conventions. Calling attention to the self-referentiality and artificiality of narrative or discourse means also calling attention to the gendered identities that are discursively or culturally constructed. As Hutcheon asserts, metafictional parody “thematises the postmodern concern with the radically indeterminate and unstable nature of textuality and subjectivity, two notions seen as inseparable” (1989, p. 46). Nix exploits this parodic practice, overtly referencing generic tropes and literary conventions, and explicitly commenting on fairy tale traditions with a mocking or ironic tone. For example, the following exchange parodies the character dichotomies of good and evil in fairy tales:

“I don’t know where to go,” continued Anya. “For help against the Duke, I mean. Who would help us?”

“The Good Wizard might, or perhaps a responsible dragon, a sensible knight, a great queen or king… You will have to seek out suitable allies,” Tanitha advised. (p. 43)

By giving the characters titles of “good” “responsible” “sensible” and “great,” their moral positioning is overly simplified in a manner that parodies the ways in which fairy tales typically polarise characters according to socially acceptable behavioural patterns. The meaning behind these titles is thus ironically double-coded: they can be read in a straight way with reference to fairy tale characters, or their ironic “edginess” can be activated. While the ambiguity is not clarified by a metafictional intervention here, the text does adopt metafictive devices elsewhere, as when Anya rejects the generic convention of the quest:

“The time has come when you must go on a Quest.”
“A Quest! I haven’t got time to go on a Quest, or even a noncapitalised little quest!” protested Anya. (2017, p. 41)

Hutcheon’s concept of irony’s edge—an edge enabled by the unpredictable nature of interpretive acts as grounded in the heteroglossic aspects of language—is also relevant to the following excerpt, in which Nix metafictionally highlights the plurality of available meanings associated with the word “Good”:

She supposed that by their very nature, Good Wizards would be required to help questers like herself. Otherwise they’d be Bad Wizards. Unless, of course, the reference was to their skill at wizardry. Then a Good Wizard would be a skilled wizard, and their ethics and behaviour would be up to them, and a Bad Wizard would just be incompetent, but could be quite nice. She hoped good in this case meant kind, wise, and helpful. (p. 104)

As Hutcheon states, “irony can make you edgy, nervous about how to fix meaning securely and how to determine motivation” (1995, p. 36). Anya demonstrates this hesitation, or edginess, in the above passage, and the reader is invited to share in her uncertainty.

While parodic retellings of fairy tales—particularly for YA audiences—might employ metafictional techniques to provide stronger interpretive signals, to neutralise the acute discomfort irony and its uncertainty can cause, parody arguably always occupies an ambiguous space. Being inherently Janus-faced, preserving and subverting, looking backward and forward, the parodic text is inherently ambiguous and provisional. To quote Hannoosh, “Through its essential self-reflexivity, parody . . . constantly demonstrates its awareness of contributing to the tradition that it mocks” (1989, p. 120), but its operation at the liminal space of the in-between may be where parody derives its energy, and where it can demand agency.

In the final chapter of this exegesis, I turn to an in-depth analysis of a distinctly different mode of parodic story telling: video games. I situate video games within the broad intertextual cultural context that highlights the various ways they appropriate literary genres and texts in revisionary ways. Video games and digital narratives, as relatively new mediums, offer unique ways of adapting fairy tales for modern audiences. These mediums are also arguably more interactive than print and film, providing greater opportunity to thematise agency through game mechanics and offering players a chance to actively participate in a narrative
process that involves experimenting with gender performance. My key case study, Tale of Tales’ parodic exploratory game *The Path*, for instance, allows players to control several versions of Red Riding Hood in ways that raise important questions concerning matters of agency and socialisation.
Chapter 3—Video Games and Parody


Having explored parodic strategies in literature, film and television, the final chapter of this exegesis will be focused on an analysis of parody in relation to video games. It attempts to answer the question: can parodic video games be used to revise gender ideology in subversive ways? Like all cultural products, video games are produced by people in cultural contexts and are therefore intertextual and ideologically encoded, being shaped by their producers in both deliberate and unexpected ways, and open to interpretation. Furthermore, video games are part of a broad multimedia and transmedial landscape, intersecting with various cultural forms through practices of adaptation and supplementation. Typically, these intertextual connections are concerned with adding a layer of familiarity to the relatively new medium of video games, rather than aiming to critique. Indeed, as Ziva Ben-Porat points out, intertextuality in games is often related to the cultural phenomenon of “memes” and is activated “retroactively” by literary readers more than gamers (2012, p. 270). However, there are video games that engage in parodic and critical practices in subversive ways that demand intertextual activation, approaching adaptation from a revisionary standpoint. These are the games that I will be analysing, especially those that focus on revising problematic gender representations in fairy tales through parodic practices.

The explosion of the digital age has had a significant impact on pioneering new modes of storytelling, particularly within the gaming industry, and over the past decade gaming culture has broadened and flourished. As Axel Stockburger observes,

In the last ten years we have witnessed a significant cultural re-evaluation of video and computer games. Whereas these games were generally treated as children’s toys during the 1980s, they have permeated the whole of society by the year 2000. (2014, p. 36)

This is partly due to the fact that gaming consoles have become mainstream (now doubling as a media hub in many households), mobile gaming has seen a boom,
and the gaming community has broadened beyond “hard core” gamers. With this growth, the study of video games has largely been documented in terms of discourse analysis (Gee 2005) and socio-cultural impact (Crawford, Gosling & Light 2011, Jenkins 2006); however, I will be focusing on the combined narratological, ludic and parodic dimensions of video games, which have received relatively less attention. Following scholars such as Astrid Ensslin and Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, I propose that video games can be analysed in similar terms as literary texts—with reference to communicative patterns, language systems, and intertextuality, for instance. From a narratological perspective, video games present stories that can be adapted and retold, just as they can in literature, albeit in distinct ways associated with the gaming medium, as I will now detail with reference to a proposed literary-ludic framework. What distinguishes games most readily from other texts is the agency afforded the player. This makes them potentially powerful tools for addressing precisely the lack of representative agency for female readers typically found in traditional fairy tale texts.

**Transmedial Transformation**

In considering the textuality of video games, it is important to acknowledge that games possess unique technological and ludic elements. The interactivity and peculiar agency that video games generate are often highlighted as points of difference from the experience of readers consuming literary texts, as Espen Aarseth succinctly points out: “A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless . . . He cannot have the player’s pleasure of influence” (1997, p. 4). Acknowledging the agency that players are granted through ludic practices, Conor McKeown describes video games as a mode of structured play involving “interactivity between algorithm and human, player and machine” (2016, p. 97). This unique experience of agency that video games provide is something that has been emphasised by theorists such as Aarseth, Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen, known as key players in the so-called ludology versus narratology debate. This debate has seen ludologists and narratologists at odds with one another over the kind of approach that is most relevant to the study of video games. Whereas narratology prioritises representation and textuality, ludology focuses on game systems and rules. As
Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca summarise, the ludic argument is that the narrative elements of a game, such as story and characters, serve merely as an interface level for the rules and mechanics of the core game (2013, p. 11). On this, Eskelinen states that the ludic components of video games should, “annihilate for good the discussion of games as stories, narratives or cinema” (2001). However, Janet Murray has usefully challenged the terms of this debate. Describing the idea that “games, unlike other cultural objects, should be interpreted only as members of their own class, and only in terms of the defining abstract formal qualities,” she argues that scholars “should no longer be confused by the appearance of an either/or choice between games and stories, or distracted by an unproductively sectarian discourse” (2005). They are “interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other” (2005). Gordon Calleja suggests something similar: “Arguing that narratives are not particularly important to the gaming experience is a nontenable, normative assumption that predetermines how players experience game environments. On the other hand, attributing every aspect of the gaming experience to narrative is equally unproductive” (2011, p. 113). This is the stance that this thesis takes, analysing video games in terms of their combined ludic and narrative qualities.

Ensslin similarly theorises video games as part of a transmedial landscape, embedded in both textual and ludic systems. As Ensslin describes it, “games and gaming integrate smoothly with other texts and media, such as the world wide web, interactive television, radio and digital fiction” (2012, p. 56). In The Language of Gaming Ensslin also makes a compelling argument for the textuality of video games, acknowledging the communicative elements of video games and the use of language across a variety of mediums. While Ensslin certainly recognises the formal differences between literature and games, she argues that games nevertheless operate at a semiotic level:

Meaning as conveyed through video games derives partly from their specific ludic (playful, rule-based) and interactive qualities, and partly from the unique ways in which they both simulate and represent fictional worlds and narratives through image, sound and, not least, human language. (2012, p. 5)
She points out that video games, as a form of new media, might not present stories in traditional ways, but many still rely on archetypal plots and characterisations, generic motifs and lore, “thus following the intercultural conventions of storytelling” (2012, p. 145). This points to the intertextual dimensions of video games or what Ensslin describes as “the textual ecology of video games, and the ways in which intertextuality, intermediality, transmediation and paratextuality operate to create a complex network of discursive relationships and cross-references” (2012, p. 42).

It is the starting point of this chapter that video games can be analysed in similar terms as literary works, but should also be thought of as having their own unique “language” through which they produce meaning. Certainly, as I will argue, video games share similarities with other mediums (narratively, semiotically and intertextually), and players engage with them in relation to the conventions of other mediums. Indeed, while the game rules are what facilitate the story and allow one to “play” a game, I would argue that it is nevertheless the story and characters that often captivate and engage players. This is arguably evident in the fact that some games offer a “story only” mode that allows one to play a game on an easy setting in order to prioritise story over gameplay. For instance, popular Telltale games such as *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), *Tales from the Borderlands* (2014), and *Minecraft: Story Mode* (2015) are interspersed with merely brief moments of basic gameplay, usually only requiring the player to tap a button at the right moment or make a dialogue/action choice. In other words, they are known, and enjoyed, for their narrative elements; as the ludologist Jesper Juul argues, in a compromised position, “Video games are rules and fiction” (2005, p. 12). That is to say, a player’s gaming experience is mediated by rules, conventions, and technology, but they also engage with and imagine a fictional world beyond those regulators. They also do so in a creative way, negotiating in-game fictions alongside the real-world space inhabited by players. Video games also can and do intersect and engage with texts from other mediums in parodic and ironic ways. For example, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the familiar princess archetype is a trope that manifests in various mediums in different ways, and which has been both exploited and revised in video games.
In fact, I would argue that video games are more open to transformation and parody than traditional texts, owing to the specific nature of the medium and the agency afforded to players. For Linda A. Hughes, the adaptiveness of video games is inseparable from the ludic elements of the medium, which afford agency to players: “Game rules can be interpreted and reinterpreted toward preferred meanings and purposes, selectively invoked or ignored, challenged or defended, changed or enforced to suit the collective goals of different groups of players” (1999, p. 94). Players thus “co-author” gameplay experience in the ways that they play or refuse to play according to the rules of the game, allowing a certain amount of room for deviation and even subversion. It is also the case that, while literary culture may boast the transformative (albeit minority) tradition of fan fiction, video games are associated with a stronger culture of adaptation. This is evident in various practices that include (literal) recoding, re-contextualising and replaying. Sean C. Duncan acknowledges the many different ways that people engage with digital games, noting the blurred lines between producer and consumer, and the crossover between digital games with other media, such as the internet, television, film, comics and literature (2013, p. 85). Once in the hands of active participants, video games are frequently transformed, through involvement with the gameplay, varied interpretive stances, creative moderation, and the global sharing of content. For instance, live streaming games on Twitch, “let’s play” videos (recorded gameplay, usually with commentary), “machinima” (game play footage used for cinematic production), and “modding” have become key components of gaming culture, and extend the narrative of a game well beyond that of the original product. In the case of live streaming and let’s plays, these videos form narratives in and of themselves, with the player’s commentary and personality being overlaid with the game, forming multiple layers of meaning and the doubling of intertextual “voices.” With machinima this extends even further, with entirely new stories emerging from game-play footage, sometimes with little connection to the original game’s content or story. The long-running online series by Rooster Teeth, Red vs Blue (2003-), for example, draws on the Halo franchise, using footage from the sci-fi video games, but the parodic characters tell a unique story and set a humorous tone. Ensslin describes this phenomenon as a “complex and creative intertextualisation” of player engagement and fan culture (2012, p. 53). She gives the example of CD Projekt Red’s Witcher games (2007-2015) and
the ways in which fans generate intertexts from them by making artwork and sharing fan fiction, “thus claiming imagined ownership by means of textual reference, appropriation and development” (2012, p. 53). Furthermore, as Helen Thornham observes, this behaviour reveals that “gaming is a social activity arcing well beyond the immediate moment of gameplay” (2011, p. 1). Significantly for this chapter, the extensions and adaptations of video games, and the ways in which communities share them, also demonstrate an enhanced potential to transform stories and meanings, particularly in relation to gender binaries, both in game worlds and in the real world.

Thus, while video games have a reputation for cultural and ideological conservativeness—supporting a patriarchal gender status quo, for instance, as the “Gamergate” scandal notoriously demonstrated—the digital nature of their medium and thus their ready availability for adaptation makes them open to spontaneous, zeitgeist-driven transformation. According to Ensslin, while mainstream video games tend to follow strict conventions and formulas, players have the capacity to recode the meaning of any game by sharing their perspectives with other players and by participating in the various communicative webs that are part of videogame culture: “[Whilst] videogame makers seem to follow a conservative line with respect to representations of gender, race and language, gamers themselves engage in a multitude of subversive practices . . . [that] manifest themselves particularly poignantly in gamers’ communicative interactions” (2012, p. 160). In other words, though games may have rules, objectives, plots and other conventions that may shape gameplay, players will always find ways to appropriate video games for their own needs and purposes. Whether it be a narrated Twitch stream, a recorded “let’s play” video, game play tutorial, fan fiction, chat room discussion, recorded and shared achievements, or cosplay, players reinterpret and subvert the messaging of video games in many ways, contributing to a multitude of overlapping voices and narratives. In these varied ways video games are marked by intertextuality, being adapted and transformed by different developers and audiences, and for different purposes.

As Ensslin also recognises, despite the utopian possibilities of open-endedness and revision represented by an on-line gaming culture, “like any other human-
made product, video games carry complex layers of meaning, which always reflect a certain set of ideologies about society and its power relationships” (2012, p. 5). Given that gaming is still emerging from a male-dominated group of “hard-core” players, many commercial games present problematic portrayals of women, “represent[ing] femininity in terms of either weakness (the damsel in distress) or hypersexuality (the femme-fatale), or, indeed, both” (2014, p. 14). Princess Peach from the Mario games (1983-2017), the classic damsel in distress, is an often cited example, and at the other end of the spectrum there are characters like the hypersexualised Bayonetta (Bayonetta, 2009-2014) or Shaundi (Saints Row, 2008-2015). The presence of such gender stereotypes may, as Nina B. Huntemann suggests, stem from the presumption that it is predominantly young heterosexual males playing video games, and therefore mainstream games are marketed towards them on the premise that “sex sells” (2013, p. 51). For instance, internet banners for MMO games (such as League of Angels and Dragon Glory) frequently display busty women in skimpy outfits to try and get players to sign up and log in; cover art often presents provocative images of women, commodifying the female body in order to sell video games to young men (as in early Tomb Raider games and Grand Theft Auto); and gameplay itself sometimes frames female sexuality in terms of violence (as seen in Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat). As Sarah M. Grimes succinctly puts it: “Gaming culture is still largely framed in male-centric terms” (2015, p. 68).

In “Rescue the Princess: The Videogame Princess as Prize, Parody, and Protagonist” (2015), Grimes analyses a feminine stereotype—the princess—which prevails in many forms of media, including video games. However, focusing on parody and transgression in the revision of the princess stereotype, she argues that video games have “engaged with the ‘rescue the princess’ trope as a key entry point for highlighting and opening up a space for critical discussion about the conservative gender politics that continue to prevail within much of mainstream gamer culture” (p. 67). As a result, “the princess has come to provide a diverse set of intertextual cultural meanings within videogame narratives, culture and lore” (pp. 66-67).
According to Grimes, one of the primary functions of a princess in mainstream games is to be a call to action for male heroes, whose role is “to search out and eventually rescue a kidnapped, imprisoned or otherwise incapacitated princess” (p. 66). Certainly this plot device of rescuing a victimised woman or girl is common in many forms of media and genres (especially fairy tales), and in video games it can be a way of structuring action, objectives and gameplay. For example, much like Cinderella, Snow White, or Red Riding Hood, Princess Peach from *Super Mario Bros.* or Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda* often find themselves patiently waiting to be rescued by heroic males, facilitating the masculinised agency of the playable character and presumed male game player. As Claire Hosking argues, the victimised female is objectified so that the masculine player can act and be rewarded for acting: “When a character is damseled and there’s no opportunity to play as or interact with the female character, there’s no opportunity to understand the female character as a subject, a person, an individual. She becomes a glorified fetch-quest” (2014). Hosking continues: “The damsel trope tends to characterize this helplessness as a natural, female state, despite the incredible diversity between the 3.75 billion women on the planet, and often conflates disempowerment with other traditional feminine traits, including innocence and purity” (2014).

However, there are numerous games that engage with and revise the princess archetype by subverting her role and affording her much more agency, suggesting a feminist revisionary principle at work in the creation of video games. Just as I discussed in the previous chapters concerning fairy tale revision and the parodic subversion of feminine stereotypes, there are many video games and digital narratives that problematise the frequently sexist or misogynist attitudes perpetuated by commercial video games. For instance, in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015), which is adapted from Andrzej Sapkowski’s novels, Princess Ciri is not the pampered, helpless orphan her pursuers think she is, but rather a strong-willed and capable young woman trained by witchers to protect herself and others. Though much of the gameplay is focused on a male protagonist and playable character, Geralt, and the pursuit of his young ward, Ciri, players are also able to play as Ciri, seeing events play out from her perspective. Arguably, the whole game revolves around Ciri’s story and her rise
to power in a world where men dominate. Where Geralt primarily fights monsters, Ciri is additionally threatened by monstrous men and has to fight off several despicable characters. In these moments agency is key, as the player must use Ciri’s abilities to keep her alive and make decisions about how she’ll deal with threats. Ultimately, Ciri, as a videogame princess, is made more than a damsel for Geralt (and the player) to save. She is given a meaningful story of her own, and is made playable as a hero, capable of far more than her male counterparts.

CD Projekt Red further challenge passive gender stereotypes in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt—Blood and Wine* expansion (CD Projekt Red 2016) by toying with fairy tale tropes and expectations, demonstrating the self-reflexive intertextual and revisionary impetuses evident in some video games. As another form of adaptation, the game expansion sees Geralt find an enchanted fairy tale book, which transports him to Fablesphere, a bright and disarming world populated by revised characters from myth and fairy tale, such as aggressive and foul-mouthed versions of the three little pigs, and an abused, decaying version of the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk. One particularly poignant moment comes when Geralt encounters the ghost of Longlocks at the top of a rundown tower, allowing for a point to be made about the tragedy of passivity. This parodic and ironized portrayal of Rapunzel reflects on the traditional tale and its gender ideology, as it becomes apparent that Longlocks’ prince never arrived to rescue her, compelling her to hang herself with her own hair out of loneliness and despair. As a video game player and one familiar with fairy tales, it is jarring to find her corpse at the top of the tower, rather than a princess ready to be saved. The game confronts and challenges conventional gender tropes in this way, having the player fight her embittered spirit instead of attempting a rescue. Before attacking him, Longlocks wails at Geralt: “it’s too late,” indicating that, contrary to fairy tale tradition and its rewarding of feminine passivity and patience, Longlocks’ inaction was her doom.

Similarly, though in a more nuanced way, Tale of Tales’ *The Path* parodies fairy tale tropes, subverting gameplay conventions and generic expectations in its revisionary treatment of Red Riding Hood. Foregrounding matters of agency
through character design, player involvement, narrative, and parody, the game addresses issues of female victimisation and passivity, positioning the Red Riding Hood characters as playthings, which the player must lead to their peril in order to progress the game. The game relies upon player engagement and intertextual awareness to challenge gender assumptions, activating moments of ironic tension and presenting uncanny characterisations for critical engagement. Focusing on both its literary and ludic elements, *The Path* is my primary case study for examination here, because its parodic work targets gender and genre norms but also ludic or gaming traditions.

**Fairy-tale parody and gender subversion in *The Path***

Ensslin labels the independent game *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) a “ludic-literary hybrid” (2014, p. 143), since it is a game that includes both literary and ludic elements, that is to say, both readerly and playerly characteristics. I have chosen it as my primary case study since its parody of conventional gameplay works alongside the parodic appropriation of fairy tales to subvert gender ideologies pertaining to power and agency. The intertextual relationship between *The Path* and *Little Red Riding Hood* can be decoded within a postmodernist context and in terms of gender, providing commentary on the construction and performativity of feminine subjectivity.

According to its developers, *The Path* is a game that “offers an atmospheric experience of exploration, discovery and introspection through a unique form of gameplay, designed to immerse you deeply into its dark themes” (Tale of Tales, n.d). These dark themes revolve around the internal struggles of six sisters, each at different stages of adolescence and aged from 9 to 19; the individual and different paths they might take in life; and the symbolic wolves that wait for them in the forest when they stray from the “path” that is traditionally laid out for them. However, the game also adopts a socio-cultural stance, tackling issues of identity and development, and examining the social expectations placed upon young women as they transition into adulthood. Aside from the coming-of-age issues, the game experience also reveals the complicity of cultural and social structures in the objectification of women.
*The Path* is a short single-player game that combines elements of horror and parody with psychogeographical exploratory gameplay. Though technically a video game, many have described *The Path* as more of an experience or interactive story (McCafferty 2009; Rose 2009), which provides players with the freedom to navigate the world and pursue the allusive narrative as they see fit. Tim Martin, describing *The Path* as an example of a “vigorous experimentation with techniques of narrative,” compares the video game to “an Angela Carter novel as siphoned through *The Sims*” (2009), while Charles Onyett of IGN similarly describes it as “an open structure that's meant to be explored and experienced instead of ‘beaten’” (2009). Due to its unconventional gameplay and narrative structure, *The Path* does indeed offer something other than the usual satisfaction of “winning” a game by traditional means. Against the backdrop of the Red Riding Hood fairy tale, with its coming-of-age theme, *The Path* allows players great freedom to wander off the path and, in so doing, challenge stereotypes of feminine passivity and traditional processes of socialisation. Just as Carter’s and Sexton’s fairy tale revisions presented doll-like heroines, limited by patriarchal ideology, *The Path* initially renders its heroines helpless playthings, before encouraging players to explore the individual and complex subjective experiences of these young women.

One plays the game as one of the six sisters of differing ages and personalities, all of whom are parodic versions of the Red Riding Hood character, and all of whom, according to Ensslin, “symbolize the process of adolescent maturation, which is full of temptations, failures, and disappointments” (2014, p. 148). Certainly, *The Path* offers a richly metaphorical depiction of maturation, and girlhood specifically, as is the case with traditional versions of Red Riding Hood. However, *The Path* makes some crucial alterations concerning gender relations and matters of agency. As outlined in the previous chapter, stories of female maturation are frequently plagued by problematic binaries. As Shauna Pomerantz observes, “the girl is talked about as either excess or lack, good or bad, nice or mean, chaste or slutty, aggressive or passive . . . powerful or submissive” (2009, p. 150). Traditional fairy tales frequently perpetuate such dichotomous understandings of femininity, restricting girls and women to limited roles. This
The concept is central to *The Path*, being viewed critically through the lenses of feminism and postmodernism. The character’s experiences are full of symbolic, and literal, references to female disempowerment and disenchantment, as they struggle against patriarchal gender ideologies and binary roles. Furthermore, the wolf, with all of its patriarchal connotations and symbolism, stalks the sisters as they explore the world (or rather, the player explores the world) and serves as the ultimate threat to their development.

Let us explore the six characters. Robin is the youngest of the sisters. She demonstrates childish naivety, and the wolf that threatens her is the closest to a literal beast, taking the shape of a werewolf. The young girl tries to ride it around, perceiving it as a plaything, rather than a threat. flashes of memory or foresight show her lying in a pool of blood, suggesting that her lack of caution and ignorance leads to a grisly fate. Of all the sisters, Robin is most reflective of traditional versions of Red Riding Hood—and arguably the least satisfying to play. Rose is a little older, 11 years old, and shows greater awareness of the world and its dangers than Robin. She is philosophical, contemplating her sense of self, death and the soul as she floats in a lake. This imagery could be interpreted as a poetic rendering of female agency and disembodiment, as it is during this scene that Rose equates the buoyancy of floating in water with an out-of-body experience. This disconnection speaks to the disempowerment and objectification of women, and a fragmented sense of self. For as Marie-Louise von Franz argues, women are often mirrors to men’s desire, aware of their feminine personality in light of man’s reaction to them, and in turn, “the real woman is uncertain as to her own essence, her own being, of what she is, or could be” (1993, p. 3). It may also be read not as literal death, but as the death of innocence. This theme is reinforced by the ghostly wolf that appears by the lake to haunt Rose, and her subsequent near-death experience of drowning.

Ginger is older again and more boisterous, a tomboy figuring out her sexual identity. She seems curious, optimistic, and open to experiences, and the world as she sees it seems vibrant and full of possibility. In a revision of the original fairy tale, the wolf that she encounters is not masculinised, but rather a playmate in the guise of a young girl dressed in red, symbolic of her transition into adulthood.
This scene draws parallels with traditional versions of the Little Red Riding Hood tale, in that it is marked by sexual symbolism and the journey into the forest signals her transition from sexual innocence to experience. The girls play together in a field of flowers, with Ginger chasing the girl in red, the flowers here serving as another symbol of blooming womanhood and sexuality, as in traditional variants of the tale. As Francisco Vaz da Silva relevantly observes, “a girl decked with flowers literalises the French metaphoric expression of \textit{jeune fille en fleurs}, which designates a menarcheal girl as someone who carries flowers” (2017, p. 17). Consequently, Vaz da Silva’s reading of both the Grimms and Perrault’s Red Riding Hood implies that “the path of flowers leads to the girl’s deflowering” (2017, p. 18). While Ginger may ultimately lose her innocence by chasing after the girl in red, the difference here is that her development is shared homoerotically with another young woman and framed by feminine experience, rather than presented as something shameful.

In a stark comparison to the carefree Ginger, Ruby, at 15 years of age, is similarly coming to understand her sexual self, but she is pessimistic, withdrawn, and ashamed of her sexuality. She has experienced trauma, having injured her leg in an accident, and since drifted from her peers. During this time, it seems she had a sexual encounter with a young man, which has left her insecure and unsure of herself. This scenario is replayed in a scene in which her “wolf” is represented by a dark-haired boy who tries to charm her by the playground, encouraging her with drugs. As in traditional versions of Red Riding Hood, our heroine is victimised, being lured by the predatory “wolf” who wishes to rob her of her innocence. However, in this interactive version, the situation is presented with greater complexity, as the player is given greater insight into the character’s psychological state of being and the nuanced way in which she was led astray. In a subversive twist, the player is positioned to feel sympathetic towards Ginger, viewing her as a victim of male desire, rather than of her own sexuality.

Following a similar trajectory of maturation and toying with gender binaries, the next sister, 17-year-old Carmen, is more sexually assertive than her siblings and can arguably be thought of as a she-wolf in terms of her masculinised desires. In one scene she drinks with an older man, a wolf of sorts, by a campsite and
actively makes advances towards him. The imagery of the fire represents her passion and the threat of things raging out of control, as it speaks to fairy tale traditions concerning the regulation of feminine sexuality. In her analysis of the representational she-wolf Natalie Hayton observes that, “female sexuality and agency either serves male purpose, or is ‘marked out’, in Kristeva’s terms, as Other and abject” (2013, p. 145). In this case, the appetite of the wolf/man ultimately overshadows Carmen’s own desire, and, like her sisters, she is devoured.

Lastly there is Scarlet, who is presented as the most reserved and mature of the siblings. She is concerned with artistic expression. A pianist in the theatre, she is torn between her passion for music and her “wolf,” which is associated with feelings of familial responsibility and maturity. She struggles with competing voices which pull her between desire and responsibility, mirroring the social pressures that inform gender identity for girls.

Playing through each of the sisters and exploring the symbolically rich environments that they occupy, the player is provided with varying points of view that add complexity to the hegemonic model of innocence and dutiful femininity represented by the original Red Riding Hood of fairy tale lore. The double voicing of parody allows the player to reflect back on the ideology of the traditional version and critically compare it with the ambiguous revisions that the game version offers up for player exploration. Matters of agency are complicated and reframed by aligning the player with both the wolf and the female characters, and by giving players a certain level of control in guiding the sisters, but ultimately making it impossible to avoid engaging with the patriarchal domination of the wolf. Notably, the female characters are mostly voiceless, their stories being communicated through flashes of memory and text. As Jeana Jorgensen notes, while silence is typically associated with women and disempowerment, it can also be a powerful metaphor for women’s experiences and recoded as a form of agency, since “moments of silence in fairy tales are particularly multivalent” (p. 25). In this instance, I would argue that the voicelessness of the characters is a deliberate and haunting acknowledgement of their lack of agency, which is reinforced by the player’s engagement in the experiential game-play.
While the tale of Little Red Riding Hood may be the primary hypotext that *The Path* mobilises to address issues of power, the game also seems to draw inspiration from Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, mirroring some of her narrative strategies and imagery in an intertextual fashion. Just as Carter focuses on questions of agency associated with gender and sexuality by presenting a series of transformations that liberate her heroines from restrictive gender roles, so too does *The Path* with its six versions of the Red Riding Hood character. The various characters presented within *The Path* demonstrate fluid subjectivity. While their identities are originally commodified in a line-up for the game player to choose from, their characterisations are given depth and range as the game proceeds, and deconstructed and reconstructed in different and ambiguous ways. Such representations challenge the notion of a fixed gender type, demythologising sexual identity through the lens of feminine experience and revealing the socialising practices that shape the feminine self. Indeed, the “playability” of these characters can be experienced as a metaphor for the socialisation process, as their coming-of-age stories and life paths are informed and guided by an external force in the form of the player.

Aside from ambiguously parodying gender roles and characterisations, *The Path* also parodies gaming traditions, some of which are concerned with representation and agency. The first step of the game hinges on misdirection, and seeks to break down traditional plot devices and gaming expectations. The game spawns the player’s chosen character alone on a road in the forest and directs them to follow the path to reach the grandmother’s house. However, if one follows this advice and sticks to the path all the way to the grandmother’s house, the game ironically states that the player has failed because they did not engage with enough objects, characters or memories, which is to say that the player did not activate the girls’ agency and individuality enough. The game then deposits the player back at the girls’ apartment where the player must start again. Here the game asserts that, rather than follow the traditions of a genre or of game-play, the player should follow their curiosity into the unknown forest and off the beaten path, thus exploring the distinct psychogeographical landscapes of the available player-characters. Astrid Ensslin identifies this design feature as an *allusive fallacy*, discussing how devices such as intertextuality are used in a way that is
disconcerting rather than narratively and navigationally cohesive. She states: “players who are subjected to allusive fallacy are deliberately misled in a game, for instance, by deceptive semiotic clues leading them in the wrong direction” (2014, p. 145). That is to say, players are generally guided by narrative and interface elements towards a goal or objective, and are provided enough information to flesh out the game world and its story. However, in *The Path*, the use of intertext and dominant gaming mechanics are used to mislead and deceive the player. For instance, the guidance at the beginning of the gameplay to stick to the path is deliberately deceptive, and results in a win/lose scenario of reaching the grandmother’s house but in a far-from-satisfactory manner. This parodic subversion of traditional gameplay complicates matters of control and understanding, using the player’s awareness of intertexts and previous gaming experiences to deliberately mislead them and, in turn, challenge their assumptions.

This misdirection is only the first indication that *The Path* does not adhere to gaming and generic conventions. Its parody of conventional gameplay works alongside the parody of the fairy tale to address issues of female agency. Whereas traditional versions of the Red Riding Hood story warn of the dangers of the unknown and of disobedience, *The Path* promotes risk and exploration as key to “growing up”. As the player freely explores the eerie forest, they encounter various objects with which the player can interact. Engaging with these objects produces poetic dialogue scrawled across the screen, which is significant to the character, if not always directly meaningful or accessible to the player. Sometimes these poetic and ambiguous fragments of text provide glimpses of memories, or moments of reflection. They also provide insight into the minds of the characters, fleshing out their personalities by expressing their desires and fears. Exploring and interacting with objects comprises the bulk of the game-play, aside from the vague objective of reaching Grandma’s house. The focus is on getting to know the characters and understanding their particular burdens—though certainty about the girls remains pointedly elusive. They are not to be objectified or stereotyped. Accordingly, the tone of the game is contemplative and the pacing deliberately sluggish. As Ensslin notes, this is evidence of the game’s
subversive tendency towards experiential gameplay and a way of encouraging the player to reflect on social and cultural issues:

The main purpose of this design feature is to give players breathing space and further exploratory options, to make them reflect on their actions and other aspects of videogame culture, and to force their attention to elements of the game world they would normally ignore and therefore fail to appreciate. (2014, p. 142)

Indeed, most of the design features are geared towards creating a meditative atmosphere focused around psychogeographical meandering, rather than catering to the player’s desire for action, levelling, and progression, which is typically delivered in mainstream games. Instead the game creates a space where players are encouraged, and rewarded, for exploration, inviting them to reflect not only on fairy tale traditions but on aspects of videogame culture. Here the player has to take responsibility for their in-game actions as they wander the forest searching for fragments of feminine identity and experience, allowing the agency of the female characters to be activated and explored.

Ensslin argues that many mainstream games, particularly those within the sports, war, or strategy genres, establish clear objectives by which players can measure their success. Players are guided towards these specific goals or missions, with the outcome being victory or failure. This measure of achievement can be polarising and limiting, forcing the player to identify as either a “winner” or a “loser,” with only “winners” being able to “beat” the game in any traditional sense. The Path, by contrast, deviates dramatically from such videogame conventions. Rather than establishing a set of rules or objectives, it communicates a vague message of exploration and complicates any blithe occupation of the player-character. In this uncanny game, “winning” involves steering the girls or player-characters into dangerous encounters, making for an experience that provides necessary progression but is also unsettling.

The final scoring at the end of each character’s journey parodies gaming traditions by providing an ironised assessment of the player’s actions within the game. Once the player reaches the grandmother’s house they can explore the rooms, which are adorned with symbology relevant to each girl’s journey and their troubling encounters with their respective wolves. One of the bedrooms in
the house provides details of how well the player navigated the forest and dealt with encounters, issuing a rather arbitrary score, intended to signal the completion of that character’s journey, before unlocking the next sister for play through. This performance review can be interpreted as an ironic mockery of the achievement culture of video games and the dichotomy of dominance/subordination that this tends to perpetuate. For even though the player may have beaten the game in a traditional sense, the victory of completion is presented as intentionally shallow and unsatisfying, as it comes at the cost of the character’s wellbeing, and the enemy (the wolf) is never understood or overcome. In fact, the female characters are not victorious and there are no rewards (loot, gear, unlockable levels) for progressing in the game. This ironised outcome introduces a feminist critique to the game-play experience, speaking to the victimisation of women in mainstream video games and the ways in which they are traditionally rendered passive for the sake of masculine quests.

With its subversive version of a female quest, ironically constructed in parallel with misogynistic attitudes, *The Path* symbolises the difficult journey and oppressive socialisation of young females. As noted, keeping in line with the traditional Red Riding Hood tale, perceived dangers are manifest in the form of wolves. Each girl inevitably encounters a different wolf, and each wolf serves as a manifestation of the internal dilemmas or fears with which they are struggling. If the player chooses, they can manoeuvre the characters to engage with their beasts, and with their insecurities. However, it is also possible to simply avoid the wolf, and not interact with it at all. Like the found objects in the forest, the player can choose to move on without engaging. However, if one does not approach the wolf, the game ambles on without conclusion and without being “won” in any typical sense. Confronting the wolf initiates a cut to blackness and then deposits the player’s character back on the path. While the encounters are not shown at all, some form of violence is insinuated by the body language, dishevelled appearance and subdued demeanour of the girls following the confrontation. The exact details of what transpired is something deliberately left to the player’s imagination, but it is implied that the encounters with the wolf, traditionally associated with masculine sexuality, revolve around themes of sexuality and power. As Alison Davies observes,
the big bad wolf appears like a dark shadow lurking in the forest of fairy tales . . . He represents fear in its purest form. It doesn’t matter what that fear is or how it’s made manifest, his presence is there, always watching and waiting for the opportunity to pounce. (2015)

*The Path* employs the wolf motif in much the same way; the wolf instils fear and a permanent sense of a predatory presence or a gaze that is always watching over the sisters. In fact, the game draws an uncomfortable association between player and predator in the very beginning scenes of the game. The top-down perspective gives the impression of voyeurism—of watching the characters from some unseen vantage point, like the wolf stalking them—before the choice of player-character is made.

By effectively encouraging the player to guide all six sisters towards their wolf and subsequent doom in order for the game to be concluded, *The Path* encourages critical reflection upon matters of masculine violence. Drawing on the misogynist tone of traditional versions of Red Riding Hood, *The Path* parodically thematises sexual identity, female curiosity, and disobedience by foregrounding the influence of male-centric perspectives and effects on female subjectivities. By forcing the player into a role that involves them being complicit in the “ravaging” of the sisters (to use the developers’ term), the game makes a controversial, and somewhat paradoxical, statement concerning female agency within patriarchal society. The real-world implication is that society sets young women on a path in accordance with the social order, and if they stray from this path then whatever foul encounter that may befall them is perceived to be due to their poor choices. Such is the message of traditional versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*. To quote Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves,” “the wolf is carnivore incarnate” (2006, p. 136), and the threat to virtue that it poses is used to scare girls and women into obedience and timidity. Ironically, *The Path* both reinforces and subverts this notion by demanding that players act out precisely the behaviours that fairy tales warn against, while also having this involve a traumatic encounter between each of the female characters and the wolf. Ultimately, *The Path* presents as a game about innocence lost. In this regard it understands the fundamental theme of the Red Riding Hood tale but reframes the story through parodic strategies to complicate its resonance and invite reflection on matters of agency,
including how agency can be circumscribed according to social and cultural patterns for gendered experience.

In a discussion of the importance of the player-character, Jay David Bolter argues that video games have a liberating cultural purpose in that they enable us to occupy the position, and therefore the point of view, of people or creatures different from ourselves. To occupy multiple points of view . . . becomes a new positive good and perhaps the major freedom that our culture can now offer. (2000, p. 245)

Of this freedom, Bolter suggests that the occupation of alternative viewpoints can evoke empathy and understanding, because it puts one in the position of ‘Other’ and pluralises conceptions of self: “In general, then, the freedom to be oneself is the freedom to become someone (or something) else. Because there is no single, privileged point of view, the self becomes a series of ‘other’ points of view” (p. 247). Such claims, of course, are not unique to video games; similar assertions have been made of literary texts that portray minority characters and multiple points of view. However, the ludic elements of The Path arguably provide greater agency and thus a more intensely immersive experience when it comes to experiencing the girls’ subjectivity—and the haunting tragedy of its circumscription—effectively enhancing the potential for personal and social transformation. As Bolter describes it, linear mediums such as visual art or literature, present a window on a representational world, through which the audience can gaze, whereas immersive mediums such as video games allow players to more actively participate in the experience of the representational space (p. 251).

To summarise, parodic games like The Path create defamiliarising experiences of fairy tales designed to invite critical reflection on gender stereotypes and narratives and the ways in which they relate to gaming conventions. The Path is arguably as complex in its parodic response to fairy tales as Carter’s fiction, revising the latent misogyny of past narratives and gender binaries, which normalise feminine victimisation, while granting its female characters a complex experience of psychosexual development.
Conclusion

Having examined parodic fairy tale retellings in a wide variety of mediums, it would seem there are some key elements to revisionism that can inform social change and challenge persistent gender ideologies. First and foremost, as has been the primary argument throughout this exegesis, parody as intertextual appropriation can be ideologically subversive in its transformative practices. Through heteroglossic double-voicing, parody critically reflects back while also looking forward towards change and renewal, inviting comparison between hypotext and hypertext and the ideological encodings of both. Irony plays a key role in this process, activating moments of interpretive uncertainty through competing cultural voices. Metafictive practice is also important, particularly in clarifying a parodic text’s subversive agenda, by directly inviting intertextual comparisons, and by foregrounding the genre conventions that have historically naturalised certain gender conventions. By challenging the purported mimetic quality of art as a mirror to life, metafiction instead engages in textual double-voicing, making the reader aware of representational processes, their historicity, their instability, and their potential for change.

As Maria Tatar argues, the role of revision is “to demystify these sacred cultural texts, to show that we can break their magical spells and that social change is possible once we become aware of the stories that have guided our social, moral, and personal development” (1999, p. xvii). As I have hoped to demonstrate, both in this exegesis and the creative artefact, parody with its intertextual, ironic and metafictive elements can help to foreground these narrative practices and the ways in which the subject is discursively constructed. Ultimately, the subversiveness of parody as a form lies in its potential for creativity and renewal. These characteristics of parody are evident in the realm of fairy tale retellings which, as Do Rozario, Sulway and Calderone observe, are “a genre that has a long history of continual reinvention and relocation” (2017, p. 1). Indeed, as the case studies I have analysed in this exegesis demonstrate, incorporating fiction, poetry, film and video games, fairy tales are eminently available for transformation, both when it comes to medium and content.
I would like to conclude by reflecting on other emerging creative technologies as potential new modes for story-telling and adaptation—such as AI—and on potential future themes of fairy tale revision and fairy tale scholarship. In her monthly column on the online magazine *Catapult*, Cate Fricke writes about the lasting power of fairy tales and how they have influenced us. In “Dreaming Machines: Fairy Tales in the Age of Artificial Intelligence” she draws attention to AI programs that are already producing fairy tales according to stock tropes and conventions. She also asks the interesting question, “what makes a fairy tale a fairy tale?” (2018). Acknowledging the impact of climate change on the environment, Fricke ponders the significance of this for fairy tale forests, which are an iconic aspect of fairy tales. As she observes, “Rich in symbolism and prolific in page presence, the woods are an often literally inescapable setting for our most familiar stories” (2018). What will happen to fairy tale forests as real forests dwindle? For me, as an emerging creative practitioner and scholar, this begs many other questions. What is a fairy tale without a forest? How might we, as writers and scholars of fairy tales, intervene through parodic or revisionary practices—or scholarship attentive to those practices—when it comes to the environmental catastrophe of the Anthropocene?

Ecocritical methodologies provide an avenue for further research, as does attention to AI story-telling programs, which rely on the repetition and recombination of fairy tale conventions rather than their socio-politically oriented retelling. The fact that such things remain outside the ambit of this exegesis shows how productive fairy tales look to remain as cultural sites of parodic contestation going into the future.


Athrin dashed headlong through the dense forest, wincing as branches scratched against his delicate, fair skin. Several times he stumbled, but each time he simply picked himself up and kept moving. He had to reach the temple before Sirus found the seer.

It had been days since the seer had revealed to him the prophecy that saw the self-proclaimed sorcerer vanquished. As it usually was with psychics, the woman’s vision was stilted at best, revealing mere fragments of a possible future, with very little context. Athrin wasn’t even sure the sorcerer she spoke of was the one he now sought to destroy. But if it was Sirus, as the seer predicted, then Athrin wouldn’t be able to defeat him.

The dread that gripped Athrin drove him onward.

In the distance he saw the great temple, resplendent in the light of the rising sun. The point of the central pyramid was visible over the tops of the trees. Athrin kept running towards it, ignoring the searing pain that burned in his thighs.

The wolf at his heels barked a warning. “Caution, Khensu,” it growled. “He’ll no doubt be expecting you.”

Athrin stopped short and turned to his companion, his shaggy dark hair falling across his face as he bent, panting. “If Sirus learns about the girl,” Athrin said between ragged breaths, “he may be able to prevent the prophecy. I can’t let that happen. I must see him defeated.”

“I understand you have a role to play,” the wolf said in a gravelly voice. Its sharp golden eyes fixed intently on Athrin, holding him with its hypnotic gaze. “But you’re no longer alone in this battle, Khensu.”

Khensu, Athrin thought bitterly. It was a title he would soon be rid of.

“That may be true, but until I leave this world it is my responsibility to keep Sirus at bay so that the girl can kill him. If I fail in this mission, then the prophecy means nothing, and the death of the Ancients was meaningless.”
“Which is why I’m telling you to tread with caution,” the wolf said in a tone that was both kind and commanding.

Athrin put a mental restraint on the fury that burned inside him and began moving through the forest again. This time he walked, becoming aware of the stinging cuts that his mad dash through the woods had left on his face and arms, and of the heavy fatigue in his legs. He had exhausted himself. He thought of the girl, hoping she was strong enough.

By the time he reached the entrance to the glistening white temple, the sun was high and the wolf had vanished, as it so often did, leaving Athrin standing alone, facing the gruesome scene. The smell was horrendous. Corpses, both human and non-human, littered the sandy ground around the temple. No one was bold enough to claim the dead, fearful as they were of Sirus and his magic. Even the soldiers and thralls who had fought for the sorcerer had been left to rot. Athrin wasn’t surprised. Sirus had no honour and respected no one—not even those loyal to him.

Athrin was accustomed to death. He had been surrounded by it since becoming Khensu and over the years he’d learnt to brace himself against the sight of it. He had watched many die, some by his own sword. Others had been lost while he tried to defend them. But Sirus had a way of turning murder into a sick art, finding new and more grotesque ways of killing. Nothing and no one was sacred. Including children. It was their own children that the last of the Ancients had been battling to save.

Athrin took a moment to centre himself, before boldly continuing through the triangular entrance of the temple and into the cavernous room within.

The light was dim in the temple. Torches adorned the four walls, but their flames spluttered with the drafts coming from the open doorway and many vents in the building. Nevertheless, there was an unpleasant musty smell about the place, mixed with the stench of death.

The seer lay slumped beside an ornate golden throne on a raised dais, her glassy eyes wide and unseeing. She was surrounded by her own intestines.

“I was wondering when the great hero would get here,” came a snaky voice from the gloom. “You see, I’ve had a vision.”

Athrin felt his stomach drop. Now Sirus knew the future too.
Sirus materialised out of thin air, reclining in the golden throne at the foot of which lay the corpse of the seer. He was regal in a long maroon-coloured robe with gold trim, which was buttoned from the chest down, but gaped open around the neck. His long sandy-blonde hair gleamed even in the dim torch light, hanging loosely at his shoulders and framing his chiselled jaw. His piercing blue eyes watched Athrin intently.

It caused a sensation that Athrin had always found deeply unsettling.

“It seems this day is to end very badly for you, Khensu,” Sirus cooed. He vanished from the throne, only to reappear behind it a second later.

Athrin wasn’t surprised by this show of magic. He knew that Sirus, a mere mortal, a man, had a penchant for theatrics, and he’d seen him do this little trick before. It was a blatant waste of the magical energy that he’d syphoned from the Ancients’ children and other magical beings. More than anything this ignited Athrin’s anger. He hated the games Sirus played and found his silky, sing-song voice grating. He briefly envisioned running him through with his sword, before remembering it was not his destiny. If he tried it now, he would fail. Still, the desire burned in him.

“For you to have a vision you’d have to be gifted,” Athrin growled. “And we both know you’re not.”

“Oh, come now, Athrin,” Sirus cooed leaning forward in his throne. “Such petty words are unnecessary after all these years. I know you’re upset about how this is going to play out, about your own inadequacies, but there’s really no need to be hurtful. Let us part on better terms.”

Athrin swallowed his anguish at having failed to keep Sirus in the dark about the prophecy. He had to give the girl the time necessary to defeat this man. No matter how much he wanted to be the one to destroy Sirus, he couldn’t do it. It had to be her.

“If you hadn’t been so eager to kill the seer you might have known this isn’t the end for us,” Athrin said in a quiet voice. “I will see you die. Just not today, and not by my hand.”

Sirus laughed. It was a sickly sound, laced with contempt. “I know that’s not true. Before I cut out her tongue the psychic told me her vision, as she surely told you.” He proceeded to mimic the seer, a cruel edge to his tone: “The man they call Khensu cannot defeat the one with the silver tongue. Disconnected and
unbending, he is unable to see the path through the trees, and so His Voice will continue to be heard.” He stood up, stepped over the dead seer and strode towards Athrin. “Do you think there’s any truth to that, Khensu?”

She didn’t mention the girl, Athrin realised. He said a silent prayer to the deceased seer. He knew she must have been tortured hideously before her death—it was an activity Sirus relished. The seer had done the world a great service by withholding the identity of the one who would ultimately defeat Sirus. It had cost the woman her life.

“The seer was right,” Athrin said, ignoring the bead of sweat that was trickling down his temple. “You will be defeated.”

Athrin seized the moment. With lightning speed, he thrust out his hand and threw the powdery vial he’d been clutching at Sirus’s feet. It exploded in a burst of shimmering dust and bone fragments. In an instant the cloud surrounded Sirus, engulfing his entire body until he was barely visible to Athrin. Voices began to chant in the dark recesses of the temple. They were quiet at first, almost whispers, but as the cloud began to expand into a giant shroud around Sirus, the chanting grew increasingly louder and more determined. Athrin didn’t understand the words but he knew it was the Clay Nymphs. They had come to join him in the fight, as promised.

The cloud began to swirl around the sorcerer, being sucked towards him by an unknown force. It clung to him, taking on his shape.

Wild cackling erupted from the hazy mass. “You still hope to stop me with such feeble magic,” Sirus mocked. “Even though it is written in the halls of prophecy that you can’t kill me. Have you learned nothing?” He let out another scornful bout of laughter even as he stumbled back towards his throne.

Athrin drew his sword from its scabbard. It was the sword his father had forged for him, a gift awarded to him at the tender age of fourteen when he became Khensu. Athrin remembered the pride in his father’s eyes as he had presented the magnificently ornate sword to his son. On the hilt he’d crafted Athrin’s newly appointed title in silver braided wire, with a tiny ruby embedded at each end of the word. Khensu. Such a noble title, and one so rarely appointed. A title steeped in honour and tradition. It was who he was born to be.

It was who she was to become.
“I’ve learned the value of sacrifice,” Athrin said confidently. Raising the sword before him, Athrin sliced it along the inside of his upper arm, drawing enough blood to wet the full edge of the blade, and flicking it onto the swirling mass of dust that was settling on Sirus. “With my life’s blood I bind you to this stone form for as long as I am divided from this world.”

A gasp sounded from the shroud of dust and bone that enveloped Sirus. The powder had begun to solidify. The chanting of the Clay Nymphs was subsiding to a soft murmur. Sirus cursed as he tried to smash the rocky infection against the arm of the throne, but his ability to move had been curtailed. He tried to cast a hasty incantation, using the magic he had recently syphoned from the beings in his pits, but his fingers and entire left hand had turned to stone, making it impossible for him to draw the appropriate symbols needed for defensive spells.

He roared in frustration as his legs became rooted to the ground. Both legs and lower torso had turned to solid stone. Then the white spreading stone crawled up past Sirus’s navel and across his muscled chest. Stone tendrils curled around his neck, choking off the scream that tried to emerge.

Athrin watched in silence as the last patch of visible skin on Sirus’s cheek was turned to stone, sealing away his body behind a smooth stone encasing. When the cracking of grinding rocks subsided, along with the chanting, Athrin sheathed his bloody sword and pressed his hand against the throbbing cut he had made on his own arm. He stepped towards the throne to stare up at the statue in front of it.

He shivered.

The statue looked eerie in the dim light with the flickering candles causing shadows to dance behind it. Somehow Sirus’s eyes retained their intensity. Athrin could feel the man’s gaze, communicating his utter hatred.

“I’ll see you at the end, Sirus.”

“Well done, Khensu,” said the wolf, appearing at Athrin’s side. It peered up at the young man, its golden eyes like burning torches in the dim light. “You have done what was needed. Shall we go?”

Athrin nodded. “I’m ready,” he managed to mumble.

Stepping out into the daylight, Athrin closed his eyes and let the warmth of the sun wash over him. The cut on his arm had stopped bleeding. The clearing around
the temple was still and marred by death, but beyond it the forest was full of life. In the distance Athrin could hear the sounds of animals. Birds called out to their neighbours, wild horses whinnied, and somewhere very far off a dragon roared.

Athrin gave a faint smile. It was a world he had been unable to enjoy for so many years now, since being called into the role of Khensu. He had thought he was so important. Now he saw how much he missed these ordinary things; how disconnected he was from this world.

Together he and the wolf wove their way through the endless expanse of trees that was Pan’s Forest, walking for days, stopping only for water and meals, until they reached the clearing with a giant carved boulder. The mighty grey stone had been carved by unknown hands into the shape of a bear. Having faced untold lifetimes of weather, the surface of the rock had been worn away, leaving it scarred and rough, but the distinct carvings around its paws and face remained.

Athrin approached the bear with silent regard and ran a hand over its coarse snout. He followed the line of its gaze to a spot at the edge of the clearing. Shimmering light rippled the forest there, making the pine trees beyond it seem distorted. Athrin had only seen this particular portal once before, but he knew it was the right one. This was his destiny and he was prepared for it. He would return to the world of Pan’s Forest only when the new Khensu was ready, when Sirus could be released from his prison of stone.

He drew his sword from its scabbard. He thumbed the braided wire of the hilt, caressing each letter of the title. “I won’t be needing this any more,” he said.

“But it was made for you, Khensu,” the wolf said. “In your honour. You may still need it.”

“No,” Athrin answered. He was still a young man, but he felt overwhelmed with tiredness. The years had been unkind to him, leaving him pale and gaunt; his body scarred and sinewy. He had left his human wife, Emily, along with their three-year-old son, Pax. He’d also had to say goodbye to his elderly father. They all had understood his duty, as did he—or so he thought. But in fact nothing could have prepared him. There had been so much fighting and pain, so much terrible violence and death. It was surely time for him to rest, perhaps even time for a new way of living in the world to be forged, somewhere, somehow.

“Let the new Khensu have it if she wishes,” he said, turning the sword in his
hands, though in truth he would not want to bestow the sword and its weight on anyone.

The wolf lowered his head in sorrow. “I will sorely miss you.”

“And I will miss you, friend. But we’ll see each other again.” Athrin lay the sword down in the soft dirt by the stone bear’s paws and listened to the mournful cawing of the crows that watched from the trees. “Guide her well, won’t you, as you did me? The role of Khensu is a heavy burden and she will need support. She shouldn’t have to be alone.”

Athrin turned and strode towards the rippling portal that hung in the air in front of the ancient trees. Without turning to look back at his friend, he stepped into the shimmering space and let the void consume him.

*It’s up to her now.*
Once Upon a Time…

In the centre of a vast ancient forest was a small sheltered clearing, and in the heart of that clearing sat a cosy wooden cottage, surrounded by daisies. The home was simple and strong, made of the sturdy oaks that used to occupy the very spot where the house now stood. It had a thatched roof and brick chimney, and a green timber door that mirrored the colour of the surrounding forest.

Beside the house, nestled between a low stone wall and a vegetable patch, was a crooked little chicken coop which housed six plump chickens and a chivalrous rooster. When they weren’t busy pecking around the clearing, the chickens tucked themselves away in the security of the coop, and rewarded their owners with small speckled eggs, which they lay in the provided boxes.

The chickens were guarded by Stump, a grizzled but loyal mutt who was so-named because of his missing tail. He’d wandered off into the forest once as a pup, and when he returned, he had a bloody stump where his tail had been. After that, the dog was a lot less curious. He spent most of his days either sprawled on the sunny porch, or under it if it was raining.

Together, the house, garden, chickens, and dog made up the home that Isabelle and her father George had established for themselves over a decade ago. They’d settled there not long after Isabelle’s mother had died, when Isabelle was barely six years old. She was now nineteen and this was the only life she’d ever known. A life of collecting eggs, setting traps, tending the garden, collecting water from the nearby stream, chopping wood, gathering wild mushrooms and berries, mending clothes, repairing the house, cooking, and doing other domestic chores.

When she had a moment of spare time, Isabelle would escape into one of the few books she owned. Her father had bought them for her when she was a child and taught her to read. The books told grand tales of fanciful beasts, magic and adventure, and were populated by noble heroes, brutal villains, and doe-eyed damsels in distress. Isabelle had read them over and over again. She usually identified more with the heroes, fancying herself a strong, resourceful young person capable of taking on the world. However, once in a while, when she was feeling sorry for herself, she dreamed of being whisked away from her
monotonous life by a handsome prince. She was, though, finding herself increasingly bored by the limited outcomes and repetition of the storylines.

Aside from her books, Isabelle’s only other escape was hunting. Her father had taught her how to hunt when she was old enough to carry a bow and arrow, and he still occasionally allowed her to venture a short way into the forest. Her father had told her that her mother died in a hunting accident, but Isabelle figured that her father still let Isabelle hunt because his desire for meat overcame his fear for her safety. When she was six and learning how to hunt under the tutelage of her father, her game had been necessarily small, but now she would bring home deer or pheasant. Isabelle found that she loved the power she felt when hunting. She would melt into the dense expanse of trees and underbrush as she silently padded over the moss-covered earth and ducked behind patches of bramble. Sometimes she would scale a tree and perch in its branches with her bow at the ready, and silently wait for her prey to wander by. She was an excellent shot. Isabelle never went home empty handed. It was the closest she ever got to power and freedom.

Her father, still mourning the loss of his wife, mostly liked to keep Isabelle safely within the confines of their home or at least their farm. He, however, would venture out into the forest, occasionally making the journey to the nearest village, Rea. It was only a small community, and took a full three days to reach on foot, but it was a necessary journey as it was their only source of seed, cloth, yarn, flour, sugar, flint, cured meat, and mead. Isabelle had never been allowed to make the journey to Rea. George insisted it wasn’t appropriate for her to travel alone in the forest. They’d bickered about it often of late.

“But I’m quicker and nimbler than you are,” Isabelle would argue.

“I’m stronger and more intimidating,” her father would retort.

“I’m younger and fitter.”

“And I’m older and wiser.”

“I need my independence!” Isabelle would exclaim in frustration.

“What you need is to let your father protect you from the dangers of the world!” George would shout back.

This would continue until one of them would storm outside—usually Isabelle. But there was nowhere for her to go. Their land was surrounded by the inestimable depths of Pan’s Forest, its thick perimeter of trees as effective as
prison walls, and its depths full of strange and dangerous beasts—or so Isabelle was warned.

It was after one of their arguments, when Isabelle was exorcising her anger in their vegetable garden near the bordering forest, pulling weeds and shovelling, that a path of potential escape suddenly opened to her.

Perhaps it was the battered sun hat, which helped keep her long dark hair out of her face and cast a shadow over her dirt-smeared cheeks, that allowed Isabelle to be snuck up on that day by the satyr. He dropped out of a nearby tree like an autumn plum, plopping to the earth in an ungainly fashion. Swaying for a moment on his goat legs, he whistled at Isabelle, who immediately stood bolt upright, holding her shovel defensively. Her hat tumbled from her head with the sudden motion, landing on some turnips. Her linen pants and shirt were covered in soil. Normally she felt comfortable in grubby work clothes and boots. But, confronted by this stranger, she found herself wishing she was wearing her hunting outfit: a leather vest and boots, woollen tunic, and a cloak, if it was chilly. The outfit was tailored in shades of green and brown to provide suitable camouflage while stalking through the forest. It always made her feel strong.

The satyr grinned at her ruefully.

“Mind if I have a swig from that watering can?” he called. He bent and picked up a long straight branch that had been fashioned into a staff, and then began strolling towards her. “I’ve been watching you toil away for a while now, and your hard work has made me thirsty.”

Isabelle’s lean, muscular body felt tight, like a coil ready to spring. She wondered where her father was. Would he come to the window and see them? Would he, at any moment, come running outside to intervene? She was not sure that she wanted him to.

At first she had mistaken the stranger for a young man—perhaps even the hoped-for prince, prophesied by her storybooks—but as she looked closer she noted that he had small horns protruding from his forehead, partly concealed by shaggy brown hair. He also had hooves where his feet should be. He wore nothing but a pair of tatty linen shorts, which revealed that he was stocky and muscular. He was also, Isabelle noted as she observed his bare chest and felt the colour rise to her cheeks, extremely hairy.
Isabelle’s mind raced. She didn’t know if satyrs were dangerous or predatory creatures, or if they had magical abilities. They seemed to have an ambiguous role in the stories she had read, but according to her father all forest beasts were dangerous. What if this one was part of a group, and the rest were lurking in the forest, ready to leap out at her at any moment? Would he try and rob her? Should she call for her father? How had he got up that tree with hooves?

Isabelle remembered her father and lifted the shovel, pointing the spaded end at the satyr in what she hoped was a threatening gesture. “You should be on your way,” she barked. “I don’t want any trouble.”

The satyr clutched his hairy chest and feigned a look of being hurt. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled teasingly. “I’m not looking for trouble. I merely asked for a refreshment. Really, you humans have no sense of hospitality.”

His mocking tone made Isabelle uneasy. Nevertheless, she lowered the shovel a little. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“I could tell you, perhaps over a mug of wine?”

“I don’t have any wine.”

“Ale, then.”

“I don’t have ale, either. Who are you, and what’s your business here?”

Rolling his eyes, the satyr drew closer to Isabelle, completely unperturbed by her gruff demeanour and stance. “The name’s Hyde, and I have no business here. Hand me that watering can, would you?” Without waiting for Isabelle to move or reply, Hyde snatched up the can from the ground near her feet and dumped the contents into his open mouth, letting the water spill over his chin and bare chest. The water collected dust from his skin and ran in dirty rivulets to his hairy waist.

Isabelle inhaled sharply and took an involuntary step backwards. “Oh, c’mon, I’m not that feral looking. Anyone would think you’ve never met a satyr before.”

A soft breeze tickled Isabelle’s neck and she had to suppress a shiver. “I have never met a satyr before,” she murmured.

Hyde raised his eyebrows in surprise. For the first time he seemed to really focus on Isabelle, examining her with pointed curiosity. His gaze trailed down the length of her sinewy body then back up again, taking in her creamy
brown complexion and flushed cheeks. His gaze lingered on her ears for a moment, before meeting her pale violet eyes. “Then we should do this properly,” he said. He dropped his staff, wiped a grimy hand on his equally grimy shorts, then extended his hand to Isabelle with a warm smile. “Hello, I’m Hyde. No last name. That’s a satyr thing. What a pleasure it is to meet you.”

Isabelle hesitated. She couldn’t tell if the satyr was still mocking her or not. She scrutinised his grizzled, human-looking face, trying to gauge his true intentions. There was something about his relaxed stance and the look in his green eyes that reassured her.

After an awkward moment she took his hand and gave it a very quick shake. “I’m Isabelle Gray.”

The momentary warmth of his hand thrilled her, and she flushed with shame again.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Isabelle Gray. Apologies if I startled you before.”

“That’s alright,” she replied, her palm still tingling from the touch of another being. “You just caught me off guard, is all. Why were you lurking in the trees?”

Hyde shrugged. “It’s a new pastime I’m trying out.”

They stared at each other in silence. Isabelle became aware that it was becoming awkward, that something was expected of her, but she didn’t know what.

“So…” Hyde finally drawled. “You’re part elf. That’s neat.”

Isabelle dropped the spade, which clattered to the soil at her feet. She felt the shock of the accusation in the core of being. “I’m not an elf,” she spluttered.

“I didn’t say you were. I said part elf.”

“I’m not an elf, or part elf. I’m just…me.”

“Well, Me, your elven features are unmistakable.” He held up his hand and began counting off traits on his fingers. “Tall. Lanky. Narrow hips. Characteristically high cheekbones. Violet eyes. And there’s your pointed ears.”

Isabelle fidgeted with her hair, tugging it forward to cover her ears.

“You’re wrong,” she asserted, feeling thoroughly confused. She felt herself turning red again. She stared down at the soil and thought of her father. She had observed her physical differences from him, but she had put these down to her
being a woman, like the fact that she bled every month, while he didn’t. Certainly, her father had never explained anything. She had had to come up with her own understanding of her body and its place in the world.

Hyde grinned wryly. Evidently he was amused by her ignorance. “So you don’t know about your ancestry? How intriguing. Many think elves are extinct, you know; that they left this plane of existence many, many years ago. You’re a rare specimen.”

Isabelle shifted uncomfortably. She did not appreciate this stranger making assumptions about her, or his familiar tone.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she snapped, looking at the tufts of hair matted on his chest by the cascade of water from the watering can. The truth was, though, she didn’t know anything about herself. Her father had never been keen to talk about her mother. She found herself suddenly flooded with shame—an emotion much deeper than the momentary flushes of embarrassment she had been experiencing in her conversation with Hyde. She realised that she knew next to nothing about her mother, about her own flesh-and-blood. How had she allowed this to happen? How had her father permitted her ignorance?

Hyde placed a hand on his chest and held the other one up placatingly. “Hey, sorry, I’m just having a bit of fun with you,” he said in a sombre tone.

“My father is human,” Isabelle said. “My mother is dead,” she added, her voice catching in her throat.

Hyde winced. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“And you’re sure she’s dead?”

Isabelle was shocked by the satyr’s bluntness. “What kind of a question is that?” she demanded, bending over to scoop up the spade that she had dropped and holding it angrily in front of her with both hands.

Hyde scratched at the damp fur of his upper chest and brushed some dirt away. “It’s just that most elves vanished mysteriously over a relatively short period and no one really knows what happened to them.”

Isabelle was struck dumb. The idea that her mother could still be alive was preposterous, wasn’t it? She felt something begin to stir in her and realised it was hope. She guarded herself against it: surely this was some kind of cruel joke.
Hyde turned his attention to the zucchini plants and started prodding at them with his hoof. Perhaps he was capable of shame, she thought.

“My mother died in an accident,” she stated, trying to sound firm and plunging the head of her spade into the soil in front of her. “There was nothing mysterious about her disappearance.” She said the last part with less certainty.

Hyde gave her his attention again. “Well, I can tell you that the disappearance of the elves was something strange. Their numbers were many, and they are known to live exceptionally long lives. The last documented reports suggest that many elves were growing weary with the state of the world, with the frequent warring and the human’s exploitation of the land. My understanding is that there was some unrest between different elven factions; some debate as to how to respond to the changing world. The most popular theory is that the elves didn’t die out, they just moved to a secret location.”

Isabelle crossed her arms and squinted at the satyr questioningly. “How do you know all this?”

“I learnt about it at the Great Library on the shores of Lake Merida. It’s where all ancient and historical documents reside, including detailed reports of elven politics.”

Isabelle’s violet eyes lit up. She imagined an enormous room, full of storybooks of the kind she had in her bedroom. “Where is this library?” she asked eagerly.

Hyde smiled and yawned lazily. “Far East. It’s built at the edge of Pan’s Forest, where the Lake of Merida meets the trees.”

“Do you know how to get there?”

“Sure, more or less.”

“More, or less?”

“I’m leaning towards more,” Hyde said, disturbing the zucchinis again with his hoof.

“How far is it?”

“Not so far. Can you read?” Hyde asked, meeting her eyes again.

“Yes, of course I can read,” Isabelle snapped.

“In how many languages?”

“Just one,” Isabelle mumbled. Then she recovered her composure and turned the question onto him. “Why, how many can you read?”
“Oh, I can’t read.”

“What?” Isabelle was astounded. Perhaps everything this satyr was saying was a lie. “But you just told me you read about the elves at the library.”

“No, I said I learnt about them there. I made a lady friend while I was visiting the library and she told me all about it.” Hyde smiled lazily at the recollection, twirling the hair on his chest between his long fingers. “She had a strange notion of pillow talk.”

Isabelle felt momentarily flustered, and then she was overcome by a sense of quiet contemplation. She let her gaze move past Hyde, staring mesmerised by the swaying branches of the nearby trees and the busy flutter of insects in the air. She recalled a memory from her early childhood, of her mother sitting on the edge of her bed talking softly in an ancient language while stroking her hair. She hadn’t understood the words, but the low melodic whisper had been soothing. She thought of this moment often, even dreamt about it occasionally. In the dreams, warm yellow light obscured her mother’s face so that she couldn’t make out her features. The more she tried to focus, the more indistinct her mother became.

She remembered her father.

“I need to get back inside,” Isabelle said, snapping her attention back to Hyde.

“Of course,” Hyde said. He seemed uncharacteristically respectful. “I’ll be hanging around these parts for a few days. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Isabelle turned, abandoning the spade that she had stuck into the soil of the vegetable garden, and hurried back to the house, her mind racing with a myriad of questions. She needed some answers, and she knew where to start.
Revelations

When Isabelle got inside, she saw that her father had prepared their evening meal. It was an act of conciliation, and it caught her out. She pulled up a chair at the kitchen table. Sitting silently with her father, she felt simultaneously embarrassed and annoyed. She couldn’t look at his pale eyes and normal ears without experiencing, with a new intensity, the difference of her own features. She moodily scooted eggs and tomatoes across her plate.

“Not hungry?” George asked, having watched Isabelle over the rim of his glasses for several minutes as she played with her food.

“Not really,” she muttered.

“I suppose we have been eating light the last few days. If you want, you could head out at dusk to rustle us up some meat. Or I can do it, if you prefer. I think I saw a deer stalking around out there this morning.”

Isabelle focussed intently on the plate in front of her as if it was a very difficult puzzle. She had a knot in her stomach. Even though she wasn’t looking at her father, she could feel his eyes on her. “It might not have been a deer,” she muttered.

George grunted and absentely scratched at his grey stubble.

Finally lifting her head to face her father, Isabelle asked the question that was nagging at her. “What really happened to my mother?”

George nearly choked on his eggs. “What?” he spluttered. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Because we never talk about it, and I don’t remember much about her. I don’t remember having a funeral after she passed, or family coming to mourn her death. You said she died in a hunting accident, but who brought her body home?”

“Izzy,” her father huffed. He was flushed in the face and now his eyes were fixed intently on the plate in front of him. He fiddled nervously with the napkin in his right hand. He never did cope well with confrontation. “These aren’t appropriate questions. You were very young. I kept you sheltered from all that stuff.”

Isabelle pressed on despite her father’s discomfort. “Well, I’m not a child anymore and I want to know.”
“Her body was never retrieved,” George muttered. “There was no need for a funeral ceremony. We said goodbye to her in our own way.”

“What about her family? I vaguely remember she had sisters that used to visit us.”

George removed his glasses and rubbed at his tired eyes, before slipping them back on. “They stopped by briefly to pay their respects; you slept through most of the ordeal.”

*He’s lying.* Isabelle wasn’t sure how she knew, but she was sure her father wasn’t telling her the whole truth.

“I’m not trying to make you feel uncomfortable,” she said, trying to sound gentle and understanding. She tucked her hair behind her ears. “I just wish I could remember her better than I do. I sometimes wonder if I’m like her.”

“You are nothing like her,” her father spat, suddenly angry. His clenched fists landed on the table, making their plates and cutlery jump and rattle. “And I’m thankful every day for that fact. I loved your mother, Izzy, but she had her flaws.”

“Did she have pointed ears like me?” Isabelle asked. After a pause she added, “Like an elf.”

“For goodness sake, Isabelle, that’s enough.”

Isabelle was shocked by his anger. She shoved her plate away. “Why can’t we just talk about this?”

“Because you’re being ridiculous. There is nothing to talk about.”

“I think there is. Who was my mother?” Isabelle felt close to tears. This was a different kind of argument to the ones they usually had. There was a new level of intensity. It made her sad, and she knew there would be no going back, but she had to press on. “All I know is that she taught me how to hunt, and she used to sing to me at night in a language I don’t understand. And I can remember her telling me stories about magic, mystical realms, and prophecies.”

George thumped the table again. “They were more than just stories!” he hollered. “That’s why she left! To fulfil her destiny, despite the fact it didn’t involve me—or us.”

Isabelle thought she glimpsed the faint glimmer of tears in her father’s eyes at that moment, but couldn’t tell if it was because he was upset or enraged. Then George slumped in his chair; all the fight had gone out of him. For a long
moment he sat staring at his plate. Isabelle sat, also silently, in shock. After a while he rasped in a throaty voice: “Your mother didn’t die, Isabelle. She was called away by her people, her elven people. She left us. She chose a life of magic—superstition—over her family, over me and you. How could I tell you that? She was gone. So that’s what I told you. She may as well be dead, Izzy.”

But she’s not. The words echoed in Isabelle’s mind.

Outside, in the forest, an eager owl hooted, signalling the approaching dusk.

“Do you know where she is?” Isabelle asked quietly.

George ran a hand over his shaved head and closed his eyes in tired resignation. “No. I swear to you, I have no idea.”

Isabelle didn’t know what else to say. She felt numb. There had simply been too much information dumped on her too suddenly, and she didn’t know what to do with it all.

George grunted and awkwardly pushed his chair backwards, looking around for something to do. Apparently, the conversation was over. He began busying himself with clearing away the dishes. Isabelle left him to it and headed upstairs to her room.

Once in the comfort of her bedroom, Isabelle flopped down on the bed and closed her eyes. She felt so mentally exhausted, she was sure sleep would take her. Instead, all the thoughts clamouring around in her head made her so tense that it hurt to keep her eyes closed. Her mother was alive. But her mother had also abandoned her.

She sat up and rubbed at her temples, willing herself to relax, and stared out of the grimy window. The sun was beginning to sink in the cloudless sky, causing a golden glow to light the treetops of the surrounding forest. Gazing at it now, Isabelle thought Pan’s Forest seemed less like a prison and more like a magical world of vast possibilities, awaiting exploration.

Isabelle looked at the spines of her childhood storybooks lined up on the small bookshelf beneath the window. They were all she really knew. But Hyde’s arrival had made Isabelle more aware of what she had already suspected: there was a vast world out there, filled with stories and people and sights she had never read about and could not even imagine. And now she knew her mother was out there too.
Prince or princess? The question floated in her mind. Should she wait and see? Or should she go out and find her fate? She knew what her father wanted her to do, but what would her mother have done?

Isabelle leapt out of bed with renewed vigour. She snatched up her waxed leather backpack from the bottom of a cupboard and began hastily shoving items into it as she found them. First into the bag was her favourite woollen cardigan, which her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Over the last three years Isabelle had worn it constantly, hardly minding that it had worn out on both elbows and frayed around the collar, not to mention developed several holes.

Next, she stuffed in a heavy woollen blanket, followed by socks, undergarments, a linen shirt, a water flask, pocketknife, a flint rock, and some candles. She spotted the empty bowl she’d eaten porridge out of the day before, with the metal spoon still resting against it. With a quick check to make sure it was clean enough, Isabelle threw that in after the rest of the items. She looked around the room for anything else that might be useful. Her hunting gear sat folded on a chair beside the window, with her bow and arrows resting on top. The leather outfit would be heavy to carry, along with everything else. She’d have to wear it.

Slipping off her gardening clothes, she left on her light cotton undershirt and woollen leggings. Over the top she tugged on her leather trousers, pulled on the leather bodice, which she laced tightly at the breast, and slipped her feet into a pair of tall leather boots. She didn’t want to be cold. She finished the ensemble with a soft woollen tunic the colour of moss. It had long sleeves, a wide hood and delicate white stitching at the squared neckline and split hem. She picked up her bow.

Now she felt ready. Strapping the bow and quiver across her back and hefting the bag to her shoulder, Isabelle moved over to the open window and leaned over the ledge. Carefully, she dropped the bag to the ground below, watching as it hit the earth with a soft thud. She ducked her head back inside.

I can’t just leave, she realised.

As hurt as she was by her father’s lies, she could almost understand why he hadn’t told her the truth. He had always been relatively meek and unadventurous. He was perfectly content with a safe and simple life, and Isabelle still wanted to believe that he meant well by sheltering her. He just wanted to
keep her safe and believed that was enough. But it wasn’t. She had been kept a prisoner—from the truth and from the world.

Isabelle wished she could remember her father the way he was when her mother was still around. Surely, he must have been a different man then, to have won her mother’s affection. Then she remembered how he had described her mother’s elven magic: *superstition*. Perhaps he had never respected her mother’s difference and power. Or was he simply speaking from the pain of being abandoned by her, from the position of a man left alone to raise his infant daughter?

Thinking on these things, Isabelle stopped at the tiny wooden desk by her bedroom door and bent to scrawl a note on a loose scrap of paper.

*Father,*

*I am sorry that you had to reveal a secret that must have been very painful for you to talk about, but I am glad to know the truth. Please understand that I am not angry with you for hiding my mother’s heritage or existence. Though I am disappointed you thought it best to lie about what happened, I know you were trying to do what you thought was best for me. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to try and find out more about her and the elves, and in the process, more about myself. Please try and accept this decision. Rest assured, I will return before too long. You will see: I can look after myself.*

*Your daughter,*

*Izzy*

After reading over the letter several times, and deciding it was adequate, Isabelle placed it on the bed, then slipped downstairs. As she was sneaking out the back door, she glanced at her father’s back as he stooped over the washbasin in the kitchen. Her stomach lurched with the thought of leaving him so completely alone, but if she didn’t leave this very moment, she knew she never would. And so, stopping to retrieve her bag from beneath the window, and then to collect a few things from the storehouse, Isabelle headed straight for the forest without looking back.
Into the Wild

The trees crackled and groaned as Isabelle walked, moving branches and twigs out of her way, stepping over the biggest roots on the mossy ground. High above her, concealed in their sprawling canopy kingdom, the wood sprites watched her progress—and they weren’t the only ones. Nymphs and fairies occupied the hollows of trees, shrubs and bracken. Hidden among the unnoticeable crevices of the forest, they took in her presence, before continuing with their lives, unfazed by this fellow creature moving among them.

Though Isabelle was vaguely aware that many unusual creatures lived in Pan’s Forest, she had no idea just how many species and varieties there were in such close proximity to her home. If she had, it’s unlikely she would have ventured into the forest with so little caution, particularly with her father’s warnings about the dangers of those non-human forest strangers ringing in her ears.

“Hello there,” called a friendly voice through the trees, contradicting George’s misgivings. “Nice night for a quest, don’t ya think?”

Isabelle had been counting on Hyde still hanging about, but she wasn’t about to let him know. She spoke loudly and confidently. “I thought you’d be long gone by now.”

Hyde stepped out of the shadows with a bemused smile on his face. He wore the same grubby outfit, with the addition of a white linen shirt, and he leaned on the same wooden staff. Isabelle thought he seemed even more enigmatic in the evening light. “Have you come to seek out my guidance?” he said.

“No,” Isabelle answered bluntly. “I’ve decided to travel east for a while to see if I can find some answers about my mother.”

“I see. So, you mean to seek out the library, then?”

“Yes.”

Hyde grinned obnoxiously. “You know there are a lot of mountains to the east. There’s Isis Peak, The Tekkon Ranges, Mount Apollo. The river that flows from Lake Merida also poses a problem if you don’t cross at the right point. You could find yourself stuck in a bog or lost in troll territory. How do you plan to
traverse all that rugged terrain? Or are you just going to climb every mountain you stumble across?”

Isabelle marched past him in defiance, hoping that she wouldn’t trip in the fading light. “If I have to,” she called over her shoulder.

Hyde jogged after her. “Of course, I could help you out. Point you in the right direction. For starters, you should follow the river to keep from getting off course. I know all the best crossings. You should also know that the Great Library is far away. It would help if you were with someone who knows exactly where to go. All I ask is that, in return, you share whatever goodies you’ve got in that bag of yours.”

Isabelle was proud of the weight of the bag on her back. She was nothing if not prepared. “Sounds like you’re not very good at hunting and gathering,” she said.

Hyde’s eyes glinted. His face was obscured by shadow. “I consider this hunting and gathering.”

“But I’ve already done the gathering part!” She stopped and turned to face him, feigning outrage. Their banter was strangely exciting. Certainly, she and her father had never talked like this.

“It’s all just a matter of perspective.” Hyde waved his hand airily, and then made a grab for the bag. Isabelle was too quick. She swivelled and stepped away from him.

Hyde pointed his staff at Isabelle and her backpack. “C’mon, don’t be greedy. What have you got in there?”

Isabelle hesitated, then unshouldered her burden, reached into the pack and pulled out the flask, offering it to the satyr.

“Brandy?” he asked eagerly.

“No, ginger cordial,” she replied as he took a disappointed swig.

Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled, reminding Isabelle where she was. “Listen, I have to get moving. I want to put some distance between me and this place before it gets too dark, and that’s not far off now. I’ll need to allow time to make a shelter, and I may need to find firewood if I’m going to keep warm at night.”

Hyde looked suitably impressed. “You’re more resourceful than you look.”
“Gee, thanks.”

He eyed her bow and quiver of arrows. “I have a new proposal,” Hyde said, prodding her weapon with his walking stick. “What if I take care of the cooking, and guide you through the forest, and in return you share with me any game you catch. I can’t remember the last time I tasted pheasant or basilisk meat.” He rubbed his stomach wistfully for good measure, rumpling the white linen shirt that covered the hair there.

Isabelle noticed that Hyde didn’t seem to have any belongings with him, save for the staff. “How do you manage out here, alone, and without any stuff?” she asked.

Hyde grinned. “I shouldn’t really give away my secrets, but…” He took several steps backwards, then leaned over and rustled in a large juniper bush. Soon he held a canvas bag aloft. “I have simple needs,” he declared. “A good blanket, knife, coat, and tarp are all I need to get by. The forest provides everything else.”

Isabelle took a moment to ponder. This wasn’t the kind of arrangement she had come across in her storybooks, but when she answered, her tone was business-like. “Alright. I agree to provide for the both of us.”

Hyde grinned. “Great! I think this will work out marvellously.”

Despite a niggling sense of wariness about a partnership with such a dubious character, Isabelle found herself grinning along with Hyde. Aside from the occasional travelling merchant, from whom her father would always hide her away, sending her to her room whenever he saw one approaching, she’d had very little experience of strangers. It was thrilling to have someone new to talk to, and even more thrilling that it was a non-human. Like my mother, she thought. Like me.

The pair headed into the depths of the forest, with Hyde leading the way as arranged. Isabelle studied Hyde’s unusual gait, fascinated by his hooves and the angles of his lower legs. Did she look as strange to him as he did to her? Was her strange appearance the reason her father used to send her away when strangers came? Why her father refused to allow her to visit town?

Isabelle knew that, with each step, she was leaving behind her father, her home and everything she had ever known. But she refused to look back. She was heading into Pan’s Forest, a world of magic, a new reality. And she was ready.
Behind them, clinging to the shadows of the forest, a wolf silently pursued the young woman and satyr, trailing after them as gracefully as smoke on the breeze. It had been waiting patiently for the girl to take her first steps into the unknown; for the vision of who she might be to begin awakening in her. For too long the different worlds had been sealed off from one another, growing stale, waiting for something important to happen. Now things would change.
Lessons

The sun was bright the following day, though it was hard to tell beneath the thick canopy of trees. Isabelle had barely slept that night, having had only her blanket and a damp patch of grass for a bed. She had thought of her father reading her note before he went to bed, and of the night he would have spent alone in their home for the first time. Her feelings of guilt and sadness had almost overwhelmed her. It didn’t help that Hyde snored continuously. It was also the case that, from time to time during the night, she thought she could make out a shimmering light among the trees. But whenever she shook away her drowsiness and strained against the darkness to try and examine the strange apparition, it vanished. It made her uneasy. There was so much she didn’t know. In the hours before dawn, she began to question her faith in Hyde and in herself. Perhaps, in leaving behind her father and the comfort of the known, she was making a disastrous mistake.

In the morning, though, after a light breakfast and the feast of Hyde’s conversation, Isabelle had rediscovered her resolve and was eager to resume the journey. She would find her mother now that she had forsaken her father. She would explore herself and this new world.

Soon after breaking camp, she and Hyde came across a narrow, pebbly river and began following it upstream as it wove its way east. Strolling along the edge of the river with Hyde a few paces ahead of her, leaving her guilt further and further behind, Isabelle marvelled at the freedom she felt being out in the forest. All she needed to focus on was survival, and there was a wonderful simplicity in that. She was also intrigued to find that the forest felt strangely familiar to her, even though she’d never been this far into the woods before. The towering oak and ash trees and the shelter they provided, the secret shadowy spaces beneath, the melodic sound of the river against rocks, the smell of earth and dew—it was all rather comforting. The night before, when collecting brush for the fire and clearing a space for her bed, she felt as though she’d done it all before. She couldn’t tell if she was experiencing flickers of memory or just imagining things, but either way, the curious sense of déjà-vu reassured her. She felt, more than ever before, as if she belonged. The magic of Pan’s Forest seemed like part of her.

“So, what are we learning today?” she asked Hyde as they strolled along, adjusting her backpack to allow for the slight spring she found in her step.
Last night, sitting at the campfire with Hyde after their evening meal, she had learned all about Hyde and where he was from. As it turned out, he’d lived a fairly nomadic existence, roaming the land, never staying in one place for very long. He insisted that satyrs generally ventured out on their own at a young age, and that he was quite used to being on his own. However, it seemed obvious to Isabelle that Hyde was a sociable being and enjoyed having someone to talk to. She found that she loved listening to the sound of his voice, which was so novel, after having listened only to her father or her own voice for most of her life. She also found that she liked sitting at the fireside in the evening, across from this exotic being. Night in the forest, she discovered, made her feel different, more grown-up, ready to take risks.

Hyde used his walking stick to flick a pebble off the bank and into the shallow water. “I am many wonderful things, Belle, but I’m not a school teacher. Or were you just expecting this to be a guided tour, with commentary on the wildlife and flora?”

“I just thought you might be able to tell me a little bit about magical beings. About elves.”

Hyde turned to face her, walking backwards, so that she could see him when he rolled his eyes. “You know, a guy likes to be wooed a little before he’s drilled for information.”

Isabelle tousled her hair, bringing it forward around her neck and ears. She felt embarrassed, not for the first time, by Hyde’s flirtatiousness. She was getting better at hiding it, though. “Come on,” Isabelle pressed. “You must have met all kinds of creatures. I’m giving you an opportunity to show off.”

“You’re trying to flatter me,” said Hyde, feigning indignity. Then he shrugged and grinned, waving his walking stick in the air with a flourish. “But I like it. Feel free to keep going.” He fell into step by her side.

Isabelle smiled and indulged him. “Being the charmer that you are, I imagine you’ve made many friends over the years and surely learnt a thing or two about the different cultures. Maybe you even know a bit of magic?”

Hyde picked at some mushrooms that he had been snacking on and that had gotten caught in his stubbled beard. “I’ve picked up a few tricks,” he said, shifting his canvas bag from one shoulder to the other. “I don’t exactly have a natural affinity for it; I can only bend basic elements. But I’ve done enough
travelling and met enough people to understand the basic principles. I suppose I could pass on a few pearls of wisdom.” He scratched his chest thoughtfully, pondering where best to begin.

“Firstly,” he said, “you should know that the term ‘magic’ is just one of many that has been established for what was originally known as *gaia atman*, or the soul of the earth. In some places it is known as voodoo, witchcraft, transmutation or sorcery, and in others it is called the eternal energy. Some people refer to it as the use of Will. Whatever you want to call it, it is known and practiced across this world and beyond. To you it may seem mystical and astounding, but it’s quite commonplace. Those who can channel their Will draw upon the energy that exists in all things, and can then manipulate the elements around them.”

“Is it true that humans can’t use magic?” she asked, thinking about the books on her shelves back home. In those stories it was always the fairies and dragons and shape shifters that were inherently magical.

“Generally, that’s true,” Hyde replied. “There have been some reports of humans managing to harness supernatural powers, but it’s extremely rare and most go mad before long. From my experience, most humans aren’t very good at noticing the subtleties in nature, which is something required to tap into the magic of this world. If you want to learn, you’ll have to forget all your rational teachings and assumptions, and replace them with the wonder usually possessed only by children and crazy folk. An open mind will lend you more room to accommodate magical tuition.”

“An open mind and the fact that I’m part elf,” Isabelle noted, gazing out across the glimmering river and the forest beyond. She was testing out the words and the truth of them. She was surprised to find that the admission came with a newfound sense of pride.

“Yes, that helps,” Hyde replied matter-of-factly. “After all, elves are considered to have a natural affinity for channelling the eternal energy, being such an old race and so closely related to the Ancients.”

“Ancients?” Isabelle queried.

Hyde looked back at her. “They were the oldest beings to walk the earth. But they’re gone now.”
Isabelle pondered Hyde’s words as they continued to stroll alongside the narrow river. *Gone like the elves?* She wondered. Hyde stopped every once in a while to toss a pebble into the water or pick some blackberries. Despite being increasingly peckish, Isabelle was reluctant to try any of the unfamiliar berries or mushrooms Hyde offered her, regardless of Hyde’s assertions that they were perfectly safe eating. She wasn’t sure if her and Hyde’s digestive systems were quite the same. After all, they were different in so many other ways. She found herself scanning the forest for prey. A game bird would be good, or even a hare. Anything bigger, like a stag or a wild goat, seemed uncomfortably similar to Hyde. In fact, Isabelle was beginning to question her carnivorous diet since venturing into the forest and learning of the diverse wildlife. What was her place in the food chain? Where should she draw the line?

As if sensing her hunger, or perhaps hearing the rumble of her stomach, Hyde said: “Let’s stop and catch a fish for lunch. We’ve walked enough and I could use some grub. Why don’t you gather some wood for the fire.”

Hyde leaped onto some rocks in the river, identifying a clear and deep pool of water, and then leaped back onto the shore, disappearing into the forest for a moment. He emerged with a long stick and started busying himself with the task of whittling the end of it into a sharper point.

Isabelle dropped her pack, bow and quiver on the pebbly shore beside Hyde and wandered off into the forest to look for kindling. In the darker regions of the woods, where the trees huddled together, Isabelle began collecting twigs and branches from amongst the debris on the forest floor, and soon had a large bundle for a fire. It was work she was used to doing when she lived with her father. She would be allowed to collect twigs and sticks for kindling while her father chopped down boughs or whole trees for firewood on the verges of their land. There she was, thinking about her father again. Hyde’s prattling, she realised, was a useful distraction.

She had an image of her father, facing his first day without her, worrying about where she had gone. She had abandoned him, she realised with a gasp, just as her mother had done. Guilt and grief assaulted her. Tears began to prickle her eyes. What had she been thinking, leaving like that? Perhaps she should return home. It wasn’t too late to go back.
Suddenly a squeaky voice from above startled her into dropping the load of sticks she had gathered.

“Curious to see a goat man with a human. Did you trick him into helping you by getting him drunk? Goat men always spill their secrets after drinking too much.”

Craning her neck to look up at the ancient trees, Isabelle spotted the source of the voice perched on a branch high above.

The creature was small and delicate with wings like emerald crepe paper. Her skin was a chocolatey brown and freckled. Resembling a tiny person but with a broad flat nose and pointed ears, the nymph would have been cute if it weren’t for the disconcerting stare of its disproportionately large amber eyes.

“Hello, there,” Isabelle answered in awe. She had never seen such a marvellous creature as this before.

The nymph fluttered down from her perch to sit on a closer branch just above Isabelle’s head. Isabelle noticed she was covered in green and brown leaves, strategically held in place with delicately braided vines. They provided excellent camouflage. “I’ve been watching you,” she said. “I see a lot from the trees. Saw you and your satyr, and a lot of other stuff. You mumble in your sleep and goat man borrows without permission.”

Isabelle was a little thrown by the fact that this creature had been spying on them, but she was not too concerned. The nymph hardly appeared threatening. “Well, it’s nice of you to come down and talk with me,” she called out to her. “Do you have a name?”

“Everything has a name. Mine is Meera. Yours is Isabelle. But goat man calls you Belle. I will call you Belle also, because it reminds me of bluebells and they are pretty, like your bootlaces.”

Isabelle glanced down at her drab brown laces. “Thank you,” she replied, hesitantly, confused by the nymph’s understanding of what might qualify as pretty. The storybooks in her bedroom back home usually named colourful silk ribbons and lace as things deserving of the label ‘pretty’. Perhaps those books had gotten it all wrong.

“Do you live around here?” Isabelle asked.

Meera did a cartwheel across the branch, humming to herself as she did so. When she came to a standstill she peered at Isabelle as if noticing her for the
first time. Her broad nose twitched. “Everyone lives around here. Around here is our home. You and I are neighbours. We just haven’t met before because you were still learning to walk.”

“Actually, I’ve been walking for a great many years. In fact, I learnt to walk quite early on.” Isabelle was surprised to hear herself talking so proudly. After all, this creature could fly.

“I don’t mean your feet,” said Meera, in the kind of bemused tone that one might take with a child. “You can cross the spaces between here and there. I can see the static around you. The others had it too. Particularly the angry boy.”

Isabelle frowned. She felt she was missing some very important context.

“What boy? What static?”

Meera leaned forward to stare at Isabelle, her large amber eyes unblinking. “The boy who walked between worlds. He was always buzz, buzz, buzzing, just like you are now. And the tall ones that left this place—they all hummed together. It was such a pleasant sound. I miss it sometimes.”

“Oh.” Isabelle tried to think of a more detailed response, but couldn’t come up with anything. She had the feeling that this nymph knew more about her than she knew about herself. The feeling was unsettling. She couldn’t help wondering what else the nymph knew.

“You know,” Isabelle ventured, “I was about to make a fire and cook some lunch. You’re welcome to join us.” It occurred to her that she had no idea what nymphs ate. “I’m sure the goat man would like to meet you.”

Meera scrutinised her. She wrinkled her nose and flapped her wings. “Fires make too much smoke,” she said matter-of-factly. “I don’t like smoke.”

“Oh,” Isabelle found herself replying again. Meera was sure to think she was an idiot, which was not the impression she wanted to give to this magical creature whom she found herself desperately wishing to befriend.

Feeling uncomfortable beneath Meera’s gaze, Isabelle bent to gather the firewood she’d dropped. “Well, I’d better get back to my friend. Maybe I’ll see you again some time?”

Meera watched Isabelle unblinkingly, until Isabelle began to wonder if this nymph was more dangerous than she looked. Isabelle turned to escape the nymph’s gaze and hurried back to the river. When she reached Hyde, he had
already caught a small but fat fish and was using a knife to clean and gut it. His fingers and hands, which moved expertly, were messy with fish scales and blood.

“Geez, you took a while,” he said gesturing for her to put the wood down. “I was beginning to think you’d been taken by gypsies or eaten by a bear.”

“I met my first nymph!” Isabelle exclaimed, suddenly gushing. She dumped the wood haphazardly beside her belongings so that she could gesticulate with her hands. “She was just like the drawings in my storybook, though a little stranger than I had imagined. She was very friendly, but she was saying weird stuff about me being able to walk, and about something she called static, and about some boy she met. I think she’s been watching us.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re getting to know the locals,” Hyde said absently, busy with his work. “Just remember that you’re part human, and there are a lot of creatures out there who don’t think much of the human species—no offence.”

A breeze picked up, skimming leaves across the forest floor towards the riverbank and lifting a slight chill from the water. Isabelle swept her long hair away from her face, tucking it behind one of her pointy ears. What was it that the humans had done? Why had they earned such a bad reputation? She thought of her father and his hostile description of her mother’s elven magic: superstition. He had hidden the truth from her for all these years—the truth about who she was. But who was she really: a human, or an elf? Both?

“So, humans are evil,” she announced, testing out the words—words that condemned her father, and perhaps herself too.

Hyde set the fish down on a smooth flat rock and walked over to the pile of wood Isabelle had gathered. He began arranging the kindling into a pyramid on a rocky area of the river bank in preparation for the fire. Then he returned to the task of filleting the fish. “People like to stereotype,” he finally said. “Most assume that because I’m a satyr I must live hedonistically and enjoy nothing but wine.”

“Well, don’t you?” Isabelle asked, getting to work on the fire with some flint.

“I prefer brandy.” Hyde laughed raucously at his own joke, nearly slicing his finger off in the process.
Where the Dead Things Are

The next few days brought miserable weather, washing away the sunny optimism that Isabelle had initially felt upon leaving home. As she and Hyde trudged east, the constant drizzle persisted, turning the earth along the river bank to mud and causing little rivulets to spill out towards the river from among the trees and ferns of Pan’s Forest. Isabelle was soaked through, her boots were caked in earth, and her hair was plastered to her face and neck. She worried her waxed backpack would start absorbing water, if it hadn’t already.

Hyde was equally subdued. His fur was dripping, as were his tatty clothes and canvas sack. Any hope of creating a campfire had been abandoned, along with the promise of a hot meal. Instead the pair had been forced to settle for fruit and mushrooms, carefully sourced by Hyde. Isabelle had no choice but to trust him—and to believe that her digestive system was as robust as his.

As Isabelle tramped behind Hyde along the river, which was becoming larger and noisier, in part from the rain, she found herself longing for roast chicken and mashed potato. She could almost taste the creamy texture of the potato in all its buttery perfection. Images of hot apple pie made their way into her reveries. Her father made it every year for her birthday, sprinkling it with brown sugar for extra sweetness and serving it with a big bowl of fresh cream. Suddenly she found herself missing him painfully. But she reminded herself: he had lied to her all her life. He had kept from her the secret of who she was. She thought of her mother—the memory of her at her bedside, the sound of her voice, those mysterious words spoken in another language—and pushed the thought of her father out of her mind.

“I could eat an aboleth I’m so hungry,” Hyde grizzled, picking his way along the muddy shore of the riverbank with his trusty staff. “I might even be willing to chew off my own arm in another hour or so.”

“What’s an aboleth?” Isabelle asked, knowing immediately that she would regret asking.

“It’s a giant amphibian that leaves mucus wherever it goes. They’re vile creatures. I’m not actually sure if they’re a real thing or a myth, but at this point I’m so hungry, I pray that they are real, so that we might stumble upon one, and eat it.”
Isabelle stared at him warily. “I think you’re delirious.”

“Because I’m so hungry! Even you’re beginning to look appetising!”

“What do you mean ‘even’ I’m looking appetising? Are you saying that this slimy aboleth is more appealing than me?”

Hyde looked her up and down with a raised eyebrow. “Well, it’s got more meat on it than you do. You’re little more than skin and bone.”

Isabelle felt self-conscious and slighted, having her body assessed and dismissed in such a frank and rude manner, but she also felt strangely light-headed. She barely knew what they were talking about, but she knew it didn’t make much sense. Had Hyde mentioned something about eating his own arm?

“We just need to focus on moving forward,” she said determinedly. “The rain will pass eventually.”

“What if it doesn’t?” Hyde wailed hysterically. He threw his arms to the heavens, letting the drizzle fall directly onto his face. With his grubby white shirt pasted to his chest, he shouted: “Why won’t you stop? What have we done to offend you?”

Isabelle felt alarmed. Was this who she had trusted to feed her berries and mushrooms? To guide her through unknown lands? Perhaps they were both starting to hallucinate. Perhaps they were lost.

She glanced around at the surrounding forest. Vine covered trees, mossy rocks and ferns glistened in the damp. Over the past few days, after meeting Meera, Isabelle had felt as if hidden eyes were constantly watching her. Sometimes it unsettled her, but at other times it felt oddly comforting, knowing that the forest was home to a great many creatures who took what seemed to be a benign or distant interest in her. But today she was beginning to feel uneasy. There was a heavy feeling in the air, and as much as she wanted to believe it was just the weather, she knew it wasn’t. She shivered. Something ominous was out there.

“Is it just me, or is there something spooky about this part of the woods?”

There was a new edge to her voice, and she realised it was fear. Despite all of her father’s rhetoric about danger and the need for caution, she had never really felt afraid—until now.
Hyde instantly pulled himself together. He thumped his staff down to the ground, looked at her levelly, and said: “It’s probably the spirit people. I suppose they must be close.”

“So, spirit people?” Isabelle asked trying not to sound too alarmed.

“Over there,” Hyde said, gesturing towards the opposite bank of the river and a distant rise in the forest, where the trees seemed to thin out and their foliage become scarce. “You see where the trees begin to look withered and diseased? That’s where the spirits are tethered. You don’t want to go there. The spirits of this area are restless and carry death with them.”

A chill ran up Isabelle’s spine, making her feel cold as well as wet. “I hope you’re being melodramatic when you say that.”

“No, I’m deadly serious,” Hyde replied and giggled. “Pardon the pun. As soon as a spirit touches you, they taint you with death. Or so I’m told.”

Isabelle turned to stare at Hyde incredulously. She had never read about anything like this in her storybooks. The forest was always a place of potential danger, but she had never fathomed that deadly spirits would be something she’d have to worry about. And she couldn’t believe how flippant Hyde was being. She was suddenly angry. “Then why are we journeying so close to where they dwell? You’re supposed to be my guide in this forest, Hyde!”

“Oh, don’t worry, Belle,” said Hyde, shaking the rain from his head and body, as a dog might. “They can’t wander far from where they were slain.”

“Who . . . who”—Isabelle hesitantly began—“killed them?”

“Ah, that would be the man they called Sirus.”

Isabelle turned the name over in her mind. A question came to her. She dreaded hearing the answer, but she needed to know. “Is this Sirus . . . human?”

“Yes, a human alright,” Hyde said. They looked at each other in silence for a moment before Hyde continued. “He found a way to steal magic and become powerful that way. He formed an order of human thralls called the Gatherers and tasked them with abducting young children from the Ancients so that he could use their powerful magic for his own needs. As you can imagine, they didn’t take kindly to having their children stolen. According to the legend, they rose up and fought back, but Sirus”—Hyde drew a finger across his neck—“was ruthless.”
Isabelle felt the stir of fear but also a hot anger at the injustice of what she was hearing. To steal—and steal from—children. Was Sirus the reason humans were so poorly regarded by the creatures of the forest?

“What happened to Sirus?” she asked. “And his Gatherers.”

“Well, they’re gone now, I think,” Hyde said, squinting into the rain in a way that did not make Isabelle feel confident. “Along with the last of the Ancients. His temple still exists though. Actually, it’s not too far from here. And won’t take us out of our way.” Hyde pointed in a direction up ahead of them and, encouragingly, away from the haunted grounds of the spirits. “Do you want to see it?” Hyde’s wet tapered ears pricked up as a thought occurred to him. His ears, as Isabelle had already noted, had a life of their own and made her more aware of the movement of her own pointed ears. Their bodies, she had come to think, were dancing some strange dance she did not fully understand. “There could be food in there!” Hyde said with great enthusiasm. “Or treasure!”

Isabelle felt the rain trickling down the back of her tunic. She was cold, wet, miserable and completely out of her depth. Her instincts were telling her to avoid the place, but she thought of the prospect of being dry and warm, the possibility of a fire and food, and gave Hyde the go-ahead with a simple nod.
His Voice in the Dark

It took several hours of walking beneath the dripping canopy of the forest to reach the temple. With their eyes focused on the ground to prevent themselves from slipping or tripping, and with the misty sky preventing any kind of long reaching view, it came as a surprise when the forest suddenly stopped and they found themselves in a large clearing. Isabelle had to catch her breath at the sight of the enormous and pristine structure before her. She had never seen such a massive and imposing sight in all her life. The temple that Hyde had spoken about was in fact a pyramid. It had been constructed out of some sort of smooth white stone that had been cut into giant bricks and joined together seamlessly. On both sides of the pyramid were low square buildings with mysterious engravings carved into the outside walls. Four large stone pillars stood in silent rows beyond them, featuring ornate birdlike figures at the top of each.

At the entrance to the temple grounds, close to where Isabelle and Hyde had stopped, were two great stone statues. Isabelle and Hyde walked silently towards them. There were intricately carved details in the smooth grey stone, with only a few odd patches of moss obscuring their features. The figures were different. The one on the left resembled an ox with large flared nostrils, curled horns and hooves, but the chest and arms of a man. The other had a fully human body but possessed the head of a falcon. Though they were different creatures, they clearly shared the same purpose and that was to stand guard, serving as a warning to those who dared to enter the temple grounds. They each held a spear that met in the air between them, forming an arch.

Isabelle looked at Hyde, who seemed to be lost for words for a change, and stepped through the archway into the temple grounds. Immediately, she felt herself drawn to the entrance, where she stopped to stroke the slick walls and the engravings that were carved around the triangular doorway.

A piercing screech interrupted her trance. She spun sharply around to locate the sound and saw a flock of large bright birds rising into the grey sky above Pan’s Forest. Hyde, still standing at the gateway to the temple grounds, had also turned to inspect the sky.

“Just some cheer birds,” he called over to her and began making his way across the puddled earth of the temple grounds, where no vegetation seemed to
grow. “I’ve never gotten this close to the temple before,” he admitted, arriving at her side.

Isabelle doubted she had ever been this close to Hyde before. And certainly no one else, apart from her father, had been this close to her. They looked into each other’s eyes, and she wondered what he saw. She noted his smell first: earthy and damp. Then she observed, for the first time, that his eyes were two different shades of green, the right eye being slightly lighter in colour. They were, she thought, as beautiful as they were odd. He also had a small scar above his left eyebrow that was partially obscured by hair, and his horns bore shallow scratches. She regarded them briefly and then looked back into his green eyes. She saw then that he was nervous.

Isabelle became aware of the tension in her own body. “Maybe we should turn back?” she ventured, aware of how alien her voice sounded here. She couldn’t get over how different this place—this human place—was to the womb of the forest. Everything here was made of stone. There was nothing living.

“But there might be food,” Hyde said, sounding more like his old self. “Sirus was human, so he had to eat, right? The Gatherers must have had crops. I don’t know how much longer I can go without real food, Belle, and I’m sick of this rain.”

Isabelle noted how uncomfortable her soaked leather bodice and trousers were. They had shrunk with the damp and chafed badly in all the wrong places. She desperately wanted to change and to sit in front of a roaring fire. She could not remember the last time she had felt dry. Brushing a dripping strand of hair behind her ear, Isabelle assessed the temple sceptically.

“Alright,” she said at last.

The two of them exchanged another look and, as if they had a silent agreement, stepped through the door and into the temple side by side. It was very dark inside, with only a triangle of light from the grey day outside filtering in through the doorway. Isabelle had to squint to see anything. Hyde went ahead of her. She had noticed that his night vision was better than hers.

“We should probably watch our step, in case there are traps in here,” she called after her companion’s shadow as he retreated further into the darkness. Her voice echoed emptily. She felt an uneven tiled floor beneath her feet, though there was a layer of sand, dirt or grit on top of it that made it slippery.
Hyde chuckled, the sound echoing devilishly throughout the cavernous room. “You’ve read too many adventure stories. Traps! Ha ha!” As he grew in confidence, Isabelle could hear him becoming more like his old self. “Even if there were any traps,” Hyde called out, “this temple’s ancient. I’m sure they’ve all been sprung by now, or disintegrated throughout the ages. You’re being para –”

He was cut off by the tremendous sound of an explosion and rocks smashing to the ground. The noise reverberated throughout the temple, shaking the ground beneath Isabelle and causing her to cover her head instinctively. She felt dust and light pieces of debris rain down on her head and shoulders. When the dust had settled and her ears had stopped ringing, Isabelle lowered her arms. It was now pitch dark. Isabelle turned, blinking in the darkness in a desperate attempt to see through the gloom, and groped her way to where the temple opening had been. To her horror, she felt the doorway was now a wall of rocks. As her eyes adjusted a little to the darkness, she made out a sliver of light emanating from a gap in the top of the rubble pile. The crack through which daylight was making its way was never going to be big enough to provide an escape route.

She turned away from the rubble and called anxiously into the shadows. “Hyde? Are you okay?”

The reply was a series of curses, followed by the clanging of metal against stone. “Who makes a booby trap like that?” he hissed. “I only opened this chest and the whole bloody doorway collapsed!” There was more clanging and some muffled words, and then all of a sudden a pool of yellow light illuminated the room. Hyde stood in front of a massive stone chest, holding a lamp above his head. “Are you alright?” he called over to her.

Isabelle nodded mutely. She felt shell-shocked by what had just happened and even more surprised by the fact that she was completely unharmed, despite having been only a dozen metres or so away from where the roof had collapsed. She gingerly made her way over to where Hyde was standing beside the chest. There was nothing but some tattered old books and a magnifying glass inside, all covered with a thick layer of cobwebs and dust. She rounded on Hyde.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” Isabelle asked tersely. In her wet clothes, standing still in the dark of the temple, she was growing colder than ever. And frightened. Shaking with adrenaline and shock, she snatched the lamp from
his hands, not waiting for a response. “Where did you find this? How did you get it to light?”

He looked sheepishly towards the doorway, now stopped up with rubble. “I used my Will.”

She felt the shock of it. *His Will.* The magic was real. Not just a matter of superstition, like her father had said. But she refused to let it assuage her anger. “And yet you couldn’t use your magic to check for traps?” she snapped.

She swept the lantern in an arc around her body, scanning the room. The darkness seemed to suck the light into its depths so that it was hard to see anything. “Honestly, Hyde, you should try letting your brain lead you, instead of your stomach.”

Hyde’s hurt expression made her feel immediately guilty. His entire body slumped. She remembered how close they had been just a moment ago and took a deep breath to calm her rising panic. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t mean it. I’m just tired and hungry and cranky. Let’s just try and find a way out of here, okay?”

Isabelle stepped carefully away from Hyde, using the lantern to scan the area for a possible exit. The single lamp did not illuminate much in the cavernous space, but its light was sufficient to reveal a small circular opening in the wall, not too far from where they stood. It looked like a tunnel.

A noise further inside the temple made Isabelle turn in alarm. It sounded like rocks crumbling to the floor. For a full minute or more she and Hyde stood frozen in fear, straining their ears to pinpoint the exact origin of the sound, but it was near impossible to see anything that far back in the recesses of the cavern. When the rumbling stopped, Hyde whispered to Isabelle: “I think we should leave now. Right now.”

Some unknown force prevented Isabelle from speaking. She found her attention riveted by a tall, large mass in the centre of the gloom at the back of the temple. Her head throbbed with a dull pain and was accompanied by a rhythmic thumping in her ears. As if in a hypnotic trance, Isabelle felt herself taking one step towards the ominous mass, and then another, and then another, until she was involuntarily shuffling towards it in the darkness, while Hyde called to her to stop.

“Have you got a death wish!” he called frantically. “Where are you going?”
Isabelle heard him only distantly, and what he had to say did not matter. A low hum was reverberating in her ears, muffling all other noise. Her mind was filled with the image of the statue that now towered before her.

She held up the lantern. Intricately carved from smooth white marble, the figure was that of a regal-looking man who might have been straight out of one of her storybooks. He was dressed in a floor length robe with a gaping collar that revealed his muscular chest beneath. He stood tall and proud, one arm at his side, the other slightly raised. His features were angular, his square jaw cut aggressively into the hard stone, and yet his wavy, shoulder-length hair had a softening effect, giving him the appearance of a gentler man. He had a neatly trimmed beard that joined with his neat moustache. But it was his hollow eyes that were the most striking feature. Though blank and unseeing, Isabelle felt them upon her skin and sensed there was a great river of emotion and knowing seething behind them. They bore holes into her very being.

“So you like ‘em rugged and stony, huh,” Hyde joked uneasily, jogging over to stand beside Isabelle.

Drawn out of her trance by Hyde’s presence, Isabelle tore her gaze away from the statue and blinked several times in an effort to focus on the satyr. Very briefly his animal features, distorted by the darkness, seemed alien and frightening. His horns seemed larger, monstrous even, and his eyes appeared predatory in the flickering lamplight. Isabelle shook away the fear, remembered that Hyde was her friend—she supposed that was the right term—and she was grateful for the warmth of his presence at her side.

“What did you say?” she muttered absently, realising that Hyde had spoken but that she had not heard what he said. Her mind felt foggy.

“This guy,” Hyde replied. He gestured with his thumb towards the statue, which Isabelle reluctantly turned to view. “I take it you were overwhelmed by his chiselled jaw, and rock-hard abs?” He elbowed Isabelle in the ribs, teasingly. She immediately grasped at her side, where he had touched her.

“No, I…” Isabelle rubbed her eyes in an effort to clear the disorientation. Time and events seemed muddled. She was having difficulty recalling where she was and how she had gotten to where she was currently standing. She felt as if a prince or king from one of her storybooks had risen from the pages and now stood, carved in stone, before her. Whether he was good or evil she could not say.
Hyde turned to examine the figure. “Looks old, don’t you think?” he said. “Check out those cracks. It looks like it’s just about to fall apart.”

Isabelle turned back to look at the statue. Sure enough, there were tiny hairline fractures covering the entire statue. In fact, upon closer inspection, it seemed the years had really taken their toll, or as if there was a great force struggling beneath the surface of the stone, trying to break free.

Even more disconcerting was the vague whispering that she was pretending not to hear. She couldn’t make out any distinct words, but there was a distinctly silky, sing-song voice inside her head, making her feel foggy and unsure of herself.

Isabelle shivered. She turned away from the statue and focused on Hyde’s eyes. “It’s creepy,” she said, grabbing for his hand. Their hands closed over one another’s, and they stood silently for a moment. “Let’s just find a way out of here,” she said urgently.

She was just about to turn to leave when another loud crack echoed throughout the room, this time much louder than the first. It was the statue. One of the cracks had split open to form a fissure that snaked all the way from the figure’s hip to his neck. Dust puffed out from the gap and stone fragments crumbled to the ground, making Hyde and Isabelle cough as they stumbled back a few paces in an instinctive effort to get away from the crumbling statue.

“What is that foul odour?” Hyde gasped.

Isabelle smelt it too. The air had begun to reek of decay and rot, and something else she couldn’t quite put her finger on. It made her want to vomit. She put a hand over her nose and mouth. “I don’t know, but we need to get away from it, right now,” she said, her voice muffled.

She cocked her head to indicate the tunnel in the chamber wall, and the two of them stumbled towards it, moving briskly but cautiously. They had to stoop to fit into the tunnel, which revealed a long, straight passage with a gentle incline. The tunnel walls were lined with stone, but the floor revealed compacted earth, sand and gravel. Isabelle led the way with the lamp. Every now and then her bow would bump against the ceiling. Often, she would brush a cobweb off her face or swat at a moth. There seemed to be a lot of spiders and insects, which she and Hyde were disturbing as they edged their way through the gloom. It made Isabelle want to get out of there all the more, but she did not even know if the
tunnel would ever come to an end. Perhaps, she thought with horror, it looped back into the main chamber, where that statue seemed to be breaking apart—or was it coming to life?

After several minutes of walking in tense silence, it was with great relief that she spotted a light at the end of the tunnel. It wasn’t a bright light, but it definitely indicated an opening. Isabelle quickened her pace and Hyde followed closely behind, bumping into her several times. Pushing open a rusted iron gate at the end of the tunnel, they emerged into a small circular room with a sandy floor and a thatched roof. The walls consisted of stone and compacted earth, which suggested to Isabelle that the room was in fact a pit dug into the ground. Straw lay strewn about the place, with a few disintegrated blankets crumpled here and there. It was very damp. The thatch roof was badly worn from years of neglect, with multiple holes and thinning patches that let in narrow shards of wan light. There were pools of water all over from where the rain was dripping through the damaged roof.

“What do you think this place was used for?” Hyde asked in a hushed tone, as they allowed themselves to stand at their full height and surveyed the room.

Isabelle rubbed her lower back, which was aching from crouching inside the tunnel. She looked around, her eyes lingering on a soggy straw mattress with a tattered blanket lying abandoned next to it. She remembered the security blanket she had carried around when she was little. “I hate to think,” she replied. She squelched over to stand in the middle of the pit and stared up at the ceiling.

Hyde turned to face Isabelle and followed her gaze up to the roof. “It’s far too high to climb up and out that way,” he noted.

“We need to bring the roof down,” she said decisively.

“What? Why?”

“If we knock down enough of the roof thatch we can try and start a fire. Even if it just smoulders away it should cause enough smoke to attract some attention … at least that’s what I’m hoping.”

Hyde looked uneasy. His eyes darted back towards the tunnel and then to the roof. “What if it attracts the wrong kind of attention? You know there are things out there more hungry than me, and I hate to say it, but we’re alarmingly helpless right now.”
Isabelle pulled an arrow from her quiver and notched it to her bow. “We are not helpless.” She focused on a particularly loose patch of roof that was half hanging down already, and then released the arrow with one quick snap. As she had anticipated, the wicker and reeds gave way when hit by the arrow.

She continued to target weak-looking parts of the roof, with mixed success. At times the arrows simply lodged in the patchy roof, much to Isabelle’s chagrin. She didn’t have many arrows to spare. Hyde moved from one side of the space to the other, dodging the falling debris. There didn’t seem to be anything to say. It was as if they didn’t want to speak about what they had seen, and heard, in the temple chamber. Certainly, Isabelle didn’t want to admit her desperate desire to get away from the disintegrating statue, because it would mean admitting the strange pull it had on her.

Isabelle stopping shooting arrows and inspected her handy-work. Debris littered the floor from where she had knocked it loose, and there was now a large gap in the ceiling that revealed a grey patch of sky and through which light drizzle entered.

“Now what?” Hyde asked, hugging himself and rubbing his arms. His damp linen shirt and shorts clung to his body. Looking at him, Isabelle again realised how wet and cold she was. They needed to remove their clothes and dry off, though she didn’t know how they were going to manage that, stuck together in this small space—especially after what had happened at the temple entrance. She remembered what it had felt like to look into Hyde’s intriguing, mismatched eyes from close up, and to be looked at by him. The truth was, she didn’t understand exactly what had happened, but she felt as if something had irrevocably changed.

“We need to set this on fire,” Isabelle said, lightly kicking the pile of debris with her foot.

Together they made a hasty pyramid of straw and thatch, using the driest materials they could find. They positioned it slightly to the left of the hole in the roof so that the rain wouldn’t fall directly onto it, but the smoke could easily escape.

“Okay then, give me the flint stone,” Hyde said when they were done. He held out his open palm and wiggled his fingers, waiting for Isabelle to hand it over. Relieved to find the contents of her bag dry, she fished the stone from the
bottom of the pack and passed it to him. She felt an electric charge as she touched his palm and wondered if he felt anything too. If he did, he didn’t give anything away.

Holding the stone tightly in his grasp, Hyde leant over the pile of debris and began tapping away with the flint. Because of the drizzle and dampness, it took a while for the straw to ignite properly, but it did eventually catch, largely due to Isabelle’s persistence in blowing at the base of the mound. Together, they watched the smoke trail upwards and out through the patchy roof, to greet the cloudy sky above.

When the fire was strong enough to burn on its own, Isabelle stood up and brushed off her dirty knees. “And now we wait, I suppose,” she said. “At least we can finally dry off a bit in front of a warm fire.”

“Yes, it’s great,” Hyde snorted. “If you ignore the fact that we’re trapped, we still have no food, and there’s a statue coming to life nearby.”

Isabelle felt the dread in her own being at her companion’s comment. She looked at Hyde. He was shuffling on his hooves. Hooves, Isabelle thought, feeling momentarily amazed all over again, as it was easy to forget that her friend was not human. But then she was not human either, she reminded herself.

Hyde’s eyes, she saw, kept darting back to the hole of the tunnel through which they had arrived, as if he expected something to leap out at them.

“I heard something back there,” she admitted in a hushed voice. “A whispering, in the dark. Or maybe in my mind. I don’t know. It sort of…called to me.”

Hyde clutched his tufted ears and tugged on them. “Me too!” he exclaimed, clearly relieved he had not been the only one.

The pair stood mutely after that, each with their own dark thoughts and fears, the misty rain dampening their skin, clothes and spirits. Isabelle worried she could hear distant thunder.

After a while, Isabelle noted Hyde’s slumped shoulders and grim expression and knew that she had to break the silence. She had to interrupt whatever it was he was thinking about. She worried he was becoming suspicious of the human in her and what she had heard. “I can’t hear the voice anymore,” she said, staring into the fire. Hyde didn’t respond. She had to say something else, but
she didn’t know what he wanted to hear. “We’ll be on our way again in no time, I’m certain,” she added, trying to reassure herself as much as Hyde.

But she wasn’t certain of anything, least of all why the awful statue had exerted such a pull on her. It was a troubling thing.

“Troubling, indeed,” said a raspy voice, echoing around the pit.
The Wolf That’s Not a Wolf

The wolf shimmered into existence amidst the smoke of the fire. It seemed to have no solid form for it was blurred around the edges and was as intangible as the smoke around it. It had no discernible colour, but it was close to being a hazy whitish grey. With two deliberate steps it moved towards Isabelle and Hyde. Its paws seemed to barely touch the earth and its passing made no sound whatsoever. Its eyes were a gleaming shade of gold with flecks of black, like polished marbles, and they mesmerised Isabelle as she stared into them, stupefied.

When the wolf spoke, its mouth didn’t move. The sound that emanated from the creature was like dry leaves blowing across the earth.

“Isabelle Gray,” it said, declaring her name as a statement, not a question. “I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you. It’s an honour.”

“You’re a spirit!” Hyde blurted unceremoniously. “You’re not one of those killed by the Gatherers, are you?” Panicking, he was trying clumsily to back away from the wolf while tugging on Isabelle’s sleeve. Isabelle held her ground, as mesmerised by the wolf’s eyes as she had been by the creepy statue.

“I am not a spirit, and you needn’t be alarmed,” the wolf answered serenely. Its intense gold eyes were still focused on Isabelle, who was rooted to the spot.

“I’m not alarmed,” Hyde muttered under his breath, letting go of Isabelle’s arm as he realised she wasn’t going anywhere.

“I have no need for a name, but the former Khensu called me Zoku.” The wolf made a small bow of its head. It was an odd gesture for a wolf. “You may also know me by this name, if you wish. My being is currently bound to a young man by the name of Athrin. I am his familiar. This form you see is his perception of me, but I can change it if you wish. I have no true gender, form, or fixed persona—I can be whatever you wish me to be.”

When the wolf bowed its head, breaking eye contact with Isabelle, she felt his hold on her relax. All sorts of thoughts immediately raced through her mind. What was this creature? She thought of her storybooks back home. Wolves, she vaguely remembered, were associated with temptation and danger, and certainly in real life they were a genuine threat. She needed to be on her guard.

“How do you know my name?” she asked, hoping to sound authoritative.
The wolf blinked serenely and swished its tail. “Khensu Athrin has entrusted me with the task of guiding you while he is away, just as I guided him when he first became aware of his abilities. So, I’ve been watching and waiting for the right opportunity to present myself.”

“You’ve been watching me?” Isabelle blinked in the smoke, which was swirling around the pit and trailing upwards towards the dilapidated roof.

“Yes. For some time,” said the wolf. “For you are the new Khensu.”

“Who are you trying to con?” Hyde demanded, crossing his arms and puffing out his chest in a manner that was supposed to be intimidating. Given how wet and bedraggled he looked, he was hardly convincing. “The Khensu is just a myth. There’s no such thing.”

“This myth happens to be rooted in truth,” Zoku replied, unruffled. “My companion, Athrin, was Khensu. Now that honour belongs to Isabelle.”

Hyde stared at Isabelle, who in turn gawked at the wolf and Hyde in confusion. It all seemed absurd. It had been a long day and she was tired, physically and mentally. Too many impossible things had happened in the last few days. She almost felt like laughing. The fear of the statue inside the temple evaporated. None of it was true. It was all a dream. She threw her backpack to the ground and sat cross-legged leaning against it. The smoke from the fire immediately gravitated towards her, as smoke from a fire would. Now she did laugh out loud. Then she coughed.

The wolf bowed its head. “I’m sorry. It’s been some time since I’ve had contact with a living creature and I seem to have forgotten my manners. This must be overwhelming for you, so I will try to explain myself as best I can.” He sat down opposite Isabelle, curling his tail around himself.

“The word Khensu means many things,” Zoku began, the words emerging from his body even though his mouth did not open. “Traveller is perhaps the most apt description of what the Khensu does and is. For the Khensu is a person who has been gifted with the ability to walk between worlds by identifying portals that no one else can see. He or she travels through these portals, gathering knowledge and wisdom from places that no one else can access, as well as learning many great things from the people and cultures of these realms. When they return to our world, they see it with new eyes. Furthermore, the Khensu inherits knowledge from past Khensu. This wisdom comes instinctively. It is passed on mystically.
when one Khensu passes and another is born. Some say it is reincarnation. There’s no way to know really; one can only observe the phenomenon that has been occurring for generations. I am here to inform you that you are the next Khensu, Isabelle Gray.”

Isabelle stared mutely at Zoku, not knowing how to respond. Though she was absorbing all that he had to say with amazement, he may as well have been speaking another language, given the amount of sense it made to her. She was also wary. She couldn’t help but feel like he was trying to sell her something. Her father had told her how he had to take care with the flatterers and other silver-voiced traders in the marketplace, and of the travelling salesmen who came by from time to time, desperate to sell their wares. Certainly, there was something soothing, almost hypnotic, about the wolf’s voice and gaze.

Zoku continued, his tone impassive. “I presume you can sense the eternal energy? You may recognise it as a low hum in the background of your mind or a shimmering in the air. You’ve probably tapped into it instinctively since leaving the fortress of your home. This is part of the Khensu’s gift—a profound familiarity with the force that connects all worlds, and the ability to sense things that others cannot. As Athrin used to say, only a Khensu knows the secret shape of things.”

When Isabelle didn’t respond, Zoku continued: “Because of the unique insights and powers of the Khensu, he or she has a great responsibility to the people of this world. In fact, there is a pressing issue that needs your attention right now.”

“When, wait, wait,” Hyde interrupted, approaching the fire and slinging down his own canvas sack. The rain seemed to have stopped, but water dripped from the roof, or what was left of it, creating a soft rhythmic tapping in the corner of the room. “You’re saying Belle is some kind of hero?” Hyde asked eagerly, squatting so that he was at their level and looking first at Zoku and then at Isabelle.

Zoku cocked his head to the side, peering at Hyde as if he were the strangest creature he’d ever seen. Isabelle focused on the smoking fire, staring blankly into the embers and swirling smoke until her eyes watered. She didn’t want to be a hero. She didn’t want to embrace any role that had been chosen for her. That was part of the reason she had left home to begin with—to experience
the world on her own terms, to be who she wanted to be, to find out who she really was. She remembered her mother, sitting at her bedside in a golden glow, speaking words she could not understand but words that were nevertheless meant for her. Isabelle had her own mission, and it had nothing to do with what this wolf was saying.

“What if I don’t want this responsibility?” she asked, staring hard at the wolf across the smoke of the fire. Its body seemed to meld with the haze, swaying with the wind. “What if I have my own pressing business to attend to?”

Zoku seemed unmoved by her declaration, his intense gaze unwavering. Hyde, on the other hand, seemed stunned. He gave a nervous chuckle. “You can’t just decide not to be Khensu, Belle. Prophecy is not to be messed with,” he said. “Right, wolf?”

“Prophecy is tricky,” Zoku replied simply. He continued to address Isabelle as if Hyde were not there at all. His tail swished against the sandy floor but did not disturb a single speck of dust. “The role of Khensu has always been interpreted differently,” he said. “Some choose to use their abilities to better themselves or their communities. Some see it as a way to attain enlightenment. Others endeavour to harness knowledge as a weapon, or use it to gain power.”

Hyde scowled dubiously at Zoku. “You don’t think she has a responsibility to accept this role?”

“We are all responsible for the wellbeing of others,” Zoku said, staring levelly at Isabelle, ignoring Hyde. “But we are also responsible for our own wellbeing. This is something Athrin could never reconcile. He sacrificed too much of himself.”

Isabelle thought she detected a slight twinge of sadness in the wolf’s gravelly tone as he reflected on his companion.

“Some might say that was noble,” said Hyde.

“Some might say it was stupid,” Zoku said matter-of-factly, finally turning his attention to Hyde. “How do you help others if you do not help yourself?”

Isabelle was tired, hungry, and uncomfortable. It made her words come out more crankily than they otherwise might have. “I think I’m going to have to pass on this. Right now, all I want is some dry clothes and something to eat. Let someone else take on the noble role of Khensu.” There was an edge to her voice, but she couldn’t help it.
Zoku shook his head, the intangible nature of his form leaving tendrils of smoke roiling in the air as he moved. “That’s not how it works. You may reject the role, but no one else will be Khensu while you live.”

Silence filled the space between the three, punctuated only by the sound of dripping water. The smoke was beginning to fade as the fire died, and this unmasked the scent of damp straw and soil, soggy leather and wet fur.

“What happened to the last Khensu?” Hyde asked with unusual restraint, lowering himself fully onto the ground and leaning back onto his canvas sack.

Isabelle thought she saw Zoku sigh, but it was hard to tell since his body was so insubstantial and masked by smoke.

“Athrin has been biding his time in Emporia,” he said. “It’s a world where there is no such thing as death, and one does not age. He’s been waiting for the new Khensu to be chosen so that you can retrieve him, and together, stop Sirus. That was the pressing issue I mentioned earlier.”

“Sirus?” Hyde hissed, stiffening.

“Hang on,” Isabelle said, shaking her head. Her damp, bedraggled hair tumbled around her face and clung to her neck. “So, the previous Khensu, Athrin, is still alive? You said when one dies, another is born with this ability. So how can I be Khensu?”

“He crossed over into another realm long ago, and though he lives, he is no longer a part of this world.” Zoku revealed the briefest hint of a grin, flashing his pointed teeth. “Heroes have a way of manifesting when they’re needed. We have been waiting for you.”

Alive but no longer part of this world—what did that mean exactly? Isabelle found herself thinking of her mother. Had she gone to that place? Emporia is what Zoku had called it. Isabelle understood life and death, but not this strange in-between place the wolf seemed to be talking about. She found herself remembering her childhood cat, Casper, which was bitten by a snake. Its leg had swelled up and become a festering mess and her father had had to put it out of its misery. Death had been a welcome relief. The image of her mewling pet and its corpse made her think of Sirus. She felt suddenly queasy. Perhaps it was her empty stomach, or the stink of the damp pit.
“So, you’ve been around the whole time, watching Belle?” Hyde said, regaining his confidence and leaning in towards Zoku. “That’s creepy,” he added, rubbing his hands together in front of the dying fire.

Isabelle looked at Hyde with interest.

Zoku cocked his head to one side, giving Hyde his attention. “How so?”

“Because you were lurking in the shadows watching her, when she thought she was alone.”

Zoku was deadpan. “I don’t lurk.”

“I think you’re missing the point,” said Hyde, mussing his hair in an attempt to dry it out. “It’s predatory. You do realise you’re a wolf, right?”

For the first time, Isabelle saw Zoku show a sign of emotion, as he growled in frustration. It was a strange noise, not like that of any natural animal. It seemed infused with an elemental power, like the rumble of distant thunder, or a volcano about to erupt.

“I already told you, I am not a wolf,” he snapped, standing up. “This is merely Athrin’s perception of me.”

Before Hyde could continue his interrogation, Isabelle decided to step in.

“You mentioned Sirus,” she said. “This was his temple, wasn’t it?”

Zoku’s spectral ears twitched. “It still is. Athrin used magic to trap Sirus in a stone prison—a statue. Unfortunately, as you saw, the spell seems to be waning.”

Isabelle felt the breath rush from her. She held her head in her hands to steady herself. None of this made any sense. Then she remembered the hypnotic effect of the statue, and the evil power she felt emanating from it. That disturbing voice inside her head. What had she gotten herself mixed up in? Was her father right about the forest being full of danger and things that wanted to kill her?

“Sirus is a man of contradiction,” Zoku continued, padding around the fire in slow circles as he spoke. “He despises magic and yet he seeks to possess it, viewing it as a tool for dominance. He calls himself a sorcerer, but he has no real magic of his own, he just syphons it from others, growing more and more powerful. He will pick up where he left off. Prophecy foretells that only you can stop him.”

Suddenly Hyde was speaking, and it seemed in her defence. Isabelle could hear in his voice that he was rattled by what Zoku had revealed, but she couldn’t
bring herself to look at him. “Everyone knows that prophecies are unreliable and often misconstrued,” Hyde said, no longer interested in joking or being provocative. “Depending on the interpreter, the meaning can differ.”

“This is true,” Zoku replied. “I cannot explain to you how I know it, but Isabelle is the one who can defeat Sirus. She will prevail where the former Khensu failed.”

Isabelle heard Hyde shuffling over to her side and felt him place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Then he squatted in front of her so that she had to look at him. He spoke in a hushed voice and from such close range that Isabelle could feel the warmth of his breath. She looked into his green mismatched eyes. His expression was serious. “Listen, I know you want to learn about your heritage, and maybe even find your people, but if this Sirus guy is half as scary as the stories say, he’s going to make life very difficult for you, and everyone else.” He paused and swallowed. Isabelle felt her whole body growing warm from the touch of his hand, still on her shoulder, and found that she needed to swallow too.

Hyde began to speak again, softly, just for her. “Maybe this is a different way for you to find out who you are, and what you’re made of? I’m not a heroic guy. I don’t strategise, or make plans, or practice my fighting stance when no one’s around. I can’t imagine how I would begin to try and stop this mad man, but I think you probably can. And if you do, I want you to know that I will help you, in whatever way that I can.”

“As will I.”

Isabelle and Hyde turned back to face Zoku. He was gazing at them with his intense golden eyes. Hyde gave Isabelle’s shoulder a squeeze then let go and stood up.

Isabelle felt something unexpected: resentment, rage. What did Hyde know? What did Zoku understand of her life? She’d spent her whole existence in seclusion, and now she finally had the chance to be reunited with a mother she had thought was gone forever. She couldn’t let herself be side-tracked. She had already decided upon her own mission. What these men wanted had nothing to do with her. She had no interest in a cursed statue stuck in a run-down tomb. Nevertheless, the thought of Sirus reminded her how urgently she wanted to get out of there.
“Whoever it is you’re looking for,” she said firmly, “it’s not me.” She stood up and dusted off her wet clothing, letting bits of straw and debris fall at her feet. She slung her backpack over a shoulder and looked at Hyde. She found that she didn’t want to leave without him.

“Are you coming?”

Hyde stood stock-still, his eyebrows raised in surprise. He fidgeted with the hem of his shirt and kicked at the dirt with one hoof. She sensed that he wanted to try and convince her of something, but was torn about how to proceed. The turmoil within him was written all over his face, in the furrow of his brow, and in the biting of his lip. Eventually he threw his arms in the air, with his usual sense of drama. “Well, we made a deal, didn’t we? I can’t just abandon you in the middle of your quest. You’d be lost without me.”

“How do you plan to get out of here?” Zoku asked, while sniffing the air. His tone was cool and detached, and he seemed unperturbed by her rejection of the role of Khensu.

Isabelle picked up her bow, mentally checking off how many arrows she had left in her quiver. “I’m working on it,” she said coolly. “We’ve brought down enough of the roof that the smoke should be visible to anyone nearby. Hopefully someone will notice it and come to investigate. If not, we’ll have to opt for plan B.”

“There’s a plan B?” Hyde asked.

“Of course,” Isabelle said. “If someone doesn’t come to help us, we will climb out ourselves.” Isabelle walked over to the wall of the pit and ran a hand over the earth, scratching at it with her fingers. A small shower of dirt and clay fell away. “We can dig foot holds into the walls of the pit,” she said. “The clay seems hard enough that it will support us, but soft enough to dig away. We’ll need a knife, or a spoon.” She held a hand out.

Hyde nodded and reluctantly trudged over to his pack to find a utensil. “I suppose I’m not going to be eating with them anytime soon. I may as well get some use out of them.”

“Let’s get going, then.” Isabelle swept a long, wet tangle of hair out of her face and tucked it behind her pointed ear—a feature, she reminded herself, that she had inherited from her mother. After having mused little on her ears for most of her life, they were now something of which she was becoming increasingly
proud. They made her something other than human, perhaps more than human. A vague thought about missing soap and warm water passed through her mind, but she was quick to dismiss it. No matter how weary and uncomfortable she now felt, Isabelle remembered how much she relished being out in the wild, making her own decisions. It was that freedom she clung to now.

Zoku swished his incorporeal tail, swirling the last of the dwindling smoke from the fire. “I’m glad to see you’re so…resourceful.” He had cocked his head to one side as he thought of the right word. “But perhaps I can assist you. I’m not restricted by earthly barriers after all.”

“Ah…I think help might’ve already found us,” Hyde said. He stretched out an arm, pointing to something beyond the roof of the pit.
Seeing is Believing

It took Isabelle a minute to figure out what he was referring to. Perched on one of the broken beams, a delicate nymph peered down at them, her large, curious eyes like bright embers piercing the haze.

“You’re making a lot of smoke,” the creature squeaked. “I told you I didn’t like smoke.”

“Meera!” Isabelle exclaimed. “You found us!”

Meera cautiously leaned over the edge of the beam and wrinkled her broad freckled nose. “I never lost you to begin with.”

Hyde stared up at Meera, squinting. “Is that the nymph you said you met in the forest?” he asked Isabelle incredulously. “Has she been following us?”

Isabelle slapped Hyde heartily on the back. “It appears she has.”

The little nymph flapped her emerald wings and gently drifted down to land on top of Hyde’s head, where the fur was still wet and matted between his tufted ears. She rubbed her face against his horns.

Hyde frowned and grumbled something inaudible at the nymph’s presence atop his head, but did nothing to displace her. He turned to address Isabelle. “No offence to your little friend here,” he gestured upwards with his eyes, “but how exactly is she going to help us? It’s going to take someone with a lot of strength to pull us out of this pit. Neither a ghost wolf nor a teeny tiny nymph fit the brief. The best either of them can do is go and find help.”

“I’m not a ghost,” Zoku grumbled, standing proud with his ears and tail erect. “And don’t you know anything about emerald nymphs?” He turned his golden eyes towards Meera.

“I know they’re not capable of hauling satyrs and humans out of pits,” said Hyde dismissively. “Look at her,” he pointed to the top of his head. “What can she do for us?”

“She can fly you out of here,” Zoku said in a flat monotone.

Hyde’s face contorted into a confused frown. Isabelle approached Hyde and looked up at Meera. The little nymph was humming absently while running her tiny brown fingers up and down Hyde’s horns. Every now and then she would stop to inspect one of the scratches she found there, and finger it appreciatively.
When it was clear that Meera wasn’t going to give Isabelle any further attention, Zoku took it upon himself to elaborate. “Emerald wood nymphs are much like ants in that their physical strength is disproportionate to their size. Meera should be able to carry you both out of this pit, if she’s willing.”

Isabelle stared at Meera in disbelief, watching her as she picked fleas from Hyde’s hair and tossed them to the wind. Isabelle found herself briefly shocked again by Hyde’s animal nature. Her cat used to get fleas, but they weren’t something that had plagued her or her father. Was she more like Hyde, or more like her father? Was she elven or human? The question of who she was remained to be answered.

For now, she focused on Meera. She looked so dainty and fragile. “Is that true, Meera? Could you help us out of here?”

Meera looked up and blinked. “Do you want to get away from the smoke that you made?” She tapped on Hyde’s forehead as she scolded them. “You should not have started a fire if you didn’t want smoke.”

Isabelle reached out a hand to the nymph and wiggled her fingers. “I’m sorry, Meera. We didn’t mean to upset you by starting the fire. We just needed to get someone’s attention so we could get out of this pit.” Remembering the statue inside the pyramid, and the power it had seemed to have over her, Isabelle felt momentarily sick.

Meera flapped her emerald wings and hopped over to Isabelle’s open palm. “Okay. But only if you say the magic word.”

“Please, Meera, could you help us. We’d really appreciate your assistance,” Isabelle replied solemnly. She marvelled at the tickling sensation of Meera’s bare, dainty feet on her hand.

Meera looked at Isabelle with what looked like a mixture of confusion and disgust. “None of those words were magic!” she exclaimed. She gestured for Isabelle to lift her hand closer to her face, and then Meera leaned in towards Isabelle and whispered towards her pointed ear: “The magic word is transmogrification.” She clapped her hands together and excitedly jumped up and down several times on Isabelle’s hand. “Now. Who goes first?” she squealed.

“Belle can go first,” Hyde said hurriedly, shuffling his hooves in the dirt and straw. “I’m going to have to see this to believe it,” he mumbled to himself.
“Goat man is afraid I’ll drop him,” Meera said, addressing Isabelle in a hushed tone. “He might be self-conscious about his jiggly belly.”

Zoku gave an uncharacteristic short, sharp bark of laughter.

“I am not afraid,” Hyde quickly spat, pressing a hand to his stomach. “And my belly is not jiggly.” Isabelle found herself remembering Hyde as she had first seen him, shirtless in her garden plot. He hadn’t seemed remotely self-conscious about his body then.

“Let’s just get going, shall we?” Zoku said. The spectral wolf flickered for a moment, then dematerialised.

Meera winged her way to Isabelle’s shoulder and crouched there, partially covered by hair.

“Okay, Meera,” Isabelle said, remembering her desperation to get out of there. She snatched up her backpack, bow and quiver and pulled them on, arranging the weight against her back. She was relieved to find that her clothing no longer felt damp. “Show us what you can do.”

“I can do loads of things!” Meera replied. And with that, she launched herself into the air, flapped around to Isabelle’s back and grabbed hold of the scruff of her tunic.

Isabelle felt a slight tug on her clothing and then, very slowly, her feet began to leave the ground as Meera pulled her gently upwards. Isabelle felt for her quiver to ensure none of the arrows could fall out, and then there was nothing else for her to do, other than observe what was happening. It was a strange sensation. Isabelle could barely feel the nymph’s grasp on her back, aside from the pull of her own body weight in her wet clothing. She worried her tunic might rip or that Meera would lose her grip. It would also be easy to bump her head on the busted roof. She could see her own arms and legs dangling before her helplessly as she was lifted inch by inch towards the ceiling.

As they reached the level of the roof, Isabelle saw that she had been right. Their enclosure had been a pit dug into the earth. The tunnel they had followed had taken them a short distance away from the pyramid, which loomed against the grey cloudy sky. The trees had been partially cleared around the pit, with a few stark grey stumps remaining. There were also several large stone slabs strewn about concealed by dirt and brush. Meera let her go next to one such slab, and Isabelle landed with her feet, knees and hands resting on the damp earth. She
stood up and brushed the soil from her knees and hands. Zoku was already waiting up there, sitting on his haunches and observing the proceedings as if nothing in the world could bother him.

“Thank you, Meera,” she said. “You’re amazing. There’s definitely more to you than meets the eye.” Isabelle found herself suddenly and immensely relieved of the panic she had been feeling—panic which, she realised, she had been working hard to repress while they were stuck in the pit. She would be happy to be back in the forest and on her way to the library, and hopefully, towards answers.

Meera flapped her wings, grinning from ear to ear with pride. “People are always surprised by my many wonderful gifts,” she chirped. “I don’t know why. I will do my amazing thing again for the goat man.”

She swiftly flew down into the pit again and in less than a minute she had Hyde dangling in the air next to Isabelle. He was considerably heavier than Isabelle and he was squirming. Meera had to grip him tightly with both hands scrunched in the fabric of his shirt between his shoulders.

Hyde found his feet on the earth and arched his back, causing it to crack loudly. “Okay, I’ll admit that was pretty impressive,” he said, tugging his shirt back into place. “I don’t know how I’ve never heard of nymphs having this ability.”

Meera fluttered back and forth in front of Hyde as rhythmic as a pendulum. “You probably never asked us about it,” she said matter-of-factly. “In case you’re wondering, I can also spell ‘gargantuan’ backwards, identify every type of tree in this forest with my eyes closed, and tell if someone is lying.”

“Good to know,” Hyde replied sarcastically.

“There! That was a lie.” Meera grinned with pride.

A chill wind whistled through the forest and into the clearing, whipping Isabelle’s tangled hair against her face. She swept it away, wishing she had a ribbon to tie it back with, then tucked her hands into her armpits to warm her icy fingertips. She was eager to get moving. “Let’s get away from this place,” Isabelle said, addressing Hyde. She turned to Zoku, who sat quietly staring at her, his tail curled around his feet. “What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“What I have always done,” Zoku replied cryptically. “I will leave you with one last piece of advice. Trust your instincts; see where they lead you. I will
be around, should you need me.” Then with a nod of his head, he vanished into thin air.

“That guy needs to learn some manners,” Hyde muttered under his breath. He picked up his bag and staff, which Meera had dropped next to him, and turned to the nymph. He twirled his staff and smiled, turning on a charm he had previously only reserved for Isabelle. “What about you, muscles?” he said to the nymph. “Are you going to hang around?”

Meera tilted her head quizzically and then came to land in front of Hyde, on a patch of moss growing on one of the stumps close to the pit. She looked closely into his eyes. “Hanging about,” she explained carefully, “is something that bats do, and bats are nasty, smelly creatures. I will go back to the trees and wait for Belle to find the hidden people.” Without another word she lifted off, spiralling up and over into the canopy of the nearby forest.

“Thank you, Meera!” Isabelle called after her. She watched her fly away until she was no longer visible amongst the foliage. The hidden people . . . What on earth did she meant by that?

“Okay, that’s enough excitement for one day,” Isabelle said, feeling a little awkward now that she was alone with Hyde again. “Know any shortcuts back to the river?”

Hyde visibly swelled with pride, straightening his back and stroking his grizzled chin. “Actually, Belle, I believe I do.” He licked his finger and held it aloft, in a gesture that was purely for show. “We should head this way,” he said confidently, pointing.

Isabelle shrugged and followed his lead, eager to put some distance between herself and the destiny that had been spelled out for her by the strange wolf.
One of These Things is Not Like the Other

By the time Isabelle and Hyde reached the river, the sun was beginning to sink beyond the tops of the trees. The misty rain had stopped, the sky had cleared, and the grass, shrubs, moss, trees and rocks glistened and shimmered in the evening light. Everything was still.

Isabelle felt weary from the brisk pace they had maintained since leaving the temple, but she was thankful for the distance they had managed to put between it and themselves. She cherished every step that got her further away from the horrors of that place. From Sirus and the intrusion of his voice inside her mind. From what the wolf had said about her duty to defeat him.

She and Hyde had walked most of the way in silence, both lost in their own thoughts. Isabelle was perturbed that Hyde wasn’t his usual chatty self and was relieved when he finally spoke up.

“I’m exhausted,” he said, stopping abruptly by the riverbank and letting his pack fall to the ground. He dropped to his knees by the river and cupped his hands, lowering himself towards the water for a drink. After splashing some water on his face and rubbing it clean, he stood and addressed Isabelle. “Let’s make camp; have something to eat. We just passed some tubers and wild mushrooms. I could make a very bland, but edible soup.”

Isabelle responded with a yawn. She gently unshouldered her belongings and nestled them between some rocks. Her clothes had almost dried, but they felt stiff and dirty. She would have liked to strip them off and wash them in the river, but with a quick glance at Hyde, she decided that wasn’t an option. Besides, if Meera and Zoku had been watching her, what other spying eyes were out there? She cast her eyes warily around the dense forest. Then she gasped: “Are those apple trees?” Pan’s Forest, in all its variety and richness, never ceased to amaze her.

Hyde swivelled around excitedly, water dripping from his horns. Following Isabelle’s pointed finger, he ran towards the trees and started fossicking about in the grass beneath them. After a brief moment, he held something aloft and cheered. “It’s an apple!” he squealed with glee. “Thank the Gods, we have real food, at last!”
He sunk his teeth into the flesh of the glossy red apple and ran back to Isabelle, chewing and slobbering, with apple juice running down his chin. Isabelle felt uncomfortable with how much he was enjoying it. The look of pleasure on his face bordered on obscene. He grabbed his pack and tugged free his blanket.

“Okay, Belle,” he said in between mouthfuls, his tone serious. “Take out your blanket. Whatever won’t fit in our packs, we’ll carry in the blankets.”

“I’m not going to use my blanket to hoard food,” Isabelle scoffed. Nevertheless, she followed Hyde to the grassy area beneath the gnarled branches of the trees and started feeling around for apples. Before long, she had a perfect red apple in her grasp and had taken a delicious bite. Her stomach groaned in appreciation. The apple was gone before she knew it. She tossed the core over her shoulder and reached for another.

Meanwhile, Hyde had laid his blanket flat on the ground, folding and tying knots until he had transformed it into a sling. He started filling it with fallen fruit. “Fine, but don’t come hassling me for apples when your supply runs out,” he said. “Walking is hungry work. It makes sense to stock up now, while we have the chance.”

Having collected the apples from the ground, Hyde clambered up one of the trees. For someone who had hooves instead of feet, he made it seem remarkably easy. He hauled himself from one branch to another with his strong arms, until he was perched casually amongst the foliage. He grinned eagerly while he plucked fresh apples and carefully placed them in his sling. Every now and then he would affectionately pat the precious bundle of fruit at his side as if checking to make sure it wasn’t all a dream.

Isabelle went to the river, knelt down before a clear-looking pool in between some rocks, and drank deeply of the cold water. The water settled in her stomach like a rock, and she felt suddenly consumed with tiredness. Everything she had gone through that day felt too real and overwhelming. She dawdled back to her pack and took out her blanket, thinking that perhaps Hyde was right about collecting the fruit. But once she had spread out her blanket, she could think only of lying down. She dragged her backpack beneath her head to serve as a pillow, and felt her mind drift as she listened to the chirping crickets.

It was then she noticed a faint glimmer where the forest met the clear ground alongside the river. At first she thought it was just the fading sunlight
glimting on the wet shrubbery, but there was something unusual about it that drew her curiosity. She remembered the strange shimmering enigma that she had seen the first night in the forest. She squinted her eyes. She rose reluctantly from the ground, slinging her bow and quiver over her shoulder for good measure, and headed over to the shimmering air, but the apparition was frustratingly elusive, like a rainbow.

Isabelle wondered if she was becoming delirious. She closed her eyes. She let herself feel the cool evening breeze against her skin, and listened to the sounds of the forest and her own breathing. She tried not to think about anything. She focused on slowly inhaling through her nose and exhaling from her mouth, making sure she breathed deeply and rhythmically.

She opened her eyes. A great rippling wall of energy glimmered before her. Isabelle could see the trees beyond it, but they were distorted and fuzzy. It was like staring at a heat wave that undulated with the breeze. Her skin prickled. There was warmth emanating from the portal.

Isabelle felt a tremor of uncertainty, but immediately pushed it aside. Somehow the whole situation seemed vaguely familiar. She concentrated on the warmth and the throbbing glow of the portal; she let it engulf her as she took one slow, deliberate step forward.

Isabelle stepped through the magical doorway and into a forest not unlike the one she had been standing in moments before. She was instantly struck with an overwhelming wave of nausea, which brought her to her hands and knees. Her stomach muscles hurt as she retched. She closed her eyes and tried not to panic.

Kneeling, Isabelle took a few deep breaths in an effort to settle her stomach and nerves and then swept her hair back out of her face. She scanned the area. She was kneeling on a dirt road with purple and yellow pansies growing at its edges. Surrounding her were tall, straight trees with white bark and mottled green foliage. There were no apple trees to be seen. No Hyde. Dappled sunlight filtered through the canopy, tickling her skin. It was no longer evening. Tentatively, Isabelle brushed the dirt off her knees and stood up.

For a moment she felt dizzy, but the sensation quickly passed. She lifted her head to gaze at the sky. It was blue. Not a soft blue, like the sky of her world. She’d spent many an afternoon lying in the grass at the back of her house, often
with a book in her hands, daydreaming while watching clouds drifting across the infinite blue. This sky was different. It was too vivid, too bright. In fact, it offended her eyes with its unnaturalness. It was surprising to her that a colour should bother her so much. It was so similar to her own sky, and yet, so different. A gaudy replica, she thought.

“Good morning,” came an unexpected voice from Isabelle’s right.

Startled, Isabelle jumped to confront the one who had spoken.

Standing on the dirt road beneath the shade of two arching trees was a short, petite young woman, who couldn’t have been more than fifteen or sixteen, Isabelle guessed. She had striking ebony hair styled in a bob, which framed her delicate features. Her skin was like porcelain, smooth and white. She wore a long, immaculate A-line dress of white silk that flattered her narrow waist and trim figure. Its puffy capped sleeves had tiny red jewels stitched onto them, which caught the sunlight and made them sparkle. They matched her ruby-red lips. She batted her long, dark eyelashes at Isabelle, her azure eyes full of curiosity. She didn’t seem quite real. Like the sky, there was something unnatural about her.

“Are you lost?” the woman asked Isabelle, tilting her head to one side to inspect her. “It’s unusual to find one such as yourself caught wandering the forest unaccompanied. You must have been out here a while for your skin is so tan! And your garb is rather unusual. How strange to be wearing men’s trousers and boots. Are you in disguise? Are you on the run from someone? I have heard of young maidens fleeing from disagreeable marriage arrangements. Though I have been extremely fortunate to find some measure of security beyond the castle walls, my situation is not ideal. Have you been shunned by a wicked stepmother, too? Or perhaps your rival is a witch? Oh dear! Do you find yourself cursed?”

The expression on the young woman’s pale face had become one of growing concern and anxiety as she spoke. Isabelle raised a hand to stop the stranger from working herself into a panic attack.

“It’s nothing like that,” Isabelle said, attempting to reassure the girl, though the truth was she was not sure what had happened to her. “I’m just a traveller…of sorts,” Isabelle found herself saying. “You needn’t be alarmed.” In truth, Isabelle herself was more than a little alarmed, but she felt the need to comfort the stranger, who seemed so much younger than herself, even though there were probably only a few years difference between them.
The young woman frowned in contemplation. “Like a performer?” she asked, taking in Isabelle’s strange attire and the bow and arrows at her back.

Isabelle pondered this assessment. Truth be told, she didn’t know what she was these days. Human, elf, Khensu, runaway, vagabond, explorer; it seemed she was all of these things and more. “Sure. A performer,” she replied to the innocent child. “I wander the realms telling stories and performing daring acts to amaze and delight.” She made a little flourish with her hands as if that would sell the lie.

The young woman seemed suitably impressed and grinned happily. “Oh my, you must live an exciting life, entertaining the nobles and such. I bet you have a wonderful stage name.”

“Of course. They call me . . . Brilliant Belle,” Isabelle blurted. She instantly winced. It wasn’t exactly an inventive or witty title. Hyde would have been appalled at her lack of imagination. Nevertheless, it seemed to satisfy the girl, who smiled wide, showing her perfectly white and even teeth.

“The Brilliant Belle. How wonderful!” she trilled. “I’m Snow.” She gave a practised curtsy, bending low and obsequiously, and exposing a thin, pale neck buried beneath her black hair. The action made the girl seem even more vulnerable.

“And why are you out here all alone, Snow?” Isabelle asked, noting the impracticality of the girl’s attire. Her heeled slippers were not appropriate for the dirt road. She carried no visible weapon. Her pale arms did show slight definition, indicating some physical strength, but she was entirely too skinny and had an overall air of fragility about her.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve come to know these woods rather intimately. And I’m rarely alone,” she said, rocking back on her heels with her hands behind her back, childishly. “My dear dwarf friends live nearby, and they watch out for me. But I like to step out every now and then, just in case…” Snow stared wistfully into the distance, down the road through the forest on which Isabelle and Snow were both standing.

“In case what?” Isabelle prompted, turning to look in the direction of Snow’s gaze. The road, bordered with pretty pansies, made its way through the forest of white trees, seemingly for eternity.

“Well, I’m hoping a dashing prince will ride by and spot me. He’ll whisk me away on his steed, we’ll be married, and live happily ever after.”
Isabelle cringed. The story sounded familiar. Was this all some kind of joke? Was Zoku trying to trick her? She looked at Snow and felt as if she was looking at herself, when she used to indulge in fairy tales and linger on the outskirts of their property, wishing for someone or something to save her from the repetition and boredom of her life.

Snow continued, oblivious to Isabelle’s reaction. Her tone was perfectly conversational as she laid out her life’s history to a complete stranger. “I used to live in a castle, you know. I was a princess. But when my father remarried, my stepmother didn’t want me getting in the way. She sent me out here. Some dwarves took pity on me and let me into their home. So, now I live with them and take care of all their domestic chores. They’ve been ever-so kind to me. Because of them I have a roof over my head, food in my belly, and company. Though admittedly, I do miss my father.”

Isabelle pictured her own father, sitting alone at home. He’d be worried sick. She felt a sharp pang of worry and pain thinking about him. Perhaps she should have told him she was leaving, instead of running away. She had acted like a child, rather than an adult, absconding while her father did the dishes, leaving nothing but a note. She realised then that she still had some growing-up to do.

“Surely your father worries about you, and wonders where you are?” Isabelle asked, still thinking of her own father.

Snow screwed up her face as if she’d never considered the question before. “I’m not sure,” she said. “To my knowledge, no one has ever come looking for me. There was a mirror that foretold everything. It said that I was the fairest in the land and would not long be married. I suppose my father knew my destiny, and so did not worry himself with my disappearance unduly.”

Isabelle paused in silence, thinking about this business of destiny. The wolf had laid out her supposed fate so casually, and with such authority, as if it were irrefutable. But what was fate to her? What power was it that determined who anyone was going to be? Isabelle’s mind was flooded with questions. She felt almost crushed by the weight of them. She thought of the storybooks at home, which laid out repetitive futures of peril and rescue, fathers and husbands, as if it all followed some predetermined plan. She desperately wanted to believe that her own story had not yet been written; that her destiny was her own.
Snow continued, growing more pensive as she spoke. “I used to be unhappy with my fate, but then again if my stepmother hadn’t sent me away, I’d never have learnt to cook, or swing an axe, or read, or speak the language of the dwarves.” Then she lowered her voice and whispered conspiratorially to Isabelle. “I can just imagine my nanny’s expression if she knew I could curse in dwarven-tongue!”

Staring off along the dirt path and into the uncanny forest, Isabelle reflected on Snow’s words. Maybe fate, even when it contradicted your will, could bring about new opportunities. Perhaps one of the tricks was knowing how to respond.

Snow suddenly clapped her hands as a thought came to mind. Her eyes went wide with excitement. “You should join us for lunch! The lads will be returning from the mines soon and I’ve got a big pot of rabbit stew waiting back home. You’re welcome to join us. You’re an entertainer—you can regale us with stories. Oh, please say you will.”

Isabelle hesitated. She hadn’t ruled out the possibility that all of this was a magical trick, or a dream, or some sort of hallucination. But she also remembered Zoku’s words about the ability of the Khensu to travel through worlds, and the things they could learn from doing so. Maybe this was an opportunity to discover something about the missing elves—about her mother. She also noted that she was extremely hungry. The apples she had eaten back in Pan’s Forest had not been nearly enough to satisfy the ache in her stomach, and the thought of a hot meal made her giddy. She thought of Hyde. He would never turn down such an appealing offer. Neither would she.
Isabelle assented and was surprised when Snow took her hand. The skin of Snow’s palm was surprisingly rough—Isabelle supposed from the work she had been doing for the dwarves. Snow led her into the forest, where the white bark of the trees struck Isabelle as both beautiful and deathly. Isabelle wondered if she was the naïve one, rather than this girl-woman whose hand she held. What was she doing wondering into an unknown forest with a stranger? However, in a short while, with time passing in a strangely amorphous fashion, they arrived at a small cottage in a clearing, with a brook running close by. There were vegetable gardens and flower boxes, and by dwarf standards the residence struck Isabelle as being generously sized. However, as Isabelle soon discovered, from a human perspective, the dimensions were significantly more cramped. Even Snow had to stoop to pass through the doorway, and Isabelle had to hunch her shoulders and crouch to enter the house.

She briefly thought of her flight through the tunnel from Sirus’s temple, inside which the oppressive force of the man seemed to be coming back to life. But this place was nothing like that, she assured herself. It was, in fact, quite homely.

Isabelle looked around the small kitchen and dining room in which she found herself. There was a vase of flowers on a bureau and frilly curtains at the windows. A cheerful fire was crackling in a hearth in a corner of the kitchen, with an iron pot hung above it. A long wooden table with seven chairs filled most of the dining area. All the furniture was crafted from pale wood, but everything was miniature. There was no way she would fit on one of the wooden chairs. It may as well have been made of kindling. Noting this, Isabelle opted to sit cross-legged on the wooden floor next to the dining table, pushing away the chairs on either side of her.

Snow busied herself in the kitchen ladling stew into small tin bowls and then ferrying them over to the table, three at a time. Isabelle watched as she deftly set the table. It was obvious that this was a practiced ritual. Each bowl was placed in perfect symmetry, aligned with the one next to it, and the cutlery was similarly arranged on neatly folded napkins. As part of the final touch, Snow arranged three
baskets of steaming bread rolls at even intervals along the table. The smell of the stew and warm bread was almost too much for Isabelle.

“I’ll be back promptly,” the young woman said, hurrying to the back of the house with her head and shoulders slightly stooped. When she emerged again, seven burly dwarves trailed behind her like a gaggle of goslings.

“My friends, please allow me to introduce the Brilliant Belle,” she extended her arm towards Isabelle, grinning broadly.

Isabelle felt she should stand but feared she would bump her head on the roof, so she just waved dumbly instead. It wasn’t exactly a convincing act for a would-be entertainer.

“And Isabelle, these are my dear friends.” Snow pointed at the creatures one by one as she introduced each dwarf. “Strength, Tenderness, Desire, Wisdom, Courage, Patience and Hope.”

A low chorus of mumbled greetings arose from the dwarves. Several of them shuffled and fidgeted uncomfortably, but one of them, Courage, stared at Isabelle scathingly and pointed a fat little finger at her in accusation.

“What are you peddling this time, witch?” he growled. “Restrictive laces? Cursed combs? An enchanted lipstick that burns its victim?”

“Courage,” Snow hissed in embarrassment, smoothing down her silk skirt. She dropped her gaze to her ruby slippers. “This isn’t like last time. Belle isn’t trying to sell me anything or offering any gifts. You’ve nothing to worry about.”

“Bah, nonsense,” spat the dwarf. “I’ve always got something to worry about. Forgive me, lass, but ye’ve not got the greatest track record when it comes to avoiding trouble. Yer far too trusting. And this witch is as wily as they come. She’d rip out yer heart with her bare hands by the looks of her.”

Isabelle was shocked. Dressed in her hunting clothes, carrying her bow, was this how she came across? She didn’t always feel so fierce. She thought of Zoku and the prophecy, which held that she would be the one to defeat Sirus, and wondered if there was any truth to it.

Snow turned to her, her expression conveying deep shame. “I’m so sorry. Admittedly, I have made a few bad choices when it comes to strangers. But you’re not… are you?” Her azure eyes grew wide and uncertain.

“Not what?” Isabelle asked.
“We want to know if yer that vain, angry, hateful witch that sought t’ cut out her rival’s heart!” Courage replied, stepping forward boldly, his thumbs tucked beneath the braces that were holding up his patchwork trousers.

“I’m not a witch, or anyone’s stepmother. I’m not even from these parts,” said Isabelle. “I just met this polite young woman on the road and she invited me for lunch.” The aroma of the meal that had been laid out on the table was almost too much. Her stomach groaned for food. But Isabelle forced herself to maintain eye contact with Courage, who was standing at the front of the group of dwarves assembled on the other side of the dining table.

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, the shortest of the group, Hope, spoke up. He ruffled his short brown hair and glanced at each of his brothers, bashfully.

“I think the lass is tellin’ the truth,” he said. “The queen wouldn’t waste her time comin’ here. She’d have offed the lass while they were alone in the woods. That’s the way it always plays out.”

Courage grunted. “She could’ve changed her tactics. Mayhap she aims to off us all, since it be us what keeps saving the lass.”

“I’m not trying to ‘off’ anyone!” Isabelle exclaimed in frustration. She didn’t like her character being called into question in such an aggressive way.

“That’s just what an evil witch would say!” Strength piped up.

“But so would an innocent traveller,” Tenderness interjected.

“Please, friends,” said Snow, stepping closer to Isabelle and wringing her hands nervously. “Let’s all calm down and forget this bit of silliness. We can all enjoy a nice lunch while it’s still hot. Isabelle might even regale us with a story if you behave.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Patience, shuffling over to the table to sit opposite Isabelle. His bushy grey beard brushed the china plate in front of him. He beamed at Isabelle, welcomingly, and passed her the nearest basket of bread rolls. Isabelle tried to restrain herself to a single roll in order not to appear greedy, but when she lifted it to her mouth and its buttery perfection dribbled down her chin, she could barely believe how delicious it tasted. She was soon reaching for another.

Once Patience had sat down, the rest of the dwarves followed suit, taking their usual spots at the long dining table. Snow sat next to Isabelle, on a low stool,
which she pulled in close to her new friend. With the extra guest, the table was cramped, and their elbows bumped together awkwardly.

“Courage, please come and sit down, would you?” Snow pleaded with the surly dwarf who was still standing, arms folded in the entryway to the kitchen.

Courage glowered at Isabelle for a long uncomfortable moment but finally took his seat at the head of the table, grumbling as he did so. “I’ll be watching you,” he mouthed at her.

For the most part, lunch was a civil affair. Several of the dwarves made a concerted effort to be friendly to their guest, and Courage seemed to relax as he heard her speak about her life. Hope was the one who asked Isabelle about her people and where she hailed from, eliciting stories about Pan’s Forest, her father, her mother, and her search for the lost elven community. Isabelle queried him about the mythical land of Emporia, but to no avail. Hope had never heard of such a place, nor had any of the other dwarves. Isabelle wasn’t yet ready to talk about the myth of the Khensu. With food in her stomach, she had been able to think a little, and she now assumed that she had indeed passed into this strange world by virtue of having the powers of a Khensu. But that did not mean she was prepared to accept the role for herself. She had not yet worked out her relationship with destiny. Her fate was something she wanted to own—more than ever, Isabelle reflected, after this strange meeting with the passive Snow. And yet, perhaps this business of travelling between worlds, which the wolf seemed to have opened up to her, could lead her to her mother.

The dwarf named Desire interrupted Isabelle’s thoughts. He wanted to examine her bow, after admiring its craftsmanship. Isabelle reluctantly slipped it off her shoulder and placed it in the dwarf’s sturdy hands.

“My, she’s a beauty, this one,” Desire cooed, cradling the bow as though it was made of glass. He lovingly turned it this way and that, inspecting it from every angle with a gleam in his eyes. “Look at those fine curves, the detailing at the grip, the balance of the upper and lower limbs…,” he trailed off, licking his lips.

Isabelle didn’t know what to say.

“Come now, brother, we’re in company,” Tenderness gently scolded. “Don’t be lusting after the young lady’s weapon while we’re eating. It ain’t proper.”
“What is it? Willow? Yew?” Desire continued. “Feels too flexible to be oak.”

“Willow,” Isabelle replied, focusing on the dwarf’s appreciation of her bow, rather than the strange ardour of his language, which reminded her of the way Hyde sometimes spoke.

“And I try to use silk for the bow string when I can get it. It costs a cart load, but it’s worth it,” she added. She did not tell him that she only knew this because her father would complain about the cost upon returning from the town. She did not tell her hosts that she had never herself been to the market, because her father had always insisted on her remaining home. She did not tell the dwarves that she had once been a prisoner, much like Snow, keeping house and being kept safe, while all the time pining for a different life to that which had been determined for her.

By the time they’d all eaten their fill of stew and bread—and of the miracle of butter cake that followed—and the dwarves had polished off a keg of ale between themselves, the miners began to slouch drowsily in their chairs and yawn.

“Well, lads, we’d better get back to work before the day’s snuck away from us,” said Strength, wiping his beard with the back of his hand and straightening his shirt. “There’s been entirely too much lollygaggin’ today. Belle, it was a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for entertaining us with your grand tales this afternoon. May fair weather follow you on your travels.” With that, the stocky dwarf rapped once on the table, then stood up and left through the front door. One by one the other dwarves followed suit, mumbling goodbyes to Isabelle and Snow before filing out the door.

When it was just the two women left, Isabelle stretched out her legs, which had grown sore from sitting, and massaged her thighs. Snow watched her as if she was doing something obscene, and Isabelle again noted the differences in their costumes. Isabelle returned her hands to the table and tapped against the hard wood.

“Great cake,” Isabelle said to break the awkward silence. “Back home we had apple trees. My father would make the best apple tart you’ve ever tasted.”
Suddenly Snow’s expression grew troubled. She bit her plump lip in consternation and made furtive glances at the kitchen cabinets as if something dangerous were lurking there. She began to nervously fiddle with her napkin.

“Did I say something wrong?” Isabelle asked.

“It’s… it’s nothing,” Snow stammered. Again, she glanced at the kitchen, then back at her plate.

“Are you sure?” Isabelle asked. She began to feel dread creeping into the pit of her stomach, where she had previously felt only a delicious fullness. She scolded herself for not being more cautious and alert to potential threats. What a foolish mistake! Swiftly, she retrieved her bow from under the table where she had stowed it, her eyes darting around the cramped kitchen.

Snow looked at Isabelle with wide, glistening, doe eyes and whispered, “I think I made a mistake.”

“What kind of mistake?” Isabelle asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

Snow stood up abruptly, scraping her stool against the floorboards, and hurried into the kitchen. She hesitantly opened one of the top cupboards of the cabinet and reached inside with both hands. When she turned to face Isabelle, she was gingerly cupping a glossy red and green apple in her hands.

“It’s an apple,” Isabelle said slowly, unsure.

“It’s a cursed apple,” Snow corrected. “At least I suspect it is.”

“What makes you think it’s cursed?” It looked like any other apple to Isabelle. She’d watched Hyde scoff several similar looking ones not so long ago.

Snow walked back to the table, still holding the fruit. Gently, she placed it on Isabelle’s empty plate and they both stared at it.

“I have a history with strangers and cursed objects.” Snow flushed with embarrassment, rosy blooms appearing on her pale cheeks. “Yesterday, while I was waiting for my prince, a starving beggar woman came hobbling along with a basket of oddities. She pleaded with me to buy something, anything, so she could purchase bread, a pair of shoes and a warm shawl to see her through the winter. She was all skin and bone and said she’d likely expire without them. What was I to do? I had to help her. I gave her my silver necklace to sell, and for my generosity she insisted I take an apple. She seemed so kindly and honest, I took it without thinking. But now I wonder if that might have been unwise.”
Snow choked back a sob and dabbed at her eyes with her delicate fingers. It was no small wonder that she kept getting tricked, naïve and kind-hearted as she was. The encounter sounded peculiar to Isabelle.

“Didn’t you wonder why a beggar would part with food, if she looked to be starving?” Isabelle asked, trying not to sound too judgemental.

With a sudden shudder of shame, Snow burst into tears. Isabelle rushed to comfort the crying girl, bumping her head on the ceiling as she stood. She rubbed her head and manoeuvred over to the other side of the dining table, throwing an arm around Snow’s shoulders. She was startled by how small and feeble the girl felt—as delicate as a bird. She bent over and whispered soothingly in Snow’s ear, “It’s alright, we all make mistakes. You were just trying to do the right thing, and that’s noble of you. And nothing came of it, anyway. You’re fine. Your friends are fine. Who knows, the apple might just be an apple.”

Snow snifflled and blinked the tears from her eyes. “Do you really think so?”

Isabelle glanced at the apple sceptically. “Sure,” she replied in her most reassuring voice.

Snow brightened a little and wiped her nose. She gave a small, earnest smile. “Well, maybe I should make a pie with it then, as a treat for you and the boys. I make wonderful pie, maybe as good as your father’s.” She beamed with pride and child-like eagerness.

“No, no,” Isabelle said quickly. Perhaps her pantomimes of reassurance were sending Snow the wrong message. “That’s quite all right. Why don’t we play it safe and bury it instead? Far out in the forest, just in case. Perhaps you’d be so kind as to walk me back to the road where you found me, and we’ll bury it there, together.”

For a split second, Snow looked like she might start crying again, but she just snifflled once, then nodded. Isabelle rose carefully and picked her way past the miniature furniture, stooping all the way to the front door. Snow followed close behind, clutching the apple against her breast.

Isabelle stretched in the sunshine and waited as Snow closed the door behind them and locked it, tucking the key under a pot plant beneath the window. The sun was as radiant as ever; the sky just as still and unnaturally blue. Isabelle noticed that she couldn’t hear any birds, or insects. It was unsettling.
Isabelle and Snow struck out into the pale forest and before long they had reached the dusty road. As they approached it, Isabelle grew increasingly uncertain. She realised she had no idea how portals worked. She had initially assumed that the shimmering portal would be right where she left it, and that she could just pass through it, the same way as she had before. However, she now worried that it might not be that easy. For all she knew the portal could materialise randomly, and anywhere in this alternate world. What if it had been a fluke that she’d seen the portal at all? It could take ages to spot another one. Maybe she was lost and stuck here for good.

Isabelle felt a stab of panic. She cursed herself for so carelessly stepping through the portal without knowing what it was or where it led. Why hadn’t she questioned Zoku about how portals worked? Because of that oversight, she might never see her home again. Or her father. Or Hyde. Her thoughts were racing. What if she never figured out what happened to her mother?

Calm down, she told herself. Panicking won’t help. You can figure this out. Isabelle consciously slowed her breathing and began surveying the landscape. She noted the familiar purple pansies, and the mossy pond that she and Snow had passed earlier that day upon leaving the road. Then she spotted the shimmering portal at the opposite side of the road, blurring the white-trunked trees behind it. It flickered and pulsed, energy bleeding from its edges. Somehow it seemed more tangible now, more distinct. Isabelle jogged towards it, feeling an instant flood of relief wash over her.

“Where are you going?” Snow called, anxiously. She held the apple out in front of her, away from her body, in cupped hands.

Isabelle turned back to her, noting her innocent features, the fragile paleness of her skin. She barely looked real. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever find it,” Isabelle explained.

“Find what?” Snow asked, with a delicate frown.

“The portal,” Isabelle gestured to the roiling mirage. “It will take me home. At least I think it will.”

Snow’s frown deepened, and she fidgeted with the ribbons on her dress. “I do hope you haven’t got heat stroke.”
Surprised, Isabelle looked back at the portal. Snow couldn’t see it. She was glad. Snow didn’t belong in her world. And Isabelle didn’t belong here. Yet here they were, both struggling against fate.

“Let’s bury that apple, shall we,” Isabelle said, turning away from the portal.

They dug a shallow hole under a nearby birch using their hands to scoop away the rich soil. Snow was careful not to sully her white dress, choosing to stoop rather than kneel on the ground while she worked. She gently plopped the apple into the hole as if it were some precious thing, then Isabelle piled dirt in on top of it, pressing the earth down to form a slight mound. Snow threw a handful of brush over it for good measure.

“That should do it,” Isabelle said, satisfied. She looked over at Snow, taking in her rosy cheeks, porcelain skin and innocent eyes. A troubling thought occurred to her. “You won’t come back for it, will you?” she asked hesitantly.

“Oh no,” Snow assured her. “Truth is, I probably wouldn’t be able to find it again, even if I tried.”

Isabelle smiled sadly at the girl. Her innocence was disarming, but it was also a curse. Had she herself been this innocent, living naively with her father for so long, allowing him to shelter her from the wider world? She’d always considered herself capable, wise, and practical. Yet she had never asked questions. She had never thought to wonder about her mother. Innocence, if that was what it was called, had never done her any favours.

Who knows how long she would have stayed locked away from the world if Hyde hadn’t come along to shake things up. It didn’t bear thinking about. Remembering Hyde, she realised that he would probably be worried about her by now. She needed to return.

Isabelle reached out and squeezed Snow’s shoulder encouragingly. She felt like an older sister, trying to protect her sibling. “Listen,” she said. “The world is wide and there are many possible futures out there. Don’t be afraid to choose one for yourself, okay.”

Snow flashed Isabelle her pretty smile and threw her arms around her in a tight embrace. They stood huddled beneath the tree for a long tender moment, before Snow pulled away.
They said their goodbyes, then Isabelle hefted her bow and quiver and strode towards the rippling portal. She took a deep breath and disappeared into it.
“You’re back!” Hyde cried, dropping an apple that was half way to his mouth. He left the warmth of the fireside beside which he had been pacing and ran over to Isabelle. For a moment, she thought he was going to embrace her just as Snow had, but he pulled up just short, seemingly embarrassed. This made Isabelle embarrassed too. “Don’t ever vanish like that again!” he blurted.

Isabelle noted that it had grown dark during her absence. The forest was alive with the familiar sound of insects and nocturnal creatures, combined with the comforting crackle of the fire and the gentle rippling of the river. Isabelle felt extraordinarily glad to be back.

“Is that cake I can smell on your breath?” Hyde asked incredulously, leaning in towards her and sniffing.

Isabelle gave a loud spontaneous bout of laughter. She grabbed Hyde and pulled him into a hearty embrace. She felt his arms encircle her too, after tangling a little with the bow slung across her back. He smelt of dirt and damp fur, but the warmth of him against her was as delicious as the food she had eaten in Snow’s home. She’d never really acknowledged just how starved for physical attention she was. She and her father had so rarely embraced. It was almost as if, Isabelle thought, he had always been a little frightened of her.

“The most unbelievable thing happened,” she said, pulling away from him to look into his mismatched eyes.

Hyde cocked his head. “You found a portal?”

“How did you know?” Isabelle mumbled.

“I’m just glad you’re back. The wolf is lousy company.”

Isabelle looked over Hyde’s shoulder to see Zoku sitting quietly at the fireside, obscured by smoke. His eyes were even more hypnotic in the firelight. Isabelle realised that she was not surprised to see him there. The wolf apparently had a preternatural knowledge of her and her whereabouts. It was something she had accepted, she realised, without having to think about it.

“How did you fare with your travels, Khensu?” Zoku asked.

Being called Khensu still bothered her, but she let it go. She approached the fireside and held her hands out to its warmth.
“I discovered that destiny,” she said, “is a concept that exists in more than just one world.”

Hyde joined her at the fire, looking from her to Zoku. She could sense his anticipation, and Zoku’s. They were waiting for her to say more, but she stood still, silently contemplating the flames. The role of the Khensu still felt alien to her, and fate seemed like something worth wrestling with rather than accepting. But what she knew, more than ever, was that she wanted to find her mother. It seemed to her that using the world-travelling powers of the Khensu might very well be the quickest path to doing that. Sure, Zoku had said that only Khensu had the power to travel between worlds, but what if the elves had found a way? Hyde had mentioned that they disappeared, suddenly and mysteriously, and that they were an ancient race whose magic ran deep. Perhaps travelling between worlds was a power they also had.

Isabelle had made up her mind, and she was ready to speak. “I’m not agreeing to put my whole life on hold and start playing the role of hero,” she began, looking squarely at the wolf and then at Hyde. “This has to work for me.”

Zoku and Hyde were silent.

“I will try and find Emporia, and Athrin, and I will do what needs to be done in regard to Sirus,” Isabelle continued. “But I will also find my mother and discover who I am. Being Khensu is largely about exploration for me. It has to be about freedom, not servitude.”

Zoku swished his tail along the ground without disturbing a single blade of grass or speck of dirt. Isabelle had the unnerving sense that he could read her mind. “As you wish,” he said.

“So,” Isabelle said, looking boldly and directly at Zoku, “how about you tell me a bit about this Athrin. Is he a human?”

“Yes and no. His mother was fae.”

“You mean, like a fairy creature?” Isabelle felt the power of Zoku’s hypnotic gaze as they spoke, but she refused to look away or be drawn into his sway.

“In a sense, yes. True fae may very well be extinct, but their blood-lines are far-reaching since they are prone to coupling with other species, especially humans. It is believed that elves and fairies are the descendants of fae.” Zoku paused and looked at her with greater intensity, making Isabelle self-conscious, as
if she was seeing herself through his eyes. “Athrin is much like you in that he looks relatively human. He is lean, with skin as pale as snow and delicate features. His hair is long, black and straight.” As if sensing her tension, Zoku looked into the fire, releasing her from his stare. “Of course, this was last I saw him, some hundred years ago. Perhaps he now has a tan, tattoos, and a shaved head. He may’ve even grown fat.”

Hyde, standing at Isabelle’s side, guffawed and then stopped when he realised no one else was laughing. Isabelle couldn’t tell if Zoku was attempting humour since his expression was so inscrutable. Sparks from a falling log in the fire rose up into the black sky.

“Can all fae travel between worlds?” Isabelle asked.

“Their magic runs deep,” Zoku said, returning his attention to Isabelle, “but no, to my knowledge they do not possess that power.”

“And what about the portals? Are Khensu really the only ones that can see them? And how many are there?”

“Indeed, the Khensu is the only one with the unique ability to see portals,” Zoku replied, rearranging his front paws. A swirl of smoke passed through his spectral form, obscuring him momentarily. “There are countless portals as there are countless worlds. But some portals are more difficult for a Khensu to spot than others. They seem to resonate at different frequencies. It is possible that you’ve passed many but are unaware of it.”

“You’ve been around a long time, haven’t you, Zoku?” Isabelle asked, tentatively. Then she looked hard into his eyes. “Do you know what happened to the elven population? Hyde says they vanished mysteriously, but he doesn’t know where to.”

“And I’m afraid neither do I,” Zoku replied with a regretful bow of his head. “That secret belongs to the elves, and no one else.”

Hyde broke the silence that followed. “Hey,” he said to Isabelle, jostling for her attention at her side, “I found a few things while you were gone. I can fry up some mushrooms and eggs.” He stopped and squinted across the fire at Zoku. “Forgive my bluntness, but do you even eat?”

The spectral wolf lowered himself to the ground, lying down and wrapping his tail neatly around his hind quarters. “No,” he answered.
“Great!” Hyde replied with immense cheer. “That’s one less mouth to feed.”

It was as if a spell had been broken, and all the tension around the fire had been released. Soon Isabelle was eating the meal that Hyde had prepared for them. It was nothing like the lavish meal that Snow had cooked, but Isabelle found herself enjoying a new peace both in herself and in Hyde’s and Zoku’s company. That feeling helped her nod off to sleep, wrapped in her blanket beneath the canopy of trees, where the heat from the fire still reached her. Everything, she thought, was going to be alright.
**Sweet Dreams**

Isabelle padded through the dark forest, oblivious to the chill of the earth beneath her bare feet and to the sharpness of rocks and sticks. She weaved her way between the silent pine trees that grew tall and dense, forcing her along a narrow path. The smell of them was lush in her nostrils. Every now and then she would brush past a tree branch and expect to feel the scratch of the bark against her skin, but she felt nothing.

A voice called to her through the darkness. It was the soothing, gentle voice of a woman. It was vaguely familiar. She trusted it, and let it lead her onwards through the trees.

Isabelle slowed her pace as she entered a small clearing covered in a blanket of pine needles and littered with boulders. From the trees, hundreds of black crows watched silently, their beady eyes scrutinising her every step. A low fog rolled in around her. In the soft moonlight the boulders resembled beasts, their backs rising from the mist. Everything glistened.

She approached the largest of the boulders and ran her hand along its surface. Now she could feel. It was icy cold and slick with frost. Her fingers passed over a deep scar in the rock, partially covered by moss. Isabelle squinted in the dim moonlight. The stone had been chiselled in such a way as to form the body of a hulking creature. The carvings were teeth and claws, ears and nose. *It’s a bear*, Isabelle realised, trailing her fingers over the snout of the stone beast.

The silent grey statue seemed alive somehow. It had such an imposing mass and stood like a sentinel watching over the clearing. Isabelle brought her face close to its snout. Its deep-set eyes bore holes into her, as if trying desperately to communicate something. *What are you guarding?* Isabelle wondered. She turned to look in the direction the bear was facing.

Through the fog, a shimmering round portal materialised against the tree line. Its edges were indiscernible as it flickered and melded with the mist. At its centre was a figure. Isabelle had to squint to make out the silhouette, faint as it was amidst the hazy portal.

Isabelle took a step towards it…

“Wake up,” said the wolf.
Isabelle sat up abruptly, startled by the voice. Her blanket tumbled down around her waist. Bright morning sun was bursting through the canopy, causing slashes of light to penetrate the dense forest. Hyde’s bed of leaves and blankets was empty. Zoku, though, was standing in a nearby shaft of light, his glimmering eyes focused intently on Isabelle.

“Good morning,” he said, padding towards her soundlessly.

Isabelle stretched her achy body and combed her fingers through her bed-hair. Birds chattered in the trees above her and rustled about busily in the foliage, giving Isabelle the impression that she’d overslept. She was still exhausted from the events of the day before.

“Good morning,” she replied, her voice hoarse. “I was having the most vivid dream.”

Zoku blinked back at her. “Were you?” he asked serenely.

“I could see a portal.”

“Did anything look familiar?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Perhaps you noticed a distinctive landmark? What kind of forest was it?”

Again, Isabelle had the disconcerting sense that Zoku could read her mind.

“There was a bear carved out of rock,” she said and stopped. “But how could you know that? You’re hiding something.” She squinted at Zoku. “I can see right through you, Zoku. Literally. Now tell me what’s going on.”

Zoku remained silent for a moment as he considered his response. After a tense minute he sat down and casually replied: “I was dream walking.”

Isabelle stared blankly back at him, so he continued. “As I’ve told you, I am neither of this world nor any other, but somewhere in between. I can walk between the waking world and your dreams just as easily as I walk between the trees in this forest.” He paused. “I saw the bear and the portal, as you did. It is the portal to Emporia.”

Isabelle gasped. An alarming thought occurred to her. “Did you put that dream in my head?” she asked. “I’ve never seen that place. I couldn’t have dreamt about a place I’ve never been.”

The wolf let out a low rumbling laugh. “I’m sure you’ve had many dreams about places to which you’ve never been,” he said. “Who’s to say some of them aren’t real places? You are right, however, in that this particular dream was not a coincidence. But I did not force it upon you.”
Isabelle disentangled herself from her blanket and walked over to the river to splash some icy water on her face. The shock of the cold was exactly what she needed. It assured her that she was awake and made her feel alert. She stood and turned back to face Zoku, who had followed her in his ghostly way. The campfire, she saw, was a pile of ash and charcoal, though the log that she and Hyde had shared as they ate their dinner the night before was still in its place. They had sat there, with their knees touching.

“The portal wasn’t the only thing I dreamt about last night,” she said in a low voice, turning to inspect the stones on the river bank.

“I’m aware of that,” Zoku replied nonchalantly.

Isabelle blushed. “So, you saw… other stuff?”

“I assure you, Khensu, I didn’t pay any attention to the other dreams. And if you are worried that I would share your dreams with anyone—”

At that precise moment Hyde came strolling up to the camp, bare-chested, his arms filled with sticks and branches for the campfire. His large ears were pricked up. “Were you two talking about me? I won’t be offended if you were. I’m a fascinating individual.” He dumped the sticks next to the ashen remains of yesterday’s fire and started building a new one. Isabelle could see the muscles and sinews on his back and shoulders working as he moved. She glanced at Zoku, but he was also watching Hyde at work.

Never one for enjoying silence, Hyde looked up at his two mute companions. “I was thinking maybe today we could take the morning to relax and enjoy the fruits of nature.” He grinned and took an apple from a tin plate piled with fruit that he’d collected the day before. Crouching on his haunches by the unlit fire, he took a bite and mumbled, “I could stew these.”

Isabelle shook her head. “No,” she said, perhaps more firmly than she intended. Hyde stood, still chewing his apple, and looked at her in confusion.

“I had a dream last night,” she told him. “I saw the portal to Emporia. I know where Athrin is.” There was a bitterness in her voice, which she saw that Hyde picked up on. He stopped chewing and lowered the apple from his mouth. But how could she explain that it was all too soon. Her plan was to explore worlds. The plan was to find her mother first. She felt as if Zoku had planted the dream in her head and was forcing her hand.
“How do you know it was anything more than a dream?” Hyde asked gently. Then he bent down and busied himself with the fire. “I mean, I dreamt that the river had turned to honey and the fish were fuzzy like bumblebees. I tried to drink from it and all my teeth fell out.” He paused from his work with the flint stone and looked up at her. “Dreams don’t mean anything, Belle.”

“This one does,” Zoku responded firmly. “Past Khensu are calling to Isabelle. They’re trying to show her the way.”

Hyde turned his attention to Zoku and then struck the flint stone until fire flared and caught on the kindling.

“Well, I’m trying to show Isabelle the way to the Great Library,” Hyde said, standing and wiping his hands on his hairy chest. “And I intend to do just that. Let’s take a long breakfast then get going. What do you say, Belle?”

Both Hyde and Zoku looked at her expectantly.

Isabelle felt as if she had been caught in a trap. Just last night she had felt so sure of herself, so clever, but now that confidence was quickly eroding. She was daunted by the branching path before her. She needed to take control of the situation somehow. She needed to buy some time for herself before fate—or Zoku, or Hyde—took charge of everything.
After a restorative morning meal of stewed fruit and porridge, using the last handful of oats that she had brought from home, Isabelle felt no more sure of herself than she had on an empty stomach. After Hyde’s speech and observing Isabelle’s reluctance, Zoku had promptly disappeared, leaving her to wrestle with the decision of how to proceed. Eating breakfast with Hyde in front of a small but cozy fire, with the rising sun also warming them in the clearing next to the river, she’d tried to decide who to follow, swinging back and forth between commitment to the role of Khensu, and her desire to find the library and her mother. She supposed that following the role of Khensu was the adult thing to do, while chasing the fantasy of her mother and the mysterious elves somehow seemed childish. She felt guilty for even weighing the two options, then annoyed that she was being made to choose at all. Neither option seemed adequate. She needed a third option, one that allowed her to recapture the sense of freedom and optimism that she’d felt upon leaving home.

Fortunately, that third option presented itself in the form of a nymph with emerald wings and wide curious eyes. Meera fluttered down from the treetops and landed gracefully atop Hyde’s head, just as he was licking the last of the fruit from his bowl.

With a start, he jumped up off the log he was sitting on and frantically swatted at his head. He was lucky not to unbalance and fall into the nearby river. “What is that?” he shrieked. “Is it a bat? Please tell me it’s not a bat.”

Isabelle, who was sitting on the ground opposite Hyde, laughed at his outburst and Meera’s role in it. She found herself comforted to know that the little nymph had been watching over her. Unlike Zoku’s watchful eye, which always made her feel uncomfortable, Meera’s presence was reassuring. Meera, Isabelle felt, was on her side.

Meera effortlessly propelled herself up and away from Hyde’s frenzied attack, flying over to Isabelle. She carefully avoided the smoke from the dwindling campfire. “I’m not a bat,” she informed Hyde indignantly, her orange eyes flaring as she looked back at him. “How would you like it if I called you a horse?”
Hyde immediately relaxed and lowered his arms. He sat back down on the log and picked up his bowl, which he’d dropped by the fire during his panic. He shrugged and resumed licking the bowl, ignoring the dirt that had stuck to it.

“Actually, I’d take it as compliment since they have huge —”

“You’ve followed us quite a way,” Isabelle hurriedly said to Meera, cutting Hyde off before things got awkward.

“Have I followed you or have you followed me?” Meera replied cryptically, settling on a tall rock by the river that was lit up by sunlight and squinting her large amber eyes at Isabelle. Before anyone could answer, she continued, “Your wolfy keeps blinking in and out. He’s hard to track. Where is he now?”

In truth, Isabelle wasn’t really sure where Zoku went when he vanished. Considering how much he liked to lecture her about her destiny, he explained very little about himself. “He’s somewhere,” Isabelle said, throwing up her arms, “waiting for me to go looking for a bear statue.” She hoped that was enough of an explanation.

Meera wrinkled her nose in puzzlement. “A bare statue? A statue with no clothes on?” she queried.

“No, bear, like the animal. Four legs, snout, teeth.”

Meera sat down on the rock, daintily folding her legs and wings. “Why do you want to find a bear with four legs, snout and teeth?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” Isabelle sighed not wanting to admit to Meera, or herself, that she was caught up in a complicated situation from which she could see no escape. “Zoku has shown me that there’s something I need to do.”

Meera blinked and fanned her delicate wings, which revealed themselves as transparent and stunning beautiful in the sunlight that now shone through them. Isabelle found herself staring. “That’s silly,” Meera said, interrupting Isabelle’s reverie. “Only you can know what you need.”

“Try telling him that,” Isabelle snorted.

“If it’s clarity you seek, there is an Elder Tree nearby.”

“An Elder Tree?” The nymph’s conversation was so nimble and shifting that Isabelle had trouble keeping up.

“Yes. Big tree, very old. Its roots run deep and connect with all things, making it a good spot for reflection. Many people have sat beneath its shade and
asked for guidance. It positively sings with energy.” Meera flapped her wings and hovered a foot above the granite rock. She looked into Isabelle’s eyes. “I could show you.”

Up until now Hyde had sat quietly, seemingly preoccupied. Now he piped up, tossing his bowl in the dirt. “Tree hugging?” he scoffed. “We don’t have time for that. We’ve got to get to the library. We lost a whole day yesterday.”

Isabelle, though, held Meera’s gaze. She had wanted an excuse not to hurry off to find Athrin. Maybe this was it? She certainly felt like she could use some time to look inward and figure out what she truly wanted.

“You originally wanted to spend the day relaxing,” she reminded Hyde, finally turning her attention to him. “Sitting quietly under a magical tree sounds pretty peaceful, don’t you think?”

“Hmm,” Hyde hummed and scratched at his grizzled chin, dislodging dried porridge and dirt. He gazed off into the trees. “Alright,” he said, tossing the water from his mug onto the fire. “Let’s do it.”

Flying low enough that Isabelle and Hyde could follow her, Meera led the way to the Elder Tree. The journey was a pleasant one, with the sky being brilliantly clear, and the air crisp. After about an hour of ducking and weaving through the shadowy forest, the trees began to thin out, allowing the sun to reach them. Isabelle enjoyed its warmth and found herself walking with her face tilted upwards to catch the sunlight. This meant that she tripped on several occasions, much to Hyde’s amusement, but she didn’t care. She felt as if the sun was cleansing her of the day before and of the darkness of Sirus’s temple. She did not know what tomorrow would bring, but right now she felt as if there was hope.

“We’re here,” Meera said, fluttering to the ground beneath a towering elm. The tree was massive, with strong twisted branches that sprawled out in every direction and a tall solid trunk that leaned slightly towards the west.

Isabelle peered up at the luminous green foliage. The sunlight caught in the leaves, giving the appearance of a halo circling the treetop. “It’s lovely,” she breathed, marvelling at the age and endurance of the mighty tree.

Then she noticed that there were many carvings scratched into its trunk. Some Isabelle understood as names or phrases; others were unfamiliar to her. She
stepped forward, taking care not to tread near Meera, and reached out a hand, gently tracing the words with her fingers.

“You’re not the first to seek guidance from the Elder Tree,” Meera said, as if reading her mind. “Many have laid out their hopes, desires, and fears and asked the universe for insight. The tree knows how to unlock the secrets of wisdom.”

“But how?” Isabelle asked, crouching down to be closer to Meera. “Is it... somehow alive?”

“Of course it is,” Meera replied with a snort. She wrinkled her broad freckled nose. “Really, Belle, I thought you were brighter than this.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Isabelle responded, feeling her cheeks flush. She didn’t want Meera to think her foolish. “I know it’s a living organism, but is it sentient? When all’s said and done, isn’t it just a tree?”

“It’s no more *just* a tree, than you are *just* a woman,” the little nymph said. “It is many things, just like you are many things.”

Isabelle conceded with a nod of her head. She had to start looking beyond the surface of things.

Isabelle glanced over at Hyde and spotted him relieving himself on a neighbouring tree. She flushed deeply and, flustered, focused her attention back on Meera. “Will you show me what to do?”

“Yes. But do you need some time to rest? Walking seems so tedious compared to flying.”

Isabelle’s feet and shoulders were still aching from yesterday, and her pack was heavier today on account of all the fruit Hyde had loaded into it. Still, she figured some meditation under a shady tree would likely be the best thing to ease the pain in her muscles. “I’m ready if the tree’s ready,” she replied.

“The tree is always ready,” Meera asserted. She spun up into the air, then flapped her way up onto a low hanging branch, where she crouched on all fours, peering down at Isabelle. With her dark skin and mottled green leaf dress she melded with the tree until she was almost invisible. “Make yourself comfy. Clear your head-space of all clouds and thunder and focus on your breathing. Let the energy flow through you.”

Isabelle took a seat under the ancient elm. She picked a mossy patch and sat cross-legged with her hands resting on her knees. With one last glance at
Hyde, who was now standing opposite, arms folded, she closed her eyes and tried not to think about him watching her.

The dappled sunlight that shone through the trees flickered on her inner eyelids, causing blotches of reds and oranges to appear. A cool breeze tickled her skin. She listened to the drone of insects and frogs, and the twittering of the birds that stalked them. It was sometimes easy to forget that the forest was busy with inhabitants of all shapes and sizes, each with their own quests. Listening to them now, under the shade of the elm, Isabelle surrendered herself to Pan’s Forest. After a while she let everything outside of herself slip away and concentrated on the steady rhythm of her breathing. She felt a great calm fill her body. Her muscles relaxed and her mind tipped back into nothingness.

Meera appeared before her. Isabelle could see her in her mind’s eye, sitting far off in the distance. When she spoke, it was with a remote echo.

“Imagine you’re a star, burning with hot white light. It fills you up. It radiates from your body,” she said. “Now, come back to the ground. Feel the connection between your legs and the ground. Feel the trunk of the tree against your head, neck and back. Melt into it. The roots of the elm spread out beneath you, deep in the earth. Follow them.”

Isabelle listened to Meera’s gentle voice and advice, even though some of what she was saying didn’t really make sense to her. She pictured the roots of the tree as an extension of herself, extending out in every direction. She became aware of the many generations the tree had seen come and go, of all the people who had visited it, and the interconnectedness of all things. The roots drank from the same underground river as the neighbouring plants. Animals that died dissolved into the earth and became nutrients for the elm. The birds that nested in its branches carried seeds to the distant ends of the world, creating new saplings. The elm was an integral part of the forest and the relationship it had with all life was a complex one, with many diverging paths.

Suddenly, an image flashed before Isabelle. A woman dressed in a simple green dress stood in a forest of autumn trees. Orange-gold leaves were scattered all around her, forming a thick, warm carpet, pierced by shafts of sunlight. As the woman raised her bowed head, her long dark hair fell around her face and neck. Isabelle recognised her as an elf. Her ears were tapered, far more so than Isabelle’s, and her stunning mauve eyes were flecked with gold and silver.
The woman stared serenely at Isabelle. With exquisite grace, she slowly extended her right arm and pointed an elegant finger at Isabelle, who blinked back at the woman, unsure what she was trying to communicate. It took her a moment to realise that the elf-woman wasn’t pointing at her, but at something behind her. Isabelle turned to look.

A thin young man with shaggy black hair stood naked in the distant depths of the forest. His pale skin shone through the darkness of the woods that surrounded him. The trees were huddled close together, making him seem small and vulnerable in their midst. Isabelle couldn’t see his face clearly in the dim light, but something about him made her feel deeply sad. She had never seen someone who looked so alone.

The elf woman drew close behind Isabelle and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. She smelled of lilac and honey. The touch and smell of her was uncannily familiar. Isabelle turned to look at the woman’s face.

“Help him find his way back home, Isabelle,” the woman breathed. “He is so terribly lost. Fate can be cruel to those without hope.”

Isabelle recognised that the woman was speaking in a language that was different from her own, but she had no trouble understanding what was being said.

“And Sirus—he must be stopped.”

Isabelle’s chest tightened with uncertainty and fear. Her mission had suddenly become real, and she didn’t know if she was capable of doing any of the things required of her. Perhaps it was one of the reasons she resisted Zoku and the prophecy. She found she didn’t need to speak. The elven woman knew all her doubts.

“You are capable of more than you know,” she said in her soothing voice. “The Great Library will help you find all that you seek, though you must remember to read between the lines.”

Isabelle now recognised the voice. Her heart caught in her chest. “Where are you?” Isabelle asked wordlessly, looking into her mother’s eyes.

Her mother smiled back at her, immense kindness mingled with sadness lighting her violet eyes. “I will be waiting,” she replied.
Rest for the Weary

Athrin sat slumped in an iron chair, a bottle of sickly blue liquor in one hand, the other hand resting on his knee. He stared dully at the front door of his austere house, waiting.

He couldn’t remember how long he’d been in the world of the un-dying. He had wanted a world without killing—dreamed of it. But, while he did not miss violence and the many traumas of its aftermath, it seemed that without the presence of death, life just dragged on and on. Time had no meaning in such a world. Nothing was of any significance. The city he had settled in was full of people of all ages. It was unclear how they had come into being. No children were born, and there was no religion or science to explain the creation of human life. A time before or after life could not be imagined. People just existed, and no one questioned it, much less bowed down in worship.

With a slow steady hand, Athrin raised the bottle to his lips and took a generous swig. His mind and body felt numb. The only way he had remained sane in such a place was by keeping himself in a perpetual state of intoxication and allowing the numbness to consume him. He had shut himself away in a tiny dull box of a house, making no effort to find friends or someone to love. He’d already found love and raised a family, in another life—a life he’d left behind. When he’d first arrived in Emporia, Athrin had often thought about his wife and son, wondering how they were, if they missed him, if they had moved on with their lives. But these moments were met with overwhelming guilt and grief, and the realisation that his family would be dead and gone by the time he made it home—if he made it home. The emotions washed over him like a flood, and so he locked his memories away in a dark corner of his mind and tried to forget about them. He doubted he was capable of feeling anything anymore.

How proud he had been, he remembered, when Zoku found him and delivered the news that he was the new Khensu. His father had given him the gift of the sword, and Athrin had believed that his destiny was simply unfolding as it naturally should. He was a man and a warrior. He would save the world. He would be a hero. Now, here he was, in the land of eternal life, wanting only his own death. To be alive forever, alone, with so much blood on his hands, was too much to bear.
Athrin’s eyelids fluttered as he gazed at the front door of his house. No one ever came through it. Provisions were deposited in a drop box outside every dwelling in Emporia, so Athrin very rarely left the house or spoke to anyone. All of the meals consisted of small bland cubes of concentrated protein, vitamins and minerals, which were produced in a factory somewhere on the edge of town. Water came in plastic pouches and had a strange metallic taste. The liquor had to be requested using a tablet attached to the wall by the door, as did other luxuries. Aside from these meagre rations, Athrin survived on little else.

Despite the isolation and emptiness he felt, Athrin couldn’t deny that something was beginning to stir within him. He had started dreaming again; something he hadn’t done since coming to Emporia. At first his dreams showed him slicing through hordes of men that came at him, sword whistling through the air with each arc. He chopped and stabbed like a mad man. There was no grace in it. He didn’t even glance at the faces of his enemies, only at the point of his sword and the flesh that it struck. Every now and then warm blood splattered against his face or trickled down his arm. No doubt some of the blood was his own, but he felt no pain from his injuries. He felt nothing at all.

Next came the nightmarish visions of the temple and Sirus. He had seen the tyrant standing proud beside a pile of burning bodies, holding the Khensu’s sword aloft—the one Athrin’s own father had given him—with blood glistening on its blade. He saw the pits beside the temple filled with young creatures of magical alignment. On those nights he had awoken in a cold sweat and shaking.

But in the past few days, the dreams were different. He kept seeing an armoured woman with flowing black hair and piercing violet eyes, standing proudly in a forest, bow in hand. She emitted a faint glow that surrounded her entire body. Athrin found it soothing. In his dreams he would run towards the mysterious figure, but he could never seem to get any closer to her. She was a beacon of light in the dark forest that surrounded her.

Athrin let his eyelids droop. For the first time in a long time he thought he felt the stirrings of something he still recognised. Hope. The possibility of it snagged in his body, making him feel interest and longing—for the life he had left behind, for Pan’s Forest—and then it was gone. He thought of the wars and battles he had fought—and of the fight that still awaited him should the girl, the Khensu spoken about in prophecy, finally come for him. He took another swig
from the bottle and closed his eyes, surrendering to the darkness that enveloped him. How much more killing must be done? Was that all the world had in store for him as a man?
Surrender

The moment she blinked out of her trance, Isabelle spotted the rippling portal in front of the trees opposite the giant Elder Tree under which she was sitting. At first she thought it was just her eyes adjusting to the light, but then she became aware of an energy emanating from it in steady waves, and a low, persistent hum in her ears. Her skin prickled. This was no trick of the light. Still stunned by the vision of her mother, all she could think of was reaching her. Perhaps the portal was the way.

She looked urgently around and found Hyde, slouched beneath a nearby tree, absently whittling the end of his staff with a knife. Meera was nowhere to be seen. When Hyde noticed she was awake, he stopped what he was doing and scrambled over to her through a thick layer of leaves. “Do you feel enlightened?” he asked cheerily, crouching by her side.

Isabelle reached out and clamped a hand onto Hyde’s shoulder, turning him around to face the shimmering image. “There’s another portal,” she whispered.

Hyde turned and squinted. “I don’t see anything,” he replied.

“What do you mean? It’s like a mirage, or a heat wave. Just there.” Isabelle pointed at the shimmering image, which blurred the forest just behind it.

“If you say so,” Hyde replied. He scratched his chest through his shirt and yawned. Then he stood up. “Are you going to go through it?” He held out his hands and helped Isabelle to her feet.

She took Hyde’s hand and led him towards the mystical doorway. Isabelle could feel warmth radiating from the portal along with a faint blue light. Her heart began to hammer in her chest with nervous excitement, pulsing rhythmically in unison with the energy from the portal.

“Can you feel that?” Isabelle asked her companion eagerly. She so badly wanted to share the thrill of her discovery with him.

Hyde stood rigid and quiet, his eyes flicking left to right, then left again.

“What should I be feeling?” he said after a moment.

“It’s warm in this spot. See?” Isabelle took his hand and moved it towards the rippling wall of warmth, letting their entwined fingers brush the soft edges of
the portal. A tingling sensation shot through her arm and she looked wide-eyed at
Hyde, hoping he felt it too. But he only shook his head.

“Sorry, Belle, but I’m not seeing or feeling anything unusual,” Hyde said.
Isabelle looked deep into his mismatching eyes but couldn’t tell if he was
disappointed.

Isabelle let go of his rough, warm hand and sighed, surprised at how
devastated she felt. Maybe the Khensu really was the only one who could access
other worlds. Which meant she would have to go it alone.

She had to go while she could—before the portal disappeared. She moved
urgently towards her pack, bow and quiver, shouldering them after quickly
checking her supplies. Satisfied that she had enough food and water, she turned to
Hyde. “You’ll stay safe, won’t you?"

Hyde gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Please, safety is my middle
name. How do you think I’ve stayed alive all these years, out here alone?”

“Pure luck?” Isabelle speculated with a raised eyebrow. Then with a wave
farewell, she strode through the rippling doorway and was swallowed by blue
light.

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The nausea this time was not nearly as bad, though the disorientation of crossing
worlds again brought her to her knees. Isabelle blinked against the startling glare
of the sun and its reflection on the hard and shiny ground on which she found
herself. Lifting an arm to shield her face, she found herself atop a rocky cliff
overlooking a magnificent emerald sea, which sparkled under the bright sun,
mirroring the cloudless sky. Far off in the distance she could see a ship perched
on the ocean, its sails coloured black and white. The scene was like something out
of a picture book. She would not have believed it was real, but there was a
bracing wind that carried the pleasant aroma of salt and surf. It tousled her hair,
blowing the long locks forward to tumble around her neck and shoulders like
tendrils of seaweed.

Isabelle walked to the edge of the outcrop and marvelled at the view.
She’d never seen the ocean before. Everything about it was breathtaking: the
rhythmic swell of waves crashing on the shore below, the distant cacophony of
seagulls over the sea, and the light sea spray that tickled her face and neck even up here.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, tilting her face towards the sun and letting the warmth and scents wash over her. How’d she’d missed the sunshine! In the summer her skin browned to a creamy caramel colour and brought out coppery highlights in her dark hair. At the moment, however, she leant towards the pasty side. And it was not the fair, glowing complexion of Snow, but a blotchy sun-deprived pallor that came from trudging through a thick forest with little rest or proper nutrition.

Isabelle exhaled and when she opened her eyes, she saw that there was a goat track that seemed to lead down to the sand below. How she longed to get closer to the power of the waves.

Isabelle made her way down the track, sometimes crouching and grabbing at tufts of grass to prevent herself from toppling down the steep cliff. When she reached the level ground of the beach, her legs felt like jelly. She dropped her pack, bow and quiver, and started walking towards the surge and suck of the crashing waves. There was a line of rock-pools and rivulets of seawater crossing the beach, and it was before one of those pools that Isabelle suddenly stopped. In the shallow water was a woman with pearly-white skin and long turquoise hair that pooled around her on the still surface of the water. Her chest was scaled, like a fish. The glittering silver scales rose up around her breasts before thinning out to meet her pale skin. Her eyes were a stormy grey-blue. She was lolling on her back, staring directly at Isabelle, who felt as if she had caught the woman taking a bath. Isabelle became aware of just how dirty she was. She was covered in grime from days spent trekking through the forest, and her hair hadn’t been properly washed or combed since leaving home.

“Are you lost?” asked the scaled woman, unperturbed by being watched.

Isabelle continued to examine the woman with unbridled curiosity. She was naked except for a woven cord necklace, which featured a small seashell pendant nestled snugly between her scaled breasts. Isabelle thought of her own breasts, which were much smaller. Her frame was generally less curvy. She had, she realised, never seen another naked woman before.

Then Isabelle realised that the woman had a tail instead of legs. Partially visible through the clear water, it was the same colour as the silvery scales on her
upper body, but with a tinge of pink. Every now and then it would breach the surface of the pool and cause little splashes. The woman’s tail reminded Isabelle of Hyde, with his furry legs and hooved feet.

“If you’re interested, my name’s Reu.” The mermaid made slow easy circles with her arms, reclining effortlessly on her back.

“Ah,” Isabelle began, trying to recover her manners. “I’m Isabelle. Nice to meet you.”

The mermaid pointed at Isabelle with a tapered and dripping finger.

“You’re not a pirate, are you?”

Embarrassed, Isabelle touched a hand to her leathered chest. She had removed her tunic during the walk to the elm tree with Meera and Hyde earlier that day, soaking in the precious sun’s warmth, so that now her bodice was exposed along with the grubby white shirt underneath. “No. I’m just not from here,” she explained, almost stuttering. “I came searching for someone.”

“Who are you looking for?” Reu asked, her tone still friendly, though she was yet to smile. “There are a lot of lost things here. Most make their way into the hills or are taken by pirates. A few fly away from here and never look back. Maybe I can help you.”

“I’m looking for my mother,” Isabelle replied, the words tumbling out of her before she knew it. She tucked her hair behind her ears so that the mermaid could see who she was. “And her elven clan,” Isabelle added proudly. Reu noted the ears but evidently had nothing to say on the matter.

“I see,” said Reu making lazy circles in the water with her arms. “We see lots of boys and men here. No mothers so far. I could show you the lagoon where my sisters and I spend our days, if you like.”

The sun was warm and Isabelle very much liked the idea of shedding her clothes. It had been too long since she’d had a chance to bathe and she was eager to wash away the grime that clung to her body: the ash from the many campfires she had shared with Hyde, the dirt from the pit in Sirus’s temple. But it would be risky to be naked and vulnerable—and with this creature, who was someone she barely knew. She didn’t know what to do.

“Sometimes you can find what you’re looking for in unexpected places,” Reu sung in her clear melodic voice. “Come swim with me, sister.” The glistening
mermaid extended her hand to Isabelle, coaxing her into the water with wiggling fingers. The mermaid’s blue eyes were magnetic.

After days spent in the cold, feeling tense and overburdened, Isabelle was not unhappy when she found herself unlacing her bodice and even stripping off her cotton shirt and trousers. What a relief to be shed of her clothes! She tucked her gear into her pack, placing it safely between two big rocks, stowed her bow and arrows there, and returned hurriedly across the sand to the rock pool. The mermaid smiled at her for the first time, and Isabelle surrendered herself to the water.
A Place for Lost Things

Isabelle was not long in the water of the rock pool, before Reu coaxed Isabelle to swim along behind her in one of the shallow rivers that traversed the beach. Rounding the bluff of the cliff, Isabelle was startled to see a magical lagoon where several other mermaids were bathing in the shallow blue-green waters, sheltered by the wide stretch of beach from the crashing of the sea. The cliff face towered over them, and strong and lush palm trees bordered the water of the lagoon. All in all, the lagoon seemed like something out of a storybook—almost too perfect to be real.

Isabelle was glad that the water hid her legs, which marked her out as human—and different to these extraordinary women—though she had to remind herself that Reu had not shown any signs of suspicion at seeing her walking on the sand. The water of the lagoon wasn’t anything like that of the chill river she’d bathed in, fully clothed, with Hyde nearby, or the heated bath she’d slave over at her house. The lagoon was just warm enough to be comforting, but cool enough to be soothing under the heat of the sun. She loved the smell the salty water left on her skin.

The mermaids seemed nonplussed at her presence, observing her but not bothering with formalities or introductions. Isabelle found herself relaxing in the women’s sanctuary, listening to the hum of insects from the clifftops above, the distant sound of the ocean, and the silken sounds of the lagoon water slipping over the mermaids’ bodies.

Time moved strangely here, Isabelle noticed, and the mermaids seemed hard to pin down. At one point, Reu left her side, and a freckled mermaid with thickly curled red hair that trailed halfway down her back appeared next to her. Isabelle was surprised to learn from the mermaid that there were no mermen. Having lost her inhibitions, perhaps when she shed her clothes, she was curious about how they reproduced.

“We become pregnant only once in a lifetime,” answered the mermaid languorously. “It usually occurs somewhere around our thirtieth year.” She swished an arm through the water and pointed at the palm trees, which Isabelle noted were vividly green. “There is vitality for all creatures that dwell here because of the nourishment of these waters.” Isabelle caressed the surface of the
turquoise waters, watching the ripples in wonderment. The mermaid turned her
green eyes on Isabelle. “How are offspring created where you come from?”

Isabelle remembered how awkward her father had been on the one and
only occasion that he’d discussed sex with her. By the time Isabelle had started
menstruating her mother was long gone, leaving her father to be the one to tackle
the issue. He’d tried to support her but was not a communicative person at the
best of times, so Isabelle had never really had someone with whom to discuss
such matters. And her storybooks had little to say on the matter. Relations
between men and women usually ended with a chaste kiss.

She began to speak but became increasingly unsure. Perhaps she didn’t
really know. “Well,” Isabelle began, moving her arms in small circles to keep
herself afloat, “when a man and woman are attracted to one another they might…
um… that is, when we find the right partner…” Isabelle trailed off, unsure how to
explain the process to the curious mermaids, who were all staring at her intently.
She chewed her lip as she struggled to find the right words, and then she found
herself wondering how Hyde would explain it. Surely he would be more frank,
unfamiliar as he was with tact. She blundered on. “Things get intimate, you know,
in a physical way, then nine months later a baby pops out.”

Isabelle winced. She knew this was a terrible explanation, but she really
didn’t want to get into details. The truth was she had very little experience in the
matter and the whole thing was making her feel very uncomfortable. She realised
that a number of other mermaids had drawn closer to hear her answer, and
thankfully most of them seemed fairly satisfied, with only a few, including Reu,
continuing to look at her quizzically.

“So, you have two parents?” asked a young mermaid who was fully
submerged in the water, except for her dark, heart-shaped face and ebony hair.
Her voice seemed disembodied. “A male and a female?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you are raised by both?”

“Usually,” Isabelle replied. “Though in my case, my mother died when I
was a young girl, so my father taught me a lot of what I know.”

Reu cocked her head to the side questioningly. “I thought you were
looking for your mother? How can that be if she is dead?”
Isabelle’s body tensed and she was brought sharply back to reality with a pang of guilt. After years spent thinking that her mother was dead, it was an automatic response to say she was gone. But she wasn’t. She was out there somewhere; Isabelle just had to find her.

Shrugging off the drowsy feeling that hung over her, Isabelle waded to the shore and pulled herself up onto the sand. She felt suddenly heavy on dry land. Her body was now exposed to the mermaids, but she did not care. She felt a sense of urgency to get back to her search. Reu had followed her and lay on her stomach in the shallows at Isabelle’s feet.

“I thought she was dead, until recently,” Isabelle explained, wringing the water from her hair. Little trails of water dribbled down her legs and pooled at her feet, darkening the pristine sand. The solid ground beneath her made her feel more resolute. She looked up at the sun, which did not appear to have moved in the blue expanse of sky, and at the cliff face behind her. She needed to retrieve her backpack and bow, and find the path down the cliff that had brought her to this beach. Then there was the matter of locating the portal again.

Isabelle looked into Reu’s stormy eyes. “Now that I know she’s alive I have to find her. That’s why I’m here.”

Reu returned Isabelle’s gaze from the turquoise water. “I don’t blame you for wanting to find your female parent,” she said serenely. “From my experience, men are anguished creatures, with too much fire in their bellies, and not enough sense. The boys of Neverland are without their mothers, and that’s why they never grow up—too much turmoil in their hearts, and no one to guide them.”

Isabelle thought of the vision she had had beneath the Elder Tree. The man she had seen, she knew, was the former Khensu, suffocating in a world where death and life were meaningless. It was her mother—not just the wolf—who had tasked her with the man’s rescue.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” asked a nearby mermaid, flipping her golden tail and sending lazy ripples out across the mirrored lagoon. “You were separated from your mother, and now fate has brought you to Neverland. Perhaps you’ll stop growing, just like the Lost Boys.”

The notion was unsettling. She would not remain separated from her mother. There was a hole in her life that her mother had left. Isabelle felt that, if
she found her, she would be able to truly grow. She had no desire to be suspended in time and forever young.

“I’m not lost,” Isabelle said resolutely. “I may have been separated from my mother, but I will find her again. I’m sure of it.”

Reu propelled herself out of the lagoon and landed on the sandy bank beside Isabelle, showering her with a spray of salty water. Isabelle almost gasped at the full and magnificent vision of her breasts and torso and tail.

“You may have the legs of a human, but you’ve the spirit of a mermaid,” Reu purred. “Stay with us. We could show you all kinds of wonderful things in return.”

Isabelle contemplated the mermaid’s suggestion. Perhaps she could give it all away. Perhaps the answer was that simple. She could just forget about Sirus, Athrin, Zoku—even Hyde—and the burdens of being the Khensu. She could stay here with these women, all of whom seemed perfectly content without any men to bother them, sheltered in their own private paradise. But, no. She couldn’t forget about her mother. She couldn’t give up on her quest to find out who she herself was.

She felt the cool breeze on her wet skin and shivered. There were goosebumps on her skin, which was soft and wrinkled from being in the water for so long. It was time she got going. “I’m honoured,” she told Reu. “And I know I’m still finding my feet,” Isabelle continued, before realising that her phrasing wasn’t particularly well-suited to mermaids. “What I mean is, I’ve got a lot to figure out about myself, and about what I can do. Which is why I can’t stay here. I need to continue my journey, back in my world, and perhaps in others.”

Reu shrugged her shoulders and said, “Then let me show you the way back.” It didn’t take long for them to reach the spot where Isabelle had left her clothes, with Reu swimming between the sandy shoals and reefs, acting as Isabelle’s guide.

While Isabelle was pulling on her trousers, shimmying to get them up over her hips, Reu rose up out of the water of the rock pool, after pulling at the pendant around her neck. “I want you to have this,” she said, holding out her necklace to Isabelle, her green hair resplendent as it hung around her breasts and her eyes glowing as blue as the sky. “As a reminder of this place and of what we have here—what you could have.”
Isabelle bent down and accepted Reu’s offering, her dry fingers brushing against Reu’s wet palm. She fondled the creamy coloured shell with its streaky brown markings. At the tapered end of the shell was a tiny stopper, which she hadn’t noticed before. “It’s lovely,” she said, rotating it in the palm of her hand. “Is there something inside it?”


Isabelle remembered the speech of the mermaid with the red hair, the unusually vivid colour of the palms circling the lagoon, and the turquoise water reflecting the never-ending blue of the sky. She took a moment to stare at the tiny, unassuming shell in her hand, before draping the necklace around her neck. She tucked the shell underneath her tunic, against her chest. Isabelle hardly knew what to say. The power of what she held in her little flask was almost overwhelming. “Thank you, Reu. This is a very special gift.”

The mermaid was expressionless. She lowered herself back into the pool and began moving away through the seawater rivers and ponds strewn along the beach, seemingly uninterested in goodbyes. Isabelle watched the shine of her scales as she drifted back towards the lagoon, wondering at the lack of feeling or passion demonstrated by the mermaids. She felt the sun warm her blood and turned to the goat track that would take her back to the cliff top and the portal. She knew then, with a passion, that she wanted to go back to Pan’s Forest, where Hyde would be waiting for her. She had a man to save, a villain to destroy, and a future with her mother.
What Makes a Man

The sound of stone fracturing emanated from the darkest recesses of the temple. The man’s eyes glinted in the gloom. Though the fragments of stone that dropped from the statue to the tiled floor were slight, the sound they made echoed through the silent ruins with a sinister clarity. Sirus’s neck was almost fully exposed now. The skin underneath was pale and sickly, having been encased in stone for so long. It had become loose and wrinkled, with festering sores that released a pungent odour.

Though the stone figure still wore the same hard expression it had for decades, the spirit within was smiling. *Soon*, he thought triumphantly. *Soon I will be free of this tomb and reclaim my glory. When I do, I will tear the beating hearts from those who oppose me and take absolute power once and for all!* During decades of waiting in the darkness of his stone tomb, Sirus had had plenty of time to plot his revenge.

First on the agenda, when he was free, would be setting ablaze the home of the Clay Nymphs. They had foolishly sided with the Khensu all those years ago, and now their ancestors would pay the ultimate price for that treachery. Sirus was determined to see every one of them burn. Next would be the fae. If any of the true fae still remained, he would seek them out and personally destroy them. They were too closely related to the Ancients, and Sirus wanted Athrin to see his people annihilated.

Sirus could see his release and revenge so close at hand that it sent shivers of ecstasy throughout his entombed body.

Another loud crack echoed through the dark.

Once upon a time, Sirus had been very ordinary. This had been his curse. Born in a time when Ancients, though limited in numbers, were thriving thanks to their innate magic and unique symbiotic relationship with nature, humankind paled in comparison. As he’d grown, Sirus had come to envy the Ancients and their magic. He was determined to take it from them.

Firstly, he sought to diminish their power by culling the forest. Using his power—the gift of persuasion—he convinced small clans of humans to expand out into the forest, cutting it back to make way for new homes, crops, farmland,
dams, store houses, roads and any other infrastructure that a civilised society might need. They began to burn the forest one corner at a time.

Next, he encouraged those clans to seize what they needed from lesser beings—magical beings. For why should the forest-creatures be better off than humans? It wasn’t right. The humans began to send large raiding parties deep into the forest. When they encountered resistance, they turned to violence.

Sirus didn’t have to do much more to stoke the embers of war. Soon a bloody battle between humans and non-humans raged from one end of the forest to the next.

But land and resources weren’t enough. Sirus tasked his best, most loyal men with abducting the children of the most powerful race, the Ancients. For he had come to learn an old forgotten language that would allow him to draw the energy from a person and make it his own. With this power, he could take whatever he wanted!

That stolen magic gave him strength now. Sirus called to his minions. His hypnotic chanting had been going on for days now, very quietly at first, but growing stronger every day, reaching out into the darkness and taking hold of all those unfortunate enough to hear it.

At first it was just the smaller, weaker creatures that succumbed to his Will, milling about the ominous statue, the surface of which continued to crumble with every passing moment. Mice and rats piled upon one another at the foot of the statue, shrieking as they clamoured for space and dominance. Spiders of all shapes and sizes had crawled into the nooks and crannies of the temple, stringing elaborate webs across the ceiling and setting traps for the winged bugs that were mindlessly infesting the gloom. Outside, several snakes restlessly trailed around the building, hissing periodically at nothing in particular, trying to find a way in. A three-tailed fire fox clawed frantically at the debris above the pit hidden in the forest.

Sirus was fuelled by the energy of the creatures that he drew towards him. His influence was slowly growing. He reached further and further beyond the temple, calling to all those who would listen.

Birds began to flock to the temple. They fought over who would perch on the apex of the pyramid and screeched from the nearby trees of Pan’s Forest, alerting even more creatures to the presence within. One day, a lark brought him
news of a young woman who vanished into thin air, only to reappear some time
later. She was accompanied by a spectral wolf and a satyr. Sirus learned that the
sprites were all abuzz with the gossip, spreading news throughout the forest that
the Khensu had been reborn.

Sirus was not perturbed. He had guessed that Athrin’s magic was fading
for a reason, and that was why he was now able to break free. That a new Khensu
had awoken was of no great consequence. If the girl who’d stumbled through his
temple with her satyr was the new Khensu, as he assumed, she was clearly
inexperienced and weak. He’d pierced her mind easily. She was no threat to
him—not yet.

He would send his most useful devotee after her, a tall muscular man with
leathery skin, calloused feet, and brown bushy hair. Sirus had lured him with his
hypnotic powers as he was hacking at a distant grove of pine trees. Without really
knowing why, the man had stopped in the middle of an axe-swing and cocked his
head to the side, listening intently to a voice that only he could hear. His blue eyes
had glazed over. The world stood still, and the sounds of the forest vanished. All
the man was aware of was the voice. It was everywhere, and everything.

Answering Sirus’s mesmerising call, the woodcutter had emerged from
the forest several days ago and begun moving rocks from the collapsed entrance.
His glassy blue eyes were unseeing as he toiled throughout the night, relentlessly
hauling rocks and debris away from the opening until his fingers were bloody and
calloused. Even then he continued to work. The voice was clear in his mind,
instructing him, motivating him.

He did not think of his family, who would forever wonder what had
happened to him. He would do as he was told. He would not question. He would
not want. He would believe whatever the great man wanted him to believe and
follow the destiny laid out for him, because only Sirus knew the grand order of
things and could guide him wisely into the new world.

When the woodcutter was standing before him in the dark cavern of the
temple, Sirus closed his eyes and whispered, letting his words penetrate the man’s
mind. Soon the man, with his back rigid and his jaw set in a grimace, loped out of
the temple and into Pan’s Forest in the opposite direction he had been travelling.
In his right hand he clenched a small bone-handled knife, his knuckles white with tension. His mind was blank, save for the deadly intent that had taken root there.
Hide and Seek

Over the next few days Isabelle and Hyde zigzagged through the vast forest while travelling in the general direction of Lake Merida and the Great Library. With the sky clear and the sun on her back, Isabelle felt invigorated and confident. Since her experience beneath the Elder Tree, she had practised meditation every morning and night, trying to clear her mind of unproductive thoughts and niggling doubts. For her efforts she had managed to find two more of the mystical doorways and successfully crossed over into unfamiliar realms.

One of the worlds was populated by giant, stilted, mechanical monsters that stalked the barren landscape, seemingly without purpose. Isabelle hadn’t lingered in this place. It was grim and devoid of life.

The second shimmering doorway Isabelle found led her to a quaint village nestled between grassy hills and farmland. The townsfolk were a short breed of men, with exposed hairy feet and wide round eyes. They had greeted her with smiles, and she had felt like Snow, surrounded by a world of dwarfish men. Having grown up with only her father, the environment did not feel entirely unnatural to her, though these men, unlike her father, were very communicative. They were like walking storybooks, emerging from their homes to share tales about dragons, wizards, orcs, and most notably, elves, as they spotted her walking down their streets. She wondered if she might find the missing elven community somewhere in their world. It was unlikely, since the elves the men spoke of sounded different to the elves of her world, but she made a mental note of where the entrance portal was, just in case she wanted to return for a thorough search. However, she wasn’t entirely convinced that the men were in possession of the truth.

Isabelle also sensed a menacing presence watching over her the whole time that she was there. She wondered if it was Zoku. Though he had insisted that only Khensu could walk between worlds, she still worried that he might be stalking her, hoping to force her to comply with her destiny or his will.

Despite no luck in finding her mother, Isabelle was quietly pleased with her success. She felt she had mastered the ability to see portals by focusing her energy in just the right way, and this made her very proud. Little more than a fortnight ago, her world revolved around the home, and she imagined her entire
unremarkable life would be spent in that place. Up until now her greatest adventures were exploring the edge of the forest while she hunted for rabbits and deer, often accompanied by her over-protective father. Now she roamed the darkest corners of the forest, where the trees grew tallest and close, searching for doorways into spectacular worlds that only she could see. It was exhilarating—and frightening.

Though she was making good progress, Isabelle felt that she still had a long way to go in terms of her abilities. She was also very aware that Sirus could be close to breaking free of his prison; indeed, that he might have done so already. If Athrin could help her to stop the self-proclaimed sorcerer then she had to find him as soon as possible, and this created a pressure that was sometimes overwhelming. It helped her to keep her mother’s face and voice—and advice—in mind. She had to get to the library first, before she attempted anything.

After days of walking in leather boots and damp socks, and nights spent sleeping on the unforgiving ground, Isabelle was more than a little uncomfortable and achey. Hyde was also unusually quiet and in a bad temper, thrashing at overhanging branches with his staff as they passed through Pan’s Forest, his filthy white shirt having been ripped by one of them, much to Hyde’s displeasure.

Isabelle swatted at a particularly large, ugly insect that kept circling around her head.

It was then that the spectral wolf appeared between two large juniper bushes, stopping Isabelle and Hyde in their tracks.

“Damn it!” Hyde exclaimed. He had dropped his staff owing to the sudden shock of Zoku’s appearance. “Announce yourself next time, will you?”

“My apologies,” Zoku replied. “It’s hard for me to make noise.” He swished his tail back and forth. It passed right through the bushes without disturbing a single leaf, proving his point.

Isabelle felt immediately tense. She was certain that the wolf had come to demand that she immediately seek out and rescue his master, the tragic hero, Athrin. She wasn’t sure she’d be able to resist him for much longer. After all, he seemed to be able to read her like an open book, and knew just how to persuade her. She wondered if Zoku knew that she had her own plans and that her mother had showed her a different path towards her destiny. Isabelle threw her pack onto
the forest floor, but held fast to the bow still over her shoulder. She looked at Zoku suspiciously. He was such a mystery. He held her gaze.

“I thought you might like to know,” Zoku said, “that Sirus is free.”

Dread clamped around Isabelle’s insides like a steel trap. Not only was she fearful of what Sirus might do now that he was free, she felt like destiny was forcing her into a corner. If she didn’t confront Sirus soon, as prophecy demanded, any life lost at his hands would be a result of her inaction.

Hyde looked equally anxious. His ears flattened and he began to fidget with his hands. “When you say he’s free…”

“I mean he is walking around, as flesh and blood,” said Zoku, not taking his eyes off Isabelle. “And he has an army of thralls fortifying his temple. They’re building a high stone wall and traps in the nearby forest. He’s not wasting any time. He knows he’s currently unchallenged, and he will exploit this opportunity while he can.”

If Zoku’s intent was to make Isabelle feel guilty, then he had succeeded. A wide range of emotions washed over her—shame, anger, and uncertainty—and her fight or flight instincts battled with one another. On the one hand she wanted to run as far away from Sirus and that cursed temple as she could, putting worlds between them if she had to. But she also knew that she couldn’t leave Hyde and Meera, or anyone else for that matter, to face Sirus’s wrath. She wondered what her mother would do. She had told her to seek wisdom in the library, but she had also been a huntress, bold and steady handed. More than anything, Isabelle wished for her mother’s courage in that moment, and for her guidance.

Hyde gently touched Isabelle’s arm, and she turned to him. He stared into her face, the troubled look in his mismatched eyes mirroring her own anguish.

“What do you want to do?” he asked earnestly. Isabelle didn’t like his sombre tone. She wanted him to make a joke, or to challenge Zoku, or to make an inappropriate gesture of some kind. She wanted him to be anything but serious. It was too much.

“I don’t know!” she whispered to him, fighting back hot, angry tears.

Isabelle knew that Zoku had overheard, but he said nothing. Isabelle focused her attention on Hyde, but she could feel Zoku staring at her with his gold, piercing eyes. Hyde gave Isabelle’s arm a little squeeze. “We’re almost at the lake,” he said in a low, calming voice. Isabelle watched his mouth as he
spoke. His lips and tongue looked pale and soft. “We may as well rest the night at the library, as intended, and do a bit of research. Things will seem clearer in the morning, after a good feed and a sleep.”

Isabelle suddenly felt bone-weary. The thought of a soft bed and a hot meal made her ache with longing.

When she turned around to face Zoku, he had disappeared into the brush.
Isabelle and Hyde moved with renewed urgency, and at their fast pace it didn’t take too long for them to reach the vast lake, just as the sun was beginning to fade. The colours of the setting sun made the lake glow in an orange mirror-reflection of the sky. Pan’s Forest, its trees encircling the lake, glowed too.

The sensation that crept up on Isabelle as they approached the sandy shore of the lake was of pure energy, thrumming all around them. The hair on the back of Isabelle’s neck stood on end. She tried to brush the feeling away with her hand as she scanned the area. She spotted the Great Library, on the western bank of the lake.

“There it is,” she breathed, squinting to make out more detail.

The library was a towering stone structure that rose impossibly high, its top lost amongst the clouds. Impressive sandstone steps led to an expansive curved central landing with two heavy carved wooden doors providing entry to the library. Large stone braziers bordered the stairs to light the path, alongside a pair of enormous statues resembling armed giants. Isabelle had never seen anything so grand.

There were stained glass windows at even intervals around the bottom of the tower, and warm golden light pooled out of them. Similar portals of light shone from the upper levels, though these were much smaller windows and unevenly spread.

They began to walk around the lake towards the library, walking with new ease across the sand, but it was still dark by the time they reached the building. A full moon and a sky full of stars lit their way, as did the reflection of the sky sparkling from the smooth waters of Lake Merida. Isabelle gazed at the building, wondering how she would find the books she needed to read, the wisdom that would enable her to rescue Athrin and defeat Sirus—and her mother.

Isabelle thought she could make out a faint blue light somewhere near the top of the tower. She also noticed there were several stone gargoyles clinging to the sides of the building, peering down at them as they approached the great stone steps.

“I can’t believe we’ve finally made it,” Isabelle whispered, reverently.

“It’s magnificent.”
“Wait ‘til you get inside,” Hyde replied. He adjusted the weight of his pack then pointed his wooden staff at the building. “You could spend years exploring the library’s nooks and crannies and still not discover all of her secrets. Believe me, I tried.”

“What were you looking for?” Isabelle asked. “Besides romance,” she added, remembering his dalliance with a flash of envy. The thought of Hyde being intimate with anyone made her feel strangely uncomfortable and flushed.

Hyde seemed oblivious to her insinuating comment. “Precious artefacts, rare tomes—anything that might be valuable enough to sell. I almost made away with a fabled crystal slipper that would’ve made me rich, but sadly, the guardians got me before I made it to ground level.”

Isabelle did not know if Hyde was joking. Would he really steal from the Great Library? She looked into his green eyes, but the glint of the moonlight on his irises made it impossible to tell if he was being serious. She decided not to interrogate him about it, knowing it might give him the opportunity to play one of his teasing games, and knowing that she might not want to know the answer.

“Who are the guardians?” she asked instead.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Hyde said with smirk and a wink. “Let’s get inside.”

The pair were about to climb the stairs to the library when Hyde suddenly stopped. He stiffened and his ears began to twitch. He turned and crouched slightly, raising his staff in a defensive position in front of him. “I hear footsteps,” he hissed.

Isabelle swivelled around, instantly alert. She unshouldered her bow and steadily notched an arrow, pointing it at the ground, but keeping her arm tense.

“Zoku?” she asked.

“No,” Hyde whispered. “We never hear him coming.”

There was no one on the shore of the lake from where they had come. She and Hyde strained their eyes, peering into the forest that surrounded the library.

Then, in a hurry, a tall figure cloaked by shadow emerged from the trees and advanced towards them.

Hyde gasped and trotted some hesitant steps backwards, up the sandstone staircase. Isabelle stepped forward, adrenaline coursing through her body. She did
not know how, but she knew that the man had come for her. If fate had caught up to her, she would stand her ground.

“Who are you?” she called out into the gloom in what she hoped was an assertive voice.

The man lumbered forward until the light from the moon and the library windows illuminated his grim, pale face and clenched fists. His shoes had worn through, revealing bloody feet beneath the tattered remains of the leather. He had eyes only for her as he approached the bottom of the stone steps.

Isabelle held her position. Then she noted the glint of silver in the man’s left hand and his steady pace as he shambled towards them. Then the man raised his hand, making visible the knife he was wielding. “The master wants you to die,” he said simply. And with that he charged at Isabelle.

In an instant, Isabelle had her bow raised. As she aimed, she stared into the face of a living man, a human—for the first time since she had left her father. She snapped her arm back and fired.

The man dropped onto the bottom step. The arrow had pierced through his neck. Blood trickled from the wound, bubbling around the arrow that was lodged there and staining the sandstone step. He gave a few sporadic gurgles before falling still and silent.

Isabelle took a moment to steady herself. She’d been holding her breath, but now her breathing was quick and shallow as the reality of the situation began to settle on her.

Hyde also stood in mute shock. Then he spoke. “He was going to kill us,” he murmured.

Isabelle’s lip quivered. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the body sprawled before her. She thought she might vomit.

Hyde hurried over to Isabelle and gripped her shoulders. He stood in front of her to block her view of the body. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Isabelle looked into his mismatched green eyes, which were more distinctly contrasted in the moonlight. His face was haunted by dirt accumulated from their days of trekking, and by the night’s shadows.

She had been taught to hunt as a child. Her father had always told her that killing was part of survival. But this was different. “I’ve never killed a person before,” she murmured. Her voice sounded foreign to her. She could not bring
herself to admit what she had seen before she fired the arrow at the stranger: an image of her own father.

“You were just defending yourself. He meant to kill you, you know that.”

Isabelle nodded mutely, but she wasn’t convinced by Hyde’s words. She could have wounded the man instead of killing him. Why had she instinctively aimed at his head? A wave of guilt washed over her.

“We have to get rid of his body,” Hyde stated. He anxiously looked over his shoulder at the library. “We can’t leave him here. You wait here, I’ll deal with it.”

Isabelle was in such shock that she barely registered what Hyde said. She let him lead her by the elbow and sit her down at the top of the stairs, where she sat quietly. She couldn’t let go of the man’s blank expression and lifeless eyes as he had come at her. It was chilling. And the assassin had referred to his master, she remembered, before he drew his knife. Was that master Sirus? If so, how did Sirus know where she was? How had this man found her here? Were there more hunting her?

She found herself grateful for the brightness of the light at the top of the staircase, where the light spilled from the library windows, making her feel safe. She even found solace in the company of the gargoyles. She was also pleased, some time later, when Hyde’s silhouette emerged from the forest, and he clopped up the sandstone stairs and plopped down at her side. His expression was grim. There was a rust coloured leaf caught on one of his horns and fresh dirt smears on his torn shirt.

“How you holding up?” he asked tentatively.

Isabelle still didn’t know the answer to that question, numb as she was. “What did you do with him?” she asked dully.

Hyde grimaced and a look of shame flashed across his features. Suddenly he seemed to want to look anywhere but at Isabelle. “I dragged him into the forest and covered him with branches and rocks,” he replied with a quick glance towards the tree line. “I doubt it will save him from scavengers but at least he’s out of sight.”

This time Isabelle grimaced. Despite his deadly intentions, she would’ve preferred to bury the man properly. She felt revolted at the thought of his body
being torn apart by wolves or griffins. She kept envisioning her father’s face as she had seen it on the stranger, just before she fired her arrow.

Hyde rubbed his arms against the chill air which was now blowing across the lake and carrying up to the stairs to the library. It had gotten late.

“Are you ready to go inside?” he asked.

Isabelle nodded. Her head felt like it was made of lead.
The Library

It was brightly lit inside the library foyer, with fat white candles set on tables and generously positioned on every wall in ornate sconces. Flickering light danced on the walls and somewhere soft lute music played, creating a warm cheery atmosphere that seemed grossly inappropriate given what had just transpired outside.

“It’s massive,” Isabelle said in astonishment, taking in the entirety of the impressive room.

Massive was an understatement. At the very centre of the building, starting at ground level, grew a gigantic tree with a silvery trunk and mottled red-gold leaves, and around it wound a mahogany staircase, which circled up to a glass-domed roof, which let in a vision of the moon and starlight from the night sky. The tree had grown in that spot for eons prior to the library being formed around it. Its enormous branches reached out in every direction, beckoning to the books that encircled it.

The great expanse of towering bookshelves that filled the library was nothing short of magical. The library was the most significant repository of magical tomes, artefacts and knowledge ever to be collected in one spot, and an enormous amount of magical energy was stored in the physical building itself. Each brick was infused with ancient spells to give them unnatural strength and durability. The oak awnings, floorboards, staircase, doors, and bookshelves were etched with runes and incantations. All of the ornate stained-glass windows were imbued with magic, having had elaborate rituals performed as they were inset.

Each level contained tall bookshelves groaning with literature, with rolling ladders providing access to the highest shelves. There were also pedestals, glass cabinets and shelves dedicated to artefacts, as well as small secretive rooms containing prized tomes, reserved only for those who could be trusted with their knowledge. These were heavily guarded and often hidden with magic. Wooden desks were spread around the library, and nestled in awkward corners were comfortable armchairs with oil lamps set on accompanying side tables.

Mechanised automatons in copper, brass and silver roamed the library, offering assistance to visitors and knowledge-seekers. They were roughly the same size and dimensions as a large human, with a complex composition of
overlapping plates and panels covering their bulky frame. Rather than eyes they had a single pulsing blue light in their domed heads, and a speaker box high on their chest for conversing. They did not sleep or eat, and aside from general wear and tear, they did not age.

The automatons possessed an extensive database of knowledge concerning the multitude of volumes contained within the library. In their stilted, emotionless voices they could recite the title, author, and publication date of any work, as well as provide a concise summary of its content. They also killed moths and silverfish, cleaned, repaired damaged books, managed the catalogues, maintained the building, provided security, dusted, and served food and beverages to visitors.

All that anyone knew about the automatons came from what the automatons themselves could relay. They were dwarven-made, their cores forged from star metal and crystal, but it had been the Ancients who gave them life. Though time had scattered many of the Ancients and the reach of the old magic, it was preserved here, in these mechanical beings.

One such automaton rolled over to Isabelle and Hyde as they were marvelling at the architecture. Its ancient copper body was tarnished all over with mottled patches of turquoise, and blackened scratches. Its spherical base squeaked as it approached.

“Greetings,” it chirped in a friendly, if somewhat robotic voice. It made several sharp clicking noises before proceeding. “Do you require sustenance? This evening you may choose from spiced honey tea, mead, spring water, cured meats with cheese, or parsnip soup with crusty bread. Please be aware that all food and drinks are to be consumed on the ground floor only, and that alcohol should be enjoyed in moderation, lest you become disorderly and require ejection from the library.”

“Bring us all of the above,” Hyde replied eagerly.

It amazed Isabelle that Hyde could still have an appetite after what he’d just done. Her own stomach was in turmoil.

“Certainly,” replied the automaton. “Is there anything else I may assist you with?” asked the robot, which began clanking as a panel on its left leg began to open and close involuntarily.

Hyde nodded. “Yes, the lady and I will be needing rooms for the night”.
“Very well,” the mechanical being intoned. “Please take a seat and I shall return promptly.” With that the guardian rolled away, clicking and whirring as it left.

Isabelle let her gaze roam around the peaceful library and its handful of patrons. Sitting at a table on the far side of the room were a pair of squat women who looked like they might be dwarves. They were having a lively debate about the value of gold over copper, with each holding up a book to prove their argument, suggesting that the books contained contradictory information. There was also a drunk satyr alone at a table, hunched over his tankard, and several pixies flapping around the base of the tree. Isabelle also spied a creature she didn’t recognise. It had beady, black eyes, leathery skin, a long, crooked nose and tapered ears.

Isabelle was uncomfortably aware that the creature was watching her. A prickly sensation came over her then, combined with a certainty that the creature was aware of what she had just done, and was judging her for it.

Hyde ushered Isabelle to a quiet bench close to the tree, and they sat down opposite each other, with an oak table between them. They sat in silence, neither one wanting to discuss the disconcerting events of the evening. Thankfully it wasn’t long before the automaton returned with a large tray of soup, bread and cheeses, mead and water. It carefully placed the wooden tray on the table, its joints squealing with effort. Then a small panel on its lower chest popped open, revealing an iron key with a leather tag attached to it.

“Your accommodation request was approved. Accommodation is located on the second floor, west side. Please take your room key and observe the assigned room number. Take care not to lose it.”

Isabelle’s stomach did a back flip. Though she and Hyde had slept near each other during their journey together without any awkwardness, sharing a room was an entirely different matter. She thought of her own bedroom and the prospect of having Hyde sleep there. Her mouth felt dry. Hyde, by contrast, didn’t seem bothered by the prospect of such intimacy. He reached into the cavity of the automaton and removed the key, tucking it into his pants pocket for safekeeping.

“Should you require further assistance, contact your nearest guardian,” said their host, before speeding away to tend to the intoxicated satyr at the far end.
of the room, who had spilt soup on the floor. Isabelle had a feeling that he would be ejected and wondered exactly how the automaton would manage the feat.

Then Isabelle found herself distracted by thoughts of the man she had killed and his master, Sirus. If Sirus had the power to enthrall a man, having only just regained his power after years spent locked in stone, how long would it be before he could control all of humanity? What if he could get inside her own mind? She had no way of knowing if her elven heritage made her immune to his mind control, but the idea that he could penetrate her mind was utterly terrifying.

Hyde nudged a jug of mead towards Isabelle, bringing her out of her stupor. “This will make you feel better,” he said assuredly.

She took a deep swig from the cup and willed her body to relax.

Surprisingly, by the time she had finished her third cup of mead and polished off a plate of meat and cheese, Isabelle felt comfortably drowsy and warm. She’d forgotten about her achy muscles and blistered feet, and she could no longer see the assassin’s face in her mind’s eye or, indeed, her father’s. Sirus was like a bad memory.

Isabelle observed Hyde from across the table. He looked different to her somehow. Her vision seemed to have become a little hazy. Hyde’s shirt was unbuttoned down to the navel, with so much of his hairy chest exposed that Isabelle wondered why he even bothered with that last button at the bottom. There was a small crumb snagged in his stubble beard, and it was accompanied by a few droplets of mead. Through hooded lids he was watching a faun playing a lute beneath one of the brilliant stained-glass windows. The languorous faun and her movements reminded Isabelle of the mermaid Reu.

Isabelle felt her cheeks flush with heat and wondered if it was the mead or something else. She looked down at her filthy bodice and trousers, and then she eyed Hyde again. “Why don’t you ever look at me that way?” she snapped.

Lazily, Hyde drew his attention back to Isabelle. “Huh?”

Isabelle bumbled onwards, words tumbling out of her before she could think and before she could stop them. “You’re generally flirty, but you’ve never made a pass at me. Is it chivalry? Or maybe I’m just not your type.” This last part came out more angrily than she had intended, though she didn’t know why she was angry.
Hyde examined her with sudden clarity in his mismatched eyes, his brows knitted together. “Everyone’s my type, Belle,” he said carefully, biting his lip. “Uh, but we’re friends. I wouldn’t want to complicate things.”

Isabelle snorted and banged her tankard of mead on the table top, slopping some of its contents. “I’m caught up in a hundred-year-old prophecy with a magical tyrant, I’ve killed a man, you buried him, and we’re about to share a room for the evening. How much more complicated could it be?” Her words, she realised, were slurring together in a strange way.

They stared at each other for a long tense moment. Isabelle’s glare was a challenge. Hyde was trying to gauge her level of inebriation.

Finally, Hyde broke the tension. He pushed himself up from the table and reached into his pocket for the room key. With a little nod to Isabelle, he dropped it on the table with a heavy thunk and said, “You take the room; get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Isabelle burned with anger and frustration as she watched Hyde walk away. How dare he presume to know what she needed! He had dismissed her like she was some fragile thing whose chastity needed protection. Hyde was no gentleman, and it infuriated her that he would start acting like one now.

Isabelle tossed back her tankard and let the last gulp of mead wash down the back of her throat. Its sickly sweetness did nothing to counter the bitterness she felt. She thought of chasing Hyde and demanding that he pay attention to her, but then she saw the automaton notice her and begin to move her way. The drunken satyr, she realised, had been ejected. Perhaps she was to be next. She quickly stood up, picked up her bag and bow, and stomped off towards her room, already starting to feel embarrassed.
Consequences

The next morning, Isabelle awoke with a hollowness in the pit of her belly. Her head ached. She buried herself further beneath the cosy pile of pelts and nuzzled into the luxurious goose-down pillow with a groan of self-pity.

Even though she felt terrible, she was glad of a proper bed, having slept under the stars for the past couple of weeks. The room was cramped and modestly decorated, but comfortable nevertheless. It contained a plush armchair for reading, two narrow straw-lined beds—heaped with plush pelts and high pillows—a washbasin, a bedpan, and a wooden stool, which also served as a bedside table. There was a brass candlestick on the floor beside the basin, with a flickering candle that had, during the night, struggled against the drafts but had managed to stay alight through to the morning.

Despite the cosiness of the room, Isabelle’s sleep had been marred by restlessness. She had stirred with every little noise, thinking Hyde might have changed his mind. But he hadn’t. When she did sleep, she was plagued by nightmares. She saw the man she’d killed, his distraught family huddled around his body in tears. Then her father, alone and motionless at their kitchen table, his eyes glassy and grey. She felt as if she never wanted to use her bow and arrows again.

Isabelle lay on her side and stared at the empty bed across from her. She briefly wondered if Hyde had spent the night alone, as she had, or if he had found company in the faun’s arms. She groaned again and flung the blankets back, heaving herself out of bed with an effort. What a mess, she thought to herself. How could she be thinking like this? How could she have been so irresponsible as to get drunk? She had not even begun searching the library. She had important work to do; Sirius may have sent another assassin after her, and here she was wallowing in self-regard and self-pity.

She walked over to the washbasin and stooped over it. There was cold fragranced water in it and a sponge. She stripped off and began to vigorously clean herself. The water was bracing yet rejuvenating. After drying herself with a cotton towel that she found under the bed, Isabelle dressed quickly in her trousers and shirt and ran her fingers through her tangled hair. She left her bag and—after a moment’s hesitation—her bow and quiver in the room, and flung open the door,
walking out into the hall. A guardian was waiting for her. Isabelle noticed that this one had springy legs, whereas their host yesterday had had a spherical ball to propel it around the ground floor. The automaton rattled and clanked towards her, its single eye pulsing rhythmically as it addressed her.

“How may I assist you?” it intoned. “Would you like sustenance, catalogue advice, or room service? We could launder your clothes or prepare a hot bath. Perhaps you’d like a library tour?”

“How may I assist you?” Isabelle replied. Then, as an afterthought, she added, “And my clothes laundered. Anything that’s in the backpack could use a wash.”

The automaton whirred and led her downstairs to the dining hall, where she had gotten so unfortunately drunk the night before. After a hearty breakfast of bread and preserves, Isabelle was eager to launch herself into some investigatory work, in part to distract herself from her more troubling thoughts. Furthermore, she wasn’t keen to face Hyde just yet. Her embarrassment was still raw, and she was worried things would be awkward between them after her bumbling mistake. He had been right to walk away, she saw now. They were friends, and she was thankful for that. She desperately hoped she hadn’t ruined things.

Isabelle left the dining area and wandered through the towering stacks of the third floor, pondering where to begin her research. The rows of bookshelves that spiralled around the central tree were lit with candles, but there were many dark recesses and shadowed areas. It would be easy to get lost in this place, Isabelle thought, ducking into a particularly gloomy row. She knew she should probably start looking up information about Sirus and potential ways of defeating him, but with such precious knowledge spread out before her in neat rows, it was a different question that came to mind.

Isabelle spotted an automaton tidying a pile of books on a nearby desk. “Excuse me,” she called, “could I get some help, please?”

The automaton swivelled its head to look at her with its singular pulsing ‘eye’. The glowing disc on the front of its head was its only discernible facial feature. Resembling fractured glass, the disc pulsed rhythmically, as if the automaton was breathing. “You may call me A’lec,” it droned. “How may I assist you?”

Isabelle cleared her throat and, with clumsy pronunciation, said: “Alec, I’d like to know everything there is to know about elves, please.”
The guardian made a series of sharp clicks followed by a mechanical whirring, then responded: “To relay the full catalogue of knowledge concerning elves, including all volumes that mention the term ‘elves’ or ‘elf’, as well as biographical works written by those of elven heritage, and works written in the Ancient language, will take me approximately 1,000,296.3 hours. Shall I commence, or would you like to narrow your search parameters?”

Isabelle paused to think about how she could re-phrase her question, tucking her hair, still damp from bathing in the washbasin, behind her ears. “Let’s start with the most popular theory of where the elves disappeared to, filtered by most recent accounts of their possible whereabouts. Oh, and include any references to Khensu or portal worlds.”

Again, the guardian whirred and clicked, the cogs inside its metal body spinning vigorously. In a monotone, it replied: “Thaed Amnell’s *Plural Realities* is the most recent and widely recognised literary work pertaining to the disappearance of the elven populace. Amnell theorises that the dominant elven communities were dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in this world, particularly the increasing conflicts between human and non-human factions concerning land, resources, religion and politics. They mourned humankind’s weakening connection with the eternal energy and feared that humans would ravage the land in their pursuit of something the humans liked to call progress. To summarise, the elves lost faith in humanity and sought refuge elsewhere. Amnell poses that the elves may have found a way to access and migrate to another realm in much the same way as the Khensu is capable of moving between worlds. Though there is much debate surrounding this theory, scholars such as Baudelaire, J’nec, and Korseur have similarly speculated that the powers of the Khensu may not be exclusive. Given the strong magical intuition of the elves and fae lineage, they could, arguably, also envision and access parts of the multiverse.”

“I knew it!” Isabelle exclaimed clapping her hands triumphantly. The clap echoed down the row of towering bookshelves, carrying all the way to the stained glass windows at the end. A startled young tiefling with crimson curled horns peeked out from one of the rows, her long tapered tail wrapped protectively around her body. She looked annoyed.
“Sorry,” Isabelle mouthed back at her, with an apologetic grimace. The tiefling shook her head and disappeared back into the stacks.

The guardian whirred. “Is there anything you would like me to elaborate on?”

Spurred on by the guardian’s confirmation of her hunch, Isabelle continued with another query, this time speaking in a hushed voice: “I understand the Khensu can walk between worlds, but you used the word ‘envision’. Are you referring to the Khensu’s ability to see the doorways between worlds, or something else?”

_Clicking._ The guardian’s single glowing ‘eye’ pulsed rhythmically as it processed the question. Isabelle found it eerie. Like Sirus’s statue, it gave the impression of watchfulness, but the true nature of its sight was ambiguous. “I am referring to the speculative theory that the Khensu has the capacity to create gateways to an infinite number of worlds, which the Khensu may envision,” it intoned. “In terms of probability, any reality the Khensu imagines is likely to exist somewhere. The Khensu need only access it.”

Perplexed, Isabelle turned away from the automaton and leaned on the cool polished wood of the balustrade to overlook the twisted tree. Its strong arching branches reached out to the countless rows of book shelves on the middle and upper levels of the library. Its leaves had turned pink and gold. Below, glimmering fairies spun around the tree trunk, trailing fairy dust in their wake. She watched them absently, her mind lost in contemplation.

“Why can I only see portals and not make them?” she mused out loud. It occurred to her that Zoku might not be telling her everything about her abilities. If he wanted her to stay on track to find Athrin, he may have withheld information regarding the Khensu’s power to create portals, lest she be tempted to pursue another path—a path towards her mother. He had an agenda all of his own, that much was clear, though it was also clear that Zoku was right: Sirus had to be stopped.

Isabelle spun back around to face the guardian, who was waiting motionlessly and expectantly. “Is there any evidence of a Khensu summoning a portal to a specific, imagined universe?” she asked.

“There are a total of twenty-two documented accounts of a Khensu summoning a portal of their own creation. Eleven of these accounts come directly
from Khensu, though of these eleven, five are translations and therefore may not be completely accurate or authentic in their meaning.”

Isabelle thought a moment. “What was the most recent account?”

“Five hundred and sixty-two years have passed since the last recorded creation, by Khensu Nekhbet Alduin,” the guardian replied, clicking and clacking as it recited its knowledge. “On her 70th birthday the orc priestess made a totem describing her passing, inscribing it with her wish to die with dignity and on her own terms. It is written that she said farewell to her family, summoned a portal to oblivion, stepped into it, and was never seen again. The totem resides on the eastern side of the nineteenth level of the library if you would care to examine it.”

Isabelle could barely contain her growing excitement. Her mother must have known what she would discover here. She had never felt closer to her than she did now. She felt as if she had indeed followed the right path in coming to the Great Library.

She had one more question for the automaton. “Alec, could you bring me some books concerning the creation of portals, starting with the most recent documents?” She knew the automaton would obey.
Never Judge a Book by its Cover

Isabelle spent the day crouched at a desk with a wall of books and papers surrounding her. She had just finished scanning a clay tablet that contained vague scratchings about the location of a particularly prosperous realm that one Khensu had deemed necessary to record. It had a crude map etched on the back, which Isabelle couldn’t decipher, so she discarded it, along with various other works.

Next, she moved onto a large leather-bound tome with yellowed pages. Printed on the cover in gold-foiled lettering was the dramatic title: ‘Faery Tales from the Great Beyond.’ There was no cover art or author’s name.

The guardian that was assisting Isabelle had brought her the heavy book, thumping it down next to all the other works, stating that it pertained to the Khensu and a plurality of worlds. The automaton also relayed that it was a limited edition, unique in its mode of storytelling and only select individuals would be able to read it.

This piqued Isabelle’s curiosity. She assumed she wouldn’t be able to understand it but was nevertheless intrigued. Brushing papers aside to make room for the large book, Isabelle wiped a hand over the worn cover and opened it.

There was a whooshing sound and flash of white glaring light, and then blackness. Isabelle felt a wave of vertigo wash over her, accompanied by blurry vision. Her ears were ringing, and her fingers and toes tingled. Woozily, she squeezed her eyes shut and held her head in both hands, bending forward a little against the sickening sensation. She took several deep breaths and waited for it to pass.

After a minute or two she regained her composure and opened her eyes to examine her surroundings. Suffice to say, she was no longer in the library. She’d materialised in an abundant green world, with rolling green hills and thick tangled woodlands that were home to a variety of brightly coloured mushrooms and exotic flowers. The sky was thundery and grey with patches of pale blue sky peeking through the gaps in the clouds. She couldn’t see the sun. The smell of damp wood and wild flowers lingered on the breeze.


She wasn’t prepared for this. Her leather bodice, along with the rest of her clothing, was back at the library, being washed by the guardians. All she wore
was her shirt, trousers, and boots. She didn’t have her pack or her bow. She was without water and food, and without any means to defend herself. And no one knew where she was. She looked urgently in her immediate vicinity. She could not see the portal through which she had come, which made sense, given she had been transported through the pages of a book. But how would she get home if there was no portal connecting this world to her own? *Maybe Zoku or Hyde will find the book in the library and figure something out,* she thought. *Maybe I should wait here?*

No, inaction wasn’t an option. There was too much to be done. She had to move.

Not too far off, Isabelle spied the pointed tip of a castle tower rising above the forest and into the cloudy grey sky. She made reaching it her objective. Leading into the woodland was a winding stone path, which disappeared into the gloom of an imposing forest, thick with trees and thorny creepers. Despite the ominous wall of vegetation that stood between her and the tower, Isabelle decided it was the only path worth following. She proceeded into the woods with caution.

It was even gloomier within the depths of the woods. The tightly packed trees devoured most of the light before it reached the forest floor. Only small shafts of light from the sky penetrated the thick canopy, illuminating random patches of the fern and mulchy leaves like a wan spotlight. It took a long time for Isabelle to navigate her way through the woods to the castle. Several times she accidentally wandered from the path and had to backtrack in order to find it again. The path was twisted and often obscured by debris. Isabelle struggled to push her way through the tangled webs of overhanging branches and vines, often getting lacerated by the vicious flora. Her arms and face stung from the many scratches. Because it was difficult to see where she was going, Isabelle had to rely on the soft tapping of her boots against the stone to make sure she was on track. It would be all too easy to get horribly lost in this eerie place, and who knew what lurked in the shadows. Isabelle hoped she wouldn’t have to find out. She felt naked without her bow.

When she finally emerged from the woods Isabelle was tired and sore from her battle with the vegetation. Her mouth was dry, and her feet ached, and the thought of having to fight her way back through the woods if help couldn’t be found filled her with dread.
The sky had grown even heavier with clouds, and yet it took her a moment to adjust to the light of the afternoon. The land before her was flat and green, with small round shrubs dotting the landscape. Standing proud, not far from the edge of the woodland, was the stone tower, which Isabelle could now see was part of a greater castle. Further beyond the castle was a wall of mountains, their peaks hidden by fluffy white clouds.

As weary as she was, Isabelle didn’t stop to rest. She could picture Hyde worrying about her disappearance, and envision Sirus, unchecked, wreaking havoc on the unsuspecting creatures of the forest, turning every human into a weapon against the Ancients, sapping the fae of their magic and power. If she couldn’t find a way out of this place, Athrin would be waiting for her for all of eternity. If she was stuck here, she may never know what happened to her mother. Isabelle mustered all of her remaining energy and strode towards the castle.

There was no gate at the entrance to the castle, which Isabelle found strange. The wall simply had a large arched opening on the front side, with a row of lit sconces above the gap. There were no banners or signs of heraldry. There was also no sign of guards on or within the walls. The place seemed entirely empty—and it looked like it had been for some time. The ground in front of the castle was completely undisturbed. There were no cart tracks, signs of foot traffic, or hoof marks in the dirt, which Isabelle thought unusual, given that a castle of this size would surely require regular deliveries of food and resources.

Nevertheless, she kept her guard up because she’d learnt that things were not always as they seemed. There could be any number of hidden dangers in the seemingly abandoned castle and its grounds.

Suddenly, as if to reaffirm Isabelle’s suspicions, a blast of green lightning came hurtling towards her, striking the ground at her feet, where she stood before the archway that formed the entrance to the castle grounds. The static in the air crackled and hissed. The stench of sulphur surrounded Isabelle, making her eyes water. She blinked furiously, attempting to clear her vision.

“Turn back now,” came a booming voice from out of nowhere. Like thunder it rolled across the land, its origin unclear. “Crawl back into the woods and forget this place, or face my wrath.”

Isabelle froze. She cursed herself for not stopping to whittle a stick into a makeshift pike, or even to pick up some stones, so that she could better defend
herself. She glanced around, urgently trying to identify the threat. Was there a sniper on top of the walls or in the tower? She thought the voice sounded vaguely feminine, though it was so thunderous and deep that she couldn’t be certain. The magical lightning had been well aimed and was obviously intended to intimidate her into leaving. If the person guarding the castle had wanted her dead, she would be dead. Instead she’d received a warning, which indicated at least a shred of mercy. Isabelle decided to take her chances and test the limits of that mercy.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that,” Isabelle called back through the archway. She didn’t know where she should direct her response, so she just shouted towards the castle at large. “I’m lost, and I’ve wasted too much time in those dreaded woods already. I don’t mean anyone any harm. Please, I just need some assistance.”

“No one has ever sought aid in this cursed place,” said the mysterious voice, somewhat contemplatively. Isabelle realised that, without the sound of their voices, the forest and the castle grounds were utterly silent. Not a bird or an insect disturbed the stillness.

“Well, I don’t know this land or its history,” Isabelle replied frankly. She hoped she didn’t sound too naïve or helpless. While she wasn’t too proud to ask for help, she also knew it was unwise to present herself as a damsel in distress. She envisioned another green bolt of lightning striking her dead and wondered how long it would take Hyde to decide that she had gone for good.

Thankfully, there was no lightning. There was, however, a sudden explosion of greenish smoke in front of the castle, from which a magnificent, tall figure emerged. The woman was draped in a long black robe that cascaded around her feet in silken tendrils. The sleeves of her dress widened at the wrists to reveal a deep purple lining that reappeared at the collar, which flared dramatically around the woman’s slender neck. She wore an exotic ebony headdress of woven gauze and leather, which had points that resembled horns. They curled slightly, forming a lazy ‘S’ shape and tapering into sharp points. Her skin was like ivory. Her cheekbones were sharp and matched her angular jawline. From behind long, dark eyelashes, her golden eyes glimmered dangerously. Isabelle thought immediately of Sirus.

“My, my, lost indeed,” the woman cooed. Her voice was like honey, rich and sticky, though it did not soothe in the way of the mermaid’s voices. It made
Isabelle feel slightly ill, just as Sirus’s had. “My name is Maleficent, and this is my home, but I can see that you come from another realm entirely.” The woman looked Isabelle up and down, making Isabelle self-conscious about her filthy attire.

Isabelle swept her hair back, exposing her ears. She had come such a long way—from indifference or shame about her elven heritage, to this pride in the power and status of her mother’s people. “My name is Isabelle,” she called out to the woman, “and I come from Pan’s Forest.”

“I see many things,” Maleficent said in response, approaching and visibly noting Isabelle’s ears, “including things the common-folk cannot. I. See. You.” There was a hardness lurking behind the woman’s eyes, even as she performed a smile. It filled Isabelle with unease and made her feel small and vulnerable, even as she tried to stand tall and proud.

A single plop of rain dashed itself against Isabelle’s cheek. She quickly brushed it away with the back of her dry, scratched-up hand.

“What brought you here, to the Enchanted Forest of Grimm?” the woman purred, stopping a few steps away from Isabelle, who had not dared to trespass into the castle grounds and who held her place outside the archway. “And so unprepared in your dress? You look like a beggar woman.”

Isabelle realised she must look a mess in her grubby attire and scratches all over. Still, the comment hurt. She wasn’t sure if she should tell Maleficent anything, but she didn’t see that she had much to lose. “I arrived here quite unexpectedly,” she said, “when I was reading a book.”

“Oh, of course,” Maleficent said with a casual flick of her wrist. Her flared sleeve flapped with the movement, revealing white, slender wrists. They looked as if they had never seen the sun. But perhaps the sun never broke free of the clouds here, Isabelle thought. The sky above, she saw, was churning with clouds now, despite the absence of any wind. “You wouldn’t be the first to get lost that way.” The woman’s voluptuous crimson lips curled into a leer. Her face was pristinely made up. She fixed Isabelle with her hawk-like gaze, sizing her up.

“You know, most people who face me either run in fear or make threats,” she said. “I admire your fortitude.” She clapped her hands together as a thought came to her. “I think I’m feeling generous today, and so I will help you.”
“Really?” Isabelle blurted, before cursing herself for giving away her own desperation. She was powerless here; now Maleficent knew it too.

“Of course, my dear,” the woman smirked, her long black skirt swinging as she took another step towards the frightened Isabelle, though she kept her distance from her, giving expression to a look of distaste. “What’s the use in having great power if I can’t use it occasionally.”

A breeze scuttled through the grounds, causing stray leaves to pinwheel through the arched doorway and across the grounds. The stone castle loomed in the background, silent and formidable against the equally intimidating mountains. The clouds, Isabelle saw, seemed to be descending towards them, obscuring the jagged mountain peaks and threatening a storm.

“Well,” Isabelle said to break the silence, “I appreciate you helping me.”

“Well?” Maleficent abruptly asked. “My power over others hasn’t always been highly regarded. Formidable women are rarely objects of praise.” Bitterness had edged its way into her voice. “It’s fine for fickle kings to steal their wives, marry off their children for wealth, and sack neighbouring cities in the name of glory, but heaven forbid a woman try and increase her social standing through anything other than marriage. I was outcast. That’s why I live alone in the mountains, far from the small-minded folk that would love nothing more than to see me burn. But you, my child, are a most welcome visitor here.”

Isabelle wondered how old Maleficent was. It was difficult to gauge her age, but Isabelle guessed she couldn’t have been more than fifty years old. And yet something in her eyes revealed a depth of knowledge and experience exceeding her apparent age.

Isabelle thought again of Sirus, of the power he exuded, and his isolation in the temple. This woman, like Sirus, seemed made of stone. She was hard with her perfection.

“Your power,” Isabelle began, thinking of her storybooks and tales of wicked witches, “were you born with it or …?” She realised she could not speak the words that were in her mind: or did you steal it, like Sirus?

Maleficent waved a hand airily. Her red painted nails were like talons. “I used to be a fairy, you know. A greedy king invaded my home, so I made it my task to ruin him. I consumed every book I could get hold of. With practice and a great deal of passion and determination, I have grown to be the most powerful
woman in the land, and the most fearsome.” She paused and then added: “You should know, there is nothing more motivating, more vital, than revenge.”

Isabelle’s mind went to the man she had killed—the one now lying dead in the forest, half buried by rubble and dirt. She had been reluctant to consider what she would have to do—what she must be willing to do—to stop Sirus himself. But it would take more than a single arrow. Of that she was sure. If she had access to the kind of powerful magic that this woman had, maybe she could defeat Sirus before he did any more harm. Surely she had an obligation to stop him by any means. Perhaps Maleficent would be able to teach her what she needed to know.

The woman interrupted Isabelle’s silent ponderings. “I sense you are attracted to power,” Maleficent said, “but you’ve yet to embrace it. What is it you desire? I would hope that a girl of your age has many ambitions.”

Isabelle was caught off guard by this question, but she tried not to appear flustered. The woman walked towards the archway of stone until she loomed over Isabelle, her horned headdress casting a monstrous shadow over Isabelle and the ground. “Well?” she pressed.

“I want to find my lost mother,” she blurted, sounding for all the world like a little girl. She was immediately ashamed and so, to impress Maleficent, she continued. “I want to rescue Athrin, as prophecy requires. Then I want to stop our enemy before he kills anyone else. I want everyone to stop telling me what I should be doing and how I should be acting. I’m the Khensu, but that’s not all I am!”

Isabelle blushed and immediately felt silly for her outburst, but the woman’s expression was as composed as before, her predatory gaze focused intently on Isabelle. “This enemy you speak of,” she spat, with distaste. “Can I assume he seeks to oppress you, as all ambitious men do?”

Isabelle nodded.

The sorceress straightened herself to her full height, her sharp golden eyes becoming as fierce as the roiling skies. “Then kill him,” she said matter-of-factly. Power resonated in her words. “Don’t be afraid of your strength, child. Embrace it, and you shall be free.” She curled a finger at Isabelle, beckoning. “Come, and I will show you.”
A pair of large, dishevelled ravens hobbled along the top of the wall, cawing into the cloudy afternoon sky. Isabelle felt a chill pass through her. In truth, she was afraid of her fierceness. She’d never thought herself capable of taking a human life, but in the heat of the moment—under threat—she hadn’t even hesitated. She had stopped that assassin dead, and what scared her most was how much she wanted to do the same thing to Sirus. How much she wanted to have that feeling of power again.
The woman beckoned with a wave of her hand for Isabelle to follow her, and Isabelle followed the floating hem of her black gown into the castle grounds. They passed a small fenced garden brimming with red roses and topiaries, which were carved into the shapes of predatory animals. Isabelle recognised a bear, an eagle, and a wolf. The low iron fence surrounding them gave the impression that they had been conquered. However, other than that area of manicured greenery, there were no other ornaments or plants, with the cobbled ground consuming most of the landscape.

As they approached the walls of the silent castle, the building seemed even more eerily devoid of life than before. Isabelle pictured the sorceress floating around its many rooms and passages, like a restless spirit, and wondered how she kept herself from going mad with boredom and loneliness.

At the far left-hand corner of the castle grounds there was a raised stone dais with a rich velvet carpet of green, red and black swirls draped atop it. At the centre of this was a shallow basin of water on a pedestal, which Maleficent approached with outstretched arms. The basin was made of silver with ornate filigree work on the three curled legs. The bowl itself was silver, with a glossy aqua glaze on the inside that made the water shimmer vibrantly.

Isabelle followed Maleficent over to it and looked up at her expectantly. Maleficent was much taller than her, as tall as Sirus was as a statue, entrapped in his prison of stone. Her headdress made her all the more imposing.

“Hold out your arm, dear, over the water,” Maleficent said in her rich, silky voice. “If your destiny is tied to another – Athrin – then we will start by finding him.”

Isabelle obliged.

With a flourish, the sorceress pulled a knife out of her robe and, with one quick slice, made a shallow gash on Isabelle's arm, cutting right through her shirt and flesh.

Isabelle allowed herself a quick intake of breath and winced against the startling pain. She didn’t want to appear weak in front of this great woman, but she was shocked by the casual manner with which the sorceress had wounded her. She felt suddenly afraid.
Maleficent’s lips were pursed in a thin smile. “We all must suffer,” she instructed her coolly. She jerked her head towards the basin, gesturing for Isabelle to hold her arm over the water. Reluctantly, Isabelle extended her hand out over the basin and watched as a few droplets of blood dripped into the water, blooming on the surface. As they peered at the dispersing blood, Maleficent began to recite an incantation. Isabelle didn’t understand the words she was hearing, but as she watched the blood melt into the aqua water an image began to take shape.

She could see a young man, tall and thin, with ebony hair that hung in front of his eyes. He was in a house, lying on a rigid looking bed with a thin mattress. A single glass lamp was resting on a low bedside table, and by its light she could see that the man’s eyes were closed.

“Is this the one you seek? This Athrin?” Maleficent asked. She scowled, one of her thin arched eyebrows raised. “He’s not particularly impressive, is he?”

Isabelle peered at the man in the vision. Certainly, he wasn’t any kind of storybook hero, standing tall and proud, impervious to human pain and suffering, but she knew him to be a warrior nonetheless. Zoku had told her enough about Athrin’s sacrifices, and her mother had shown her, during the trance beneath the Elder Tree, that he was a man in need of her help. Isabelle wasn’t certain, as she observed Athrin palely sleeping, if he had any fight left in him. She couldn’t see how he would be able to help her defeat Sirus. But she knew what her duty to him was.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Isabelle said, surprisingly defensive.

“I suppose they can,” Maleficent said enigmatically.

“I need to reach him now.” Isabelle looked up into Maleficent’s eyes and noted the clouds behind the woman’s head, which seemed to be growing darker and thicker, and were almost upon them. “Can you help me?” Isabelle asked, figuring that she had nothing to lose from a direct approach.

Maleficent waved her hand across the air above the basin and the image rippled away, losing clarity until it was gone altogether. She pulled a tiny bottle from one of the deep pockets of her robes, uncorked it and dipped it into the aqua water. When it was full she scooped it back out, briskly replaced the stopper, and handed it to Isabelle. “When you’re ready, splash every drop of this water on the ground. A trail should materialise that will lead you to your lost boy.” She stared
at Isabelle, studying her face with an unnerving intensity, as if trying to calculate her worth.

Isabelle’s pulse quickened. She reached out and clasped the tiny bottle, cradling it in her hands as if it was a baby bird. Isabelle felt nothing less than astonished by the generosity of the woman’s gift, but before she could respond, the sorceress clapped her hands together and said in a business-like tone: “Now then. Clear your mind and focus on my voice. Let us set you on the path to greatness.”

Isabelle pocketed the vial, and Maleficent leaned in close to her, bending so that their eyes were level. The woman’s pale skin and sharp features made her appear deathly in the growing gloom, and Isabelle remembered when she had been trapped inside the temple with Hyde, mesmerised by the ghastly statue. She began to doubt Maleficent. Was her kindness true? She thought of the little shell that the mermaid Reu had gifted her and clutched her hand to her chest to make sure it was still there, nestled beneath her shirt. Isabelle wasn’t sure she wanted to follow any path that Maleficent was recommending, but she did know that she urgently wanted to get out of there.

Maleficent closed her eyes, so Isabelle followed suit. She could feel her fingers tingling, and then her arms and chest and legs. Isabelle felt someone taking her hands and opened her eyes to stare into the face of Maleficent. The sorceress wore a wickedly triumphant expression. “I feel that you are reluctant. Well, first feel what it is like to have no power!” Behind her, a swirling vortex had manifested several inches above the ground, like a small thundercloud, all grey and angry. It swelled and churned the air, sucking dust and debris into it with growing ferocity. Isabelle wasn’t sure that she wanted to hurl herself through the dangerous looking vortex. It was so different to the usual portals. Worst of all, she had no idea where it would take her. And what was the woman shouting about her having no power?

Maleficent yelled above the din, “Go now!”

She looked to Maleficent, resplendent in her flowing ebony gown and extravagant headdress. Her glittering golden eyes were sharp and hungry. With a nod of uneasy gratitude and confusion, Isabelle mustered her courage and dove headlong into the swirling vortex.
Rescue

Isabelle lay as still as death. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t lift a finger, wiggle a toe, or bat an eyelid.

Upon travelling through Maleficent’s spiralling portal, she found herself lying on her back in some sort of glass case, outside, in full daylight, completely immobilised. In fact, she couldn’t even make a sound. She wanted to scream and cry and beg for aid, but as if in a nightmare, she couldn’t produce even the faintest noise. She was utterly helpless; a hostage within her own body. All she could do was stare up at the sky through unblinking eyes and watch the peaceful clouds that scudded across it, propelled by a silent breeze.

Maleficent had betrayed her. First feel what it is like to have no power. The woman’s words taunted Isabelle, who would have cried in anger and despair, but there was no way for her to give expression to any feelings.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay there, screaming inside her own head, lost in terror, but eventually a face popped into view above her glass casket. It was a man, or someone like a man. He must have been short for his face was close to the glass and he didn’t appear to be stooping. He had a thick, wiry beard the colour of rust and a matching moustache. His bulbous nose had the rosy glow of an alcoholic and his ruddy cheeks told a similar story. With intense green eyes he stared down at her, drilling holes into her very core.

If she had been capable of shuddering, Isabelle would have. She felt like a doll on display, lying still beneath the glass, exposed, being gawked at by this stranger. She wondered if he knew she was conscious. Was it her face he saw, or someone else’s? Could she rely on him to help her?

Desperately, Isabelle willed her body to respond to her commands. She tried to blink, to indicate that she was awake. Nothing happened. She focused on her numb fingertips, on trying to get them to move, even if just to twitch. They didn’t budge. Open your mouth! She screamed in frustration. It was no use. She had no voice.

“Still sleeping, my pretty?” asked the man. His gentle voice was muffled through the glass, but Isabelle could hear him clearly enough. “I see the sun still hasn’t marred your lovely fair skin,” he continued. “Aren’t you lucky. A day toiling in the sun and my skin’s as dry and brown as an old hide boot! But not
you, my sleeping beauty. Not you. You’re as pure as the winter snow, aren’t you?” He patted the glass above her chest with a weathered hand.

*No, I’m not!* Isabelle wanted to respond, thinking of her generally honey-coloured skin. *Please, help me!* she begged. *I’m not who you think I am. I’m not supposed to be here. This isn’t where I end up!*

Her pleas went unheard. The man scratched his beard, and then his crotch, before walking away.

More time passed. Isabelle wasn’t sure how much time. Long enough for a starling to land on the case and preen itself. Long enough for maple leaves to blow past, and dust to speckle the glass. Long enough for the sun to complete its lazy passage from one end of the sky to the other.

As the sky was turning pink from the setting sun, several other men came to visit Isabelle. First an old fellow with grey in his grizzled beard and pock marks on his leathery skin. He didn’t say a word. He just placed a bunch of daisies on the glass case, stared at her a long moment, then left. Sometime later three more stout men arrived. They were all a bit dishevelled, their grimy clothes streaked with sweat and dirt. They were carrying pick axes. They hovered over her, like adults flocking around a newborn. And like an infant, Isabelle couldn’t help but stare wordlessly back at them. Their faces conveyed a mixture of kindness, hunger, pity.

“Poor lass,” one said.

“Such a shame,” said another.

“Still, it’s a blessing that that old hag inadvertently preserved the girl’s beauty, despite meaning to snuff it out. Though it’s sad to see her so lifeless, her pretty face does warm my heart some.”

“Aye, that it does,” the shortest man concurred in a hushed tone, bowing his head in reverence. Then they each kissed the foot of her casket before leaving, as if she were part of a shrine.

Then as the sun began to dip beyond the horizon, out of Isabelle’s sight, and the sky became the colour of indigo, speckled with cold stars, a human face appeared. The man bobbed into view so abruptly that it startled her. He was much taller than her other admirers, younger too. His hair was thick, curly and blonde; his clean-shaven face was chiselled. A stray curl flopped forward over his brow as he bent to examine the case and its contents.
His magnetic blue eyes consumed her, studying the intricacies of her face and then trailing down the length of her body in appreciation.

“What a great beauty,” he sighed in awe, his full lips close to the glass.

“I’ve never seen a specimen like her, have you, Gustav?”

Another man approached. He was considerably older, with a grim countenance and tired eyes. He crossed his bony arms as he peered at Isabelle.

“She is quite fair, your grace,” Gustav replied rather unconvincingly.

The young man laughed heartily. “Quite fair? Gustav, you old bore, have you forgotten what attractive women look like? Look at her! She’s a prize.”

“So, you mean to keep her, then?”

“Of course. She will make a most enviable bride.”

Gustav stared deadpan at the prince. “But what of her… affection, your grace?”

The young man looked up at Gustav with an expression that suggested he was being pertinent. “My mind is made up. I must have her. Load her onto the wagon immediately,” he barked.

“As you wish, your grace,” said Gustav.

Isabelle couldn’t believe what she was hearing. This stranger was going to literally cart her off to be his bride! Quelling her fear and frustration, Isabelle resolved that she would not continue in this state a moment longer, being drooled over like she was the last slice of cake at a banquet.

While the prince was busy ordering his servants about, having them discard things off the cart to make room for his new bride, Isabelle started thinking back to Maleficent’s advice, before she had conjured the portal to this coffin, and concentrated on clearing her mind. Would she be able to conjure another portal without the woman’s help? She remembered the cold and bony feeling of Maleficent’s hands, grabbing hers while she had her eyes closed.

Isabelle was sure that Maleficent had somehow interfered with her conjuring of a portal, delivering her, instead, to this place, in the hope of teaching her … what? To embrace her powers? Isabelle shuddered. She knew what she had to do, but she did not want to end up alone and cruel like that witch.

It was difficult to focus her thoughts without being able to close her eyes. She had to make a real effort to tune out the stars arching overhead in all their brilliance above her in the sky. However, eventually she felt the sky receding into
a haze. The Prince’s muffled voice became more and more distant. *I’m not here,* she told herself.

She thought about her home and her friends. She imagined her father sitting in the living room in front of the fire. Hyde would be searching the Great Library for her. Perhaps Zoku had appeared with another message for her. Hyde and Zoku might even be bickering. She recalled their voices and visualised Hyde’s expression when he was annoyed. She thought of Meera, her amber eyes and her blunt way of expressing herself. Then she thought about her mother, the language spoken to her at her bedside when she was a child, and how she had looked in the vision beneath the Elder Tree. *I will be waiting.*

Her fingertips began to tingle…

She was in a cellar. At least she assumed it was a cellar because of all the wine barrels that were stacked neatly around the cool, low-ceilinged room. Jars of preserved fruit and huge wheels of cheese were piled on top of a low wooden table, along with a couple of crates marked ‘cured meat’. The space was oppressive and claustrophobic. The potent smell of sulphates offended her nostrils and the dim light forced her to squint.

In a far corner of the room there was a fold-out stretcher, and on the stretcher lay a lean woman with ashen hair piled loosely in a bun. She had her back to Isabelle and appeared to be sleeping. She wore a pair of brown leather trousers and a dirty white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. On her pale arms Isabelle could make out various thin pink scars and some angry bruises. On the ground next to her rested a squat flickering candle, tall leather boots, and a pair of long swords sheathed in worn leather scabbards.

Isabelle didn’t want to be around when the woman awoke, for a warrior who carried not one, but two swords was likely a force to be reckoned with.

There was an intense hum in the air, loud and persistent. Isabelle couldn’t tell where it was coming from—it was everywhere at once, penetrating deep into her being. As it grew in intensity, becoming something akin to pain, she squeezed her eyes closed and clamped a hand over her ears, trying to block out the noise.

“Mama?”

When Isabelle opened her eyes at the sound of the woman’s husky voice, the world fell away, and she was plunged into nothingness. She felt herself
falling. She tried to scream out for help, but there was now no sound at all in the inky black void that had become her reality. Images shuddered in and out of existence. In her panic, Isabelle thought she glimpsed Maleficent crouched in front of a cauldron with a wolf at her side, but as she frantically tried to cling to that image, it fell apart and was gone.

Bursts of light stung Isabelle’s eyes. She struggled to find something tangible to tether herself to, to stop the worlds from spinning out of control and tearing her apart. She saw a giant grey building that rose high up into the night sky, dotted with symmetrical squares of illuminated glass. A woman with golden hair leaned out of the top window. Just as quickly as the image had appeared, it was replaced by the image of a fiery creature with horns and stone claws, its long tail whipping out to strike at a horde of faceless people. Again, Isabelle opened her mouth to call out, and again she could make no sound. Isabelle braced herself for a further assault of images and slippages, but instead she felt solid ground beneath her feet. What’s more, she felt a pair of warm hands on her shoulders, bracing her against the violent return.
“Belle?”

Isabelle slowly opened her eyes to find Hyde peering back at her with deep concern etched on his weary face. They were huddled on the cool floor of the Great Library amidst the towering stacks and he was grasping her shoulders, his face inches away from her own. His warm breath on her cheek was reassuring. It felt real.

“I’m alright,” she rasped. Her throat was dry and sore. She looked around the library, trying to get her bearings. The candle light emanating from the various wall sconces was soft, but it still made her dizzy. She squeezed her eyes closed against the light. When she reopened them, her eyes fell upon the gently swaying branches of the silver tree at the centre of the library. She’d never noticed them move before and there was no wind in the library. Maybe they weren’t swaying. Maybe she was.

Isabelle reached out a shaky hand and brushed something solid—a chair leg. She was next to the desk where all of this had begun.

“What happened?” Hyde asked breathlessly. “I’ve been looking all over for you. At first I thought you might have left after … but then Zoku said he couldn’t sense your presence anymore. You scared the life out of me!” He let go of her and rocked back on his haunches. His clothing looked like it had been laundered and smelled faintly of juniper.

Isabelle pushed herself to her feet, using Hyde for support, and stood unsteadily beside the desk. The heavy leather-bound tome that had transported her to the Enchanted Forest sat innocuously on the desk top. Its gold lettering seemed to wink at her under the dancing candle light.

Hyde offered her a pitcher of water, which she accepted gratefully. “How long was I gone?” she asked, once the cool water had soothed her raw throat and settled her nerves.

Hyde eyed her warily. He tried to touch her temple, where Isabelle could feel a raw scratch, she assumed from her battle through the forest near Maleficent’s castle, but Isabelle brushed his hand away. He seemed to have a new respect for her. There were no jokes. “A full day,” he replied. “And night. Where were you?”
Isabelle ignored his question. “We don’t have time to waste,” she said, becoming alert. “We should get going as soon as possible.” She found that she wanted Sirus dealt with, once and for all, so that she could move on. Resentment grew inside her at having to deal with his malicious plans instead of continuing with her own quest. She didn’t want it to take hold of her.

“I know how to find Athrin.” Isabelle brought out the tiny vial that Maleficent had given her, relieved to find that it was safe in her trouser pocket. She held it out to Hyde for his inspection.

As she did so, Zoku materialised out of thin air, next to Hyde. His bright eyes gleamed in the dim light of the archives. He spoke, as always, to her.

“Isabelle,” he rasped, looking her up and down. “You are unharmed.” He took in the tiny flask in her hand. “And ready to retrieve Athrin, I see.”

“Hold on,” Hyde said, still looking concerned, and maybe even a little nervous. “Aren’t we going to talk about what happened?” He gave Isabelle a meaningful look.

Isabelle stuffed the vial back in her pants pocket, keeping her hand closed around it. “I’ll fill you in on the way to Emporia,” she replied.

Hyde scratched thoughtfully at his cheek and turned to eye a nearby automaton, which was reorganising a section of shelving. Its joints screeched as it bent to the task. “Okay. Give me an hour,” he said to Isabelle. “I want to order as much food and drink as I can carry.”
Discovery

After three solid days of trekking, Isabelle, Hyde and Zoku finally reached the pine forest, which Isabelle had first envisioned in a dream. Shortly after leaving the Great Library, Isabelle had dumped the contents of Maleficent’s potion on the ground and was relieved to see that a thick trail of blue smoke had materialised, hovering a few inches off the ground. After Maleficent’s betrayal, she’d worried it wouldn’t work, or worse, that it would melt her skin or turn her into a toad. But then, the woman had taught her how to summon a portal just as she’d promised she would, albeit in a manipulative fashion. Her father had done a similar thing when teaching her to swim. She’d only been five years old and scared of the murky depths of the lake near their house. One day he lured her there under the pretence that they were to go fishing, then, much to her horror, he tossed her in. She’d panicked at first, but as her father had predicted, she found her way to the surface and managed to paddle ashore.

Nevertheless, it had shaken her trust in him, and she felt similarly uneasy now, blindly following Maleficent’s potion as it wove haphazardly through the forest.

It led them into a copse of spindly pines. The ground was strewn with a thick layer of pine needles and twigs, which crunched underfoot. In several places, small red mushrooms with spotted caps pushed up through the needles to form bright clusters. Cackling crows watched their progress from above.

Isabelle was just about to voice her concerns about the magical trail, when she spotted something through the trees. Her pulse quickened.

The giant boulder shaped like a bear was resting peacefully in a clearing, a shaft of sunlight striking its muzzle. Isabelle padded silently towards the giant stone beast, as if afraid that it would somehow hear her advancing and bolt.

“How about that,” Hyde marvelled as they approached the statue. He dumped his canvas sack onto the ground beside some mushrooms and began running a hand over the scars in the rough stone. “Looks like your witch came through.”

Isabelle trailed her own hand along the statue, examining the weathered rock from one end to the other. It was just as she had envisioned it. When she
reached the head of the bear she let her fingers linger on its snout. She looked at its blank eyes.

“Can you see a portal?” Zoku interrupted. Then he paced around the statue, his head lowered as if he were sniffing the earth. The fur on his back was bristling.

“You’re going to leave again?” Hyde asked anxiously. His ears twitched, and he fidgeted with the staff in his hands. His brow was sweaty from the journey and a bead of sweat trailed down his temple.

“Well, I didn’t come all this way just to stand here and look at a big stone bear,” Isabelle quipped, trying to mask her nervousness. She patted the statue, following the beast’s gaze into the forest, and sighted the shimmering portal, glowing amongst the trees and overgrowth.

Without hesitation, Isabelle turned and wrapped her arms around Hyde, pulling him towards her and hugging him tightly. His stubbled chin tickled her cheek as he hugged her back. He smelled faintly of mead. “I’ll be fine, Hyde,” she said reassuringly, and then turned to face the entrance to Emporia, ready to confront the man whose fate was so entwined with her destiny.
Lost and Found

As usual, Isabelle’s body tingled all over with the sensation of static energy. Her skin hummed, and if she’d bothered to look down she would have noticed that the fine hairs on the back of her hands and wrists were raised. Then the usual debilitating nausea hit. By the time she was recovered, crouched on hard earth and looking around at her new environment, she was too engrossed by the fantastic world she’d stepped into to think about how she was feeling.

A crowded landscape of blocky buildings with flat roofs and jagged corners sprawled out before her. Some of the buildings were tall, others low and flat. They were all painted different shades of grey, from dark charcoal tones through to pale silvers. There were skinny trees dotted around the place, sticking out of the narrow gaps between the buildings. They were different from the ones back in Pan’s Forest, having no lower branches, just a single bushy orb of foliage at the top.

The ground was hard and black. Isabelle couldn’t specify exactly what it was made of, but it was similar to slate. Patches of grass grew defiantly against some of the buildings, breaking up the drab footpaths, but those signs of life were few and far between. Given the number of houses and the fact that she knew this was the place of eternal life, she had been expecting to see a lot of inhabitants, but there were only a few lethargic humanoid creatures drifting silently through the streets. They were all dressed in loose fitting linen pants and matching collared robes in shades of grey and brown. They were all very pale and lean, with tight features and dull eyes.

The people, she observed, seemed to pay each other little attention, and if they recognised Isabelle as an anomaly, they didn’t show it. No one even glanced her way. It was as if she had wandered into a world of shadows and ghosts.

The air was heavy with humidity and made Isabelle feel stifled, clammy and anxious.

She was, however, grateful when she saw that the trail of weaving smoke from Maleficent’s potion was still working here, though it had lost some of its colour and was fading quickly. She hurried to follow it and eventually came to a low-ceilinged house painted dark grey. Along its front ran a narrow slit of a window, tinted black so she couldn’t see in. It was wedged in between two other
matching houses and had no garden or fence, just a stone path leading to the entrance. The smoke trickled under the heavy-set iron door, disappearing within.

Isabelle stepped onto the porch and stared anxiously at the front door for a full minute before knocking twice on the cold, hard iron. As she stood nervously waiting, she felt her skin tingle. The sensation was akin to the prickling she felt when crossing between worlds, accompanied by a magnetic pull. This was the place of the former Khensu, she was sure of it.

The door scraped opened. A tall man with pale skin and stormy eyes stood before her. He wore grey cotton pants and no shirt. His bare chest and narrow shoulders were smooth and white, but well defined and marked with thin pink scars. His long dark hair was swept back away from his face. Isabelle remembered that he was part fae, but his delicate features, luminous complexion and straight black hair reminded her of Snow. However, where her blue eyes had been full of innocence, his were hard and spoke of experience. In fact, Isabelle was struck by the look of despair he wore when he opened the door, though his eyes widened with life when he saw her.

“Khensu?” he choked, squinting against the glare from outside. “You’re finally here,” he breathed, staring at her in apparent awe. Athrin then suddenly realised that he was naked from the waist up and hurried over to the bed to scoop up a crumpled shirt. He hastily shrugged it on before turning back to Isabelle. He looked embarrassed and a little confused. “My familiar, Zoku, was meant to guide you?”

“And he has,” Isabelle reassured him. She advanced a few steps into the gloomy house and took in the stark surroundings. There was a small round table with a single wooden chair, and a lonely tumbler half-filled with a blue liquid resting on a concrete bench along the side wall. The room was dimly lit. There was a single bed wedged in a corner with a thin blanket and flat pillow. The home, if you could call it that, was devoid of life.

“I’m not aware of how much time has passed exactly,” Athrin said, standing awkwardly before her and rubbing at his arm, “but it was foretold that it would be some hundred years. Has it been that long?” The mere question seemed to pain him, and Isabelle remembered that Athrin had had a family in Pan’s Forest. A family he had long ago left behind.

Isabelle nodded.
“And Sirus is stirring?” Athrin asked. Isabelle shifted the weight of her pack and bow against her back. The space of the dark room felt claustrophobic. “Yes,” she said and tried a smile. “Which is why I’ve been traipsing all over the forest looking for you.”

Athrin examined the details of Isabelle’s face, his serious expression unchanged. He also noted her messy hair, the cuts and scrapes on her face and neck, her sweated brow and the knife at her hip. Her violet eyes were bright and fierce. “May I ask how long it has been since you discovered your calling?”

“Not long. A few weeks or so,” Isabelle replied.

“A few weeks?” Athrin spluttered, suddenly animated. He brought his hands up to his temples in despair. “And Sirus is free?” He groaned. “This is terrible news. I thought you’d be ready.”

Isabelle felt annoyed by his doubt—and his apparent rejection of her friendship. She tucked her hair behind her ears in a gesture that was becoming a habit whenever she felt challenged. She, after all, was the one prophesied to defeat Sirus. “The question is,” she replied sternly, “are you ready?”

Athrin silently regarded Isabelle, this time with more confidence—in her but also, Isabelle thought, in himself. Then he turned and glanced about the sparse room. Isabelle noticed that there was not a hint of fondness, attachment, or thoughtfulness in his gaze—only resentment. “I was ready to leave this place the moment I arrived,” he said bitterly.

Isabelle felt a pang of sympathy for Athrin then. His life and sacrifices, she knew, had not been easy.

Athrin snatched a black coat off a hook by the door and draped it over his arm. “Let’s go,” he said decisively.

They left the house together, and Isabelle led the way back through the streets, towards the portal that would take them back to Pan’s Forest. Whenever they passed someone, she saw Athrin recoil. He kept his distance from her too.

The silence in the streets was unnerving. Feeling more like Hyde than herself, she found herself wanting to break it.

“Hopefully you can still pass through portals,” she said, half-joking, stepping aside to avoid a passing woman on the narrow footpath. The humans here did not make eye contact, keeping their eyes to the ground, and so Isabelle found herself having to avoid collision with them.
Athrin nodded, causing his dark hair to fall across his scarred face. “Prophecy says that I will return with you,” Athrin replied, with a face as stern as the grey buildings around them.

“Yes, I heard a lot about prophecy from Zoku,” Isabelle said, barely containing the snort she wanted to give vent to.

Athrin pursed his lips and glared at her as they walked. “Prophecy is sacred to the Khensu.”

“My life,” Isabelle asserted, glaring back at him now, “is sacred, and it is my own.” She had not expected there to be so much tension between them.

“That’s an extraordinarily selfish outlook,” Athrin remarked, chiding her. “And an inappropriate attitude for the Khensu. You serve a higher authority. You have a duty, a calling. You must be focused on defeating Sirus.”

Isabelle bristled. She was sick of men telling her who she was and what she must do, and Athrin was straining the last of her fraying nerves. She knew what her responsibility was to others, and she knew what her responsibility was to herself. She was willing to overlook some of Athrin’s comments, and his limited vision of heroism, given he was born several generations ago, but she wouldn’t let him insult her with such blatant condescension.

“I know what to do,” she stated in her most authoritative tone, restoring silence, though in truth, she realised, she wasn’t entirely sure how she would defeat Sirus.

Isabelle wove her way through the narrow streets, concentrating on retracing her steps. Having found Athrin, the smoke trail had dissipated, and the uniformity of the city made the task of returning to the portal difficult. When she spotted the mirage dancing in the street, she was secretly relieved. Athrin must have noticed it too, because he slowed his pace as they approached and muttered something about the doorway to hell.

She turned to face him.

Athrin looked around at the dull streets and the few people moving about like ghosts. His face was hard and emotionless. “This is a place of eternal life, but I have not been alive. I had a family once. They’re nothing but dust now. All I’ve been doing is waiting for the chance to kill Sirus.” He looked at Isabelle then, his fists clenched. “My hatred for him has kept me going all these long years; nothing else.”
Isabelle was disturbed by how cold Athrin was. She didn’t want to be consumed by the role of Khensu the way he had, committed to warfare and chained to a prophecy which he obeyed as if he had no choice but to become the destroyed man he was. She saw it now—Athrin and Maleficent had suffered from different flaws but they had met with the same fate. A life of loneliness and anger. Perhaps it wasn’t too late for her to show Athrin a different path.

“Take my hand and let’s go,” she said, with a newfound kindness. Isabelle extended her palm to him. Athrin hesitated momentarily, but then reached out and gently clasped it. His skin was cold and rough. Isabelle gave his hand a tight squeeze and then pulled him along with her towards the portal. The two Khensu stepped through the shimmering gateway, hand in hand.
Reunion

Isabelle released her grip on Athrin and blinked against the glare of sunshine that illuminated the forest. Then she saw Zoku and Hyde, sitting beneath a spindly pine. Hyde leapt up from his spot under the tree and hurried over to Isabelle, throwing his arms around her. “We were worried!” he exclaimed, pulling away to look into her eyes.

“I wasn’t,” Zoku replied, deadpan. He was staring at Athrin, who was also gazing at the incorporeal wolf.

The former Khensu spoke his first words to Zoku in over a hundred years. “It’s good to see you, old friend,” he said, his voice raspy.

Hyde was about to say something, but Isabelle quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, anticipating that he would ruin the moment by saying something inappropriate.

“It’s good to see you too, Khensu,” Zoku replied. He padded closer to Athrin, his spectral fur swaying with each step. Isabelle expected that they might touch—if it was possible for Zoku to be touched—but they held their ground.

“So, Sirus is awakened,” Athrin said, his voice unbroken by emotion this time.

“That is correct, Khensu. Therefore, your return could not have come at a better time.”

“Really?” Athrin’s eyes flashed with anger, thinking of his family. “It seems to me it would’ve been better had I been summoned before Sirus got free.”

Zoku spoke slowly. “Sirus broke free quite suddenly.”

Athrin swept his hair out of his face to reveal narrowed eyes. “But the girl—is she really the one?” Athrin lifted a hand towards Isabelle.

“Whoa!” Isabelle exclaimed, holding her hands up in defence. Hyde’s mouth dropped open, and then he stamped his cane into the ground as if ready to declare war.

Zoku glanced at Isabelle, his eyes calm, before turning back to Athrin. “I’ve been watching over Isabelle since she was an infant, just as I watched over you. She knows how to balance the burden of being Khensu. If she will not be defined by it, if she will not be warped by it, that is not such a bad thing.”
Isabelle was shocked by the wolf’s revelation. He was not disappointed with her, as she had assumed. She felt Hyde’s hand rest warmly on her shoulder.

Athrin stood mutely, staring at Zoku. Athrin’s lean body was tense and rigid. Isabelle couldn’t tell if he was hurt or angry. In the trees above them, crows began to caw. A cool breeze had sprung up and it rustled the trees, causing pine needles to fall like snow, thickening the carpet on the earth below. Then Athrin suddenly moved, turning away from Zoku and stalking off into the trees.

Zoku sat down and wrapped his ghostly tail around his hind legs. “Forgive him,” he said. “Athrin always understood the role of the Khensu as being about fighting, rather than . . . exploring. It has hardened him.” Then the wolf rose. “Ah, that reminds me,” Zoku exclaimed. He loped towards the stone bear then began digging between its front paws. Dirt and pine needles showered out from beneath the wolf as it dug.

“Did you know he could do that?” Hyde asked in disbelief, leaning in close to Isabelle so Zoku couldn’t hear him.

Isabelle rolled her shoulders and sighed. The weight of her pack and bow felt uncomfortable against her back. She unburdened herself of them, letting them fall to the ground in a tangled heap. Zoku defied logic, as far as she was concerned, and she was too tired to try and figure him out.

When Zoku lifted his head he was carrying a gleaming short-sword with an ornate leather hilt between his teeth. He padded over to Isabelle and dropped it at her feet. “This belongs to Athrin,” he said, “but he wanted me to pass it on to you. You see, he could not imagine a way of being Khensu that didn’t involve fighting. He couldn’t imagine another way of defeating Sirus. Can you?”

Overhead, a lone crow cackled and hammered at a tree branch, sharpening its beak.

Isabelle kept her eyes on Zoku and found herself nodding. Her hair fell across her face with the movement and she had to flick it back over her shoulder. She grabbed the little flask that was tucked against her chest and held it tight. She had the answer. “Yes, I can. We need to find another Elder Tree.”
Two Khensu, One Hero, and a Promise

“I can help with that,” a familiar voice said, immediately breaking the tension in the clearing.

Isabelle looked around until she spotted Meera perched in one of the skinny pines on the edge of the clearing. She flapped her emerald wings and drifted down to meet Isabelle and her friends, landing on the stone bear.

“Why do people keep sneaking up on us?” Hyde said exasperated, throwing his arms in the air.

“I’m not sneaking,” Meera replied with an indignant snort. “I have come to tell you that Sirus and his followers have made the forest all red and angry, and now there is smoke all over. And you know how much I hate smoke.”

Isabelle felt panic rise in her chest followed closely by a wave of guilt. She’d let things get out of hand. Sirus was burning the forest because she had been unwilling to confront him. She needed to act—now.

“Meera, do you know where we can find an Elder Tree?” Isabelle asked.

Meera fluttered upwards to perch on Isabelle’s head, stroking her forehead in a motherly fashion. “Of course,” she said, pointing forward and tugging on Isabelle’s hair like reins, “I will show you.”

It took a few hours for Meera to lead them to an Elder Tree. Athrin had reluctantly re-joined them, mostly, Isabelle guessed, because he had nowhere else to be. Hyde nattered on as they walked, recounting recent events for Athrin’s sake, despite the former Khensu’s insistence that it wasn’t necessary. Athrin’s face, whenever Isabelle dared to look at it, was almost as impassive as Zoku’s. Isabelle found him hard to read, and it unsettled her. Hyde’s face, by contrast, warmed her with confidence and joy.

Isabelle knew what she needed to do, but she had yet to share her plans with anyone—though she suspected that Zoku was able to read her mind in ways she did not understand. She knew how she would stop Sirus, just as she knew how she would find her mother. It would be through a greater power than Athrin had ever known how to channel—the power of creation. He would be the first to see what she knew. It was the only hope, she realised, of saving him.
When they arrived at the Elder Tree, rising in a lush and verdant area of Pan’s Forest, Meera trilled: “Here she is! I don’t like to pick favourites, but this Elder Tree is very special. It positively sings with life.”

Isabelle stared up at the tree; Meera wasn’t wrong. It was filled with small brightly coloured birds, which flitted from branch to branch and twittered amongst themselves. The strong, healthy tree reached up into the sky, so high, as if it might be responsible for holding it up.

Athrin also gazed up at the great elm with the same look of awe that Isabelle had had when she first saw an Elder Tree. “They’re bigger than I remember,” he said more to himself than anyone else.

“Now, are you finally going to explain exactly why we are here?” Hyde asked, as he threw down his sack and staff, and plonked himself on a pile of leaves beneath an oak tree.

Isabelle followed suit, dropping her belongings to the ground and flattening a patch of daisies. She rolled her shoulders. Her back ached from the load she had been carrying, which now included the added weight of Athrin’s sword, which she had hidden in her pack.

“Athrin and I need to do something together,” she explained, looking from Hyde to Athrin, whose attention she had successfully aroused by saying his name. “I think we can use the Elder Tree to tap into the wisdom of the forest. We should be able to see inside the temple and discover exactly what’s going on.”

Isabelle rolled up her sleeves and sat beneath the tree, squirming to get comfortable. She looked to Athrin. “If you need to take a break or eat something, you should do it now, before we get started,” she said matter-of-factly.

Athrin stomped over to the tree and plonked himself down beside Isabelle, his back against the mossy trunk. A disturbed beetle crawled out of the bark and scurried over his shoulder. Aggravated, Athrin flicked it away.

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“I’m ready,” he huffed.

“I assume you know how to meditate?” Isabelle asked, reaching for his hand. She marvelled at how different this experience was, compared with the first time that Meera had led her to an Elder Tree. Then, Isabelle had been under her tuition. Now she was to guide Athrin.

The spectral wolf sat in front of Athrin, his tail swishing back and forth against the ground without moving a single speck of soil or grass. “Try to empty
your mind,” he said soothingly. “Focus on your breathing and visualise a warm pulsing energy at the centre of your chest. Breathe in through your nose, and exhale from your mouth.”

“I know how to breathe,” Athrin snapped.

Isabelle waited for Athrin to close his eyes, and then she closed hers, feeling the dappled sunlight dancing on her face. Isabelle very quickly relaxed into the warm embrace of energy that pulsed through the mystical tree, allowing herself to connect with the life force of the ancient forest. She could feel, though, how Athrin was having much more trouble surrendering himself. Isabelle heard him take a deep breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Eventually, the gentle rhythm of their breathing was in unison, and the barriers between the waking and sleeping worlds dissolved.

White light flooded the forest, making everything seem soft and fuzzy around the edges. Isabelle and Athrin were standing together, and before them was a young girl, clothed in a fur pelt held in place with roughly cut leather strips. Her hair was scruffy and brown and grew almost to her waist. She couldn’t have been more than thirteen years of age.

Isabelle didn’t move her lips, but Athrin heard her voice in his mind, clear as day. She’s the first Khensu.

The girl smiled serenely at Isabelle and Athrin and then, in the blink of an eye, she was directly in front of the pair. She reached out and took their hands so that they formed an intimate circle. Isabelle felt a surge of energy around them. The air crackled and hummed, and her skin felt tingly and warm. She knew that Athrin felt it too. The young girl closed her eyes. Isabelle and Athrin did the same.

Suddenly the world came alive below her. She was a bird, soaring high above the forest, surveying the land below. She could see the fire raging in the forest surrounding Sirus’s temple. She could see other birds and fairies flitting around in the canopy, trying to escape; mice running for cover through the long grass; a herd of centaur charging down a naked hill, creating a dust cloud in their wake. She could feel the breeze against her feathers, lending her the buoyancy she needed to glide along, and the drag of the heavy smoke rising from the earth.

Then, the next moment, she was a gnome. She was low to the ground and could see her own stubby fingers in front of her, planting seeds in a tiny garden.
The earth felt cool against the rough skin of her fingers. She could smell the damp, musty aroma of the soil, mingling with the stench of compost from the bucket next to her. Everything appeared enormous. The forest seemed immensely thick and imposing, the trees reaching high into the sky, the tops beyond visibility. A cricket hopped past, clicking its wings as it landed nearby. The sound was deafening in Isabelle’s ears. Then, finally, the gnome smelled the smoke. She felt his alarm.

And then she was at the entrance to Sirus’s temple. The clicking of the cricket had morphed into the crackling of fire, which burned all around her. The smoke was thick and stifling. Combined with the waves of heat coming from the flames that licked at the trees, it was enough to drive her to her knees, coughing and blind. Now I’m human, she thought to herself, noting her hands splayed out on the ground in front of her. Observing the world through this body, Isabelle was aware of two sets of thoughts, one being her own, the other being the consciousness of the man whose body she now occupied. He was terrified. His memories and identity were muddled, and this made him confused and afraid. He couldn’t remember how he had arrived at this spot, alone in the burning forest. He must have been, Isabelle reasoned, one of Sirus’s brainwashed devotees.

Run, Isabelle screamed inside the man’s head. She wasn’t sure if he could hear her, but she could sense everything he was experiencing, including the heat, fumes, and fear. She thought of her father. Come on, run! she screamed again.

The man pushed himself to his feet and began to lurch towards the entrance of the temple. No, not this way—run away from Sirus! But she had no power over the body she had found herself in. Soon he was inside the temple, and Isabelle saw what the man saw.

Sirus stood serenely in the middle of the cavernous room, dressed in a long, gold-trimmed, crimson coat with flared sleeves. It was buttoned from the neck down to his waist, then split open and pooled around his boots. His blonde hair was swept back from his face and his beard was trimmed short forming clean lines around his angular jaw. In his icy blue eyes was a look of disdain.

He was staring down at a frightened spriggan. The tree-like creature had its skinny limbs bound with rope and was on its knees, weeping. The substance that trickled down its lumpy face resembled sap. Sirus kicked out at the creature with his boot, connecting with its face.
The spriggan responded with a chilling shriek, but with its bound limbs it could not run away. Sirus kicked at it again, and a pain like no other ripped through the spriggan’s body, which was also now Isabelle’s body. It was then she knew, because the spriggan did, that Sirus’s pits housed three of its children, along with many other creatures of Pan’s Forest. The pain of knowing that was worse than the pain of Sirus’s boot, which again connected with her chest.
Faith

Isabelle was thrust back into the reality of her own body. Hyde was already at her side, comforting her with his warm touch and his smell of earth and sweat. She noted that her eyes were damp. She looked across at Athrin, who was still beside her. He was awake, but his eyes were still closed, and he was still as the dead. She knew, before he had even opened his eyes, that he had experienced something similar. Surely, she thought, he now understood his interconnectedness with all things. Perhaps it would be harder for him to kill now.

Hyde suddenly raised his nose to the air, as did Zoku, who rose to his paws across from Athrin. Meera likewise lifted into the air from her resting place on a mossy log and screwed up her nose. “Ew, yuck!” she spat.

Isabelle wasn’t sure whether she could really smell smoke on the breeze or it was a phantom sensation left over from the vision. In her mind’s eye she could picture the flames licking at the trees around the temple. One thing was clear—Sirus was intent on destroying everything. She had to act fast if she was going to save the creatures who called the forest home. She knew what she had to do.

As she untangled her hand from Athrin’s, he opened his eyes.

“What are you going to do?” he asked sullenly. She looked at him. They both knew what they had seen. His eyes were tired and full of regret. She was relieved to see that he had calmed down, perhaps discovered some humility.

“I have something from my travels,” she explained. “I know how to extinguish the fire and heal the forest.” Isabelle pulled out the small shell necklace that Reu had given her, removing it from beneath her shirt. The flask was warm to the touch, having been resting snugly between her breasts. “Because the Elder Tree is connected to all things, I can put out the forest fire from here. Hopefully.”

She pulled the stopper from the tiny shell.

“Are you sure about this?” Hyde asked. He was sitting on his haunches next to her, his face contorted with anxiety.

Isabelle found herself hoping like mad that her journey into the realm of the mermaids and the aqua-coloured lagoon in which they had swum had not been just a dream. She chewed her lower lip as she stared up at the trunk of the tree, its
branches rising and tangling with the other trees in the canopy above. “Yes, I am,” she said, surprised at the confidence in her voice.

Athrin and Hyde scrambled out of the way, and Isabelle took a deep breath and scattered the contents of the shell onto the nearest roots of the elm, which were protruding from the earth, knobbly and brown. She shook out every last drop. There wasn’t much water in it. She watched with disappointment as the liquid seeped into the soil around the roots and was gone. Then she placed both her hands on the elm’s soft, mossy trunk and closed her eyes.

“Is it working?” Hyde whispered.

The dappled sunlight danced on the inside of Isabelle’s eyelids, creating blotches of red and orange. She listened to the rustle of leaves above her and focused on the cool breeze against her cheeks. Isabelle envisioned the lagoon where the mermaids bathed and tried to hold onto the image, savouring the conjured scent of the water and the overhanging bushy, verdant palms. She imagined Reu perched on a rock, her turquoise hair glittering in the sunlight. Then she drew her eyes down, below the surface of the water, and saw the roots of the palms drawing nourishment from the lagoon.

A thrumming energy reverberated through Isabelle’s body, down through the palms of her hands and into the tree trunk. She focused her will on the great expanse of roots that spread out beneath her, deep in the soil and tangled with the roots of the surrounding trees and ferns. She lent them her strength.

Then she looked skyward, to the uppermost branches of the tree rising up to greet the clouds. She imagined rain. She felt the tips of the branches tugging at the clouds, beckoning them towards the forest. The air became charged with a magnetic energy that seemed to intensify around the Elder Tree, and around Isabelle. The clouds darkened and churned.

Isabelle opened her eyes. Hyde was sitting nearby, his canteen raised halfway to his lips. When he saw that Isabelle was looking at him, he lowered his flask and sprung to his hoofed feet. “Did it work?” he asked expectantly. Athrin was also standing nearby, looking at her.

“I honestly don’t know.” Isabelle said, suddenly heavy with doubt. She looked at the cloudless sky. “It might not have been enough.”

Meera fluttered over to her, and Isabelle lifted her hand. “The smoke, I think, is getting less smelly,” she said, stroking Isabelle’s palm.
Isabelle wasn’t sure she believed her, but it was what she needed to hear. She placed Meera on her head and strode over to her pack, quiver and bow, slinging them onto her back. It was time to get moving.

Hyde stared at her from his log, his expression uncharacteristically intense. “Are you going to kill Sirus?” he asked in a low, serious voice. Zoku swished his tail with apparent interest.

Before Isabelle could respond, in two short strides Athrin was at Isabelle’s side and had his hand inside her backpack. He pulled his sword free with one fluid movement and assumed a warrior’s stance, sword held firmly across his body. His eyes were hard. “Let’s go,” he said.
Life Finds a Way

When they were close to the temple grounds, but still out of sight of them, the five of them rested behind some scorched boulders. The forest was shrouded in a smoky haze. Isabelle was extremely relieved to find that the fires appeared to have been extinguished by rain, though a large part of the surrounding forest had been burned, leaving the trees charred and naked, and the majority of the undergrowth devoured by flames. Amongst the damp, smouldering debris and blackened trees, there was an unsettling stillness. The absence of wildlife meant that there was very little noise in the devastated forest, save for the creaking of trees and the crunching of wet debris under foot.

Zoku padded off, with his nose to the ground, while Meera, who had been sleeping on Isabelle’s head as they travelled, yawned into wakefulness and fluttered, carefree, onto one of the charred rocks. Isabelle unshouldered her belongings and removed her canteen from her backpack, taking a generous swig of water, giving her surroundings a quick scan. Hyde stalked along behind her, crouching low for cover. Athrin was standing at the ready, holding his sword, not even bothering to conceal himself.

Isabelle looked at him, wondering if she knew what he had in store, wondering if she would have to stop him. “How did you know that was in my bag anyway?” she asked to get his attention.

“I may be many things, Khensu, but clueless is not one of them,” he replied without looking at her. “I noticed the pommel of the sword sticking out of your backpack some time ago and noted that you favour the bow. I reasoned it must belong to someone else, and obviously it’s not Hyde’s.”

“Hey!” Hyde protested, sticking his head up in outrage. “It could be mine.” After a long and speculative look from Athrin, Hyde ducked back down and muttered, “Okay, fine, it’s not mine. But you shouldn’t just assume.”

“I spent a lot of time with that sword,” Athrin continued. “It didn’t take long for me to recognise it, once I got a closer look.”

“If you knew I had it, why didn’t you ask for it back days ago?” Isabelle asked.

“I didn’t want to carry it,” Athrin replied simply. The faintest smile tugged at the corner of his lips.
Suddenly, as they stood there, Isabelle became aware of something happening in the charred remains of the forest. It was just a noise at first, and then a feeling. And then she saw that new shoots of grass and ferns were emerging, pushing their way through the blackened ground. Nearby trees, that had been blackened by the fire, groaned and began sprouting new shoots that would become new limbs and foliage. Tiny mushrooms bloomed nearby, pushing up through the ash. A thick sturdy tree root rose beneath Isabelle’s feet, causing her to stumble back. It was miraculous.

Hyde grinned wildly and ran over to some bushes, plucking a plump purple berry from its newly grown branches and popping it in his mouth. “You did it!” he exclaimed, whirling around to face Isabelle. His teeth were stained purple. “You’re a legit hero.”

Isabelle could hardly believe it. She felt overwhelming pride. Somehow, she had managed to heal the forest—her home—with some help from Reu and Meera.

Athrin looked as if he were about to say something congratulatory, when suddenly all chaos broke out.

Zoku dashed to Athrin’s side and barked a warning, moments before a young woman with matted blonde hair, who had come charging from the temple grounds, was upon them. She ran at Athrin full tilt, her eyes wide and feral.

Athrin raised his sword, but then he dropped it, letting the woman tackle him, slamming her full weight into his chest and pinning him to the ground. She thrashed a knife at him wildly, while he dodged her deadly thrusts. Grimacing, he threw her off and her head slammed into the rock nearby. The woman immediately fell silent and still.

Then two burly men with raised clubs came running after her. They were met by Meera. She dive-bombed a bald man with glassy eyes, scratching wildly at his face and neck while he swatted at her. The other man, also under Sirus’s influence, waved his club haphazardly and with little effect. Their movements were sluggish, their eyes glazed over and unresponsive. They had no hope of hitting Meera as she buzzed over their heads with ferocious intent.

She gouged at the eyes of her next victim as he tried to bat her out of the air. He groaned dully, shook his head and clamped a hand to his ruddy face. The other man ducked as Meera came at him again, her teeth gnashing.
Isabelle was about to intervene when the two men decided it was time to flee. They simultaneously dropped their clubs and ran off into the forest, stumbling as they went.

“I’d better not see you around here again, you fire-lovin' two-leggers!” Meera shouted after them. She circled around to land serenely atop Isabelle’s head, all of her fury vanishing in an instant.

Athrin brushed himself off and gazed upon his attacker’s limp body, panting heavily. He wiped a hand across his mouth and Isabelle noticed he was shaking. He hadn’t killed her, Isabelle realised.

“She’ll wake up,” Athrin said. “Hopefully when she does, she’ll no longer be possessed, because Sirus will have been taken care of, right?” He stared levelly at Isabelle.

Hyde interjected. “You don’t have to do this alone, Belle,” he said in a low voice. “We can help you.”

Isabelle smiled for him. “You can help by aiding any creatures that escape from the pits and by keeping Sirus’s thralls away from me.” She looked to Athrin, acknowledging his assent with a nod. It was time she put aside her fear and enter the temple. She needed to confront her destiny.
Growing Pains

Sirus felt the ground beneath his feet quake. Dust from the temple’s ceiling rained down on him, settling in his long hair and on his shoulders. Something unexpected was happening. Bracing himself, he staggered to the triangular entryway and scanned the area outside. There were guards posted all around the temple scanning for trouble, just in case the new Khensu and her friends were foolish enough to try and confront him. Each warrior was strong, capable and battle ready. Being possessed by Sirus, these men and women knew no fear and had no sense of morality. They wouldn’t hesitate to kill anyone that threatened their master’s grand plans or got in his way.

The earth trembled again. He emerged from the temple and suddenly what looked like the beginnings of a giant tree trunk thrust out of the earth. Sirus stumbled back against the wall of his temple, his icy blue eyes wild with disbelief and anger. Then the tendril of a climbing plant tore through the earth and rose into the air. It twisted and writhed for a second, before harpooning the wall of the pyramid. It was the first of many. One after another the gnarled tendrils of new vines began to erupt through the earth and make their way upwards, invading the walls and guard posts he had erected around his temple, as well as the area of the pyramid itself. The vines snaked out of nowhere, the weight of them crumbling buildings and walls into rubble, and tangling themselves around the legs of several of Sirus’s minions.

Sirus staggered back inside his temple. He set his mind to casting a protection spell for himself and the building. He cursed the amount of magic he had to use, as he watched some of his minions regain control over themselves and stumble away into the newly grown forest. Luckily, the pits were full of magical creatures. Certainly their meagre power did not compare to that of the Ancients, but it would suffice. He would worry about his thralls later.

The Khensu, he knew, was behind this. He would have to make it his priority to destroy her, and then he would have her power.
This is the End

Isabelle weaved her way through the vibrant trees that had coalesced around the temple grounds, occasionally having to climb over low branches and push her way through large bushy barriers. The great stone statues that had guarded the path to the pyramid had been knocked over by the invading forest, and lay ruined on the ground. At the temple’s entrance, she was impressed to find two gigantic mossy oak trees guarding the triangular entryway with their crisscross of gnarly branches. She was about to try and find another way in when the branches unexpectedly parted before her. With a loud crackle they twisted and bent outwards to create a small opening that led directly to the entrance of the temple.

Isabelle felt her muscles stiffen. Her stomach was in knots. The last thing she wanted to do was enter this place again, but she knew that she had a responsibility. It was time to confront the tyrant who had tried to kill her and her friends, and to destroy their home and future.

With great purpose, she strode forward into the shadows. The cavernous space inside the temple wasn’t quite as dank and dark as it had been the first time she’d entered it. There were lanterns on the walls, and there was a flaming pit in one corner of the room, with a rabbit roasting above it on a spit. Instead of adding warmth and comfort to the space, the lighting created long shadows on the walls and floor, making everything seem distorted.

Isabelle turned towards the spot where Sirus’s statue had stood. In its place was a mound of rubble and dust, with large chunks of white stone scattered nearby.

“This place smells icky,” Meera murmured.

“Meera!” Isabelle almost yelled. What was she doing here?

The nymph crawled out of Isabelle’s quiver and fluttered close to her ear. “I’ve come to keep you company,” she said. Meera winked and then nestled herself in Isabelle’s hair at the top of her head.

At first Isabelle was alarmed, and then she realised that Meera could look after herself. And the truth of it was: she was enormously comforted to have someone with her.
Isabelle silently removed her bow from where it was slung over her shoulder, and then reached into the quiver on her back for an arrow. If Sirus appeared she wanted to be ready. She would not hesitate.

A faun came stumbling out of the tunnel and ran frantically for the temple entrance, panting heavily. It looked right through Isabelle.

“Where’s Sirus?” Isabelle shouted after it.

“He’s headed for the pits,” the faun cried in despair. “We have to get away from this cursed place. Get away before he gets inside your head!”

That wasn’t an option for Isabelle. She headed towards the tunnel.

She was little more than a few awkward strides down the narrow passageway when she realised that it was undoubtedly Sirus’s strategy to lure her into this cramped space. He was drawing her to him. She stopped and pressed her fingertips to the cool slick walls. There were fat gnarled roots bulging through the stone and earth that hadn’t been there before. The presence of the forest growing here emboldened her.

“Come out, Sirus!” Isabelle shouted, her voice echoing down the tunnel. “Your followers have scattered, and the forest has reclaimed this land. Your man failed to kill me, so you’ll have to confront me yourself.”

She leaned into the silence and gloom, listening for a response. At first all she could hear was the faint sound of moths flapping against the walls. But then she could make out a soft pervasive voice, whispering to her with growing intensity. Then she realised it wasn’t in the tunnel. *It was inside her head.*

Panicked, Isabelle tried to block out the voice by shouting over it. “That won’t work on me!” Her voice rang out, clear as a bell. She gripped her bow tightly. “Face me, you coward.” She stood her ground. She tried a different tactic. “I’m all alone and helpless,” she retorted. “This should be an easy win for you. Why drag it out?”

Sirus gave a low menacing laugh. “I like to savour the special moments in life. Taking the power of a Khensu will be pure ecstasy, especially when that power is so pleasantly packaged.”

Isabelle thought of Hyde. “If you want to talk about packages, you should know that I’ll be kicking you in yours,” she snapped.

From the other end of the tunnel the figure of Sirus emerged from the shadows, bent over in the cramped passage so that he resembled an old man. His
blonde hair was immaculately groomed, swept up in a tight bun. He leered at Isabelle.

Meera’s sharp fingernails bit into the flesh of her temple. The nymph hissed in her ear: “Strength, friend. He’s just a man.”

Isabelle only hesitated for a moment. She reached around and drew an arrow from her quiver. *Just a man,* she repeated reassuringly as she notched the arrow to her bow.

“You are hopelessly outmatched, you ignorant little quim,” Sirus hissed. “While you cling to your primitive ways, I dream of a glorious future in which human ingenuity and development transforms this world from one of ancient law and mysticism into a powerful machine!”

Isabelle swallowed. “I won’t let that happen. I am here to release the prisoners you’ve taken, to restore to them their own magic and their own future,” she said as firmly as she could. Isabelle found herself clenching her jaw. Her knuckles were white as she gripped her bow tightly.

Sirus cackled and took another step forward. “You’re nothing.”

With one smooth movement Isabelle levelled the arrow at Sirus, took a deep breath, and released.

The arrow pierced his upper thigh, where Isabelle had aimed, bringing him crashing down to one knee with a howl of pain and fury. Isabelle wasted no time. She withdrew into her mind, calming herself and focusing on what she wanted. She blocked out Sirus’s cursing, which reverberated throughout the tunnel. She visualised a dark, swirling portal, and beyond that, the realm she had planned.

Sirus, however, had quickly pulled the arrow from his thigh and, leaning heavily against the dank wall, pulled himself to his feet. “You won’t be able to resist my mind control,” he snarled. He raised his hands and curled his fingers, creating a fiery round shield in front of himself, then began to chant.

Isabelle was drawn back to the reality of the tunnel by his threat. She was genuinely afraid of his potential power over her. She felt her confidence falter. Even in the dim light she could see the dark stain of blood that had pooled at Sirus’s feet, but she knew it wasn’t enough to stop him. She needed more time.
It was then she saw Meera, creeping along the roof of the tunnel until she was behind the sorcerer. The nymph leapt at Sirus and bit his hand with all her might, clamping her sharp needle teeth into the flesh above his thumb.

Sirus growled and tossed her away into the darkness, but her attack had the desired effect. His shield flickered and evaporated in a shower of sparks, and his chanting stopped; his concentration was broken.

Isabelle didn’t waste the opportunity. She turned her attention back to the portal that she intended to conjure. With a clear mind, she emptied the landscape before her, imagining a vast expanse of nothingness. There was no life. It was a world of eternal darkness and cold. The frozen surface of a landscape, which stretched out for miles in every direction, flickered before Isabelle’s eyes. Its mirrored surface, glossy and black, reflected a sky equally as expansive. Yes, Isabelle thought. This will do nicely.

There was a loud rumbling and earth showered down upon Isabelle and Sirus. A tree root snaked its way across the ground and over Isabelle’s boot. The temple was crumbling under the weight of vegetation that was pushing its way through it from the ground up.

“You bitch!” Sirus spat, and Isabelle saw that he was angry and scared. He had fallen to one knee again, being tugged down by a tree root wrapped around his left ankle. Sirus glared at Isabelle, his lip curled in loathing, clutching at the wound in his thigh with his bleeding hand. Isabelle knew that he hadn’t expected two women to bring him to his knees.

Isabelle didn’t react. She remained where she was, her gaze locked on Sirus. The portal she had envisioned shuddered into existence behind him, swirling and churning an inch above the tunnel floor. It was thick and syrupy, a vortex that sucked dust and cobwebs into itself with growing momentum. Despite the violent appearance of the breach, it was eerily quiet.

Sirus, becoming aware of the force swirling behind him, used the wall for support and pushed himself to his feet. He straightened his shoulders in an attempt to regain some semblance of composure, but the gesture was undercut by the swirling portal that tugged at his clothing and hair, and the tree root that had ensnared him.
“So, you want your word to be law, your ideology to be universal?” Isabelle yelled at him. “That cannot be. Not in this land. The good news is, I’ve found a place where you can be lord of your domain.”

The portal was throbbing and whistling now, growing larger and more powerful with Isabelle’s intent. Sirus’s eyes were wide and frantic. Like a cornered animal, he was trapped and didn’t know what to do. His magic was waning. Isabelle seized the moment. She ran at him and kicked out, slamming her boot heel into his gut, the way she had seen him do to the spriggan. With a howl, Sirus fell backwards into the vortex, a mixture of hatred and surprise etched on his face, and was consumed by the void.

The vortex immediately imploded and was gone.
Letting Go

Isabelle emerged from the dark temple and stepped out into the daylight with Meera perched proudly on her shoulder. She gazed upon the mess of vegetation that clamoured at the temple walls. The sky was clear and blue. All around her newly grown trees of different varieties reached out with their limbs as if to greet her. Underfoot were small white mushrooms and patches of wild flowers in purple and blue. There were masses of clover, and shrubbery, and moss. Somewhere in the forest a lark sang. It was joined by a chorus of frogs and insects, and Isabelle thought she might have even heard a manticore roaring.

Isabelle looked at the crumbling walls. Strong leafy vines had snaked their way up and over the walls, dragging parts of the stonework with them. Segments of the temple had been knocked down completely, with piles of rubble strewn about, and large cracks visible in the parts that still stood. Isabelle was pleased to see that the forest and wildlife had reclaimed this dreaded place.

Meera was gingerly licking her hands when she suddenly stopped, wiggling her nose at something in the forest. She cautiously craned her neck towards a sound that only she could hear, before launching off Isabelle’s shoulder into a nearby tree, still black, but covered with fresh, green leaves. “I don’t want to get squashed,” she squeaked from her lofty perch, anticipating Hyde’s arrival.

Sure enough, from between a thick grove of greening trees, a scruffy Hyde came stumbling out to greet Isabelle. His eyes were wide and full of exhilaration. Isabelle barely had time to drop her bow to the ground before he bundled her up in an embrace, pinning her arms against her sides as he hugged her tight. He lifted her, forcing her onto her tiptoes.

Behind him, Athrin strode towards her in a much more leisurely manner, though his expression indicated that he was just as relieved as Hyde to see that Isabelle was unharmed. He had a few scratches on his delicate pale face, and a bloody gash on his temple. The attacks on his person had obviously continued.

“You’re alive!” Hyde exclaimed dramatically. He tousled Isabelle’s dark hair affectionately then released her. “Which means you must’ve defeated Sirus. You did defeat him, didn’t you?”

Isabelle nodded solemnly. All the fight had gone out of her, and she was suddenly very tired. “He’s gone. Did you run into any trouble?”
“Nothing we couldn’t handle.” Hyde beamed at her, clearly proud of himself, though by the unruffled look of him, Isabelle guessed that it had been Athrin doing the fighting.

Stiffly, Athrin held out his hand. “Well done, Khensu,” he said formally. “You have stopped a great evil, just as prophecy told.”

Hyde reached under his shirt and vigorously scratched at his chest. He cocked his head to the side. “So, what happens now?”

Athrin looked at Isabelle, as if she might have the answer.

The three of them stood in silent contemplation, sheltered by the newly grown forest. A pair of rabbits dashed past them and disappeared into the bushes, followed shortly afterwards by a hungry three-tailed fox.

“Where’s Zoku?” Isabelle asked, his absence dawning on her. She looked around the lush forest, expecting to catch sight of his ethereal form.

Athrin pointed at the sky.

Frowning with confusion, Isabelle squinted up against the glare. She couldn’t see anything but the blue sky beyond the tops of the trees and a few birds gliding on the gentle breeze. “What am I supposed to be looking for?” she asked, perplexed.

“Didn’t he ever explain it to you?” Athrin asked. “He isn’t a wolf in any essential way. He’s a familiar. His form is bound to the Khensu.” Athrin looked up at the sky again. “For me he’s always resembled a wolf. Right now, he’s the phoenix soaring above us.”

Isabelle followed Athrin’s gaze until she spotted the large golden bird flying in lazy loops above them. Its mighty wings were spread wide, tapering at the ends, and trailing golden flames. Every now and then it called out, a cry that was clear and jubilant.

“Hm. So now flying is impressive, is it?” Meera said, hands on her hips. “Well, you can watch me fly away.”

“Meera, wait!” Isabelle called, as the nymph lifted from the branch. There was so much to say.

“I know, I know,” Meera said. “I think you ground people might call it a joke?” Then she smiled gently at Isabelle, nodded to Athrin and Hyde, extended her emerald wings and was gone.
The three remaining allies stood in silence and watched the fiery tendrils cascading from Zoku’s tail.
Isabelle sat under the shade of a poplar tree, her eyes closed in meditation and her legs crossed. Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees, warming her skin, and the soothing hum of bees helped to quiet her mind and create the tranquil setting needed to summon a portal.

She had been practising for about a month now, learning to focus her mind and direct her will. Hyde had stayed with her during this time, keeping her company as they explored the forest. She found he was a reliable anchor, which she could use to draw herself back into the world on occasions when she found herself lost and drifting in unknown realms.

Athrin and Zoku had also accompanied her for a while, before eventually leaving with Hyde to visit the Great Library. Struggling to find his purpose, Athrin needed to discover a new place for himself in the world and Isabelle had assured him that the library would help with that. Hyde had insisted on leading them there, bragging about what a wonderful guide he was for up-and-coming heroes. Though she was sad to see Hyde go, Isabelle knew it wouldn’t be the last she saw of him, and where she was going, he couldn’t follow.

Which is why, on this peaceful sunny day, with her friends having moved off, Isabelle let herself reflect on her mother with an open mind and hopeful heart.

Sparing a thought for her father, Isabelle leaned into her reverie, then let the memory of her mother bloom in her mind’s eye. She thought about her mother’s soft, lilting voice as she whispered secret stories to her before bed. She remembered the way she would hum while gardening. Her hair would tumble around her face and she would absently try to blow it out of her eyes. She remembered the way her strong, comforting arms felt when she wrapped them around her. When she laughed, her violet eyes laughed too.

A shimmering mauve portal flickered into existence and Isabelle smiled triumphantly.

She was going home.