

Between Worlds: A Novella

A Thesis Project Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English, University of
Hawai'i at Mānoa

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For Master of Arts in English with a focus in Creative Writing

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March 23, 2020

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone that has taken the time to assist me in this endeavor. I would especially like to thank my mentor, Subramanian Shankar for his academic and support and guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank my committee members Cristina Bacchilega and No'u Revilla, for being willing to be a part of this project. Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who reads or writes fiction, you are the ones that make work like this possible.

Abstract

I have always loved the way reading can transport you, especially during the most difficult periods in life. When I was a little girl, I used to rely on stories to get me through the darkest times and admired the way a good book could make getting through even the most insurmountable issues appear possible. I dreamed of being a writer and crafting the kind of stories that changed my life. Reading is still my favorite escape, and I still love getting lost in a book. Authors like Neil Gaiman, Kurt Vonnegut, C.S. Lewis, George R.R. Martin, Madeleine L'Engle, and many others, have inspired me to write my own stories. I am especially interested in adapting fairy tales and myths into unique stories that appeal to both the modern generation as well as those who love classics. For my Thesis, I chose to write a novella that adapts both Russian fairy tale elements and Greek mythology. The reason I am drawn to this type of fiction is because as a culture, we have grown up on stories of princes and princesses, dragons and dragon slayers, and happy endings. These tales are not only important, but vital, as they both inspire and caution us, letting us know that while anything may be possible, maintaining morality is also important. Thus, stories have the power to shape and change lives.

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Critical Introduction

My interest and love for fairy tales and mythology has endured since I was a little girl. Indeed, Kay Stone says, “many females find in fairy tales an echo of their own struggle to become human beings” (144). I used to see myself in some of these tales and they would help me to escape my reality. Characters that only existed on paper could feel very real to me, and their quests often seemed impossible, which made my own problems seem manageable. As I grew up, I often wondered about the transformation or adaptation of tales and became interested in these new retellings. The adaptations I read were interesting and often quite beautiful. I was enchanted by the way they transformed characters, reimagined relationships, and brought in historical elements to give the tale a new twist. In this story, I combined Russian fairy tale elements with Greek mythology to create a unique adaptation which has a basis in the story of Persephone and Hades. I also included a frame tale which is an adaptation of the Russian firebird myth. I have mostly written short stories in the past, so for this thesis project, I wanted to create something a little longer and spend more time developing my characters. I also wanted the heroine to be a young, strong female character who has agency of her own and does not rely on a prince to save her, nor does she have the “happy ending” marriage that has become quite cliché in Disney movies. Above all, my goal is to create tales that could be read purely for the joy of reading, and I want to bring back the whimsical feeling that I believe stories should offer. Fairy tales, legends, and myths are a genre to which we all belong, and they belong to us, in a way that other narratives can hardly mimic. The fantastic elements of these types of stories not only inspire us, but give us a window into other lives and a different perspective on our own. Jack Zipes, prominent scholar in fairy tale studies writes in his article "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much":

It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more. Perhaps it has mattered too much, and our reliance on fantasy may wear thin and betray us even while it nourishes us and gives us hope that the world can be a better place. We have imagined gods, the kingdom of a single god, the miraculous feats of divine and semi-divine characters, and the commandments that have been established to lead us to the good life, if not paradise. (2)

Zipes points out how important it is for us to dare to imagine and believe in the impossible.

Without our imagination, our lives would lack possibilities and motivation. By allowing ourselves to believe and strive for more, we learn to reach for the stars. As Neil Gaiman was quoted: “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten” (7). While reading a story, our own problems both cease to exist for a short time, but also become infinitely more surmountable. Readers are able to realize that there is both an escape from reality and, by comparison, their own issues do not seem as troubling. We modern Americans are a culture that has grown up on stories of princes and princesses, dragons and dragon slayers, and happy endings. Of course, most cultures have fairy tales, myths, and legends of their own, but in America, many of these stories meet as people from all over the world have settled here. These tales are not only important but vital, as they both inspire and caution us, letting us know that while anything may be possible, maintaining morality is also important. Thus, stories have the power to shape and change lives. That said, our modern culture also displays a cynical outlook on “happily ever after” and perfect beauty conquering all foes. This is one of the reasons I like to create adaptations: to fill the need that modern readers have for characters who are flawed and situations in which there may not be a

happy ending. Adaptations make sure that stories will endure through time--changed, but never forgotten.

Among the many writers that have created their own successful adaptations, some focus on promoting feminism and rethinking the damsel in distress, while others focus on LGBTQ issues, politics, or socio economics. Not to say these tales are not important; on the contrary, many of these writers have been extremely successful in using the fairy tale as a medium and platform for these sensitive topics. However, my focus has always been on the wonder and magic that fairy tales and myths bring to our often mundane daily lives. "I found that many storytellers I have heard in performance and in conversation that have developed an understanding for the creative dynamics of composition. They do not merely repeat tales, they recreate them at each performance" (Stone 99). The recreation of stories, particularly fairy tales, myths, and legends, to fit modern times is what I love and would like to offer to my readers. In an age where every child over 5 has an iPad or computer, and Google has become preferable to research and reading a book, stories have never been more important. If we had never heard the tales of our youth, what would the loss have been and where would we be today? We may not realize it, but we are nothing without our childhood stories and our histories. From the very first moment humans sat around a fire and told each other stories to keep out the darkness, we have created, imagined and lived lives beyond our own. We have slayed dragons, kissed princes, and tricked ogres. We have made something extraordinarily precious to humanity itself, and by retelling these stories through the generations, we can connect old and new, magic and technology. We are able to build upon the foundations of classic stories and add in modern twists, deliberately inventing adaptations that speak to us in different ways.

The success of Walt Disney and his team's enduring films is largely because he apparently takes any ulterior motive out of the picture and just makes it about the wonder of the story. His plots are quite basic, with good triumphing over evil and a picture-perfect marriage at the end. "Disney is quite successful in his Americanization of the old European tales. He makes the heroines and heroes more interesting, adds humor, subtracts magic, and downplays royalty." (Stone 29) Although I too hope to recreate the childlike wonder that we feel when we first encounter a fairy tale, in my adaptation I challenge Disney's representation of women (particularly the passive princess) and need for a marriage to create a happy ending. In the frame tale within my story, there are two women who end up falling in love. In this way, I am challenging the heteronormative type of relationships often seen in fairy tales and mythology.

Feminism in Modern Adaptations

The recreation or transformation of characters is important in an adaptation that is fitting for modern audiences. The experience of reading a story, even a fairy tale, is quite personal, for instance:

A twelve-year old reported that she has usually identified with the older sisters who "never got anything and made stupid mistakes like not giving bread to the birds in the woods." Negative as such characters were, they were more interesting to her than "the ones who just sit by the fireside and never do anything, then one day just blossom into beautiful girls." (Stone 43)

The personal identification with characters is important for modern audiences, especially young adults who recognize that not all stories should focus on the "lucky" character, or that such characters may not even exist. "Several others of various ages mentioned the emphasis on

beauty and expressed concerns in their own inability to measure up” (Stone 49). The feeling of not “measuring up” is normal in modern times, as there is a high level of beauty demanded by advertising, and we may crave to emulate but never attain the supermodel and superstar status.

In an adaptation, any character may win though, even one who is unlucky or not as blessed at the start. For example in my story, the protagonist believes herself to be an orphan who is raised by a group of magi and has no other children to grow up with. She is physically attractive, as I did not want to stray too far from fairy tale tradition, but her beauty is not the main focus of the story. It is my hope that my stories will caution young women against placing beauty above intellect or friendship. “The emphasis on female beauty, passivity, and dependence on outside forces suggested in fairy tales is supported by Western culture in general. The women and girls who felt uncomfortable with this model, or even challenged it, were not fully certain they had a right to do so” (Stone 52). Adaptations give the audience the freedom and right to see things in a new way, and become comfortable with challenging the classic beliefs of Western culture. My type of adaptation also makes the genre of fairy tales and mythology more realistic for an older audience, something that I believe is important if these stories are to endure. “It is the possibility of such reinterpretation that gives hope that women can eventually free themselves from the bonds of fairy tale magic, magic that transforms positively at one age and negatively at another” (Stone 53). In my story, the main character is a heroine who does not rely on her looks, but rather her wit and intellect. It is my hope that the audience will be able to see that my heroine has a strong sense of identity despite being an orphan. Thus, female characters do not need to be stereotyped or typecast simply to further the tale as we know it. It is my hope that women will be given the chance to free themselves from not only the “bonds of fairy tale magic” but the roles in which we have been cast over and over again.

The “Innocent Persecuted Heroine” is one of these such roles. This type of female protagonist is extremely important to both classic tales and adaptations because young women often identify and relate with this role:

In the sum, the persecution depicted in the acts of the innocent persecuted heroine genre seems to be a metaphoric representation of the types of problems a young woman is likely to encounter and of her attitude, as well as society’s toward these problems. These basic and typical problems appear to concern her relationship to her parents, to her own sexuality, and to her mate. Ultimately, these tales are both psychological mirrors and socially framed registers, reflecting personal attitude as well as reinforcing a code of beliefs and behavior to which the cultures and audience members are encouraged to subscribe. For example, both the psychological inclination toward an oedipal attachment to the father and the social impropriety of such an attachment are conveyed. Similarly, the emotional propensity toward an oedipal rivalry with a mother figure or a sibling rivalry with sisters and the practical complications of and the socially approved options for resolving such a conflict are conveyed. (Jones 39)

In my story, I hope to challenge this classic role. There are many tales that feature a passive female heroine who has misfortune heaped upon her, yet gets a happy ending due to being incredibly beautiful. I did not want the heroine of my story to have beauty as her sole virtue. Although she is beautiful, her beauty is not held in high esteem. Rather, it is her intelligence and strong will that help her to accomplish her goal. She also has a talent for magic, particularly, the magic of making a story real. I wanted to show how powerful a story can be and how stories can influence our lives. I purposefully did not go into lengthy descriptions of her physical attributes,

as I did not want the audience focused on her appearance more than her other qualities. “In addition to challenging gender stereotyping through critiques, feminist writers also responded by offering more aggressive heroines” (Stone 57). The heroine in my story is indeed more aggressive and she has agency, she is not a passive princess who waits for a hero to save her.

Although she does not fit the mold of “innocent persecuted heroine”, my protagonist is an orphan. “Orphans form an important part of the fairy tale cast of characters: a child audience can empathize with the pathos of their situation; to potential rewriters, perhaps what appeals is the sense of freedom to develop individual codes of behavior” (Mackintosh 154). Developing the heroine as an individual was important to me, as I wanted the audience to connect with her. While my heroine does have parents, she believes herself to be an orphan and does not have their guidance while growing up. Instead she is mentored by the magi, one mage in particular, who ends up being a helper-type character. Although she does not have a traditional family dynamic, she develops a strong moral compass and desire to do the right thing. She is also quite young, fourteen, when she embarks on her quest and I wanted to have her be capable and strong-willed even without a “normal” upbringing. Though she faces many obstacles along her journey, she does not succumb to self-pity, nor does she rely on the stronger male characters to save her. “Rather than design a life for themselves, the women “in thrall” to fairy tale patterns wait for male rescue, or at least for something to happen. They half consciously submit to being male property, handed from father to suitor to husband without complaint or volition” (Harries 100). I wanted to show readers that a young female can still be strong and independent. While she may accept some help from male characters, it is her own strength, not theirs, that drives her. I hope that young girls and even older women can get a sense of empowerment through reading my stories.

I also wanted to reimagine the “hero” stereotype of the strong, muscular male character. In my story, the sidekick is a male character who, instead of relying on strength alone, relies on his intelligence. It is this intelligence that saves them many times in the story. The mentor of my heroine is also a male character who uses wit and cunning instead of brute strength to triumph over his challenges. Thus, my stories also take the spotlight off of male strength as a superior trait. I also wanted to put focus on how strong a female character can be, even one who does not physically appear to be so. My heroine is young and quite child-like in appearance but has a strong moral compass and unwavering dedication to her quest. “Other feminist writers have reworked old stories in new ways to emphasize the unrecognized aspects of feminine strength” (Stone 58). By reworking old tales, writers are able to add to our characters in ways the audience may not expect, but hopefully will be gratified by.

Adaptations and Inspirations

“Progress in feminist fairy-tale studies requires not only a determination to rethink the complexity of fairy-tale texts and responses to them but also a willingness to expand the field of inquiry across national and cultural boundaries” (Haase xi). In my story I sought to combine elements from different cultures to present the audience with something that felt new. I wanted to take parts of different myths and fairy tales and put them together in a unique way while still being coherent. I have always been fascinated by both Greek mythology and Russian fairy tales, so I based the core story on the myth of Hades and Persephone, and the frame tale which is told by the mentor character is based on the story of the firebird. One of the adaptations that influenced the frame tale was Mercedes Lackey’s *Firebird*. My version includes some of the classic elements of the firebird myth, such as Koschei the Immortal keeping his death in a box,

within a rabbit, within a duck, etc. These unique touches will be able to be spotted by one who has read these stories before, but I also wanted to put a fresh twist on them.

In addition to Greek mythology and Russian fairy tale elements, recent anthologies like *Black Swan*, *White Raven* by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Emma Donoghue's short stories in *Kissing The Witch*, Neil Gaiman's *Fragile Things*, *Smoke and Mirrors* and *American Gods* were wonderful inspiration for me. These new tales adapted from classic fairy tales and myths hold great interest for me, and I wanted to write something that inspires others as well.

In my thesis, I wanted to write from different perspectives and also play with narrative strategies. My goal was to have elements from classic tales combine with modern inventions, melding techniques so that the reader stays interested. In this way, I built upon foundations that already existed, adding my own traits to characters and place descriptions to create a unique story. The main story is told by a classic external narrator, but in present tense, which I feel is less widely used in fiction, and the internal frame tale is told in first person by one of the characters, which I wanted to experiment with. The introduction is told in the rare second person point-of-view to give the reader a sense of being there and sharing in the experience of the characters. "Stories composed in writing tend to become fixed and unchanging, and authors and readers no longer share simultaneously in the creative event" (Stone 68). I wanted the reader to feel like they are getting different perspectives on the stories instead of sticking to one specific narrative strategy. By playing with narrative strategies, I hoped to give the reader the feeling of sharing and being part of the creative process.

In the main story, I also include a mother-daughter relationship that develops as the story progresses. Unlike some fairy tales, however, this relationship is nurturing instead of

competitive. My goal was to challenge the idea of female competition and have instead, women working together to achieve a common goal.

Jenoff's approach takes this well-known tale in very different directions that reconstruct the story without the loss of its vitality.... More specifically, she challenges the woman-against-woman conflict found in so many popular fairy tales-daughters threatened by mothers/stepmothers or elder sisters or "bad" fairies, not to mention false brides who try to replace them. In this way, Jenoff moves in deliberately in undisciplined directions, focusing on relationships between women that lead to freedom rather than competition and control. (Stone 153)

I feel as if there are many stories that pit women against each other, which can create unhealthy influences for girls and women in the modern age. In a world where women are sometimes given less opportunities, it is advantageous for women to stick together and help one another instead of seeing each other as competition. In my story, the main character is reunited with her mother towards the end and finds that her mother had been trying to protect her since she was a baby. I hope that by bringing a loving relationship between mother and daughter into the story, I can challenge the idea of feminine competition in fairy tales.

I deeply enjoy fairy tales that are rooted in mythology and wanted to include elements Greek mythology in my story. The story starts out more like a fairy tale, and the mythological elements do not appear until about mid-way through. I based some of the tale on the classic myth of "Hades and Persephone", but included elements from the "Cupid and Psyche" myth as well, where the heroine sets off on an epic quest.

More importantly, Psyche's story is what one critic has declared a 'paradigm of female heroism.' The intrepid heroine, jilted by Cupid, never indulges in self-pity but sets off on an epic quest fraught with risks and requiring her to accomplish one impossible task after another. (Tatar 25)

The idea of fairy tale tasks and a quest being undertaken by a female heroine was very appealing to me, and I wanted to create a story where the heroine goes through these tasks in a fictional world. Thus, I chose to create a Greek type underworld for her to travel through, where she faces different lands and creatures; her journey is both an internal and external one. Through completing her quest, she also finds out who she is and about her family as well. I also wanted to have our world intersect with the story a bit so that readers could connect to it. This is why I chose to include Persephone, as her descending to the underworld supposedly begins winter in the mortal world. "The story according to which Persephone spent one part of the year in the lower world, and another with the gods above, made her, even with the ancients, the symbol of vegetation which shoots forth in spring, and the power of which withdraws into the earth at other seasons of the year" (Encyclopedia Mythica). I also have one of the characters come from our world to add a realistic element. Since most of the story is in the realm of the fantastic, I hoped to ground the story by having a few references to the world we live in.

Audience and Reception

My goal was to create tales that are suitable for an adult or young-adult, audience rather than something that is strictly for children or, like Disney films, family entertainment. However, the story is not so dark that it cannot be read by a younger audience as well. Fairy tales and myths are a genre that I believe should be accessible to all. Stories are so interwoven into our

lives, and I would like to foreground this. I did not want too much focus on romance, as that is something I am trying to get away from, but there is a connection between the heroine and the male character. There are also some points where the characters fight the obstacles that have been created by feelings of abandonment or racial stereotyping. I wanted readers to be able to connect with the story on a personal level.

Stories are more important to our culture than we would care to admit, and I would like to bring our focus back onto how influential they have been for generations. I would particularly love to have my generation go back to reading instead of relying on digital technology and being engrossed in television. For example, fairy tales that are not as well-known from the past were for adults, not children and often spoke to young women in particular. This was the case with French tales from the late 17th and early 18th century written by aristocratic and subversive women like Catherine d'Aulnoy. "For much of the twentieth century, then French fairy tales were caught in an infernal cycle of pedagogical and canonical exclusion: they could not be taken seriously because they were not taught; and they could not be taught because they were not taken seriously" (Haase 69). My own stories are informed by these French fairy tales' complex plots and style as well as by their focus on magic or wonder.

The House

In a forest there is a house. This house is not a normal house. From the outside, it looks quite ordinary; whitewashed walls and shingled roof, wraparound porch with a swing hanging from the ceiling. It is only when you go inside that the house becomes extraordinary. When you enter, there is no foyer, no dining room or kitchen. There is only a long hallway stretching as far as the eye can see. Certainly, it looks longer than it could possibly be. The hallway is lit with old fashioned lanterns and the floor is polished dark wood. As you walk down the hallway, you notice that there are multiple doors on either side. Each door is different. There are simple wooden doors with round brass handles, doors painted red or white or black. Some doors are stone, worn smooth from years, while others are ornate with iron screens or heavy knockers held by roaring lions or dragons or gargoyles. Some doors look like apartment doors and even have numbers on them. There are doors that are two times taller than a man and four times wider; doors that are so small you would have to stoop to go through. As you walk, lights flicker and you hear faint sounds of music or laughter, but there is nobody in sight.

You pick a door at random, one that is dainty and pretty, painted a soft blue with a simple silver handle and swirling designs in lavender and white around the edges. The doorknob turns easily under your hand, and as you crack the door open, you can hear the sound of waves crashing upon an unseen shore. The smell of salt and sea floats through the air, and you get a glimpse of a star filled sky. The cries of seagulls' drift through the air.

You almost step through the door, but decide to wait.

It's not time yet.

You step back and close the door gently.

You walk down the hall a bit, passing more doors. You stop at a simple door made of light planks, well-constructed, but nothing special. However, the doorknob itself catches your eye. It is silver shaped into the coils of a snake with its head rising off the door, facing you. Its mouth is open, and upper and lower fangs curve into a handle. Each individual scale is formed, and tiny rubies are set as eyes. When you pull the door open, you are greeted by a gust of wind, fine grained sand brushes your fingers. After it settles, you find yourself staring out at an expanse of desert. Sand dunes spread as far as the eye can see, undulating up and down like a snake. Nearby, you see an oasis; a grove of palm trees surrounds a small, spring fed pool. A tent of jewel toned silks shade a few cushion-topped chairs. The smell of spices permeates the air; cinnamon and cardamom and vanilla.

You almost step through the door, but decide to wait.

It's not time yet.

You step back and close the door gently.

You approach another door. This one is dark mahogany, carved in elaborate shapes; trees, animals, mythical creatures. There are mountains and forests, nymphs and satyrs dancing under a sky with two moons; one is a crescent and the other is almost full. Vines climb up and around the door frame. You open the door and peer into a tunnel of trees, branches intertwine at the top. Lanterns of all different shapes hang from their branches and candles drip wax from where they are carefully placed in the forks of the trees. There is the scent of the earth after it

rains, green and fresh and lovely. The notes of a harp drift to you from the distance, pure and sweet. The sound of laughter follows close behind.

It is time.

You step through the door.

Wrapped in Rainbows

Although this is a fairy tale, it does not begin like so many tales do. For example, it is not a dark and stormy night when the magi discover the baby on their doorstep. In fact, it is rather a mild spring morning. It would be more dramatic if it was a dark and stormy night, although the baby would probably not like that. Said baby is bundled in fabrics of all different colors and textures- sheer lemon yellow and silky raspberry pink tangle with splashes of ocean blue and fringes of gold- and is currently fast asleep in her basket. There is a scrap of paper pinned to one of the pieces of fabric, one with orange and black tigers romping on an opaque background of emerald.

The note says simply: “she belongs here”.

The magi are bewildered. None of them can remember an encounter that would have resulted in a baby (not recently enough anyway) and besides, there are no females among the magi. If there is any place this baby might belong, it seems highly unlikely that it is here. Even the colors she is swaddled in look garish and out of place. The magi are dressed all in grey robes, the basket spilling rainbows the only bright spot among them.

“What should we do with her?” An apprentice mage named Ivan asks, wringing his hands in distress. He is rather new to the mage tower and never expected to be dealing with something like this. One of the other novices accidentally set a master’s robes on fire the previous week. That was quite easily dealt with, but mysterious babies showing up in baskets is another thing entirely.

“I shall inform the head mage,” an older mage with a somewhat impressive silver beard says.

“That will not be necessary, Thompson; he is already aware,” another mage with a much more impressive beard says from behind the small gathering.

The other magi immediately feel more at ease. The presence of the head mage tends to do this. As magi go, he is rather magnificent. His beard is snow white and reaches down past his waist and despite his advanced age, his grey eyes are sharp and sparkle with intelligence. He carries himself regally and only occasionally uses the walking stick he carries. The stick itself is a stunning relic, carved of ebony wood and topped with the head of a raven in what might be ivory or bone. The detail in the carving is astonishing, the raven’s head is etched with sharp detail and onyx stones glimmer where its eyes would be. The robes of the head mage are pure white, and somehow (either through magic or extremely fastidious eating) always spotlessly clean. A live raven sits on his right shoulder, its head cocked as if it is listening to the nervous whispers of the group of magi around the baby.

“Let me see the child,” the head mage, who everyone calls Master Lorenzo, says.

The basket with the baby is picked up nervously by Ivan and passed over to Master Lorenzo without mishap. The head mage glances at the note and sighs. It is not a despairing sigh, but rather the kind of sigh you might emit after a busy day, when you find out there is still one more thing to do before you can go home.

“Well I suppose she will have to stay,” Master Lorenzo says.

The raven caws softly, cocking its head even further.

“What is that you say?” Master Lorenzo mutters. “Yes, I know it is not the ideal time, but we must make the best of it. I know she is not what we were expecting, but who is really?”

The raven ruffles his feathers indignantly.

“Oh, stop fussing Lucius,” the head mage strokes the raven absently and continues to watch the baby sleep.

“What did you say Master?” Ivan asks, looking askance at the raven. The other magi had told him that the head mage could understand the speech of animals, and that the raven could even speak the human tongue if he chose, but he did not know if he quite believes it. Either thing was possible, and he had never heard the raven do anything other than caw and croak.

“Oh nothing, nothing at all. Take her and make her comfortable. I’ll send to the kitchen for some milk. There’s a good lad,” Master Lorenzo says, passing the basket back to Ivan.

“But Master...” Ivan begins to protest, but the head mage has already disappeared.

The baby grows up in the tower of magi. She is given a room and a crib is conjured for her. An enchanted mobile of stars and planets that hover in the air without strings is put above the crib when she cries; the planets slowly revolve around each other and the stars shape themselves into different patterns, mesmerizing her so that she falls asleep each night among dragons or unicorns or constellations of different universes. Eventually, the crib is replaced with a small bed, and a desk and chair are added as she grows.

Some of the older magi take it upon themselves to teach her different things. She is bright and learns quickly, devouring books voraciously as soon as she is taught to read. History, geography, mythology, even mathematics; the girl learns them all. She learns how to play the harp and how to speak different languages, some from different worlds. She even makes friends with the cook and the hunters who bring the magi food. From them, she learns how to find water in the woods and which plants are good to eat or used for medicine. She even learns how to set simple snares to catch squirrels or rabbits, how to skin and clean them, and how to cook them over a fire. Despite being reasonably well-cared for, the girl is left to run a bit wild. After all, she is the only child in a tower of scholars, and besides making sure she is fed, clothed, and educated, she is mostly left to her own devices. She is not even given a name until she sees a word she likes in a book; the magi refer to her as “girl” or “that one” or “you there”. She is a delicate, fey child with an elfin, heart shaped face and large eyes the unusual color of sea glass with hints of gold that glitter like two coins in her pale face. Her black hair grows long but thankfully not into knots. In fact, it is unusually straight and silky, and it is this quality that the girl names herself after. When she asks the head mage if she can be called Velvet, he frowns but nods once before going back to his work. From then on, she is Velvet and no longer just “the girl”. She likes her new name and the way the syllables roll off her tongue, warm and smooth

like the fabric itself. It makes her think of black currant nights with blueberry tones and diamond stars, or of a mug of hot cocoa on a snowy evening. The word reminds her of something else too, but she cannot think what it is.

The newly named girl explores the tower when she is not in lessons, discovering hidden staircases and rooms filled with books and scrolls. She discovers rooms with maps to places she has never heard of and directions other than north, south, east and west. She finds a room filled with odd things like skulls (some human and some not) and on one of the skulls there's a hat that looks like it might have belonged to a pirate. She knows about pirates from stories, so she takes the hat with her and pretends to be a pirate looking for treasure. She wishes she had a parrot but there are no parrots in the tower, there is only Lucius the raven, who can sometimes be persuaded to sit on her shoulder while she explores if she coaxes him with a bit of bread or corn.

The girl hasn't found any treasure yet, but she isn't discouraged. She knows good things take time to find. One day, she discovers a room with a large fountain in the center of it. A mermaid statue rises out of the middle of the fountain; she sits combing her hair as water spills around her in a tiered waterfall. The scent of lotus blossoms hangs in the air and there is a soft sound, like the sound of a hundred sighs, mingled with the splashing. When the girl nears the sculpture, she notices a glimmer under the pool of water. At first, she thinks they are coins, like the wishing wells she has read about in books. *Maybe there is treasure here after all*, she thinks. However, as she approaches, she realizes that they are keys. Startled, she steps closer and reaches into the water to grab one.

A flurry of feathers dives down, and she feels a sharp pinch in her hand.

“Ouch,” she cries, yanking her hand back. “Lucius, that hurt,” she addresses the raven who had been innocently perched on her shoulder but is now looking at her reproachfully. He settles on the lip of the fountain and caws at her.

“I was just looking, you bully,” she grumbles, cradling her hand.

“He’s right you know,” a voice comes from behind her.

The girl jumps, not quite guiltily as she still doesn’t think she has done anything wrong.

“Ivan, you scared me,” Velvet says.

The no longer apprentice mage stands in the doorway, regarding the girl with a mixture of fondness and exasperation. He is a young man with hands and feet that still look a bit large for his lanky frame, making him look a bit boyish, although he is now in his twenties and not really a boy anymore. His skin is pale from a lack of sun and excess of books, and his sandy hair always looks a little unkempt, as if he has been constantly pushing it out of the way with his fingers while reading or writing. Ivan is one of Velvet’s favorites; almost like what she would imagine an older brother to be, if brothers were extremely patient and occasionally had their heads in the clouds. He read her stories when she was a small child, and they were never boring like some of the other magi’s stories. The stories he read her were always full of adventure—pirate ships and sunken treasure, strange creatures and different worlds.

“You should heed Lucius you know,” Ivan says. “You’re not quite ready for this yet.”

“What do you mean? What is this?” Velvet asks, gesturing to the fountain and the keys.

Ivan sighs. It is a sigh Velvet has heard often, one that means he does not really want to explain, but he knows if he doesn't, she will most likely get into more trouble trying to find out the thing she is not supposed to know.

“Come and sit,” Ivan walks over to the stone bench surrounding the mermaid fountain and settles down, gracefully smoothing his robes.

Velvet sits beside him. She has not yet acquired the grace the magi possess, and her robe is a bit too large for her, though it is the smallest one the mage tower possesses, made for a boy when he first becomes an apprentice.

“Let me tell you a story,” Ivan says. “This story is unlike the ones I have told you before, for it is a true story; or at least, a story I know to be true, as it is my story.”

Velvet leans forward eagerly. She knew how Ivan had come to the mage tower; how he was the youngest son of a noble family, sent to learn something of magic to increase his family's power. How he had come to love the mage tower and decided to stay to become a master mage instead of going home after passing his basic training. But she never knew what exactly happened to Ivan between the years of his arrival and now. She knew he had been gone for a long time because she had missed him. She did not know how long because little girls do not measure time in days or months or years. They just knew there was a difference between a short time, a long time, and a very long time. To Velvet, Ivan had been gone sometime between a long time and a very long time.

When he came back, he was different, but he would not speak about what had happened when he was gone. He had only told her that he had been on a quest, and he would tell her about

it when he was ready. Velvet was satisfied with this answer. She knew from books and stories that quests were very personal things, knowing that he would tell her one day was good enough as he had no obligation to tell her anything at all. She knew it must have been a very important quest, as Ivan was no longer the nervous young man he had been. He had attained some of the dignity of the older mages, something had settled inside of him. Spells that had once given him trouble no longer had the audacity to do so. He seemed to understand Lucius without having the head mage translate and did not think it strange to speak to a raven or that the raven spoke back. He was still quiet and spent much time buried in books. After all, his type of magic was the magic of words. He could arrange words so that the listener believed anything he said or weave them in such ways as to make one remember or forget. He could even write poems and stories on paper that made the reader weep or laugh or dance. He could whisper spells that made the wind howl or lull into quiet or die altogether, or, when spoken into the ear of an animal, made it desire to do his bidding. There were other magics that were flashier or brighter and other magi who were more powerful, but Velvet always thought Ivan's gift was one of the best. It was what made his stories so excellent, although he swore he never used coercion when telling her tales (but Velvet thought they were magic all the same).

Ivan's Tale

“After every apprentice mage's training, there comes a final test. A mage can choose to take this test or decline. The ones who decline are sent home to their families and become scholars or soothsayers or fortune tellers. These magi will keep the small magics they have learned and may be content with them, but they will always wonder about what could have been,” Ivan says.

“The ones who do choose to take the test are brought to this very room. They are told to look into the fountain and pick a key. There are many keys in the fountain, but there is only one key that is important. If the mage is deemed ready, the key will call to him. He will feel a pull to this key and the key to him. If he does not feel this pull, he is not ready. Some will never hear the key’s song or feel its draw, and these are also sent home. The magi that do feel the call of the key will be told a secret. This secret has been guarded carefully by generations of magi. It is why the mage tower was built in this forest, so far away from anything else. This is because the magi guard something precious, something that very few ever get to see. I am only telling you this now because I believe one day, you will feel the pull of the key yourself, and I trust you to guard the secret until then,” Ivan gives Velvet a look that is not quite stern, but almost.

“I can keep a secret,” Velvet says with all the determination of her small voice, hoping he will believe her.

“I know.” Ivan gives her a gentle smile before continuing his story. “After the mage attains the key, he is told the secret that we guard. He is told that in the forest, there is a house. This house looks old and unadorned from the outside, but it is not the outside that matters. The key that sang to the mage is inserted into the lock on the front door. Once it clicks open, the key vanishes and appears back in the fountain. The mage has been told nothing more than to bring back an object; no other instructions are given. Each mage has a different experience, this was mine.

“I do not know what I expected when I first stepped into the house. I could feel its magic around me like a held breath. I felt as if I were walking into someone else’s dream. The hallway stretched as far as I could see, and then there were the doors. Doors of all shapes and sizes,

colors and textures. Carved doors and painted doors, old doors and new doors. Doors that looked like they were made for giants and doors so small they could only fit a mouse. I knew at once why the other magi would not describe what I would see. Nobody *could* describe it and do it justice, not really. I stood there for a minute, feeling the mystery of the house sink into my skin and fill my bones, fizzing in my blood like champagne. The only other time I've ever felt anything like it is the day we found you, wrapped up in rainbows like an orphan from a fairytale.”

Velvet hardly dares to breathe, caught up in the wonder in the tale now, not even commenting upon her own sudden appearance in it. She had ruminated on where she had come from before without coming to any conclusions and didn't want to interrupt the story anyway.

“When I finally could make my feet move again, I began exploring the doors, trying to figure out if I might be able to find out where they would lead just by the way they looked. Some looked ordinary, like they could lead to a house or a shop down any lane in one of the villages here, but some were works of art; elaborate carvings of animals or people dancing under different stars, or malevolent looking winged creatures swooping and diving and fighting. Other doors were painted with lovely panoramas of oceans and mountains. One door I saw was an elaborate iron sculpture with a candelabra inset in it, every flame burning although there was not a soul around to tend to it. I wasn't sure which door to choose, or even if I could choose more than one. I took some time just browsing doors like I would browse a library of books, just studying the carvings and markings on them without daring to open them. All the time I walked down the hall, I never got any closer to seeing the end.”

“But how is that possible?” Velvet whispers. She quickly hushes herself, not wanting to disrupt Ivan.

He answers her question anyway, not seeming to mind the disruption. “There have been many studies done by magi on the house. There are books in the library in this very tower filled with pages and pages of theories. I believe the simplest and most complex idea is true. The house is magic. I do not mean it simply contains magic or generates magic, although it does. The house *is* magic. It is the source of everything. All the spells and powers and myths and legends and fairytales, stars and stardust. I read somewhere in a marvelous story from a world that no longer has access to magic, “there are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I believe the house contains doors that may lead to anywhere in any world. There are those who have written about getting lost in the land of Faerie, but I believe they accidentally walked through one of the doors imbued with the magic of the house. I believe that there are multiple doors in other worlds, but they all lead back to the house first. It is a kind of threshold, and in-between place. I also believe one must have magic to open a door from their own world. Some worlds may have doors, but not enough magic users to open them from their side. However, a mage may be able to walk through one of those doors and back. This is why the house is so important. Any door can be opened from the house. We magi must protect the house at all costs. This is why the test exists. Sometimes, a mage that feels the call of the key does not come back. We do not know if they perish or if they become trapped or if they simply choose not to return. Some may have found a door to a place they are unwilling to leave. It is forbidden to look for them. One must make the journey and return on their own to pass the test,” Ivan says.

“What about the object?” Velvet can’t help asking.

“Ah yes, you remembered. A mage must return with a magical object. This object is highly personal to the mage and will remain with them all of their days,” Ivan says. He looks over at Lucius pointedly as the raven ruffles his feathers. “I suspect that is why this guy is still alive.”

Velvet gasps. “But...Lucius? He is the master’s object?”

“I suspect it is so, although he has never confirmed or denied it. And Lucius is no ordinary raven.”

At this, Lucius gives an indignant caw and flaps over to settle on Ivan’s shoulder.

Ivan chuckles fondly and strokes his wings.

“And you? What was your object?” Velvet asks.

Ivan gives a sly smile and pulls a single feather strung onto a leather cord from under his robes. It almost seems like it glimmers, but on second glance, it looks like any other feather from an ordinary bird.

“A feather?” Velvet is a little disappointed. She had expected something rather more grand.

Ivan laughs at her expression. “Someday, you will understand. It is not time yet, although I will tell you how I retrieved it, if you care to hear the rest of the tale.”

“Of course I do! I didn’t mean...”

“I know. You did not offend me child. It isn’t the object that is important to me, but the tale is one worth telling,” Ivan reassures her.

“Please go on,” Velvet says.

“I finally got up the courage to open one of the doors. It was painted light green and had a pattern of gold vines inlaid around the borders. The doorknob was shaped like a bird in flight. I opened the door onto an expanse of sky. There were clouds wreathing mountaintops floating in the distance. Waterfalls flowed down off the sides of the mountains and dropped into the space below. I looked down and saw more mountains floating below and another layer of clouds like mist, but there was no bottom in sight. I had never seen anything like it in my entire life. I stared in awe and began to be able to pick out structures on one of the mountains. There appeared to be bridges connecting some of the mountains together, and something that looked like a castle towered above the trees. Birds of so many different colors flew through the mist. There were shapes even bigger than birds that looked human shaped in the distance. These shapes had huge wingspans and feathers that varied from scarlet to iridescent gold. It was gorgeous, but I couldn’t see a way to get to the mountaintops, so I gently closed the door.

I opened a few more doors and saw so many fantastic things. One was a vista of water as far as the eye could see; a turtle as big as a house swam by with a cottage on his shell, its chimney puffing clouds of purple smoke and silver sparks; another was a grassy plain under a night sky filled with stars. I finally came to a simple wooden door, obviously well-made but quite plain other than a gorgeous carving of a bird with a tail made of flames. I opened the door and I saw a beautiful garden filled with fountains and statues. The craftsmanship was exquisite beyond compare; there were knights on horses and dancing maidens. You could see the detail in

the horses' manes and tails. The fabric of the maidens' dresses seemed to flow as if it were real, not stone. There were bubbling fountains and willow trees brushed the surface of a lake as clear as glass. I heard a haunting melody, so beautiful it hurt my heart to listen. I stepped over the threshold to explore further and try to find the source of the song, but as the door closed behind me, it disappeared! I felt around in the air, but there was only empty space where the door had been. I sank to the grass in despair.

“Suddenly, I saw a flash of red and gold in the nearest willow tree. A stunningly beautiful bird alighted upon one of the branches. Its head was something like that of a heron, but finer, and its plumage was the color of flames that glowed in the moonlight. Its tail was so long it almost reached the grass from the branch where it was perched.”

“Traveler, why do you weep?” The bird trilled in crystalline voice. I recognized the voice as the one I had heard before lifted in song.

Astonished, I stared for a moment before responding, “I have come here through a door and it closed behind me, leaving me stranded for I cannot find it. I was listening to your song and I could not help but to follow the notes through the door. I have never heard anything like it in my life.”

“Oh dear, oh no. I am sorry, I did not see you or I would have stopped singing. The door to the in-between place you mean,” the bird said, sounding melancholy.

“Yes! You know it?! Can I get back there somehow?” I asked.

“Come sit under the willow where the branches might shield you. I will tell you a story,” the bird said.

I obeyed, walking through the willow’s long branches until I was obscured from the outside. “Please tell me what you know, I must find the way back.”

“Long ago, any creature with enough magic could enter the door to the in-between at will. Some went to other worlds to explore, others found new homes and stayed. I used to fly far and wide, searching for magical fruit, for it is only that which may sustain me. I flew to a world with an orchard of golden apples guarded by beautiful maidens who were the daughters of a god. They were to make sure none could steal the apples, but I would sing for each of them, and they would give me an apple in return. I also went to the garden of a witch who was kind to me and allowed me to eat any fruit she grew. She had wishing plums and dream cherries, sunshine mandarins and moon berries. I would sing to her as she gardened, and we would speak of tales of old. I do not need much to eat, it takes very little if the fruit is powerful. Always, I would come back here and plant the seeds of the fruit I found, as this is the world in which I was born. These used to be my gardens,” the firebird, for I had realized that was what she was, said sadly.

“What happened? Does it not still belong to you?” I said.

“No longer. An evil sorcerer came through the door from another world. Now, this world used to hold only benevolent creatures. Those of us with magic guarded the way and made sure to keep those who would do harm out. I would sing an enchantment and make them leave and forget the way here. But this sorcerer was immune to my song. He calls himself

Koschei the Immortal. After he came here, he spelled the door so we could no longer leave. The door will not appear for anyone but him. He built a castle and surrounded it with a maze so none could get in. Each year, he has the kings and lords of the land send him their daughters, and each year, he picks one to be his wife. Thirteen years have now passed since he has dwelled in this land, and he has picked his thirteenth bride only two moons ago. There were those who tried to rescue the maidens, but Koschei turned them all to stone. It is strange you were able to get in, perhaps the enchantment only works in one direction.”

I looked back at the statues in horror. I noticed the maidens were not dancing, they were running. “And who are these poor maids?” I asked.

“They are the sisters of one of his brides. They came to beg for their sister’s freedom. They wept and pleaded so sweetly it would melt any heart, but they say Koschei has no heart. He grew angry and turned them to stone even as they tried to escape. We are all prisoners of Koschei now,” the firebird said. Even as she spoke, I noticed a long golden chain trailing from her leg and attaching her to the tree. The firebird saw me notice, and said, “Yes, he has captured me as well. I am unable to fly away to find help for us, and I must sing to Koschei whenever he wishes, or he will not bring me fruit and I will perish. I cannot enchant him to sleep, but he wishes me to sing for him anyway. The beautiful garden that was once my pride is now his. He feeds me fruit from my own trees.” There was a trace of anger in her sweet voice.

“There must be something I can do to help,” I said. I thought about the test-- perhaps this was my quest to face. “Although I am but an apprentice mage, I am willing to try.”

“It is dangerous,” the firebird said. “Koschei is so powerful, they say he cannot be killed. You may perish if you attempt it.”

“I cannot leave without trying to help. Besides, there is nowhere for me to go. The door is closed, and this Koschei is the only one who may open it,” I said.

“That is true,” the firebird said. “Well, if you must, I will give you what help I may. Here, take one of my tail feathers, it will guide you through the maze. Koschei may have set guards or traps, these you will have to get by on your own, but the feather will at least show you the path so you will not get lost.”

I did as she said and carefully plucked one of her long red gold feathers. It glowed with a subtle light.

“The glow will dim if you try to take the wrong turn. Now, drink from the lake. It will sustain you and you will not feel hunger or thirst for many days,” she told me.

I followed her instructions and knelt to drink the water of the lake. It was cold and sweet. After I drank, I felt full and refreshed. My sight seemed clearer and my wits felt sharp.

“Thank you. Now, let me see if I can free you of this chain,” I said. I picked up the gold chain in my hand. It was fine as a strand of silk and gleamed in the faint moonlight.

“I have not found a way in all these years. If I manage to break it, it grows back together instantly. No spell I know will affect it,” the firebird said.

“There must be a way,” I said stubbornly. I examined where the chain looped around the trunk of the tree.

“I do not expect you to be able to break Koschei’s spell,” she said.

I followed the chain back up to where it attached to the firebird’s leg. There was a small golden circlet around her leg, like a cuff, and there was a tiny keyhole. I whispered into the keyhole for a long time, coaxing it with my words. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the cuff fell open in my hands.

“You did it!” the firebird trilled ecstatically. “I am free!” She beat her great wings, sparks flying from them in a shower of gold, and rose into the air. “How did you manage to break the lock?” She said in astonishment, landing upon my shoulder.

“I spun a tale and told the lock that it was holding captive a most beautiful creature. I complimented its golden shine and reminded it that such a precious metal deserved far better treatment. It should be adorning the heads of kings and be admired by all, not sitting alone in a garden of statues. The lock must have agreed,” I said.

“You are a great wizard,” the firebird said.

“I am only an apprentice mage,” I told her humbly. “But I am glad I was able to free you.”

“I will always be grateful,” the firebird said. “Now, if you mean to find Koschei’s castle, you must go. Once the moon reaches its apex in the sky, he will awaken and come to the gardens. If ever you need me, blow on the feather three times and I will come. To get to the maze, walk straight through the gardens until you see the hedge wall, then follow it right and you will see the entrance. I will stay here for now. Loop the cuff back around my leg but leave it

open. Koschei will come to hear my song and I will keep him here for as long as I can. When he gets up to go back, I'll fly off and try to lead him away."

"Thank you, firebird," I said. I carefully arranged the cuff around her leg, then tucked the firebird's feather in the belt of my robe and turned to find the entrance to the maze. After I walked through the gardens for a time, I came to a what looked like a tall hedge. The hedge looked like a wall, extending far on both sides. I followed it to the right for some time and eventually came to an opening. I took the firebird's feather and held it in front of me like a candle. It shone with enough light to guide my steps, and I made my way deeper into the maze. Whenever I came to a branching of ways, I looked to see which way made the feather glow brighter and took that path. I travelled quickly and without incident for some time. And then, suddenly, I came around a corner and saw something blocking my path. It was a sphinx, a great cat with the body of a lioness and the head of a woman. Her face was beautiful and strange, with high cheekbones and felid eyes with slit pupils. When she smiled, I noticed her teeth were sharp.

"What have we here? A traveler after all this time? A hero who thinks to rescue the maidens mayhap?" She said.

"I am only a humble apprentice, great sphinx. I seek no reward other than to find the way back to my own home," I said truthfully.

"Interesting. For your courtesy, I shall give you one chance to get by me without harm. I will pose a riddle, and if you answer correctly, I will let you by. If not, I will attack and you will

die,” she said. “What stalks behind, yet leaps ahead, is neither alive, nor is it dead? It is strongest in light, yet hides from the night,” she said.

I thought for a long moment. Was it a ghost? But no, ghosts do not hide from the night. Hmm...some kind of spirit? No... I studied the sphinx as it sat patiently. The twilight was deepening, but there was still a faint streak of lavender gold in the sky. The sphinx’s tail twitched and its faint outline shadowed on the ground did the same. Wait that was it! Something that disappears at night!

“A shadow!” I said.

The sphinx smiled. “Very good. You may pass,” she said, standing aside.

“I am grateful,” I said, edging by carefully.

“One more thing, traveler,” she called to me. “If you seek the destruction of the sorcerer, you must find his heart. He keeps it hidden. If you are to kill him, you must find the heart and destroy it.”

“Why would you tell me this? Are you not one of his guards?” I said.

“I serve him because he is the most powerful of us, but we who watch the stars know more than most. A time of change is upon us. Perhaps you are to herald it,” she said, laying down on her great haunches.

“I will remember what you have said, thank you,” I replied.

I walked further into the maze, always following the glow of the feather.

As I turned a corner, I suddenly found myself looking into a great void. Stars and planets shone all around, yet there was nothing to stand on. The ground cut off abruptly right in front of my feet, and I couldn't even see the other side. For a second, I just marveled at the beauty of the illusion, for that's what it obviously was. It appeared flawless, the soft blue twilight of the night deepening into velvet black with unfamiliar constellations and planets so close it looked like I could reach out and touch them. It looked as if there were nothing but depthless drop; however, I knew there must be a way to get through. The firebird feather glowed only when I aimed in this direction. All of the other turns resulted in the glow dimming until it was nearly gone.

Think, I told myself. *I either must dispel the illusion or see if there is something solid beneath so I can walk through it.* I hesitantly stepped forward to test the air in front of me. As I had feared, my foot went right through instead of meeting solid ground, proving that the illusion was more than a simple glamour thrown over the area. It would be difficult to undo a spell this complex, and I wasn't sure if it would potentially alert Koschei if I tampered with his illusion. It would be better if I could find a way through instead. I found a small rock and threw it into the void, surprised when I heard the *click* much sooner than I expected. Looking down, I saw the rock lying about ten feet below where I was standing. *Clever*, I thought. It was obvious that Koschei cast the illusion over a wide chasm, making it look like a bottomless void. I whispered a simple spell to have the wind slow me down as I jumped into the chasm and landed near the rock I had thrown. It was disconcerting to see nothing but stars beneath my feet as I walked across the dark expanse. I felt as if I were walking through the heavens. Finally, the illusion of night sky began to lighten into blue twilight, and I saw a ledge where the ground reappeared above me. I summoned the wind to help me back up, whispering a thank you to dispel it. A towering castle loomed in the distance. The firebird said Koschei would come to the gardens

when the moon reached its apex, which meant I would be able to search the castle for his heart at that time.

I needed a place to wait until I knew Koschei was away from his castle. I skirted around the back and found myself looking at another huge lake. Thirteen enormous swans were gliding among water lilies and more weeping willows. There was a small structure with a pagoda type roof in the center. I spotted a tree with a hollow large enough to fit my body in near the water, but not too close that I would get wet. A perfect hiding place. I tucked my body into the hollow and arranged myself as comfortably as possible. As I watched the swans glide peacefully over the water, I thought about how I would find Koschei's heart. The moon rose higher into the sky, a full white globe tinged with the faintest pink blush. As night fell in earnest, the swans glided to the bank one by one. As I watched, all thirteen of them waded out of the water and stood on the bank as if they were waiting for something. Suddenly, as the moon reached its apex in the sky, the swans transformed into beautiful maidens in simple white shifts. I muffled a gasp. The maiden who had come out of the water first turned a sharp gaze on me. She was beautiful, with sable colored hair and midnight eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked me suspiciously, holding her arms out in front of the other maidens as if to protect them.

I bowed my head respectfully. “I mean you no harm, I am a humble scholar and mage. I found my way here through a door. The firebird-”

“The firebird sent you?” she said, her expression immediately relaxing.

“Well yes, I suppose so,” I said, showing her the feather the firebird had given me.

“Are you here to free us?” a younger maiden spoke up. This one had skin like honey and black eyes that tilted up like a swan.

“I will do my best. Is there anything you can tell me about Koschei? Do you know where he keeps his heart?” I asked eagerly.

“The sorcerer is clever, he does not allow us into his private rooms in the castle. We are permitted only on the first two floors. The top floor contains his study and suite of rooms. The heart could be there,” the first maiden said.

“I am not so sure. He is old and crafty, the heart may be somewhere else entirely,” a new maiden with ebony skin and oil black curls spoke up.

“I think it must be on this estate somewhere. He is too mistrustful to let it out of his sphere of power,” the first maiden mused. “I am sorry we cannot be of more help. Ever since we were captured, we were put under this enchantment. We are swans by day because it is easier for him to keep us that way, and only allowed our true form at night.”

“He keeps us like jewels in a box,” a maiden with hair the color of fire said disdainfully. “He does not even bother with us most of the time. Sometimes, he will summon one of us for his pleasure, but thankfully, it is not often.”

“Ever since he captured the firebird, he comes to us less and less. He goes first to hear her song. She does what she can to soothe his dark soul so he will not torment us,” the ebony skinned maiden said with tears in her eyes. “I wish there was more we could do to help you destroy him.”

“You may be able to help. Are there any guards in the castle?” I asked.

“There are statues that Koschei can animate. They also will spring to life if you touch any of his treasures,” the red-haired maiden warned.

“There will be a table laden with food, it will call to you because it is enchanted. Do not eat from it. If anyone but us eats from it, Koschei will know and it will put you in his power,” the first maiden warned.

“I am grateful for all you have told me. I promise I will do my utmost to free you,” I said. I spent a few more minutes learning their names and talking softly to them.

“Go now,” the youngest maiden said. “He should be reaching the garden of the firebird soon. She will lull him to relax, this will be your only chance to enter the castle without him there.’

“Thank you, I shall remember all you have said,” I told them. I made my way up a stone path lined with thorny hedges. The castle loomed closer, huge and dark. As I walked up the steps, I noticed the stone gargoyles poised at the entrance. I whispered a cloaking spell and felt the night wrap around me, shielding me from detection. I entered the foyer and noticed a long table laden with food. There were plump hens and wheels of cheese, fresh bread fragrant with herbs and whole roasts, steaming in their juices. There were ripe green grapes, white nectarines, crisp red apples and flagons of wine. My mouth watered and I unconsciously started towards the food before forcing myself to stop. If I had not drunk from the lake, the smell would have been irresistible and I thanked the firebird in my head. I skirted the table, holding my breath so as not to breathe the tantalizing aromas. Finding the staircase, I climbed up to the second floor.

I stepped into a room and got a glimpse of opulence; jewel toned rugs and warm candlelight. All of a sudden, the room vanished and I was standing in a winter wood. There was the crisp scent of snow in the air, the snap of cold against my skin. Pale, leafless silver trees stretched out in front of me amid drifts of snow. A lone owl hooted in the distance. *An illusion. Clever.* I tried to dispel it, but the magic was strong. When I looked closer, I realized the trees were made of bone. The illusion shivered and shifted, but held. I had no choice but to walk through the wood. I pulled out the firebird's feather, letting its soft glow comfort me. Suddenly, the owl I had heard before swooped down and landed on a nearby branch.

"Thou art the friend of the lady of fire?" the owl asked.

"Yes," I said. "I am here at her request. Will you aid me?"

"'Tis unwise to offend the sorcerer in his domain, traveler. But I have known the lady for an age, and any who claim her friendship has mine as well. Thou seeks the sorcerer's heart box?"

"Yes, can you show me where to find it?"

"'Tis in the highest branch of the Tree of Sorrows. Thou must climb past the fears of thee to obtain the box. I shall guide thee if thou wishes. But be warned, the tree will test thee and if thou is found unworthy, thou shalt perish. Does thou still wisht?" the owl said.

"Yes, please lead and I will follow," I said.

"Stay close, traveler," the owl said. It glided ahead, weaving silently through the dark wood. I marveled at the perfection of the illusion, even as I worried at the power of the sorcerer

who wrought it. How could I hope to defeat such might? I was too far in to back out now, there was nothing to do but trek onward.

Eventually, we came to a clearing. In the clearing stood a tree. This tree was as different from the pale, lifeless specimens around it as night is from day. It was wider than an oak and its upper branches stretched to the heavens. Its bark was black as onyx and gleamed with an inner light. It was solid and real, unlike the illusion around us. Instead of leaves, hundreds of candles stood on its gnarled branches, burning like tiny stars. I shivered at the power emanating from it.

“Here I leave thee. Thou must climb to retrieve the box. Thou must not falter, nor turn back. I wish thee good fortune, traveler,” the owl melted back into the wood, leaving me alone with my fears.

Well, nothing for it then, I thought to myself. I walked over to the tree and laid my hands on it, searching for a hand- or foothold. As I touched it, an image flashed into my mind. I was a young child again, holding a dead bird in my hand and sobbing. The bird had been my first pet and only friend for many years, and it was the first thing I loved that died. I felt the pain in my heart like a knife and I gasped, but I remembered what the owl said and I didn't let go. I found a small hollow to step in and began to climb. As I reached the first branch, the candles near me flared brighter and I saw another vision. I was a little older in this one, walking out onto a frozen lake. My older brothers were taunting me, saying I would never make it to the middle, that I was too afraid. I kept walking in the vision. *Turn back,* I thought. *You fool, turn back.* But of course I did not. The younger me took another step, then another. The ice cracked, and I froze. My brothers' taunts died. I held my breath, knowing what came next. The ice creaked and groaned, my younger self tried to cry out, but the ice finally gave way, plunging me into the black

depths. As my child self fell into the water, an icy cold closed over me and I shivered in the tree. The fear clawed at my mind with razor sharp talons. In the vision, I kicked and twisted to the surface, pounding and scratching on the ice, shredding my soft young hands. My lungs burned and ached with the need to breathe, but I held back. Black spots swam behind my eyes. I felt my arms and legs seizing up and the need for oxygen forcing my lips open. I needed air, needed to breathe. my mind silently screamed, *No!* But I had to breathe, so I opened my mouth, and icy water flooded in. On the tree, my eyes snapped open and I gasped, winter air flooding my lungs instead of water. My hands trembled violently on the branches. I was tempted to turn back, but I forced myself to climb on.

Branch after branch, fear after fear, sorrow after sorrow. They all flashed before my eyes and I felt the ghost of their pain and sadness wash over me. I saw myself leave my family to train with the magi, endured the pain of my mother's death and the heartbreak of losing my best friend to the summer sickness. Many times I almost turned back, but I steeled myself, holding the firebird's feather close to my heart and taking comfort in its warm light. As I reached the top, I saw a nest woven of thorns. Inside lay a large, speckled egg. I grasped it in both hands, wondering at its weight. The shell was thin and fragile, but I could feel a faint, persistent beat that made me shiver. I tucked the egg carefully in my robes and started wearily back down the tree. As I reached the bottom, I pulled the egg from my robes and cracked it open on a rock. A hare leaped out before I could even blink. Swifter than an adder, the owl swooped in and dove, breaking the hare's neck with a sharp crack.

"Thank you," I said to him, still amazed. His yellow eyes watched me warily. I approached and saw a seam along the hare's belly. Carefully, I pulled it apart to reveal an

intricately carved box. It seemed to be a solid piece with no hinge or crack to open. Twisting and turning it over in my hands, I explored the surface with my fingers for any clues. I saw carved symbols and grooves that appeared to be some exotic language, like the calligraphy of angels. On one side, a familiar looking shape spread under my questing thumb. I pulled out the firebird's feather, fitting it carefully in the indentation. Suddenly, the box popped open at the corners and twisted apart from some hidden seam, revealing a red, beating heart wrapped in silver chains.

The sound of clapping resonated behind me.

I looked up, jumping when I saw a tall man with long dark hair swept back from severe features. He had a twisted smile on his face.

“So, young mage is it? You made it pretty far and now you're thinking yourself to be quite the clever mouse,” he said. His voice was rich and warm, honey and spice, far too beautiful.

“Koschei, I presume,” I nodded nonchalantly, as if we were simply old friends chatting over tea.

“The one and only,” he said giving an elaborate bow. “I am curious, what were you planning to do now that you have what you sought? I must confess, you are the first to make it to this point. Indeed, most do not get past the statue garden.”

“Well obviously, there is some enchantment on these chains, probably to cancel out or rebound any magic, which I was not expecting, true,” I said, playing for time while I thought it through.

He laughed, a low, throaty purr. “How about we make this game more interesting. If you give me the box, I will grant you an exit from this world. This is none of your concern after all. I have no quarrel with you, nor you with me.”

I thought about it, the heart heavy in my hands. If I left, he would capture the firebird again, mayhap even punish her. The maidens would stay imprisoned, and this world would lay under his yoke forever.

“I could teach you things that none of your brethren know,” Koschei’s voice was low and melodious. “You could discover the secrets of all the worlds. There is an untold wealth of magic in the texts I have amassed.” As he spoke, my grip loosened on the box. Why had I wanted this? He sounded reasonable enough. I started to hand the box over.

The firebird swooped in from the distance. She was singing, and Koschei looked as if he was about to laugh, but she arrowed straight for his eyes and hooked her claws in before he could make a sound.

“I cannot enchant him, but I can take his sight,” she said, her voice feral and delicate at once. As she tore free, he screeched in rage. He threw a spell at her, but she dove out of the way. He blindly threw another towards me, but I dodged and it blew past, singeing my cheek.

“Firebird, how do I destroy his heart?” I asked. “The chains are counter charmed.”

“I do not know,” she replied, her sweet voice mournful.

I thought for a moment, slowly backing away so Koschei would not be able to fix a spell on my location. I looked at the firebird, her talons dripping with blood. “I know! These chains were bound using his own blood!”

The firebird flew over and laid a bloody claw on the chains. They smoked and dissolved, the heart glistening wet and red underneath. I picked it up. “I believe it should be you who gets to decide,” I respectfully bowed my head to the firebird. “If it cannot be destroyed by enchantment, it may be that it can be consumed by another.”

The firebird’s answering look was fierce. She used her beak and talons to shred the heart into tiny pieces, gulping down each piece with relish. Koschei shrieked and faded, his outline becoming blurry and indistinct before disappearing entirely.

The firebird swooped down, and in a flash, turned into a maiden more beautiful than any I had ever seen.

“Traveler, I am grateful for your aid,” she said.

I bowed to her and tried to give her back the feather. “This is yours, Lady. It guided me well,” I said.

“Keep it,” she told me. “I do not know if it will carry the same magic in your world, but if you are in need, wave it above your head three times, and I will come if I can.”

The thirteen princesses, no longer swans, ran up to us. The eldest princess with the midnight eyes fiercely embraced the firebird, kissing her passionately before turning to me.

“I cannot thank you enough for what you have done,” she said. “I do hope you weren’t expecting either of us to fall in love with you,” she said. “All the heroes do, it’s terribly inconvenient.” She gasped the firebird’s hand tightly in her own, eyes glittering with pride as she gazed at her.

“Oh, no,” I said. “I am merely glad to be of assistance. I don’t think I am the real hero of this story,” I said, glancing at the firebird. “Besides, I am just beginning my studies in magic, I do not intend to be married for quite some time. I would like to have a few more adventures first.”

The firebird and the princesses laughed. “Would you be so kind as to accompany us to speak with those who had been turned into statues under Koschei’s enchantment?” the firebird asked. “They must have turned back when Koschei was defeated, and many of them will be terribly confused. It would be helpful to have a good mage around in case anyone needs reassurance.”

“I’ll do what I can, Lady,” I said. “But please, call me Ivan.”

“Then you must call me Vasilisa, and this is Princess Marya,” the firebird said, pushing the dark eyed princess forward. I bowed politely and kissed her hand.

I spent the day helping Vasilisa put her gardens and castle in order. There was a great deal of treasure that Koschei had stolen, which Vasilisa decreed would be sorted and returned to its owners. After that, she helped me find the way back to the door, and from there, I made my way back to the house. I still visit sometimes, Vasilisa still rules peacefully, and all the princesses have returned home, save one.

The Lost Key

As Velvet grew, she began to learn magic. She studied with all the apprentices and learned which plants to gather to brew potions for sleep or healing, how to manipulate air and water and fire. She learned the secret languages of animals and how to coax small plants to grow. However, these were small magics that all magi could perform with ease. Most of the older magi had specific talents. One of the masters could command stone to do anything he wished, another could create powerful illusions. Of course, her favorite was Ivan with his power over words.

“When will I find out what my talent is?” Velvet asks Ivan one afternoon as they brew sleeping draughts. “What if I don’t have a special one? What if the small magics are all I’ll ever be able to do?” She uses her pestle to grind some valerian root, worrying her lip with her small teeth.

“Oh child, don’t you worry. It’ll come. You’re still a babe,” Ivan chuckles.

“I’m twelve,” Velvet says with all the indignance of her young years.

“And you’re quite advanced for your age,” Ivan tells her. He reaches over for some dandelion seeds.

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better,” Velvet frowns.

“I’m not. Some of the magi leave here with only the small magics you have now,” Ivan says. “Be patient, it’ll come.”

Velvet is not patient, but she knows Ivan is wise and she decides to listen to him for now. And one morning, she finds out that he was right.

One day, Velvet is outside on a sunny morning gathering rosemary for a tonic she is working on. One of the masters has been having frequent headaches and doesn't want to deplete his power charming them away, so Velvet has decided to try brewing a tonic for him. Suddenly, the sky darkens, and she feels the first raindrops splash on her cheeks.

Normally, Velvet doesn't mind rain, but she isn't finished gathering and she wants to get brewing this evening. Suddenly she knows what she needs to do. She has never done it before, but she listens to her intuition and lets it guide her hand. Quickly putting aside her basket, she stands up and gathers the few shafts of buttery sunlight between her small fingers. She weaves them together like she is braiding her hair, thinking hard about a gorgeous sunny day last summer when she was out playing. She hears the bird song in her mind and feels the notes between her fingers like so many gossamer threads. As she weaves the sunlight and the bird song together, she tells herself a short little tale of a bright sunny day, perfect for plants to grow and be gathered.

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl who needed to gather herbs before supper, and so she wove herself a perfect afternoon of warm sunlight. The light melted over her shoulders like butter and she could feel a soft breeze lift her hair," Velvet tells herself as she intertwines the syrupy sun rays.

Miraculously, a sphere of golden light blooms around her, redolent with the smell of sun dried herbs and filled with bird song. She ties off her weave and quickly gathers the last of the rosemary, excited when she realizes that the sphere of light isn't just an illusion, it is warm and fragrant just like a real summer day. Outside of her little sphere, the day has gone cloudy and fat raindrops fall from the sky, hissing as they meet her bright circle. Her sphere begins to shrink

slowly, Velvet watches as her weave gradually loosens, disappearing completely after about an hour. She runs back through the rain, basket full of rosemary swinging on her arm.

After she gets back to the mage tower, she drops off her basket and goes in search of Ivan. She finds him in the library, reading a thick book with a battered cover that says *The Philosophy on Intersections of Time and Space*. He is sitting in his favorite overstuffed chair and there is another book on his lap that says *Fate and its Alterations*. He is frowning, but does not seem angry, only puzzled.

“Ivan! Guess what?” Velvet says, breathless with excitement.

“Shhh,” the old bearded mage who serves as the librarian admonishes her.

“Sorry,” Velvet whispers. “I found out what my talent is,” she tries to keep her voice from rising in glee.

Ivan closes his book with a snap, the frown vanishing to be replaced by an amused grin. “Well what do you know! I told you it would happen,” he says, not bothering to whisper.

“Shhh,” the librarian hushes him, glaring at them both.

“Oh shhh yourself. There’s nobody here but us,” Ivan says exasperatedly. “Come, Velvet, let’s go to the apothecary and work on that tonic for Master Taavi shall we? You can tell me all about what happened on the way there.”

Velvet grins apologetically at the librarian, but he turns away with a “hmp!”

As she and Ivan leave the librarian to his silent disapproval, she continues her story. “Well today I was gathering herbs for the tonic and then out of nowhere, it started to rain. I wanted to finish brewing tonight so Master Taavi could try it tomorrow, but I didn’t have nearly enough rosemary. All of a sudden, I knew what I had to do. I got this odd feeling in my chest,

like something was pulling me to do what needed to be done, even though I had never done it, does that make any sense?" she asks Ivan.

"Yes, that's how it begins, with the compulsion. It's the talent inside you pulling you towards whatever you have an affinity for. What happened next?"

"Well it might sound odd, but I knew that I could weave the shafts of sunlight together as easy as braiding my own hair. So that's how it started, but as I was doing it, I imagined in my head a sunny day from last summer, and I felt the notes of bird song in my hands like extra threads," Velvet says.

"Fascinating!" Ivan murmurs.

"I wove sunlight and song together, telling myself a story while I did it. I started it 'Once upon a time', like how you do when you tell me stories. I imagined everything I could about the most perfect day I could think of, and as I wove, a sphere of light appeared around me! Inside the sphere, it was warm and bright. I could hear birds singing and smell fresh herbs and flowers. It wasn't just an illusion, like the ones Master Layton makes that you can just see with your eyes, *it felt* real too!" Velvet gushes.

"How big was the sphere? And how long did it stay? Did you have to undo the weave?" Ivan questions curiously.

"Um, it wasn't too big. It was about two of my arm spans wide in each direction. It stayed for about an hour, and no I didn't have to undo the weave, I could see it loosening and eventually it fell apart and the sphere disappeared, is that bad?" Velvet asks, worrying now that she might have done something wrong.

"No not at all! I was just wondering. I've never heard of anything like it before. I bet once you learn a bit you could make it last longer," Ivan says.

“Really? You’ve never heard of magic like mine?” Velvet asks.

“No, but I think it’s wonderful! I bet you can do it with all sorts of things. I’ll have to see if I can find some books on the subject to help you, or maybe I’ll talk to the head mage,” Ivan says, stopping in his tracks.

“Wait, but we still have to make the tonic,” Velvet tells him. They have almost reached the apothecary.

“Oh yes, right,” Ivan says, looking a bit disappointed,

Velvet giggles. Ivan can be so absent minded, but she is overjoyed at how happy he seems for her. “Let’s get this tonic brewed and then we can go back to the library, I can look for some books with you!”

They don’t manage to find anything in the library that explains what Velvet’s magic is, so Ivan decides that for now, they need to find out more about what Velvet can do by having her try different things. He takes her to a room in the tower filled with different supplies that the magi use. He lights a few squat black candles and shows her bowls of rose petals and owl feathers, piles of smooth river stones and thick strands of silk ribbons. There are jars full of beetles and piles of small ivory bones.

“Now, I want you to see if you can create something using anything in here. Tell me what you are trying to make and let’s see if I can see it too,” Ivan says.

Velvet walks around the room, touching the stones lightly with her fingertips and twining the strands of silky ribbon through her fingers. She grasps a length of wine red ribbon and a handful of rose petals. Standing in the center of the room, she takes a deep breath and looks at Ivan. Her fingers begin to work the disparate materials together, ribbon and candlelight and rose petals, and the words flow out of her like they had been waiting for her to speak them.

“Once upon a time, there was a comfortable room lit by the light of a hundred candles and filled with huge dark red sitting cushions. Rose bushes grew around the cushions and the room smelled like beeswax and flowers,” Velvet says, her fingers weaving the ribbon, candlelight, and rose petals together and winding the braid around her wrist. As she does, the room appears around her and Ivan, candles dripping wax and rose bushes blooming out of the stone floor. Comfortable wine-colored cushions appear at their feet.

Ivan stifles a gasp. He walks around the room in a daze, picking a rose and putting it to his nose, inhaling the impossibly sweet scent. He sits on a cushion, marveling at the silky softness where there was only bare stone floor a moment ago. He feels the warmth from the hundred candles scattered throughout the room, their beeswax scent perfuming the space, though there had only been two squat ones on the wooden table.

“Astounding,” he says quietly. “I can feel it all.”

“You can?” Velvet’s voice trembles with hope. She is a bit tired from the strain of holding the magic, but the look of awe on Ivan’s face makes her feel a fierce pride.

“Can you make additions to it?” Ivan asks.

“Hmm, I’m not sure but I can try,” Velvet says. She thinks for a moment before walking over to the table and selecting a few long brown owl feathers. “An owl flew into the room and perched on Ivan’s shoulder,” she says, tucking and weaving the feathers into the braid around her wrist. She feels a hard draw on her energy and sinks down onto her own cushion just as a small fluffy barn owl swoops into the room and lands on Ivan’s shoulder.

“Are you alright?” Ivan reaches over to lay a hand on Velvet’s arm. The owl hoots softly and nibbles at Ivan’s ear.

“Yes, I just got really tired all of a sudden,” Velvet says.

“Living things probably take more energy to conjure,” Ivan explains. “You should let the magic go and eat something to replenish yourself.”

“But do you think I did well?” Velvet asks.

“Extraordinary, child. This is more than I could’ve dreamed,” Ivan says with a grin.

Velvet gives him a tired smile and lets the weave fall from her wrist, feathers and ribbon fluttering to the floor. The room with its hundred candles and owl and roses disappears, leaving a tired girl and a mage sitting on the stone floor of a supply room in the mage tower. Velvet’s eyes droop with exhaustion.

“Rest, child. But first, go to the kitchen and ask the cook for a piece of bread and jam. You need to eat to regain your strength,” Ivan says.

Velvet stands up, gripping the edge of the table as she sways on her feet.

“Easy there,” Ivan steadies her with gentle hands. “Magic always has a cost, the bigger the spell, the more it will demand from you. You must build up your strength in stages. And never try to hold the magic for longer than you can manage. There have been magi who have fallen into sleep without waking before,” he warns.

“I’ll remember,” Velvet yawns. “Can we practice again tomorrow?”

“In the morning I’m going to ride to the village, but when I get back,” Ivan says. “Make sure you check on the tonic and finish your chores.”

The next day, Velvet finishes checking the tonic and sweeping the potions room, but Ivan still isn’t back. She is about to head to the library, but changes her mind, instead fetching thread, ribbons, shears, and a needle from the supply room. She goes to her room and retrieves the fabrics she was wrapped in as a baby. She doesn’t know why, but she feels there is something special about them; maybe it’s just because they are the only things that truly belong to

her. Laying them out on her bed, she begins to work. She snips here and there, saving the scraps in a small pile. Then, she starts to sew. When Velvet is done, she grins proudly at what she has made. She shrugs it on and twirls around happily. The coat is a mosaic of colors and textures. Sunset orange melds into lavender while candy pink and snow-white swirls into waves of ocean blue. A scattering of yellow stars bursts over her shoulder while a pattern of dark green ivy creeps around her collar. There are pockets in the front and back and a bunch of smaller ones hidden on the inside; in fact, the garment is more pocket than coat. She frowns and puts her hands on her hips, something is missing.

With a caw, Lucius the raven swoops in, a pouch in his beak. He drops his offering on her bed and perches next to it expectantly.

“What’s this? For me?” Velvet asks suspiciously. Lucius just looks at her. She opens the pouch and breaks into a smile as she discovers three large, star shaped wooden buttons. She shrugs out of her new coat and sews the buttons down the front. Inspired by the scraps of fabric she saved, she takes a couple long lengths of ribbon and cuts the pieces to a similar length and width. Weaving together ribbons and fabric, she makes herself a couple of bracelets of elaborate braids. Tying them on and securing them with a small spell, she shrugs back into her coat, buttoning the star shaped buttons, and looks at Lucius.

“What do you think?” Velvet asks the raven. He caws once more and flaps back out of the room. Feeling quite pleased with herself, Velvet heads down to wait for Ivan. As she nears the staircase that would lead her down to the library, however, she hears raised voices coming from the spiral staircase that leads to the rooms of the head mage. She knows she shouldn’t

eavesdrop, but then she recognizes one of the voices is Ivan's and curiosity gets the better of her. Creeping up the first couple stairs, she flattens herself to the stone wall and strains her ears.

"...not the right time!" the head mage is saying.

"But...the doors...closing...too late!" Ivan sounds more agitated than she has ever heard him. But Velvet listens harder. Doors? Could it have something to do with the house he told her about?

"Shhh!...voice down..." the head mage says. Velvet dares to creep up a few more steps but the rest of their conversation is conducted in muffled whispers. Disappointed, she tiptoes back down the stairs and flees to the library.

As the days wear on, Velvet hones her magic, practicing with Ivan until she can weave scent and starlight, stories blooming between her fingers like flowers.

"Ivan," Velvet asks one day. "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," Ivan grins. "But yes, you may ask something else."

"A while back, I didn't mean to, but I overheard you talking to the head mage..."

"Oh, you heard us, did you? And what did you hear?"

"I'm not sure," Velvet frowns. "Something about doors, and the time not being right, but I didn't really understand it."

"It is not the time for you to know what we spoke of yet, but I promise one day you will," Ivan says.

"Is it about the house with the magic doors?" Velvet asks.

"It is," Ivan says.

"Is it in danger?"

“Magic is always dangerous, child,” Ivan says. “There are those who covet it, and those who shun it out of fear. Magic is seductive and powerful. There are those who would seek to put an end to it if they could, but these are not things for you to worry about yet.”

“But if there’s something wrong with the house, won’t the magic disappear?” Velvet asks.

“Oh Velvet, child, there’s more magic in all the worlds than you think. There will come a time when all will be revealed, just be patient.”

But Velvet was not patient. She had been having odd dreams. She dreamt that she was in the house with all the doors, and yet not a single door would open for her. In her dream, every door was locked.

One day, Velvet slipped into the dream again, and yet, it felt different. The first door she went to opened, but there was a strange quality to the landscape. She was walking through a forest, yet there was no breeze through the trees, no scent in the air. There was no bird song, no sound of rushing water. She walked through the empty land, passing by a glass coffin where a princess slept, yet her chest did not rise or fall.

“Hello, child,” a voice came from a tree, startling Velvet. She turned and saw a beautiful red and gold bird.

“Firebird? Are you Ivan’s friend?” Velvet asks.

“Indeed I am. But it is you who I need to speak with,” the firebird says. “Look upon this world, what do you see?”

“It’s like its frozen. What happened?” Velvet asks.

“There is an imbalance between the worlds. The house that lies at the crossroads is not only the threshold, but also the source of the magic. All the stories make their homes in the

different worlds. Someone has been meddling, trying to close the doors. This is a world that has forgotten its story.”

“This is awful! Will all the worlds become this way?” Velvet asks.

“Only the ones with magic are in danger of becoming forgotten, but without magic, the balance will tip, and it is possible that we will cease to exist. The only worlds that will thrive will be those that have forgotten magic completely. Creatures such as I cannot survive in a climate like this.”

“What can we do?” Velvet asks.

“There is something you must discover child. I cannot tell you too much, or the balance will be disturbed even more, but there is a reason you were left with the magi. Look to the things that are yours,” the firebird said.

Velvet woke up, heart racing. She tried to remember the details of the dream. *Look to the things that are mine?* But nothing really belonged to her, nothing except...the fabrics! Velvet hurried over to her coat, running fingers over the mismatched materials. There was nothing really special about them, save the variations in materials. But where did they come from?

Velvet wanted to wake Ivan and ask him what he thought. The last time he had told her she wasn't ready. But would the firebird have come to her if the need wasn't urgent? Maybe it was time for her to take matters into her own hands.

Velvet put her coat on and knotted her bracelets of materials around her slender wrists. She crept quietly through the tower, trying to find her way back to the room with the mermaid fountain. If she was going to get into the house, she needed the key. She only hoped she would know how to choose the right one.

It seemed like hours before she found the room with the fountain. The mermaid statue snoozed, the soft sighs whispering in Velvet's ears. Velvet peered into the fountain. Thousands of keys glittered up at her. She closed her eyes, trying to feel if one called to her like Ivan said it would. Try as she might, she couldn't tell if any of the keys were different. Reaching into the fountain, she tried to pick up the nearest key. To her astonishment, the water turned solid, her hand glancing off the surface. She tried again, reaching for another key this time. Again, the same thing happened.

"Looking for something?" a voice made Velvet jump. Behind her, Ivan dangled a golden key from his finger. "I knew you would come here soon. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"The firebird came to me in a dream," Velvet started. "She said something about the doors closing and the magic disappearing..."

"Yes, for some time now there has been a problem with the house. Previously, we magi could enter any world with a door, but lately, some doors have been closed to us. I have not been able to visit many of the worlds I have gone to before. Some of the doors have disappeared completely. I tried to visit the firebird myself a while ago, but I could not find the door. The magic is becoming unstable."

"We have to do something," Velvet says.

"I think it is time for you to know the things we have kept from you. Would you sit for a moment?" Ivan asks.

Velvet sits, curling up near Ivan as she has done many times before.

"When you first arrived, that was when we noticed the disturbances in the doors. There were some of us who thought that it was coincidence, but Master Lorenzo and myself, we thought differently. You see, Velvet, Master Lorenzo recognized something very special about

the pieces of fabric you came wrapped in. There is magic imbued in them, a magic none of us have ever seen. It is almost like a transformation spell, but it is stubborn and will not respond to any of our efforts. I believe the magic is keyed to respond to you alone. I do not know why, but it seems like you are the one who is to rebalance the magic.”

“But how?...” Velvet asks.

“We do not know how or why, only that you are connected to them in some way. We have tried many times to see if we could reopen the doors. Even Master Lorenzo has tried to work with the magic, but he cannot. None of the magi can.”

Velvet’s eyes grew wide. “You think...”

“I don’t know for sure, but let’s try something,” Ivan says. “Focus on the materials, see if you can detect the magic.”

Velvet closes her eyes and runs her hands over the fabric of her dress. She can feel a faint sense of *something* emanating from it, almost like the feeling of moonlight. She uses her magic and *pulls*. Visions swam through her mind, rivers made of fire, horses made of water and foam pulling a boat with a cloaked figure in the prow, shooting stars and trees covered in a thousand butterflies. She can feel the solid weight of something in her hand and opens her eyes. There, lying in her palm, is a key. The key has an intricately woven head and looks like the silver twin to the golden key to the house.

“Ivan! Look!”

Ivan gives her a sad smile. “It is as I feared, you must be the one to unlock the doors.”

“But where does this key even lead?” Velvet asks.

“Ah, you see, now we are getting into the realm of guesswork. None of the doors in the house have locks. However, there is a story that at the very end of the house lies the door to the

underworld. The place our souls go when we die. This door requires a key, but none have ever seen it. The door itself is notoriously difficult to find, and it is said that you will only see it if the house lets you. I myself have never seen it, but Master Lorenzo has. The legend says that the key was lost, but it was made by the same maker as the maker of the key that opens the house. Whatever is happening with the magic must be tied to something in the underworld.”

“Can you come with me?”

“I wish I could, Velvet, but I do not think it is meant. The house does not allow more than one of us inside. Find the firebird, she will be able to tell you more than I. Now come, let’s get you some supplies for the journey,” Ivan says.

Ivan leads Velvet to the kitchens, finding her a pack and stuffing it with bread, cheese, and some skins of water.

“I can take you to the house, but that is as far as I can go with you,” Ivan says.

“Ivan, I’m scared,” Velvet admits.

“I know,” Ivan says. “I won’t lie and say that it will be easy, but I believe in you. You are more powerful than you know.”

Ivan and Velvet set out into the forest, Ivan holding a lantern to lead them. “When you find the firebird, tell her everything. You can trust her. The door to her world is wooden and has a carving of a firebird on it. The doors have been shifting so I’m not sure how long it will take you to find it, nor do I know what you will find when you get there. But if the firebird told you to come, I’m sure you will be able to at least get there,” Ivan says.

Finally, the house comes into view. “Have courage, dear heart,” Ivan gives Velvet a hug.

“I wish you were coming with me,” Velvet hugs him back hard.

“I’ll be with you in here,” Ivan puts a hand over his heart.

Velvet turns and walks toward the house, taking a deep breath. As she approaches the door, she turns and smiles bravely. Ivan lifts a hand in farewell. Velvet takes the key Ivan gave her and inserts it into the lock, turning it until she hears a click, the key disappears, and Velvet opens the door and steps inside.

The inside of the house is just as Velvet imagines it. The scent of cedar and smoke hangs in the air. There are doors stretching as far as she can see. As she walks, she examines each of them, looking for the wooden door with the firebird carved into it. Some doors are so beautiful that she wants to stop and open them, but she stops herself, knowing she has an important mission. Among the more interesting doors she passes are a door made of interwoven branches blooming with live flowers, a door with what looks like dozens of closed eyes, a door studded with metal spikes, and a small round door made of stone with indentations that make it look like a face. After passing what seems like hundreds of doors, she comes to the wooden door carved with a firebird. Velvet reaches for the handle and opens the door, stepping into a lush garden. Everything is silent and still. There is no wind through the willow trees nor any birdsong.

“Hello?” Velvet calls out. There is no answer. She sees a towering castle in the distance and starts walking towards it. As she walks, she notices fountains filled with water but the water is not running. There are no flowers blooming on the plants, buds hang dormant off branches. She steps under a stone arch into a courtyard, where a beautiful woman in a flowing red and orange dress greets her.

“Velvet, I am so glad you came,” the woman’s voice is instantly recognizable as that of the firebird. “Come, sit and eat.” The firebird leads Velvet to a bench piled with silk cushions. There is a platter of fruit and a pitcher of water on a low stone table. The firebird pours water into a glass and hands it to Velvet.

“Thank you,” Velvet says. “I’m sorry, what should I call you?”

“Oh! I’m sorry, you can call me Vasilisa,” the firebird says. Another woman walks into the room, she is stunning, with black hair and dark eyes. “This is Princess Marya, my partner.”

“Just Marya,” the woman sits next to Vasilisa and winks at Velvet. “I’m no longer a princess, after all.”

“I’ve heard of you! Ivan told me the story of how Koschei was defeated and you two fell in love. It was one of my favorite tales,” Velvet says.

“Oh, I miss Ivan,” Vasilisa says. “He was so brave. It’s thanks to him that we are free now. But something has been happening to the magic.”

“Yes, he told me that you might know something!” Velvet exclaims.

“It seems as if someone is trying to close the ways between the worlds. The flow of magic is what sustains the house, which is the place where all the worlds intersect. Some worlds have more magic than others, and some have none at all. By taking the magic from the worlds, it closes the doors to those worlds. If enough doors close, the house will cease to exist and all the worlds will be separated,” Vasilisa says.

“But that’s awful! Who would want that?” Velvet asks.

“I’m not sure, but whoever is doing it is very skilled in the use of magic. This world used to have an abundance of magic, but ever since this has been happening, I haven’t been able to transform, and without magic, the door will not open for me to get to the house. I was able to visit you in your dream, but it drained the last of my strength. This world won’t be able to survive if the magic is not restored. Only the strongest of trees are still bearing fruit, and in the forest, the magical creatures have fallen into a deep sleep. Even the fountains have stopped flowing and the dryads and naiads haven’t been seen at all. The only reason I am not asleep as

well is that I have my human form, and I am one of the strongest here, but I cannot even conjure the smallest spell,” Vasilisa says sadly.

“But what can I do?” Velvet asks.

“There is only one place where the magic from worlds can be taken, and that is from the Tapestry of Worlds that hangs on the Loom of Fate. This lies in the underworld inside the Palace of Hades, on the far side of the Land of Dreams and the Elysian Fields, where good souls go to rest before being reborn. To get there, you’ll have to enter through the Gates of Horn and Ivory, which appear in the house. The problem is that the key was lost years ago...”

“But I have it!” Velvet holds up the key she had conjured out of the fabric.

“How did you get that?!” Vasilisa exclaims. “Legend has it that the key was given to Persephone by Hades in order to get back into the underworld. She is his wife and she resides for half the year in the underworld. The key was made for her to get in and out, and usually the only way is through the Gate of Shades, but one cannot be living in order to enter, so Hades had the Gate of Horn and Ivory constructed and a key made for her. However, it is said that Persephone lost the key, and Hades would not make another one, so now when it comes time for her to descend, he goes to get her and brings her back down with him.”

“It was hidden with magic in the pieces of fabric that I was wrapped in as a baby,” Velvet explains. “None of the magi could get it out, but I was able to.”

“The only one that could have given you that key is Persephone herself, and she must have had good reason for it,” Vasilisa says.

“It is winter in the mortal realm now, which means she is in the underworld,” Marya interrupts. “If you find her, you can ask her why she gave you the key. She must have meant for you to find it.”

“Here, take this coin,” Vasilisa hands Velvet a large silver coin. “This will summon Charon, the ferryman. He can take you across the River Styx. I’ll try to give you as much information as I can. When you first enter the underworld, you will have to get by Cerberus, the three-headed dog. He’s fierce, but you can easily put him to sleep with music. Here, take this,” Vasilisa hands Velvet a small metal object. “It’s a harmonica. It’s easy to use, just blow into this part here.” She shows her the small openings on one side. “He’s not picky, any tune will put him under. Then, you’ll have to cross the rivers. There are six rivers in the underworld, Styx is the river of oaths, Acheron the river of woe, Cocytus is the river of lamentation, Phlegethon the river of fire, Lethe the river of forgetfulness. You’ll start on the River Styx. Throw this coin in, it’ll summon Charon, the ferryman.” Vasilisa gives Velvet a heavy gold coin. “He will take you down the River Styx to the River Lethe, which you’ll sail until you reach the River Cocytus. Then, you’ll get off in Demos Oneroi, the Land of Dreams. You must be careful, there are powerful illusions there. Remember nothing is real, don’t get trapped in a dream. After you make it through there, you’ll come to the Elysian Fields. This is where good souls go to rest before they are reborn. Some say the Grove of Persephone lies within it. This is where you may be able to find her, and you can ask her about the key and who you are. She will be your best chance of an ally down there. Then you’ll come to the Palace of Hades. It is carved of onyx, and you’ll enter through a cave. I have never been inside, so I cannot tell you what might be in place to guard it. Be careful. In one of the rooms, you’ll find the Loom of Fate and the Tapestry of Worlds. Your magic might call to it somehow. Touch it, see if you can fix whatever has been broken. Use your instincts to guide you.”

“But what if I don’t know how to fix it?” Velvet asks.

“There is a reason you were given the key, a reason you were left with the magi to learn to use magic. Trust yourself,” Marya spoke up.

“I’ll do my best,” Velvet says.

“Remember, don’t be tempted by illusions, or led astray. It is easy to lose your way in the underworld. Time moves differently there. Don’t dally, be swift,” Vasilisa takes Velvet’s hands. “Sleep here tonight, tomorrow we will pack you some supplies for your journey.”

Velvet is shown to a comfortable room decorated in soft pastels and creams. A large ivory bed with gauzy curtains draped around it dominates the center of it. Velvet lays down, trying to rest but filled with anxiety at the thought of what she is undertaking. She grips the ?? she strung onto one of her bracelets tightly in her fist and tries to think of what Ivan might be doing. Eventually, she falls into a fitful sleep.

In the morning, Vasilisa and Marya give Velvet her bag back as they walk her to the door. “We put some more food in for you, and take this too.” Marya hands Velvet a knife in a leather sheath to strap around her waist. “Just in case.” Both of them kiss her on the cheek, and she turns back for one last look at them. They are holding hands, and Vasilisa lifts her other hand in farewell. Velvet returns the gesture, trying to look brave. Then she turns towards the door, opens it and steps back into the house.

The familiar cedar and smoke scent of the house is comforting, and Velvet breathes it in deeply before beginning her walk down the seemingly endless hallway. Suddenly, an old, red painted door to her left bursts open and a tall, gangly boy with long dark hair falls through.

“Whoa! Sorry, I didn’t know...” the boy stops. “Wait, who are you?”

“Who are *you*? And how did you get in here? I thought only one person at a time could come in?” Velvet asks. The boy is dressed in strange clothing, a black shirt with some kind of long-sleeved coat, and pants made of an unusual dark blue woven fabric.

“I’m Bash, um- well it’s really Sebastien, but everyone calls me Bash. And what do you mean ‘one person at a time?’ Is this like some special book room or something?” The boy asks.

“Book room?” Velvet wonders if the boy is a bit mad. “What do you mean? This is the house between worlds.”

“Okay,” Bash laughs and flips a long strand of hair back from his face. He studies Velvet’s patchwork coat and the leather bag slung over her shoulder. “You’re shining me on, right? Good one. Do you work here or something? Look, I’m sorry I barged in, it’s just I saw the door and was wondering if there might be some cool stuff back here. This place is huge! I thought it was probably just storage or something.”

“I’m not, um, ‘shining you on’. I don’t even know what that means. This house is the place between worlds. See all these doors,” Velvet points down the hall. “They all go to different worlds, different places. If you didn’t know that, how did you even get in here? You have to have magic to even enter.”

“Wait a minute, back up. You’re expecting me to believe this place is *magic*?!” Bash laughs derisively. “Ok, I’ll play along. So where does this go?” He walks over to a door painted different shades of lavender and carved with swirling waves.

“Wait don’t-” Velvet says.

But it’s too late. Bash puts a hand on the doorknob and pushes it open. The door opens onto a lilac sea with large, leafy green plants growing out of it. White globes of fruit the size of

melons hang from the branches. Suddenly, a school of bright blue fish erupt out of the water flapping silver wings.

“Holy sh-” Bash exclaims.

Velvet runs up to the door and slams it shut, whirling to face Bash. “See! I told you. You can’t just go opening doors here! You don’t know where they lead! Listen, you should just go back where you came from.”

Bash gazes at Velvet in astonishment. Her gold-green eyes are fierce and her elfin face and colorful dress make her look like an angry child, but her features are delicate and beautiful. “I’m sorry okay? I didn’t know. I thought you were just messing around. What’s your name? How do you know about this place?”

Velvet sighs impatiently. “My name is Velvet, and I’m on a mission. The magic that keeps this place around is becoming unstable. I’m the only one who might be able to restore it. So I don’t really have time for this, ok? You need to go.”

“Hold on. So you can do actual magic? Where did you come from?” Bash asks.

Velvet glares at him, crossing her arms, but she senses he won’t leave until she answers. “I grew up in a world of magi. I don’t know where I’m really from, I was left there as a baby. The magi raised me and taught me to use my magic.”

“That’s amazing. So, you don’t know who your parents are?” Bash asks.

“No,” Velvet sighs. “Listen, if you’re not gonna go, sit down. I have some food, you can have some.” Velvet unpacks a small loaf of bread, some cheese, and two apples, handing one to Bash and breaking off half of the bread and cheese for him.

“Thanks,” Bash sits down against the wall, folding his long legs under him. So, you’re like, on a quest?” Bash asks, biting into his apple.

“I guess. I have to get to the underworld and see what’s wrong with the Tapestry of Worlds. That’s what holds the worlds together and makes the house exist so we can cross between them. Someone is taking magic from the Tapestry. Doors have been closing, and soon, the house will disappear, and nobody will be able to travel between the worlds anymore. All the magical worlds will die.”

“Whoa, that’s heavy. So why you? I mean, no offense, I’m sure you can do all kinds of stuff. But you’re what? Like fifteen? I mean isn’t there someone who can help you?” Bash asks.

Velvet sighs again. “Well someone has helped me, but only as much as they could. You see, without the magic in the worlds, a lot of the magical creatures can’t travel out of their worlds. And there’s something else too. When I was a baby, I was left wrapped in all these scraps of fabric,” Velvet holds up a corner of her coat. “And I discovered that there was a key hidden in them with magic. None of the magi could retrieve it, only me. See, the key is to the Gates of Horn and Ivory, they go to the underworld. It used to be Persephone’s, but she must have hidden it so I would end up with it. I just wish I knew why. When I get to the underworld, I’ll try to find her.”

“It’s like a novel,” Bash says, shaking his head in awe. “So, can I come with you?”

“What? Why would you want to do that?” Velvet asks. “This isn’t your responsibility, you can just go back to your world.”

“Yeah, back to my world. Let me tell you about my world. In my world, nobody believes in magic anymore. People live dull, boring lives. The only magic you’ll ever see is on television or in books. There’s no way I could go back to that after knowing this exists!” Bash explains.

“It could be dangerous, and you say you don’t know magic,” Velvet warns.

“I might not know magic, but I’m smart. I know a lot of stories and myths. I even know some about the underworld. It might be useful! Plus, I thought you said you needed magic to even get in here? Maybe I do have some kind of talent, I just don’t know about it yet! Or maybe the house wants me to help you! Come on, let me help,” Bash pleads.

The Gates of Horn and Ivory

Velvet examines his earnest face. His hazel eyes are wide and tilt upwards, giving him an exotic look. Long, dark lashes give him an open, trusting look. He is thin and lanky, with high cheekbones, a narrow nose, and full, almost feminine, lips. His dark hair hangs to his shoulders, jagged at the ends where it has been turned golden by the sun. He’s actually handsome, Velvet thinks to herself in surprise.

“Ok, but you have to promise to listen to everything I say. No going off on your own,” Velvet says. “Promise?”

“Sure, of course I promise. You’ll be like Batman and I’m just your Robin,” Bash says.

“What are you talking about?” Velvet asks.

“Batman and Robin? You know, superheroes? Oh, never mind,” Bash finishes off his bread and stands up. “So, we should get going then huh?”

“What about your parents? Won’t they wonder where you are?” Velvet asks.

“Oh, that. Well dad died when I was a kid, and mom’s a nurse, she works in the E.R, so she’s barely ever home. Plus, it’s the weekend. Sometimes I stay at my friend Charlie’s anyway. I usually leave a note, but she’ll just think I forgot,” Bash explains, scuffing his shoes on the ground. “Besides, I’m sixteen, so she doesn’t worry too much if I’m not home.”

“Oh, that’s nice I guess,” Velvet says, looking down. “I’m sorry about your dad. I never knew my parents, but I guess I can’t miss what I never had. Come on, let’s go,” Velvet starts walking.

Bash smiles shyly. “Well, I don’t know about that. Must’ve been tough, not having any folks. But growing up learning magic sounds pretty cool.”

“Yeah, well I wish I knew where I came from, but the magi were great. There was this one friend I had, Ivan. He could make magic with words. He could tell animals and elements what to do and they would listen. And he told the best stories. He was the one who taught me how to use my magic, and first told me what was happening with the house. I wish he was here.”

“So, what are we looking for? The entrance to the underworld? What does it look like?” Bash asks, examining a door with iron curlicues welded onto it.

“It’s called the Gates of Horn and Ivory. I don’t know what they look like, but they’re supposed to be at the very end of the house. I was told they don’t appear unless the house wants you to find them. But I’ve got the key, so we should come to them at some point,” Velvet tells him.

“Ok, so we don’t know how long it’ll take to find them?” Bash asks.

“No, but we just need to keep walking,” Velvet says. “So, there’s no magic at all in your world? How strange. What’s it called? What do people do there?”

“Well, we call our world Earth. It’s a planet, and the only one in our universe that we know has any life. There are people who think there are parallel universes and alternate realities that can be entered from certain points in our world, but most people think that only happens in

stories,” Bash says. “I don’t know anyone from my world who has ever travelled to another world.”

“Wow, that must feel so lonely. I mean, in my world, only magi can travel between worlds, and you’re not allowed to do it until you turn fifteen, but everyone knows that other worlds exist. In some worlds, all you need is a bit of magic to be able to go to another world,” Velvet says.

“That’s crazy. So, most of the worlds know that others exist? It’s funny, because you say it must be lonely, but our world is actually very crowded,” Bash laughs.

“I think most of the magical worlds know about the others. The worlds without magic don’t usually have magi or magical creatures, so they can’t access the house and might not know about it at all. It sounds like your world is one of those. How do people live without magic?” Velvet muses.

“Well, it’s not all bad. We have technology. You know, cars and computers and even spaceships,” Bash says.

“I don’t know what any of those things are,” Velvet says.

“Seriously? Technology is kind of its own magic, I guess. Like, a computer can tell you almost anything you want to know about anything. You can find out all about a certain animal or plant, or where anywhere on the planet is located and how to get there. You just press a few buttons and the information is right there,” Bash explains.

“Wow, that seems like a fine magic,” Velvet marvels.

Bash laughs again. “Yeah, I guess it does. That’s why I know a bit about Greek myths like the one about Persephone, and the underworld. I read a lot of stories and look things up on the computer when I’m interested in them.”

“I’d like to try using a computer one day. I wonder if I could find out more about where I come from,” Velvet says.

“I mean, it might not be able to tell you much since it only knows information about our universe and world, but if you want to know anything about the underworld stories, just ask. I can tell you what I know,” Bash says.

“Do you know the story of Persephone and Hades?” Velvet asks.

“Yeah, that’s the one where Hades supposedly kidnapped Persephone and took her to the underworld to be his bride. Persephone’s mother wanted her to return to the mortal realm, but Hades was clever and had offered her a pomegranate to eat. Even though Persephone was warned not to eat or drink anything in the underworld, she got hungry and ate six of the seeds. So, Zeus decreed that six months of every year she must spend in the underworld with Hades. Supposedly, that is when winter comes to the mortal realm and the living things go into hibernation, and when she returns in the spring, everything blooms again,” Bash says.

“Wow, you do know a lot,” Velvet says admiringly. “You learned all of that from your computer?”

“Well, yeah mostly, and from books,” Bash says.

“We have books in my world too! I love books. Ivan used to read to me when I was little, and the magi had so many books filled with interesting stories,” Velvet says.

“I really like reading too. You know, I was in a bookstore when I fell through that door. I thought that the door led to a different room and it might have some rare books or something in storage. The door was partially blocked by a shelf, and I had to move it out of the way. It was a bit stuck too, like it hadn’t been opened in ages,” Bash says.

“I wonder if anyone knew it was there?” Velvet asks.

“I dunno,” Bash responds. “It didn’t look like anything special, just an old red door with the paint peeling off.”

“How strange. I wonder why it opened for you?” Velvet muses. “Have you ever been able to do anything else? Or noticed strange things happening to you?”

“Not really. I mean, sometimes I have dreams of things happening before they actually happen, but that kind of thing happens to everyone once in a while, right?” Bash asks.

“I’m not sure, my magic is different,” Velvet says.

“Different how? What can you do, Velvet?” Bash asks.

“I’ll show you when we get to the underworld. I don’t think I should do magic in here, I’m not sure what will happen since everything has been so unstable,” Velvet explains. “But my magic is different from any of the magi. I can take objects or elements, even things like sunlight and moonlight, and weave them together to create a sort of pocket world. It’s almost like an illusion, except you can touch, taste, or smell the things within it like they’re real. It doesn’t last forever, though, it depends on what I use to make it.”

“Wow, that’s incredible! I’ve never heard of anything like that,” Bash exclaims. “Do you have to say, like, magic words?”

“Well, I always start with the words that Ivan used to tell me stories- ‘Once upon a time...’” Velvet says. “But I don’t know if I have to say them or if it just helps me to construct the story in my mind.”

“Very cool,” Bash says.

“Cool?” Velvet questions, cocking her head to the side curiously.

“It’s um, a slang term from my world. It means something is awesome,” Bash explains.

“Oh, I see,” Velvet says. “Sorry I don’t know anything about your world. I only know a little bit about the magical ones the magi have visited. There are so many worlds, but mostly the magi only travel when they need something from one of the other magical worlds. They don’t really have a need to go to the others.

“If I was a mage, I guess I would only want to visit magical places too,” Bash says. “My world is pretty boring actually. There are tons of people, but most of them just work or go to school. Nothing very exciting. People only go on quests like this in the movies or in books. That’s why I wanted to come with you. There’s no way I’ll ever get a chance to do something like this again!” Bash says.

“Well, it’s pretty common where I’m from. All the magi have to go into the house and bring back an object from another world when they turn fifteen. I would have done it too, but then the magic started becoming unbalanced. I’m actually still only fourteen,” Velvet confesses.

“But you must be pretty powerful. It seems like people trust you to get this done,” Bash says encouragingly. “Hey, look at this!” He points out a door that looks to be made of ivory or bone, with little carvings of scenes depicted. “Aren’t they called the Gates of Horn and Ivory? Maybe this is it?”

Velvet walks over to examine the door. “No, it can’t be. This isn’t the last door. Also, it doesn’t look locked, and you need this key to open the Gates,” Velvet dangles the key from her wrist.

“Oh, ok,” Bash says. They walk in silence for a while, only pausing to look at doors that stand out, but never opening them. After a few hours, they take another break to eat more of Velvet’s fruit and bread. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, they see glimmer towards the end of the hallway.

“Look!” Bash exclaims excitedly. He runs over to the very end of the hall. “Wow, this is crazy.”

Velvet joins him, staring at the Gates in awe. “These are amazing.” The Gates are intricately carved pieces of ivory and some type of onyx horn. The pieces are twisted together, with little carved details of different scenes of the underworld. One is a boat with a hooded figure in the prow, horses made of water and foam pulling it down a river. Another depicts a grove of trees with stars hanging from its branches like fruit, and winged creatures like butterflies settling over it. “This must be it! Do you see a keyhole?”

“Not yet,” Bash replies. “It could be hidden anywhere, let’s look.”

They pore over the carvings, feeling for a hidden hole where the key might fit.

“I can’t see one!” Velvet cries.

“Wait a sec, you said that your magic somehow got the key out of those pieces of fabric when none of the other magi could, right? What if you need to use your magic to make the keyhole appear?” Bash says.

“Of course! That must be it. You are smart,” Velvet says gratefully. She puts her hands over the seam where the two gates join. There is a carving of a pair of hands clasped together tightly. She can feel a sort of hum go through her, similar to how the key felt when it was hidden. She concentrates and pulls with her magic. “Once upon a time, a girl and her friend needed to journey to the underworld. The girl had the key, but there was nowhere to place it. She used her magic on the gates and a keyhole appeared,” Velvet says.

“You did it! Look!” Bash exclaims excitedly. A ring has appeared on one of the fingers of the hand on the right side. The ring has a keyhole where a jewel would normally be.

Velvet slips her bracelet with the key on it off her wrist and sticks the key into the keyhole, turning it until there is a soft click. The Gates swing open silently. She takes a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

As soon as they step into the underworld, the Gates swing closed. In front of them, Cerebus the three-headed dog lies, already asleep. His fur is grey and shaggy, and his heads resemble a huge wolf.

“This is strange,” Velvet says. “I was told I would need to play music to lull him to sleep, but he’s already sleeping. Perhaps the magic being unbalanced is affecting him too. In the other worlds, magical creatures are falling into comas as well.”

“Well, I’m not sorry,” Bash says, edging around the dog quietly. Cerebus growls softly in his sleep and Bash jumps. “This thing is the size of a horse,” he whispers.

Beyond Cerebus, there is a sort of dock. It is dark and gloomy, with a grey fog permeating everything. Even the water is grey. Beyond the dock, the river flows into the distance. Velvet retrieves the coin Vasilisa had given her and tosses it into the water. “This should summon the ferryman, Charon. I was told that he can take us down the rivers, and we are supposed to go down until the Land of Dreams.”

The river begins to bubble up, suddenly horses formed of foam and water rear up from the depths, pulling a boat behind them. A hooded figure in a tattered robe stands in the prow. When he lifts his head, Velvet glimpses a skeletal face with eyes of flame burning in the sockets.

“Charon?” Velvet asks timidly. “We are seeking the Palace of Hades, can you please take us?”

The ferryman only inclines his head, turning the boat so Velvet and Bash can hop in. Bash gapes at the boat and the horses in astonishment but follows Velvet without hesitation.

“This is the River Styx. We need to go down this river until it joins the River Lethe, then it meets the River Cocytus. There, we will get off the boat and enter the Land of Dreams. Be on your guard, I’m not sure what to expect down the rivers, and the Land of Dreams is known for illusions. If you’re not careful, you can get trapped down here forever,” Velvet whispers. The boat has still not begun to move. “I wonder what’s keeping it,” Velvet says.

Suddenly, a ghostly spirit appears out of the water. It is a beautiful young woman with a fish’s tail. “Welcome travelers. The River Styx is the river of oaths. If you wish to journey down, you must part with something precious to you, and state your purpose here,” it says. “This will bind you to your quest, and satisfy the river.”

“I didn’t know that,” Velvet replies, a bit shaken. “I don’t have much, but I suppose I could part with this.” Velvet unties one of her bracelets from her wrist. “This fabric has been with me since I was a baby. I believe it comes from here,” Velvet says. “The fabric that makes up my dress contained the key to the Gates, a bit should suffice as a token.”

The spirit’s eyes widen, but it doesn’t say anything, only nods in acquiescence.

Bash slips a silver ring off his finger. “This was my father’s, he gave it to me before he died. It’s the most precious thing I own.”

“Oh , Bash. You can’t-” Velvet begins.

“It’s ok, I don’t have anything else,” he says.

“Throw your tokens into the water and state the purpose of your journey,” the spirit instructs.

“I am here to fix whatever is wrong with the Tapestry of Worlds,” Velvet whispers, throwing her bracelet into the water. It floats on the surface for a second before disappearing into the depths.

“I am here to assist Velvet with her quest in any way I can,” Bash says, throwing his ring in after Velvet’s bracelet and it too disappears.

Finally, the boat begins to move, gliding silently through the water. At first, the banks of the river are obscured by fog, appearing deserted. Then, slowly figures begin to appear in the mist.

“What are those?” Bash whispers.

“Shades of the restless dead,” a deep, gravelly voice says from the prow. Bash starts, realizing that the voice came from Charon.

Velvet and Bash watch as the figures wander aimlessly through the fog, some calling out in different languages.

“What happens to them?” Velvet asks.

“They seek solace, which they will never find. They can never sleep, and they eventually forget who they were in life,” Charon replies. “They were those who led lives that were neither bad nor good.”

There is a desolate look to them, slowly wandering past each other, not noticing that the others even exist. Velvet shivers and moves closer to Bash. The boat glides on, and neither of them say anything more. From time to time, a glimmer appears as a water spirit rises out of the river. The water is murky and dark, like ink spilled into a pool. The outline of strange shapes can be seen beneath the surface. Small eddies of water swirl, and shapes begin to appear in the mist. A lone tree growing out of the water, crows perched in its bare branches. At first, it seems like they are pecking at large, round fruit, but as the boat drifts past, Velvet realizes they are severed heads. She covers her mouth to muffle a cry. Bash turns to her alarmed, and she points at the tree in horror. Bash’s eyes widen and he gasps in horror.

“Do not worry, the crows will not harm you. Those are the heads of oathbreakers,”
Charon says.

They glide past, the crows glittering eyes and sharp caws seeming to follow. Suddenly, a huge grey tentacle slams into the side of the boat. This time, Velvet does scream. The tentacle is a sickly grey, green color, and as thick as a tree trunk. Charon gives it a sharp rap with his oar, and it slides lazily back into the water. Velvet scoots closer to Bash, keeping a wary eye on the swirling water.

“We are entering the River Lethe,” Charon says after a time.

“The river of forgetfulness,” Velvet says to Bash.

“There are capricious spirits here who will try to get you to gaze into the water. If you do, you will forget your purpose here,” Charon says. The boat glides into darker water, almost black, with red poppies blooming on the surface. A sweet singing rises from the water.

“Come travelers, look into the river’s surface. There are so many wondrous things hiding in the depths,” a high, musical voice pipes.

“Don’t look,” Velvet says to Bash. “Close your eyes.”

Bash shuts his eyes tightly, grasping one of Velvet’s hands in his own.

“Velvet, don’t you want to know who you are?” The voice cajoles. “Come, just a glimpse. There are so many secrets you should see.”

Velvet squeezes Bash’s hand back, closing her own eyes and concentrating on the feel of his warm fingers. The singing gets louder, and Velvet begins to see flashes of images through her mind. A beautiful, smiling woman with long black hair reaches out to her, and she feels the touch of a soft hand on her face. Velvet starts, almost opening her eyes.

“Talk to me,” Velvet whispers. “Tell me something about yourself.”

Bash is seeing images of his own. A tall man with dark hair and kind, smiling eyes is reaching out to embrace him. He knows in his heart that it is his father. He has the strongest feeling that if he opens his eyes, he will be standing in front of him. Velvet's voice snaps him back to reality. "Um, ok. When I was a kid, I always wished I would see magic someday. I hoped it existed somewhere, but I never could have imagined meeting someone like you," Bash says. His words splice in and out of the images assaulting him, he is in the park, and his father is throwing a ball to him, he must open his eyes to catch it! *No, its not real*, he tells himself.

"I was always a shy kid, and I was different, because my dad is Hawaiian and Chinese, and my mom is British. Those are different races. In my world, people are treated differently depending on their race, and where I grew up, all the kids were white. Since my skin was brown and my eyes were tilted a little, they made fun of me, so I retreated into books. It's not so bad anymore, ever since I got taller and the kids learned I could defend myself, but it was hard," Bash admits. "Now you, tell me something."

The singing is getting louder, and now there is a touch of anger in the sweetness, poison under honey. The images get brighter and faster. Velvet sees her mother sobbing, begging her to open her eyes and see her. Bash sees his father turning to walk away and has to bite his tongue to keep from calling out. The iron and salt taste of blood fills his mouth,

Velvet feels tears slip down her own cheeks and squeezes Bash's hand more tightly. "I used to dream that my parents would come for me when I was little. I thought that maybe they had left me with the magi because they were in danger, but that they intended on coming back for me one day," Velvet says, her voice shaky. "I would imagine who they could be, maybe a king or queen, and I could be a princess, and I would show them all the things I learned. It's stupid," Velvet's voice drops to a whisper.

Bash sees his father turn to look over his shoulder and beckon him onward. He grinds his teeth and keeps his eyes tightly closed, focusing on the warmth of Velvet's hand and the sound of her voice. "No, it's not," Bash replies, forcing the image of his father from his mind. "Most people want to know their families. I think you're really brave."

The singing starts to get softer, the images in Velvet and Bash's minds turning insubstantial, like smoke.

"We are leaving the River Lethe," Charon's voice interrupts.

Bash and Velvet open their eyes, smiling shyly in relief at each other as the voices fade into the distance.

Into the Land of Dreams

"We are entering the River Cocytus," Charon says. "The Palace of Hades lies beyond the Land of Dreams and the Elysian Fields. You will need to get off here. It is fortunate you need not go down the River Cocytus," Charon says.

"Why is that?" Velvet asks.

"Cocytus is the River of Lamentation. You would re-live your worst memories until the end of the river if you needed to go down it," Charon explains.

"Oh," Velvet sighs in relief. "That is fortunate."

Bash nods fervently in agreement.

"This is where we part, farewell," Charon pulls the boat up to another dock. "Beware, do not let yourself fall into a dream."

"Thank you," Velvet says. "We are grateful for your help."

"Yes, thank you," Bash echoes.

Charon nods again, disappearing into the water once again.

“I was told that the Land of Dreams will show you illusions. Remember, none of it is real,” Velvet says.

“Ok,” Bash says. “We should stick together.” He holds out a hand, and Velvet takes it. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Velvet replies. They start walking. At first, there is nothing out of the ordinary, just a path and some scraggly trees. Then, the forest seems to become thicker, the trees becoming heavy with emerald leaves and even fruit. The smell of flowers and apples hangs in the air. The grey fog lifts, and starlight breaks through the trees. White winged insects, like moths or butterflies, perch on the trees. Vines with different colored flowers snake down the sides of the trunks. Will-o-wisps, glowing balls of light, bob between branches. A spotted doe nibbles on green shoots in the distance.

“It’s beautiful,” Velvet gasps in awe.

“Don’t get distracted,” Bash murmurs. “We should look for somewhere to rest.”

No sooner does he say that, tents begin to appear. Vendors under brightly colored canopies display their wares, and glowing lanterns float through the air. Different creatures browse the stalls, Velvet spots a pixie with huge lavender eyes and green wings inspecting a tray of jewels. “It looks like a market of some sort,” Velvet says.

“Welcome to the Market of Dreams,” an old, bent woman says. “Care to stock up for your journey? Anything you wish for can be found here. Care for potions? I’ve got sleeping draughts, transformation elixirs, even love potions,” the woman grins at Bash, showing missing teeth. Under her cloak, the talons of a bird peek out.

“Um, no thank you,” Velvet says, pulling Bash along behind her. “We are just looking for a place to stay.”

“Oh, there’s an inn up the path, dear,” the woman says, pointing with a gnarled finger. A few tents away, Velvet can see a small, but well-kept wooden building with a sign painted with stars and moons that says Night’s Doorstep.

“Thank you,” Velvet says politely. She and Bash walk up to the door and knock. A little man with horns and goat feet opens the door. He is smoking a pipe that emits a blue haze, but is dressed in a neat black coat and matching trousers.

“Hello, we are just looking for somewhere to stay for a night,” Velvet says.

“I’ve got a room, only one bed though,” the man says. “It’ll only cost you one memory each.”

“Wait, since it’s only one room and one bed, shouldn’t it be a memory from just one of us?” Bash interjects.

The man squints at him. “Fine, guess so. Who’ll be paying then?”

“I will,” Bash says.

“Bash-” Velvet tries to interrupt.

“No, you need your memories more,” Bash says. “I’ve got loads.”

“Hold the memory in your mind,” the man says, blowing out a few smoke rings.

Bash thinks back to a time when he was little and got lost in the woods. He had waited for hours before his mother found him. He remembers the sky darkening and the rain setting in. Suddenly, the scene disappears. Bash rubs his temple, wondering what he had been thinking of.

“Not a real great one, but it’ll do,” the man grumbles. “Come on in.”

Velvet and Bash follow the man up a set of stairs. He opens the door to a cozy room with a small fireplace. A bed with a dark green quilt stands in the middle and a rocking chair sits by the fire. “Here’s the key, need any food?” the man asks.

“No, we have some,” Bash says hurriedly before Velvet can respond. “Thank you.”

“Hmph,” the man says, leaving them alone.

“Why did you not want food?” Velvet asks. “I know we’ve got some left, but surely a hot meal would be better?”

“We shouldn’t eat anything down here. Remember the story about Persephone, isn’t that how she got trapped?” Bash says.

“Oh! I forgot!” Velvet exclaims. “I can’t believe it!”

“It’s ok, you’ve got a lot on your mind,” Bash says. “Good thing I’m here,” he grins.

Velvet swats him playfully. “I guess you can come in handy,” she says.

“Here, you take the bed, I can sleep on the floor,” Bash says.

“Don’t be silly, this bed is huge! We can both fit,” Velvet replies.

“Are you sure?” Bash says.

“Of course. We both need to rest,” Velvet pulls back the quilt and settles on the right side of the bed.

Bash slides in next to her. “Goodnight, Velvet,” he says, turning onto his back and closing his eyes.

“Goodnight,” Velvet whispers. Her arm brushes Bash’s back lightly, and she takes comfort in his warm presence.

That night, Velvet dreams she is standing in a clearing in a grove of ash trees. Suddenly, a tall, slender woman with long black hair and eyes the color of bamboo leaves steps out from

behind the trees. Her face glows with an inner light, and Velvet feels as if she knows her from somewhere.

“Hello, Velvet,” the woman says, her smile gentle and beautiful as a sunrise. “Do you know who I am?”

“Persephone?” Velvet guesses.

“Yes, child,” Persephone puts a slim, pale hand on Velvet’s cheek. “That is one of my many names, but you can call me mother.”

“You’re my mother? Really? Why didn’t I know before? Why did I grow up with the magi?” Velvet is bursting with curiosity.

“My love, I don’t have much time. But yes, I am your mother, you are the only child of myself and Hades. I can only reach you in your dreams for short periods of time. As you get deeper into the underworld, my connection to you will grow stronger. When you enter the Elysian Fields, find my grove and spend a full night there. I will come and explain. Just know, I have always loved you. I never wanted to give you up, but I had to. You are my only hope,” Persephone says as her image begins to shimmer and become transparent.

“No, please don’t go yet! I don’t understand!” Velvet cries.

“You will,” Persephone smiles one last time before she fades away completely.

Velvet wakes with a start.

“You okay?” Bash asks. He is sitting up already, dark hair tousled from sleep. He yawns and rubs his eyes. “Man, I had some crazy dreams last night. Felt so real,” he says.

“Yeah, me too,” Velvet replies. She gets up and walks over to the small basin in the corner of the room. A blue porcelain pitcher of water and two matching cups stand next to it.

Velvet fills one of the cups, rinses her mouth, then uses some of the water to wash her face. “Here,” Velvet holds the pitcher out to Bash. “Remember not to drink the water.”

Bash gets up and comes over beside her. “Got it, so what did you dream about? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It was really strange. I dreamt that I was in a grove of trees, and a woman who looked a little like me told me she was Persephone, and that I am her daughter. I don’t know if it was real or not. She said she couldn’t explain everything because she could only appear for a short time, but when we get to the Elysian Fields, I need to stay in her grove for at least a night and she’ll come back. She said her connection to me gets stronger as I go deeper into the underworld,” Velvet frowns. “I don’t know, it felt so real, but the firebird warned me that there would be illusions that would try to pull me astray.”

“Wow, that’s pretty intense,” Bash says. “But did she feel familiar at all? Like someone you could trust?”

“That’s the thing, it felt like I’ve known her forever. But if she’s my mother, why would she have left me and never come back? Why only now? I just don’t know if I can trust anything down here,” Velvet sighs in frustration.

“Well, let’s just find these Elysian Fields first, then we’ll worry about what to do next,” Bash says.

“Okay. So, what did you dream about?” Velvet asks, grabbing her pack and handing Bash an apple and a skin of water.

“Um, it was really weird and didn’t make much sense. Probably didn’t mean anything at all,” Bash replies quickly. He begins putting on his shoes, concentrating on lacing them up. As he speaks, he thinks back to his dreams. He had been playing baseball with a tall, good looking

man. Somehow, he knew the man was his father, even though he had died when he was only a baby. His mother watched them from a picnic blanket, smiling with a genuine happiness he hadn't seen on her face in years. There was a peaceful contentment to the dream. All of a sudden, a tall, black haired figure in a black cloak appeared next to him. The man was beautiful, like a sculpture, with ivory skin and sharp, angular features. But there was a cold light in his eyes and a cruel twist to his mouth.

“Bash, I've been waiting for you,” the man says. The scene pauses, his father in mid-throw, his mother frozen with the same smile on her face.

“Who are you?” Bash asks.

“I am Hades, ruler of the underworld. I have come to ask you a favor, in return, all of this you see could be real. You could have your father back, and your mother's happiness restored,” Hades said, gesturing to the idyllic scene. “All you have to do, is bring my daughter Velvet to me, and convince her to help me. She trusts you.”

“Help you how? She's here to repair whatever has gone wrong with the magic. I can't tell her what to do,” Bash said.

“She thinks she wants to repair the magic, but that is not in her best interest. If she helps me, she will become more powerful. She could stay in the underworld, with me and her mother, and have unlimited magic at her disposal,” Hades said.

“Wait, you're the one taking the magic?” Bash asked. “Huh, I should've known. Well, Velvet won't help you.”

“You don't know what you're meddling with,” Hades said, his eyes darkening. “Everyone believes I kidnapped Persephone, Velvet's mother, but she loves me. I

am just trying to make it possible for us to be together forever, with our daughter. Now tell me, is that so wrong?" Hades asked.

"No, it's not. But what you're doing, draining the magic from other worlds, is wrong. Besides, I don't think Persephone wants that, or why would she have sent Velvet away?" Bash said.

"Foolish boy. Persephone thinks she is doing the right thing, but she is too weak to see that sacrifice must be made for the greater good. When we are together as a family again, she will realize I was right all along. All you have to do is convince Velvet to abandon her quest and join her powers with mine," Hades said in a soft, silky voice.

Bash thought for a moment. He knew how sad Velvet was because she didn't know her parents, and what Hades was doing was terrible, but he just wanted to keep his family together. He once said he would do anything to have his father back, but did that mean sacrificing others' happiness? "I don't know," Bash said. "I'll have to think about it." It would be wonderful to see that light come back into his mother's eyes, and to get to meet his father, but was his happiness worth what it would cost?

"Well decide soon, this offer won't last forever," Hades said. "And think about what I could give you in return," Hades gestured around him. "Enjoy the rest of this dream, it's the least I could do to help you make up your mind." Hades vanished, and the dream started up again.

Bash enjoyed the rest of the time with his parents, cherishing every moment. He had no idea what to do. He should tell Velvet, but he didn't want to scare her or make her not trust him, besides, he hasn't decided what to do just yet.

"Bash?" Velvet asks, breaking his reverie. "Are you okay?"

"Um, yeah, I'm fine. Just tired," Bash says. "Let's get going."

They walk out of the inn and down the path towards the market. Even though it had been night when they entered the inn, it is still dark out. Each stall they pass seems more miraculous than the next. One sells dreamcatchers, guaranteed to keep nightmares away. Another is filled with cut flower arrangements, each with a different love spell. One stall is manned by what looks suspiciously like a werewolf, and sells different kinds of teeth. Another sells enchanted cloaks and bags of food that never go empty. Then, they pass a stall hung with different kinds of fabrics. There is thick fur and dense velvet, silks light as air and jewel toned satins. There are embroidered fabrics and printed fabrics, plain cloth and rich.

“These look like the fabrics that I was wrapped in as a baby,” Velvet muses. She holds an end of her coat up. Three women stand in the stall, one a young girl, one a maiden of middle years, and one an old woman. They all look similar, like the same woman in different stages of life. All have snow white hair and the same ancient, dark eyes.

“Ah, you have come at last,” the old woman says.

“Who are you?” Velvet asks.

“We are the oracle,” the three women say as one. “And you are the daughter of the prophecy. The child of the Lord of the underworld and his fair bride of spring,” the old woman cackles.

“Come, child, we have been waiting for you,” the maiden says in a sweet voice. She beckons Velvet behind a curtain in the back of the stall.

“Velvet, I don’t know about this,” Bash says nervously.

“They might know something about my parents,” Velvet says, following the women. “Come on.”

Behind the curtain is a room lit with candles and hung with sheer panels. A scent of vanilla and sandalwood permeates the air. A few overstuffed chairs and a couch in mismatched upholstery are scattered throughout the room. In the corner, an owl perches on coat stand.

“Sit down, children,” the maiden says, taking her own seat on the couch. The old woman and the young girl take a seat flanking her.

Velvet sits in a faded red chair, motioning for Bash to sit in the chair next to her. “So, what did you mean ‘the daughter of the prophecy’? What do you know about me?”

“Many years ago, Hades went above to the mortal realm. He saw a fair maiden picking wildflowers, and was determined she would be his bride, so he brought her to the underworld. The other gods said she was kidnapped, but that is not the truth. You see, the maiden, Persephone, grew to love Hades. She ate the pomegranate seeds not by accident, but on purpose, so she could spend half of her year with him. But for Hades, it wasn’t enough. He wanted her to stay with him forever. Eventually, Persephone became pregnant with a child, you. She came to us to ask our advice, what did we see for this child? So, we told her. You see, you are the daughter of two powerful beings, the only daughter of the god of the underworld, and the key to Hades’ plans. You are powerful enough to help him siphon the magic from the other worlds, closing the way between forever. Nobody would be able to travel unless Hades willed it. This way, Persephone would be with him for eternity, and none of the other gods would be able to interfere. He has already begun, but he needs you for the final step,” the maiden says.

The old woman picked up the thread of the story. “But you see, you could also be the key to his undoing. Only you have the power to repair the damage to the Tapestry of Worlds. It would take all your magic, but you could do it. So, Persephone made a grave choice. She hid her pregnancy from Hades. When the time came for her to go back to the mortal world, she

delivered you there and left you in the world of the magi. She asked for our help to hide the key within bolts of our cloth. She knew Hades would find out what she had done, but she did not want him to use you for his own purposes. She knows if he has his way, the magical worlds will fade and eventually, even the mortal worlds will die as it will become eternal winter there. She could not have that on her conscience.”

Then, the young girl continues, “when Hades found out what she had done, he was enraged. He became even more obsessed with gathering power. He tried to find you, but our spell was woven tightly into our cloth, and the magic prevented him from being able to find you. Only after you retrieved the key was he able to locate you, but he knew you were already on your way here. So, he waits for you. He will do everything he can to get you on his side,” the girl finishes.

Velvet sits in shock. “So, I have to decide either to help my father and let the other worlds die, or give up my magic?”

“Unfortunately so, child,” the old woman says sadly.

“Well, I cannot let him destroy the worlds just to keep my mother down here. She might love him, but what he’s doing is wrong. I would never help him,” Velvet says. “I only wish I didn’t have to give up my magic,” she says, a tear slipping down her face.

“I’m sorry, Velvet,” Bash takes her hand. “But are you sure that what Hades is doing will destroy the worlds? Maybe he has another plan.”

“No, boy,” the young girl says sharply, her childish face at odds with the sharp tone of her voice. “There is no way the worlds will be able to exist if he hoards all the magic. No matter what he may tell you.”

“Well, I’d never help him do that. The magi, the firebird, all my friends, they’re my family too. I would never let them be destroyed,” Velvet says.

The three women smile. “Wise child,” they say in unison. “Here, take this,” the young girl gives Velvet a bolt of black cloth. “Tie this over the eyes of Hades when you get to his Palace. Go in quietly, while he is asleep. It will buy you time to fix the Tapestry, he will not be able to use his magic on you as long as this covers his eyes.”

“Thank you,” Velvet says, taking the cloth. “I had a dream about my mother, she said to find her in her grove in the Elysian Fields. Was it real? Can I trust her?”

“We cannot say for sure, but we believe you can,” the women say. “Follow the path until you see the ash grove. Do not be led astray. Good luck, child.”

Velvet and Bash walk out of the stall, walking down the path as they were instructed.

“Do you think they were right?” Bash asks. “I mean, how do we know they’re telling the truth? Have you ever met Hades?”

“No, but they didn’t feel malicious. Plus, they told me more than anyone ever has before, and they helped my mother when I was a baby. I’m sure they’re telling the truth,” Velvet frowns. “Why? Did you not think so?”

“I don’t know. It’s just weird. We don’t know anything about them! What if they have their own agenda? And giving up your magic sounds really scary. I mean, what if Hades is just trying to keep his love. He might have another plan that doesn’t involve destroying the worlds. And a lot of the worlds don’t have magic anyway, like mine. Would it be so bad if all the worlds were that way? It’s not fair that some worlds have magic, and some don’t,” Bash says, looking down and kicking a pebble down the path.

“Bash, what’s gotten into you? You said that you love magic! You wanted to come to help me! Now it seems like you’re changing,” Velvet looks at him questioningly.

“No, it’s not that. I do love magic, but it’s just...I feel bad for Hades you know? Everyone thinks he’s this bad guy, but he just wants to keep his family with him. How is that so bad?” Bash asks. “If I could have my father back, I’d probably give up any magic I had in a heartbeat.”

Velvet jerks back as if struck. “Bash, it’s not about that! Don’t you think I want a family? Of course I do! But he’s going about it all wrong! You can’t just take and destroy. If I have to sacrifice my magic so *worlds* can continue to exist, I will! It’s not just about me and my family, or you! If you can’t see that, you should just go. I’ll go on alone.” Velvet storms off down the path.

“Velvet, come on. I’m sorry, okay?” Bash runs after her. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I just was thinking about my father. I’d do anything to have him with me again. But you’re right. It’s not just about what we want. I’m not leaving you.”

Velvet’s expression softens and she slows down. “I know you miss your father, and I’m sorry you lost him. But don’t forget why we’re here. This is already difficult. We have to work together.”

“I know. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again,” Bash says. “Promise.”

Persephone’s Grove

Velvet nods, and they walk on in silence. A few hours later, they take a break to eat more of the bread and cheese from Velvet’s pack. “We’ve only got a couple skins of water left,” Velvet says. “I hope we find the grove soon.” Although hours have passed, it is still dark. It seems as if the underworld exists in perpetual twilight. Trees and bushes line the path, and they

come across the occasional herd of deer. Sometimes, they even see small winged creatures that look like faeries hovering around the trees. Some of the trees have little wooden structures and tiny lanterns hanging from the branches. The plants are healthy and vibrant, some are recognizable as oak or ivy, but some are totally foreign looking. There are trees with huge violet flowers shaped like trumpets and trees with long vines hanging down, creating lacy curtains of foliage. Some have tiny white and yellow flowers sprouting from them. After what seems like ages, they see an ash grove in the distance.

“There it is!” Velvet exclaims. She breaks into a jog, bursting into the clearing with Bash on her heels. “Wow, this place is gorgeous.”

The clearing is a perfect circle, a small spring bubbles up from an alcove of rocks under one of the branches. The grass is soft and green, with little wildflowers sprouting in a profusion of colors. Large, flat rocks stand to one side of the clearing, with little indentations in them that make them look like huge chairs.

“Come on, let’s sit and rest,” Bash says. He takes off Velvet’s pack, which he had been carrying, placing it next to a rock and going over to the spring. He kneels down, splashing water over his face and arms. “Brr, that’s cold!”

Velvet laughs, then goes over and kneels next to him. “Hey!” she exclaims when he splashes her. She cups her hands and scoops up some water, splashing him back. “That is cold!”

After they wash, they spread Velvet’s quilt over a rock and sit down, unpacking some food. “I guess we stay here tonight and wait for Persephone?” Bash asks, biting into an apple.

“Yeah,” Velvet says, taking a swig of water. “She said she will come and explain things, but I don’t know if she knows we saw the oracle yet. I hope she’s okay.” Velvet fiddles nervously with one of her cloth bracelets.

“Are you excited to meet her?” Bash asks.

“Of course! But I’m a little scared too. What if she doesn’t like the way I am?” Velvet says.

“She’ll love you, Velvet. How could she not?” Bash says seriously.

“Thanks,” she says quietly.

After they eat, they spread the quilt on the grass and lay down. Unfamiliar stars glimmer above them.

“It’s so strange, looking at different stars,” Velvet says. “I know they’re just an illusion, but it’s still so beautiful. Ivan used to tell me stories about the different constellations in my world. There was one called the Dragon, and another called the Twin Warriors.”

“Yeah,” Bash says. “Beautiful.” But he isn’t looking up, he’s looking at Velvet. “Do you wonder what it’d be like to stay down here? Live with your mom and dad?”

“Of course I do, but I can’t. It wouldn’t be fair to the other worlds,” Velvet says.

“I know. It’s just...Never mind,” Bash sighs.

“No, what were you going to say?” Velvet presses.

“It’s just that Hades is your dad. I mean, shouldn’t you talk to him, see if what he’s doing really will destroy the worlds? What if there’s a way for your family to be together again?” Bash asks.

“But if I ask him, I lose the element of surprise. And if it turns out his plans are terrible, I might not be able to stop him,” Velvet says.

“I guess you’re right. But it’s a big decision to make, maybe you should think about it,” Bash urges. He is subconsciously pushing her, but doesn’t want to press her too much as he knows deep down Hades’ plans are malevolent. He thinks again of his dream and the bright

smile on his mother's face. If Hades could love Persephone so much, maybe he isn't the type to destroy worlds, maybe they would just have no magic. He's had to live without magic his whole life, and it hasn't been too bad. And Velvet would get to keep her magic and know her family. If Velvet were to come to the decision to help Hades, he could have his father back! But what about the firebird, and Velvet's magi friends? Would they cease to exist? But if his own family could be whole again, would it be worth it? Should he try to press her harder?

"Hey, so show me some of your magic!" Bash says, changing the subject.

"Oh, okay. I can't really improve on this place, but I suppose I could try something," Velvet says. She gets up, gathering a few flowers and some feathers she finds on the ground. Then she sits next to Bash. "Once upon a time, a boy and a girl went on an adventure in the underworld. They sat in a magical clearing and the girl conjured up the most beautiful garden, filled with flowers," Velvet begins, weaving the flowers together. "Then, birds flew over to them and perched on their shoulders, singing," she continues, braiding the feathers into the weave as small bluebirds appear on their shoulders.

"Whoa, this is incredible!" Bash exclaims. He looks around in wonder.

"The starlight brightens around them, creating a glow around the boy and girl," Velvet says softly, weaving in gossamer strands of silver starlight.

Bash looks into Velvet's sparkling eyes, the glow creating a soft halo of light around her face. Then, he leans in and presses his lips to hers. The kiss is soft and warm, a light brush of his mouth over hers before he pulls back. "The boy kisses the girl, because he thinks she's the most amazing person he's ever met," Bash whispers.

Velvet drops the weave and the scene disappears. She puts her hand up to her lips in astonishment. Then she smiles. "You really think so?"

“Of course I do. You’re brave and smart and beautiful, how could I not think so?” Bash says.

“Thanks for coming with me,” Velvet says shyly. “I would have been lonely, and you’ve made things so much easier.”

“My pleasure,” Bash says, settling back and laying down on the quilt. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, quickly falling asleep.

Velvet studies his face, dark lashes curling like a wave over high cheekbones. Tousled hair frames strong brows and warm brown skin. She sighs and lays back next to him, trying to stay awake. About an hour later, she sees a soft, silver light glowing through the trees. The light gets closer, and a silver doe steps out into the clearing. Velvet sits up, and the doe turns into the woman from her dreams.

“Persephone? I mean, mother?” Velvet asks hesitantly.

The woman smiles and opens her arms. “Oh child, I have missed you so,” she says.

Velvet runs into her embrace. “You really are my mother! I saw the oracle, they said Hades is the one messing with the magic, and you left me with the magi to stop him from using my power, is that true?” The questions spill from her like a torrent.

“I’m afraid so, daughter. Here, come sit.” Persephone draws her towards the stones, making a gesture over them so cushions appear in the chair-like indents. “I love your father, but he is an ambitious man. He has always wanted me to stay down here with him, but the other worlds would suffer. When I ascend to the mortal realm, spring returns, and the world thaws. When I knew I was pregnant with you, the oracle told me you were the key. I knew if I told him, he would keep you down here and make you use your powers to help him. I couldn’t let that happen, so I left you with the magi. I’m sorry I couldn’t come and explain before, but I didn’t

want him to find you. The spell the oracle put on the cloth prevented him from being able to locate you until you were able to break it. He was very angry, but I knew he would never harm me.” Persephone tucks a strand of Velvet’s hair behind her ear. “I so wanted to see you, but I didn’t want him to know where I left you. I wanted you to have a life, to grow and learn without the burden of destiny.”

“Is it true that if I fix the Tapestry of Worlds, it’ll take all my magic?” Velvet asks.

“Yes, it is,” Persephone says sadly. “Only you are able to restore the balance, since you were born of both of our blood. Your magic was born of the balance between life and death.”

“I’ll do it, of course I will, but is there any way you can come with me?” Velvet asks.

“I can take you as far as his Palace, but I dare not come inside. He will sense my presence, and you will not be able to come upon him without him knowing. Did the oracle give you the cloth to bind his sight?” Persephone asks.

“Yes, but won’t he know I’m here?” Velvet says.

“Since he hasn’t met you before, he will not be able to sense your magic. There is still a chance you can sneak up on him while he sleeps. If he does wake, he will do everything within his power to convince you he is doing the right thing but remain strong. Do not listen to him,” Persephone says.

“What about you? Won’t he be angry that you didn’t want to stay with him?” Velvet asks.

“Don’t worry about me child,” Persephone smiles gently. “I will still come see your father for half the year, I do still love him. And as I said, he’s been upset with me before, but as I said, he would never harm me.”

“After I lose my magic, I won’t be able to come here again, will I?” Velvet says sadly.

“Yes, that’s true as well,” Persephone admits. “You will have to choose which world you want to live in after this. But no matter what you choose, when I am in the mortal realm, I will come and visit you. Half of the year, every year, for as long as you want me to.”

“That makes me feel a bit better,” Velvet says. “Should I wake Bash?”

“Not yet, let’s pass the night together, I want to hear all about your life,” Persephone says, taking Velvet’s hands in hers. “I can transport all of us to the entrance of Hades’ Palace when we’re ready.”

So, Velvet spends one of the best nights of her life getting to know her mother. She tells her all about growing up with the magi and learning magic, and about Ivan’s stories and Master Lucius and his raven. Persephone laughs and tells Velvet about the other places in the underworld. About the Isle of the Blessed where mermaids swim in the warm, enchanted waters, and golden apples grow in the orchard. She tells her about the Halls of Night, where the Night Children, who feed on the blood of the dying, dwell. Velvet shows Persephone her magic, and tells her how much she longed to meet her while she was growing up. She shows her the coat and bracelets she made out of the fabric she was found with as a baby, and Persephone admires her handiwork. After what seems like too short a time, she tells her to wake Bash.

“Bash, come on, time to go,” Velvet shakes him gently.

“Huh,” Bash yawns sleepily. “Ok, I’m getting up.” He spies Persephone and gives a start.

“Oh, Bash, this is Persephone, my mother,” Velvet says proudly.

“Oh! Pleased to meet you, my lady,” Bash takes Persephone’s hand, and Persephone laughs.

“What nice manners! The pleasure is mine, young man. Thank you for taking such good care of my daughter,” she says.

“Well, she’s special,” Bash winks at Velvet. “So, what’s the plan? How do we get to the Palace?”

“Each of you hold one of my hands and close your eyes, I’ll take us there,” Persephone says. “I can travel like this anywhere in the inner boundaries of the underworld.”

“But how can you love Hades after all he’s done!” Velvet bursts out.

Persephone smiles sadly. “One day, you’ll understand. If you love someone, you have to take the good and the bad. Hades is not all bad, he’s just ambitious and has a strong will, but he loves me, and you too. Now hold on and close your eyes, both of you.”

Velvet and Bash each grab one of her hands and shut their eyes tight. They feel a sensation like falling, and wind whistles in their ears. Suddenly, they feel firm ground under their feet once more.

Hades 3 months ago

He stood perfectly still, shadows pooling in his wake, ivory features set like marble. The niche in the garden was lit by small lanterns strung from the trees, and fat wax tapers stood on the smooth stones around a perfectly round pool. Night blooming jasmine filled the air with a sultry scent, and the soft song of a nightingale drifted through the air. A small brazier held a lump of opium, blue smoke rising in delicate coils. An elegant, long fingered hand hovered over a dark pool. In his other hand, he held a dagger, its blade gleaming onyx in the candlelight. In one swift motion, he drew the dagger across his palm, letting three drops of blood fall into the water. The water swirled, reflection shifting to show a small girl. Her hair was long and black as night, like his own. Her features were carved in miniature perfection, green eyes like jewels

set in her pale face. Like her mother's. She was holding a key, the very key made by his own hand many years ago.

“My love?” a voice called out, honey sweet.

“I am here,” he replied.

Warm breath tickled his ear and he felt her lips graze his shoulder. “Come back to bed,” she whispered.

“In a moment. It is your fault I must work to find her. If you hadn't been so foolish-”

“I know. I'm sorry, love. Let me make it up to you,” she purred, her voice turning husky with desire, and he felt her soft hands slip under collar of his robe.

He closed his eyes, the image of the girl vanishing. “You know I cannot stay wroth with you.”

He felt her smile. He knew she was trying to distract him, and yet, he could not help himself. As he turned, his eyes drank her in greedily. Her fair skin glowed in the soft light, shadows playing in her spring green eyes. Her lips curved in a seductive smile. He remembered the first time he saw her, dancing with wild abandon under the moonlight. A maiden of spring, but there was something different about her. Something dark and wild that called to the shadows in his own soul. She was magnificent. And she loved him. Impossible, some thought. For years, it had been enough. He grieved every time she left him to ascend to the mortal realm, how not? But there had been no way to keep her with him, not without consequences. Until now, until her. It was ironic, then, that what could be his salvation had been her betrayal. And yet he forgave her, like he always did. But he needed to stay focused, this was his chance for them to

be together forever, and he wouldn't let anyone get in his way. He always won in the end after all. Hades knew Persephone was his weakness, but this time, even she would not stop him.

The Palace of Hades

"We're here," Persephone says. "Open your eyes."

Velvet and Bash do as she says, gasping as they see a huge onyx Palace rising up in front of them. Multiple spires and turrets reach into the grey sky, and the stone gleams as if polished.

"It's amazing," Bash breathes.

"I will not come in with you, Hades lives in the room at the very top, there," Persephone points out a narrow window in the tallest tower. "The Tapestry hangs on the Loom of Fate, in a room directly across from his. Don't be afraid, remember what I told you," Persephone says, kissing Velvet on the cheek and giving her and Bash a last hug goodbye. "I will come and see you, no matter where you end up. I love you," Persephone says to Velvet. "Watch out for each other." With a final smile, she disappears.

"Well, into the lair of the beast I guess," Bash quips.

"Are you ready?" Velvet asks, checking her bag to make sure she has the cloth. "Here, take this," she hands Bash her knife, unbuckling the sheath from her waist.

"Are you sure? You might need it," Bash says.

"No, you take it," Velvet insists.

"Ok, I'm ready," Bash says, buckling the sheath around his own waist under his shirt.

They set off, walking through the arched entry. Gargoyles perch on pillars flanking the entrance, and a fountain in the shape of three rearing horses gushes water in the courtyard. Even the doors are made of ebony wood, with a knocker shaped like the head of a dragon. Velvet

reaches for the handle, and it easily turns under her hand. The door swings open silently. Inside, white marble floors with veins of silver running through lead to a spiraling staircase. There is a much more modern look to the place than one expects from seeing the outside, and a black glass vase with dozens of blood red roses stands on a table in the center of the room. Velvet slowly walks up the stairs, with Bash trailing behind her. On the second floor, there is a black door carved with the sun in eclipse and the moon in different stages. Velvet pushes the door open, and gasps. The room is completely dark, but tiny planets and constellations float in midair. A red planet with golden rings around it floats by her shoulder, and a blue planet surrounded by three moons hovers above her head.

“Wow,” Bash says, looking around in astonishment. “Look how many there are!” He reaches out to touch a small purple planet ringed with silver, cupping it in his hand.

“Come on,” Velvet says reluctantly. “We have to go.” She closes the door to the room quietly, turning to continue up the stairs. They climb two more flights and come to a narrow corridor lined with lanterns. “I think this is the top. The room at the end might be Hades’.” Velvet walks down the corridor, opening the door at the end slowly. The door swings open and a huge tree stands in the middle of it. Clear globes hang from the branches like fruit, each flashing with a different image. In one Velvet sees herself with Ivan in the room of the mage tower, practicing magic. In another, she sees a little boy that looks like Bash reading a book in a bed with a blue quilt. Bash walks in behind her, his sharp intake of breath audible as he takes in the sight. He walks over to a globe with a dark-haired man kissing a pretty woman with a baby in her arms.

“Is that your parents?” Velvet asks softly.

“Yeah, that’s my mom. And that must be my dad,” Bash smiles sadly.

“He looks a lot like you,” Velvet says.

“Yeah, I guess so. I wish I remembered him,” Bash sighs. “Let’s move on, I saw another staircase back there, it must lead to the top.” He leads the way out of the room, glancing back once more at the globe containing the image of his parents. “Here, look.” Bash gestures to a much smaller, narrower staircase that Velvet hadn’t seen.

Velvet leads the way, walking quietly up the stairs. At the end of the next hallway, there are two doors, one to the left and one to the right. “One must be Hades’ room, and the other must have the Tapestry. Let’s try the one to the right first.” Velvet reaches in her bag, pulling out the cloth. “Okay, I’m ready.” She creeps down the hall to the right-hand door, pushing it open gently. The door opens silently, showing a cavernous room dominated by a huge bed hung with black satin drapes. On the bed, a handsome man is fast asleep, black hair spilling like silk around a face like pale marble. Velvet tiptoes over to the bed, raising the cloth. She quickly throws it over his face, then goes to tie it behind his head. A white hand shoots up, grabbing her wrist before she can complete the knot.

“Tsk, tsk, I’m disappointed in you, daughter,” Hades says, his lips curving into a smile. “And Bash, how nice to see you again. I expected more from you too. I guess strong will runs in the family. She wouldn’t listen to you, huh? Did you tell her about our little deal?”

“We didn’t have a deal,” Bash says.

Velvet looks at him in horror. “Wait, you’ve talked to him before?”

“Oh dear, did I say something wrong? Bash and I are old friends. He was going to help me, and I would give him his father back, right Bash?” Hades says.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Is that why you kept trying to tell me to listen to him? I thought I could trust you!” Velvet cries.

“No, Velvet! You were right, I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know what to do!” Bash explains. “I thought it wouldn’t be so bad, if it’s what you wanted, too, but you were right! I never should have even considered it.”

“Don’t, Bash. I know you miss your dad, but you should’ve said something. How can I believe you now?” Velvet shakes her head.

“Now, children, don’t fight,” Hades says silkily. “Everything will be just fine. All you have to do is help me, daughter. Then, we can be together, you, me and your mother. And Bash can have his father back too. Don’t you want that?”

“But what about the worlds? They’ll die!” Velvet shouts.

“No, dear, they just won’t have magic. And that’s not so bad right, Bash?” Hades says.

“People can’t survive in eternal winter if mom stays down here, she told me herself,” Velvet says. “And I’ve seen the worlds you’re draining of magic, they’re not the same!”

“Your mother is wrong. She just worries too much. Everything will be fine. Besides, you want to keep your magic, don’t you?” Hades cajoles.

Velvet hesitates. “Well, yes, but--”

“No! Velvet, don’t listen to him. You know he’s just trying to sway you! Stay strong!” Bash says.

“Hush now, I think it’s time for you to give my daughter and me some time alone, hmm?” Hades asks, making a gesture. Bash falls to the floor.

“Bash! No!” Velvet runs over to him.

“He’s just asleep. Now come, child, you know you want a family again, don’t you? And you can have your friend come visit us anytime you want. If you don’t have magic, you’ll never be able to see me or leave one world! How would that be, to feel powerless?” Hades says. “I

know that's not what you want. And you could give your Bash everything he wants, his father back and his mother happy! Think about that.”

Velvet gazes at Bash, motionless on the floor. She thinks about how he looked at the vision of his mother and father. “Okay, I’ll help you,” Velvet says. “Show me the Tapestry.”

“Excellent choice daughter,” Hades says. He rises and takes her to the room across the hall, pushing the door open. In the middle of the room, a huge loom stands with an enormous tapestry hanging on it.

“The Tapestry of Worlds,” Hades says.

Velvet gasps in awe. The tapestry shows images of thousands of different worlds. Worlds of water and worlds of fire, worlds filled with trees and forests and worlds of sand dunes. There are worlds with hundreds of buildings and huge ships sailing on the seas. There are even worlds of sea monsters and worlds of nothing but night sky and stars. Colors blend and meld together, rippling from sea to sky. In some of the worlds, there are huge black spots where the threads have been ripped. “Those are the spots where I’ve taken magic from the worlds. It has taken me quite long to obtain the magic from them, but with you here, we can do it much more quickly. All you have to do is focus on the world you want to drain, then pull the magic into yourself,” Hades instructs.

Velvet closes her eyes, feeling for the tears in the Tapestry. As she does, she thinks about her days spent learning to control her magic. She wishes she could help Bash, but she knows deep down that she can’t let Hades win. Velvet concentrates, instead of pulling, she pushes her magic into the Tapestry, coaxing the weave back together.

“No!” Hades shouts. But Bash comes up behind him, stabbing him in the shoulder with Velvet’s enchanted knife. Hades falls to the ground, his shoulder spilling blood. He gestures angrily with his other hand and Bash flies into the back wall, crumpling to the floor.

“Bash!” Velvet screams. She runs over to Hades, ripping her bracelets off her wrists, using them to tie Hades’ hands behind his back. He tries to push her off, but he can’t manage to with his injured shoulder.

“Once upon a time, a girl fought her father and used her magic bracelets to tie his hands, binding his magic so he couldn’t use it against her,” Velvet says, completing the knot. Then she uses the cloth the oracle gave her to bind Hades’ eyes so he can’t use magic against her.

Hades lies prone on the ground, his beautiful features contorted in rage. His hands are momentarily tied with Velvet’s bracelets and his eyes are bound. His black silk robes pool around him like ink. He struggles to his knees, his fingers working to unpick the knots that Velvet had made.

“Daughter, you’re making a huge mistake, you don’t really want to give up your magic,” he shouts. He realizes for the first time that his daughter is far stronger than he had anticipated, it had never before occurred to him that he could actually be defeated.

Velvet ignores him, knowing she must repair the Tapestry before he figures out how to unbind himself. Then, she runs to Bash. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just bruised,” he winces. “Finish what you came for.”

Velvet walks back to the Tapestry and closes her eyes. She feels for the rips again, using her magic to coax and weave the threads back together. Slowly, she feels her magic ebbing out of her, and she falls to her knees, but she doesn’t stop. The tears in the Tapestry come together,

threads of every color mending themselves, until it hangs whole and perfect once more. Velvet sighs in relief before collapsing to the ground.

Earth

When Velvet wakes up, she is in a white bed and Bash is smiling down at her.

“Where am I? Are you all right?” Velvet asks.

“You’re in my world,” Bash explains. “Your mother brought us back here after you fainted. She said that she’ll see you soon. She went back to take care of your father. The ways between the worlds are open again! You did it! This appeared for you a minute ago.” Bash reaches into a pouch and pulls out a red-gold feather. Attached to the feather is a small, rolled up scroll. Velvet unrolls the parchment, seeing Ivan’s familiar spidery writing almost brings tears to her eyes.

My dearest Velvet, sister of my heart, I never doubted you for an instant. We felt the magic return, and I am with Vasilisa and Marya as I write this. Thanks to you, the house is stable again and we can travel as before. We are so, incredibly proud of you. Persephone sent us a letter after you met her, I should have guessed sooner that you were her child! She told us what you sacrificed in order for magic to return. There are no words that can describe how grateful we all are to you, so thank you, from the bottom of our hearts. I know it is unlikely we will see you again, you would of course be welcome to come back and live here, but I gather you have formed quite an attachment to a companion of yours from another world. If you wish to write to us, just give the letter to your mother when you see her and she will make sure we receive it. This feather is for you to keep, Vasilisa says if you are ever in danger, wave it three times above your head. Help will come. Take care of yourself, child. With love, Ivan, Vasilisa and Marya.

“So, my magic is really gone,” Velvet asks in a small voice.

“I think so,” Bash says. “But you’re a hero, and nobody here has magic anyway. Your mom said she can take you back to the world you grew up in when she comes back, but I was hoping, maybe you’d want to stay here, with me. I mean, you’re just a regular girl now, right?”

Velvet smiles. “Well, maybe not,” she says, lifting a hand and showing him her bracelet, which still has the key to the underworld dangling from it.

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