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For Anna, Elijah, Aspen and Shae

List of Kickstarter Backers:

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## Chapter 1

William and Elizabeth Pennington were new money. They lived in a small village in the south of England comprised primarily of poverty with a healthy dose of old money. William's father owned a shop where he built pocket watches. He was a gifted watchmaker and he taught William all he knew. Although he put in long hours and worked as hard as any man, their family barely scraped by. When William took over after his father's death, he made a few simple changes and began to market his watches. After a few years of working hard with his new bride, Elizabeth, something happened. Pennington watches became all the rage. They were put into shops all over England. Everyone who was anyone had to have a Pennington watch. Even people with no money or station were setting aside money in hopes of one day buying a Pennington.

Elizabeth was proud of her young husband and eager to blend into the high society circles. She had been raised by her aunt who was insistent that she marry well. Aunt Agnes disapproved of William and disowned Elizabeth as soon as she learned of their engagement. Elizabeth planned to prove her aunt wrong by becoming the most important (and wealthiest) socialite in southern England.

About a year after their fortunes started changing, Elizabeth discovered she was pregnant. She and William were both elated. All the ladies with influence in the village were pleased to see such an up and coming couple becoming a family.

Katherine Abigail Pennington was born right on time. She was a rather chubby baby with a shock of black hair that seemed as though it was always reaching to the sky for something. Elizabeth's friends (if you could call them that...it might be more appropriate to say "the ladies she wanted to impress") were all amazed with what a well behaved baby Katherine was. Indeed, she hardly cried. She would smile and just look out at the world. She studied things quietly.

William and Elizabeth were both delighted with Katherine until she started to speak. As she learned to speak, she began to express herself and assert herself in a way that was not at all acceptable.

Elizabeth did love her child, but, in truth, she mainly enjoyed the attention and accolades that Katherine earned her. When Katherine began to be more of an embarrassment than an asset, Elizabeth found that her fondness for her was waning.

William wasn't very involved in the parenting as was the way of most men in that time. He simply followed Elizabeth's lead in how he should respond to Katherine.

Katherine was naturally curious and bright. She was constantly chastised for touching things she ought not touch or asking questions she needn't be concerned about. She would sit and look at books for hours, even before she could read. Once she was old enough to read on her own, she would sit surrounded by piles of heavy tomes, smiling happily as she turned the pages. Elizabeth could only imagine what the ladies in her league would have to say about this.

Katherine was very intuitive and realized at a young age that she was not what her parents hoped for. She tried very hard to become the person they wanted her to be. She tried to sit like a lady instead of running wild in the field chasing butterflies. She tried to read less and sew more.

But there came a day when Katherine decided that she didn't like the girl her parents wanted her to be. She was about seven years old and she was walking through the village with her mother. She spotted an old man. He was lying on the ground with a cup next to him. His clothes were tattered and

covered in filth. His hair was matted and falling out in places. Katherine was born with a larger than normal dose of compassion. She ran to him and put her hand on his face. She smiled at him, and he smiled back with the few teeth he had left. She rubbed his matted hair and turned to look up at her mother.

Elizabeth was embarrassed and appalled. The ladies league she was involved in donated money to all sorts of charities and humanitarian organizations, but would never consider touching a person like this themselves.

Katherine could see her mother's embarrassment and desperation to get her away from this filthy creature. She decided at that moment that she didn't like this girl that her mother wanted her to be. She leaned into the man's face and whispered.

"There is still magic in you. I can feel it." She stood and walked away from her mother. The old man sat up and smiled so wide he felt his cheeks stretching in a way that he had nearly forgotten.

Elizabeth gathered up her skirts and hurried off after Katherine, chastising her all the way home.

\* \* \*

When she had grown to the age of twelve, Katherine had become settled in who she was. She realized that she was different, and it seemed that no matter how hard she tried or didn't try, her parents were never going to accept her. She didn't want to need their love. She wanted to be independent and free, but the desire for their approval, for the feeling that she was accepted and loved just as she was, just wouldn't seem to leave her. She found safety and guidance from books. She buried herself in them.

Katherine had few friends. The ones that claimed to be her friends were only hoping for an invite to her parents' legendary parties that involved candies flown in from Paris, live music, and sometimes fireworks. Katherine was smart enough to realize this, and she found it simpler and less painful to be alone. She wasn't just smart, she was also fairly attractive. Her hair was dark as a raven and had finally decided to hang straight. Her features were fine and well centered. When she thought hard, she scrunched her face in a way that her mother said was absolutely deplorable. She didn't think of herself as pretty. No one had told her otherwise.

She spent most of her time in the family library or by the stream near the house. She would sit for hours beside the little ivy-covered bridge reading, playing solitaire, or watching the insects and animals that played around the stream. While the other girls were learning to sit for tea and embroider a tea towel, Katherine was dancing in the meadow alone. She was of the unusual opinion that there was more to life than having tea.

She was very much alone in her life. She thought her parents probably did love her, but they were very busy and baffled by a child that didn't act like every other girl in the county. Ms. Glass was Katherine's one love. She had been hired when Katherine was about four years old. Her only job had been to take care of Katherine and make sure she didn't interfere with the Penningtons' social events. She was a round woman with perpetually rosy cheeks and a laugh that sounded more like a chipmunk chattering than a large woman chuckling. She gave the best hugs, and Katherine always looked forward to being gathered up in her arms and squeezed till she thought she would never breathe again.

Ms. Glass had her hands full trying to get Katherine to put on social graces and act as she was supposed to, but her love for little Katherine let her get by with more than the Penningtons would have liked. It's not that Katherine didn't try to please them, but sometimes she found that trying made things even worse. Like the New Year's party that the Penningtons held every year. One year Katherine decided she would learn all the dances and etiquette and try very hard to become one of the crowd. She injured at least three people on the dance floor, spilled tea on the matriarch of the town

and told the priest that she didn't believe anyone was truly honest — including him. Her parents were appalled and told her that she would not come to any more parties unless she learned to become invisible. She did. One might spot Katherine Pennington at one of the famous parties, but you would never remember seeing her. She became a piece of furniture.

At one point, Mrs. Pennington attempted to fire Ms. Glass. Katherine had been at school and a boy about her age pulled her black hair like reins and told her that she would be a better fit as a Pennington if she were a horse in their stable. Katherine pushed him in the mud. The teacher discussed the issue with Ms. Glass. Ms. Glass did the unthinkable and defended Katherine. She even suggested the boy (who was from a very prestigious family) be punished. The teacher then discussed things with Mrs. Pennington, who did the right thing and apologized for her disturbed daughter.

When Elizabeth arrived home, she informed both Ms. Glass and Katherine that Ms. Glass would be leaving. Katherine ran into the garden in full view of the new neighbors and started screaming at the top of her lungs and pulling her long dark hair. The adults followed, trying to quiet her. It wasn't until her mother whispered that Ms. Glass would stay that Katherine finally grew quiet and walked back into the house. Mrs. Pennington laughed uncomfortably and waved in the direction of the neighbors gawking nearby. Katherine hated giving her mother a new reason to despise her, but she couldn't lose Ms. Glass.

And so Katherine's life continued as it always had, living in a land that felt completely foreign to her, even though she'd lived there all her life. It wouldn't always be this way. A day was soon to come when Ms. Glass lost Katherine as she knew her. Katherine, however, was reborn in a way, to a land that felt more like home than anything she'd known.

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## Chapter 2

Katherine was sitting on the floor of the library with books piled around her and a cup of tea balanced on her knee. She was attempting to pick a new book to read. This was always a long and drawn-out event. She would turn each book over in her hand and read little bits out of each one. She would often be in the library most of the day with Ms. Glass bringing her meals there on the floor.

She heard a sound of shuffling feet and jostling material. She looked up to see her mother standing in the doorway. She had always thought that her mother resembled a bird more than a human. She was tall and thin and her nose, while not large, was much more like a beak than a nose. Standing in the doorway now, holding her skirt up, her skinny ankles and pointed shoes poking out, Katherine had expected her to squawk instead of speak.

“Katherine Abigail! What are you doing here?” she asked, as though surprised that she lived in the same house.

“I’m attempting to choose which book to read next, but it’s —,” she started.

“Yes, well, you will have to clear out of the library for today and do your playing another day.” She waved her hands as though shooing an insect.

“Why?” Katherine rarely made things easy. Mrs. Pennington sighed and tilted her head.

“Well, if you must know, the Ladies of the League are meeting here today, and they requested that we have tea in the library so that we could discuss our donations.” She smoothed her dress nervously.

“Donations?” Katherine asked.

“Yes, we are donating some of our books to help start a public library. So that everyone may have access to books.” She smiled, pleased with herself.

“You are giving away our books?” Katherine felt panic rising in her chest. She loved the idea of giving to others, but picturing herself on the floor of a public building surrounded by piles of books attempting to choose what to read next just didn’t seem fitting, even for someone like Katherine.

“Calm down, dear; we are only giving away some of our sets of reference books. I know how much you love your books,” Mrs. Pennington stated. Katherine felt that this was the largest and grandest expression of affection that her mother had ever given her. Carried away in the moment, she jumped to her feet and flew at her, embracing her. She could almost hear feathers ruffling as her mother hopped back a step and threw her hands up to guard herself from Katherine’s embrace. She smiled, but it wasn’t genuine, and Katherine knew she had crossed some imaginary line that she was supposed to stay behind. She felt the pain of the rejection in her chest like a tiny stab wound.

“Thank you, mother. I’ll just clear up my mess and go out for a walk,” she managed to say. Mrs. Pennington nodded and shuffled off to make sure Ms. Glass was getting things prepared for the onslaught of skirts, gossip, and tea.

Katherine picked up the books one by one, lovingly stroked the spine, and set them all back in the empty slots around the room. She kept one in her hand, a tale of an adventure in a faraway land. She would read this one today. She gave the room one last look, then headed to the kitchen to put away her tea cup. She walked in to her mother chirping directions so frantically that she wondered when she was drawing a breath. Ms. Glass glanced up and grinned, then shot a quick wink at Katherine as she took her cup from her hand.

Katherine walked down the hall clutching her stomach. Nothing was wrong physically, but she felt the need to somehow hold her insides in. She didn't want the feelings on the inside to slip out, reveal the pain she allowed her parents to inflict on her.

She stopped at the hall closet and grabbed her playing cards (a Christmas gift from Ms. Glass). As she headed toward the front door, something made her pause. The front parlor had a large grand mirror that leaned against the wall. It had belonged to a great-great aunt of some sort and had a huge elaborate gold frame. She was used to walking past and seeing her other self walking by inside the sparkling frame. Today the mirror seemed wrong. It looked as though it were full of fog. The curtains had been opened this morning, just as they had every morning, and sun was streaming into the room. Katherine walked closer to investigate. She caught a glimpse of her own reflection through the fog. She had a strange feeling.

She reached her hand up to touch the glass, but it went straight through and into the fog. She pulled it back in a moment of terror and looked behind her, as though any second someone was going to catch her and reprimand her or laugh at how ridiculous she was being. But alas, it is difficult to walk away when something so miraculous is happening. She plunged both arms into the fog and one leg stepped forward. As her other leg attempted to follow, her foot caught on the frame of the mirror, which apparently was still quite solid. She felt herself falling back into the parlor, but something wrapped around her wrist and pulled her forward. She felt the mirror fall and turned to see it shatter into thousand pieces. She was horrified. Her mother would be furious. Another bad mark on Katherine's far-from-perfect score card. But that thought would have to wait. Now she was more concerned about what had grabbed her and pulled her through the mirror.

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## Chapter 3

Katherine looked down at her wrist and found a rather large toothless snake had wrapped his tail around it. She shook the serpent off and backed away. Her eyes widened, and she rubbed her wrist absently.

“Are you hurt, miss?” the snake asked. His head tilted and his unblinking eyes stared up at her with concern.

Katherine looked long and hard at the serpent. She thought she must have hit her head rather hard and addled her brain in some way. For a moment, the snake had seemed like something more than a snake, as though it were speaking to her.

“You are most welcome! Now, what is it that we should be calling you when we are in need of calling you?” he spoke again.

Katherine looked intently at the snake, then surveyed her surroundings. She was in a vast meadow surrounded by forest. The colors were more vivid than any she’d ever seen. The trees were unrecognizable to her, and some of them hung with deep purple and turquoise fruit. She had realized enough in her short life to realize that she had crossed over to another world somehow. The snake cleared his throat. Katherine shook herself. She realized that she still had not responded.

“My name is Kather—” she stopped herself before the rest of the name could escape her mouth. She had always preferred the name Katy, but her mother insisted that it was completely inappropriate. “My name is Katy.” She curtsied. “And what is your name, kind sir?”

“My name is Billingswaith, but I am thinking that is too much of a name for such a small mouth as yours. So you should be calling me Waith.” He grinned a huge toothless grin and bowed his head low. Had she not been so disoriented, this would have been enough to have her rolling on the floor with laughter. She came back to her thoughts and looked behind her where the frame of the grand mirror lay covered with shards of broken glass. The snake looked at her with concern.

“Are you very much yourself?” he asked. The question caused her to pause.

“Yes, yes, I think I am,” she smiled. She had long dreamt of running away to the worlds in her books, but seeing that the mirror had shattered, she wondered what that could mean. Perhaps this was a second chance to find a place where she belonged and didn’t bring so much grief to those around her. But she knew nothing about this world. So, for the moment, she clung tightly to hope and pushed fear out of her heart.

“You seem not pleased that you have lost your way in, but do not be so...for, you see, you are already in.” He was pleased with the wisdom he offered her.

“It’s just that I fear I may have lost my way out too.”

The snake looked at her in complete confusion. “Way out? Such a strange way she speaks.” He shook his head, then made himself taller and looked into her eyes.

“Come along and follow after me. The Queen is expecting you.”

“The Queen? Expecting me? I’m afraid you must have me confused with someone else!”

The snake narrowed his lidless eyes. “Oh, you mean someone else who appears as if from nowhere into the Vast Meadowlands, with hair as dark as a raven, and will arrive on this the fifteenth of Millvan?” He tilted his head toward her.

“But how did you know all that? Do you mean you knew I was coming?”

“The Aphid foretold.”

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“The Aphid?” she asked.

“He’s a very powerful seer. His name is Prontil. He lives at the palace, too. He foretold of the Queen’s new daughter.” He gestured toward Katy with his head. “He said you would be born of smoke and glass. We have never had a child come to us this way. We thought Prontil might be losing it, but he came just in case every year. He knew the very day you would arrive (but not the year) and I was here to witness your birth just as he said. And it’s a good thing too. You nearly fell back into the land of shadows. So now I will bring you to your new home,” he explained.

“Wait, Queen’s daughter? She thinks I am her daughter?” she asked.

“Oh, but you are. Somehow when you landed at first breath, you landed in quite the wrong self. Do you ever feel like a stranger in your own skin?” he asked.

“Well...yes, actually. Quite frequently.” He nodded as though he already knew this would be her answer.

“Come along, Miss Katy. It’s time to get home.”

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## Chapter 4

Katy followed Waith at an easy pace through the meadows.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“The Vast Meadowlands, which, as you can see, are surrounded by the Circling Forest.” Katy picked up her steps a pace or two and walked alongside Waith.

“But, I mean, this country, this land...where am I? How did I get here?” Waith looked up at her thoughtfully.

“This land is a land of wonder. It is ever changing and ever the same. It has no name that I know of. The different regions are named, but we are not named as one. As to how you got here, I am suspecting that you know much more of that than I.” She continued her surveying of the area and noticed more and more things that were unfamiliar to her, and yet somehow she felt very at ease and unafraid.

As they came into the forest, she had much more trouble keeping up with Waith. He slithered easily under the brush, while she fought and pushed her way through stubborn tree branches and bushes. Occasionally she would find herself at a standstill watching something in amazement, like the little bushes that looked like small pines but would shake their needles and stand up. She could see then that they were shaped a bit like tiny ostriches. Waith would call her name and get her back on track. He assured her that there would be plenty of time in the future for her to explore all the surrounding areas.

When they neared the edge of the forest, the light turned deeper blue. Katy noticed movement to her right and turned in time to see two green eyes staring at her. Just as quickly they were gone, and she couldn't get a glimpse of what or who had been watching her.

“What was that?” she asked Waith.

“That was Degrit.” He answered without looking back. “Just a village boy about your age. He lives in a home not far from here, but he seems to feel more full of happiness in the forest. It is where he is most to be found.” Katy looked again, but saw nothing.

At last, the woods relented. Waith and Katy came out of the trees and into the courtyard of a palace. Katy gazed up in wonder. The palace was breathtaking. The stone was something she had never seen. It was similar to limestone, except veins of silver and gold ran through it. The roof was tiled with something similar to sapphire. It almost matched the sky in places, and the clouds seemed to float not only above the roof, but in it as well. She stood, mouth open and eyes wide. Waith chuckled.

“Are you not having palaces in the land of shadows?” he asked. Katy's parents had taken her to a palace when she was very young. She remembered it as being very cold and foreboding, quite the opposite of this piece of art which seemed so warm and inviting.

“Palaces, yes, but nothing like this...at all.” Waith raised himself up to her level.

“Ah, yes, crafted by our last artist nearly two hundred years ago. It is beautiful. Come along, miss.” Her feet began to follow him again, although her eyes were reluctant to leave the palace.

As they came closer, the doors caught Katy's eyes. They were enormous and carved with more sapphire-like stone and a deep red wood that intertwined. It created a design that was more intricate and at the same time more simple, than anything she'd experienced.

*Land of Wonder*, she thought to herself.

~~There were no guards, no guns or swords. Various animals and creatures were milling around in the courtyard. They all stopped and stared as Katy walked past. Waith slithered to the door and without any effort on his part, the doors opened.~~

They walked through the doors together. The first thing that struck Katy was the light. It seemed that there was almost more sunlight inside the palace than outside. There were great dangling crystals that hung from the ceiling and emanated light. It wasn't a chandelier. These were more like single strands that hung about randomly all over the ceiling of the palace. They brightened as living beings came near them and then slowly faded when the room was left empty.

A small brown rabbit sat on a purple velvet stool near the door. He sat up tall when he noticed them. "Please alert your majesty that Katylove is here," Waith said. The rabbit said nothing but hopped off the chair and scampered away immediately.

"We should be waiting here," Waith said. He led Katy to a room which she quickly realized was a library. It wasn't too big in circumference, but as she looked up, the ceiling seemed so far away she couldn't even confidently identify it. The crystals hung on walls between bookshelves in this room. The shelves were crammed with books that went as far up as Katy could see. There were two large, comfy chairs. Waith slithered into one and invited her to do the same.

As she did she asked, "How do you get to the higher books?" Waith looked up as though this were the first time he had thought of the question.

"I should think you just eat a bit of mushroom," he stated as though this should clear up all the confusion. "Ah, yes, look." He pointed with his tail to a corner of the room. There was a tall log leaning against the wall, with mushrooms growing from it. She was about to question him further when she heard the sound of footsteps coming near. Waith slithered out of the chair and stood tall. Katy followed him.

Two women came around the corner, both of them stunning. The first was tall and slender. Her skin was so pale it almost seemed to glow. Her hair was golden, with occasional strands that sparkled like diamonds in it and fell in long ringlets around her shoulders. Her eyes were as blue as the tiles on the roof or the carvings on the door. She was young, not much older than Katy. She came bounding in and nearly bowled Katy over with a hug. Katy hugged her back a bit awkwardly. She saw the second woman behind the first, waiting for her turn to embrace Katy. She was very like the first, but much older. Her eyes were kinder and less mischievous. Her hair was deep brown, with sections of pure silver running through it. It was pulled up in a sort of bun, and a small tiara peeked up from the top of her head.

"Oh, Katylove! At last you're here!!" The girl pushed her back by her shoulders to look at her. "You are like nothing I've ever seen...so beautiful." Katy felt blood rush to her cheeks as she tried to find words. She only managed to get out a quiet "thank you."

The second woman, who must be the Queen, came and stood across from Katy. She took Katy's chin in her hand and looked deep into her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, we are so glad you made it to us," she said. Her voice was soft and full of kindness. "We have been awaiting your arrival for such a long time." She saw Katy's face full of bewilderment. "I'm sorry, dear, this must be very overwhelming for you." She gently pushed Katy back into the chair behind her and knelt next to her. "I am certain that Waith has attempted to inform you all he can. But I shall tell you again and try to set your mind at ease. I am your mother, and this is your sister, Eisle. Your arrival was foretold some twelve years ago. You were to arrive on the fifteenth of Millvan, but we did not know the year. It could not be seen. So each year, we have sent Waith out to wait for you. Eisle was three when the foretelling came, and for many years she would run to the Meadow with Waith, hoping to be the one to greet you. We had begun to give up hope. Twelve years is a very long

time. Your father never gave up, though. He died four years ago and the last thing he said to me was 'tell my Katylove that I am so sorry to have missed her.' We hoped, hoped with all our hearts that you would get to come to us before we were all gone." The Queen sighed deeply. She whispered, "And, last, you have. You are really here with us."

"I am very glad to be here," Katy said. It was all she could manage. She was confused and excited and emotional and unsure. "But are you certain it is me you have waited for?"

Eisley laughed a laugh that would have certainly been worth a stern lecture from her bird-mother in the land of shadows, as Waith called it.

"We have never been more certain about anything, Katylove. You are you, and you are more you now than you have ever been. And, of course, I would know my sister in a heartbeat."

"Oh, dearest, do not doubt that this is your true lineage. We prayed that you would be looked after in the land of shadows. I hope your life journey has not been too difficult thus far," the Queen said.

Katy realized that she was still clutching tightly to her book and the worn pack of cards that were in her left hand. She thought of Ms. Glass. "It's been fine. I had an angel to look after me."

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## Chapter 5

Katy had spent the first twelve years of her life wishing time away. Now she felt as though she were pulling back hard on the reigns in a desperate attempt to slow it down. She was fifteen now. The three years she had spent in what she affectionately called Wonderland would have been a dream come true if she had ever dared to dream such beautiful dreams.

Her mother and sister were as wonderful as they had first seemed. They showered her with love and affection, and were sensitive enough to notice when she needed to be alone.

The Queen would often say, “Remember, Easley dear, she has not been surrounded by love as you have. We must be certain not to smother her with it.”

The memories of the Shadowlands had all but disappeared in such a place. When Katy had first arrived, she lived in fear of being discovered as a fraud or of all the love toward her leaving when they really got to know her. Katy was someone special and cherished here. The kindness and affection from her mother and sister, and even Waith, had begun to heal broken places in her heart. Her hair, she quickly came to understand, was something of a novelty in Wonderland. No one had ever seen hair like hers (black as a raven), and it made her even more of a miracle to the inhabitants of the land.

She had lessons daily with Waith. He taught her all the things she would need to know to someday rule Wonderland. Between the laws and etiquette of the land being introduced, she also had to learn the basics about the plants and creatures she would encounter.

She had already had a few close encounters with creatures that she didn't realize were dangerous — like the snawlish, which is an adorable little water creature similar to a sea horse, but with larger eyes. They seem to be very friendly, but are just waiting for the precise moment to sink their tiny teeth into the webs of your fingers. Their venom is so powerful and fast-acting that you would not even have time to call for help. Waith had discovered Katy leaning over the pond and allowing them to dance amongst her fingers as she dangled them in the water. He grabbed her ankle and pulled her out so fast that her knees bled. Once she discovered the danger he had saved her from, she was really very grateful.

Waith was a kind and patient teacher, and she and Katy grew to love and antagonize each other very much. They spent the mornings in the palace going over books and laws and the ways of the land. They would walk through the great halls of the palace. Waith would brag about the sparse art that lined the walls, tapestries so threadbare they seemed desperate to unravel. He taught her that artists in Wonderland were very rare — the last one had been nearly two hundred years ago. When artists were discovered, they would devote their life to giving beauty to the land. They would not marry or have a family, they would create. They were held in almost as high esteem as the royal family. Waith had high hopes that another would come along soon.

Every day Waith and Katy took a walk to see what they might see. Waith had discovered that this was the best way to teach Katy about the wildlife in Wonderland. He would point out different plants or creatures and explain all about them. Most were harmless, some were friendly, and a few were deadly.

One particular day, the walk had gone rather late and the sky was beginning to darken. Katy saw eyes peering at her through the trees, and she was taken back to that first day walking through the

Circling Forest. Those curious green eyes that had vanished.

~~“Waith, do we really have to go back now? Can’t we just go a bit further into the forest before we turn back?”~~ she asked. Waith opened his mouth in a wide toothless yawn.

“My dear Miss Katy, I fear I am being far too tired to venture any further today.”

“Can I stay out for just a bit longer alone? I promise I won’t touch any plants or creatures that I’m not familiar with.” She looked at him with big pleading eyes. “Besides, we covered this area a hundred times. Isn’t it time you let me go out on my own?” He let out a heavy sigh, and she knew that she had won.

“Oh...I suppose I can’t be with you every moment. Be back before the moon is settled in the sky.” She kissed his scaly cheek.

“Thank you, Waith. I’ll be careful, I promise,” she shouted as she ran into the forest in the direction of those eyes.

\* \* \*

Katy had been fighting her way through the woods for more than twenty minutes, looking for the forest boy, and was ready to call it a night. She turned back in the direction of the palace and batted a branch out of her way. Suddenly an unfamiliar hand clasped her wrist and took off with her hand in his. Her heart pounded in her chest. She had to run to keep up with the stranger. His grip was tight, but not painful. They ran between trees, and Katy squinted to get a good look at him when the moonlight streamed between the trees.

“I wanna show you something!” he shouted. She realized with relief that this was the boy she had been searching for moments ago. She struggled to keep her feet under her. They came to a sudden stop just at the edge of the forest. They were staring out over the Vast Meadowlands. Katy started to speak but the boy put his finger to his lips and pointed toward the meadow.

She looked him over for a moment. He was just a little taller than she. His hair was golden and short, but wild, as though all the strands were pointing in different directions at once. He had no shoes and wore only the simple pants of a peasant. His green eyes she had seen before. They seemed to be full of light, even in darkness. He was staring intently at the Meadowlands.

She gazed out, squinted, and in moments began to see lights all over the meadow, floating, flying, and hovering.

“Fireflies,” she whispered. “We had something like this...” she stopped short when she realized that all of the lights had begun to change color: blue, green, yellow, purple, orange, colors unlike any she had seen. She breathed deeply in awe. The boy took her hand and put his finger to his lips once again. He began to step forward slowly and carefully so they wouldn’t scare the creatures away. She followed willingly.

She tried to get a close look at them as she walked in amongst them. All she could see were the lights. When they had walked for quite a while, the boy pointed out and all around. They were in the middle of the meadow, not far from where the shards of the mirror must have fallen. They were surrounded by the sparkling lights. She squeezed his hand with excitement.

“It’s so beautiful,” Katy whispered. She looked out in amazement, but she could feel him looking only at her. He let go of her hand and turned to face her.

“Watch this,” he said. He took off running at top speed yelling as loud as he could and the lights shot off in every direction, but they left behind a glowing trail. The meadow was a sea of light trails of all colors. The boy turned to her and laughed.

“Touch one,” he said. She reached out to the orange trail that hung in the sky near her arm. Her fingers glowed with an orange light. She pulled her hand away and still it glowed. The boy w

running wild through the colors. He stopped in front of her, covered from head to toe in glowing lights. "Better hurry, it doesn't last long." That was all the invitation she needed.

She ran like wild, jumping, rolling, trying to reach every color she could see. They laughed and ran and compared stripes of light. The colors slowly faded from the sky but lingered on their skin and clothes.

"They're called fleets," he said. "They're tiny creatures. You can rarely see them past their light unless they are dying and their light is dim. They leave light trails when they're frightened." He ran his fingers through his multi-colored hair nervously.

"I'm Katy," she said, and held her hand out to him. He laughed and shook her hand.

"I know who you are. I've heard stories of you since I was born. My mother always hoped that she would be the one to teach you the ways of a princess." He looked into the sky as though searching for something. "She was a teacher in the palace before she died." His eyes became glassy.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "What happened?"

He pulled blades of grass from the ground as he spoke. "She was thrown from a horse. The healing was slow in coming, and it was too late when she arrived." He sighed. "After she left, my father was...affected. We loved her. She had a heart big enough for more love than most creatures could contain." Katy felt unsure of how to respond. She had never met anyone so ready to be so honest and open about his life. He looked into her eyes for a moment, then back into the distance. "My father is dead inside. He works at the palace in the stables. It's what he's always done. It was one of the horses he trained that threw my mother. He can't forgive himself, and he can't forget. He's reminded everyday. He's gone all day, and when he comes home he tries to talk to me, but I can see how painful it is for him. I usually pretend to have something else to do. I can sense his relief when I head for the door. That is why I'm at home in the forest." He gazed at her for a moment. "I saw you the day you arrived." He looked down and scratched behind his ear. "I'd never seen anything like you. Hair like a raven and lips like bloodwood."

Katy blushed. "Bloodwood?" she asked.

"It's a type of wood. When it's all polished, it looks like blood. Some people don't like it, but I think it's beautiful." He looked into her eyes for a brief moment, then went back to studying the grass intently.

"Is that what's on the door of the palace?" she asked.

"Yes. It's mixed with sky stone to remind us that we are human, but there is also so much more to us than blood and bones."

She nodded silently. "I know you were there that first day. I saw you. Well, just your eyes. I asked Waith about you and he told me that you were a boy my age, but I never saw you again...till now. Everytime I heard a sound in the bushes I'd search for you. I know that Waith told me, but I can't remember your name. I'm sorry."

He smiled. "It's all right. It's Degrit." He stood and held out his hand to help her up. She took it and hopped up off the damp grass. "Come on. I'll get you back to the palace."

"Thanks," she said. He led her to the edge of the forest just outside the courtyard of the palace. She turned to him to thank him for the magic of that evening, for sharing his story with her, for being so open and kind, but he had vanished again. She walked into the palace alone, not sure whether she was still glowing or if it was just happiness radiating from her skin.

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## Chapter 6

“Katylove, wake up.”

Katy rolled over and forced her eyes open. Eisley was standing over her with an excited grin on her face.

“What’s going on?” Katy asked. She pushed herself up in her bed.

“I have a surprise for you today. You’re skipping lessons this morning and coming with me.” Her smile seemed as though it was trying to spread across her entire face. “Come down and have breakfast then we’ll head out.” She turned again as she reached the door. “Oh, and wear riding clothes.”

“All right, I’ll be right down.” Katy lay back down in her bed and gazed around her room. The Queen had decorated it years ago in preparation. It still amazed her. It was a round room with a round sofa that hugged the wall under the windows. She would sit on that sofa with her feet tucked under her, watching the busy courtyard with strange creatures coming in and out, and wonder if this would ever seem normal to her. The sofa and the bed were made of a material she had never experienced, so soft to the touch it was nearly impossible to want to leave. There was a fireplace that was lit each night by a fat squat toad. He would come in every evening, do his duty, smile widely, and then hop out of the room without a word. From all over the ceiling at various heights hung the most beautiful iridescent material in deep shades of red and white that had been cut into hearts. They hung as if from invisible thread.

Her heart was full. Last night had been almost too much magic and wonder for one heart to hold. It hardly seemed real. She never imagined that a life that started such as hers, with parents who once tolerated the sight of her and “friends” who could hardly stand to be near her, could become such a beautiful fairytale. The Queen was the mother every little girl deserves. She doted and laughed and never held back affection. Being part of the royal family was so fun and full of adventure, not at all like the life Katy had imagined in the English palace she had once visited. She breathed in deeply, trying to capture every moment and bottle it in her mind should she ever need it. She had known misery in her life, and she never forgot that it existed.

She dressed and trotted down to the table.

“G-g-g-good morn-n-n-ning, Miss K-K-Katy.” It was Lutwidge. She had met him the first day and had fallen in love with his kind spirit. He was a tall, thin lizard who worked in the palace. He was standing by the table now, with a towel draped over his arm and a chair pulled out for her. She remembered the time when she’d had a particularly long conversation with him. He had patted her hand and told her that the lovely thing about having such trouble talking was that when you found someone who was patient enough to listen, you knew that they truly were a kind soul who cared for you. She had kissed his cheek and told him she was very lucky to have met him.

Katy thanked Lutwidge and took her seat at the table. Her mother was in a very animated conversation with a small rodent similar to a weasel that was standing on the table in front of the Queen’s breakfast. Eisley sat across the table spooning food into her mouth and trying to contain her smile. Katy ate her breakfast while half listening to the weasel-like creature ranting to her mother about the mome raths getting in her garden again. Katy chuckled to herself. Almost before she had a chance to set her fork down, Eisley grabbed her hand. They both kissed their mother’s cheek and ran

out to the courtyard.

~~A strongly built man with wild blond hair stood holding the reins to two beautiful mares: a dappled grey with a silver mane and tail, and a horse as black as Katy's hair, but with a streak of dark red in her mane and tail. She looked harder at the man holding the horses. He smiled, but his eyes registered nothing. She realized that this must be Degrit's father and felt a pang of compassion for him. She had seen him many times before, but felt like she was seeing him for the first time today.~~

Eisley thanked him and took the reins. She turned to Katy.

"This is the first part of my surprise." She gestured to the black and red mare. "She's yours. I have been searching the countryside for the perfect horse for you. Isn't she beautiful? She looks as though she was made for you." Indeed, Katy matched the horse perfectly. Her raven black hair was tied in a long braid that swung behind her, and the dress she had chosen was a simple deep red frock with black lace-up boots. They did seem to be made for each other. Katy walked up cautiously. She let the horse smell her hand and then stroked its silky mane.

"Eisley, she is perfect. How can I thank you?" She nuzzled her face into the horse's mane.

"No need. It's my great pleasure to gift her to you. Her name is Fleetfoot."

Katy chuckled. The events of last night kept rising to her mind. "Are you ready?" She looked over and saw Eisley seated in the saddle, anxious to head out.

Katy stepped into the stirrup and mounted the most beautiful thing she had ever owned. She stroked her mane again.

"Try and keep up!" Eisley galloped out of the courtyard, laughing.

"All right, Fleetfoot, let's see if you can live up to your name." The horse nearly shot out from under her. As though she had understood the challenge, she stayed on Eisley's heels the entire ride.

Eisley pulled back on the reins and stopped just outside of a quaint village Katy was unfamiliar with. She hopped down and tied her horse to a tree. Katy did the same.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"This is Lewisville. And are you ready?" She paused dramatically. "This is where my match lives. And today we are going to begin the wedding preparations." Eisley squealed, grabbed Katy's hand and hopped up and down. Katy joined in the celebrating.

"Eisley, this is so exciting!"

"I know! I am allowed to bring one attendant or friend and I didn't even have to think who I would choose. I was desperate for you to come with me."

Katy knew that seventeen was the marrying age for the royal family. Not that they had to marry at seventeen, but they could. There were not nearly as many rules here about who you could marry as in the Shadowlands. The Queen used to say, "I want you to marry someone you love so much that you spill out and land on anyone who gets close to you." And Katy even heard her once say, "I suppose a stable boy might just make a better king than a prince."

Katy could see that Eisley's love was already beginning to spill over. She felt quite shocked, though she hadn't even known that Eisley was in love. She had noticed that she had been gone quite a long time from the palace lately.

Eisley squeezed her hand. "Come on! I want you to meet him!" She pulled Katy toward the tallest house in town. "This is the courter's house. We have to meet here till we are married."

The courter opened the door before they even reached the steps. Katy nearly stopped in her tracks. The courter was a tall skinny bird with fuzzy feathers and a thick heavy dress draped over her thin frame. She looked so like her mother from the Shadowlands. It was like remembering a dream from long ages ago. Katy felt like a brick had landed in her stomach.

"Come, come. Mustn't linger in the doorway all day." Katy gawked at the spindly bird. "Oh yes, begging your pardon. You must be Miss Katy. I am Ms. Pinkington." Katy shook herself out of her

stupor and curtsied to the bird, then stepped into the house.

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Most of the day was spent with the three of them talking over wedding plans, looking at dresses, tasting different types of cake, and listening to several different singers and poets who hoped to perform at the royal wedding.

Katy felt somehow younger with the memory of her mother uncovered, as though she were eight years old again and incapable of making a decent decision or behaving as she was expected. She was sipping yet another punch flavor when there was a knock at the door. Ms. Pinkington pulled a gold watch from her pocket and tapped it. Katy caught herself wondering if it was a Pennington watch for just a moment.

“Ah, time for Mr. Thade to arrive,” Ms. Pinkington squawked.

Eisley stood and walked toward the door. Ms. Pinkington opened it and there he stood. He was tall with broad shoulders and ginger hair. His eyes were brown and his nose was dotted with freckles. He looked like a man with a boy’s face. Katy instantly saw why Eisley liked him. He smiled easily and laughed as he picked Eisley up in his arms and twirled her around.

“You must be Miss Katy,” he said shifting his gaze toward her. “I’ve heard so much about you. Hair like a raven...amazing.” He ran a strand of her hair between his fingers. “I’m Thaddeus.” He held his hand out to her and forced a smile that Katy found difficult to believe. Katy felt uncomfortable beneath his gaze. Something about the way he looked at her made her feel naked and vulnerable.

\* \* \*

As they rode back home at a much more leisurely pace, Eisley filled Katy in on all the details she had missed.

“Thad works as a builder. He built half of the village practically on his own. I met him when I came to help the village elect their next set of judges.” She sighed deeply. “Oh, Katylove, how did we get to be so lucky?” Her eyes got glassy. “If only Daddy were here. He would be so happy.”

Katy smiled. She thought again of the pocketwatch, the Shadowlands, and the only father she had known, a father that didn’t match the stories and descriptions she had heard over and over since she arrived in Wonderland. The King had been loving, safe, welcoming, and full of laughter. She had once had a father, but never a father’s love.

She had begun to feel a safety in Wonderland that she was thought was unshakable, until today. Too many memories of the Shadowlands, too many emotions. That look Thaddeus had given her — she had felt it before, but not in Wonderland. She was not enough, or too much, or both at the same time somehow.

Katy felt a divide. She was a puzzle piece with stark black hair that wouldn’t quite fit into the picture. She’d thought at first that she had found her place in Wonderland, but now she doubted she would ever fit anywhere.

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## Chapter 7

Katy loved to be near the Queen, even if just to watch her work, which was her assignment today. Waith thought it would be good for her to begin observing some of the Queen's duties.

"Today is being a day when the Queen will hear her subjects in whatever things they have to be heard by her," Waith said. "It should be quite educational." He smiled his toothless smile.

Katy settled herself in a large red velvet chair along the side of the wall with a good view of the Queen on her throne and a good view of the line of subjects waiting to be heard. She tried to push aside her doubts after her visit with Thaddeus. She put all her energy into the present. Waith made the official announcement to the anxious crowd that the Queen was now ready to begin hearing her subjects. He gestured with his tail that the first in line should approach.

A medium-sized griffin took a few steps forward and bowed low. He began to speak. His voice was deep and full like thunder.

"Your Majesty, I am in need of your good judgment. I was recently wandering on my beach and I came across a large egg. It was shaking fiercely, and I stopped to see what type of creature might emerge." He paused for a moment and glanced behind him. "I waited for a time, and as I had thought the egg began to crack. The next thing I saw quite astounded me. I saw what appeared to be a human hand poking through the crack. I know that Your Ladyship is very busy so I shall get to the point. I am now having in my care a set of twins. Boys, bald as dolphins and none too bright. But they are in need of much care. I have been feeding and tending to them as best I could for the last week, but I am not well-suited to the task, and being the guardian of the beach, I have not the time to be their guardian well. They get into a fair bit of mischief." He bowed low again and gestured for the tots to be brought forward. They were but a week old and were already the size of three-year-olds and tottering around on their own. They staggered up next to the griffin. One of them tugged on the griffin's wing and pointed to his open mouth. "No eating now," the griffin whispered. "Your Majesty, may I present De and Dum to you, and may I humbly beg for your wisdom in finding a more suitable home for them. One of the twins reached up and grabbed hold of the other's ear. The other put his finger in the first twin's nose and there they stood in a most ridiculous pose looking toward the Queen.

The Queen chuckled quietly. "Well, Mr. Griffin, first let me say that it was most kind of you to care for these boys as you have. I should like to think this matter over for a bit. If you could step to the side and wait, I will call you up again should the answer present itself." The griffin sighed with relief, bowed again, and stepped to the side. The tots waddled behind him and grabbed at his tail.

The Queen then dealt with a badger who had behaved very honorably and had rescued a young beaver who had fallen into a fassel vine, which is a vine that causes one to age so fast that if you don't get out quick, there may be nothing left of you but a skeleton. He was receiving a medal.

Then the tall bird Katy had met with Eisley, Ms. Pinkington, had some wedding business to discuss with the Queen. Katy felt the knot in her stomach again at the mention of the wedding. She stared down at her hands until Ms. Pinkington waddled off. After that, a peculiar round woman with rosy cheeks approached the throne.

"Your Ladyship," she spoke quickly and seemingly without breath. "I am quite honored to be here. I, I have need of something, although I am not altogether certain what it is that I am in need of. I feel

have come here before, but I'm not sure if that is just one of my silly imaginings. Do you know that I have ~~thirty-seven dreams every night? Sometimes I get very confused about if I am awake or asleep.~~ Is it quite wrong to have so many dreams? I want to do a great many things, but I just don't know how to get started. Sometimes I put on my shoes and coat to go and do one of those things, and when I am half way down the lane I wonder what I shall have for dinner, and then I find myself in the kitchen again cooking up a mince pie." Here she paused for a brief moment, and the Queen jumped in where she could.

"Ms. Tweedle. You have come here before, indeed. Nearly every week we are graced with your presence, and I think this week I have what it is that you are in need of." She looked to the chair along the side. "Mr. Griffin, will you come forward with Dee and Dum?" The griffin herded the twins to the side of the throne. "Ms. Tweedle, I think what you have been in need of is a great purpose, and I happen to have one for you. These two lovely round boys, Dee and Dum, have hatched on the beach and are in need of someone to be their mother. Ms. Tweedle, as your Queen, I have great faith that this is exactly what you are in need of, and they are desperately in need of you. Will you accept this very great responsibility?" Ms. Tweedle didn't need a moment to think. She picked both boys up in an instant and clung to them. They seemed quite content there in her arms.

"Your Majesty, I am so very honored, and I will look after them the very best I can, and I will love them and cook for them." She bowed her head, and the Queen smiled and waved goodbye to the new family.

"Go on and introduce them to their new home," she said.

"Yes ma'am. I'll take them home straight away. Thank you, thank you." As she left the palace, Katy heard the griffin whispering the same thing to the Queen.

\* \* \*

At dinner that night Katy was still mulling over some of the day's proceedings.

"Mother, how do you know that Ms. Tweedle will be a good mother for those boys? She seems quite mad."

The Queen laughed. "Ms. Tweedle is a good woman. She's not mad, just lonely and bored. I suspect this arrangement is just the one they all need. Sometimes making wise decisions is just a matter of following your heart. And, Katylove, that is something you are very good at indeed." The Queen patted her hand. "Just beware, my dear, a heart is a very passionate thing, and if you don't take care of it and learn to love it, you won't be able to love anyone else's, and that could lead to terrible things."

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## Chapter 8

It had been weeks since Katy had even seen a hint of Degrit. Each time she wandered the land with Waith, she would keep a close eye out for any sign of movement. She felt as though she may have imagined that magical night. Did fleets even exist? Had she really shared those lights and those words with that wild-haired boy?

She was determined to find out for herself. She longed to see the colors and lights again. The castle was dark, all the inhabitants long since sleeping. The ground felt cold even through her shoes as she headed into the forest. The air was strange tonight, as though it were vibrating. For a moment, Katy thought of running back into the castle to the safety of her room and those floating hearts, but her determination was stronger than her fear.

She was nearing the meadow and starting to feel a bit more at ease when she heard something rustling in the trees. It surely must be Degrit. She jumped toward the sound to catch him. She landed right in front of a creature she had never seen and Waith had never warned her about. He was shaped a bit like a greyhound she had seen once in the Shadowlands. He had stripes racing from his nose to his tail in blacks and greys. His teeth were as sharp as blades and glistening with drool. She was more disturbed by his eyes. They glowed a deep red and grew even brighter when he spotted her. Two pupils were hiding behind his thin back legs. Katy began to back away with her hands in front of her in a sincere sign of surrender.

“I’m so very sorry,” she began. “I thought you were someone else.” The creature came closer and began to make a deep sound, more of a vibration than a growl as he approached. She was making a plan to turn and run, although feeling very uncertain considering the build of this animal. Surely he would be able to outrun her. She backed through the woods and spun around to flee, but there in front of her were two more of the creatures, their eyes glowing menacingly. Katy began to cry and realized this may well be the end. She mustered the courage to at least attempt to save herself.

There was an opening to her right toward the palace. She bolted suddenly as fast as she could. She ran faster than she ever had. Her lungs burned and tears streaked toward her ears. She could hear the creatures behind her, gaining on her. She looked back and saw red eyes — how many she couldn’t be sure. She turned on as much speed as she could, but alas, her lack of vision was her downfall. In the darkness she couldn’t see a rather large tree branch hanging at such a low height as to strike her just across the face. By the time she spotted it there was no way to avoid it.

The next thing she remembered was fire and a loud shout. Green eyes. Blond hair. Trees overhead.

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Katy woke up in her bed with her mother sitting beside her, dabbing her face with a damp cloth. She was disoriented and confused.

“What happened?” she asked. Her mother’s eyes teared up as she heard Katy speak.

“Oh, dearest, thank goodness you’re all right. The healer was unsure.” She sighed deeply. “You were attacked by billdralls,” she said.

“Billdralls?” Katy asked.

“They only come out twice a year. The rest of the time they live underground. They come out to breed and to introduce their young. Those are very dangerous nights to be out. Could you feel the vibrations?” Katy furrowed her brow and thought hard.

“Um...I remember putting on my coat....yes. Yes. I do remember the vibrations. I almost ran home when I felt them.” It was painful to talk and she winced from the effort.

“If you are ever out at night and feel them again, you must run home immediately. Do you understand?”

Katy nodded. “I’m so sorry, mother. I shouldn’t have gone out on my own.” She tried to sit up, but found herself too weak. “How did I escape? I remember running, but I don’t remember much after that.”

“Thankfully, Degrit practically lives in the forest. He was staying high in the trees last night. He could feel that it was a night that the billdralls would be out. He heard them giving chase and ran through the tops of the trees to see what was going on. He saw you just as you hit the tree. He was in a flame tree.” Katy had learned about flame trees from Waith. The wood from a flame tree would catch fire when you hit it hard with another flame stick. “He jumped down from the trees with flame sticks lit and scared off all the billdralls. Then he carried you home. We begged him to stay and eat and rest but he rushed off. We shall forever be in his debt.”

“Yes,” Katy agreed.

“Tell me, Katylove, what is it you were doing in the forest at night?”

“I was looking for fleets,” she said.

The Queen laughed a loud laugh full of relief and exhaustion. “Oh my dear, we shall fill the palace with fleets if that is what you wish. Just please don’t put your life in danger again to search for insects. Just tell me what you desire next time and I shall arrange it for you.”

“Mother? What would you think about Degrit teaching me about the forest?” she asked. “I was just thinking that Degrit knows more about the forest than anyone. And...well...maybe he could take over my outdoor studies. He can teach me all I need to know. And Waith could still teach me all of the things I need to learn in the palace.”

“I think that is a fine idea,” the Queen said. “We shall discuss it with Waith and Degrit right away.”

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