

Hana and the Wishing Tree

by

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## Abstract

Life as a wingless faerie isn't easy—especially in the town of Smallhollow, where Hana is picked on by her classmates simply because she is different. Determined to stay as far away from school as possible, Hana ventures deep into the forest beyond the mushroom border and discovers the location of the Wishing Tree—a legendary creature with the magical ability to grant even the most impossible of wishes. Hana convinces the Tree's guardian to let her inside, but events do not go as planned, and she soon finds herself in conflict with her own severed shadow. In order to prevent her vengeful double from wreaking havoc on the creatures of Smallhollow, Hana must come to terms with her life's experience in a way that she has never done before—a process that involves learning to embrace her bodily difference as much as it does her shadow. Inspired by the author's own lived experience with bullying related to hair loss, the story is both honest and heartfelt in its portrayal of how lonely it can feel to be different; but just like Hana learns on her adventure, there is healing to be found in the power of self-acceptance, and it starts with owning your story.

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*For my grandmother and namesake, Grace Gillespie.  
May this story bring healing to both of us.  
I love you with all my heart.*

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I

I guess I'll start at the beginning, the way all good faerie tales should start.

Once upon a time there was a lonely little faerie who lost her wings and would do anything to get them back. She lived in a place called Smallhollow, a tiny town for tiny folk, where life played out in miniature. Have you heard of it? I doubt it. It's rare to find a human being who takes interest in the comings-and-goings of small creatures of the world, though in truth our lives are not so very different from your own. It's a big world out there for all of us, and whether human or Fae, large or small, most of us are just trying to find some place within it where we belong. For many, Smallhollow was exactly this sort of place. Not just home, but haven—a place of refuge amid the hustle and bustle of the wearisome world-at-large where it was said that no creature, no matter who they were or where they came from, would ever find themselves unwanted or unwelcome.

But that sentiment, like most of what is said about Smallhollow, is nothing more than a big steaming pile of crap. With flies around it. And maybe some gnats, too...

Ha, okay, sorry—that was pretty gross, wasn't it? (And probably not very faerie-like, either.) But believe me: it's the truth. It might sound like a warm and welcoming place on the surface, but underneath the bold colours and striking scenery, underneath the air of mirth and whimsy, Smallhollow is as rotten as a worm infested log, and whether you see it or not depends solely on your perspective.

It's not an insider-outsider kind of thing, trust me. I've lived here all my life and can assure you that I am as much an outsider here as you are. Why...? Because if you haven't caught on yet (and I won't blame you if you haven't) that lonely little wingless faerie—you know, the desperate one?—yeah, that's me, and I know from experience that Smallhollow is no haven for those unlucky enough to stand out from the rest.

Mine was a failed metamorphosis, you see, though nobody knew it at the time. Like all faerie children, I wove myself a chrysalis at age eleven and began the most important event of my life as a faerie: my metamorphosis—the transformation from wingless to wingèd that would mark my successful transition from childhood to adolescence and change my little faerie life forever.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. Queuing up outside the Temple of Dreams and waiting for the ceremony to begin. Buzzing with anticipation. *What colour would my wings be?* I wondered. *What shape? What size?* Giddy with yearning and itching for freedom, I sealed myself away inside my chrysalis and dreamt of flying high above the treetops.

Fourteen days later, I emerged from my chrysalis with a pair of beautiful monarch wings—orange like the sunset!—and couldn't believe my own good fortune. They were so vibrant, so beautiful, and best of all, they were *mine*. Hanging there suspended from the empty shell of my chrysalis as I waited for them to dry, I remember thinking to myself, through the calm serenity of rebirth: *this is the happiest moment of my life*. I couldn't wait to put my new wings to the test. What would it feel like to fly? As a child, I could only imagine; now, I could finally find out for myself.

Once our wings had dried, my friends and I took to the skies as one, clumsily maneuvering our new wings to take us way up above the treetops, much higher than any of us had ever been before. The sight was breathtaking—an undulating sea of green beneath a vast, cloudless sky—

but even more so was the sense of freedom that accompanied it. With my new wings, I could go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and no one would be able to stop me. The world was large and dangerous, yes, but also beautiful and strange and full of potential. What did it have in store for little ol' me? At the time, the possibilities felt infinite, and mine for the taking. A child no longer, I tore through the skies with reckless abandon, confident that life—with all of its beauty, its strangeness, and its infinite possibilities—could only get better from there.

I was right about one thing: life *is* strange.

As for the rest of it? Well.

How very wrong I was.

It started with the left wing, first—a single, teeny-tiny little hole no bigger than the point-end of a pine needle that I only noticed because a friend at school had pointed it out. “Oh,” I remember saying. “That’s weird. Must have poked it on a stick or something.” It really wasn’t uncommon for stuff like that to happen, especially with young faeries like me who were just learning how to fly. “Don’t worry about it,” said my mother, kneeling down to help me patch the hole with a scrap of spider-silk like she did each morning before sending me off to school. And so I didn’t. It was only a tiny hole, after all. What was there to worry about?

Well, turns out there was a lot to worry about, actually, because eventually that tiny hole started to grow, started to multiply and connect, and I was forced to watch as my beautiful monarch wings slowly started to wither and die, disintegrating and crumbling away a little bit more each day until they were gone completely, and there was nothing left behind me but my own useless shadow.

I didn’t—*couldn’t*—understand why it had to be me. Of all the faeries I knew, why did this have to happen to *me*? I couldn’t wrap my head around it. *What did I do to deserve this?* I

wondered, night after night as I laid my head down and cried myself to sleep. *What did I do wrong?*

These were the same questions I began to ask myself at school, where the loss of my wings had become a public spectacle so enthralling that even my own friends couldn't help but watch, eager as any to participate in my social execution so long as it kept me on the scaffold and not them.

I couldn't really blame them. I was an outcast, a freak, and any association with me was dangerous. My classmate Lyari made sure of that when she took it upon herself to spread the nasty little rumour that I wasn't just sick, but also *contagious*, and that anyone who got too close to me would be next to lose their wings, so they had better stay far away.

It wasn't true, of course, but it worked better than if it had been. My classmates began avoiding me like a particularly vibrant swath of poison ivy (at least when they weren't busy staring at me, or laughing at me, or talking about me behind my back) and so I began avoiding them, too, taking every opportunity I could to skip school, if only to avoid the exhaustion of it all, let alone the misery.

The questions.

*Does it hurt? What's wrong with you?*

The gossip.

*She's sick. Contagious. Stay away from her, or you'll be next.*

The humiliation.

*I'm so glad it's her and not me. I'd rather die than live like that.*

And especially the cruelty.

*Freak. Ugly. Larva.*

You can only hear something so many times before you start to believe it for yourself, and when it came to my freakishness—to the fact that I was ugly, and abnormal, and unwanted by my peers—there were those who just couldn't help but provide me with daily reminders even long after I had stopped needing them. I'll never forget, for example, the day that three older male faeries that I had never even met before snuck up behind me and pushed me out of a tree, nor the time that a group of them chased me around Pine Cone Park while screeching the words to "Little Larva"—a jaunty tune about the misfortunes of yours truly that everyone seemed to have memorized the moment it had earned its first snicker—as I cried and ran away, begging for them to stop.

Eventually it got so bad that, for a while there, I didn't bother getting out of bed at all anymore, choosing instead to stay home and sleep the days away rather than face another second of the torment and ridicule that always awaited me at school. Sleeping was safe, and it brought me more hope than consciousness did. *Maybe they'll grow back*, I thought, tossing and turning beneath the sheets. *Maybe the healers will find a cure*.

But 'maybe' never came, and no matter how long I slept, or how much time went by, it seemed like I was never any closer to waking up from the nightmare that had become my life, and it wasn't long before I started to wonder if there was any point in hoping I would wake up again at all.

So yeah. There it is. I won't bore you with the rest, cause it really is a miserable story, and one I'm not too fond of reliving besides. Plus, my point in telling you all of this isn't to garner sympathy (believe me, I don't want it) but rather to provide context for the *real* story, the one I know you're really waiting for: the story of how I found the Wishing Tree, and all of the trouble that came of it.

I don't ask that you believe me (for sometimes, thinking back on it, I wonder if I even believe it all myself), only that you stay a while and listen anyway, because strange and unbelievable as this story may well be, it's *my* story, and finally, here at the end of it all, I'm ready to tell it. All I need is someone to hear it, and I promise that if you manage to stick around until the very end, I'll stay a while longer and listen to your story, too.

Ok?

Cool.

Here it goes.

## II

I suppose the first thing you should know is that I found the Wishing Tree completely by accident. I had skipped class, like usual, to spend the afternoon wandering the woods alone instead. It always took me a while to make my way out there by foot, but it was always worth it, because out in the woods, far away from the hustle and bustle of Smallhollow, I was granted the greatest gift a faerie like me could ever ask for: the opportunity to be ugly in peace. No staring, no questions, no taunts—just blissful, uninterrupted solitude where at least I could be myself without worrying about offending anyone's delicate sensibilities with my presence.

It might sound kind of lonely (and I admit that sometimes it was) but it really wasn't so bad. I loved adventuring through the woods on my own because even with my limitations, there were always new places to explore and new experiences to be had, as long as I was ready and willing to seek them out. All it took was a little bit of imagination and a curious eye, and I was well-equipped with both.

That's how I found the Wishing Tree. Like I said, it happened by accident. Other than the

oppressive heat of late summer, it wasn't even a particularly special day or anything like that. I was just farting around, following a wayward will-o'-the-wisp through a large, hollowed-out log, when suddenly, upon stumbling out the other side, I realized that somehow I had become quite lost.

I found myself in an area of the woods that I had never been before—a small clearing with a rocky little pond at its centre—which, under normal circumstances, usually wouldn't be so strange a situation to find myself in. It was easy to get lost out in the woods, especially when one is forced to trudge along amid the winding roots and thorny brambles by foot rather than soar through the great expanse of vines and branches above, and there were many hidden places that I still had yet to explore.

No, what was strange about that place was the silence—the distinct *lack* of sound that somehow seemed to weigh heavier than even the muggy air around me. Growing up in an enchanted forest, I had become so used to the piercing whistle of birdsongs and the droning buzz of insect wings that the sudden absence of these sounds struck me as particularly unnerving, especially in contrast to the accelerating thump of my own heartbeat throbbing away in my ears.

But as it so often does, curiosity soon prevailed, and I found myself drifting out from the shady trees and into the harsh light of the clearing before me, gaze focused on the mysterious little pond at its centre.

The pond itself wasn't much to look at. To someone of larger stature, it wouldn't even have qualified as a pond so much as a large puddle, but since it was plenty large enough for a little faerie like me, I sat myself down beside it, scooted forward, and submerged my aching feet. The relief was instantaneous—the water being surprisingly cool despite the sunlight beating down upon it—and I felt my entire body relax in response. For the briefest moment, seated there along

the pond's edge kicking lazy circles in the water with my feet, even my troubles seemed to vanish, washed away to the bottom of the pond along with the rest of the dirt and grime I'd gathered on my morning trek.

Little did I know that the real trouble had yet to begin.

“Out for a little dip, are we?” said a voice.

Startled, I raised my head to see that I was being addressed by the lumpiest old toad I had ever seen, seated on a nearby lily pad out in the middle of the pond. He had appeared as if out of nowhere, and I wondered just how badly the summer heat had scrambled my brain.

“First you wash your feet, then what? Your armpits? The nerve...the audacity! I ought to smite your ruin upon these very pebbles for such insolence.” The toad, who was really not much bigger than I was, leaned his head back and puffed up his chest, then deflated just as quickly. “Luckily for you, I'm feeling rather magnanimous today, so I'll start you off with a warning: remove your feet from the water at once or prepare to suffer the consequences.”

I didn't know what to say. All I could do was sit there, brow furrowed in disbelief as I wondered who exactly this blustering old toad thought he was.

“*Ahem...*?” He gave a pointed look towards my dangling feet, and I hastily drew them up and out of the water in response before scrambling up to standing.

“Very good,” he said, nodding. “Thank you. You're forgiven.”

My laugh came out as a snort. “Right. And who made you guardian of the forest, huh?”

“Who made you a faerie?”

“I don't know.”

“Exactly,” he replied, as if it couldn't have been more obvious. “No one made me a guardian, it's just who I am. The naughty creatures of this forest do *so* love to cause trouble—the bad kind,

you know? With a capital-T?—and it’s my duty to ensure that they get away with as little of it as possible.”

“Wow,” I replied. “I thought all that stuff was made up, but...” I raised my brows in mock affirmation. “That does sound pretty legit.”

“It is at that.”

“And are all guardians as bossy as you are?”

He paused to consider the question. “If there were any other guardians left, they would be.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I pushed my discomfort aside and gestured to the water: “So what’s so special about this stupid little puddle, then?”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. “Puddle—!” The toad blustered through a few muttered sounds of indignation before collecting himself once more. “You wouldn’t dare say such a thing if you knew...”

“Knew what?”

He turned his gaze towards the water. “Step forward and see for yourself,” he said, and something about the look of reverence on his toad-face as he said it had me soon doing just that. I walked towards the water’s edge and, unsure of what exactly I was supposed to be looking for, crouched down low in front of it and waited for something to happen.

At first, all I could see was my own reflection, and I couldn’t help but cringe at the sight of it. But then the image started to change, rippling outward from the middle as if disturbed by a single invisible finger, and when it stilled again, somehow, impossibly, there they were: my beautiful monarch wings, fluttering playfully in some nonexistent breeze behind my back.

The sound I made was something between a gasp and sob as I struggled to make sense out of what I was seeing. I could have dropped to my knees and wept, could have cried out with joy,

but my trembling limbs simply wouldn't respond to me. All I could do was stare, blinking away each hot tear that threatened to cloud my vision.

I don't remember exactly how long I stood there, but I do remember that it was only with extreme difficulty that I finally managed to tear my gaze away from the water long enough to look back over my shoulder and confirm what I had so far not allowed myself to consider: the possibility that it had all just been a lie, and I had been stupid enough to fall for it. My wings were still gone, and whatever I had just seen in the water had been nothing more than a nasty trick.

"You think that's funny?" I spat, colour rising to my cheeks.

"Funny?" The toad frowned. "No, I don't think it's funny at all."

"Why else would you play such a cruel trick on me?"

"It's no trick. The Tree is merely showing you that which your heart most desires."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why—the Wishing Tree, of course," he said, a mischievous twinkle in his inky black eyes.

"Haven't you heard of it?"

Had I heard of it? I doubted there was a single creature in the entirety of this forest that hadn't heard the legend of the Wishing Tree at one point or another. Of all the stories my mother ever told me, those that involved the Wishing Tree had always been my favourites. I used to spend hours imagining myself as the hero of such stories, lost in a fantasy world where my bravery and perseverance would earn me the wish that would get me my wings back. I had long since grown out of such foolishness, of course, but even so I couldn't seem to help myself from blurting out: "The Wishing Tree is real?"

"Oh yes," he replied, lowering his voice a fraction as if to infuse his words with as much

gravitas as possible, “it most certainly is, and *I*,” he puffed himself up, “am its appointed guardian.”

I closed my gaping mouth with a snap. “I don’t believe you.”

“Oh?” The toad reached down to touch the surface of the water with one little hand. “How about now?”

Whatever he had done, the effect was instantaneous; where before I had looked down to see my own reflection in the water’s surface, I now looked down into another world entirely—a night-world with a sky the colour of amethysts, stars twinkling as far as the eye could see, and a full moon whose pale, ominous glow shone down upon a single, barren tree.

The toad sighed. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

It was at that. “But where am I looking? What is this place?”

“It has many names, though given the limitations of your language, I suppose ‘Elsewhere’ shall suffice.”

*Elsewhere.* “I see. So what do I have to do?”

“Do...?”

“To get my wish.”

“Ah,” he said, rubbing his sticky little hands together. “No wishes right now, I’m afraid. You’ll have to come back some other time and try again.”

“No wishes?” I repeated. “Why?”

He didn’t respond right away, and by the way his eyes narrowed in concentration, I figured he was struggling to find the right words. “The Wishing Tree is...*contaminated*...” he managed at last, sneering as if the very word itself was vulgar and unworthy of being uttered in this sacred place.

*Contaminated?* I tossed the word around in my mind, trying to make sense of it. “You mean the Tree is sick?”

“I suppose you could say that,” replied the toad. “Either way, I’m not letting anyone close to it until the contamination has been dealt with, so you’ll just have to come back some other time, alright?”

“Alright,” I said, though there was nothing ‘alright’ about it. “How long will I have to wait?”

“Who knows?” was his only response.

I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or not. “As the Tree’s guardian...shouldn’t *you* know?”

“Well, yes,” he stammered, “you would think that, wouldn’t you? But I can’t possibly guard the pond and deal with the contaminant at the same time—there’s only one of me, after all, and—”

“You don’t know how to cure it, do you?” It was a guess, but one that seemed to have hit the mark, for he didn’t even try to deny it. The toad simply nodded once, confirming the truth of my accusation.

“I’ve never felt anything like it before...” he admitted, quietly now that we had arrived at the truth of the matter. “I don’t know what to do.”

The words left my mouth before I had the chance to think twice. “Let me help you.”

“Help me?” replied the toad. “Very kind of you, really, but—”

“Never mind,” I said. “You don’t have to say it. I’m already well-aware of my shortcomings, thanks.”

“Hm?” For once, it was the toad who seemed to have been caught off guard. He looked me over with a curious expression on his toad-face, as though he were only now seeing me properly for the first time, and it was hard not to flinch when I noticed his eyes lingering on the empty

space where my wings should have been.

“Ah,” he said at last. “You know, I hadn’t even noticed.”

I scoffed. *Liar*. “Then why won’t you let me help you? Give me a chance!”

The toad shook his head, his mouth a hard line. “Absolutely not.”

“Please?”

The word had come out in a small whimper, and though I cringed to hear it, pathetic as it sounded, it seemed to have done something to soften the old toad. He tilted his head to the side, considering me anew, and though it took every drop of bravado I possessed, somehow, I managed not to look away.

“I suppose...” He sighed. “Oh, very well.”

I released my held breath and broke into a grin. “I won’t let you down—promise!”

The toad didn’t seem too terribly convinced. If anything, he seemed more wary than he had been before. “Promise me instead to be cautious,” he said. “I cannot tell you what to expect, for though it pains me to say it, in truth I do not know. This world is full of old, nasty magics, remnants left over from the Chaos of its origin, but *this...*” he shook his head, “this is something else entirely. It hides from me, the tricky thing, and I cannot seem to draw it out for the life of me.” He paused, then looked down towards the pond and released another sigh. “Perhaps you’ll notice something in there that I’ve missed...”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. Having spent the entirety of my life within these woods, I knew very little about the wider world, let alone its ancient magics. But I wasn’t about to tell him that. This was my chance—my one and only, as far as I knew—and I wouldn’t waste it. “Don’t worry about me,” I said, placing my hands on my hips. “I’ll be careful.”

“Please do,” he replied. “And take this.” He tossed a small spider-silk sac my way, and I

caught it out of the air with two hands. “Magic powder,” he explained. “Just in case. But don’t go sprinkling it about all willy-nilly, now, and don’t even *think* about getting it in your mouth. That’s rare stuff, that—from the Goblin market, you know—and quite toxic. Remove the tie only when you are ready to use it, then throw it as hard as you can and *don’t miss.*”

“Right,” I said, nodding as I tucked the scary little sac carefully into the pocket of my tunic. Then, after thinking about it some more, I frowned and added, “But where were you keeping it...?” It was like he had pulled the thing out of thin air.

He shoed the question away with a wave of his hand. “Don’t you worry about that. Just answer me this: are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” I replied, surprising even myself with how truthful the word felt. No matter what it took, I was going to get my wish. “I’m ready.”

Still, there was one piece to this puzzle that I had yet to put in place. “How do I get to it?” I gestured to the twilight world in the water before me. “I can’t swim.”

“No matter,” replied the toad. “You won’t need to. All you need to do is jump in. Feet first, head first—it matters not. Once you’re in, you’ll understand...”

“How cryptic,” I drawled, though I nodded even so. I took a deep breath to calm myself, shivering despite the blazing sun rising to its zenith in the blue sky above us, and stepped up onto the rocks that spread out along the pond’s edge. I gazed down into the amethyst sea of stars at my feet and felt my knees begin to quake.

“Don’t be afraid,” said the toad. “The hardest part is jumping in. After that, all you need to do is kick your feet and you’ll be just fine.”

“Alright,” I said, readying myself along the edge. *Here goes nothing...*

“Wait!”

I released my held breath and looked back up at the toad, still perched there on his lily-pad in the middle of the pond. “What is it?”

“Why—I never asked your name.”

“Hana,” I said. “And yours?”

“Onopandolaimonox.”

I blinked. “Could you repeat that?”

“O-NO-PAND—oh never mind,” he sighed. “Just call me Nox.”

“Nox,” I repeated. “Great name.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “Now.” He brought my attention back to the water with a smack of his hands. “Off you go, little Hana of the Fae. I’ll be waiting right here for your return.”

I nodded once in farewell before launching myself into a plunge. The water was ice-cold—much colder than it had been when it was just my feet—and completely clouded. I couldn’t see anything around me, and it was all I could do to hold my breath and try not to drown as I flailed and kicked and thrashed about, waiting for something to happen.

And that’s when I fell. There’s no sensical way to describe it; one moment I was drowning, and the next I was falling. I must have screamed, but I don’t quite remember. All I remember now is the fear, bone-deep and absolute, as I plummeted downwards into darkness.

### III

I woke up with a clod of dirt in my mouth, facedown against the forest floor with limbs sprawled all akimbo. My mind was dense and foggy, and all I wanted to do was roll over and drift back to sleep. But even amid the drowsiness, I couldn’t ignore the sense of urgency gnawing its way back into my consciousness as my mind struggled to gather the loose strands of

my recent memory. I remembered falling, terrified and confused and alone, twisting and turning and losing all sense of direction as I plummeted through the deepening darkness and into the vast unknown below me...

Or was it above me?

*“Feet first, head first—it matters not. Once you’re in, you’ll understand.”*

And just like that the strands started to fall into place, one absurd image weaving itself into the next.

Pond. Toad. Tree.

*Could it be...?*

I opened my eyes and saw the moon looking back at me, full and round and beautiful against a twinkling, amethyst sky, then sat up, noticed the mottled deadwood enclosing the dim, quiet space around me, and tried not to panic as it dawned on me that I wasn’t on the forest floor at all, but rather tucked away inside the time-worn hollow of a massive, ancient tree.

There were objects strewn about the place—tiny treasures long-abandoned, visible in the white moonlight that shone in through the single, large opening that served as the hollow’s entrance: acorns and pine cones, dried-up mushrooms and glimmering gemstones, a stick dotted with pussywillows.

*Not abandoned*, I realized, the final strand falling into place.

These were gifts. Little offerings.

And I was *inside* the Wishing Tree!

I hoisted myself up to standing and, with a nervous glance towards my own empty hands, stood there awkwardly for a few moments more before finally mustering up enough courage to send a tentative “Hello?” into the treasure-strewn darkness around me.

A heartbeat later, I had my reply. *“Hello. Who are you?”*

The voice was low and sonorous, like the slow rumble of distant thunder, and it commanded my attention entirely. I might have bolted right then and there, had there been anywhere obvious for me to run to, but it only took one glance at the night sky outside the hollow’s entrance for me to realize that there would be no escaping this place without wings to carry me, so I swallowed my fear and stood up a little bit straighter before finally addressing the Wishing Tree. “My name is Hana,” I said, not quite knowing where to look as I did so. “I—I’m here to help you.”

*“Is that so?”* replied the Tree.

I nodded, then frowned, wondering if it could even see me without eyes. “Yes,” I tried instead. “The toad sent me. You know. Olo...er...Ono...”

*“Onopandolaimonox?”*

I sighed in relief. “That’s the one.”

*“I see. And what exactly has Onopandolaimonox sent you here to help me with?”*

I paused, noticing the Tree’s laboured, raspy breathing for the first time since awakening. “You’re sick,” I replied. “I want to help you get better.”

A pause. Then, *“You cannot help me.”*

“Why?”

*“Because it would require a great sacrifice on your part, and I cannot ask that of you.”*

I swallowed. “What do you need?”

*“Do not ask if you are too afraid to know the answer.”*

“I’m not afraid,” I insisted. “I want to know.”

*“Very well,”* it replied. *“A riddle, then: I come in many shapes and sizes, from towering to slight; you can chase, but never catch me, and I disappear at night. What am I?”*

I didn't have to look far for the answer; I found it right in front of me, smooth and silent in the moonlight. "My shadow?"

The Tree chuckled. "*Very good, little one. You are correct.*"

I looked down and considered the stretch of darkness at my feet. "What do you need my shadow for?"

The Tree paused, considering. "*Medicine,*" it replied eventually. "*To cure what ails me.*" I was about to reply with another question, but the Tree cut me off before I had the chance to do so. "*You would be fairly compensated, of course. Help me to recover my strength, and I shall grant you a wish in return.*"

"A wish?" The image of my winged reflection—whole and right and beautiful—flashed across my mind's eye and I had to bite my tongue just to stop myself from agreeing right then and there on the spot. *Breathe*, I told myself. *Think*. "But what will happen to me without my shadow?"

"*My dear,*" chided the Tree. "*When was the last time you even thought about it?*"

I looked down at my shadow again and sighed, knowing that the Tree had made a fair point. What did a shadow even do, anyway? I had no idea. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right here, and I was starting to realize why. "This isn't how the story is supposed to go."

"*Oh? And why is that?*"

"Because every story I've ever heard about you has emphasized that the hero must *earn* their wish, not barter away for it like some trinket at the market..." I shrugged. "This just seems too easy."

"*Easy?*" repeated the Tree. "*No. To lose a part of oneself is never easy, though I suppose I do*

*not need to tell you that, do I?"*

I stiffened. "No. You don't."

*"Then you should understand that there is nothing 'easy' about the decision I have set before you. I am dying, faeling, and you have the power to save me. Choosing to do so even when it so frightens you is as brave and selfless a deed as any, and just as worthy of reward. Give to me your shadow, and you will have more than earned your wish in return."*

"And I can wish for anything?"

*"Anything. There are no limits to my power."*

"Even my wings?" I whispered.

And even though I couldn't see its face—if it even had a face—I could have sworn the Tree grinned in response. *"Of course."*

I opened my mouth, ready to respond, then closed it just as quickly.

"Well?" it prompted. *"Do we have a deal?"*

"No. I mean—maybe—but..." I wilted. "This doesn't feel right. You're not well, and I can't—"

*"Then there is nothing more for us to discuss,"* the Tree interrupted, its barren branches creaking in the night-wind outside. *"You say this isn't how the story is supposed to go? Very well—then write another. This is your story, little Hana of the Fae, and only you can take control of it. Either accept my bargain, or leave this place and never return. The choice is yours to make."*

Choice.

For once in my miserable life, I had a choice—a risky one, maybe, but still a *choice* nonetheless. To say that I was tempted by the Wishing Tree's offer would be an understatement

verging on dishonesty. How can I explain...? To be offered a choice over the course of my future when all my life I had felt so powerless...

The memories erupted from deep within me, spilling to the surface in thick slops that threatened to knock me off balance and sweep me away: sitting with my mother as she tried to patch up my withering wings, stewing in my own misery and wishing I was anyone but myself... Being dragged from one healer to the next as they poked and prodded me, looking for answers and then giving up once they realized that there were none, and never will be... Being goaded into climbing much higher than I should've done, then falling to the sound of laughter, high-pitched and dripping with cruelty, as it followed me all the way down to the ground, and all the way home after that...

Choice?

I didn't know a thing about it.

But I wanted to.

And so I made one. "Give me my wings back," I said, "and you can have my shadow."

"*Done,*" the Tree replied.

And then, without a moment of hesitation, it began to take my shadow.

It didn't hurt, exactly, but it wasn't pleasant, either. The darkness seemed to swell and thicken as it accumulated my feet, and when I tried to move, my limbs simply wouldn't respond to me—they were too heavy, and I didn't have the strength to lift them. Even my eyelids felt heavy, and I had to struggle to keep them open, not because my eyes were of much use in that moment, but because I was terrified of what might happen if I fell asleep. Even so, I must have closed my eyes at some point, for when I did manage to peel them open again, I was shocked to find another faerie staring back at me.

A faerie that looked exactly like me.

*My shadow*, I figured—for who else could she be? She had my same round face, my same crop of mousy brown hair, even—I noticed with mild irritation—my signature lack of wings. Only the eyes were different—not green like mine, but all-black and depthless—and I shuddered to meet them with my own. It was difficult enough for me to contend with my own reflection on the best of days, and now here I was face-to-face with it in the flesh. Was that *really* what I looked like? Was *that* what everyone saw? The image itself was familiar enough, but the sense of recognition I felt upon seeing it was entirely new to me. Here was a reflection I couldn't turn away from, couldn't reject; she stood there before me like some evil twin, and I had no choice but to accept her for what she was: *me*, as others saw me. Strange and pitiful. Sad and sickly. A blemish on the famed grace and beauty of the Fae.

Mind reeling, I turned to look back over my shoulder, desperate to confirm that—whatever was happening—it was worth it, because now, spanning outwards from my back, I had—

Nothing.

No wish. No wings. Just me and my boon companions: nothingness, lack, and empty space.

I turned back to face my double and frowned when I noticed that she was holding herself and shaking. “Hey,” I said, but she didn't respond; she was shaking more violently now, almost vibrating, and I took a reflexive step forward to check on her. “Hey,” I repeated, extending a hand. “Are you—”

My shadow snapped to attention and grinned at me, arms still wrapped in a hug around her torso. I tore my hand away and fell to the floor, scuttling backwards like a crab. She looked down on me with hard, pitiless eyes as the shaking that I now recognized as laughter petered out to a dry snicker on her lips.

“Shadow...?” I ventured.

“Not quite,” she—*it?*—replied with a smirk.

Dread sluiced through my belly when our eyes met, and I had to struggle not to look away as I demanded: “What have you done to the Tree?”

“This smelly old thing? Nothing. It was like this when I got here.”

*Got here...?* I swallowed. *But then—*

“It didn’t even put up a fight,” the imposter continued. “Can you believe it? I slithered right on in through the cracks and took over, just like I did with your shadow.”

“You...what?”

“I really can’t thank you enough,” it added, ignoring my question completely. “I mean—what a gift! No more creaking, no more cobwebs, no more roots...” The creature inside my shadow looked down at its new toes and grinned when they started to waggle. “Oh yeah. That’s the stuff. What else can this thing do?”

“This is absurd,” I said, cringing as I watched it lower into a squat. “Give me my shadow back!”

It crossed its arms protectively around its middle. “Not a chance. This is mine now. You gave it to me.”

“No I didn’t!” I shrieked. “We *traded* for it, remember? You owe me a wish!”

“Riiight. About that...” It scratched at an itch before shrugging in response. “I actually don’t have that kind of power, sorry. Tree’s all yours, though—be my guest. Maybe you can squeeze a wish out before it dies.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said,” it replied, brows bunching together in a mockery of concern. “What

kind of puppeteer would I be if I couldn't remember my own lines?"

"Puppeteer?" I repeated. "Is that what you are?" I thought about the various slapstick comedies I had seen performed in my youth and shivered as I imagined this...*thing*...pulling on the strings.

"That's one word for it." The creature shrugged. "Anyway—I'm outta here. It's time to put this puppy to the test!"

I wanted to scream—wanted to lunge at the thing and claw its freaky black eyes right out of its stolen body—but before I managed any of that, I remembered the magic powder, and, knowing that I had better act fast, grabbed the bag from my pocket, yanked it open, and threw it at the nightmarish double in front of me with all my might, hitting it right smack in the chest where it burst open into a noxious cloud of sparkling pink dust.

The effect was instantaneous. The creature doubled over as if it had been punched in the gut, each violent, wracking cough more desperate than the last as it began clawing at its own throat with frantic, shaking fingers. There was a trickle of black blood running from its nose when it lifted its head to look at me, and its eyes were wide and watery. It opened its mouth as if to curse at me, but the only sound that escaped was a gag.

Unfortunately for me, this only seemed to enrage the creature further. It made a lunge for me, but the movement was so wild and graceless that even a mountain could have dodged it, and so I managed to avoid it with little more than a quick-footed hop to the side. Riding the momentum of its fumble, the creature fell to its hands and knees with a strangled hiss before expelling its guts on the floor. Part of me wanted to run over and give the thing a little kick while it was down, but I knew better than to waste such an opportunity on petty revenge. Instead, I used the time to put as much distance between us as possible, scuttling off into the darkness of the

hollow's periphery to search for somewhere to hide.

I could still hear it retching in the distance, but the sound was choked and empty now, as if it had already puked up every rotten, noxious morsel that had been inside of it and had nothing left to purge. I didn't dare celebrate my victory yet, but I allowed myself to pause behind a pile of dried-up mushrooms and breathe just the same. *Good riddance*, I thought, fingers clenching into fists at my side. *I hope it hurts you nasty—*

“Hello?” said a voice—a small, timid voice that rang clear as a bell in the distance. “Is anyone there? Please,”—it coughed—“help me!”

I didn't know what to do. Of course it was a trick—that much was obvious—but how...? Just moments ago the thing had been too choked up to curse me out, and now here it was blabbing away again with ease. It sounded tired, sure, but also wounded and deeply afraid...

*Acting*, I reminded myself. *Another trick*. But the success of the powder had emboldened me, and I was sick of playing around. I rallied myself with a few fiery breaths before storming out from my hiding place to confront the creature and put an end this stupid game once and for all.

“Listen here you lying—!”

The insult fizzled away to nothing as I stared into the eyes of the figure before me: not all-black and depthless as before, but green now—bright and clear. The body was still a replica of my own—an eerie, near-perfect twin—but the eyes that stared out from that body were completely different, and something about the way they had narrowed in recognition when I revealed myself gave me an idea for why. “Shadow?” I whispered. “Is that...you?”

Ever so slowly, she nodded once in confirmation.

“...just you?”

Another terse nod.

“No tricks this time?”

She stared back at me with naked aversion, but responded to my question just the same. “No tricks.”

My body went limp with relief. “Thank goodness,” I breathed. “I thought that maybe...oh never mind. It’s gone now, right? So...” I held my arms out awkwardly in front me, “You can come back now, okay? I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” repeated my shadow. “No. You’re not sorry at all.” She lifted herself off the ground in one swift movement, then started prowling her way towards me. “But you will be...”

I didn’t know what to say, what to do—didn’t even have enough time to think about it with my shadow coming at me like she was. I collapsed to the ground, my legs gone to jelly, and scrambled towards the hollow’s opening on hands and knees, desperate to get away from my shadow even if I knew there was nowhere I could possibly escape to without wings.

“Please,” I cried, standing with my back against the amethyst sky as my shadow continued to creep towards me. “Please, stop! I’m sorry I traded you away, alright? I didn’t think—I mean—I didn’t realize—” the tears streamed down my face, and my shadow kept creeping. “I was desperate—can’t you understand? You should know better than anyone how it feels! Please...don’t—*no!*”

My shadow grabbed me by the front of my tunic and pulled me in close, face-to-face, so that I was forced to stare into her—*my*—furious green eyes as she demanded, “How could you?”

I had already said I was sorry, and she hadn’t accepted it—what else did she want from me?

“Well?” she prompted, fist still clenched around the fabric of my tunic as she held me there in front of her.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I pleaded, closing my eyes and wiggling like a

worm in her talon-like grip.

She reached out with her other hand and grabbed my chin, holding my head still. “Look at me,” she commanded, and I didn’t dare disobey. “If you don’t know what to say to me, then I have no further use of you, either.”

“Let me go!” I wailed. “Please!”

She smirked. “Very well.”

And then she pushed me.

That’s the last thing I remember. That, and the grin on her face as she waved down at me from above, watching with glee as I fell from the Wishing Tree’s hollow and into that all-consuming darkness once more.

#### IV

I hit the water with a tiny *plop*, and next thing I knew I was drowning. Cold water flooded into my open mouth as I flailed about, trying with all my might to propel myself upwards and keep my head above water, but sinking steadily with every kick just the same. I couldn’t swim, and the ache in my lungs was growing, urging me to breathe, so painful that I couldn’t help but open up, inhale, and let the water in, all sense of urgency washing away in the flood as I closed my eyes and sank beneath the surface...

Then I heard a voice—an urgent, muddied voice calling out to me as if from a vast distance, drawing me out through the fog and back into my body once more.

I opened my eyes and immediately spewed pond water all over myself.

“Back so soon?” said the voice, familiar now that I wasn’t preoccupied with drowning.

Splayed out flat on my back, I turned to face the speaker and balked when I saw a snapping

turtle where I had expected a toad.

“Nox?” My voice was little more than a croak. “Is that you?”

“The one and only.”

“You’re...what? A shapeshifter or something?”

“Indeed,” he replied, punctuating his response with a playful snap of his jaw.

I rolled my head back and closed my eyes. “I think I liked you better as a toad.”

“Ha! I can’t help but agree with you there,” he said, shifting back into his toad body with a *poof*. “The toad is my preferred form by far,” he mused. “Such a noble creature. Lends a certain dignity—don’t you think?”

“You’re telling me you can take whatever form you like, look however you want to, and you *choose* to look like an old toad?”

He blinked. “I *am* old.”

“Fair enough.”

He held out a sticky little hand and helped me to sit up, then sat down in front of me. “So,” he said, settling in. “What do you have to report?”

“Report?” I growled. “What was that thing?”

A grave look descended over his toad-face. “Oh dear.”

“Well?”

He didn’t respond right away, which only served to irritate me further. “You should have warned me!” I cried. “If you’d have just warned me, I wouldn’t have—”

“What...?” the toad demanded. “Out with it.”

“It tricked me,” I said. “I thought I was talking to the Wishing Tree, but it was just an imposter all along—a *puppeteer*, it called itself. Does that mean anything to you?”

The toad shook his head. “No. I’ve never heard of such a thing. What did this creature say to you, and what did it want with—” He blanched. “The Tree, Hana! What of the Tree? Is it—”

“Alive,” I confirmed. “But...not well. I think you should go take a look.”

He squeezed his eyes shut in concentration, then relaxed some as they opened. “It is as you say: the Tree is alive, but just barely. I’ll send for the spirits right away; they’ll know how to care for it.”

“It was the magic powder,” I explained. “I did like you said, and—well, whatever that thing was, it’s gone now. Fizzled away into nothing, as far as I could tell.”

“Thank you,” the toad replied. “But tell me: what did it look like, this creature? Did it have horns, or fangs, or—”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “By the time I realized what was happening, the creature had already...changed forms.”

“Changed forms...?” His frown only deepened as I hesitated. “Explain yourself.”

“I thought it was the Wishing Tree, remember? It offered me a wish in exchange for my shadow...”

“Tell me everything,” was his only reply, and this time, I didn’t dare leave anything out. I told him about the bargain, the lies—everything. Right down to the cringiest details, and every embarrassing part in between. By the time I finished my story, his eyes were wide enough to be comical, and I had to cover my laugh with a cough.

“This isn’t funny,” he chided. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Aw, come on. I saved the Tree, didn’t I? That has to count for something...”

There was no reassurance in his hummed reply. “And your shadow?” he furthered. “Where is it now?”

“I don’t know. I told her I was sorry, but she wouldn’t come back to me. And then she tried to kill me!”

“Oh my...”

“Yeah,” I sighed, wrapping my arms around my knees and drawing them in close to my chest. The beating sun had already done much to dry out my clothes, but the chill of that otherworldly place still clung to me, as if stuck to my very bones. I felt dazed, worn out, and all the while a voice kept whispering to me: *Why did you have to go and do something so stupid?*

“Well then,” said Nox. “I suppose we had best get going.”

“Why?” I asked, then noticing the pronoun choice, added, “Wait—*we*?”

“Yes ‘we’—you and I,” he said. “We have work to do. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To save the forest, of course.”

I frowned. “From what?”

“Hm, let’s see: chaos...destruction...utter annihilation...” he counted off, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Not quite sure yet, but either way it won’t be good. I caught a glimpse of your shadow when we met,” he continued, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen a shadow so dark...we must find it before it causes too much trouble.”

“But it’s not here,” I said. “It’s still...Elsewhere. It didn’t follow me back, so it must still be there, right?”

He thought about this, then shook his head. “I don’t know much about shadows, but I do know this: they are expert navigators, especially between realms. Your shadow will have no trouble finding its way back to this world, if that is what it wishes to do. We must be ready for it when it does.”

“But what can I do?” I asked. “I’ve already made such a mess of things...”

“That you have,” replied Nox. “And now you can help me clean up.” He let out another sigh. “It’s *your* shadow, after all. Who would know it better than you?”

I pondered this a moment. “I think I understand. But Nox—” I shook my head, banishing the thought of that terrible grin from my mind. “I’m afraid—well, I’m afraid I don’t know my shadow very well at all...”

“Hm. That does make it a bit more challenging.” He paused, hemming and hawing to himself as he thought. “I think we had better consult an expert on this one.”

“Who do you have in mind?”

“An old friend,” he replied. “Yial’shi, of the spider-folk. If there is anyone who can tell us a thing or two about shadows, it would be her.”

“A spider?” I bit at my lip, imagination running wild at the thought. I hadn’t encountered spiders very often; they tended to keep to themselves, mostly, though there were a few who lived in Smallhollow even so. “They aren’t exactly the most social creatures...do you think she will help us?”

“If we bring the right gift, she will. Luckily I know just the thing...”

I opened my mouth to ask another question—for I had many, *many* left—but was cut off by a sudden *poof!* as Nox transformed from lumpy toad to beady-eyed squirrel right before my very eyes. The bushy-tailed rodent let out a shrill titter that sounded an awful lot like laughter before lowering himself flat to the ground and chirping: “Hop on, let’s go!”

“On your back?” I quirked a brow and crossed my arms. *How demeaning.* I’d have rather walked the entire length of the woods ten times over than hitch a ride on another creature’s back. But I knew this wasn’t the time for arguing; I had already caused enough trouble, and so I sucked

it up, swallowed my pride, and crawled onto his furry back.

“Now wha—” I started, but Nox was off before I could even finish my sentence, sprinting across the forest floor with an energy I never would have expected from someone so old, zigzagging through the trees at lightning speed as I struggled with all my might to hang on.

“You can open your eyes now,” Nox said eventually.

I hadn’t even realized they were closed—nor that we had come to a stop. I willed my fists to unclench and slid down off his back—shaky, but alive.

“Acorns?” I asked, taking in the scene around me. We were underneath a grove of oak trees, and there were acorns all around us, scattered here and there across the forest floor despite the fact that it was still summer, quite early yet for them to fall.

“Yep,” said Nox, already busy inspecting one acorn after another. “Don’t just stand there—help me search! We’re looking for the biggest acorn we can find.”

“Why?”

He tossed the acorn he had been holding and picked up another. “Our gift for Yial’shi, of course.”

“I thought spiders ate insects?”

“They do.”

“Then why—”

“Trust me, won’t you?” he snapped. “Keep searching! It will all make sense when you meet her.”

I didn’t bother to protest any longer. We searched the grove for a good while longer before finally finding the right acorn according to Nox’s mysterious standards—one that was the same size as my head, if you want to know—which he popped into his mouth and held in the pouch of

his furry little cheek. “Awwright,” he muffled, gesturing to his back with a nod of his head.

“Wet’s wo.”

I obliged with a sigh, climbing up onto his back once more and securing myself with two fistfuls of coarse fur.

“Weady?” asked Nox.

I closed my eyes in advance this time. “As I’ll ever be.”

And then we were off.

## V

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked, hugging the acorn close to my chest as we walked.

Nox was back in his toad form now, forging along through the gloom ahead as I trailed tentatively behind in his wake. “Quite sure.”

“If you say so,” I muttered, hugging the acorn just a little bit tighter and fighting the urge to look back over my shoulder. I had never been to this area of the woods before, which was something of a rarity given my wayfaring tendencies, though it wasn’t exactly hard to understand why: the winding, treacherous paths were full of thorns and brambles, and the canopy above was so thick and cramped that the sunlight barely reached through to feed the brittle, washed-out plant life below, let alone provide us with sufficient light to see by. It was only after tripping and scraping my knees for the third time that I finally managed to swallow my pride long enough to ask Nox to slow down and wait for me, which he did, albeit rather grudgingly. He had been tense since we first arrived, and I had no idea whether it was the gloominess of the place itself or the final destination that had him moving so swiftly.

According to Nox, this place had used to be a central hub for all sorts of spider-folk, but now it seemed all but abandoned, as if everyone who lived here had just up and left one day in the middle of...well, in the middle of doing whatever it was that spiders did to fill their day, I guess. There were signs of this, too, of course—wisps of broken webbing, for example, and the abandoned carcass of some unlucky insect left behind to rot in the darkness.

“What happened here?” I asked.

Nox seemed to have been asking himself the same question. “I don’t know,” he replied, voice soft and full of sorrow. “This place was once teeming with life, so bright and cheerful...” He stopped hopping and let out a small sigh. “This isn’t...well, let’s just say: this isn’t right.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for the old toad, but I wasn’t quite sure what to say. The gloom was really starting to get to me, and I wanted to leave. “Maybe we took a wrong turn,” I suggested, but Nox wasn’t listening. He was already forging on ahead once more—newly determined, it seemed—and I had to pick up the pace to keep up with him before he got too far ahead.

“*Nox*,” I hissed, hesitant to raise my voice above a sharp whisper, “slow down, I can’t—*ack!*”

I came to a sudden halt against my will, having run into a spider web. I tore anxiously at the sticky threads clinging to my body, but my thrashing only served to entangle me further. “Nox!” I yelled, not caring about the level of my voice now. “Come back! I’m stuck!”

A voice responded, but it didn’t belong to Nox. “Greetings, faeling,” it said. “Are you lost?”

If I hadn’t been panicking yet, I most certainly was now. I resumed my thrashing with gusto, but my efforts were useless; I was stuck, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“Don’t eat me!” I pleaded, and then, thinking better of it, added, “Please?”

The speaker chuckled and came into view, revealing herself to be a large, hairy spider—

though not much larger than me, I noted with a pang of relief—with eight beady black eyes, all pointed in my direction. “Tell me,” she said, her voice as wispy and gossamer-smooth as the webbing she created. “What brings you to this part of the woods, hm?”

“I’m looking for someone,” I replied, hoping to buy myself some time. “One of your kind, actually—the spider known as Yial’shi.”

“Indeed?” she replied. “For what purpose?”

“I have some questions for you,” I said, taking a chance on my intuition. “You are Yial’shi...right?”

The spider only smiled in response. Well, as much as a spider *can* smile—it was more of a feeling, if anything, and it set my skin to prickling. “Speak, faeling,” she commanded.

“Oh. Right. Ok. Well, you see—”

“Hana!”

I wilted in relief. It was Nox, of course, hopping back through the gloom to find me. “It’s about time you showed up,” I called out to him, surprising even myself with the hurt I heard reflected in my voice. How long had it taken him to notice I was gone? I softened my expression and addressed the spider once more. “That’s Nox,” I explained. “He’s not very bright, I’m afraid.”

I jumped at Yial’shi’s bark of a laugh in response. “Onopandolaimonox,” she said. “Is that really you?”

“The one and only,” he replied, having finally caught up in his backtracking. “Yial’shi, my dear, I must say you are looking radiant as ever. Tell me—have you gotten hairier since I last saw you?”

Yial’shi seemed to brighten at the compliment. “Charming as ever,” she said, chuckling. “It

is heartening to see you once again, Onopandolaimonox.”

The toad lowered his head a fraction—a small, reverent bow. “Likewise, old friend.”

I cleared my throat. “Not to spoil the reunion,” I said, still suspended in Yial’shi’s web, “but could someone get me out of here?”

With a gentleness I would never have expected from a spider, Yial’shi peeled the sticky threads off of my body and set me free.

“Thanks,” I said, brushing off the remaining strands.

“I dislike the taste of faerie,” she said in response. “Too sweet.”

I smirked. “Good to know.”

“Even so, it isn’t often that I catch a faerie in my web,” she said, eyeing me up. “Indeed, I hardly encounter any faeries at all these days, here among the sticks and stones...too good to walk the forest floor with the rest of us, hm?”

I scoffed, gesturing to my wingless back. “I don’t exactly have much of a choice when it comes to walking, if you hadn’t noticed.”

And from her response, it seemed that Yial’shi actually hadn’t noticed. That was twice today, I noted, though I didn’t quite know what to make of it yet. “Oh! How curious,” she purred, examining me anew. “Though I suppose it fits. Nothing in this forest is immune to change, even the haughty arrogance of the Fae. These are strange times, Onopandolaimonox.”

Unsure whether I had just been insulted or not, I opened my mouth to retort, but Nox beat me to it. “Yes, strange times indeed,” he chuckled nervously. “What happened to the rest of the spider-folk, for that matter? Why are you here all alone?”

She didn’t respond right away, but when she did, her voice was soft and mournful. “As I said, nothing in this forest is immune to change. Insects are not as plentiful as they once were,

and so the majority of my kin have left this place in search of new hunting grounds.” She paused, lost in some distant memory, then continued. “I am old, Onopandolaimonox, as you well know, and thus have chosen to stay and live out the rest of my days here, at home, where I am most comfortable.”

I still didn’t know quite what to make of Yial’shi the spider, but I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy for her even so. I knew better than anyone what it felt like to be all alone, after all. “It must get pretty lonely.”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Sometimes.”

I nodded my understanding. “I’m glad we came to visit you, then.”

She surprised me with another spider-smile, this one far less creepy than the last. “As am I,” she replied. “Now, tell me—why have you sought out old Yial’shi, hm?”

I looked to Nox. “Can you tell her?”

“Oh, very well,” he sighed, and then he proceeded to tell the story.

Hearing it all spoken aloud, I was struck by how ridiculous it all sounded. A wingless faerie in pursuit of her wayward shadow, accompanied by an ancient, shapeshifting guardian of the forest who, of all the myriad possibilities available to him, chooses to take the shape of a lumpy brown toad? I wouldn’t have believed it myself, but Yial’shi, to her credit, listened with a patience that I could only imagine came from living for a very long time, while I fidgeted nervously beside her.

Once Nox had finished his summary, she didn’t respond right away, but rather hummed quietly to herself, as if pondering the implications of what the toad had told her.

This must have prompted something inside of Nox, for he let out a small gasp—“Oh!”—and then lowered his voice a fraction and murmured to me: “The gift, Hana—where is it?”

I looked down at my empty hands and realized that the nut was gone, cast aside in the dirt nearby where I must have dropped it. I picked the acorn up and dusted it off, then, following a nod of approval from Nox, offered it to Yial'shi, who plucked it from my outstretched hands with obvious relish.

“Oh, how lovely,” she said, admiring the gift as she rotated it between two clawed appendages. She then separated the acorn from its shell, and, after tossing the nut aside, proceeded to place the acorn-cap on top of her head like a strange little hat, securing it with a single gossamer thread of her own creation.

“Gorgeous, my dear, simply gorgeous!” cried Nox. “Give us a turn, won't you?”

She did.

“Oh!” he gasped. “It suits you—really, it does!”

My surprise must have shown on my face, for Yial'shi turned to me and explained, “I have always found great pleasure in the power of self-expression. Our bodies might be subject to the natural vicissitudes of earthly life, but our sense of style need not be; I cannot control my aging body, but I can control the way I choose to adorn it.”

I looked down at my dull green tunic and frowned, realizing for the first time in my life that I had deliberately chosen it, and every other piece of clothing I owned, for precisely the opposite reason—not because they caught my eye, but because they deflected the eyes of others. Fashion had never once been my goal; only camouflage and survival.

“Well done, Onopandolaimonox,” said Yial'shi, drawing my attention once more. “I am quite fond of this gift. You have my thanks, and my aid.”

Nox bowed to Yial'shi, then gestured to the discarded nut cast off to the side nearby. “Do you mind?”

The spider chuckled, waving one of her long black legs. “By all means.”

With a whip of his pink tongue, Nox snatched up the nut and swallowed it. “Yum,” he said, patting his belly.

“You might want to consider chewing next time,” I said, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips. I shook my head and turned back to Yial’shi. “So. What can you tell us about shadows?”

“What indeed?” she replied, humming softly to herself as she pondered. “Every creature has a shadow,” she continued, “from the smallest aphid to the tallest tree. But how often do we think about them, hm? Most of the time they go unnoticed, ignored, or forgotten about as we trudge along, day-by-day, through the ruts and pathways of our busy lives. And yet, our shadows are always there beside us, our silent sentinels, watching over us even as we forget they exist.”

“Shadows are...alive?”

The spider nodded. “In their own way, much like everything else.”

“Alright,” I said, not yet convinced but willing to play along. “If that’s the case, then what do they eat?”

“Very good, little one,” she purred, a twinkle in each of her eight eyes. “What *do* they eat? To put it plainly: shadows eat fear.”

“Right,” drawled Nox. “And what does fear taste like, exactly?”

“That would depend on the type of fear in question, Onopandolaimonox,” she replied, catching us both off guard with a serious response when I knew Nox had meant the question as a joke. “Fear that derives from sorrow, say, would taste rather bland in comparison to fear that derives from anger.”

“I see...” said Nox, nodding along. “I imagine the latter would be rather...spicy.”

I giggled, then stopped when I noticed the look of irritation on Yial’shi’s face.

“It might sound silly,” she continued, “but it is true: shadows feed off of fear, and the more they eat, the darker—and *stronger*—they get.”

“Oh dear,” Nox muttered.

Yial’shi paused, waiting for him to elaborate.

The toad shot an accusatory glance my way. “Sound familiar?”

I inhaled deeply, lifted my eyes to meet Yial’shi’s, then flushed and looked away again as soon as I opened my mouth. “When Nox first saw my shadow, he told me that it was one of the darkest he had ever seen.”

Yial’shi hummed, all eight of her eyes drifting to the empty space behind me where my wings should have been, but weren’t. “That does not surprise me.”

“Yeah, I’m an idiot, okay? I know. So what can I do about it? How do I get my shadow back?”

“I am afraid that is something you will have to figure out for yourself, little one,” she replied, not unkindly. “I have told you all that I know.”

My heart sank. “But—”

“*Aha!*” exclaimed Nox, eyes wide and gleaming. “I’ve got it—*fearlessness!*”

I looked to Yial’shi, then back to Nox. “Care to elaborate...?”

The toad cleared his throat as if preparing to deliver a speech of great importance. “If shadows eat fear,” he began, “then it would make sense that, in order to defeat her shadow and bring it back under her control, Hana will have to achieve a level of fearlessness that would ultimately serve to weaken her shadow and render it vulnerable to attack. No one likes to go hungry, after all,” he added, rubbing a foot across his slimy eyeball. “So. There it is. Fearlessness. Any questions?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Quite a few, actually.” I turned back to Yial’shi. “What do you think? Will this work?”

The spider shook her head. “No. The connection between you and your shadow has been severed. It is no longer capable of eating your fear.”

*Not ‘it,’* I thought. *More like...* “She.” I realized I had said the last out loud when both their heads turned to me, waiting for an explanation. “I...it’s just hard to think of my shadow as an ‘it’ when she looks, moves, and sounds exactly like me...”

“How interesting,” mused Yial’shi, eyes narrowing. “You make an excellent point, faeling.”

“I do?”

“She does?”

I ignored the toad’s jab and asked the spider to elaborate.

“Words are powerful,” she explained, “much more so than we are often led to believe. Perhaps the key to solving this particular riddle depends upon finding the most appropriate ones—the *right* words, so to speak.”

I nodded along as she spoke, though in truth I didn’t entirely understand. “But how do I find them? Where do I start?”

“I wonder...” she replied, tilting her head in contemplation. “To know your shadow is to know yourself. I would say that the right words are already inside you, waiting for you to find them. Perhaps your first task, then, will be to figure out the flavour of your own fear, as it were, for it is different for all of us, and thus should prove useful in uncovering the rest. If your shadow really is as powerful as you so claim, then it would be wise to know exactly what it has eaten in order to become so.”

*The flavour of my fear?* I pondered this a moment, hoping for an easy answer, but nothing

came to mind, and I was left feeling even more lost than before.

“Perhaps we should rephrase it as a question,” suggested Nox. “What are you afraid of, Hana?”

A myriad of possibilities came to mind, but I wasn’t about to share any of them. “I don’t know,” I said, scrambling for a lie. “Goblins?”

“Goblins.” The toad’s mouth was a thin line.

My cheeks burned, but I crossed my arms and held my chin up high. “Yep. That’s right.”

“Wonderful,” he drawled. “Let’s practice saying the right words together, then, shall we?” He tilted his head back and unleashed a wicked cackle, a perfect imitation of the dastardly creatures who often prowled through these woods looking for faeries to snack on.

I rolled my eyes. “Not funny.”

“Neither is your bluffing,” he shot back. Then, softer this time, he tried a different tactic. “Come now, Hana. Think harder. There must be something in that little head of yours that we can work with...a painful memory, say, or—”

“No,” I snapped. “I’ll figure it out by myself, ok?”

“But—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

The toad opened his mouth again to respond, but stopped short as a dull, glazed-over sort of expression swept across his face.

“Nox?”

His eyes snapped back into focus. “Your shadow is here,” he said. “And heading straight for Smallhollow. We had best be off before it—er, *she*—causes too much trouble.”

I began to shake. “No—I can’t—I’m not ready!”

But that didn't seem to matter at all to Nox, who had already transformed into a small brown owl. "I know," he said. "But you can try."

I didn't trust my mouth to speak for me, so I simply nodded once and climbed up onto Nox's back, steadying myself with a handful of soft feathers in either hand.

"Thank you for your help, Yial'shi," I said, looking down at her from above.

She smiled her spider's smile once more, and, reaching up with one long, hairy arm, tipped her acorn cap in farewell. "Good luck, little one."

And despite everything, I couldn't help but laugh and smile back.

"Ready?" asked Nox, punctuating it with a small *hoot-hoot*.

"No," I said. "But let's go try anyway, I guess."

## VI

From the moment we arrived in Smallhollow, I knew that something was very wrong. The first sign was the sheer number of creatures milling about in the streets. Smallhollow was always a vibrant and bustling place, but that day it seemed like everyone from the busiest bee to the most reclusive of mice had come outside to see what all the fuss was about. There was nothing the creatures of Smallhollow loved more than gossip, you see, and having provided them with the bulk of their supply for years now by virtue of the fact that I was unlucky enough to have been, well, *me*, I couldn't say that I was too terribly excited to find out what exactly my shadow had done to set them so on edge. There was a nervous energy to the sound of their voices that told me it couldn't have been anything good, and from the look of mild dread on Nox's face (who had transformed back into his toad form again upon arrival) I figured he was inclined to agree with me.

“Well,” he said, huffing a sigh. “We had better go investigate. Follow behind me and try not to draw too much attention to yourself.”

I rolled my eyes—as if that weren’t hard enough for me to do on the best of days, let alone at a time when there were two of me running about. “I’ll try my best.”

“Please do,” he replied, either ignoring my sarcasm or missing it entirely. “I have a feeling that the creatures of Smallhollow won’t be taking too kindly to you today...”

“When have they ever?” I mumbled, more to myself than to Nox, though it gave the toad pause all the same. “Ah,” he said at last. “Forgive me. I didn’t realize—”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand, desperate to change the topic. “Don’t worry about it,” I said, avoiding his gaze by turning towards the crowd. “Let’s just get this over with, okay?”

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Though there are many who would be quick to deny it, the truth of the matter is that there are two versions of Smallhollow—one above, and one below—and as a wingless faerie, I belonged firmly to neither of them. Faeries love to build their homes as high up as possible simply because they can, and (in my opinion) because they not-so-secretly enjoy the daily dose of vanity and self-importance that comes from looking down on everyone else from above and knowing they could spit on them all if the mood struck.

I’m exaggerating, obviously, but not by much. Whether nestled in the branches or carved into the very trunks themselves, most faerie dwellings are situated so far up the trees that they’re almost completely inaccessible to those who cannot fly—and yes, I do mean *almost*. There are lifts, too, you see—janky wooden contraptions on an equally janky pulley-and-rope-type system—but I never use them because they’re mainly meant for faerie children who have not yet completed their metamorphoses, and every second I’ve ever spent hoisting myself up to the top

of one of those things alongside a pack of wide-eyed, curious brats has been among the most frustrating moments of my life, not to mention the most humiliating.

Needless to say, I'm much more of a ground-dweller myself these days, though I've managed to find my own clever ways to the tippy-top when needed. Sometimes, for example, I'll use the toadstools that run up and down the trees to scale my way up, or, if there are no toadstools, then I'll do the same using a series of trailing vines. Thing is, these strategies are as time consuming as they are draining, and so I tend to avoid them as much as possible (a tactic that became much easier to stick to once I stopped going to school) and live my life on the ground with the other wingless creatures—toads, salamanders, mice, and the like—who choose to make Smallhollow their home.

I know what you're thinking: why would anyone *choose* to make Smallhollow their home when there is such obvious hierarchy built into its very design? The answer to that question is a simple one, and it has everything to do with the mossy, hollowed out tree stump at the centre of town, and the glowing treasure that's tucked away inside of it.

Starkeep, it's called—the *real* draw of Smallhollow. It might not look like much from the outside (just a boring old stump, really) but just like everyone so loves to remind me (especially when I don't want or need to hear it): *it's what's on the inside that really matters, dear...*

The shard—a small sliver of shooting star whose mysterious and ancient power protects the town that houses it.

No one knows exactly where it came from, or precisely how its magic even works, but everyone knows that its power, though invaluable, is also limited, and extends no further than the mushroom border that encircles the town and keeps its tiny inhabitants safe from harm. Creatures are free to come and go as they please, but it is only inside this circle that one is protected by the

shard, and so inside is where most who live here tend to stay—safe and sound inside their little bubble, the outside world naught but a terrifying, unknown blip in their otherwise tame and monotonous lives.

That's where I usually come in, of course—to relieve Smallhollow of its collective boredom by providing its inhabitants with the entertainment of my misfortune and to keep that perpetual rumour mill churning. *Did you hear? Have you seen? Lost her wings, they say—the poor dear!* Barf. Don't even get me started.

But though it had been five years since the apex of such misery, it seemed I had not lost my touch. For as we made our way down the pebbled streets and into the town proper, I couldn't help but feel as if I were stepping backwards in time, back to the beginning of the nightmare, when I was the most well-known anomaly in all of Smallhollow and couldn't escape my notoriety for a single moment—no matter what I did or where I went.

A crowd had gathered near Dewdrop Plaza, so we stopped to investigate. I suggested we stick to the periphery and scope out the situation from afar before getting ourselves involved, but Nox was having none of that, and insisted that we move in for a closer look.

I followed the toad into the crowd, taking great care not to bump or jostle anyone as I went, but—just as expected—still managing to draw attention to myself regardless. Heads swivelled as we walked, and it wasn't long before the chattering died down to a low murmur as creatures began to notice me, their eyes wandering this way and that, some curious, others nervous or afraid, searching for the object of their whisperings and then promptly looking away once they found me.

I was used to this sort of thing, of course, but that didn't make it any easier to endure. I pulled my hood up over my head and drew it down low over eyes, desperate for anything that

might shield me from the inquisitive gazes, even if just for a moment.

“You there!”

*Sigh.*

The hood never worked the way I wanted it to.

I turned to face the speaker—whom I recognized immediately—and had to resist the urge to cringe. Of *course* Myrtle would be involved in this. The old hedgehog had to have been the biggest drama queen in all of Smallhollow. Nothing happened here without her knowing it, and if she wasn’t somehow involved already, she would most certainly find a way to become so.

“Back so soon, eh?” she squeaked, the perfect portrait of moral outrage and indignation even though I knew this was probably the best day of her life. “I do hope you’re here to apologize.”

“That would be a lot easier if I knew exactly what I was apologizing for,” I mumbled, already cursing my shadow for whatever it was she had done.

Not the answer Myrtle was looking for, apparently. The old hedgehog erupted into a series of half-formed sounds of disapproval before Nox stepped in to take over.

“My dear madame hedgehog! Please, calm yourself—I assure you this is all just a simple misunderstanding and that young Hana here will—”

“Misunderstanding?” she trilled, gesturing to a separate group of creatures milling about nearby. “Try telling that to young Twig over there, the poor dear!”

My stomach flipped. Of all my classmates, Twig was the closest thing to a friend that I had. We shared a mutual bond as two of Smallhollow’s most notable oddballs, though Twig’s notoriety was mostly based on what she wore: all black, all the time, with accessories that, for the most part, were always made of bone. She had little bone earrings and dangly bone bracelets—annoying things, really, always clacking together whenever she moved—but most

notorious of all would have to be her animal-tooth necklace, which she had strung together shortly after her own metamorphosis, and had worn each and every day since. You'd never catch her in a flower crown, but there was no disdain in that decision; Twig simply was who she was, and I admired her for it—especially since she had always been kind to me as well. *Why would my shadow confront her?* I wondered. It just didn't make any sense.

Even so, my feet seemed to move of their own volition as they scurried me over to the gathered circle where I didn't even think to hesitate before pushing my way through to the centre. My stomach gave another flip when I saw her sitting there, prodding at a fresh bruise on her forehead with hesitant fingers and looking for all the world like a trampled-on dandelion puff. "Twig!"

The colour drained from her face when she saw me. "Stay back," she warned. "Don't come any closer."

My mouth was dry and flavourless. "What happened to you?" Her wild puff of white-blond hair was matted and dirty, and her clothes—black on black on black, like usual—were covered in dust and debris. It wasn't too hard to connect the dots, but even so I couldn't help but flinch when she growled back, "You attacked me, that's what happened!"

So my shadow was to blame for this after all. "That wasn't me," I explained. "It was my shadow."

She swiped a quick hand across her watery eyes. "What are you talking about? I thought we were friends..."

"We *are* friends!" I replied. "It's just that—"

"Leave her alone already, won't you?" said an onlooker—a shiny black beetle with mandibles clicking away in irritation. "Haven't you caused enough trouble?"

My knee-jerk reply was cut off by the sound of commotion in the distance, and one glance from Nox was all it took for me to realize that we had better go check it out.

I turned back to face my friend. “I’m so sorry Twig,” I said, memorizing every line of hurt etched across her weary face and vowing silently to remember the image when I came face-to-face with my shadow once more. “I’ll be back to check on you later, I promise.”

“Don’t bother,” she replied, refusing to meet my gaze.

I knew this was meant to be a dismissal, but I couldn’t help myself. “Twig, please—”

This time, she erupted. “Leave me alone, Hana! Go. Away.”

Blinking away the tears before they could turn into a trickle, I pulled my hood back down low over my eyes and stormed off in pursuit of my shadow.

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It wasn’t too hard to figure out which way my shadow had gone. All I had to do was ask myself: “What is my *least* favourite place in all of Smallhollow?” and boom—I had my answer. The marketplace. I was certain that my shadow knew as well as I did that if there was one place in this whole rotten town that could trip me up more than any other, it was this: the busiest, loudest, and most excruciatingly public area around.

Don’t get me wrong—I loved the marketplace from a casual onlooker’s perspective, with its bright colours and tantalizing smells, its many wares and fares, its treasures and curiosities. It was the *eyes* I could do without. The blinks. The stares. The curious glance here. The double-take there. Each look came with its own weight and measure, but they always added up in the end, and there was only ever so much I could handle at once. I usually made it all of five minutes in the marketplace before the crushing desire to disappear from sight took precedence over anything else I had meant to accomplish and I scurried out of there as quickly as my feet could

take me—empty-handed, usually, but blissfully alone once more.

With my shadow on the loose, however, I knew that scurrying away and hiding wasn't an option this time. I had to find my shadow and get her back under my control before she got me into any more trouble, and I had to do it quick. At least this would be a good opportunity to practice dealing with my own fear, I figured, for there was nothing that I was more afraid of than walking into a large crowd that was already mad at me only to draw even more attention to myself on purpose.

Luckily, I was so angry with my shadow that for once in my life I almost forgot to be self-conscious. I stormed along in pursuit of my shadow while Nox followed cautiously in my wake. "Let's not be too hasty now," he said. "Remember what Yial'shi said: the connection between you has been severed. You'll have to manage your own fear now, your own—"

"Yes, yes—I remember!"

"—anger," he finished, ignoring my outburst even as it made his point for him. "Calm yourself," he continued, more gently now, "and you'll stand a much better chance at defeating her. Don't give her any opportunities to hurt you. Stand your guard. Be fearless!"

*If only it were so easy*, I thought, but he was right: I couldn't let my shadow get the best of me this time; I had to win. "Let's just find her and get out of here," I said, quickening my pace once more. "She can't have gone too—"

My words faltered as we rounded the corner. "There she is!" I cried, momentarily triumphant before the reality of the situation hit me and I realized what my shadow was about to do and—more importantly—*who* she was about to do it to.

"*Ooo!* Look-y who it is," Lyari, my nemesis, crowed with glee, grinning from ear to ear as my shadow approached her. She and her cronies, Saida and Feylin, were lounging beneath a

spotted toadstool. “I didn’t see you in class today, Larva,” she continued. “I thought maybe you’d finally died out there in the woods all alone, eaten by an owl or something, with no one around to—wait—what do you think you’re—”

My shadow tackled her to the ground, and I admit the sight was...well, quite satisfying, to say the least. That is, until my shadow started swinging at her. And clawing at her. And biting at her.

Yes—biting. As in, with her *teeth*.

It was like I had been frozen solid. I couldn’t move, couldn’t think—all I could do was stand there and watch as my snarling shadow pummeled away at Lyari while her friends screamed and flailed about uselessly around her.

“Hana, do something!”

Nox’s voice was enough to bring me back into focus. I willed my frozen legs to move forward and ran towards the scuffle, tackling my shadow from behind and using my legs to try to pull her off the wailing faerie. My shadow got in a few more kicks before I finally managed to disentangle her from the fray and yank her out of there, but not before she got *me* with a hefty kick to the shin for good measure, and we both fell backwards into the dirt.

“*Stop it,*” I hissed in her ear, but she wouldn’t calm down. She wiggled and bucked as hard as she could until she finally managed to escape my grip and shove forward into standing. I expected her to head right back to Lyari, but she only scowled at me and shook her head before running off and disappearing into the now-sizeable crowd that had gathered to take in the spectacle before them.

I got to my feet and made to chase after her, but Feylin blocked my path. “What is *wrong* with you?” he spat, glancing towards Saida, who was cradling an injured Lyari in her arms.

“But it wasn’t me,” I sputtered, pointing a shaking finger in the direction my shadow had gone. “I tried to stop her—didn’t you see?”

Feylin only blinked, then shook his head in irritation. “What are you talking about, Larva?” A crease appeared between his brows, and my stomach churned as I realized that he was genuinely confused. “You’ve always been a freak, but I didn’t know you were crazy, too...”

“But it was my shadow,” I said, searching the faces of the creatures gathered around us for anyone who might back me up. “It wasn’t me! Didn’t anyone see?”

Their collective silence was answer enough.

Tears prickled at my eyes. “Won’t anyone stand up for me?” I whispered, more to myself than to anyone else, but of course—no one did. The creatures of Smallhollow only shook their heads like Feylin had done, muttering to one another in disapproval even as they continued to hang around and relish in the drama and spectacle of it all.

As I’ve said, there was nothing the creatures of Smallhollow loved more than a good scandal, and here I was providing them with yet another. I could already hear the rumour mill churning; *Did you hear? Were you there? I couldn’t believe my eyes! What’s wrong with her?*

I shoved past Feylin and broke into a run, desperate to escape their scrutiny.

“Hana, wait!” cried Nox, but I ignored him and kept running, swiping at the hot, angry tears as they trickled down my cheeks.

I didn’t stop until I found my target. She was hiding behind a cart of blueberries in an empty alleyway nearby.

“What is wrong with you?” I screamed, chest heaving. “Lyari I can understand, but *Twig?* She’s my—our—friend!”

My shadow stood up, crossed her arms, and rolled her eyes so hard I was surprised they

didn't roll right out of her head. "Don't kid yourself," she scoffed. "We don't have any friends."

"Not if you go around attacking them!"

"Come on. Do you honestly believe that Twig is our friend?"

I paused, then: "She's nice to us."

My shadow chuckled mirthlessly. "Only because she feels sorry for us. She doesn't actually like us. No one does."

"Well," I said, "maybe I have a better chance without you, then!"

"Good luck with that," she drawled. "At least I won't be around to watch you embarrass yourself further."

"You think *I'm* the embarrassing one?"

She raised a brow. "Duh. You remember it all as well as I do, but what have you done about it? Nothing. You never stand up for us, and I'm sick of it." She tilted her head back and looked down at me past the bridge of her up-turned nose. "All you do is hide yourself away and cry about it."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I swallowed my hurt, looked her straight in the eye, and settled on the only words that would come to me, the only words I had left for her in that moment. "I hate you."

"What a coincidence," she said. "I hate you too."

"Then why don't you do us both a favour and *go away*?"

"Hana," Nox warned. "That's not—"

"You're the one following *me*!"

I scowled at her. "Not anymore. I never want to see you again."

Nox's mouth dropped open, but my shadow cut him off before he could say anything further.

“Good,” she replied, straightening her spine. And then she broke into a run, knocking over the blueberry cart as she tore past us down the alley and then turned the corner out of sight.

“We have to follow her,” said Nox, not unkindly, but with a sense of urgency even so. “We can’t lose track of her again—”

I spun towards him. “Why? She won’t listen to me, and I’m better off without her anyway.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” the toad replied, “but you must keep trying. We can’t let her run rampant forever. You saw what she did back there. We must find a way to—”

“Why?” I repeated. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask for any of this! Why do I have to—”

“Because it’s your shadow,” he said, stern and definitive, “and you must take responsibility for it.”

I already knew this, of course, but that didn’t mean it was what I wanted to hear. In fact, in that moment, it was the very last thing I wanted to hear. “Easy for you to say,” I spat, gesturing to the dark shape pooling at his feet. “Look at your shadow, all...” I flailed my arms around, searching for the right words to describe such a ridiculous situation, “flat...and...innocent-like!” I clenched my fist. “My shadow is utterly psychotic...and infuriating...and just—well—*mean!*”

The old toad only sighed. “You’re not going to want to hear this, but—”

“Then don’t tell me,” I muttered, casting my eyes downward and kicking a stray blueberry down the alley.

“Someone has to,” he countered. I looked him in the eye and tilted my head in a way that said, *go on*. And so he did.

“Your shadow is the way it is for a reason. It is a reflection of who you are, who you have been, who you might be, whether you like it or not. Don’t you remember what Yial’shi said?”

“*To know your shadow is to know yourself,*” I quoted. “Yeah—I remember. So what?”

“So,” he continued, lips drawing thinner and thinner as his patience waned. “What does your shadow *want*, Hana?”

I blinked. “I...don’t know.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “And that’s the problem.”

I thought about this for a moment, then shook my head. “Look—I get it, okay? I do. But...” I trailed off as the image of my shadow pummeling Lyari to the ground flashed across my mind’s eye. “I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I choked out at last, burying my face in my hands. “I don’t!”

His voice was softer now. “I know you don’t. But your shadow does, Hana, and will continue to do so until you figure out why.”

“How?” I said, though in truth I already knew.

“You look,” replied Nox. “Look at your shadow, look at yourself, and take stock of what you see.”

I peeped at him through my fingers. “And if I don’t like what I see?”

“You look anyway.”

I sighed, dragging my hands down my face as I tilted my head back towards the sky. The clouds were dark and ominous, and the humidity unbearable. “Looks like we’re in for quite the storm,” I observed, desperate for distraction.

“Don’t change the subject,” he said, drawing my attention away from the sky and back to the matter at hand. “Let’s think for a moment. I heard the way those faeries spoke to you, and—”

My heart had started to accelerate the moment he started speaking. “They’re awful, yeah, I know. They hate me because I’m ugly, and I hate them because they hate me. What’s your point?”

He shot me a knowing look before continuing, as if I had already made his point for him. “I

would have wanted revenge, too.”

I chewed on that for a moment, then shook my head. “That’s not it.”

“No?”

I shrugged. “Maybe in part, but...no—I don’t think ‘revenge’ is exactly the right word for what my shadow wants.” I thought about Twig, about the sense of betrayal I had seen glistening behind the hard fury of her watery eyes. Why would my shadow want revenge against one of the only faeries who had ever been kind to me? It just didn’t make any sense. “It’s gotta be something more than that.”

The toad hummed his understanding, then softened his expression and asked, “Do you think it has something to do with the loss of your wings?”

I dug my fingernails into my palms but managed to keep a neutral expression just the same. “I dunno. Maybe.”

“How old were you when it happened?” he asked. “Did it hurt?”

“Twelve. And no, not...physically, but—”

“Emotionally?” he prompted, pointing to his heart. “You know, in here?”

“Yeah,” I ground out. “Obviously. But it doesn’t hurt anymore, so don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yep. My heart shrivelled up and died a long time ago. I don’t feel anything in there anymore.”

“Oh Hana,” whispered Nox. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. How can you say something like that with such a straight face?”

I shrugged. “My face always looks like this.”

“Be serious,” he replied. “What else haven’t you told me?”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

The toad’s eyes almost bulged from their sockets. “Because I’m trying to help you!”

“I don’t need your help or your pity,” I replied. “I’m perfectly capable of figuring this out for myself, thanks.”

He gave an exasperated groan. “Don’t be ridiculous. If you won’t talk to me, then we’ll just have to find someone else who—”

“We don’t have time for this!” I cried. “We have to follow her. She’s getting away!”

“But Hana—”

“I said no, Nox! I don’t want to about it. Not with you, not with anybody. This is such a waste of time!”

The toad shook his head. “You’ll never find the *right* words if you don’t practice using them first...”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

“Talk to me, Hana,” he pleaded. “Please. We can figure out the flavour of your fear together—”

“No!”

The toad wilted, but he wasn’t about to give up yet. He opened his mouth to try again, but my legs were already moving, carrying me down the blueberry-strewn alley in the same direction my shadow had gone.

“Hana, wait—come back!”

I ignored his plea and kept running, no destination in mind except *away*—away from Nox, away from this conversation, and away from the memories that had me sweating and shaking and gasping for breath as my shrivelled black heart rattled around like a cherry pit inside my chest.

I ran past the mushroom border and into the forest as the sky continued to darken overhead.

## VII

I ran like a hunted rabbit, feet pounding the forest floor in long, careless strides as I wove my way through the labyrinth of twisted roots and vegetation and out into the safety of the woods beyond. I didn't know where I was going, only that I needed to *keep moving*—faster, faster, no thinking, no looking back, just one cut-up, blistered foot in front of the other, over and over and over again, until—

I tripped over my own treacherous feet and crashed forward into the dirt.

Arms shaking, I pressed up to my knees and looked down at the red, dirt-streaked skid marks that now burned across my open palms. The wounds were shallow, no deeper than a scratch, but they stung enough to make my eyes water, and before I knew it I was sobbing, staring daggers at my injured palms while a familiar question took root in my mind.

*Why?*

*Why me?*

It was the question I had asked myself for five long years, and still I was no closer to finding the answer. *Because there is none*, I reminded myself, flinching in pain as I punched at the ground. There was no answer to this riddle, and there never would be. It didn't matter how long I waited. It didn't matter how much time went by. My wings were gone forever, and there was nothing I could do to get them back. *Nothing*. Even if the Wishing Tree did recover, I knew it wouldn't make any difference. I'd never get my wish now. I didn't deserve it. There would be no treasure at the end of my journey, no reward for my bravery, no wish in exchange for my efforts...

So what was the point? I could chase my shadow to the very ends of the earth and beyond and still it wouldn't matter. I would never get my wish now, so why keep trying to earn it back any longer? I hated that stupid town and every stupid creature in it. They would never accept me no matter what I did for them, and without the opportunity to wish for my wings back, all I had to look forward to was more of the same: more pain, more loneliness, more misery. So why bother? Why should I help them out when they have never bothered to help me?

*"Because it's your shadow,"* the toad's voice echoed in my ear, *"and you must take responsibility for it."*

The memory was like a slap to the face. *What am I doing?* I thought. *I have to go back. Have to keep trying. Have—*

"There she is!"

I froze mid-thought, eyes snapping upwards to confirm what my ears already knew to be true.

Lyari and cronies had followed me. Of course they had. I wasn't allowed to suffer in private, so they had come out here to watch me. They emerged from behind a tangle of vines and landed hands-on-hips in a circle around me. I noticed with a pang of dread that Lyari was now sporting a black eye to match the swollen lip that my shadow must have given her. "What are *you* doing out here?" I asked. "Do you have to ruin this for me too? Go away."

She didn't even bother to respond, only barked an order to her cronies—*grab her!*—and watched with delight as they proceeded to do so, securing me by either arm before zipping upwards into the air. I kicked and wiggled as hard as I could, but it was no use—their grips were solid, and I had no choice but to hang there and dangle like the useless little grub I was as Lyari flew forward to deliver my sentence.

“You messed up big-time today, Larva,” she said, indicating the purple bruise spreading like a stain beneath her eye. A mirthless smile tugged at the corner of her swollen lips. “And now you’re going to pay for it.”

“Let me go!” I growled, bucking my little grub legs with renewed gusto. “It wasn’t me, I swear! You have to believe me!”

“Then who was it?” Lyari snapped, eyes narrowing in disbelief.

“Everyone saw it was you,” added Feylin to my left.

On my right, Saida nodded her agreement. “Stop lying!”

I closed my eyes and let out a growl of frustration. *It’s useless*, I thought, arms already aching where they gripped me. *They’ve already made up their minds, and there’s nothing I can say to change that...*

So, I went for a different tactic. “It’s going to rain soon,” I said, forcing myself to hold Lyari’s hateful glare with one of my own. “Just look at the clouds. Are you sure you should be out here? What if your wings get wet? You’ll never fly again.”

She crossed her arms and shrugged, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards again into another terrible smirk. “Don’t worry about us, Larva. This won’t take long.” She nodded once to Saida and Feylin, then waggled her fingers at me in a gesture of mock-farewell. “Bye-bye!” she crooned. “Can’t say I won’t miss—”

Her words were cut off by the sound of rustling foliage, and a flurry of movement in the distance.

“What was that?” whined Saida, whose grip on my wrist now threatened to cut it off from the rest of my arm entirely.

Lyari’s eyes darted from side-to-side. “*Quiet!*” she hissed.

But the goblin had already spotted us. He burst through the bushes like a tumbling boulder, yanking on branches and swatting at vines with a careless, casual sort of violence that told me he was either very angry, very hungry, or (what was more likely) both angry *and* hungry and on the hunt for a snack. His clever gold eyes widened when he saw us, and the cackle he unleashed was borderline fiendish.

“Drop her!” cried Lyari, darting up and out of the way as fast as her blue-speckled wings could take her. “Quickly now, come on!”

Her cronies obliged without a second thought, dropping me to the ground the way a vulture would a mangled, picked-over carcass, before they flew off.

I managed to land on my feet, somehow, but the impact caused both my legs to buckle, and I ended up on all-fours in the dirt. I tried to push myself up to standing, but my legs wouldn't listen, so I settled for my hands instead, dragging myself forward with desperate, shaking fingers as the ground vibrated with each leather-booted step of the goblin's fast approach.

It took him all of two seconds to reach me. “Going somewhere, pixie?” he asked, plucking me up like a fistful of daisies.

“Don't eat me!” I cried, squirming as hard as I could. “I'm poisonous! See? No wings! Diseased!”

“Lies,” replied the goblin, silencing me with a squeeze.

My eyes were bulging from their sockets. “...s'true,” I wheezed.

His grip was unyielding, but the slight crease between his brows was not; it deepened as my words settled over him, then deepened again as he pondered. “Poisonous, eh?” he muttered, loosening his grip ever so slightly to consider me in full. His golden eyes were like two chunks of amber, and there was something feline about the shape of his pupils. He studied me the way

you would a handful of berries after discovering a moldy culprit. “Ah well,” he said at last.

“Nothing a little roasting can’t fix.”

“No!” I squeaked. “You can’t—”

Another squeeze. “Be quiet.”

“But—”

“Silence!” he growled, sending a waft of putrid breath my way.

All I could do was wheeze in response, so I took my chances and went for a bite of his finger.

I clamped down hard with all my might, but you’d think I was a mosquito from the lackluster response this elicited. I was hoping he would cry out and drop me, but I didn’t even get a snarl.

He just shook his head—*tsk!*—and began rooting around in his pocket, brow furrowed as he searched. When he found the glass bottle he’d been looking for, I almost passed out in a wave of nausea.

“Looking a little green there pixie,” he cackled. “Maybe you are poisonous, after all.” He popped the cork with a flick of his thumb, then plunked me feet-first into the bottle. I landed like a fawn on ice, my limbs all pins-and-needles.

“Someone at camp will know how to cook you,” he mused, bending down to retrieve the cork.

I slammed my fist against the glass. “I’ll suffocate before we get there!”

He paused mid-crouch to scratch at his chin. “Pixies *do* taste better when they’re fresh...”

“Exactly! So why don’t you just—”

He cut me off with a shake of the bottle. “No more lies,” he warned, brandishing a crooked little knife that seemed to have come out of nowhere. He stabbed at the ground with the speed of a viper, and it wasn’t until he replaced the mangled cork that I realized why. “Air hole,” he

explained, lips pulling back into a grin. “Consider it a gift.”

“No!” I screamed. “Let me go!”

The goblin only cackled as he slid me into his pocket. “Poisonous,” he snorted. “*Tch.*”

I cried out for help again and again, but of course there was no one to hear me; I was more alone than ever now, curled up and crying at the bottom of a bottle without even a shadow to soothe me.

---

I looked up from my crying and froze as the goblin came to a sudden halt. “Home at last,” he announced, groaning in relief as he shook out his legs and stretched (a move that sent me tumbling to one side of the bottle and back again in a cartwheel of pain). “How’s it going in there, pixie?” he asked, peeking into his pocket. “You’re still alive, so the air hole must be working.”

I squinted up at him through the glass, eyes tingling as they adjusted to the sunlight. He looked like a distorted green blob of evilness, and I decided that I’d never hated anyone more in my life. “I’m going to swim through your arteries and chew up your heart,” I said.

“Again, that’s what the roasting is for,” he replied.

“I’ll roast *you* if you don’t let me out of here!”

He let out a bark of disbelief. “You’re a feisty one, I’ll give you that.”

I had run out of threats and insults, so I settled on a rude gesture instead, ears burning at the sheer indignity of it all.

“How crass,” he drawled. “Did the toad teach you that one?”

I couldn’t decide whether to laugh or scream. “Nox...?”

The goblin grinned. “Gotcha.”

“Let me out of here!”

“Okay, okay! Yeesh.” He removed the cork, lowered to a squat, then tipped me out onto the ground.

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded. “I could have died in there!”

He waved my concern away with a lazy flap of his goblin hand. “That’s why I gave you an air hole.”

“Oh! How generous of you!” My voice was shrill and scathing, and I wanted each word to have teeth of its own. “You might be a backstabbing liar, but at least you’re not a *murderous* backstabbing liar, right? Friend of the century right there.”

The goblin’s eyes went wide. “Whoa, hold on—backstabbing liar? Really? Don’t you think that’s a little...intense?”

“No.”

“Oh come on,” he coaxed. “I saved you from the Three Little Pests, didn’t I? That has to count for something...”

I thought back to my run-in with the bullies and sighed. He was right, of course—who knows what those dingbats would’ve done if Nox hadn’t intervened on my behalf?—but still: “I don’t like being the butt of the joke,” I said.

“Ah.” The goblin winced in understanding, then snapped his fingers and transformed into a toad. “My apologies, Hana. I didn’t mean for it to go so far; I just wanted to give you a little scare.”

“Yeah, well. Mission accomplished.” I seethed in silence for a heartbeat longer before loosing a breath and muttering, “Thanks Nox.”

“You’re very welcome,” he replied—still wary, but visibly relieved nonetheless. “If they

ever bother you again, know that I also do a very convincing manticore.”

I imagined the look on Lyari’s face and chuckled. “Now that I’d like to see.”

“Me too,” said a voice—one that I recognized immediately, and had feared I would never hear from again. I whipped around and there she was, sitting cross-legged on a rock nearby. She had changed her clothes since last I saw her (which, when it came to Twig, meant swapping one black tunic for another) but the ever-present tooth necklace still remained, looking sharp and pearly against the dark backdrop of the fabric beneath it. “Hey,” she said with a wave. “How was the bottle?”

“Absolutely terrifying,” I admitted, to which she responded with a smile.

“No kidding. I probably would have died from the shock alone if it had been me in there.”

I resisted the urge to glare at Nox. “I needed a good scare, apparently.”

She hopped down off the rock and flew to us, teeth necklace all a-clacking. “I heard about your shadow,” she said as she landed.

“Oh.” I swallowed. “And?”

“I want to help.”

“You do?”

“Of course,” she replied. “Isn’t that what friends are for?”

My heart swelled, but I knew there was something more I had to say. “I’m so sorry, Twig.”

“It wasn’t your fault—” she began, but I cut her off with a shake of my head.

“I’m the one who let her loose,” I explained. “There’s no one to blame but me.”

“That’s not true,” said Nox. “I should have known better than to let you get involved in the first place. I’m just as much to blame for this as you are.”

I responded with a half-hearted shrug. “Either way, I want to apologize to you as well.”

He blinked. “For what? Running away?”

“For *everything*,” I breathed. “The Wishing Tree, my shadow—all of it. If I could turn back time and do it all again...” I shook my head and looked up towards the darkening sky, just visible beyond the gaps in the canopy above. “I wish that I had never agreed to trade away my shadow in the first place. I wish I had been stronger. I wish—”

“No sense wasting a wish on something like that,” he replied. “You can’t change the past, after all. No one can. Better to wish for something more practical.”

“Such as...?”

“The courage to make things right, perhaps?”

I released a sigh and nodded my understanding. “But where do I even start?”

“Why not start at the beginning?” he suggested—hesitant, but with a knowing look all the same.

I knew exactly what he wanted from me, but that didn’t make it any easier to do. “What, right now?” I asked, glancing back and forth between the two of them. “Here?”

“Why not?” Twig shrugged. “That rock over there was pretty comfy. We could all fit if we squeeze...”

“No way. This place sucks. I can’t—” A raindrop hit me square in the forehead, cutting me off mid-sentence.

“Uh-oh,” said Twig, folding her wings in close to her body as she peered up towards the sky.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I know exactly where we are and where we can go for shelter.” I turned to address the toad instead. “But I’ll need some help getting there.”

“Aye-aye!” he replied, and then *poof!*—my beady-eyed steed had returned.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” I said, hopping up onto his bristly back. I looked

down to check on Twig just as a pair of arms wrapped themselves around my middle.

“What?” she asked, meeting my puzzled expression with one of her own. “It looks like fun. I want to try.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Hold on tight, then—and be sure to close your eyes in advance.”

Nox was all twitches and jitters below us. “Alright up there, you two?”

I took my own advice and closed my eyes. “Yep. Let’s go squirrelly.”

He reared back with a chitter, then paused and asked: “Wait. Where are we going again?”

“I haven’t told you yet.”

His bristly tail deflated. “Ah.”

Twig stifled a giggle, and I gave Nox a pat on the back. “Just follow my directions, okay?”

He let out another shrill, tittering cry, then took off at a run, bounding across the forest floor and up into the treetops just as the raindrops started to quicken.

## VIII

“Wow,” said Twig. “Hana...did you do all of this?”

A lopsided grin tugged at the corner of my mouth despite my best efforts to suppress it. “I have a lot of time on my hands,” I explained.

“That much is clear,” added Nox, back in his toad-form now, though I could tell from the glistening of his own eyes that he was just as impressed with my collection as Twig was.

I held my arms out wide in front of me. “Welcome to Fort Misfit.”

I had stumbled upon the place years ago, and now it was my best kept and most beloved little secret. At first it had been nothing more than an abandoned nest inside the time-worn hollow of a gnarled old oak. But each adventure brought with it a new treasure—a tuft of fur one day, a four-

leaf clover the next—and soon the nest had become a treasure trove of woodland trinkets and fairy-sized fittings not unlike the one I had seen inside the hollow of the Wishing Tree. The climb up was difficult without my wings, but it was always worth it, for there was nowhere else in the world that felt safer.

“Amazing,” breathed Twig, bending down to examine a woven basket full of lustrous pebbles. “Where did you find all these?”

“Here and there,” I replied, running a hand through my knotted hair. “The forest floor is full of treasures, you just notice them more on your feet. You can take one, if you like.”

She smiled and pocketed the stone she was holding. “Thanks.”

“I hope it’s a lucky one,” I said with a wink.

The rain was coming down in earnest now, hissing like a basilisk as it doused the leafy canopy above. I imagined my shadow prowling around out there all alone and I suppressed a shiver; wherever she was, I hoped it was at least somewhere dry.

Nox broke the silence with a clumsy clearing of his throat. “So,” he said, settling in and crossing one chubby little arm over the other. “Let’s talk.”

I lowered myself down to a cross-legged position and leaned back against a pine-cone. “I still don’t know what you expect to uncover, but fine. What exactly do you want to know?”

The toad took a deep breath before speaking, and the words that followed were clipped and precise, as if he’d practiced them before. “Your shadow is a menace, Hana. She is causing harm to this forest and those who dwell within it, and I need your help to stop her. I don’t want to upset you, but the hard truth is that we’re running out of options, and all we have left is each other. Three brains work better than one, but it’s *your* brain that needs to start the thinking. You know her better than anyone, so please—won’t you talk to us?”

Twig scooted in a little bit closer. “Just tell us your story,” she suggested. “It doesn’t have to be perfect. We’ll be the ones listening for clues, so all you have to do is talk.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Nonsense,” said Nox. “You talk all the time.”

“Not about this stuff.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed,” said Twig.

“I’m not embarrassed.” *Liar*. “I’m just...”

“Stalling?”

Twig gave the toad a nudge with her elbow. “Hey. Don’t be rude.”

“Apologies,” he replied, eyes darting back to me. “I just wish that you’d believe me when I tell you that there’s nothing to worry about. You’re safe here. You don’t have to—”

“You aren’t listening to me.”

“Hana, we’re all ears—”

“No, you’re not!” I shouted. “If you were, you would have heard me loud and clear the first time: I don’t want to tell you my story. I don’t like talking about it. I don’t even like *thinking* about it...! You don’t understand. I can’t just—” I flapped my arms around wildly, totally at a loss for words. “When I talk about this stuff, it’s like I’m there again. Right smack in the middle of it all when I hated my life so much that I wanted to throw myself into the void and disappear forever just for a chance to rest for a while—for a chance to *breathe* without the constant weight of my own miserable existence pressing down on me from all sides, everywhere, all the time. You have no idea what I’ve been through...”

“We might if you told us,” Twig said, a deep crease between her brows. “But I get it. Sorry for pushing you.”

I relaxed my shoulders with an exasperated sigh. “You don’t have to be sorry. You’re just trying to help, and I’m mostly frustrated with myself, anyway.”

“Now that I don’t get,” she replied. “What do you mean?”

Even I had to think about it for a moment. “I don’t think you realize how much I *want* to be the hero here. How much I *want* to save the day...” I leaned back against the pine cone and closed my eyes, silently willing myself to be brave. “I’m not trying to be stubborn. I’m just...” *too afraid*, I almost said, but I knew they wouldn’t get it, so I followed up with this instead. “It takes everything I have each day just to survive this place. Just to get up in the morning and pretend that their taunts don’t bother me, or that their stupid questions don’t bother me, or that I’m *not* silently screaming at the top of lungs all the time, desperate for someone to hear me...”

“Oh Hana—” Twig began, but I cut her off with a shake of my head. “It takes everything I have each day just to survive this place,” I repeated, “and I do it by *not talking about it*. I might be screaming like a banshee on the inside, but *they* don’t need to know that...I’d be done for if everyone really knew how sad it all makes me.”

Twig’s knuckles were white where she clutched at her necklace. “I won’t tell a soul. I swear it on every tooth.”

Nox was eager to agree. “I don’t have any teeth in this form, but I can give you my word as a guardian instead. It stays with us, Hana. Promise.”

I was almost too stunned to reply. “That really means a lot to me. Thank you.”

Twig laid a hand on my shoulder and nodded her understanding. “You don’t have to explain yourself anymore, okay? We can talk about something else for a while. Take a break and come back to it.”

It was a tempting offer, but I knew that I couldn’t accept it. Not with my shadow out there

slinking around the way she was. “We don’t have time to take a break,” I sighed, “but that’s okay, because...”—*blink, swallow, here it goes*—“I think I’m ready now.”

“Really?” Twig replied. “I mean—that’s great!—but what changed?”

I thought about it for a moment, then shrugged when nothing came to me. All I knew was that I felt lighter than I had in years—giddy, even—and the novelty of that sensation alone was enough to encourage me to explore it further. “I guess I just changed my mind,” I said. “Don’t jinx it, okay?”

I had meant the last as a joke, but I could tell it hadn’t landed by the way her eyes widened in response. “No way. I’m done talking. It’s your turn now.” She brought two fingers to her lips and mimed the act of sewing them shut before gesturing for me to begin.

*Alright, I told myself. You can do this.*

And somehow, finally, I did.

I started from the beginning and told it all the way through to the present, surprising even myself with how easily the words came to me once I was finally willing to unleash them. I started by talking about confusion, first: the nauseating sense of disconnect that accompanied the initial noticing—*What’s this? A hole?*—and the way my hands shook as I examined my wing. “Everyone told me it was nothing to worry about,” I said, “but they couldn’t have been more wrong if they tried.”

Because it wasn’t nothing. Not even close. It was more like an omen, or a prophecy, and what it foretold was the end of my innocence. Like a metamorphosis in reverse, the next chapter of my life would transform me in ways that only loss and humiliation can do, battering away at my sense of self a little bit more each day until there was nothing left to batter, and I was left living in the body of a stranger. Hana of the Fae was dead and gone, and “Little Larva” had been

put in her place. “Wingless Freak, Ugly Grub, Mutant, Worm...” The names were endless, really—so many to choose from!—though my least favourite had always been “Wings.”

*‘Sup Wings?*

*Watch yourself, Wings.*

Or, most clever and creative of all, a simple, bellowing cry of *WIIIIINGS!* from across the way whenever I was unlucky enough to be spotted by one (or many) of my peers. “You’d think they’d get tired of it,” I muttered, “but nope.” The meaner the name, the better it sticks, and mine were incredibly nasty. They stuck to me like burrs, pernicious and prickly, and I still haven’t managed to shake them. I’d be “Little Larva” until the day I died, for all I knew, and there was nothing I could do to change that. I tried standing up to a group of them, once—near the flowerbeds at school where we learned how to make things grow—but it didn’t change anything; my anger only made them laugh harder, and my tears were just proof of my powerlessness, so I went home that day and screamed until my throat was raw and raspy, knowing that I was destined to suffer just as much again the next day, and then the next day, and then the next day again after that.

“Do you know what it feels like to go to school each day knowing that everyone there wants to hurt you?” I asked. “Or what it feels like to be walking around, just minding your own business, only for a complete stranger to come up and ask what’s wrong with you?”

I remember being told over and over again that ‘we all go through something’—which, alright, sure—but why did *my* something have to happen so soon? I wasn’t ready yet. How could I have been? I was just a kid, greener than a patch of clover, and all I could do in response to my ‘something’ was learn how to quietly endure.

*Cornered by a pack of bullies? Endure.*

Laughed at and excluded by a group of my so-called ‘friends’? *Endure.*

Pushed out of a tree on purpose? *Endure.*

But even I could only endure so much before snapping, and once I was broken, there was no going back. Enduring was only possible while I believed there was something worth holding out for, and once I finally understood that there wasn’t, that I’d be stuck like this for the rest of my life no matter how long I endured, or hard I fought against it, well...

You know the rest.

And now, finally, so did they.

“I just want to be happy,” I finished. “That’s all. I want to be happy so bad it hurts, and if there’s one thing I’m really afraid of—like, deeply, *desperately* afraid of—it’s the thought that I never will be. Does that make any sense?”

Twig nodded immediately, causing the tears in her eyes to trickle. “I’m so sorry, Hana.”

“For what? You didn’t do anything.”

“Exactly,” she replied. “I’m sorry that I never stood up for you more.”

“Oh. It’s okay. It was enough that you were nice to me when no one else was. It always meant a lot to me, even if I never said it.”

“Why are they so awful?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “To be honest, it’s not as bad as it used to be. Lyari and her friends still like to pick on me, sure, but everyone else tends to leave me alone now for the most part. They’re the only ones who still actively try to make my life harder than it already is.”

She frowned. “Then why don’t you come to school anymore?”

I shrugged. “Because no one wants me there.”

“I want you there,” she countered. “And you really shouldn’t wander the woods alone. It’s

dangerous. You never know what sort of—”

“I don’t care.”

She studied me through narrowed eyes. “What do you mean?”

“It’s exactly how it sounds. If I’m out in the woods and an owl swoops down and eats me up—well, so be it.”

“Oh Hana,” breathed Nox. “Surely you don’t mean that?”

I simply shrugged again and looked away, unsure of what else to say.

“But...why?” asked Twig, her voice little more than a whisper.

“Weren’t you listening?” I snapped. “Because it’s hard to be a freak, that’s why. It’s exhausting, and I’m tired of it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being different,” started Nox, but I cut him off with a scoff.

“Easy for you to say! You can look however you want—*be* whoever you want—while I’ll be stuck in this ugly, defective body for the rest of my life, and there’s nothing—*nothing*—I can do about it.” I buried my face in my hands and mumbled, “I’m completely powerless.”

“Powerless?” repeated the toad. “Oh no—I don’t think so.”

I lifted my head. “Oh really?”

“Yes, really. Don’t you remember what Yial’shi said? *Words are powerful*. Have you ever considered that there is power in the way you speak to yourself? In the way you speak *about* yourself?”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “What are you getting at?”

“Don’t you hear the words that come out of your mouth?” he asked. “*Ugly. Broken. Defective...*” he shook his head as he listed them off. “Tell me—are those *your* words?”

“I—” My lip had started to quiver. “I don’t—”

“And when you call yourself a freak,” he continued. “Is that *your* voice?”

I thought of Lyari, Saida, and Feylin. “No,” I whispered, tears prickling at my eyes. “It’s not.”

“Then maybe it’s time that you told that voice to shut it,” he replied. Then, softer now, “You don’t have to listen to that voice anymore, Hana. Find your own voice, and maybe you’ll discover that you’re much less powerless than you think you are.”

I chewed on that for a moment, then I inhaled deeply and said, “I understand what you’re saying, but...”

“But what?” prompted Twig, laying a tentative hand on my shoulder.

“Sometimes I just feel so sad—so...*angry!*—like I’ve been cheated, or...I don’t know!” I buried my face in my hands and started to sob.

For a while, neither of them said anything. They just sat there and let me cry, listening to the steady pattering of the rain outside. Then, in a tiny, hesitant voice, Twig said, “They make fun of me too, you know.”

I looked up from my sobbing and resisted the urge to glance at her necklace. I already knew this, of course, but it felt rude to say so in the moment. “They do?”

She nodded. “They call me the Tooth Faerie, which wouldn’t be so bad if they didn’t also run away whenever they saw me, clamping a hand over their mouths in mock horror as if I were about to steal their molars.”

“That’s terrible,” said Nox. “I like your necklace. It’s very pointy.”

“Thanks,” Twig replied. “I do too. That’s why I wear it.”

“Because it’s pointy?”

“No. Well, yeah, sure—that too. But what I meant was: I wear it because I like it. Faerie girls

are supposed to be all cute and dainty, right? Like little spring flowers.” She stuck out her tongue and pretended to barf. “Me? I’m more of a mushroom. I prefer the darkness.”

I had to laugh at that. “I think I’m more of a mushroom, too.”

She tried to smile back at me, but the gesture fell flat on her face. “I’m not trying to like...make this all about me or something. Sorry if it came across that way.”

“It didn’t,” I replied. “It’s kinda nice to know I’m not the only one they torment, even if it sucks big-time for the both of us.”

“Well, you know what they say about misery and company.”

“Ha. Yeah. Although...I think I’m more familiar with misery than I am with company,” I admitted. “I don’t really have a lot of friends.”

“Well, you do now,” she replied, slapping Nox on the back and grinning from ear to ear. “But seriously. They’re a bunch of turds, Hana. Lyari, Saida, Feylin, all of them. Just great big turds one and all. They’re mean because they’re miserable, so try not to let them get to you. You’re so much cooler than all of them combined, trust me.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh yeah. That whole lone-wolf thing you do? Very cool. It’s like you have a secret identity or something.”

“Maybe I do,” I replied, mouth twitching upwards into a smile. “What do you think, Mr. Toad?”

I turned back to Nox and frowned when I saw the vacant, glassy-eyed expression that had overtaken his features. “Nox?” I said. “Are you—”

His eyes snapped back into focus. “She’s taken the shard.”

His words were like a slap to the face, and I was up and on my feet within seconds. The shard

was just a sliver in comparison to the larger shooting star it once came from, but its magic was potent, and it had kept the creatures of Smallhollow safe for as long as anyone could remember. Without it, every single creature who lived there was now vulnerable to attack, and it was entirely my fault.

“Where has she taken it?” I asked.

The toad closed his eyes in concentration, then released his held breath with a groan. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I can’t see that far in the rain.”

“What’s going to happen to the town without the shard?” Twig whispered. “Without its magic to protect us...”

“Everyone’s in danger,” I finished for her. “Yeah. I know.”

She stared back at me with wide, fearful eyes, as if she still couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. “We have to stop her. Have to retrieve the shard and put it back, have to—”

“I know!” I repeated, dragging my hands down my face. And though I had no idea how I would do it, I added, “I will.”

“But Hana,” implored the toad, “are you sure you’re ready?”

“No,” I replied. “But I’m going to try anyway.”

He opened his mouth to reply, then snapped it shut and nodded his understanding.

I turned to Twig. “Stay with Nox,” I said. “You’ll be safe out here as long as you stick with him.”

“But I want to come with you,” she pleaded. “How am I supposed to watch your back from here?”

I shook my head and gestured to the falling rain. “You can’t fly there with wet wings,” I said, fully aware of the irony implicit in this statement, “and besides,” I glanced at Nox again and

stood up a little bit taller, “this is something I have to do myself. She’s my shadow, after all. Nobody knows her better than I do.”

“Aren’t you afraid?” asked Twig.

I surprised them both with a short, humourless laugh. “Terribly so. But I’m not going to let that stop me. Not this time.”

“Remember,” cautioned the toad, “‘the right words are already inside of you, waiting for you to find them.’ You’re much stronger than you think you are, Hana dear. Don’t forget it.”

“Thanks Nox.”

“Be careful,” said Twig, surprising me with a hug from behind.

I patted awkwardly at her arms, a flush creeping up my neck. “I will be, don’t worry.”

She let go, and I walked over to the nest’s entrance to peer out into the grey gloom of the sodden forest beyond. Without my wings, it didn’t matter if I got wet, but that didn’t make the idea of heading out into the rain any more appealing.

“Well,” I said, turning back to look over my shoulder—to look at my *friends*—one last time.

“Wish me luck.”

## IX

The rain proved to be more of an obstacle than I’d thought it would be. The waxy green leaf that I had plucked up off the ground to cover my head as I ran did little to protect me from the bone-deep chill of the pelting rain, and the sodden earth below my feet was so thick and mucky that I eventually had to abandon my leaf in favour of a walking stick so as to avoid being knocked over, swept up and carried away by the merciless flood waters that zigzagged through the undergrowth alongside me as I ran.

Needless to say, by the time I crossed the mushroom border and arrived in Smallhollow, I was thoroughly soaked (and soiled) from head to toe and shivering so violently that I thought my poor teeth might crack and shatter in my mouth. I took a moment to catch my breath under the spotted cap of a large toadstool and tried not to think about the dry warmth of the nest that I had so foolishly abandoned, never mind the support and guidance of the friends that I had left behind inside of it.

I knew that it was all up to me now, but I still didn't know exactly what 'it' even meant. I had to find my shadow and either convince her to return the shard or somehow steal it back from her, but I still had no idea what I was supposed to do or say to accomplish either of those options. Even if I did manage to find the right words—would she listen to them? I thought back to our argument in the alley and sighed, fully expecting that I would soon be embroiled in another one whether I found the right words or not.

Either way, I knew that I had to do something. The rain might keep the predators at bay for now, but once it cleared? I shuddered to imagine it, and the thought alone was enough to persuade my numb, mud-spattered feet to keep moving, drawing me out from under the relative shelter of the spotted toadstool and out into the flooded, empty streets of Smallhollow once more.

I arrived at the moss-covered, hollowed out stump known as Starkeep to find its treasure stolen and its guards—two brown mice that I recognized as my neighbours, Pebble and Winky—passed out in a furry heap on the ground, snoring contentedly (much to my relief) despite the fact that they had probably been placed in such a position by my wicked, nasty double. Again, I wondered what this sort of behaviour said about my shadow, and what this sort of behaviour said about me.

What *did* my shadow want? Nox had asked me that question after the disaster that was our traipse through the marketplace, and I still didn't know the answer. She wanted revenge—that was clear—but against whom, exactly? The entire town? I hated this place just as much as she did, but I would never in a million years think to do what she had done and doom them all to ruin by running off into the woods with the shard...

*Or would I?* whispered a tiny, treacherous voice inside my head.

A voice that I could ignore no longer, even if I was afraid to listen to it.

*To know your shadow is to know yourself*—Yial'shi had said those words to me, and up until this point I had thought that I understood why. My shadow was a reflection of who I was, yes, but now I was starting to realize that, like a mirror, the inverse was also true, and that I was just as much a reflection of my shadow as she was a reflection of me.

Do you see the difference? It might be subtle, but it matters, for I was now beginning to understand that the problem wasn't so much that I didn't know what my shadow wanted, but that I had been too afraid to ask her. I had been so concerned with what her behaviour said about me that I had failed to consider what *my* behaviour said about her. So concerned with finding the right words that I hadn't considered the value of simply shutting my mouth and listening to hers.

Because I was afraid to. There's no other way to put it; I was afraid to listen to my shadow because I was afraid of what she would say, and what I might learn about myself in the process.

How much fear—how much anger, and misery, and shame—had she eaten over these long years in order for me to have survived this long? What memories had she swallowed on my behalf to save me from reliving them over and over again in my dreams? When I thought back on everything that had happened to me, I often wondered: *how did I do it? How am I still here?* Now, I knew that it had been my shadow all along, eating up the pain that I tried so desperately

to push away even when she was already full of it because I hadn't been ready—or even able—to deal with it all myself at the time.

She had been there beside me all along, helping me to survive, and what had I done? I had sold her out—traded her away without a moment's hesitation—because I thought it would bring me happiness, and put an end to my troubles once and for all.

But trouble doesn't disappear so easily. It lingers, like an ember smouldering in the ashes of our memories, until it grows so hot that it erupts into flame again and threatens to consume us. I couldn't let that happen with my shadow; I had to find her and tend to the blazing inferno between us before it was too late to put it out.

Luckily, the fact that she was *my* shadow also meant that there were footprints to follow—a trail of craters through the mud that hadn't yet been washed away completely by the pouring rain. Again, I couldn't help but smile at the irony of it all—the fact that if it had been any other faerie in this same situation, there wouldn't have been a trail to follow. *Then again*, I thought, *if it had been any other faerie, I wouldn't be out in this rain at all now, would I?* It was a thought that would have sent me spiralling at any other point in my life, but now? Now it seemed kind of funny—hilarious even—and though I didn't quite know what to make of this change at the time, I tucked it away in the back of my mind for later and kept moving, determined to find my shadow before she did something that neither she nor I could ever hope to undo.

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The footprints led to the hollowed-out remains of a fallen tree—long-dead, it seemed, and covered in a vibrant patchwork of trailing vines, mushroom clusters, and soft green moss. A golden glow trickled out through the cracks and fissures, illuminating the log like a beacon in the dark and confirming my shadow's presence within.

*This is it*, I told myself, heart thundering inside my chest as I steeled myself for the confrontation to come. *No running, no turning back. I am Hana of the fae, and I am not afraid.*

I took a deep breath and followed the trail-end of the footprints into the log. Inside, I found my shadow crouched down low against the wall, lost in thought as she stared at the glowing artifact cupped between her tiny hands. She looked exactly like me, only angrier, more exhausted, and—I noticed with a jolt of curiosity—much less...opaque. She looked shabbier now than she did at the market, and it seemed like her colour was starting to fade.

“Hello, Shadow,” I said, reaching up to push back the sodden hood of my rain-drenched tunic.

She was up and on her feet in an instant. “Go away,” she hissed, lips pulling back into a snarl as she clutched the shard against her chest.

I shook my head. “Not until you agree to stop this nonsense and put that back where it came from.”

She tipped her head back and laughed. “Why would I do that when it took so much effort to steal it?”

“You know why,” I scolded, brows knitting together in what I hoped was a look of searing disappointment. “How could you?”

“Easily,” she replied, eyes narrowing in contempt. “Once the rain lets up, I’m going to climb to the top of the tallest tree I can find and chuck this thing as far as I can.” Her lips curved upwards into a grin so hateful it pained me to behold. “I hope it shatters into stardust so fine it scatters like dandelion fluff on the wind.”

I closed my mouth with a snap and scrambled for some sort of response to that.

“You know it as well as I do,” she continued, eyeing me warily as she gauged my reaction.

“They deserve it—each and every one of them—and there’s nothing you can do or say to change my mind, so don’t even bother to try.”

*Fine*, I thought, inhaling deeply. *Then here it is*. “Revenge won’t grow our wings back.”

She flinched, then straightened, eyes blazing with fury as she raised her chin and considered me past the length of her upturned nose. “I know that.”

“Then why?” I pleaded. “What do you want, Shadow?”

“I want them to suffer as much as I have,” she snapped. “I want them to regret every insult, every humiliation, every patronizing, pitying glare...” She was breathing hard now, tightening her grip on the glowing shard between her fingers. “I won’t let them get it away with it all. I *can’t*.”

“Alright,” I conceded. “But then what will you do?”

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion, as if she didn’t quite comprehend my meaning.

“After you get your revenge,” I elaborated. “What will you do then?”

“Whatever I want,” she shot back.

“That’s not—” I cut myself off with a groan and shook my head. “Revenge isn’t the answer, Shadow.”

“Oh? Then what is?”

I wanted so desperately to provide her with an answer, but I didn’t have one, so I just shrugged and said, “We’ll just have to figure that out together.”

“Together?” she repeated, eyes widening in disbelief. “You *sold* me!”

“It was a terrible mistake, and I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care,” she snarled. “You betrayed me, and I’ll never forgive you for it.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me.”

“Then what do you want?”

Despite everything, I couldn't help but smile softly as I replied: “The same thing that you want, apparently—to stop hurting.”

Her glossy eyes flashed with recognition, but she didn't respond right away, so I forced myself to continue before I had the chance to falter. “I really am sorry, Shadow.”

The tears were streaming down her face now, but for once she didn't snap back at me. Rather, she surprised me with a look of genuine heartache as she whispered, “Why?”

I blinked. “For selling you out, of course...”

“No,” she shook her head. “I meant—why'd you do it?”

“Oh.” I ran a hand through my wet hair and looked away, face flushing. “You know why.”

She frowned. “I want to hear it from you.”

“Fine,” I snapped, meeting her eyes once more. “You want to know why I did it? Because I'm tired. I'm tired of waking up every day only to spend it alone, crying and moping about and *hating* myself for something that is completely outside of my control, but that I still can't accept because I know that I'll never be whole again no matter what I do, or how long I stick it out.

“I sold you because I thought it was my last chance at happiness. I thought it would solve all of my problems, but I was wrong. It was all a lie, and I was so desperate for a solution that I let myself believe it even though I knew it was too easy, too good to be true...I tried to wish my pain away, and look what happened—I was duped by a false promise, the same way you're being duped by your desire for revenge right now. It might make you feel like you're taking your power back in the moment, but it won't change anything; the pain will still be there afterwards, and always will be until we figure out a way to soothe it together.”

Again, she didn't respond right away, but I could tell my words had struck a chord with her,

and so I kept going. “You don’t have to forgive me,” I said, standing up a little bit taller. “But I can’t let you do this.” I pointed to the glowing shard and summoned every ounce of courage I possessed before looking her square in the eye and demanding: “Put it back.”

For the briefest of moments, I almost thought she’d do it. Her face was a mask of unwavering self-assurance, but even still I could have sworn I saw a sliver of doubt flickering through the cracks of her bravado as she considered the glowing shard clasped between her shaking fingers. But just when I thought I’d had her convinced, she pivoted on the balls of her feet and tore off down the length the of log and out into the rain on the other side.

I followed her into the storm, clinging to my walking stick as the rain pelted down on me from above. “Shadow!” I bellowed, peering out into the gloom beneath a raw, trembling hand as I searched for her. “Shadow, where—”

“Help!”

I stumbled through the dripping bushes and found her stranded on the other side, belly-deep in a mud puddle with only a thistle weed to cling to. The rain was borderline torrential now—the forest floor all thick and soupy. I had to rescue her before the flooding began, but I paused when my eyes landed on the tell-tale glow of the shard in front of her, pulsing faintly in the mud where she’d dropped it.

“Help me,” she pleaded, eyes wide with fear as she sunk a little bit deeper. “It’s too deep—I’m stuck!”

I stood there as if frozen, eyes darting back and forth between my stranded shadow and the ancient, glowing treasure I had come all this way to retrieve.

“Please,” she added, voice small and fragile against the hiss of the rain through the leaves.

I only hesitated for a moment before wading forward and extending my walking stick

towards her. “Grab on,” I said. “I won’t abandon you again.”

She let go of her thistle and grabbed hold of the stick. “It’s slippery!” she complained.

“Just hold on tight.” I dug my heels into the thick sludge at my feet and pulled back with every ounce of strength I had left in me, yanking her out of the ground like a stubborn weed and sending us both sprawling backwards into the muck.

But before I could even think to celebrate, she was up and on her feet again, sprinting off towards the abandoned shard. I used my stick to lift me back up to standing, though my legs were much wobblier than expected, my feet all numb and clumsy. I stumbled towards my shadow as she plucked the shard up off the ground, holding it close to her chest as she studied it.

“Shadow,” I said, sagging against my stick. “You must put it back.”

She didn’t respond. Didn’t even look at me. She stood there as if transfixed, captivated by the shard and whatever it was she saw reflected in its otherworldly glow.

“Shadow,” I tried again, my sense of determination faltering by the second. “*Please don’t do this!*”

She wrenched her gaze away from the shard and stared back at me through the pouring rain, eyes flickering with suspicion as they bored into my own, searching for signs of treachery. I lifted my chin and held her gaze, clinging to my stick for dear life as my exhausted limbs wobbled and shook beneath me.

Finally, she tore her eyes away from mine and squeezed them shut, lips pulling back into a grimace as she howled into the storm. “It’s not fair!”

“I know,” I said, because I did know, and it wasn’t.

“I just want to be like everybody else!”

“I know,” I said again, because for most of my brief existence, that was all I had ever wanted,

too. “But we aren’t, and that’s ok. We’re just different, and—”

“I don’t *like* being different!”

I took a step forward. “You don’t have to like it, you just...” I cut myself off with a shake of my head and tried again. “Our wings are gone, Shadow. We’ll never stop hurting if we can’t learn to accept that.”

She bared her teeth in a snarl. “I will *never* accept that.”

“Why?” I asked, though deep down I already knew the answer.

“Because,” she began, lip quivering. “Because then...” She burst into a sob and sank to her knees. “Because then I’ll have nothing left to fight for! No hope, no cure...nothing!”

“Not nothing,” I countered, taking another hesitant step towards her. “You have me, and I have you—”

“No,” she hissed, hugging the shard in tight against her chest like a dragon curling itself around its hoard.

I closed the gap between us with a final step, and kneeled down next to her in the rain. Neither of us said anything at first, but she didn’t flinch when I put a hand on her shoulder, and so I left it there, feeling the rise and fall of each ragged breath as she began to shake and sob.

Three times I turned to her and opened my mouth to speak, but each time the words got caught in my throat, and I ended up right back where I started, opening and closing my mouth like a weary songbird as I scrambled for the right words, or really any words at all, to close the final wound between us and put an end to this struggle once and for all.

But in the end, it was my shadow who beat me to it.

“I’m tired too,” she said—three little words that had me sagging forward as hot tears flooded into my eyes.

“I know,” I replied. “I’m so sorry, Shadow. Please come back to me. I’m ready to be your friend again.”

She looked down at the shard glowing in her lap, then up at me again, eyes lingering on the hand I had placed on her shoulder. She breathed in, breathed out, then finally, just as I was beginning to worry, nodded once in acceptance before taking up the glowing treasure and extending it out to me on an open palm.

Barely daring to breathe, I reached out with a trembling hand and snatched the shard away from her much more quickly than I had meant to, causing her to flinch in response. I pocketed the shard before she could think to change her mind, then grabbed my walking stick and used it to hoist myself up off the ground. Then, smiling down at her from above, I extended a tentative hand her way.

She only hesitated for a moment before heaving a sigh and extending her own hand forward, which I used to lift her up. “You look like a drowned rat,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her as she looked me over from head to toe.

“So do you,” I replied, gesturing to her dripping, tangled hair and mud-covered clothing.

And much to my surprise, she actually smiled at that. “Makes sense.”

I returned her smile, then held my arms out awkwardly in front of me.

She considered me down the length of her nose, then uncrossed her arms with a sigh before taking a step forward into my open embrace.

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around her. She stiffened in response, but I held tight, squeezing her in close against my thumping heart as we stood there waiting for something to happen.

But in the end, it simply wasn’t enough. I opened my eyes and leaned back to consider her at

arm's length. "Won't you come back to me?" I pleaded.

"I'm trying!" she replied. We embraced again, this time more desperately, but still nothing happened. She looked at me then with wide, fearful eyes before whispering, "What do we do now?"

I squinted up at the drizzling grey sky and frowned, considering. "Looks like the storm's almost over," I said, fingering the jagged piece of shooting star inside my pocket as I gathered what little strength I had left for the muddy trek to come. "Let's start by getting this thing back where it belongs," I continued. "After that..."

"We'll work on figuring out all the rest of it."

I smiled, then gestured towards the bushes with a tilt of my chin. "Just try to keep up this time, okay?"

## X

To their credit, neither Pebble nor Winky ever breathed a word of what happened, though I suspect this was more out of a desire to protect their own reputations than out of any sense of loyalty towards me. They were still asleep when I returned with the shard, so I was able to put it back without either of them having noticed it was gone, but still—the grizzled old mice remembered everything that had happened in the moments before it was stolen, and for that I owed them an explanation. Luckily, I now had Shadow there to do it for me—and what a marvellous job she did. She told them everything (well, almost everything; she left out the part about actually having stolen the shard, of course) and much to my surprise, they didn't bother to interrogate us any further once she had finished. They still didn't seem entirely convinced by our story, but the fact that there were two of us standing there before them must have been proof

enough, for they accepted our apology with a terse nod and a grumble and then sent us on our way again, eager to be rid of us. The shard was safe and shimmering, and that was all that mattered to them. Everything else would be our little secret, we had decided, and I was more than happy to oblige.

As for the others—well, that’s where it gets a bit murkier. I returned to the nest as soon as I could, but where I expected to find two friends waiting for me, I instead found only one, fast asleep upon a pile of leaves with her green wings draped elegantly overtop of her like a blanket. I managed to rouse her easily enough, but as we spoke, it soon became obvious that Twig had no idea what had happened to Nox, nor where he might have gone to. He seemed to have disappeared completely, and I admit that it hurt my feelings. I figured that he must have had his reasons, being a guardian and all, but still—after everything that had happened, I would have at least appreciated a goodbye.

Even so, I couldn’t help but search for him. The old toad had been a good friend to me, and I wanted to thank him for it. I figured that he might have returned to the pond where we had first met, but for whatever reason, I couldn’t find the place again for the life of me. Wherever Nox had disappeared to, it seemed like he had taken the pond—and the Tree—with him, and I soon grew tired of searching.

Luckily, I had plenty of other concerns to occupy my mind during this time, most of them related to my shadow. She had forgiven me for my betrayal, and we had returned the shard together, but we still couldn’t figure out how to reverse the strange magic that had separated us from one another in the first place. We tried everything that we could think of, even going so far as to try colliding into one another as hard as we could, but it was no use—in the end, we remained two sundered halves of a whole, and there was nothing we could do to change that.

It wasn't so bad at first, living this way. Time passed, and with it came a change in season. I kept my shadow hidden out at the nest, where I would visit with her every day after school, sometimes alone, and other times with Twig there beside me too. We spent most of our time in conversation, swapping stories and getting to know one another, and—when it came to Shadow and I—learning how to live together as friends again after everything that had happened between us.

But as time went on, it soon became apparent that my shadow wasn't meant to be separated from me for as long as she had been. Without my fear to sustain her, she was slowly beginning to fade. Faerie food did nothing for her, and each day she grew a little bit thinner, and a little less opaque, withering away before my eyes just like the changing leaves of fall above us. I worried that she too might disappear completely the way Nox had done if I didn't somehow find a way to feed her soon.

And so, with no one else to turn to, I decided to try consulting Yial'shi the spider once more. If there was anyone in the forest who might know how to help me, I figured it would be her. But just as I was on the verge of convincing my gaunt, sickly shadow to join me, I heard it—a voice like a whisper on the wind, calling out my name and beckoning me to follow.

And when I did, this time, after weeks of fruitless searching, we finally found the pond.

It was exactly as I remembered it. The only thing missing was the toad.

I sighed my disappointment and turned to face my shadow, who hadn't yet followed me out from the bushes and into the clearing. "This is it," I told her. "The—"

"The Wishing Tree's pond," she finished for me, narrowing her sunken eyes and drawing her baggy cloak in tight around her. "Yeah. I remember."

"Oh," I replied, cheeks warming as I realized just what this place might mean to her. "Right.

Sorry. I should have thought—”

She cut me off with a wave of her hand, as if she were simply too exhausted to hear it. “Just show me how it works.”

I took her by the hand and led her over to the pond’s edge. “It’s magic,” I explained, kneeling down beside the water and gesturing for her to follow. “See?”

“I don’t get it,” she grumbled, tilting her head to the side. “What’s it supposed to do? All I see is me.”

I took in the sight of my own reflection and swallowed. “It’s supposed to show you that which your heart most desires.”

“Oh,” she replied, scrutinizing the pond anew. “So then...what do you see?”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “My wings, obviously.”

Shadow stiffened, then nodded her understanding. “Yeah. That’s what I figured.”

“Really?” I asked. “Because you sound pretty disappointed to me...”

“I’m just nervous,” she replied, staring at the water again and purposefully avoiding my gaze. When I didn’t ask why she was nervous, she switched tactics and asked: “What are you going to wish for?”

There was no sense in trying to deny it—why else would the Wishing Tree call me here if not to offer me a wish?—but I still bristled at the bluntness of her question, for I knew where this was going, and I didn’t want to go there. I had already given up on earning my wish back weeks ago, but the flame of hope had been rekindled within me, and I hesitated to speak about it for fear it might go out.

“Well?” she prompted.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Oh, come on. You know who you’re talking to, right?”

“Shadow—”

“That’s right. I’m your shadow. I know exactly what your heart most desires, no magic necessary.”

It was hard not to scowl at her. “Then why’d you ask?”

Shadow gestured to her emaciated torso and shrugged. “Because I was hoping you’d change your mind.”

My eyes began to fill with tears, and I didn’t bother to wipe them away. I let them trickle down my cheeks as I seethed.

“I miss them too, you know,” she continued, expression softening. “But—”

I silenced her with a shake of my head—erratic, but definitive. “I won’t let you disappear.”

“Really?”

I nodded, though I couldn’t bring myself to look her in the eye as I did it. “Yeah,” I said.

“Promise.”

She didn’t respond right away, but I knew what she was thinking by the way her eyes moved, darting back and forth beneath a furrowed brow as if searching my face for a lie. I still didn’t trust myself enough to elaborate, so I settled for repetition instead: “I promise not to let you disappear, Shadow. I’ll find a way to save you.”

Her suspicion thawed into a grin. “Thank you,” she said, pressing her forehead into my shoulder. “Seriously. Thank you so much.”

I shrugged her off and forced a smile. “You can thank me when we get there,” I said, reaching forward with a shaking finger to touch the water and activate the portal to Elsewhere. “I think this is how you do it…” I paused before making the connection, however, hand hovering

over the surface like a dragonfly.

“What’s wrong?” asked Shadow.

“Nothing,” I replied. “Just...saying goodbye.”

The smile faded from her face as she nodded. “Take your time. I understand.”

I stared into the water and considered the image in front of me. I knew better than to call it my reflection, for I now understood that it wasn’t my reflection at all, but rather a reflection of a reflection—(if that makes any sense...)—a trick of the light so powerful that it had managed to bend me out of shape more times than I could count, drawing my eye like a beacon of hope when it had been nothing but a mirage the whole time. Those weren’t my wings down there in the water, just a memory of what they had meant to me: happiness, hope, and belonging, yes, but also ugliness, anger, and grief; a hodgepodge of emotional contradictions that no longer seemed to fit me the way they used to because I was finally, *finally*, starting to outgrow them. To shed one skin for another, and leave the empty husk behind. For though the loss of my wings had changed me forever, I now understood that my metamorphosis had only just begun.

I tapped at the water and shattered the dream, obliterating my wingèd reflection as another image rippled in its wake: the Wishing Tree in all its former glory, swaying softly against the twilight backdrop of Elsewhere. Last time, the Tree in the water had been barren and lifeless, like some desiccated husk. Now, it was covered in budding silver leaves that twinkled faintly in the night-breeze despite the fact that the moon was naught but a waxing sliver in the star-filled, amethyst sky.

I turned to face my shadow. “Do you trust me?” I asked, extending a hand.

She nodded once, then placed her bony hand in mine.

“Alright,” I said, turning back to face the pond. “Here we go.”

I breathed in deep. She did the same. And together we jumped into the pond.

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*“Welcome back, little one. I am glad that you have found your way.”*

The Wishing Tree’s voice was soft and soothing, melodic even, like the most beautiful song I had ever heard. I opened my eyes and smiled at the treasure-strewn hollow around me, relieved to find it warm and welcoming now that the Wishing Tree had finally recovered its strength. Last time the hollow had felt like a tomb, dark and mysterious and haunted; but this time the walls were illuminated, overgrown with a tapestry of twinkling night-flowers whose blooming scent was almost as lovely as their glow. I had never seen nor encountered a tree-spirit before, but I swear that I saw one that day in the hollow, peeping out from its hiding place in the vines on the wall.

Shadow wasn’t as enthusiastic to be back as I was. “You don’t exactly make it easy, do you?” she mumbled, peering warily about the room.

The Tree chuckled in response, causing the whole place to shift and creak as it did so. *“No one can find me unless I want to be found,”* it explained.

“Makes sense,” she replied, relaxing some. “So how does this work, then?”

I shot her a cautionary glare. “Shadow—”

“What?” she replied, meeting my frown with one of her own and then turning to the Tree. “You’re going to grant her a wish, aren’t you?”

The Tree was unfazed by Shadow’s boldness. *“That is correct. You have done me a great service, Hana of the Fae; it is because of you that I have managed to regain control of my body, and I have decided to offer you a wish in return. Tell me what your heart most desires, and I shall use my power to make it so.”*

My hands were clenched and shaking, but my conviction remained unmovable. “I won’t abandon you again,” I said to Shadow. “I’ll use my wish to reunite us, and we’ll never be apart again.”

Shadow’s glossy eyes widened in response, but there was no joy in them. No relief.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Won’t you come back to me?”

Shadow lowered her head, meek and deflated. “I...don’t want to.”

“What?” My jaw began to tremble, my face flushing red hot. “That’s not—no! I thought you had forgiven me...”

“I do forgive you!” she pleaded. “But—”

“Then why won’t you return to me?”

“Because...” She bit at her lip in contemplation, then surprised me with a sad little smile.

“Because now I know what it’s like to feel the sun on my face. To run through the rain and fall in the mud. To laugh and scream and cry and—” she shook her head, then looked up at me with a light in her eyes that I had never once seen there before. “All I’ve ever known is the taste of fear—and now?” she smiled even wider “Now I’ve had a taste of living, and I *like* it. I want to stay this way forever. I want to live!”

“But you’re dying,” I countered. “You need me!”

Shadow hesitated before responding. “If I was a real faerie...”

*No.* “I need you!”

She surprised me with a huff of a laugh. “No you don’t. You managed to save the day without me, didn’t you? You know how to deal with your own fear now. You don’t need me anymore.”

“Yes I do!” I cried, burying my face in my hands. “I can’t—I don’t—”

I felt a pair of bony arms wrap around me, and I wilted forward into them, desperate for something to cling to as I struggled to make sense of what was happening. No wings, no shadow...what else would I be forced to lose before the day was done?

“*Well?*” prompted the Tree. “*Have you made your decision?*”

Time seemed to slow to a trickle around me, and for a moment all I could do was stare, mind reeling as I felt the final dregs of my resistance dwindling away with each agonizing, drawn-out second.

I thought about my wings, and everything that they had meant to me: freedom, belonging, happiness...

Then I looked to my shadow—my snarky, volatile, hot-headed shadow—and took in the sight of her, too: wasted, thin, and fading...

She was a part of me, and always would be. She was my shadow, my sister, my friend...and I couldn't betray her again.

“Tree?” I asked.

“*Yes?*”

“I want to give my wish to Shadow.”

“*Very well,*” it replied. “*Tell me, Shadow: what is it that your heart most desires?*”

“Go on,” I urged, forcing a smile. “Make your wish.”

Shadow closed her eyes and took a breath, bony fingers lacing together beneath her chin. “I wish to be a real faerie.”

“*It is done,*” said the Tree. And even though it didn't have a face, I knew it was smiling as it spoke.

Silver light erupted in front of my eyes, and when it cleared I was outside in the forest again,

standing face-to-face with my former shadow. She was still stick-thin, but her colour had returned, and there was a solidity to her presence now that hadn't been there before. She looked just like me—wingless and all—but the beaming smile on her face was all her own.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

Her stomach gave a grumble, and she giggled in response. “Hungry.”

I laughed, then gestured to the green space around us. “It’s a big world out there. Where do you think you’ll go first?”

“I don’t know yet,” she replied, smiling up at the sun. “Somewhere warm, I think.”

I looked down at my feet and suppressed a sigh at the lack of a shadow I saw there. “Just be careful, okay?”

She surprised me with a smirk. “I should say the same to you.”

“What do you mean?”

She gestured over my shoulder with a tilt of her chin. “Ask him.”

I turned around and there he was, sitting in his toad-form on a log nearby. “Nox!”

“The one and only,” he replied, hopping down off of the log and making his way towards us.

“Miss me?”

I couldn’t help myself: I ran forward and nearly bowled him over with the strength of my embrace. “Where were you?” I asked. “What have you been up to all this time?”

“Snipping strings,” he said with a frown. When I didn’t react to that, he added: “Remember that creature you met inside the Wishing Tree? The so-called ‘puppeteer?’”

My stomach lurched at the memory of its dark, depthless gaze. “Yeah. What about it?”

“It has a few siblings, I’m afraid. Well, many of them, actually,” he added with a grimace. “I tried speaking with one myself recently, but the attempt was completely in vain. It wouldn’t dare

reveal its intentions to me, and the responses I *did* get were all rubbish and nonsense... I don't know why they're here, but they've certainly been busy, and the forest is in great peril as a result. More and more creatures are being possessed by the day, and—" he paused to do a double-take, then narrowed his eyes and addressed my smiling double. "You're looking rather...solid."

Shadow laughed in response, but I couldn't bring myself to join her. Not yet, at least. She must have understood how I was feeling, however, for she took the lead on explaining what had happened to Nox, and once she had finished, there was a look of warm approval in both of their eyes that had me standing up just a little bit taller despite the weight of everything that had just occurred.

Still, I couldn't help but notice a trace of sadness in Nox's eyes as well. "What is it?" I asked. "Something wrong?"

He hesitated three times before responding. "You know? For once, it's me who doesn't want to talk..."

"Spit it out," said Shadow. "We can handle it."

He sighed as he turned to me. "I'm very proud of you for what you did."

"But...?"

"It is no idle thing to lose one's shadow," he continued. "There may yet be consequences to this decision that neither I nor Yial'shi could ever hope to predict."

Shadow and I looked at each other, a mutual *uh-oh* passing between us. "Consequences," I repeated, looking down at my feet. "But I thought—"

Shadow gasped, pointing towards her own feet. "Look."

"No shadow," I observed. "Great." *How confusing can this get...?* "Guess I'm not the only

one who's gonna have to manage my own fear now, eh?"

Shadow let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah. Didn't really think about that, did we?"

My stomach felt like one giant knot as I turned to Nox with desperate eyes. "What should we do?"

"Fear is a part of life," he said at last. "That's why shadows exist in the first place. It won't be easy to navigate this world without one, but that doesn't mean it can't be done. Perhaps it will get easier over time," he suggested. "Or perhaps not. You really can't know until you get there."

"That doesn't sound very hopeful," I said.

"Why not?" he challenged. "Time has a way of changing things, so you'll just have to wait and see."

His words didn't bring me any comfort, but they didn't discourage me either. I turned to Shadow with a smirk on my face and gave her a playful punch on the arm. "We'll figure it out," I said. "Promise."

She replied with a smirk of her own. "I know we will."

Even Nox seemed to brighten at my optimism. "That's the spirit! Now tell me: what's next, Double-Trouble? Straight on to the next adventure, or...?"

"She's going to travel," I told him. "And I'm going to become a guardian of the forest like you."

The corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly in response. "Oh? I didn't realize we had an opening."

"She's not kidding," Shadow told him, to which he replied: "I know."

"Then why the hesitation?" I asked. "You said it yourself that the forest is in trouble; I want to be there to help you save it!"

“Why does this sound so familiar...?” he grumbled.

“Because you’re so old and wise and experienced?”

“Not quite.”

“Come on,” urged Shadow. “She loves this forest more than anything. Give her a chance to prove it.”

“It would be after-school only,” I added, hoping to sway him with the news of my return.

“And maybe Twig could tag along sometimes, too.”

Shadow was quick to nod her agreement. “We already know how much you love bossing other creatures around,” she said, tapping a finger against her temple, “so it should be a no-brainer, really.”

His inky black eyes darted back and forth between us, and I smiled in relief at the twinkle I saw there. “Oh, very well,” he said at last. “I suppose I could use all the help I can get.”

Shadow let out a whoop of excitement. “See? I knew he’d say yes. Now all you need is a team name and you’re set.”

I met her grin with one of my own, then gave the toad a hearty slap on the back. “Any ideas?”

His only response was a groan followed by another of his long-suffering sighs.

I shared a wink with Shadow, then turned towards the setting sun. “I’ll think about it and let you know what I come up with.”

But that will just have to be a tale for another time.

*The End.*

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Creative M.A. Thesis

Advisor: Dr. Warren Cariou

### Critical Afterword

When it comes to popular writing advice, there is no escaping the phrase “write what you know.” Some authors denounce the adage as reductive and limiting (a cliché) because it prioritizes lived experience over research and imagination (Costello). Others claim that the phrase is only “bad advice” when it is misunderstood or misinterpreted, and that a better piece of advice would be “write what you *feel*,” as in, write what you know emotionally (Temple). As Nathan Englander puts it, write what you know is about emotion: “if you’ve known longing, then you can write longing. [...] That’s the knowing behind ‘write what you know’” (qtd. in Gots). Either way, it seems like “write what you know” is about authenticity. After all, to quote Jane Stemp: “[A] book by someone who ‘knows’ rings quite differently from a book by someone who is playing on the possibilities of a situation” (Stemp).

I don’t exactly know where I stand on the debate between whether “write what you know” is good advice or not, but I do believe in the power of “knowing” when it comes to art and storytelling. To me, there is nothing more powerful than an encounter with someone else’s deepest emotional truths, especially when those truths have been transformed into the shape of a story, as I have done with *Hana and the Wishing Tree*. My initial intention with this project was to express the truth of my experience—my “knowing”—in a thoughtful and honest way, because

I knew it would lead to powerful storytelling in the sense I just described. And yet, writing *Hana and the Wishing Tree* was not an exercise in “write what you know;” rather, it was an exercise in “write what you *fear*”—my own personal interpretation of the popular adage.

What does it mean to write what you fear? For me, it meant finding the courage to write the story that I was most afraid to tell, because I realized that I was suffering from keeping it secret. I have Alopecia Universalis (AU), which is an autoimmune condition characterized by the complete loss of hair on the scalp and body. I was diagnosed with AU at twelve years old, and it is no exaggeration to say that it changed my life forever. The bullying I experienced during those formative years was particularly traumatizing, and the coping mechanisms I developed as a result—my survival strategies, in other words—only made matters worse in the long run, especially in terms of my mental health and self-image. I still struggle with anxiety and depression as a result of the trauma I experienced in my youth, and it has taken most of my adult life to re-build the self-esteem that I lost to years of internalized self-hatred and shame. This is why it was so important for me to write *this* story, the one that I was most afraid to tell: I wanted to liberate myself from the burden of secrecy by sharing the truth of my experience with others, and I wanted to create something meaningful—something tangible—from my grief in the process.

This was all much easier said than done, however, as it wasn’t “just fear” holding me back from telling my story—it was fear that was rooted in shame. I wanted to tell this story in order to heal from the process of creating it, but I was too afraid to commit to the project (at first) due to the immense amount of shame I felt surrounding its contents. This makes sense because, according to shame and vulnerability scholar Brené Brown, shame and fear go hand-in-hand. As she says: “Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable,” and in this sense, “it’s the total

opposite of owning our story and feeling worthy” (69). Shame convinces us that people won’t like us if they know the truth about who we are, and so we keep our stories secret in order to avoid the pain of judgement (69). Like Brown, I use the term “we” here because one of the most important things to know about shame is that we all have it: “Shame is universal,” she says, “and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience” (53). We don’t like to talk about shame because we are afraid that it will lead to people thinking less of us, but in reality, this sense of secrecy only leads to more shame down the road. This is what Brown means when she says that shame loses its power when spoken (55), and it is why she places so much value on the act of cultivating/sharing our stories; essentially, we need to talk about shame in order to heal from it, which is why I chose to write about my experience with AU in this story.

Once again, however, this was all much easier said than done, especially given the traumatic context of the shame I sought to heal from. It isn’t easy to talk about trauma, and the only reason I was able to accomplish this with the writing of *Hana and the Wishing Tree* is because I had already made great strides in this same skill through therapy. Learning how to talk about and process my trauma was one of the first skills I gained from therapy, and though it was incredibly difficult (and re-traumatizing) at first, it only got easier with practice, which consisted of two main activities: 1) writing this story; and 2) opening up about my trauma with family and friends. This is why there is so much emphasis on the power of “sharing your story” in *Hana and the Wishing Tree*, and why Hana’s character arc leads to her doing so. Like me, Hana must learn how to talk about her trauma in order to heal from it, which is what finding the “right words” really means in this text. Essentially, “finding the right words” is a euphemism for the work I did in therapy, which—as mentioned—was in itself fundamental to this novella’s creation because it helped *me* to find the “right words,” too—by which I mean: the words I needed to express myself

to others, both on and off the page.

Even with the “right words,” though, it was difficult to commit to such an emotionally-intensive project, especially one that I knew would require so much courage to complete. I *wanted* to write about my experience with AU, but I was still too gripped by internalized shame to do this directly, which is a large part of what made fantasy as a genre so appealing. Fantasy is my favourite genre, but it also made the story easier to tell because it allowed me to talk about my trauma in the abstract (as in, through the lens of the fantastic) without sacrificing any of the emotional truth I sought to capture. In other words, fantasy made it easier for me to be vulnerable, and it did this by establishing a sense of distance between “my story” and Hana’s—the story that I was *creating*. This made the project more fun and less daunting because it removed any sense of pressure I felt about “getting it right” and replaced it with a sense of creative possibility instead, meaning I could tell the story as it came to me without worrying about the accuracy (or “authenticity”) of every detail, or whether the story would be “truthful” enough to convey my deepest knowing in full. After all, a story doesn’t need to be factual to be true (Le Guin, *Dreams*, 269), which is one of the reasons why fantasy works so well as a storytelling mode and method.

Indeed, to quote fantasy scholar Richard Mathews: “Fantasy enables us to enter worlds of infinite possibility [...] circumscribed only by imagination itself” (1). Unlike realist fiction, fantasy “does not require logic [...] to explain the startling actions or twists of character and plot recorded on its pages,” which means that almost anything can happen (Mathews 3). This is why fantasy works so well as a tool for cultivating imagination and creativity. Basically, fantasy provides us with a safe space to explore new ideas, which can lead to new ways of thinking in the long-run. Not only does it provide a temporary and healthy escape from the burdens of daily

living, it also helps readers foster problem-solving skills by allowing them to “imagine themselves in different roles and scenarios [...] without experiencing any real risk” (Allen et al 1). This is why fantasy worked so well as the storytelling mode for this story: it gave me the “space” I needed to explore hard feelings in a constructive and interesting way, then challenged me to develop my ideas to their full potential by requiring me to problem solve, think through, and “see” from a different perspective.

That being said, the genre isn't perfect—especially when it comes to the representation of disability and bodily difference. Characters with disabilities have a long history in fantasy fiction, but unfortunately, “the date of a book's publication is no guide to the manner in which the characters with disabilities are portrayed” (Stemp). One of the most common tropes in this regard is the “magical cure,” where characters are cured of their disability and/or bodily difference as a reward for overcoming hardship or struggle (Stemp). This trope is particularly common in fantasy because there is often magic involved in these stories, which can lead to “miraculous” cures for wounds, disabilities, and other visible differences. For example, Seanan McGuire's novel *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (Wayward Children #3) features a character named Nadya who is born without an arm, but when she ventures into her “portal world” (a feature of this series—each child has one, and they are all uniquely tailored to their personalities) she immediately receives a magic arm that essentially “cures” her from being disabled (her new arm isn't a prosthetic, but rather a magic arm that functions just like any other). As one online reviewer points out, the problem here is that Nadya is the only child in the series whose source of difference is “fixed” upon entering her portal world, which therefore prompts the question: “why does Nadya need fixing?” (May). “Disabled kids reading this story won't be magically cured,” the reviewer continues, “so it would have been nice for them to see they can have fun adventures

and a fulfilling life just the way they are” (May). Basically, none of the other children in the series are “cured” of their difference upon entering their portal world, so it would have been a better decision representation-wise for Nadya to receive the same treatment.

Fortunately, there are many other modern fantasy series that don’t fall into the trap of the “magical cure,” including Leigh Bardugo’s *Six of Crows* duology, and V.E. Schwab’s *A Darker Shade of Magic* series. The first example, *Six of Crows*, features a protagonist named Kaz Brekker who walks with a limp after breaking his leg (the bone never fully healed), but he doesn’t use magic to “fix” this. Instead, he uses a cane to help him walk around, and the cane (iconic with its crow’s head handle) becomes part of his “mythos” as “Bastard of the Barrel”—the formidable reputation he creates for himself in order to survive the slums of Ketterdam. His limp isn’t the main focus of his character, but it does cause him pain sometimes, and people frequently underestimate his abilities because of it (which Kaz ultimately uses to his own advantage). Still—Kaz’s limp is never treated as a weakness in the narrative, or something that needs to be “fixed” or “overcome,” which is one of the major reasons why *Six of Crows* is an example of positive disability representation in fantasy.

Similarly, V.E. Schwab’s *A Darker Shade of Magic* series features Lila Bard, a character who wears a glass eye. Although Lila asserts early-on that her missing eye has never been a weakness, she is still self-conscious about it at the beginning of the narrative, and doesn’t want anyone to know about it. Later on in the series, however, she becomes much more confident in herself, which leads her to start embracing her difference. Even though there is magic in the story (Lila is a magic-user herself) she never uses it to replace her missing eye, and by the end of the series, she chooses to start wearing a glass eye that stands out completely (solid black) because she is no longer interested in trying to hide her difference from others. Also, like Kaz in *Six of Crows*,

Lila's disability is never depicted as something she needs to "overcome" in order to succeed, which is an important detail to note when it comes to the representation of disability in fiction.

Indeed, the "magical cure" trope is closely related to what Eli Clare refers to as the overcoming narrative, which is an ableist cliché that centres around the idea that disabled people must "overcome" their disability in order to succeed (8). This cliché is highly problematic for two main reasons: 1) because it poses individual hard work as the "key to success" rather than broad-based disability access; and 2) because "overcoming" *disability* itself is not an actual possibility for most disabled people (Clare 9). As Clare (who has cerebral palsy) says: "Overcoming is a peculiar and puzzling concept. It [...] requires dominating, subsuming, defeating something [...] But how could I dominate my shaky hands, defeat my slurring tongue, even if I wanted to?" (9). And yet, overcoming is "everywhere," and it bombards disabled people at every turn (Clare 8). As Leduc explains: "so many of the stories we continue to tell argue that disability is a thing to overcome, to eradicate, to disappear," and stories like these "are what fuel the difficulties that disabled people encounter in the world" (220). Basically, a society that is accustomed to not seeing disabled people represented in stories becomes a society that is accustomed to not seeing disabled people in real life, and a society that is accustomed to not seeing disabled people in real life will continue to build a world that makes it incredibly difficult for disabled people to participate in said world, thus reinforcing the problem (Leduc 230-231). This is why we need to start telling different stories about disability and bodily difference, which is exactly what I'm trying to do with this novella.

*Hana and the Wishing Tree* is primarily a story about self-acceptance, and as such, I have known from the very beginning that Hana wouldn't get her wings back at the end of it. This was important to me for two reasons: 1) because I wanted to write a story that actively challenged the

two ableist tropes previously mentioned (the “overcoming” narrative and the “magical cure”); and 2) because I wanted to write a story in which the main character learns not only to accept their difference, but to embrace it as part of what makes them unique. In other words, I wanted Hana to succeed *because* of her winglessness rather than in spite of it, which I ultimately made happen through a series of narrative decisions related to the rain. For example: in the world that I’ve created, faeries have wings much like butterflies, which means they can’t get wet; Hana doesn’t have wings, however, which is what allows her to run out into the storm and retrieve the stolen shard. Moreover, she is only able to find her shadow in the first place because they both have to walk everywhere (her shadow cannot fly, either), which means that there are footprints in the mud to follow. Both of these narrative decisions were entirely deliberate, and I made them in response to Leduc’s call for diverse protagonists who triumph because they are different, and thus, have “a different way of seeing the world” as well (235). Another major narrative decision that I made in this regard involves changing the ending of the story between drafts, but before I delve into that explanation, we need to talk a bit about “cure.”

In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Eli Clare talks about the “imaginary pill” question, which is basically the everyday equivalent of the “magical cure” trope previously mentioned, as well as the inspiration for the Wishing Tree and its wishes in my story (a connection that I will expand upon later in this essay). Basically, the concept (phrased as a question) goes like this: “If you could take an imaginary pill that would cure you from [X], would you take it?” This is a complex question for many reasons. First, because it depends on *who* you ask (for example, people with chronic illnesses that cause pain might be more willing to take the imaginary cure pill than people with congenital disabilities that haven’t known a body without it). Second, because it depends on *when* you ask (basically—some days are harder than others). And finally, third:

because it's entirely hypothetical. As Clare says, "In exploring our varied relationships to cure, we need to take into account what is hypothetical and what exists right now" (91). "Actual cure," he continues, "exerts different pressures and demands different responses than hypothetical cure" (92). In other words, it's hard to know how exactly one would respond to such a choice when it doesn't exist yet, especially considering how the imaginary cure pill would come with "pressures, temptations, and unknowns" to which we might not know how we would respond (93). In this sense, the "imaginary cure pill" question is (for many of us) entirely redundant; if it doesn't even exist yet, then what's the point of asking this question? Because "cure" itself still holds a lot of power—especially in relation to hope.

Indeed, one of the reasons why cure is so powerful is because it can serve as a beacon of hope for the future. As Clare explains: "The desire for cure, for the restoration of health, is connected to loss and yearning. What we remember about our body-minds in the past seduces us. We wish. We mourn. We make deals. [...] We remain tethered to our body-minds of the past, wanting to transport them into the future, imagining in essence a kind of time travel" (57). Cure is thus such a compelling response to body-mind loss because it "promises us our imagined time travel," and yet, this promise can also cause us to "devalue our present-day selves," including "the lessons we've learned, knowledge gained, scars acquired," etc. (Clare 57-58). This is why Clare says that he *wouldn't* take the cure pill even if it did exist. As he explains: "When non disabled folks ask me whether I'd take the imaginary cure pill for cerebral palsy [...], [they] expect me to say, 'Yes, of course, I'd take that pill in a heartbeat,' and when I don't they're puzzled and disbelieving [...] How can I possibly not want a cure? It's simple. Having shaky hands and shaky balance isn't as awful as they imagine, even when I slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time" (87-88). Clare goes on to explain how his unique way of moving

through the world provides him with a unique way of *experiencing* the world as well, which is why he would “lose so much” if this perspective were somehow taken away from him (88). In short, Clare knows that he wouldn’t be the same person today without cerebral palsy—as he says: “I have no idea who I’d be without my tremoring and tense muscles, slurring tongue” (6)—which is why he would reject the imaginary cure pill if it actually existed.

I bring this up because it is directly related to the ending of my novella and the way it has evolved between drafts. Essentially, the ending evolved as I learned more about “cure” and my own complicated relationship to it, which ultimately led to a stronger story at the end of the day. As mentioned, I set out from the beginning to write a story about self-acceptance, which meant that there would be no “magic cure” for Hana’s winglessness at the end of it. This hasn’t changed—she still remains wingless at the end of the story—but the *context* under which this occurs has changed considerably, especially in relation to character development and theme. For example: in the first two drafts of this story, I was dead-set on the notion that Hana’s wish would be impossible to grant—even for the Wishing Tree—because I didn’t think it would be “realistic” (whatever that means in a fantasy story) for Hana to choose her shadow over her wings under any other circumstance. Upon revision, however, I have decided to change this, because I realized that I was engaging in the exact same lack of imagination that I had been looking to critique (i.e. the lack of imagination that occurs when we cling to ‘old ways’ of thinking by default). Allow me to explain.

In my novella, the Wishing Tree is essentially a physical manifestation of the “imaginary cure pill” that Eli Clare describes, which is why the original ending took shape the way it did. Basically, I didn’t think it would be “realistic” for Hana to wish for anything other than her wings because I couldn’t imagine *myself* doing the same in relation to my hair. Put more plainly,

I couldn't imagine a scenario in which I would reject the "cure pill" myself, which led me to assuming the same about my character. My initial solution, then, was to remove the choice altogether; but then I realized—just because I can't imagine this choice for myself yet doesn't mean I can't imagine it for my character. After all, sometimes imagining something as possible is the first step to making it so, which—ironically—is exactly what this project is about: the role of imagination in healing from trauma, and in finding hope outside of cure.

As mentioned, I set out from the beginning to write a story about self-acceptance, but only to a limited extent. The original ending (where Hana's wish is impossible to grant) led to a sort-of reluctant (or forced) self-acceptance, which was simply a reflection of my own limited mind-set at the time (I felt as though I had "no choice" but to accept myself, which isn't exactly the most inspiring message to share with young readers). Through revision, however, and through my own personal growth and development, I realized that I had an opportunity to craft a stronger narrative by re-structuring the ending in a way that forces Hana to let go of cure altogether rather than just "settle" for the only option she's been given. In the new ending, Hana *chooses* to save her shadow rather than wish for her wings back because she knows it's the right thing to do, but she's only able to make this decision because the events leading up to it (opening up with her friends, making peace with her shadow, etc.) have given her the ability to do so. In this sense, self-acceptance is not Hana's "end-goal" so much as it is the very force behind her growth as a character. She trades away her shadow at the beginning of the story because her desire for cure is so great, but by the end of the story, she has learned enough about herself to put this desire into question, which ultimately allows her to let go of it. More specifically, she is able to let go of cure because she has learned that the happiness she craves is possible without it, which is what it means to find hope outside of cure.

This is what I mean when I say that fantasy allows us to imagine new stories about ourselves and practice new ways of thinking. There are still days where I would give anything for a “magic cure,” but I’ve realized that this doesn’t matter so long as I stay open to the possibility that my thoughts about this subject can change. To connect this back to the ending: I made Hana choose her shadow over her wings because that’s what *she* would do, and now, I look to *her* for guidance, because I have created a character that I can look up to, and who I hope that others—especially children—can look up to, too. Hana chooses not to take the “cure pill,” and I want to believe that I can get to a point in my own healing journey where I’d be able to do the same because—like Hana—I am now open to changing my thinking. It might take a bit of imagination to get there, but it’s worth it, because in my experience, the journey towards self-acceptance provides more hope for the future than my yearning for “normalcy” (via cure) ever did, which is why there is so much emphasis on the power of changing your thinking in my novella. Before you change anything, however, you need to know what sort of “thinking” (i.e. mental conditioning) you’re dealing with, which means turning to look at your shadow.

What does it mean to “look” at your shadow? To “turn around” and “face” it? To me, these words are a metaphor for the journey towards self-acceptance, which is the journey that Hana undertakes in this novella. I first encountered this idea in an essay called “The Boy and the Shadow” by Ursula K. Le Guin, wherein she provides her own interpretation of what “the shadow” represents in reference to the works of Carl Jung. As she says: “The shadow stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind [...] It is all we don’t want to, can’t, admit into our conscious self, all the qualities and tendencies within us which have been repressed, denied, or not used” (59). To my mind, this means that the shadow is a symbol for all the things about ourselves that we don’t want to accept because it is too painful (or difficult) to

do so. For me, then, the shadow is a symbol for my trauma, and all the “baggage” that goes along with it: self-hatred, internalized shame, depression, anxiety—all of it. In this sense, looking at the shadow is akin to “unpacking” it, which means learning how to sort through and process whatever it is you find. For in the words of Le Guin, “The less you look at [your shadow], the stronger it grows, until it can become a menace, an intolerable load, a threat within the soul” (*Language* 59). These words were the direct inspiration for Hana’s relationship with her shadow in this novella, and they are the reason why “accepting” (or reconciling with) her shadow is so important to the narrative; the shadow is simply a reflection of herself—for better and for worse—and she needs to learn to accept this part, too, in order to move forward, heal, and grow. So, one of the lessons Hana learns in this story is the power of self-compassion: moving away from self-judgement (worrying about what her shadow’s behaviour says about her) and towards self-actualization (turning around to “face” the shadow in an effort to better understand herself).

What does it mean, then, for Hana to live without a shadow from now on? As mentioned, fear in this text is related to trauma, and all the complex emotions that go with it (for example, the “flavour of your fear” = the specifics of your mental conditioning, by which I mean: thought patterns, survival strategies, triggers, etc.) Hana learns that her shadow has been eating her fear for a very long time, but when her shadow gets severed, she has to learn how to manage this fear on her own, which—in the words of Nox—“won’t be easy, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be done.” This is meant to symbolize the way I repressed my traumatic experiences in order to survive, but then was left with a really intense “shadow” to deal with once I finally allowed myself to grieve. Thus, Hana not having a shadow anymore and having to learn how to deal with her own fear now is meant to represent the (often) life-long challenge that is learning how to navigate the world after experiencing something traumatic. For the truth is that healing isn’t

linear, and it doesn't end with self-acceptance. For many of us with trauma backgrounds, healing is a lifelong journey, which means it ebbs and flows with time. Sometimes we take ten steps forward, two steps back—but the important thing is just to keep going. Our conditioning is hard to change, but it *can* be done with practice, which is why Hana's story ends the way it does; Hana will never forget her shadow, but in the end, she knows that she has to let her go in order to make space for something “new,” by which I mean: new ways of thinking, new stories, etc.

True change can only occur once we have dealt with the “shadow,” but we don't have to let what we learn about that shadow define us for the rest of our lives. This is the meaning of the line “shedding one skin for another, and leaving the empty husk behind,” which is my favourite line in the story because it encapsulates everything I've learned about the power of imagination in finding hope outside of cure. Like Hana, I have realized that my story is malleable, which means it can change for the better. I used to be so ashamed of my visible difference, but now, I am learning to embrace it—something I thought was genuinely impossible for me to do back when “acceptance” (or body-neutrality) was my only goal. I still struggle with shame from time to time, but it no longer controls me the way it used to, which has improved my quality of life immeasurably. Do I still wish I wasn't bald sometimes? Yes—but those moments are becoming fewer and farther between the more I practice saying: “*I love and accept you*” to my brilliantly imperfect reflection. I still don't know if I'd be able to reject a “magic cure” if one was miraculously presented to me, but I now understand that this doesn't really matter so long as I continue to imagine that it's possible. Like I said—sometimes the first step to making a change is imagining that you are capable of doing so, which is why writing this story was so empowering for me. Hana chooses not to accept the “magic cure” because that's what *she* would do, and now, I think to myself: “*if she can do it, so can I*”—which is a lot more hopeful than “*never.*”

My point here is that transformation—or metamorphosis—has occurred beyond the page, proving to me that Brené Brown is right when she says that talking about shame is the best way to get rid of it. I used to think that the most empowering thing I could do with my pain was turn it into art, but I now understand that the act of *sharing* said art with others is empowering in its own regard. Just like trauma, shame is passed down when it isn't dealt with, which is why sharing this story with friends and family has been profoundly therapeutic after years of private misery and suffering. Essentially, I have gone from repressing my trauma—barely able to *think* about it let alone talk about it—to writing a book about it (my Master's thesis, no less), and the act of doing so has transformed me; I'm more comfortable in my own skin than ever before, and I can say with certainty that the amount of work it took to get here was worth it just for that. I never would have imagined this for myself two years ago, but that's my whole point, isn't it? It *starts* with imagination, and then you find a way forward from there. This is how I have found hope again—hope outside of cure.

I believe that stories are important, and that it matters to ask not only *which* stories are we telling, but *whose*? When we think something negative about ourselves, we need to ask: whose voice is that? Is that my voice? My story? Or is that just a story I've been told, and that I continue to tell about myself even though it isn't true? It is easy to feel powerless in this world with everything that's going on, but I do believe that the one thing we do have power over is the way we treat ourselves and others, and therefore, I believe that “changing the narrative”—as it were—is important both personally and in a broader socio-cultural context. We need imagination and new stories to help us in these dire times, and we need to work together to come up with new solutions. When we help ourselves and help each other, we can all have the energy and strength to tackle larger issues together and make the changes happen that we want to see.

Ultimately, I wanted to write this story to help myself heal, and then share it with others in hope that it might help them to heal, too. It is easy to feel like you are alone when you have been made to feel ashamed for being different, but the truth is that many people have been made to feel ashamed of their bodies in one way or another, and we need to open up about these experiences with other people in order to realize that we aren't alone, and that there is hope for a better future.

Working on this project has been profoundly transformative for me, and it is no exaggeration to say that it has changed my life for the better. I love myself more now than I ever thought possible, and the creation of this story—dreaming it up, writing it down, revising and re-writing it—was the path I took to get here. I took the energy I used to put into wishing for a cure and used it to create art instead, which has proven to be a much better use of said energy, because it has helped me to heal my heart and soul.

Writing this story is how I've found hope again, and if you are struggling, know that there is hope for you, too. I have so many stories to tell, and I can't wait to share them. This story was just the first one, and its end is really a beginning: the beginning of the rest of my life, no longer burdened by shame.

But that will just have to be a tale for another time.

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