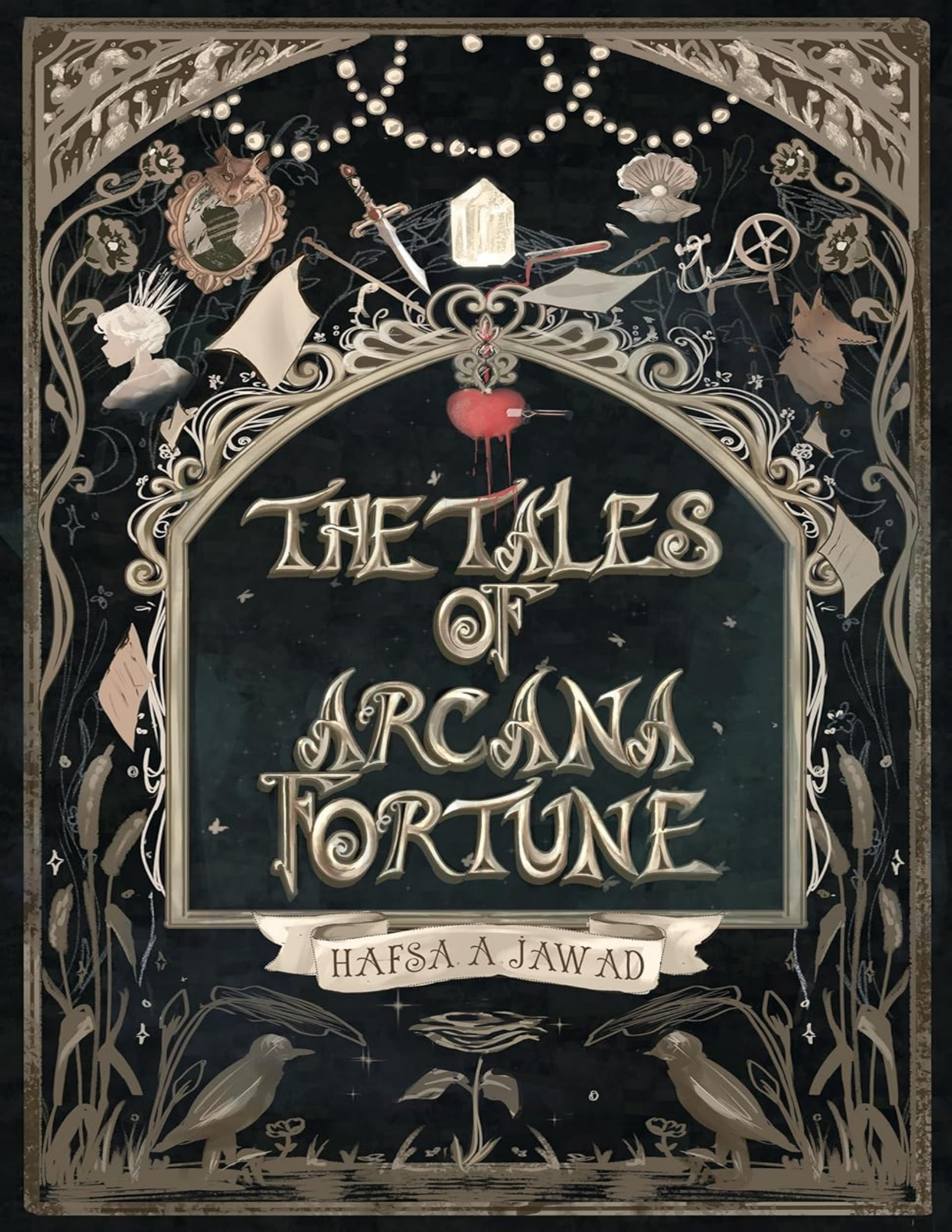
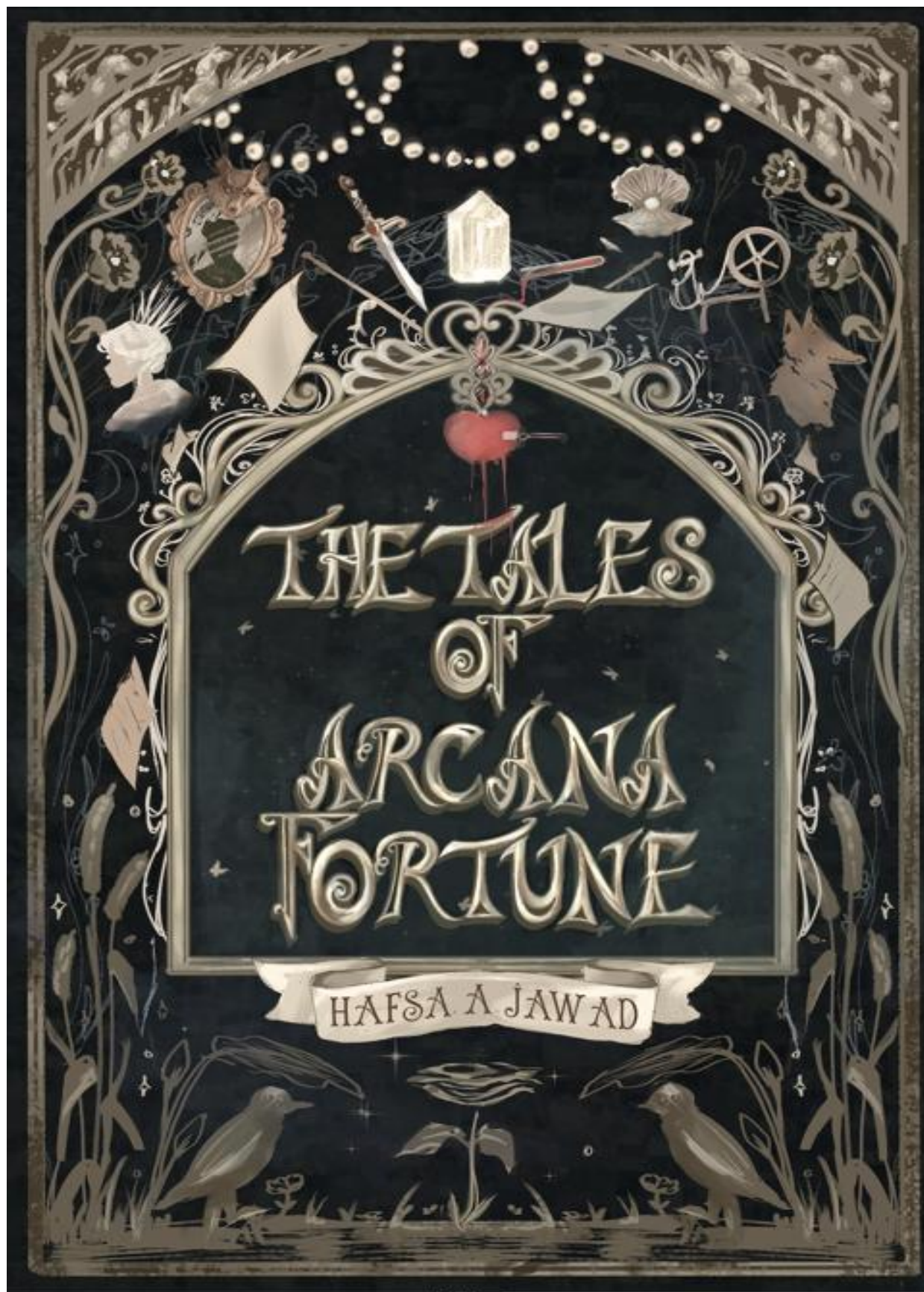




# THE TALES OF ARCANNA FORTUNE

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# Dedication

*To everyone whose inner child never stopped believing in fairytales — this one's for you.*

*And to Taha, you are my fairytale.*

# Prologue

## **N***ineteen Years Earlier*

*The spirits were in a good mood that night.*

*A gentle breeze kissed her wild dark hair as she surveyed the clear skies so unusual for the stormy village of Glenn.*

*She didn't miss the constant rains, but there was something about the calm weather that always made her melancholic. Tonight was no exception; she felt more restless than ever. It hadn't taken her long to excuse herself from the bustling atmosphere created by her family as they gathered inside her tiny cottage.*

*It wasn't that she didn't love them. Truly, she did. She was fond of her sister; she got along with her brother-in-law. When her parents had still lived in Glenn, before they had decided to follow her sister to Leis to be a part of her more colorful, ever-changing life, she had been a dutiful daughter. She even loved her nephews in a distant sort of way, despite the fact that they wanted nothing to do with their dour-faced aunt who smelled like dusty old books.*

*She clutched her shawl tighter as she looked back at her cottage, home to her dearest treasures. She had decided early on that she had better things to do, bigger dreams to pursue, and never had she regretted the path she had chosen. Not one single day.*

*Except nights like tonight, perhaps. When her traitorous heart longed for something she could not name, her chest feeling a hollow sort of emptiness.*

*She looked up at the inky sky again, the stars winking at her. The night was still, as if it waited along with her for the auspicious moment to occur.*

*A high pitched wail split through the night, startling her.*

*The baby had been born.*

*Her heart gave that peculiar squeeze again, and someone called her name. Her nephew stood in the cottage doorway, his cheeks flushed as he yelled for her to come meet the baby.*

*Sighing, she trudged back up the path to her home and entered the hot stuffy room. Her sister lay in the bed, holding a tiny bundle up to her chest, a tired smile on her face.*

*“A girl,” she rasped, her voice betraying a depth of emotion.*

*With what seemed like a herculean effort, she held the baby up to her aunt, who accepted the precious bundle with a slight wince, expecting the same cry her nephews had let out when she first held them.*

*It did not come. Curious, she held the little one up, cautiously touching a finger to her cheek.*

*Tiny, pudgy fingers grasped it with a surprisingly strong grip for something so fragile. She tried to dislodge her finger, but the baby held fast.*

*And as she looked into those wide, trusting eyes of the clearest green—the color of the forest on a sunny day—her throat burned with unshed tears, and her heart filled with furious emotion.*

*And for the first time in her life, Maeve Larke fell in love.*

# Chapter One



## ***T**en Years Ago*

Rina Rose did not appreciate the cold. And she certainly did not appreciate discovering that the fun trip her mother had promised her was to a cold, gloomy village in the middle of nowhere. Looking out the foggy glass, she realized why her brothers had made hasty excuses when Mama

announced it was time for Rina to finally visit Glenn, the village where her grandparents and her mother had once lived. Where her Aunt Maeve still resided.

Mama's description had made it sound like she would be visiting somewhere special, but the place she was currently staring at was anything but. The village seemed to exist only in shades of gray—the buildings, the atmosphere, even the people. As much as she tried not to feel disappointed, her heart sank as she took in her surroundings. She had harbored a secret hope that Glenn would be a charming fairytale place, the opposite of their noisy fishing town of Leis. The perpetual drizzle that greeted her when she stepped out of the coach furthered the insult, and she felt her wish that the village would be a special place, wither like a fragile flower in winter.

Feeling quite put out, she stayed silent as her mother led her to the woods that bordered Glenn. She reminded herself that she wasn't a baby anymore, so she couldn't complain too much, but every step she took made her wish her mother had never suggested this trip.

They had just entered the woods when she felt it—an almost imperceptible shift in the atmosphere. The rain tapered off, and a gentle breeze ruffled her hair as shy, golden rays of the sun swept through the gaps in the trees, drenching the place in gold. Wildflowers dotted the sides of the path, and birds sang a song that made her little heart want to dance with joy.

"The rain's gone," she said in wonder.

Her mother gave her a small smile. "The woods are pretty, aren't they? I used to love playing here when I was your age. Your Gran would always get so cross with me when I returned home with muddy skirts."

Rina looked at her in surprise. She couldn't imagine her neat and tidy mother ever getting herself dirty.

"Was Aunt Maeve like that as well?"

"No, she much preferred staying indoors to read."

"Does she live in the woods now?"

"Your aunt lives in the family cottage on the other side of the forest." Mama's words were tinged with disapproval. Rina didn't understand why;

living near a place as pretty as this seemed lovely to her. Not for the first time, Rina wondered what kind of a person her aunt was.

“Why does she never visit Leis?”

This time, the strain in her mother’s tone was loud and clear. “Aunt Maeve is a very busy woman. She doesn’t really have time for visits outside of Glenn.”

Frowning, Rina scuffed her shoes on the ground but hastily stopped when she remembered that her mother hated when she did that. Racking her brain for all the information she had gleaned about her aunt over the years, she asked another question that was bothering her.

“You said Aunt Maeve was there when I was born,” she said. “Why did I never see her after that? Does she not like me?”

“Of course not!” exclaimed her mother. “Your Aunt Maeve fell in love with you the minute she saw you. She was forever holding you in her arms, right up until the day we left for Leis.”

“If that were true, wouldn’t she want to come visit me often after that?”

“Oh look, we’ve arrived!” said Mama, her voice heavy with relief. She tugged Rina’s hand forward.

Rina looked to where her mother was gesturing, and all questions disappeared from her mind. Before her was a cottage that most certainly belonged to the fairies.

“Welcome to Primrose Cottage.” Her mother smiled at the wonder on Rina’s face.

Primrose Cottage was everything her mother had promised and more.

The cottage walls were covered in ivy and honeysuckle, and the garden was charmingly overgrown with the prettiest flowers in the brightest colors. Roses, hydrangeas, pansies, all littered around in abundance. As they stepped through the rickety brown gate into the garden, the faint song of a babbling brook carried from somewhere behind the cottage. The air practically vibrated with the kind of magic she was sure fairies had—good and pure. Nothing like the bustling town she lived in. The cobblestoned path

was surrounded by tiny daisies, and it led to the front door, which was engraved with a single rose. Just like her name.

The door opened then, and a tall, lithe woman with messy dark hair piled up on her head appeared. Her dress was rumpled, the hem covered in dust, and her hands were smudged with ink. A delicate pair of golden spectacles perched upon her long, narrow nose.

Rina suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to step behind her mother, who instead nudged her forward to greet her aunt for the first time. Aunt Maeve took her little hand, and her eyes glimmered with an odd sort of emotion.

“Welcome,” she said, her voice pleasant and throaty. “I’ve prepared your rooms already. You can wash up and rest a while before the meal.”

“Thank you,” said her mother. “I’ve had my hands full with this one asking me a million questions the entire way here.”

That was unfair. She had been a perfect model of good behavior the entire time, only asking her mother a few things to sate her curiosity.

Her aunt led them upstairs and pushed open a cracked wooden door to reveal a small cozy looking room with furniture that looked like it had been carved by elves. Sunlight streamed in through the window, and in the corner, a huge tabby cat curled up for a nap.

“Sorry about Whiskers; this is the room he likes to take his afternoon nap. I can take him downstairs if you want?”

“No!” Rina blurted, dazzled by the fairytale picture the entire scene made. “Let him sleep. We don’t mind, right Mama?”

Her mother agreed, and Aunt Maeve thanked them before turning and disappearing downstairs. Rina perched herself on the bed watching her mother unpack as a thousand queries flew around in her head.

Sensing the storm of chatter that would inevitably come her way, her mother paused and quickly ushered her to the door her aunt had left through. “Why don’t you go take a look around downstairs? There’s still some time before dinner, and I’m sure you could find something to do.”

Perking up at the opportunity to explore, she zoomed down the stairs. Aunt Maeve was nowhere to be seen, so she surveyed her surroundings. She

crept to a pair of doors facing each other and hesitated for only a minute before she pushed open the one to the right and peered in.

It looked similar to the one in which they were staying except for the papers strewn on the bed, and a pile of clothes stacked on top of a wooden chair.

“That’s the room you were born in,” came a voice behind her.

Nearly jumping out of her skin, she turned around to see Aunt Maeve looking at her with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“Sorry,” Rina squeaked. She would be in trouble if her mother knew she’d been caught snooping in her aunt’s room. “I didn’t know this was your room, honest!”

“It’s quite all right.” Her aunt smiled. “I don’t mind.”

“Why was I born in this room?”

“It’s an old Glenn tradition of girls giving birth in the home they had been born in, although with so many people moving out of Glenn recently, it isn’t followed much anymore. However, your mother still wanted to adhere to it, so she returned here to give birth to you. Would you like me to show you the other rooms?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

“Come,” said Aunt Maeve, motioning her forward. She crossed over and opened the door opposite to her room.

Rina gasped in shock and delight at what she saw. The walls of this room were lined with shelves upon shelves of books. There were books on the windowsill, books upon tables, upon chairs. The air smelled of paper and ink and dust.

And she loved it.

“You are looking at the treasure of Primrose Cottage: the Larke family collection. These are books and records that have been compiled and transcribed for generations by our family, mostly by the women.”

“What kind of books do you have?” Rina asked, her eyes glued to the shelves lining the walls.

“Primarily, a large number of historical and folk texts dating back to the time of the Golden King.”

“There are fairy tales, too?”

Her aunt laughed, a warm amused sound.

“Most of them are fairy tales or akin to them. We have a collection of them second only to the kingdom’s royal library. The study doesn’t have as much space, but the scrolls and books it does contain are the rarest of rare—often the only copies that exist. Some of the keepers of this collection are fluent in multiple languages and sometimes transcribe texts as well. Many of us are also lucky enough to be able to correspond with the kingdom’s foremost scholars. It’s a legacy to be proud of.”

Rina felt her mouth drop as her thoughts whirled with her aunt’s revelation. How had her mother never mentioned any of this? She had always wanted a magical and awe-inspiring family history, and this exceeded her wildest expectations.

“I apologize,” said her aunt, seeming to mistake her silence for confusion. “I forgot that you are a child and are probably bored with my exposition.”

Rina could hold back her questions no longer. “How does one choose who gets to do this? Can anyone from the family just participate? And why are you the only one in charge of the books?”

Her aunt stopped dead in her tracks and whipped around with an arrested look on her face. “You... Are you actually interested in this?”

“You haven’t answered my questions,” persisted Rina. “How are you the only one who gets to do this?”

Aunt Maeve’s eyes twinkled. “While I appreciate your enthusiasm, most others don’t view this as a privileged duty. Sometimes, care of the Larke Collection even skips a generation. My grandmother, your great-grandmother, was the previous caretaker. Your grandmother, however, was not interested at all. But I fell in love with the books and the family tradition the first time Granny showed me the collection.”

That was impossible. How could one not want to do this? To take care of these beautiful books, to spend their time in Primrose Cottage, and to write

letters to other people who loved reading? How could her brothers have ever thought coming to Glenn was dull when all of this existed?

“Would you...” Her aunt hesitated. “Would you perhaps be interested in seeing more? I could show you some of my favorite books.”

“Oh, yes. Please.” Rina clasped her hands together in joy.

Her aunt sat her down on the desk in the corner of the room and brought over a pile of books. There were tales about fairy princesses and knights and scrolls with beautiful diagrams that showed magic mirrors and crystal scepters.

“Why do all these books talk about fairytales like they’re real?”

“Fairytales are as real as you and I,” said her aunt. “Just because most people have forgotten them doesn’t mean they never existed.”

Rina nodded. She had always believed fairies were real but did not talk about it anymore because her parents grew irate, and her friends said it was... what was the word? Blasphemous? Whatever it was, she did not like it, and so she kept her thoughts a secret.

“I believe you,” she confided in her aunt. “I always knew fairies and goblins and all are real.”

Her aunt patted her head and smiled. “Thank you.”

Looking around at the cluttered table, Rina was astonished to see a small portrait with a very familiar face. “You have a picture of me?”

Aunt Maeve coughed a little awkwardly. “Yes, well. Your mother sent it to me, and I thought it would look nice in here.”

Rina smiled at her aunt widely, glad that her earlier fears weren’t true. Aunt Maeve did like her.

Taking a closer look at the papers on the table, Rina asked, “Are you a scholar, Aunt Maeve?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“I wish I knew what I could be,” said Rina, with a theatrical sigh. “Garrett wants to be a merchant and work with Papa, and Emile says he wants to work with horses. Mama says I don’t have to worry even if I can’t think of anything because I’m a girl and girls can just get married.”

“You could get married,” said Aunt Maeve carefully. “But I think it’s good to find things you want to do other than that.”

Looking at her quickly, Rina leaned closer and whispered, “There is one thing.”

“Oh?”

“I would like to be a fairy,” Rina puffed out her chest proudly, “I think that would be nice.”

“That does sound very nice. But it might take too long for that. Is there anything else? Something you’ve seen someone else do and wanted to do the same?”

She thought for a minute. “I like going to the healer. He has lots of colorful medicines, and I always feel better after we visit him. I think I would like to make people feel better.”

“Well then, I think you have your answer, Healer Serena Rose.”

Rina loved the name, it made her sound grownup and important. Perhaps she would consider it more when she went home. Maybe she could even ask Healer Barre some questions about how he became a healer.

They stayed in the study for a long time, going through more books, until her mother came in and told them it was time to eat dinner.

“Oh yes,” said Aunt Maeve, blinking. “My apologies. I got carried away as always. I don’t often host and it seems like my manners are rusty.”

“Your manners were always rusty, Maeve,” her mother said with a smirk.

To Rina’s surprise and glee, her aunt who had, until now, seemed incredibly dignified and stately, stuck out a tongue at her sister before getting up and leading them to the kitchen table.

The food smelled good, but as soon as Rina took a bite of it, she frowned. It didn’t seem right, and she was about to say so when she caught her mother shaking her head at her quickly. Not understanding why she couldn’t point out the obvious issue in taste, Rina nonetheless held her tongue as her aunt addressed her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t show you the rest of the place,” said Aunt Maeve. “We got too caught up in the books, and it slipped my mind.”