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Opening extract from

Ophelia and the Marvellous Boy

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THE NORTH WIND DOTH BLOW AND WE SHALL HAVE SNOW

In the end the Queen was nothing like she was in the stories the Marvellous Boy had been told, first as a child beside the hearth and later by the wizards. There were no claws. No sharp teeth. She was young. Her pale hair dripped over her shoulders. She opened her blue eyes wide and smiled sweetly at the King.

"I do not like him, my darling," she said, not once raising her voice. "I do not like him one little bit."

"B-b-but he is my Marvellous Boy," stammered the King. He hated to disappoint her; they were only newly wed.

"That is the problem exactly," she said. "They tell me he does not age. That he has been here ten years yet looks just as he did when he arrived. That his hair has not grown, nor his body. It makes me uneasy. I cannot sleep peacefully while he is free to roam. And this story they tell me, of the sword he carries. How can I feel safe when I hear such a thing?"

"Now, now," said the King. "For many years, he has been my faithful companion."

"I should like him locked away," she said.

"Locked away?"

"We shall lock him away. He shall be locked in a room and allowed out only to be exhibited. He shall be displayed beside all my other precious things; he is a curiosity. I will feel safer."

"I don't know," said the King. "He is a good boy; he means no harm."

The new Queen narrowed her eyes at him.

The snow had already begun by then, and now it did not end. It covered the palace grounds, the once-green gardens, the Herald Tree. It blanketed the hills and the fields. It covered houses. Whole villages simply disappeared. The lakes froze over, and then the sea. Children's faces grew thin and gray. Old ladies keeled over and froze in the streets.

When the room was ready, the Marvellous Boy was led along the great corridors. In the palace there were hundreds of rooms and hundreds of staircases and hundreds of glass cabinets. Displayed there were her jewels and her other still trophies: snow lions and leopards, white elephants, snowy owls—a whole room of them, frozen in time, their wings pinned open on the mounting boards.

There were great mosaic floors depicting the wedding pageant of the King and Queen and wintry worlds and sea monsters eating boatloads of people.

"Whatever made you think of that?" asked the King about the sea monsters.

"It was a story I once heard," said the Queen, "and I enjoyed it so."

She really was very cruel.

The boy did not struggle as he was led to his room. He had struggled already. Three times since the wedding he had tried to run from the city, and three times he had been returned.

Around the door there had been painted a mural of his marvellous journey. In the mural the boy stood with his magical sword raised, but at the door his sword was taken from him and handed to the King. His satchel too, which contained the instructions and his compass. The boy looked to the King, but the King would not return his gaze. Inside his room there was nothing but a bed and chair and one window, high up. The Queen smiled and looked very pleased. She fingered the key on the chain at her throat.

"You have failed in everything you set out to do," she said when they were alone, just the Marvellous Boy and her. "I do not know why the wizards chose you, such a poor, sorry thing. Why did they think you could defeat me?" She did not pause for his answer. "And this charm that is bestowed on you so that I cannot harm you—it is nothing but an irritation. When the charm has worn off, I will run you through with my sword. What are years to me? I shall build a clock to count the seconds and minutes and days and years, and when they are passed, its chimes will sound, yes, and I will harm you greatly."

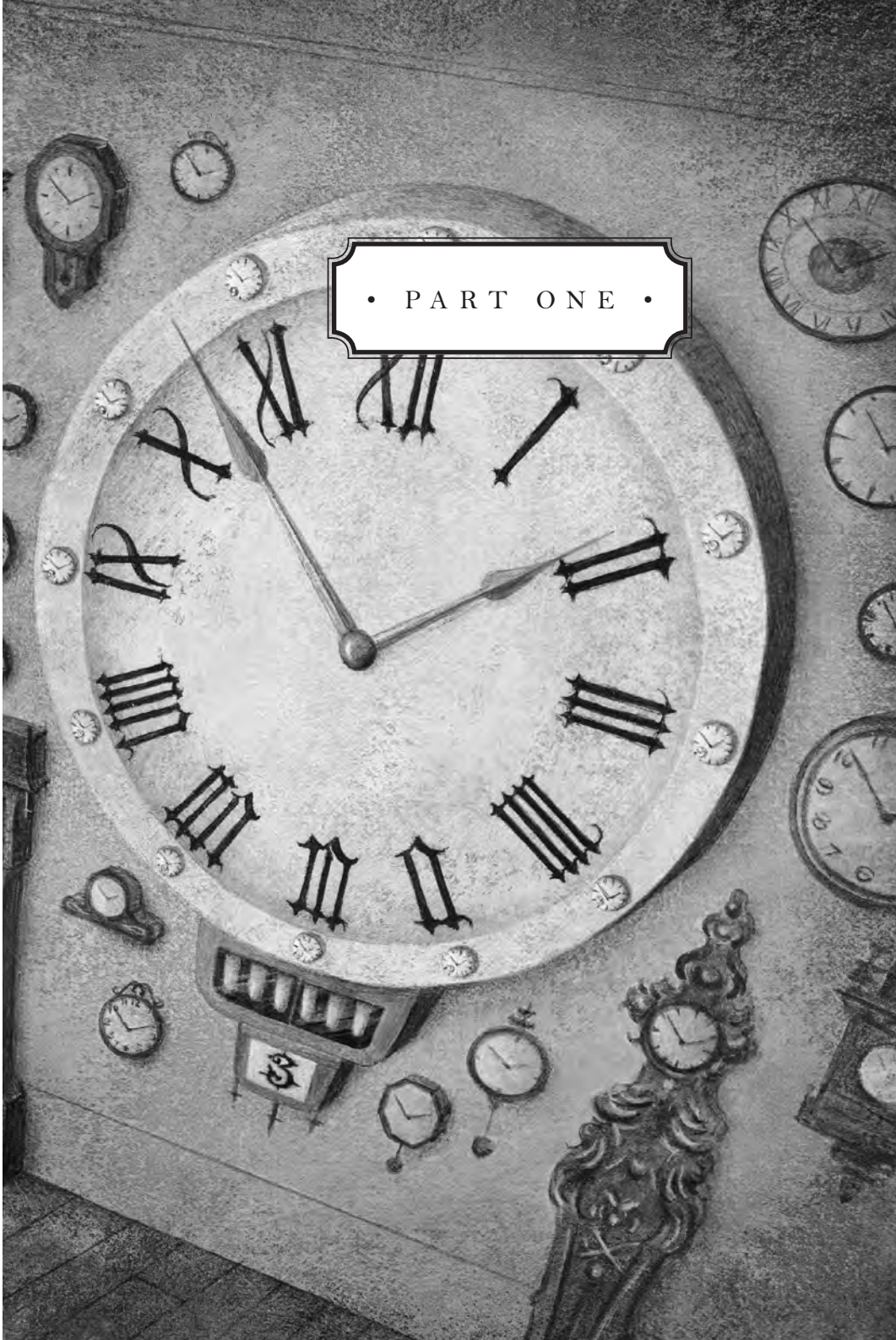
She said it very pleasantly, as though she were talking about marshmallows or afternoon tea.

"I will find the sword," the boy whispered. "And the one who will wield it."

"It will be destroyed," said the Queen, "melted down, chopped into a thousand pieces."

"We will find a way to defeat you," said the boy.

Which made the Queen very amused, so that she laughed quite merrily. Then she left him there, closed his door, and turned the key.


• PART ONE •

1

In which Ophelia Jane Worthington-Whittard discovers a boy in a locked room and is consequently asked to save the world

Ophelia did not consider herself brave. She wasn't like Lucy Coutts, the head girl in her grade, who once rescued a baby in a runaway stroller and was on the front page of all the papers. Lucy Coutts had heavy brown hair and pink cheeks, and she called Ophelia *Scrap*, which made everyone laugh, even Ophelia, to show she didn't mind.

Ophelia didn't consider herself brave, but she was very curious.

She was exactly the kind of girl who couldn't walk past a golden keyhole without looking inside.

The keyhole was in a foreign city where it always snowed. It was on the third floor of the museum, in the 303rd room. Ophelia wasn't at all sure how she got there, only that she let her feet take her wherever they wanted to go.

Her father had taken a job at the museum. He had become,

at the eleventh hour, the curator of *Battle: The Greatest Exhibition of Swords in the History of the World*. The previous curator had left without warning. In three days, Ophelia's father was to prepare hundreds of swords to be exhibited on Christmas Eve.

He also hoped that a week in a foreign city would be just the medicine for his daughters. They could explore and ice-skate while he worked. And they would have a white Christmas away from their home, which had grown so quiet.

He was very busy, though, far too busy to spend much time with them. He told Ophelia she must stay close to her older sister, Alice. But Alice was not interested in seeing any of the attractions. She wanted to go nowhere and do nothing. She wanted to sit all day with her headphones, playing gloomy music and thinking gloomy thoughts. She'd been like that ever since their mother died, which was exactly three months, seven days, and nine hours ago.

"I'll take you ice-skating later," Alice said, but in a very halfhearted way.

So, all morning Ophelia had walked alone. She had been upstairs and down. She had climbed in and out of elevators that rattled and creaked between the floors. There were grand galleries filled with priceless treasures and glittering halls filled with dazzling relics. There were precious paintings by the old masters and glorious statues and huge urns, and the ceilings danced with painted angels. Ophelia tried, as hard as she could, to be interested in all these things.

She leaned her head to one side and nodded approvingly.

She looked up interesting facts in the rather useless guide.

She tried to stifle all her yawns.

But fortunately, these glimmering places also led to murky corridors. And these murky corridors also led to dimly lit rooms. And these rooms contained smaller, stranger collections. And it was these places that made Ophelia's heart beat faster.

She found a lonely room filled with teaspoons.

Which led to a room containing only telephones.

Which led to a shadowy arcade of mirrors.

She passed through an exhibition of stuffed and preserved elephants. She tiptoed through a quiet pavilion filled with the threadbare taxidermied bodies of wolves. She squeezed through the crowd in the *Gallery of Time* and saw the famous Wintertide Clock. It ticked so loudly that people had to stick their fingers in their ears. She ran down a long, dim hallway filled with melancholy paintings of girls.

It was very cold. Windows were left open to stinging sparks of sleet and snow. The wind whistled and moaned through the galleries and down the stairwells. It made the cobwebs on the chandeliers dance.

Even with a map it was a very confusing place. Signs pointed in the wrong directions, and no one bothered about fixing them. The sign for *Porcelains 1700–1850 AD* led to *Costumes and Culture of the Renaissance*. The sign for *Costumes and Culture of the Renaissance* led to *Bronze Age Artifacts*. The sign for *Bronze Age Artifacts* led to an imposing red, locked door.

There was no point in asking the guards. The guards sat in corners and knitted or dozed. Sometimes, they snarled

and yelled like banshees for no good reason, and other times, they let children climb on the glass cabinets, using the brass handles for footholds. Sometimes, they came rushing at people who just happened to stand too long in one place, and other times, they smiled huge toothless smiles and offered old fruit from their large black handbags.

The museum in the city where it always snowed was the type of place where a person could very easily get lost. Miss Kaminski, the museum curator, had said so herself. Miss Kaminski was dazzlingly beautiful. Her blond hair was tied in an elegant chignon, and she was surrounded by a cloud of heavenly perfume. She had smiled at Ophelia and Alice before placing a perfectly manicured hand on their father's arm.

"It is advisable that they do not wander alone," Miss Kaminski said. "The museum is very big, and several girls have become lost and never been found."

But Ophelia didn't feel afraid. It was much better on her own. It was a relief to be out of the workroom, where her father had begun work as soon as they arrived in the city. He was unpacking swords and polishing swords and cataloging swords endlessly. Her father knew everything there was to know about swords. His card read:

MALCOLM WHITTARD

LEADING INTERNATIONAL EXPERT ON SWORDS

"I have a very tight deadline, Ophelia. Christmas Eve!" he said whenever Ophelia tried to talk to him. "I'm sure there are more than enough things here to keep you and Alice occupied."

If ever you have the chance to visit this museum, the keyhole to room 303 is quite close to a much-celebrated sea monster mosaic floor. It is marked on the maps by an octopus symbol. That first morning, Ophelia spent some time walking on the mosaic waves and the mosaic foam. She traveled the length of all eight glittering tentacles, observed the people falling back from the monster's mouth. She bent over and looked directly into its eye.

It was the sort of thing her mother would have loved. Ophelia Jane Worthington-Whittard wished more than anything that her mother were alive.

Near the sea monster mosaic floor, she noticed a gallery with a red rope hung across its entrance. Ophelia slipped under the rope and went inside. It was a small exhibition of broken stone angels. There was no guard in the room, so she touched some wings, even though she knew she shouldn't have. It was very quiet and very still. All she could hear was her own footsteps and her own breathing. It had a peculiar, empty smell. No one had been that way for a very long time.

In the corner of the room there was a very normal-looking gray door. Above the door were the small silver numbers 302. Ophelia opened it.

The room behind the ordinary gray door was also almost normal. The floor was checkerboard. The tall windows, with tatty velvet curtains pulled back, gave a view of the city. The sky was also gray.

The room would have also been ordinary if it wasn't for the little stage at its end and the faded mural of mountains and a blue sea and a boy with a sword. Above this scene, painted in

golden letters, cracked and peeling, stretching in an arch, were the words:

THE MARVELLOUS BOY

There was a small door. It was hidden among the peaked blue waves with their little whitecaps, and in the small door there was a golden keyhole.

Ophelia crossed the checkerboard floor and climbed one step up onto the stage and walked across the floorboards. She knelt down to the keyhole and pressed her eye against it to see inside.

She did it without thinking.

It was the type of girl she was.

She did not expect anything unusual.

She did not expect to be looking straight into a large blue-green eye.

"Hello," said the owner of the eye, a boy's voice. "I come in friendship and mean you no harm."

Ophelia was on her bottom, crawling backward away from the door. Her heart was lurching and leaping inside her chest. She felt for her puffer in her blue velvet coat pocket and gave herself a squirt.

"Who are you?" she said, or at least tried; her words came out squeaky.

"I don't have a name," said the voice. "It was taken from me by a protectorate of wizards from the east, west, and middle to keep me safe."

"But I don't believe in wizards," Ophelia said.

"Come closer," said the voice.

Anyone would say, *"Don't go closer."* Ophelia wasn't stupid. In fact, she belonged to the Children's Science Society of Greater London, which met on Tuesday nights. Of course she wouldn't go closer. It was only common sense.

Ophelia knelt, staring at the mural. The beautiful mountain range, the turquoise sea, the boy with the solemn expression and his sword raised. She pulled down hard on her braids, because that sometimes made her feel better.

"Why can't you come out?" Ophelia asked.

"I'm locked in."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes," said the voice.

Ophelia could have walked away. She could have picked herself up and walked backward from the room. She could have followed her feet all the way past the stone angels and across the sea monster mosaic. She could have run down the long hallway of painted girls and squeezed through the crowd in the *Gallery of Time*. She could have raced down, down, down the damp, creaking stairs to her father, cataloging and classifying swords. When Mr. Whittard asked her what she'd been doing, she could have said, "Absolutely nothing. It's very boring here."

But she didn't. She walked on her hands and knees slowly toward the keyhole.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The blue-green eye was surrounded by dark lashes. When the owner of the eye leaned back, she could see it was a boy. He

had a pleasant enough face. He wiped his bangs out of his eyes. When he smiled, a dimple appeared in his right cheek.

"I need your help," the boy said, "to save the world."

Ophelia wasn't expecting that. It made her cross.

"I'm so glad you came, even if you are very late," he continued. "I've had only Mr. Pushkinova to speak to and I haven't been allowed out for ages now that the ending is near."

"Who's keeping you in there?" Ophelia asked.

"I am a prisoner of Her Majesty, the Snow Queen," said the boy.

"But I don't believe in Snow Queens."

"Do you believe in magical swords?"

"Well . . . ," said Ophelia. She didn't want to sound impolite.

"Great magical owls? Misery birds?"

"Who?"

"What about ghosts?" asked the boy, leaning forward again.

She thought awhile. The smile in the large blue-green eye faltered; the lid closed momentarily.

"Ghosts?" the boy asked again.

Ophelia chewed her fingernail. "I might believe," she said, "in the possibility of ghosts, but I'm not sure. I need to research the evidence more."

"What *do* you believe in?" asked the boy.

She didn't like his tone. "I believe in lots of things," Ophelia said, trying to sound very certain. "There was a big bang; all the stars are still traveling apart right now. The moon is a certain distance from us, but sometimes it comes closer and sometimes farther—that's how it pushes the sea. Everything in the

whole world can be classified scientifically. For instance, I am from the kingdom Animalia, phylum Chordata, class Mammalia, order Primates, family Hominidae, genus *Homo*, species *Homo sapiens*. I only eat class Pisces and only if they're called sardines. I don't believe in unicorns or dragons or anything magical, really."

She took her mouth away from the keyhole and pressed her eye there.

"Well, they only give me porridge to eat," said the boy, "and everyone knows unicorns and dragons aren't real. But you may believe in ghosts?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Good, I must tell you many things," he said. "If you choose to help me, you must find the key to this door. We need to find my sword, which is magical, and the One Other, who will know how to wield it. On the Wintertide Clock there is a number in the little window at the very bottom of the face, just below the door of chimes, that will tell us how much time we have."

Ophelia bit her bottom lip.

"I told my father I'd only be gone a little while," she said.

"Please, Ophelia," said the boy.

Of course she couldn't save the world. She was only eleven years old and rather small for her age, and also she had knock-knees. Dr. Singh told her mother she would probably grow out of them, especially if she wore medical shoes, but that wasn't the point. She had very bad asthma as well, made worse by cold weather and running and bad scares. Ophelia thought this

should have all been proof that she couldn't possibly help. She leaned away from the keyhole.

Everything was meant to be simple. Mr. Whittard was to work, and Alice and Ophelia were to ice-skate. They'd go to the rink in the city square beneath the giant Christmas tree. A foreign city was meant to take their minds off terrible things. Ice-skating would help them forget some of their sadness. Now here was a boy asking her to do impossible things. He was making everything unsimple.

"After you have been to the Wintertide Clock, you must find the elevator in the dinosaur hall," said the boy. "That will take you to the seventh floor. You will need to take the left corridor. The right corridor leads to the Queen's chamber. The left corridor is where the misery birds are kept—you must be careful not to wake them. At the very end of the corridor, there will be a small white cupboard with a small white drawer. You must bring the key that is in that drawer to me."

He's full of orders, thought Ophelia. Check the clock, take this elevator here, get that key there.

"Why were you chosen by a protectorate of wizards?" she asked. The best way to get to the bottom of things was with questions. "And how can someone take your name from you? I don't think that's really possible."

The boy sighed. The sigh of someone who is in a hurry but who knows he has to stop and go back to the very beginning to get anywhere.

"Sit closer," he said. "And I'll tell you." Through the keyhole, the boy said:

* * *

You might think things fade with time. Memories, I mean. But they don't. They grow stronger. I can still see the river beside the city, where I played with Julius and Rohan and Fred. We skipped stones there and built rafts and sailed all the way to the weir.

When I was chosen, people didn't understand. They said, "Why, him—he's nothing but an ordinary boy." But the wizards, they were never ones to listen to such talk. They always know exactly what they are doing because they learn it from standing very still and thinking for hours.

The wizards had asked for every boy child, aged twelve, to be brought to the town square.

"There is a boy child who shall undertake a treacherous journey to deliver a magical sword to the One Other so that the Snow Queen may be defeated," the Great Wizard said in his calm, low voice.

"We have dreamt him," the wizards said together. "We have seen him in our visions."

My mother, on hearing this, was not impressed at all. "I think we'll go fishing instead," she said.

All day we went about the forest and caught spangled trout, a whole bucketful, and even when I was tired, she wouldn't go home. Of course, I know now it was because she sensed the boy to be chosen was me.

While we were gone, the boys lined up in the square. There were some girls too, dressed as boys, because some mothers desire their children to do great things and thought there might

be some benefits that came with the role. When my mother and I came home, it was well after dark and she thought we were safe. But there was the Great Wizard sitting at our small kitchen table, waiting.

"He is the one," he said.

"How do you know?" said my mother, who wasn't shy of a fight.

You might think wizards are always casting spells and stirring cauldrons and changing tin into gold, and it's true that sometimes they do, but mostly they are known for their trances and their thinking and their staring ahead until the future comes swimming into view. They can see the future in puddles and in dewdrops and sometimes even in shiny spoons.

"Because it has been seen," sighed the wizard. "And because he is so good. The Snow Queen will desire him, and he will lead her away from here to the other realm. And once there he will destroy her."

Good.

Not brave or strong or super.

These were the traits the town folk thought the decision should have been based upon. But it was because I was *good*. Well, they didn't like that. And no amount of explaining settled them down for some time.

"The Snow Queen likes more than anything else to destroy good things," the wizards explained. "She likes good things to become bad things, bad things to become sad things, sad things to become eternally frozen things."

But the town folk soon forgot. It was still summer, you see,

and the threat of an invasion from the north seemed impossible. The wheat was waving golden in the fields and the roses were as big as dinner plates.

"You're just an ordinary boy," my mother muttered as she got me ready for my first day of education in the wizard house. "You don't know the first thing about swords and journeys. And you're bone lazy and always forgetting things."

Yet she deposited me at the door of the wizard house and tried not to cry. She brushed down my hair with her hands, and told me to be good and listen to what was being taught.

They took my name. That was the first thing they did. They took it from me with a spell, and one of the young wizard apprentices grabbed it and placed it in a scruffy velvet box.

Now, you might say this is impossible, but only because you have never had your name taken. The King himself could not believe it when I arrived here. He told me many times that all I had to do was sit down in a quiet place and think hard about it. But no amount of thinking could get my name back. In my mind there was nothing but a clean space, like a freshly painted wall. And it was the same for everyone else who knew me—my mother, for instance, when she came to collect me in the afternoon. She went to say my name and stopped, and tears filled up her eyes.

And you might think a name is just a name, nothing but a word, but that is not the case. Your name is tacked to you. Where it has joined you, it has seeped into your skin and into your essence and into your soul. So when they plucked my

name from me with their spell, it was as heavy as a rock in their hands but as invisible as the wind, and it wasn't just the memory of my name, but me myself. A tiny part of me that they took and stored away.

It was hoped that if they kept that part of me when I crossed to the other world, then they would be able to help me back again. But they weren't very sure. No one had been that way for a long time.

When I realized my name was gone, I was angry as a wild boar. I stamped around in the upstairs school, which was just a bare room with a wooden floor and no seat and no table. I was made to stand there for hours and hours. I was made to listen to their lessons, which were all about being polite and standing still and listening to trees and about nothing magical at all. That first day I banged on the walls. I shouted, "Give me my name back!"

The Great Wizard himself came and told me to stop making a racket. Wizards don't much like noise, you see. Regarding the name, the Great Wizard said in his slow, calm voice, "Well, you'll get used to it in time, and it is only for your own good. If the protectorate keeps your name, it will allow you to return one day through the meridian, which is the point of no return between that world and this. Or at least that is what we hope."

Which didn't make me feel very confident.

All that summer I had to go to them each day, and they taught me what they could. They taught me how I must always

tell the truth and always stop to help those who needed help, and something about magical owls, but I missed that part because I wasn't listening. I had to repeat again and again, "I am a boy chosen by a protectorate of wizards from the east, west, and middle to deliver this sword so that the Snow Queen may be defeated." My voice grew hoarse from saying that. And they taught me that, in the other world, I would find a kind and just ruler.

And I asked them, "Well, do you know his or her name?" and they just stared at me patiently.

But I got used to those wizards, who really are very kind. If you have heard it said that wizards eat nothing but biscuits, then you have heard the truth. The biscuits at the wizard house were made by Petal, who was not tall and thin like the others, but short and round. And also she was a woman and also seemingly a wizard, which made even less sense to me.

On that first day they let me down from the schoolroom and deposited me in the kitchen, where Petal was kneading dough. She was sitting in a slant of sunlight from the large kitchen windows, her red hair aflame, her large arms working the dough. She banged the dough with her fist and picked it up and slammed it on the table so that clouds of flour rose and settled in showers over her. She smiled at me.

"I'm going to make biscuits," she said.

I didn't answer, but scowled.

Petal had a broad, calm face browned by the sun and very large, pleasantly freckled hands. "Are you terribly sad about your name?" she asked.

"Well, wouldn't you be?" I replied.

"I would. It's true. I would. But one day it will be yours again."

"But I want it back now. It was mine, and stealing is wrong."

"Indeed," said Petal. "Indeed." She took a small piece of dough and roughly made it into the shape of a little man. "Here, watch this." She took the little man and cupped him near her mouth and breathed a tiny soul into him. She put him on the table, and he stood up and danced its length, spinning and turning and doing cartwheels.

It was the first piece of magic that I had seen in the house, and it made me laugh.

"Can you do it again?" I asked.

"I could," she said. "But then I would have to lie down for the rest of the day, and there is work to be done."

The wizards smell like the earth and mushrooms. The smell of them stays in the room for hours after they've gone. Yes, I got used to those wizards in a way.

All the while that summer, everyone was waiting for her. The Snow Queen, I mean. At first it seemed too difficult to believe in such a thing. Then the first of the refugees appeared from the north, skinny and starving, children, mainly, who had managed to escape her. They said she had teeth like razors and hair like a blizzard and she carried a sword called the Great Sorrow.

When the wizards heard that, they said, "It is as we have seen."

Which didn't make the town folk feel confident at all. The

forges worked day and night, making weapons. Everyone looked to the horizon. People were spooked by certain clouds coming over the grasslands and swamps. They packed up their belongings, ready to take flight, then unpacked them again when they realized they were nothing but ordinary clouds on ordinary days.

They complained to the wizards. Why would they spend such time bothering with a boy? Why could they not fight the Snow Queen with their magic? The wizards didn't say much to that. They took me into the forest. They taught me which plants to eat and which not to. They taught me how to shoot with a bow and arrow. I quite enjoyed that until I had to kill a rabbit, which was horrible. They showed me how to lay my hands on the Herald Tree, which was a very strange education.

"You keep talking about a sword, yet I haven't seen one," I said in the wizard house. "Is it all make-believe?"

They smiled serenely at that.

"I mean, none of it makes sense," I said. "This One Other, for instance, who is that? Shouldn't you give me some details? Like what he looks like?"

They smiled even more serenely, and it was a good thing they hadn't given me the sword yet.

Each night I went home, and my mother met me at the door and examined me to see if I'd changed at all. She had been very annoyed about my name in the beginning but had gotten used to it. *My boy* was what she had taken to calling me, and it was quite comforting.

"What did you learn, then?" she asked me each day.

All I could do was shrug.

The morning I left the kingdom, I woke with the wizards standing above me, in our very own little house, without even having knocked. For three days the air had cooled, though it was still summer. The fruit had browned and fallen from the trees. Everywhere people were bundling their daughters onto horses and their grandmothers into wagons, and whole processions of people were leaving the city. The river was covered in a lacework of ice.

That morning my mother didn't say much but held my face between her hands.

"I don't want to go," I said.

"Hush now. It's you that's been chosen and there's nothing we can do about it," she said.

"Will I see you again?"

How she cried at that.

"Please," I said. "Tell me I'll see you again."

And she said, "Yes, yes, yes, my boy, of course you will."

Petal had made me some biscuit men, and my mother placed some bread and cheese inside my satchel. The wizards gave me the compass, which they told me must always point south.

"But I don't know what to do," I said. "You haven't taught me properly."

It was true—all their months of teaching me and I still couldn't make sense of it.

For instance, how was I meant to know who this One Other was? Couldn't they give me some sort of clue? But I dared not ask that again.