

ATTENTION READER:

Please note that this is not a finished book.

A bound galley is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer. The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to change, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this galley, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you,

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

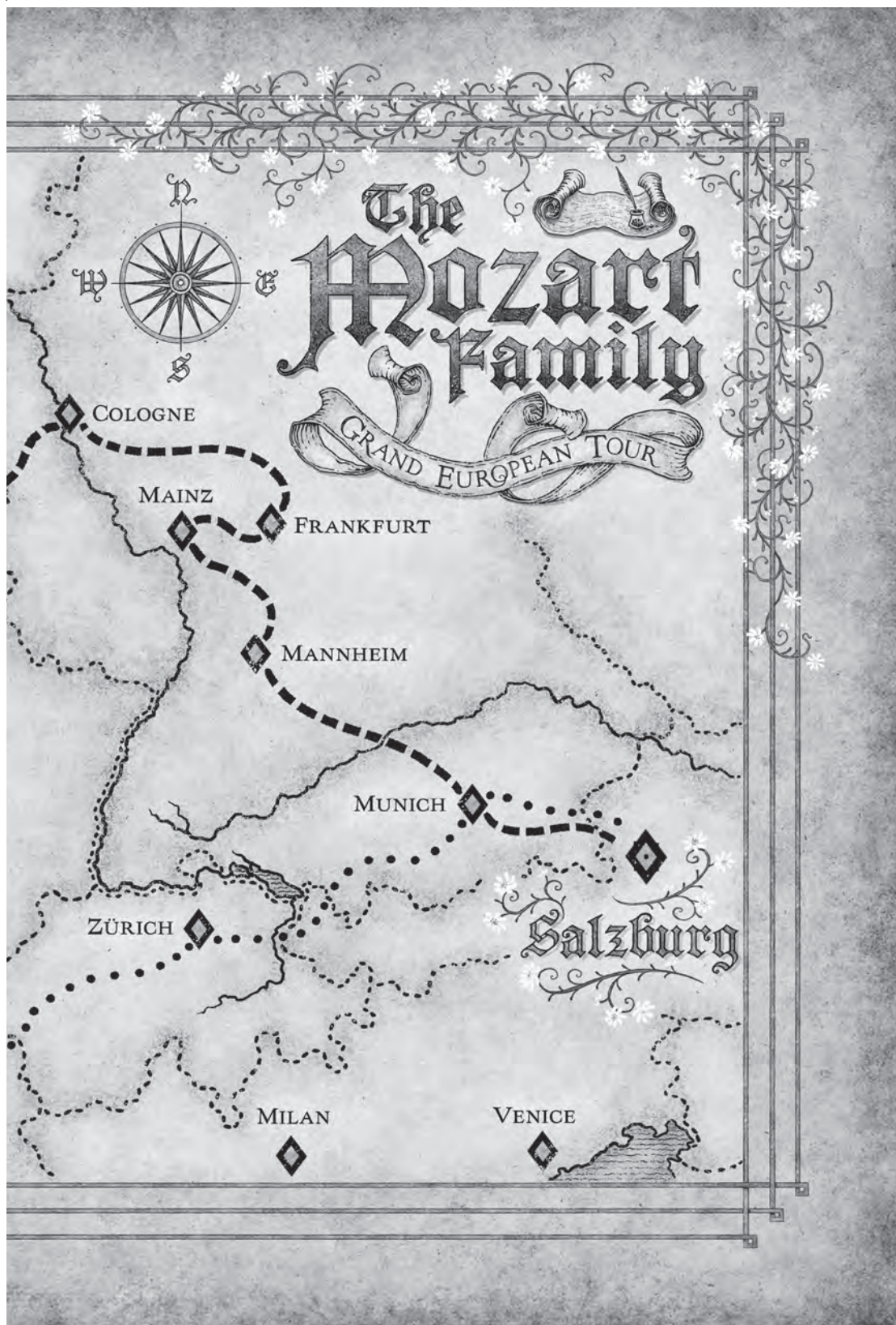
**The map titled The Morzart Family Grand European Tour will appear as the printed front endpapers of the finished hardcover edition.
The map titled The Kingdom of Back will appear as the printed back endpapers of the finished hard cover edition.**

UNCORRECTED PROOF

Coming in March 2020 from G. P. Putnam's Sons
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
PenguinTeen.com

March • Fiction • 5 ½ x 8 ¼ • 336 pages
Ages 12 and up • Grades 7 and up





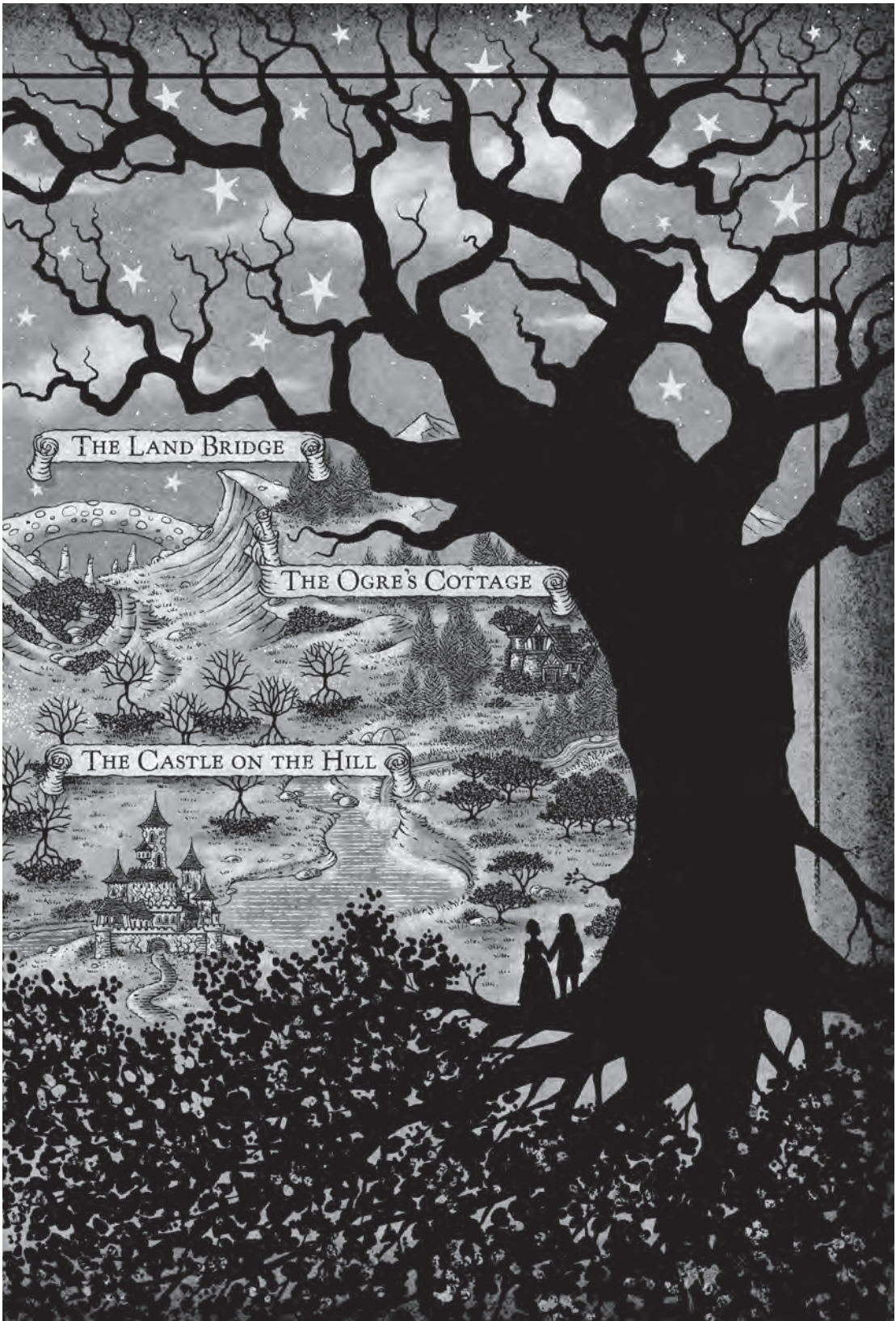
The Kingdom of Back

THE STARFISHERS' REALM

THE FIELDS OF EDELWEISS

THE UPSIDE~DOWN FOREST

THE WITCH'S GROTTO



ALSO BY MARIE LU

Warcross

Wildcard

Batman: Nightwalker

The Young Elites

The Rose Society

The Midnight Star

Legend

Prodigy

Champion

THE
KINGDOM
OF BACK

MARIE LU

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G.P. PUTNAM'S SONS
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2020 by Xiwei Lu.

Map illustration copyright © 2020 by [TK].

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lu, Marie, 1984– author.

Title: The Kingdom of Back / Marie Lu.

Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [2020]

Summary: "Desperate to be forever remembered for her music, Nannerl Mozart makes a dangerous pact with a mysterious stranger from a magical land, which may cost her everything"—Provided by publisher. Identifiers: LCCN 2019002623 |

ISBN 9781524739010 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781524739027 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Berchtold zu Sonnenburg, Maria Anna Mozart, Reichsfreiin von, 1751–1829—Juvenile fiction. | Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 1756–1791—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Berchtold zu Sonnenburg, Maria Anna Mozart, Reichsfreiin von, 1751–1829—Fiction. | Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 1756–1791—Fiction. | Musicians—Fiction. | Brothers and sisters—Fiction. | Mozart, Leopold, 1719–1787—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.L96768 Kin 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019002623>

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 9781524739010

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Kristie Radwilowicz.

Text set in FreightText Pro.

This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.



*For Kristin, who believed first.
This is the book that started it all.
I'm forever grateful.*



I AM GOING TO TELL YOU A STORY YOU ALREADY KNOW. But listen carefully, because within it is one you have never heard before.

The story you know is about a boy named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

You recognize his name. Even if you do not, you know him well, because you have heard his music all your life.

He was here and then gone, a brief, brilliant shard of life, a flash of stardust that ignited the sky. I knew his mind better than anyone else, understood its every winding path and quiet corner as deeply as my own. I remember everything about the way his tiny hand fit into mine, the sweep of his long lashes against his baby cheeks, the expression he would turn on me in the darkness of our shared bedchamber, his wide, fragile eyes glittering, always dreaming of some faraway place. I will tell you how the space in his small chest held so much joy and beauty that, if he wasn't care-

ful, it might all spill out into the streets, drenching the world in too much light. He knew this, and so he held back, made rigid symmetry of the unimaginable so that the world could understand it, and for that his music became all the more sublime.

The story you have never heard is about the sister who composed beside him. In a way, you know her too, for you have also heard her music all your life. She is not the stardust but the steady wick, the one who burns low and quiet. You do not see her by the way she lights up the sky but by the way she steadies herself against the darkness, alone, at night, beside a window while the world sleeps around her. She writes when others do not see. By morning, none would know that her flame had ever been there. Her music is the ghost in the air. You know it because it reminds you of something you cannot quite grasp. You wonder where you have heard it before.

The story you already know is set in a real land, full of real kings and castles and courts. There are long carriage rides and summer concerts and a little boy in a royal coat.

The story you have never heard is set in a dream of fog and stars, faery princelings and queens of the night. It is about the Kingdom of Back, and the girl who found it.

I am the sister, the other Mozart. And her story is mine.



SALZBURG, AUSTRIA
1759



MOZART BY THE OCEAN

SOMETIMES, A DAY COMES ALONG THAT SEEMS possessed by a certain shade of magic. You know those moments. There is a peculiar pattern to the silhouettes of leaves quivering against the sunbeam on the floor. The dust in the air glows white, charmed. Your voice is a note suspended in the breeze. The sounds outside your window seem very far away, songs of another world, and you imagine, that this is the moment just before something unusual happens. Perhaps it is happening right now.

My day of magic arrived on a bright autumn morning, when the poplar trees swayed against a golden city. I had recently turned eight years old. My brother, Wolfgang, was not yet four.

I was still playing through my exercises when Papa came through the door with Herr Schachtner at his side, the two of them discussing some matter or other about the archbishop, their hair blown wispy from the bustle of the Getreidegasse,

the city's main thoroughfare, on which our home stood.

I paused in the middle of my arpeggios and folded my hands in my lap. Even now, I can remember the uneven stitching of my blue petticoat, my white hands against black clavier keys, the skeleton leaves clinging to Herr Schachtner's shoulders. His voice had been steeped in something rich and baritone. The scent of the street—wind and smoke and baked bread—lingered like a perfume on his coat.

My lips were rosy and dry. My hair stayed neatly curled behind my neck in loose dark waves, held back with pins. I was still too young to fuss over my appearance, so my mother had left me in a simple state.

"Herr Schachtner!" My mother's voice sweetened with surprise at the sound of men in the room. She said this as if we were not expecting him at all, the esteemed court trumpeter of Salzburg, as if we had not planned everything in advance for his visit. "Such talk of the archbishop and the orchestra, it's no wonder you and my husband are always tired. Sebastian," she added, nodding at our manservant. "The Herr's coat and hat."

Sebastian hung up the court trumpeter's belongings. They were finely made, velvet encrusted with gold lining, his hat made of beaver pelt and trimmed with lace. Beside them, my father's coat appeared worn, the threads thin at the elbows. My eyes wandered to the hem of my mother's dress—it was fraying, the color dull. We were the look of a family forever on the edge of respectable.

My father was too busy with our guest to pay me any mind, but Mama noticed the stiffness in my posture and the paleness of my cheeks. She gave me an encouraging glance as she passed me.

Steady, little one, she had said to me earlier in the morning. You have practiced hard for this. Do not be nervous.

I kept her words in mind and tried to loosen my shoulders. But Papa had timed their arrival a bit too early this morning. I had only played my scales so far. My fingers had not yet shaken the cold from their tips, and when I pressed down on the keys, they still felt as if they were somewhere far away.

My brother stayed mercifully out of sight today, hiding somewhere in our parents' bedroom, no doubt up to some mischief. I hoped he would remain quiet until Herr Schachtner left, or at least until I finished playing.

The Herr gave Mama a warm smile that crinkled the edges of his mouth and molded his face into a pleasant sight. "Ah, Frau Mozart," he replied, winking at her as he kissed her hand. "I always tell Leopold how lucky he is to have found the rare woman with a good ear."

My mother blushed and thanked him for his kind words. Her skirts glided against the floor as she curtsied. "I can only claim my gifted ear from my father," she told him. "He was a talented musician, you know."

As she moved, I memorized the polite tilt of her head and the way she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Somewhere in those movements must have been her true reaction to his statement, but her face remained as it always was, serene and secretive, sweet and mild. It was clear she pleased the Herr, because his grin broadened.

"Yes, God has blessed me in many ways," my father said. His smile was coiled as tightly as my nerves. His eyes flashed in my direction, hard and glittering. "Nannerl inherits her good ear from her mother, as you'll soon see."

It was my unspoken cue. At my father's words, I rose obediently from my bench to greet our guest. Papa disliked it when I curtsied without stepping away from the clavier or let my gaze wander anywhere that was not the floor. He said it made visitors think me a distracted and careless young lady.

I could not give Herr Schachtner any reason to find me rude.

Serene and sweet. I thought of Mama and tried to imitate the way she had lowered her head just so, the demure way she'd swept her skirts across the floor. Still, my curiosity stirred, and my eyes darted immediately to the court trumpeter's hands, searching for proof of musical talent in the way his fingers moved.

Mama called for Sebastian to bring some coffee and tea, but Papa waved her off. "Later," he said. It was best, perhaps, if the Herr did not see our porcelain set. I pictured the old saucers with their small chips, the teapot's fading paint. Mama had begged him for a new one for proper company, but it had been ages since we had a reason to entertain such guests. Until today.

Herr Schachtner brushed the leaves from the velvet of his justaucorps. "Thank you, Frau Mozart, but I will not stay long. I am here to listen to your lovely daughter's progress on the clavier."

"Johann followed me home after I mentioned Nannerl's talents." My father patted Herr Schachtner's shoulder. "He could not help himself."

"What luck," Mama said. She arched a brow at me. "You are just in time, then. Nannerl happens to be in the middle of practicing."

My hands trembled and I pressed them together harder, trying to warm them. Today would be the first time I ever performed for an audience. My father had sat at the clavier with me for weeks

as we prepared, studying my technique, slapping my wrists when I erred.

Music is the sound of God, Nannerl, he would say. If given the talent, it means God has chosen you as an ambassador for His voice. Your music will be as if God has given you eternal life.

My father, God . . . there was little difference between them to me. A frown from Papa might as well have been a frown from heaven, for what it did to my mood. Every night, I'd go to bed hearing the way my hands would move across the keys, the notes crisp in their perfection. I'd dreamed of how the Herr would stand, clapping heartily, and how my father would sit back in his chair with a satisfied smile. I'd imagined the Herr demanding I play before a wider audience. My father making the arrangements. Coins filling our family's coffers and the strain easing from his eyes.

That was the reason behind everything this morning. Children my age, Papa said, could not play the clavier with the skill that I did. I was the miracle. Chosen by a divine hand. Destined to be noticed. If I could demonstrate this to Herr Schachtner, he could extend an invitation for me to perform before Herr Haydn, the most acclaimed composer in Austria. He would be my gateway to the royal courts of Europe, to the kings and queens.

From my hands could sing the voice of God, worth its weight in gold.

"Nannerl, is it?" Herr Schachtner's voice addressed me.

I nodded in his direction. My chest fluttered as if it were brimming with moths. My fingers twitched, eager to dance. "Yes, Herr," I said. The last time he visited our home, he had not noticed me. But, then, he had no reason to.

“How long has your papa instructed you on the clavier, Fräulein?”

“Six months, Herr.”

“And do you think you play well?”

I hesitated. It was a tricky question. I did not want to speak too proudly, so that he may think me arrogant, or too meekly, so thus a poor player. “I don’t know, Herr,” I finally said. “But I believe you will know best when you hear me.”

He laughed, pleased, and I allowed myself a small smile in relief. Men, my mother had always advised, were incapable of resisting praise. If you needed something from them, you first told them about all the ways they impressed.

When I chanced a look up at him, his smile widened and he tugged at both sides of his justaucorps’ collar. “Well, what a charming girl, Leopold,” he said to my father. “Delightfully reserved for her age. She’ll marry well, I’ll say.”

I turned my eyes down again, forcing a smile at his compliment, even as my hands tensed against the fabric of my dress. I’d once heard a coachman call his mare delightfully reserved as he tightened her bridle.

Papa turned to me. “We learned a new menuett yesterday,” he said. “Let’s start with that, Nannerl.”

It was not a new menuett, truthfully, but one that Papa had written for me weeks ago and that I’d practiced for ten days. But Herr Schachtner did not need to know that. So I said, “Yes, Papa,” then sat back down at the clavier and reached for my notebook.

In my nervousness, I started to play before I had counted to three in my head. *Careful*, I scolded myself. Herr Schachtner would notice every mistake I made. I took a deep breath and let

the world still around me. The slant of light in the air, the sound of my father's voice, the weight of a stranger's presence in the room. They faded now, leaving me with only my hands and the keys.

Here, I was alone. This was my world. I began to play and my fingers steadied against the music. A major scale, a shift, a drawn-out A, another scale, a trill. I closed my eyes. In the darkness, with only myself, I searched for the pulse of the music and let my hands find it.

It was like coming upon a web in the woods so fragile that a single puff of air would blow it away. I thought of the clouds right before they shifted, a butterfly on the underside of a leaf, velvet-white edelweiss on a lonely rock, rain at midnight against the windowpanes. When I played, it was as if I were discovering the harmony of everything I already knew, but in a way that revealed itself only to me.

My entire heart pulled with yearning at the music. I leaned into the web and let it encase me.

Then—

A bubble of laughter came from somewhere in my parents' bedchamber. The web around me wavered, threads of it starting to burn away to reveal the room again, the light and the stranger and my father.

I furrowed my brows and tried to concentrate again. But from the corner of my eye, a blur of motion emerged from behind the bedroom door and ran over to where Papa sat. I caught sight of a head of warm brown curls. Small, stout limbs. A bright smile that beckoned to everything around him.

My brother, Wolfgang.

"Ah, Woferl!" I heard the familiar affection in Papa's voice as

he used my brother's pet name. Of course, he did not scold him for the interruption. "What are you so eager about? It will have to wait. Do you see? Your sister is playing for us."

My brother simply smiled and lifted himself up onto the tips of his toes to whisper something into Herr Schachtner's ear. In spite of myself, I strained to hear what he said. My focus elsewhere, I felt my fingers speed up, disturbing the web in the woods and the flower on the rock. I bit my lip and forced myself back into rhythm.

Herr Schachtner laughed loudly. He shared the joke with my father, who chuckled, and then said something in return to my brother.

The music that filled my head began to fragment, and in the slots between the notes grew guesses at what they could be discussing. *Look at the funny faces she makes. See how stiffly she sits. Her tempo is uneven.*

Or, perhaps worse, they weren't talking about me at all.

My hands stumbled over each other—I managed to catch this mistake before it ruined the piece, but one of my fingers still slipped off its key.

The note came out silent, an ugly gap between rising arpeggios.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. I cast a glance toward my audience to see my father's eyes dart at me, surprise and disapproval sharp on his face. Herr Schachtner tucked one hand under each of Woferl's underarms and picked him up to sit upon his lap. My brother's legs swung idly.

"Thank you, Nannerl," Papa said.

His voice startled me. I hadn't even realized that the menuett was done, that my hands had already retreated to my lap. The web in the woods was gone. The clouds and butterflies and rain vanished from my mind. No one was listening to me anymore.

I straightened and rose, trembling, from the bench to curtsy. The floor beneath me swayed in the sudden silence of the room. My father's smile swayed on artificial hinges.

From where he sat on the Herr's lap, Woferl met my eyes with all the innocence of a little boy. His cheeks were round, still flushed from the remnants of a lingering fever that had struck just days ago. His eyes shone as brightly as pebbles winking in a stream. I softened at the angelic face of the brother I loved, even though I did not want to linger on his gaze.

Do not blame Woferl, Papa would say later. He could not have distracted Herr Schachtner if you had played well.

Herr Schachtner put his hands together and clapped. "Ah! Splendid, child!" he exclaimed. "You are a true talent." He turned to my father. "You are absolutely right, Leopold. She plays such smooth measures, and with such control. I've no doubt she will perform for royalty when she is older."

My father thanked him politely at those words, but I could see the strain in his pride, the disappointment in his expression.

Herr Schachtner was supposed to say more. He was supposed to be astounded. He should have extended an invitation to us, arranged for me to perform before Herr Haydn and Austria's other masters of music, offered to introduce me to his friends at court. Suggested a grand tour, to showcase me across all Europe. *Just think of the Italians!* he should have said. *A prodigy hailing from the Rome of the North, worthy of Rome herself!*

But instead, what he said was: *When she is older.*

I was not the miracle, destined to be noticed. Already, the Herr had moved on to telling my father a story about an argument between the orchestra's horns, my brother still bouncing on his knee. My performance was thoroughly forgotten.

Six weeks, I'd prepared for this. I felt the numb tingle return to my fingertips, and the shame of the note I'd let slip spilling out onto my cheeks.

I never let notes slip.



Later that night, after Papa had already retired to his chamber, I sat up in bed with my music notebook in my lap, the pages still open to the measures I'd played earlier in the day. As usual, Woferl lay curled lengthwise at my side. I thought about pushing him away, but instead I watched his chest rise and fall in a gentle rhythm, weighing my mood against the incessant complaints that I'd hear if I shook him out of sleep.

I ran my fingers across the dried ink, replaying my performance in my mind. Finally, I closed it and placed it on my shelf, reaching instead for a round pendant I always kept nearby, its glass surface painted bright blue and black. Faint oil streaks lingered on its surface where my thumbs had rubbed away its glossy sheen.

Mama noted my silence from where she was gathering up a few of Woferl's toys on the floor. She sighed. "Remember, Nannerl, your brother is only a child," she said to me. The skin under her eyes was soft and wrinkled, her hair a mixture of mahogany and silver. "He does not know any better."

"He knows what a performance means." My eyes went to hers. "He distracted Herr Schachtner today. You saw him."

Mama smiled in sympathy, her eyes warm with understanding. "Ah, *mein Liebling*. He means no harm. You played very well today."

I looked back down at Woferl. His face was flushed, his waves

of brown curls in complete disarray. Mama was right, of course, and out of guilt, I reached over to smooth my brother's hair. He stirred, yawning like a pause between measures, his tongue tiny and pink.

"Can you tell me a story?" he murmured, and pressed himself closer to me. Before I could answer, his breathing evened again into sleep.

It was a request he made almost every day. Sharing stories with Woferl was our constant game—we spun myths of elves and dwarves, chimera that emerged from the dark woods, gnomes guarding the sleeping emperor in the Untersberg Mountain. But we told them to each other in secret, for Papa disapproved of them. At worst, they were stories about the Devil's creatures, here to torment and tempt us. At best, they were faery-tale nonsense.

Mama, however, indulged us with them. When I was very small, she used to gather me in her arms at night and whisper such stories to me in a hushed voice. After Woferl came along and Papa complained about our mother filling our heads with fables, I became the one to tell them. They soon turned into something that belonged wholly to us.

In this moment, his dreaming voice sounded so small, his question to me so true, that I felt my heart soften, as it always did, to him.

Mama came over to sit with us on the edge of the bed. She glanced at the pendant in my hands that I kept rubbing. It had been my birthday present from her, a trinket acquired when she'd visited our uncle Franz in Augsburg. *To give you luck*, she'd told me with a kiss on each cheek. Now she looked on as I ran my fingers idly across its smooth surface.

“Do you need good fortune so desperately?” Mama finally asked, taking my hand in hers.

My hand tightened against the pendant. “Yes,” I said.

“And what for, my little love?”

I paused for a moment and turned my eyes up to her. A *silver wolf*, Papa had once called her, for although my mother was as steady and graceful as the snow, she was also warm, her eyes alight with intelligence for those attentive enough to notice. It was the gaze of a survivor, a woman who had fought through poverty and debt and somehow carried on after the deaths of the five children who Woferl and I had outlived.

My own insecurities embarrassed me. How could I explain to her the feelings that pressed against my chest? My mother, who glided through every moment in her life with serenity and grace. Who seemed to have faced every misfortune without fear.

“Mama,” I finally said. “What are you afraid of?”

She laughed and leaned over to tap my nose. Her voice was full of vibrato, the music of a fine cello. “I am afraid of the cold, little one, because it makes my bones ache. I am afraid when I hear stories of plague and war.” A graveness flickered in her gaze, as it often did when she thought of her childhood. “I am afraid for you and Woferl, as mothers always are.” She raised an eyebrow at me, and I felt myself drawn into her gaze. “And you?”

My hands returned to the pendant, its black eye staring silently back up at me. I wondered if it could see into all the drawers and pockets of my father’s mind, if it could tell me if I was still kept carefully in there. If I played poorly again, perhaps my father would lose interest altogether in teaching me. I thought of how the men had looked away from me after my

performance today, how little the Herr seemed to have heard of what I played.

“I am afraid of being forgotten,” I said. The truth emerged fully formed, empowered somehow by being named.

“Forgotten?” She laughed, a rich, throaty sound. “What a fear for a little girl.”

“Someday I won’t be little anymore,” I replied.

Mama sobered at the words of an old soul emerging from her daughter’s lips. “Everyone is forgotten, *mein Liebling*,” she said gently. “Except the kings and queens.”

And the talented, I added in silence, studying my brother’s dark curls. They were words my father had once said. *Only the worthy are made immortal.*

With a sigh, Mama leaned toward me and kissed me gently on my cheek. “You will have plenty of years to weigh yourself down with such thoughts. Tonight, love, let yourself sleep.” She turned her back and closed the door behind her, leaving us alone.

I stared at the door that Mama had just stepped through, then turned to look out at the dark city through our window. In that moment, I made a wish.

Help me be worthy. Worthy of praise, of being loved and remembered. Worthy of attention when I bared my heart at the clavier. Worthy enough for my music to linger long after I was gone. Worthy of my father. Make them remember me.

The thought trailed through my mind in a circle. I saw myself seated at the bench again, this time with the Herr never turning away in distraction, my father looking on with pride, the web in the woods unbroken and perfect. I let the image linger so long that when I finally went to sleep, I could still see it imprinted behind my closed eyes.

I thought no one heard my secret prayer, not even God, who seemed to have little interest in the wants of small girls.

But someone *was* listening.



That night, I dreamed of a shore lit by twin moons, each bright as a diamond, both suspended low at the water's edge. Their images were mirrored perfectly against a still ocean. The line of a dark forest curved along the horizon. The shore's sand was very white, the seashells very blue, and through the curling sea foam walked a boy. He looked like a wild child, clad in nothing more than black bark and silver leaves, twigs entangled in his hair, a flash of pearly white teeth brightening his smile, and although he was too far away for me to make out his features, his eyes glowed, the blue of them reflected against his cheeks. The air around him rippled with a melody so perfect, so unlike anything I'd ever heard, that I woke with my hand outstretched before me, aching to grasp it.

That was the first time I ever saw the Kingdom of Back.



THE WAKING DREAM

I SPENT DAYS SITTING BEFORE THE CLAVIER AFTER that first dream, trying in vain to find the perfect melody I'd heard. But no matter what I did, I couldn't get it to sound quite right.

"What is it that you keep playing over and over?" Woferl asked me whenever he came to watch me practice.

"Just something I heard in a dream," I told him.

He looked thoughtfully at me, his eyes wide as if searching for the melody too. "But the notes are not the same, are they?" he said.

I still don't know how he knew, except that he must have guessed by the frown on my face. "No, not the same," I replied. "Because what I heard in my dream wasn't real."

Weeks passed, then months, and soon my memory of it blurred. My attempts turned scattered, the tune shifting until

it became unrecognizable. Eventually, I let myself believe that maybe it hadn't been such a perfect melody after all.

The seasons shifted from ice to rain to sun to wind. The hills that hemmed in Salzburg became white with snow, then green with new buds, then orange and gold, then white once more. My mother fixed my dresses as I grew. I began to hear murmured conversation between my parents at night, about how soon I would no longer be a child, about marriage and what prospects I had, how they would fill my dowry chest. Outside, the New Year's rifles fired and the star singers visited our door, slapping their arms against the Christmas cold, their voices warm with good cheer. Here and there, I'd hear a snippet of music in the streets that would just barely touch the edges of my memory, reminding me of something from a faraway dream.

Papa continued my lessons as I aged, filling the notebook he had bought me with menuetts, and I continued to practice the pieces. No more guests came to listen to me. Most days I was glad for it. The clavier was my cocoon of a world, my haven. In here, I could listen to my secrets in peace. But at night I lay awake and replayed the music in my mind, my thoughts circling the wish I'd spoken from my heart.

In my dreams, I was haunted by the way my father leaned away from me after a lesson, the weight of his disappointment that I couldn't grasp what he was offering me. I wondered what it might feel like to fade into the air one day. Whether my father would notice it. There was only so much time before I would leave childhood behind and he would stop teaching me entirely.

One morning, when Papa finished his lessons with me and I closed my notebook carefully, Woferl climbed onto the clavier bench beside me and reached his hands toward the keys. He had

grown too, although perhaps not as much as a boy his age should. His eyes still looked enormous in the small, plump set of his face, and when he turned toward the music stand, I could see his long lashes against his cheeks, haloed in the light. He was a fragile child, both in body and health. It made me want to curl my arm protectively around his shoulders.

“Woferl,” I chided gently. “Papa does not want you to play yet.” My father said he was too young, his fingers too small and tender to press the keys properly. He did not want him to damage his hands. For now, selfishly, I was glad to keep music lessons something between only my father and me.

Woferl seemed to stare through my notebook, his eyes yearning for somewhere far away. His lashes turned up for a moment as he looked at me. “Please, Nannerl,” he said, scooting closer to me so that he pressed against my side. “Can’t you teach me a little? You are the best player in the world.”

He had been asking me this for weeks, climbing onto my bench after Papa had left for the day, and each time I had turned him away. But this morning, his expression was particularly coaxing, and my mood was light, my hands warm and sure against the keys.

I laughed at him. “Surely you don’t think I’m better than Papa,” I replied.

When I looked at him again, he seemed serious. “I promise I won’t tell.”

Whatever a promise meant to a small boy. Still, the sweetness of his face made me surrender.

“You are too far away,” I said at last. “Let’s move the bench closer, *ja?*”

Everything about him illuminated. His eyes, his smile, his

posture. He let out a soft squeak under his breath as I drew him close to the clavier, then helped him position his fingers against the keys. His hands looked so tiny against mine that I held them in my palms a beat longer, as if to protect them. Only when he made a sound, pushing me to move aside, did I release him.

“This is a chord,” I said, stretching my own hand out beside his. I played a harmonious trio of notes for him, each key spaced one out from the next, at first all together, then one after the other.

He watched me in fascination. He was still small enough that he had to use two hands to play it properly, the thumb of his left hand holding down the lowest of the three notes while two fingers of his right hand tapped out the middle and highest notes. E, G#, B. He listened curiously to it, tilting his head this way and that at the sound.

I smiled and played another chord. He followed my example.

This was when the first sign appeared. I don’t think that anyone else could have noticed it, not even Papa, who never had the patience to see these things.

When Woferl pressed down on the keys, one of the notes that he struck sounded very slightly out of tune.

He frowned, then played it again. Again, the note came out at the wrong pitch.

I leaned toward him, about to tell him that the string must need tightening. But the frustration that clouded his gaze made me pause. He pressed the key a third time, thinking that it might fix itself, and when it didn’t, he hummed the right pitch in the back of his throat, as if he couldn’t understand how the same note could be correct in his mind and incorrect outside of it.

I knew, in that moment, that he had a remarkable ear. Sharper

than our father's, sharper than Herr Schachtner's. Perhaps even sharper than mine, at least at that age. Already he understood the sound of perfection.

I now think this was how he first learned that the world was an imperfect place.

"Very good, Woferl," I said to him.

He paused to give me a relieved smile. "You hear it too," he said, and in that moment, I felt the warmth of his presence in my world, a second soul who understood.

We played a few more sets of chords before Woferl finally leaned away, looked from the clavier to the window's golden light, then back to me. "Can you tell me a story?" he said absently.

So, he was in a whimsical mood. I glanced toward our parents' bedroom, as if Papa could still hear us even though he had left hours ago. Mama had gone with Sebastian to the clothier. No one else was home.

"All right," I said, and closed my eyes to think of something.

I still don't know why it returned to me then. Perhaps it was the chords we'd played together, which still seemed to hang in the air. But there, in the darkness, I found myself hearing the achingly pristine music from my dream years ago. The memory resurfaced of a beautiful young face that I couldn't quite recall. Of waking with my hand outstretched before me, yearning to stay longer.

I opened my eyes. The sun was slanting against the floors just so, and a new haze hung about the light in the room. We were bathed in its glow. "There is a forest," I said, looking down at my brother. "That surrounds a kingdom."

Woferl grinned at that. He clapped his hands. "What kingdom?" he asked. "What forest?" This was the game between

us. He would ask me questions. I would invent answers for him, and slowly, our story would grow.

“It is a place where moss and flowers coat the floor,” I said in a hushed voice. “Trees grow in thick bundles. But, Woferl, they are not trees like what we know.”

“What are they like?”

Now my dream returned in glittering pieces: the moon, the sea, the black line of woods, and the strange shapes of the trees. The boy walking through the sea foam. I lowered my voice and gestured him closer. My imagination wandered free, constructing the rest of what this fantasy of a land might be. “They stand upsidedown, with their roots pointing up to the sky and their leaves curling against the ground, forming deep pools of rainwater along the lone path. You must be careful, for they feed on those who slip and fall in.”

Woferl’s eyes turned round as coins. “Do you think ghosts live there?”

“All manner of creatures do.” I pondered on what to tell him next. “They are not what they seem. Some are good and kind. Others will tell you they are one thing when they are another. You must follow the good ones, Woferl, and if you do, they will lead you to a shore with sand white as snow.”

Woferl had forgotten everything else around him now. He stared up at me with such an intent face that I laughed at his attention. My fingers danced across the clavier’s keys as I played a few light notes for him. To my pleasure, every note drew his admiration, as if he could not get enough of this world I’d chosen to share with him.

“Come here,” I suddenly said, putting my arm around him. “I know a piece that sounds just like this forest, if you want to hear it.”

Woferl giggled as I turned to a blank page in my notebook, careful not to crinkle the edges of the paper. I took a deep breath, then attempted yet again to reconstruct the music I'd heard in my sleep. I thought of the snippets of sounds from the streets that would awaken my memories, and added them to the melody.

Note by note, a strange song emerged from another world.

Woferl's fingers danced in the air. He hummed the tune under his breath, his pitch perfect, and a part of me knew that he must be the only other person in the world who could hear the same beauty I could. "Can I play it like you, do you think?"

"When your fingers grow a little." I gripped the bottom of our bench, then stood and pulled it toward the clavier. Woferl's hands scooted closer to the keys. "Would you like to try?" I asked him.

Woferl did. He mimicked my notes. And again, I found myself pausing to notice that he could remember everything I'd played, that even with his small hands, he could follow along almost as if he'd been practicing with me for days.

I watched him in wonder, and within that wonder, a small twinge of something—envy, fear—took root. The feeling sat cold against my chest. The wish I'd made so long ago came back to me in a sudden wave. *Make them remember me.*

That was when it first happened.

Woferl saw it before I did. He sucked in his breath and cooed in delight, and then stretched his little arms toward the open pages of my notebook. I looked at what had captured his attention.

There, right on the first page, was a tiny cluster of grass blades and three beautiful white blooms of flowers, all growing from the parchment at a straight angle. I blinked, hardly believing what I was seeing. They were edelweiss flowers, treasures of the Alps.

"Don't touch them, Woferl," I whispered, pulling his arm back.

“Are they real?” he asked.

I leaned closer to inspect the strange sight. Edelweiss did not grow at such low altitudes, and certainly not out of music paper. They were flowers of the mountains, plants that men sometimes died seeking out for their beloveds. Mama once told us that the Virgin Mary herself had blessed our land with edelweiss by dusting the mountains with stars.

And yet, there they were—snow white, their petals thick and velvet, their edges hazy in the glow of the afternoon. A clean, fragile scent hung in the air. The light in the room seemed very strange now, as if perhaps we were part of a waking dream.

“They must have come from the forest,” I said. I reached one finger out.

My brother made an irritated sound. “You said not to touch them.”

“Well, I’m older than you.” I let my finger skim the surface of one flower. The petal felt like the collar of my winter coat, fuzz against my fingertips. I drew my hand back. Part of the color came away when I did, leaving a streak of white across my skin like paint.

“I’m going to tell Papa,” he said.

I grabbed his hand. “No, don’t. Please, Woferl? Papa will think I’ve been filling your head with silly stories.”

He looked at me for a moment, his expression wavering between emotions. I patted his cheeks gently in the way that our mother did. It was this that finally won him over. I saw the resistance go out of him, the sway of his body toward me as he savored the affection. He scooted back beside me. I rubbed the streak on my skin between two fingers, watching as it smeared and faded away into the air. Perhaps it had never been there at all. When we glanced back to the notebook’s open pages, the edelweiss

had disappeared. Beside me, Woferl held his breath, waiting for the dream to return. My hands trembled.

But that was not all. When my finger had touched the flower petal, I'd heard a distinct musical note. No, something more than that. A sound too perfect to be from this world. A secret. I could tell by my brother's expression that he had not heard it. I played it over in my mind until I realized the note was not a note at all, but a sweet and beautiful voice that bubbled with bright laughter. I knew, immediately, that it belonged to the boy by the ocean. It spoke only one sentence.

I can help you, Nannerl, if you help me.



THE BOY FROM ANOTHER WORLD

I THINK IT ALL STRANGE NOW, OF COURSE—A BOY from another world, born from somewhere in my dreams. But the voice was very real then. I thought about it late into the night, turning it this way and that in my mind in an attempt to make sense of it, aching to hear its perfection one more time.

Woferl lay next to me in our shared bed and watched me with bright, sleepless eyes. Finally, he propped himself up on one elbow. “Do you think we’ll see the edelweiss flowers again?” He leaned toward me. He was still so small that his arms sank almost entirely into the folds of the bed. “Did they come from the forest in your story?”

I sighed and rolled over to look at him in a knowing manner. “Perhaps,” I said, to appease his curiosity. “I don’t know. But I do know I’m quite tired. Aren’t you?”

Woferl stared back innocently at me. “Yes. But you know

everything, Nannerl. Don't you also know what the forest is like?"

His chatter distracted me. All I wanted was to close my eyes and drift off to sleep with that musical note again in my mind. I sighed. "If I tell you a little more of the story, will you go to bed?"

"Yes," he promised in a rush.

I couldn't help smiling at his eagerness. "All right." I snuggled closer and wrapped my arms around him. "The forest is very large," I went on. My imagination loosened again. The world from my dream reappeared in my mind, parts of it blank and waiting for me to fill them in. "Larger than anything we've ever seen."

"Larger than Salzburg?" Woferl asked.

"Yes, much larger than Salzburg. Or Vienna. Or all of Austria. It is an endless place."

Woferl shifted in bed so that he could look at me. "Nothing is bigger than *all* of Austria," he declared.

I laughed. "Well, this place is. And while edelweiss is only in the Alps here, in the forest they grow everywhere, because it is their birthplace, where all such flowers come from."

Woferl made an impressed sound at that. "It must be a special place."

"Well, a special forest needs a guardian, doesn't it?"

He nodded without hesitation. "Of course it does."

A memory glimmered in my mind of an outfit stitched together from black bark and silver leaves. A smile of white teeth. "Because you have said so," I replied formally, "the forest has a guardian now."

Woferl leaned eagerly toward me. "Who is it?"

"Well, who do you think it is?"

“An imp?” He was picturing the ones from old German tales, wicked pranksters who could shift into the shape of a rabbit or snatch children from their cradles.

“Surely not just any imp, Woferl?” I insisted. “They aren’t clever enough on their own to guard an entire forest. They need someone to help them with their plans.”

Woferl considered this with a serious face. “A faery princeling, then, of the forest.”

A princeling. The memory in my mind sharpened further. A pair of glowing blue eyes, twigs tangled in hair. A voice too beautiful for this world. I yearned toward the thought. “A princeling,” I agreed. “Someone unafraid to play pranks on trespassers to drive them away. Someone clever and lovely enough to lure in whomever he wants, someone capable of conducting the forest’s symphony. Someone”—I thought for a moment, then winked at my brother—“wild.”

A crash sounded out from the other side of the wall.

I bolted upright in bed. Woferl’s eyes turned wide, illuminated by an edge of moonlight slipping into our room. The living room had fallen silent again, but we did not dare move. I tried to keep my breathing even, but I could feel Woferl trembling at my side, and his fright stirred my own. Where was Mama’s voice or Papa’s steps, someone who should check on the noise? We heard nothing. I glanced toward our closed bedroom door. Even though I heard no footsteps, I did see a faint light wander back and forth under the door.

I tucked my feet into my nightgown. It suddenly seemed very cold.

After a long silence, I finally loosened my knot of legs and swung them over the side of the bed. Perhaps Mama or Papa had

tripped over something and needed help. I couldn't hear their voices, though.

Woferl stared at me. "Are you going out there?" he whispered.

I turned my eyes back toward our bedroom entrance. Lights still reflected from its bottom slit, hovering. It did not look like candlelight or the light of a fireplace or sunlight. I motioned for Woferl to stay in bed, then crept over and peered out into the living room.

There, on the other side of our door, drifted a world of fireflies.

It did not occur to me that I might be dreaming. The air seemed too alive. The fireflies were everywhere, too bright to be an illusion.

I'd never seen so many, certainly none in the winter. They clustered the most brightly near the music room. One flew so close to my face that I stepped back and blinked, afraid it would land on me. But perhaps they were not fireflies at all—for in that moment, I glimpsed a tiny figure behind the light and caught sight of slender arms, legs as fine and delicate as flower stems. It made a bell-like sound before darting away.

I wandered out of our room, awed into silence. Moonlight spilled through the windows to paint patterns on the floor. Outside, I could see the dark outlines of the Getreidegasse's buildings asleep under the stars. The tiny creatures' glow gave our flat a strange color, somewhere between this world and another. I wanted to say it looked yellow, or blue, but I could not. It was like describing the color of glass.

The shadows stirred near the music room's door. I turned toward it. My feet moved forward on their own, and my brother followed close behind. The dots of light drifted aside for us, letting us carve a dark blue trail through their golden mist.

Someone was humming near our clavier. When I saw him, I gasped and lifted a hand to point in his direction.

The boy swiveled to face us. He flashed me a smile that revealed pearl-white canines.

He was taller than I, his frame as young and willowy as a dancer at the ballet. His skin glinted pale in the moonlight, and his fingers were long and lithe, his nails sharp. Sapphire hair tumbled shining down his back, and among the strands hung twisted trails of black ivy, shimmers of moss and forest, night and jewels. His eyes were large, luminous, and wondrously blue. They glowed in the darkness and lit up his lashes. His lips were full and amused. When I looked closer, I noticed the catlike slant of his pupils. His cheekbones were high and elegant in his youthful face, and he looked so unbearably beautiful that I blushed at the sight of him.

Of all my memories, this first meeting remains the sharpest.

“Who are you?” I asked.

Beside me, Woferl’s eyes were round with awe. “Are you the guardian from the forest?” he added.

The boy—the creature—tilted his head at me. “You don’t know?” he replied. There was a wildness about his voice, like wind that made the leaves dance, and I recognized it immediately as the sound I’d yearned toward in my dream. *This is who whispered to me at the clavier, the same boy I’d seen walking beside the ocean in my dream.*

It was him, and he was here. The breath in my chest tightened in fear and excitement.

Was he an imp, as Woferl had first suggested? I’d seen black-and-white ink drawings of those gnarled little creatures in collections of faery tales, legends, and myths, but this beautiful boy bore hardly any resemblance to them. It was as if he were the

original mold and the drawings merely his crooked shadows.

When I said nothing, he smiled and beckoned to me. Several of the fireflies danced close to him now, tugging affectionately at his hair and kissing his cheeks. He brushed them away and they scattered, only to return to hover around him.

“You are the Mozart girl,” he answered. “Maria Anna.”

“Yes,” I whispered back. “But I’m called Nannerl, for short.”

“Little Nannerl,” he said, his grin tilting playfully up at one side. “Of course.” The way he said my name sent a shiver down my spine. He turned to look at the clavier, and the gesture set the jewels in his hair clinking. “The girl with the glass pendant. I heard your wish.”

How could he have heard something I only held in my heart? A wave of fear rose in me that he might say it aloud. “You were the one in my dream,” I replied.

“Was it *your* dream, Nannerl?” His fanged smile gleamed in the darkness. “Or are you in mine?”

The lights hovering about his face twinkled. *Hyacinth!* they cried at him with their tiny bell voices, and he cocked his head at their calls. “Go back to bed,” he said. “We will talk again soon.”

Then, he reached out to the clavier’s music stand, grabbed my notebook, and tucked it under his arm.

Wofelr cried out before I did, his baby hands stretching out toward the boy. “He’s stealing your notebook!”

The boy shot me one last glance. “There is a trinket shop at the end of the Getreidegasse,” he said. “Come tomorrow, and I will return your music to you.” He didn’t wait for me to reply. Instead, he turned his back to us and threw himself at the window. My cry choked in my throat.

The glass shattered and the boy blended in with a thousand

glittering shards that spilled from the frame. His figure vanished as he fell to the street below. Woferl and I both darted to the windowsill. There, the scene made me step back in shock.

The Getreidegasse, its shops and carriages and silent iron posts, had disappeared. In its place lay a forest thick with upside-down trees, their roots reaching up to the stars, their leaves spreading out on the ground like velvet pools. Twin moons washed the scene into ivory and blue. A faint hum lingered on the night breeze, that same perfect, enticing melody from my dream, whispering for us to come closer. A trodden path wound its way from our building far into the forest's belly, deep into somewhere we could no longer see, where it faded away into the darkness.

A crooked wooden signpost stood right at the forest's entrance, pointing to the path. I squinted to read what it said, but couldn't make out the letters.

The music hanging in the air made my hands tremble, and a sudden urge surged in me. I tugged on Woferl's hand. "Let's follow him!" I whispered.

Woferl obeyed without hesitation. Our feet took flight. I unlocked our flat's front door, swung it open, and hurried out with my brother. My nightgown hugged my thighs as I ran, and the winter floors numbed my bare feet. I ran down the stairs and past the archways, down the third and second stories, down, down, all the way down until I stumbled to a halt at the arched entrance leading to the main street.

I blinked.

The forest, the moons, the upside-down trees, the trodden path, the sign. The music. They were gone. The Getreidegasse had returned to normal, the bakery and winery and the pubs, their wrought-iron signs dangling quietly over their doors, shutters

closed and flags pointed up toward the sky. In the distance loomed the familiar, black silhouette of Hohensalzburg Fortress, below which curved the silver ribbon of the Salzach River. I simply stood there, trembling from the cold, clutching the edge of my gown, starving to hear more of the melody from that other world.

Woferl came panting behind me. I caught him right as he ran toward the street, and pressed him close to my side. He looked as surprised as I did.

“Where did he go?” he asked. His breath rose in cloudy wisps.

A sick feeling crept into my stomach. I did not look forward to seeing Papa’s face when he found out that the notebook had gone missing. He would think I’d lost it and shake his head in disappointment. Beside me, my brother noticed my crestfallen expression and sobered immediately, slumping his shoulders and lowering his eyes.

“Woferl. *Nannerl!*”

The familiar voice startled me. Both of us whirled around in unison. It was Mama, her hair tucked underneath a nightcap, racing down the steps toward us. Her hands clutched at her coat. The image of our mother looked so real, the lines of her face so defined in contrast to the halo of light that had surrounded the boy. Suddenly, I felt how solid the ground was beneath my feet, how biting the chill was in the air. She frowned at me. *I am afraid of the cold*, Mama had told me before, and I turned my eyes down in shame for forcing her out here on an autumn night.

“Nannerl, what in the world are you both doing down here?” She shivered, her breath rising in a cloud. “Have you lost your senses?”

I started to explain what we had seen. But when I pointed up to where our windows were, where the boy had thrown himself

down to the streets—I saw that the glass panes had returned to their normal state. Nothing was broken.

My words died on my lips. Even Woferl stayed quiet.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I finally said. “We were dreaming.”

Our mother looked from me to my brother, then back again. The hint of a smile danced on her lips before it disappeared again behind her frown. There was a question in her eyes, something curious beyond her stern gaze that wondered what could really have brought us out here.

After a pause, Mama shook her head and held out a hand to each of us. We took them, and she began to lead us back up the stairs. “The very idea,” she murmured, frowning at how cold our hands felt in her warm ones. “I’d not thought you capable of such mischief, Nannerl. Rushing out here with your brother in the darkest hour of night. And in this cold! Thank goodness your father sleeps so heavily, otherwise he’d never let you hear the end of this.”

I looked up at her. “Didn’t you hear the crash in the music room, Mama?” I asked.

Our mother raised a slender eyebrow. “Nothing of the sort.”

I fell silent again. As we stepped back inside our building, I saw the trinket shop at the end of the Getreidegasse from the corner of my eye. The boy’s final words lingered. I wondered what would happen if I met him there.

When I looked at Woferl, he looked ready to say something to Mama—but after a while, his mouth relaxed into a line and he turned his face down. The matter was dropped.



THE PRINCELING IN THE GROTTTO

PAPA DISCOVERED THAT MY NOTEBOOK WAS missing the next morning.

He did not shout when he became upset. Instead, his voice would turn quiet like a storm on the horizon, so soft that I'd have to strain to hear what he was saying.

Careless. You are so careless, Nannerl.

Each of his words lashed at me. I bore it and kept my head turned down, my eyes focused on the embroidery of our rug. It was a hunting scene of three brothers riding in the sun-dappled clearing of a forest, their hounds forever frozen in the throes of tearing a doe to pieces.

"Well?" my father asked. "What do you have to say for yourself, now that we must buy you a new notebook?"

I counted the number of hounds and horses as I tried to still my thoughts. "I'm sorry, Papa," I replied.

“Sorry,” he echoed me in disbelief, then shook his head and looked away.

Beside him, Mama glanced quickly at us and cleared her throat. “They are still children, Leopold,” she said, putting a comforting hand on our father’s arm. “You are a grown man, and yet how many times have I scolded you about your misplaced quills and your lost spectacles?”

Papa just scowled. “Young ladies should be more responsible,” he said, looking back at me again. “How will you care for a husband if you cannot even care for your belongings?”

The word burrowed into my mind. *A husband, a husband*, it repeated in a whisper that quickly evolved into a roar. *You will be forgotten*, it said. I watched as my mother smoothed my father’s sleeve. *One day, you will disappear*.

I did not know how to defend myself. How does a daughter explain such a thing to her father? Even I could not be sure anymore what had happened. Sleep had already fogged the memory of last night. Could someone really have been in our home, standing by the clavier? Who had drawn us out into the street?

No, my father must have been right. I simply misplaced it. Last night was a dream, nothing more. And yet I kept staring at the rug, studying the doe’s wide eyes as my mother coaxed Papa with soft words.

Then, as my father resumed his scolding of me, Woferl rose from the dining table. He went up to the clavier, pulled himself up onto the bench, and placed his hands on the keys.

“Don’t be angry, Papa,” he said over his little shoulder. “I can remember the pages. Then we can write them down again.”

Of course he could not. Of course this was just another one of his whims. I stood there and almost wanted to smile at his strange

attempt to defend me, for trying to turn our father's shadow away from where I stood.

Papa's eyes softened in amusement. "Can you, now?" he said.

Woferl's expression stayed serious. He turned back around on the bench and started to play.

At first, he struck the wrong note, and hit a few more strays before he shook his head and paused. The piece was supposed to be a menuett in C. I saw him frown, knew that the same thought had just crossed his mind, and watched him start over.

This time, Woferl hit the right note. Then another and another and another. One of his fingers slipped, but that was the last mistake. He managed to make it through sixteen measures, all correct, of the menuett, and though his rhythm was off because he had to think about each measure, he remembered all of it.

My father stared at him, all signs of his earlier tirade completely vanished. I looked at my brother in disbelief. None of us dared move a muscle, as if what we'd witnessed was only a figment of our minds, and that if we disturbed this moment, Woferl's playing would have never happened at all.

My brother was barely old enough to read. What he just did was impossible.

I looked at our father. His smile had disappeared but his eyes had turned very bright. He said nothing. He needed not to, for even then, I could see in his mind the thought that lit his face.

This was the song of God he yearned for, emerging from the small hands of his son.

My affection for Woferl wavered then, and suddenly I felt that cold twinge return to my chest. The same one I'd felt as I'd let him play on the clavier beside me, when he'd remembered what I played so easily. It had taken me a week to remember the same

piece! Surely, he could not have memorized so much in such a short amount of time. I wondered, suddenly, if Woferl could have been the one who hid away my notebook.

My brother climbed off the bench and looked at me. There was only curiosity in his gaze, that perpetually innocent smile on his face. He was waiting for me to compliment his playing. I hesitated, unsure of what I might say.



Several minutes later, Papa hurried out of our flat on his way to Herr Schachtner's home. He was in such an eager mood that he had to return to grab his hat, which he'd completely forgotten.

I stayed quiet as Woferl and I prepared to accompany Sebastian down to the Getreidegasse for bread and meat. My brother hummed the tune under his breath while I helped him into his coat. When I listened closely, I could tell that he knew far more of the piece than he'd played.

"When did you learn the first page?" I finally asked him as we stepped out of our building and into the street. It was a brisk, busy morning, full of the music of carriages and conversations.

Woferl made me lean over to hear his reply, so that I walked awkwardly with my body tilted sideways. "When we saw the flowers." He kept his eyes on Sebastian's back. "When they were growing on the first page. Did you like it?" he added in a hopeful voice.

This couldn't be the answer, and I was so humored that I laughed. The edelweiss in my notebook had been a daydream. "You mean, you remembered the notes from yesterday?"

“Yes.”

“Just from the few moments I kept the page open?”

Woferl seemed puzzled by my shock. “Yes,” he said again.

I looked at him again. “Woferl,” I said, “you could not possibly have remembered the entire piece from our session. How could you? It was too long. Now, tell me the truth, Woferl—I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to. Did you take my notebook and hide it somewhere?”

He shook his head, sending his curls bouncing. “It was not too long,” he insisted. His eyes turned up to me in frustration. “I don’t need to take your notebook to remember the music.”

What Woferl said could not possibly be true. He must have practiced at another time, when no one else was around. Even if he hadn’t taken my notebook, he must have stolen peeks at it when I wasn’t looking. But his words were so sincere, so absent of his usual mischief, that I knew he wasn’t lying.

He huffed. His breath floated up in the air and faded away. “Besides,” he said, “we both know who stole it.”

I thought again of the fireflies that had floated in the darkness of our apartment, then the midnight dream of the boy in the music room. He had spoken so clearly to me. I’d seen him tuck my notebook under his arm and throw himself from our window against a silhouette forest. Even Woferl remembered.

The skin on my neck prickled. Last night was, of course, nonsense. But this time I did not laugh at the thought.

“You are very talented, Woferl,” I said to him after a long pause.

It was what he had been waiting all morning for me to say, and he brightened right away, forgetting all his frustration with our talk. His hand tightened in mine. My other hand rubbed at the

glass pendant in the pocket of my petticoat. Acknowledging my brother's playing frightened me less than the thought of last night being anything more than a dream.

The Getreidegasse was still wet today from a cleaning, and the air hung heavy with the smell of soups, carriages, horses, and smoke. Hohensalzburg Fortress towered over the city's baroque roofs, a faded vision today behind a veil of fog. Farther down, where the streets met the banks of the Salzach, we could hear the splash of water from the butchers hunched behind their shops, cleaning freshly culled livestock in the river. Everything bustled with the familiar and the ordinary. Woferl and I blew our warm breaths up toward the sky and watched them turn into puffs of steam. The clouds looked gray, warnings of snow. Several ladies passed us with their faces partially obscured behind bonnets and sashes. One of them carried at her hip a fine, pink-cheeked boy swaddled in cloth.

I watched her and tried to picture myself doing the same, hoisting a child in my arms and following a faceless husband down these uneven sidewalks. Perhaps the weight of carrying a child would damage my delicate fingers, turning my music coarse and unrefined.

We reached the bakery. Sebastian ducked his head under the wrought-iron sign, greeted the baker affectionately, and disappeared inside. While he did, I turned my attention to the end of the street, squinting through the morning haze to where the trinket shop stood. I half expected to see a shadowy figure standing there already, a tall, willowy creature with his glowing blue eyes, my notebook tucked under his arm.

"Let's go," I whisper to Woferl, tugging his hand. He needed no encouragement, and slipped out of my grasp to go skipping

toward the shop, his shoes squeaking against the street.

The trinket shop was a familiar sight. Woferl and I liked to stop here often and admire the strange collections of figurines behind its windowpanes. Sometimes we would make up stories about each one, how happy or sad they might feel, how old they were. Herr Colas, the elderly glassmaker who owned the shop, would humor us by playing along. Some of the trinkets were thousands of years old, he'd say, and once belonged to the faeries.

Woferl blew air at the window and left a circle of fog on it. The circle began shrinking right away.

"Woferl," I scolded, frowning at him. He stared back with big eyes.

"Do you see the boy in there?" he whispered, as if afraid to be overheard.

I bent down to study the trinkets. Some had colors painted on, deep-red dishes and gold-trimmed butterflies, blue glass pendants like my own, crosses, the Virgin Mary. Others had no color at all. They were simply glass, reflecting the colors around them, reminiscent of the faery lights we had seen in our flat. My gaze shifted from them to the shop beyond.

"I don't see anyone," I replied, looking back to the trinkets.

Then something scarlet caught my eye. I turned to look toward it and noticed a tiny sculpture I'd never seen before.

"Woferl," I breathed, pulling him closer to me. I pointed through the windowpane. "Look."

The trinket was of three perfect, white edelweiss, frozen in porcelain, their centers golden, their velvet petals gleaming in the light. One of the flowers had a missing streak of white paint.

My memory flooded with the image of the flower from my music notebook.

“Do you like this one, Fräulein?”

We both jumped, startled. Herr Colas stood near the shop’s door, squinting down at Woferl and me. Thin white bandages wrapped around his hand that clutched the doorframe. As he peered at us, I could see the deep pockmarks on his face crinkled up into slants. I sometimes wondered how he looked before the smallpox ravaged his skin, if he had ever been young and smooth-faced.

I pinched Woferl’s arm before he could say anything, and then I curtsied to Herr Colas. “Good morning, Herr,” I said. “The trinket is very pretty.”

He smiled and waved us forward with his bandaged hand. “Come, come, children,” he said. “Come out of the cold and have a look around.” He glanced at me. “You’ve grown taller since I last saw you, Fräulein. Your father has nothing but praise for your musical talents. I hear all the gossip, you know. The young girl with an ear like a court musician!” He gestured to my fingers, now covered in my gloves.

The Herr might know the gossip in the streets, but he’d never heard the barbed words my father said in our home, or seen the disappointment in his eyes. Papa would never belittle my skills in public. After all, that would embarrass him. Still, the Herr’s words warmed me, and I found myself blushing, murmuring my thanks.

“Where is this trinket from, Herr Colas?” Woferl piped up as we stepped inside, his eyes locked on where the porcelain edelweiss sculpture sat in the window display.

The old shopkeeper scratched the loose skin under his chin. “Vienna, I believe.” He leaned down to give us both a conspiratorial grin. In the light, one of his eyes flashed and I thought I caught

a glint of blue. He wagged a finger not at the trinket, but at the windowpane, and I thought again of the strange boy shattering our window into a thousand pieces. “Who knows, though, really? Perhaps it’s not from our world at all.”

My skin prickled at his words. I wanted to ask him what he meant, but he had already left us alone to our wandering and returned muttering to his little desk in the shop’s corner.

The shop looked hazy, the light filtering in from the windows illuminating the dust in the air. Shelves of trinkets were everywhere, music boxes in painted porcelain and strange creatures frozen in yellowing ivory, their lips twisted into humanlike grins. The stale scent of age permeated the room. While Woferl wandered off to a corner decorated with wind chimes, my eyes shifted to a dark corner of the shop hidden behind shelves and boxes. A thin ribbon of light cut through the shadows there. A door.

“Herr Colas,” I called out politely. “Are there more trinkets in your back room?”

He didn’t answer. All I could hear was the faint sound of humming.

My attention returned to the door. The humming seemed familiar now, a voice so perfectly tuned that it pulled at my chest, inviting me closer. My feet started moving of their own accord. I knew I shouldn’t have been back there without Herr Colas’s permission, and a small part of me wanted to step away—but as I drew closer, my fear faded away into nothing until I found myself standing right in front of the door.

The humming voice came from within, beautiful and coaxing.

I pushed the door with slow, steady hands and stepped inside.

At first, I saw nothing. Darkness. The door edged open without a sound, and I felt a touch of cool air. It smelled different from the

air outside, not of winter and spices or of stale antiques, but of something green and alive.

I stepped onto moss, the dampness of it soaking the bottom hem of my petticoat. A faint glow gathered at my feet, a quivering mist of faery lights, skittish in their movements. The darkness crept away as I continued forward, until I could see the ground clearly without bending over, and I realized for the first time that I was walking inside a tunnel—the walls dripped with moss and green ivy, baby ferns and tiny rivulets of water. Strange fruits hung from the ivy trails, wet and bright blue and as plump as bird eggs, their shapes like musical notes. Eating one was surely a quick invitation to be poisoned, but in that moment, I felt such a surge of want tingling on my tongue that I reached out, unable to stop myself, and plucked a single fruit free of its stem. My movement jerked the ivy forward and then quickly back. Drops of water rained down from the vines in a shower.

I popped the fruit into my mouth and bit down until its skin burst. Sugar and citrus and some otherworldly spice flooded my mouth. I closed my eyes, savoring the flavor of it.

I reached to take another and my fingers sank into the soft vegetation. One of them brushed past something familiar—a soft, velvet surface. I looked at where my hand had been.

A patch of edelweiss was growing against the wall, their velvet petals glistening with dew, and when I blinked, several more popped out from the wall's moss to hang sideways, their buds drooping toward the floor.

It was impossible, truly, to see a flower of the mountains in a place like this. But nothing about this place seemed real at all.

A few notes of music caught my attention. I turned instinctively toward the sound, seeking it out. It came from farther down,

where the tunnel ended in a circle of light, playing like a secret insulated from the rest of the world. My heart ached for it. *Music from my notebook?* I picked up my skirts and quickened my steps. Ahead of me, the tunnel began to widen, sloping higher until it opened abruptly into a circular cove.

The ceiling appeared to be formed from a lattice of leaves and fruit. Patches of silver moonlight filtered through to the ground, where edelweiss carpeted the floor in a white blanket. Moss and foliage enveloped every wall. And sitting there, in the center of this strange space, was the most beautiful clavier I'd ever seen, covered with baroque art and wrapped in lengths of ivy.

No one sat at the bench, even though the velvet cushion upon it had an indent as if someone had just left. When my eyes went up to the clavier's music stand, I saw with a surge of joy that my notebook was sitting there, waiting for me.

"It's here!" I called out into the tunnel, hoping that Woferl would hear me from the shop. I stared in wonder at the clavier. The keys had rounded tips that glowed under the light like polished gulden, and the entire instrument looked carved not from wood, but from marble. I ran my fingers across its surface, searching for the gaps where the body of the instrument should meet the legs, where the hinges of the lid should be screwed into the belly. But there were no gaps. The entire clavier was carved from a continuous slate of marble, as if it had always been molded in this form.

My hand drifted across the clavier, afraid to touch it and yet unable to bear not doing so. How could something so lovely be real? What would it sound like? I hesitated there for a moment, torn in two directions, before I finally pulled the bench forward so that I could sit. The legs scraped against the moss on the ground.

My notebook was already flipped open to a menuett in C, the latest piece my father had composed and the same one that Woferl and I had been playing when we first saw the edelweiss against the parchment. The very piece that Woferl had committed to memory from a single session. Even glancing at the written notes filled my mind with its music. I could distinctly hear the measures of the menuett as if I were practicing them during my lessons.

I lifted my fingers to the keys and touched their glowing surface. The keys were cold as ice. Instantly I drew my hands back, but the burn of it tingled like snow on my tongue, dangerous and enticing. I placed my fingers in position again, savoring the strange chill of the instrument. This time I tried a few notes. The sound hovered in the air, surrounding me, richer in tone than any clavier I'd ever played. My eyes closed. I realized I was humming now, trying instinctively to match that perfect melody around me. My heart fluttered with the thrill of the music.

A carefree laugh echoed from behind me. "You can have it back, Fräulein."

I stopped playing and whirled around to see the speaker.

There, underneath the shadows and the dripping moss, emerged a figure. Immediately I recognized him as the boy from the music room, the same silhouette who had walked along the shore in my very first dream. Under this new light, his pale skin took on a hint of blue. His grin was quick and lighthearted, his expression as much like a human boy's as it could be.

In that moment, I realized that perhaps that first dream was not a dream at all. Nor were the edelweiss growing against my notebook, or the sight of this boy in my music room. Perhaps even this moment was real. The world around me felt so sharp and alive that I couldn't possibly think otherwise.

“You can have it back,” he repeated in his perfect voice. “I’m done with it.”

“Who are you? Where do you come from?” I whispered.

The boy walked over to the clavier and performed a little jump. He settled comfortably on top of the instrument, then peered down at me with his head propped thoughtfully against one hand. His fingernails clicked against the clavier’s marble surface.

“From somewhere far away,” he said, “and very near.”

I tilted my head at him. “That’s not helpful at all.”

“Isn’t it? You know where it is. You’ve seen it before. You’ve been there.”

The twin moons hanging silver in the sky. The blue seashells dotting a white beach. A feeling of wistfulness crept over me then, as if I were thinking back on a place I’d once known. I looked at his feet, expecting to see sand between his toes.

“Where did it come from, then?” I went on. “This place both near and far away?”

“It’s been around since long before you or me. Everyone has seen it in some way, you know, although most will not remember it.”

A deep longing lodged in my throat. “Will I get to go there again?”

“Perhaps. I heard your wish,” he said, repeating what he had told me in the music room. “You want to be worthy of being remembered. By your father, by those your father regards highly. By the world. You’re afraid of being forgotten.” He studied me curiously. “That’s a large wish for a Fräulein to make. Why are you so afraid?”

My thoughts snapped to my father, how he would look away from me in disinterest if I did not play well. His talks with Mama, the whisper that followed me down the Getreidegasse. *A husband,*

a husband. I thought of fading into the light so quietly that my father might never notice. If I could fill our family's coffers . . . If I could create with the voice of God given to me, my father would not forget that I was here.

The voice of God. I thought of this boy's beautiful words, the music of his voice that trembled on the air of my dream, in that strange and vibrant place. That was it, the perfect sound.

At last, I met the boy's eyes. "Papa once told me that if nobody remembers you after you're gone, it's as if you never lived at all."

His smile widened at that. He looked like he had heard every thought unspoken in my mind. "It's immortality you seek, then," he said. "You burn with the ambition to leave your voice in the world. You fear your father will forget about you if you cannot do this. All your life, you have ached to be seen." He leapt off the clavier, then came to sit beside me on the bench. There, he leaned over, reached out his arm, and touched my chin with his cool, slender fingers. A sigh emerged from his lips. "Oh, Nannerl! You are an interesting one."

"Interesting? How?"

"Your need to leave a memory of yourself long after you have gone. Desire is your lifeblood, and talent is the flower it feeds." He gave me a sideways look as his hands sought out the clavier's keys. He began to play a soft melody I did not recognize. It was so lovely that I found myself touching my hand to my chest, steadying myself against the sound. "I can help you . . . but first, we must play a little game." His grin widened, childlike in its delight.

My heart lurched in excitement and fear at his words. "What kind of game?"

"You have your desires, and I have mine." He leaned his head

closer to me. “You want immortality. I want my throne.”

At last, he was finally answering my question. “Is that who you are, then? A king?”

The faeries floated around him, their light glowing against us as they kissed his skin. *A princeling, a princeling*, they whispered, filling the air with the word. *Princeling of the forest.*

“My name is Hyacinth,” he said.

Now I remembered the faeries calling his name the night before. The blue of his eyes certainly matched the flower. *Hyacinths*, my mother had once pointed them out to me at the market, and I’d brushed my hands against their clustered blooms. *Hyacinths are the harbinger of spring and life.*

“What happened to your throne?” I asked him.

The boy named Hyacinth ignored my question. His expression had suddenly shifted from mischief and mystery to something tragic, a flash of sadness that cut through his trickery. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, but the ghost of it lingered at the corners of his face, pulling me closer to him.

I looked at my notebook. “And why did you take this?” I asked.

He started to play again. I breathed deeply at the music. “You made a wish, Nannerl, and so I have come to you. You’ll discover that your notebook will now serve you in more ways than simple lessons at the clavier. Use it as your path to me. You can always find your way to me, Nannerl, if you speak to me through your music.”

If you speak to me through your music. I imagined this boy listening to the secrets in my heart, his eyes peering through the web in the woods. His hand taking mine and leading me down an enchanted forest path.

“What way is that?” I asked him.

“Why, to my kingdom, of course,” he answered.

Hyacinth’s words reminded me of my brother’s question from last night. “You say you seek your throne. Are you the guardian of the kingdom, then?” I whispered.

He turned to me with his secret smile. His eyes glowed against his skin. “I am *your* guardian, Nannerl. Tell me what you want. I will find a way to give it to you.”

Tell me what you want.

No one had ever said those words to me before. A slow, creeping cold began snaking its way down my fingers, until my arms grew heavy with numbness. The boy’s eyes hypnotized me.

“But be wary of what you wish for,” he went on. “Wishes have a habit of surprising their makers.”

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. The cold crept farther up my arms and to my shoulders.

When I opened my eyes again, he was gone.

I looked around in bewilderment at his sudden absence. I was alone in this strange grotto, my notebook still sitting on the clavier’s stand. With a burst of panic, I grabbed the notebook before it could disappear again, and then I sprang from the bench and turned back toward the tunnel. I called out for Woferl, but only silence greeted me. My stomach turned. He must still be back in the main shop—I had to go back to him. Sebastian must have come for us by now.

“Woferl!” I shouted, running faster as I went. “Woferl, answer me! Where are you?”

And then, just as abruptly as I’d entered the grotto, I stepped through the door and stumbled right back into the shop.

Everything looked unchanged from when I’d left it, the hazy air golden under the sun, the shop’s shelves stacked heavy with

trinkets. But the tremor of whispers and music no longer lingered in the air. It was replaced instead with the smell of aged wood, the bustle of everyday life outside the shop's walls. I stood still for a moment, trying to regain my sense of place.

Woferl looked over from where he was loitering near the windows. "There you are," he said.

I rubbed my eyes and glanced behind me. The tunnel had vanished, leaving behind nothing more than a tiny closet overflowing with empty crates.

Perhaps the dust in the shop had made me sleepy, and my mind had woven for me a web of illusion. The ice-cold burn of the clavier's keys, Hyacinth's glowing blue eyes . . .

"Are you all right?" Woferl asked, his eyes turned up at me in concern. "You look pale."

I shook my head. "I'm fine," I answered.

His eyes darted next to the notebook I clutched in my hand. "Oh! You've found it!" he said.

I blinked again, still surprised to be holding it. Had it been in my hand seconds ago? *Was* it all truly a dream?

"Was it the boy?" he asked rapidly. "Did you see him again?"

Sebastian came to my rescue before I had to answer. He ducked his head out from below the baker's signpost, caught sight of us, and nodded. "Fräulein. Young Master. We have prolonged this trip enough."

Woferl let the question drop as his attention turned momentarily to coaxing a sweet from Sebastian's pockets, and I gratefully let him go. My mind lingered on his questions, though, so that the rest of the trip home passed in a fog.

Everything about the grotto seemed so distant once I was back in the familiarity of the Getreidegasse. But even if it had

been a dream, it was a dream that persisted, the same world that kept returning to me day after day, year after year.

As Woferl pranced around Sebastian trying to make him laugh and give him another candy, I looked back down at my notebook. My fingers closed tightly against the pages. I had left our apartment without it and would return with it right here in my hand.

The music in the princeling Hyacinth's voice still played in my mind. It was possible that the grotto was a part of this continuous dream . . . or, perhaps, it was also possible that everything was real.



By morning, Papa had already spoken to Herr Schachtner about Woferl's newly discovered talent. Not a few months afterward, as if the princeling had sent them himself, letters began to arrive from Vienna. The royal court wanted to hear us perform.