

Prologue

The world around Aly dissolved into a blur of clashing steel and panicked screams, echoing off the cold stone walls of Borerose Palace. What had been a vision of handshakes and treaties had morphed into a brutal nightmare. Her lungs constricted, a heavy weight settling in her chest with each ragged breath. She forced her gaze to focus on her father's face, his features contorted with desperation that mirrored the icy dread creeping into her own limbs.

The opulent throne room, adorned with ivory statues of bygone rulers and black banners emblazoned with crimson hearts, stretched before Aly. Her eyes darted between the massive, barricaded doors and her father's face, etched with worry. Galen, her family's youngest emissary, stood beside him. But he wasn't just an emissary; he was her best friend. And his usual light-hearted expression was replaced with one that matched the king's distress.

Her eyes broke from his as a violent tremor rattled the room, dislodging dust motes that danced like phantoms in the flickering torchlight. The army of Hearts, Spades, Diamonds, and Clubs, their once-proud suits now stained with the grime of war, had breached the foyer. Only a dozen Red & White Knights from the Chessboard kingdoms stood resolute, their figures stark against the heavy oak doors, the sole barrier between the approaching storm and the vulnerable throne room.

Her father's voice, usually a comforting rumble, ripped through the chaos. "ALYCANA!" It was a barked command that jolted her. "Don't let this out of your sight!" The King of Calmër thrust a worn fabric-bound book into her hands.

The moment her fingers brushed the cover, a warmth bloomed beneath it, sending a tingling sensation up her arm. Was it magic? Why was it so important? No time to think. She nodded curtly, shoving the book into her satchel.

Aly caught Galen staring at the tall doors and followed his gaze. The war cries had ceased behind the oak doors. An unnatural silence descended upon them for what felt like ages before the thick doors shuddered under a renewed assault. The booming cracks of their enemies echoed through the hall.

"Galen, get her out of here." The King spoke firmly.

Galen grasped Aly's shoulders, pulling her away. "C'mon, Cyfri!" Strong arms, surprisingly steady despite the chaos, lifted her from her father. She struggled against Galen's grip, fresh tears staining her face.

The thought of abandoning her father was a physical blow. Every fiber of her screamed to stay, to fight alongside him. She shook Galen off and took a step towards her father, tears blurring her vision. "No, Papa!" The teenager choked, shaking her head violently.

"You must go!" He urged over her sobs. "Get to the Eighth Square! You have my Tahansa Key," the King added, his eyes falling to a key strung around her neck.

Aly suddenly felt its weight. Her hand flew up to grasp it. The Calmër Tahansa Key: two silver keys etched with swirling patterns that resembled a rabbit's head when clasped together.

Though she'd never used it before, she'd seen her parents utilize it; a key that could create a door from thin air, a gateway to anywhere you pictured.

"Don't use it in the open. Wait until you're in the cover of Senzanom Forest!"

"But where will I go? I don't know what the Eighth Square looks like!" Her voice cracked with panic. "Papa, please! Let's use it now. Please!"

The great doors shuddered. Another strike and a deafening crack echoed through the throne room as oak splintered, sending a cloud of dust billowing into the air. The once formidable entrance was on the verge of collapsing.

Grief battled with the rising tide of panic in Aly's chest. She already didn't know where her mother was—probably dead—and now she was likely to lose her father.

She watched, frozen, as the King turned back to her. "No! It'll only be easier for them to track us," he argued, shoving an archery set into her trembling arms. "Be at the ready."

Without thought, Galen took the quiver and latched it to Aly's belt. While familiar and proficient with the bow, it suddenly felt foreign and unwelcome in her grasp.

"I can't," Aly choked back tears. "You know that I can't!"

The King's expression hardened, a mixture of frustration and fatherly concern. "Only loose if you have no other option." His command left no room for argument.

Another blow and the doors would crack open completely.

"Run now!" The King roared, shoving Aly with surprising force. His face, etched with lines deeper than she had ever seen, was pale with a sheen of sweat. "Go! Galen, keep her safe!"

"Aye, yer Majesty!" Galen replied over Aly's cries of refusal. His brow furrowed with concern and determination; he pulled Aly towards the back of the throne room with surprising strength. "Cyfri," he snapped through gritted teeth, successfully tugging her into a hidden servants' corridor as the great oak doors flew open.

"Pa—" Aly's scream was cut short by Galen's hand forcefully clasp over her mouth.

A troop of Suits surged into the room, a tide of darkness engulfing the King of Calmër. Their armor, a design of obsidian black and blood-red, gleamed with an unnatural gloss. The air crackled with an unseen energy as the figures moved with practiced precision, a terrifying efficiency that sent shivers down Aly's spine.

"We can't 'elp 'im," whispered Galen. "An' it'll be no good if ya're caught, too." He kept his hand steadily over her mouth for what was more than necessary. His ocean blue eyes filled with a seriousness Aly had never seen in him. When he finally released her, the concern in his expression softened. "C'mon," he urged.

Unsheathing his claymore with a practiced flourish, they navigated the narrow passage. Emerging behind the palace, they'd been deposited into the hedge-maze gardens of Borerose Palace. The moon cast an eerie glow on the meticulously sculpted shrubbery, and the air hung heavy with the scent of roses and damp earth.

"The second sun should rise soon." Galen noted, his eyes fixed on the western horizon.

Aly followed his gaze, seeing that the smallest of the three suns had already risen. It would be the second sun that gave them the light they'd need to make their way through the dark forest of Senzanom.

"Aly! To your left!" Galen barked, whirling around with surprising speed. The moon glinted off his sword as it cut through the air. Instead of finding its mark, it cleaved the head clean off a topiary flamingo in a shower of green leaves and blood red rose petals.

Instinctively, Aly dove to the right, narrowly avoiding a lanky Spade who emerged from behind a tall rose bush. Unlike the other Suits, this one was distinctly full of fear and uncertainty. He fumbled with a short sword at his hip, but his movements lacked conviction.

She cut her bow through the air, striking the man across the face. He stumbled sideways but persisted. He unsheathed his sword but looked reluctant to use it.

"You don't want to do this," Aly said, her voice surprisingly steady despite the pounding of her heart. "So why are you?"

The Spade remained silent; his brow furrowed with defiance. Aly ducked beneath his clumsy advance, using the momentum to spin and jab the butt end of her bow into his back. He grunted with surprise. Off balance, he stumbled, and Aly capitalized on his vulnerability, sweeping his legs out from under him with a swift kick. He landed hard on the packed earth, groaning in pain. Aly, standing over him, raised her bow defensively but hesitated to deliver the blow. She brought the butt of her bow down onto the ground with a thud, inches from his head.

"Answer me!" She demanded, her voice a mixture of anger and curiosity.

Through gritted teeth, the Spade spat, "Off with your head!" His blind obedience sent a shiver down her spine. There was only one person who ever gave that command...and she wasn't a Spade.

The Queen of Hearts! Was she the one leading the attack?

"Cyfri!" Galen called.

Aly whipped around, her heart hammering against her ribs. Galen had barely parried a vicious blow from his opponent. The first Suit lay motionless on the pebbled path, a crimson stain blossoming from around his chest. A second attacker lunged at Galen, their blades clashing with a deafening screech.

Taking a deep breath, Aly shoved any hesitation aside. This wasn't the time for questions. With a quick glance at the Spade on the ground, she brought the butt of her bow down with a sickening crack against his temple. He crumpled instantly, unconscious.

"C'mon!" Galen slipped his hand into her free one and tugged. They turned the corner, the towering hedges of the Borerose maze looming high above them. Galen stopped, pushing Aly to his other side. She had been about to ask why when two Suits rounded the same corner. Galen reacted with lightning speed, his claymore a blur of silver as he ran his sword through the Diamond and kicked the Heart with a powerful blow. The Heart tumbled back, landing squarely in the hedge. Instead of bouncing off, the ivy writhed, its tendrils reaching out like grasping fingers to engulf the Suit whole, dragging him into the depths of the hedge wall.

Without a word, Galen continued guiding them through the intricate twists and turns of the maze. They didn't come across more Suits until they reached the far end, where a narrow opening led out.

"There they are!" One Suit bellowed.

"Run!" Galen shoved Aly forward before kicking a Club squarely in the chest, sending the soldier flying back. He spun, blocking the blow of Diamond with his sword.

Fueled by a surge of adrenaline, Aly slipped an arrow from her quiver. Her movements were smooth, years of target practice finally paying off in a life-or-death situation. Nocking the arrow, she aimed and released. The arrow found its mark, the Diamond crumpling to the ground behind Galen.

He glanced back at the dead soldier, then at Aly, his eyes wide with surprise.

"You're welcome," she offered, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. She swiftly approached the fallen Diamond, her gaze fixed firmly ahead. Removing the arrow from his head was a necessity, but the act felt brutal. If she had allowed herself to look down, she knew she would be sick on the spot.

A handful of Suits came around one side of the maze, their armor reflecting the light of the second sun slowly rising. From the other side, the pounding of boots on the ground announced the arrival of ten more.

"Time ta go!" Galen spun Aly around, his voice tight with urgency. "An' rememb'a, when we reach the field, don't look down!"

Aly didn't need the reminder; the acrid tang of blood filled the air. The battle on the field had long ended, but the Suits and Knights strewn across the small meadow were freshly deceased, their lifeless forms stark against the dew-kissed grass. She focused on the dark line of the forest bordering the meadow and the sliver of sunlight peeking over the mountains beyond.

"We're nearly there!" Galen called, his voice straining with exertion. "No matt'a wha' ya hear, ya keep runnin' Cyfri!"

His last statement sent a jolt through Aly. Confused, she whirled around to see her friend skid to a stop a few yards back. Galen raised his claymore in a defensive stance as three Suits gained on them, their movements a chilling combination of speed and menace.

"Galen!"

"RUN!" He roared over his shoulder, his voice laced with a raw desperation that sent shivers down Aly's spine.

She felt the pressure in her head as she fought between being obedient and defiant. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to shake the feeling. A cold resolve settled over her, replacing the frantic terror. When she opened them, a streak of cerulean waved across her light blue eyes. Holding her bow horizontally, she focused on the first Suit bearing down on Galen. The world narrowed to a tunnel vision – the rushing form of the Suit, the nock of the arrow against the taut string. When the target was a yard from Galen, Aly released the arrow. The air ripped with the satisfying twang of the bowstring, followed a split second later by a sickening thunk as the arrow found its mark.

She paid no further attention to the body as it crumpled to the ground, a silent testament to her deadly aim. Already, she was nocking another arrow, her gaze fixed on a Diamond Suit about to collide with Galen, who was locked in a desperate struggle with his own attacker. This time, the arrow found its mark with a wet slap, sending the soldier sprawling into the field of corpses. Focusing solely on the next target, and the next, her body acted on autopilot as she defended Galen with deadly efficiency.

“I told ya ta run!” Galen roared. “Go! ALY, GO!”

Aly blinked, shaking her head as if coming out of a trance. The world snapped back into focus, and a wave of dread crashed over her. Galen was barely deflecting the relentless blows of his assailants. A Suit, clad in crimson armor, emerged from the throng, bounding over the bodies with inhuman agility.

Arrow aimed at the Suit, Aly hesitated. A flicker of movement in the distance caught her attention. A small gasp escaped her lips. As far as the eye could see, a sea of red, black, and white armor surged towards them. The Suits of Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, were bad enough, but leading the charge were hundreds of figures in bright red coats – nothing like the Red Knights of Karminin – this was a uniform Aly had never seen before.

They were completely outnumbered. Aly’s arrows were dwindling, and even if she had the time, the thought of retrieving some from the carnage at her feet made her stomach churn.

Galen parried another blow, but the last Suit to pursue them from the maze lunged from behind. Aly’s reaction was instinctive. The bowstring sang in the air as she released the arrow, the fletching brushing past Galen’s neck with a hair’s breadth of space. The Suit, struck true in the chest, crumpled to the ground with a thud, joining the growing pile of fallen enemies around them.

Galen jogged towards her, his chest heaving and his face grim. “Cyfri, ya need ta keep on. I’ll ‘old ‘em back, long as I can, but do wha’ yer Pa instructed, yeah?”

Aly wanted to scream, to tell him it was pointless, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, she argued, “Where am I supposed to go?”

“Get yerself ta Rüttrüm. They’ll be able ta help ya from there.”

A single tear ran down Aly’s cheek.

“Hey,” his voice softened, both hands gently cupping her face, pulling her focus away from the approaching army. “I’ll be right behind ya. Ya know I’m a fast runner. I’ll catch up in no time, yeah?” He winked, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips, an attempt to lighten the mood despite the weight of the situation.

Despite the turmoil within, a sliver of logic cut through the panic. Galen was right. If they stayed together, they would both be captured. With a heart that felt like it was shattering in her chest, she nodded, tears stinging her eyes. Taking a shuddering breath that did little to calm the storm within her, Aly turned and sprinted for the dark, uninviting entrance to Senzanom Forest.

Massive trees loomed ahead, their gnarled branches clawing at the dawning sky. An unnatural silence hung in the air, broken only by the pounding of her own heart. Each step she took away from Galen was torture, but she knew it was the only way. She had to try to reach the

Eighth Square, for her parents, for Galen, for any hope they had for their future and the future of Wonderland.

Keep running. Don't look down. Don't look back. She frantically repeated to herself. He's clever and fast and... She couldn't bring herself to think more about it. It just felt like she was lying to herself.

Crossing the battlefield, the smell of blood burned her nostrils. Each leap over a fallen body felt like a violation of their final rest. Reaching the edge of the forest, she scrambled over gnarled roots, the uneven ground threatening to twist her ankle. Mangled branches snagged at her braids and left bloody welts across her exposed skin. Tears welled up, blurring her vision momentarily, but she blinked them back fiercely. Tears wouldn't help her, wouldn't save her father or Galen.

They wouldn't get her to the Eighth Square.

A bellow erupted from the field behind her, a woman's voice with discernible authority. "STO-O-O-OP!"

It wasn't directed at her, but the sheer power in the voice snagged at Aly's curiosity, momentarily eclipsing her fear. Alert, she slammed to a halt and swiftly spun around and crouched behind a thick wall of low-hanging branches. Peeking through the dead leaves, she took advantage of the temporary reprieve. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, but she forced herself to still, to listen. With her bow parallel to the ground, an arrow nocked and ready, she scanned the scene.

The Suits fanned out along the border of Senzanom, forming a line perhaps fifty feet from the forest's edge. They stood motionless, statues obeying an unspoken command. The silence stretched, heavy and oppressive.

At the center of the coordinated line... The Queen of Hearts!

Astride a magnificent black mare, its coat gleaming like polished obsidian in the first rays of dawn, sat the Queen of Hearts. The Queen of Corda and host of the soured negotiations. She made her way through the sea of Suits, stopping at the head of the grand army. The Queen was a picture of controlled power. Her crimson velvet riding robe flowed regally down the side of the mare, its layers cascading over a black and crimson taffeta skirt that whispered wealth and power with every rustle. Black knee-high boots peeked out from beneath the skirt, polished leather gleaming as they rested comfortably in golden stirrups. Her crown, a breathtaking display of elaborate gold heart designs and glittering rubies, was strategically set into a riding hat. The wide brim shielded her dark chocolate eyes from the harsh glare of the Light Sun. A hint of a cruel smile played on her ruby red lips, a terrifying counterpoint to the otherwise composed expression on her face. It was a smile that spoke of absolute authority and a ruthless determination to see her will be done.

Aly's icy blue eyes darted from one body to another on the battlefield, searching for any sign of Galen but to no avail. Despair gnawed at her, a cold dread that threatened to cripple her.

Everyone – Suits of Spades, Hearts, and Diamonds – stood rigidly at their posts. Then there were the new ones, the soldiers in bright red uniforms. Unlike the metal armor of the Suits,

these men wore red woolen coats adorned with gold trim and two rows of buttons trailing down either side of their torso. Beneath the black and gold-trimmed collar, a stock of black leather protected their necks, enforcing an air of rigid discipline.

Their presence was a mystery. Perhaps a new uniform design for the Queen's elite guard? No, these red-clad soldiers were something entirely different. And they had all stopped yards from the woods.

No one ever crossed into Senzanom Forest. At least, no one dared venture into the part that grew on Cordan territory. That was what Aly was betting on to keep her safe for the moment. With a quick glance at the trees, a shiver danced down her spine.

It was darker than any forest she had ever ventured into—and that included Tulgey Wood. Despite the appearance of decay, Senzanom Forest was quite alive. The sky directly above was an oppressive gray, although skies were clear and blue just beyond the border. Thick trees sprouted in impossible angles, their gnarled branches clawing at the dim light like skeletal fingers. The forest was eerily silent, broken only by occasional rustles and the squelch of Aly's boots sinking into the muck. The air reeked of stagnant swamp water and sulfur. Unlike the whimsical paths of Tulgey Wood, the terrain here was a chaotic jumble of jagged rocks and thick, gooey mud.

"My Queen?" The Captain of the Hearts addressed the regal woman.

She ignored him, her posture rigid with contained fury. Then, in a voice that dripped with honeyed malice, she cooed, "Alycana Andarun!" The Queen's perfect diction made the name sound more like an accusation than a greeting. After a few seconds, she added with a wicked smirk that sent shivers down the Captain's spine, "If you even remember who you are."

Leaning over the neck of the mare with a predatory grace, the Queen scanned the wall of branches. Her eyes flicked from one small opening to another, searching for any hint of movement or hidden shadows, hoping to see the girl. After a moment of fruitless searching, she sat back up with an audible sigh of frustration. She straightened her crimson riding skirt in a gesture that suggested she was simmering her anger.

What should that mean, I wonder? Aly, who had managed to overhear the Queen thanks to the surprising quiet of the forest, thought to herself as she watched from the shadows. Realizing no one could see her, she slowly returned the arrow to the quiver at her hip.

The Suits grew anxious, still awaiting orders, as the Queen of Hearts considered her next move. All but one Suit—the Captain—glimpsed back and forth, between the Senzanom Forest and their intrepid leader. With bated breath, they silently prayed that the command to proceed into the forest would never come.

"Your Majesty," the Captain timidly called out, breaking the tense silence. The Queen sharply faced him, her cold gaze making him swallow hard before continuing, "She has the book, your Majesty."

Still quietly hidden within the dense foliage, Aly pulled the small, fabric-bound book from her satchel. The title read: The Jabberwock. Suddenly she'd forgotten what a Jabberwock was. If someone had asked her before she'd entered the forest, she might have been able to tell

them it was the epitome of fear. The creature was rumored to live in the heart of Mount Balaur and frequented the parts of Senzanom Forest lying within Corda. But the atmosphere of the forest had already taken its toll on Aly's mind. All she knew now was that a Jabberwock wasn't anything good. And although she couldn't recall why, Aly knew it would be terrible if the Queen of Hearts had a hold of the book.

Back in the meadow, the Queen's face contorted with rage, a mask of fury that sent shivers down the spines of even the most hardened Suit. "Lieutenant!" she barked, barely containing herself. A young man marched up to them, saluting smartly as he stood to the right of his Captain. The Queen took a deep, steadying breath as he did so.

"Congratulations," she sneered, her eyes remaining fixed on the Captain of Hearts in a way that sent chills down his spine. She leaned towards them, her corset emphasizing the perfect posture she maintained even in the saddle. A wicked smile played on her lips as she addressed the Lieutenant, despite her stare focused solely on the Captain. "You've just been promoted," she stated coolly, her voice dripping with a dark promise. With a flick of her head upwards, silent but clear in its intent, the Queen issued her command.

Before he could protest, a glint of metal flashed followed by a sickening wet thud as a single, brutal swing of the Lieutenant's sword severed the Captain's head from his shoulders.

Aly felt a scream curdle in her throat. She turned away from the scene until she could compose herself. Fresh tears gently ran down her face as she returned to looking on from the safety of her hiding place.

"Incompetent fool!" The Queen spat as she sat up straight again. Turning her attention back to the tree line, her lips pressed into a thin, cruel line. The forest loomed before her, a silent challenge, and for a moment, a flicker of frustration crossed her features.

The pounding of hooves announced the Captain of the Spades as he galloped up to the Queen. With a quick salute, he urgently informed, "We've captured the Knave-King and Alice."

A devious grin curled the corners of the Queen's lips. This unexpected turn of events was a welcomed surprise. "Good," she purred. Projecting her voice to carry through the trees, knowing Aly was likely hidden somewhere within, she called, "Do you hear that, Alycana? Your precious parents are still guests in my palace. Safe...for now."

The capture of her parents sent an involuntary jolt through Aly. My mum's alive? A flicker of hope, long extinguished, sparked back to life in her chest. But it was quickly doused by a wave of despair. The Queen's words were laced with poison, designed to manipulate and control. A voice chimed in her head, Get to the Eighth Square.

"Captain Hearts," The Queen of Hearts addressed, her voice regaining its icy composure.

The Captain, reminded of the weight of his sudden promotion and his predecessor's demise, stepped forward and met the Queen's gaze.

"Line every Suit along the borders of Senzanom. Leave no gap, understand?" she demanded.

Aly strained to hear the exchange. The Queen's words were a death knell to any hope of escape through the forest's edge.

“When she crosses over, I want her brought to me immediately.” The Queen’s voice hardened as she added, “And get me that book, Captain! Do not disappoint me.” The last sentence was a barely contained snarl, a reminder of the brutal price of failure.

Determined, Aly stood and returned the book to the safety of her satchel. There would be no crossing out of this wood, not anytime soon. A shiver danced down her spine as she wondered how long they would keep searching. A week? A month? The forest was a terrifying unknown, but so was facing the Queen’s wrath.

The Captain of Hearts finished relaying orders to his newly appointed lieutenant and turned back towards his Queen. “Your Majesty,” he began cautiously, “what would you have us do if the girl doesn’t come out? If she stays just within the borders of Senzanom Forest?”

The Queen jerked her gaze away from the forest, a cruel amusement flickering in her eyes. “Captain,” she purred, her voice laced with a dark confidence, “she rushed in without a moment’s hesitation. Not so much as a glance back.” A cruel smile played on her ruby stained lips. “The toxins in that forest,” she began, gesturing vaguely towards the dense trees, “They’ll creep into her lungs, muddle her mind. Soon enough, she’ll be lost and confused...forgetting why she went there in the first place.”

The Captain swallowed hard, a horrible image forming in his mind. The Queen’s gaze snapped back to him, her smile widening into a triumphant grin.

“She’ll forget her purpose, Captain. She’ll forget her mission. Why,” she paused, a throaty chuckle escaping her lips, “...she’ll even forget her own name.” The Queen’s eyes gleamed with a chilling satisfaction as she turned her gaze back to the forest.

The Captain, left with unanswered questions and a growing sense of dread, could only salute and follow suit.

As Aly plunged deeper into the forest, the darkness pressed in on all sides. The air hung heavy and still. The only sounds were the unsettling creak of unseen branches and the occasional rustle in the undergrowth, sending shivers down her spine. Narrowing her eyes to slits, she tried to pierce the gathering fog that choked the forest floor. The sickly-sweet scent of decaying leaves mingled with the damp earth, a suffocating shroud that made her cough. Pushing on, Aly waded through the thick gray mud, her boots squelching with each step. She had to reach Rüttrüm, the Kingdom of Spades. There, she could find shelter and, hopefully, a way to the Eighth Square.

“Ooph!” Aly was stopped by her quiver caught on a tangle of branches. She thought she caught a shadow of movement in her peripheral vision. She yanked, the leather digging into her fingers. “Oh, please! Let go!” Panic clawed at her throat as she fumbled to release herself from the gnarled branch’s grasp, desperation fueling her movement. She dropped her bow, the sound of it hitting the ground was swallowed by the oppressive silence of the forest. Slapping at the rough bark and pushing at the unforgiving branches, a raw frustration bubbled within her. Just as she managed to unlatch the quiver from her belt, another flash of movement in the gloom sent a jolt of terror through her.

A pair of glowing teal eyes appeared in the hollow at the center of the tree facing her. Swiftly, she snatched up her bow and stepped back. Aly lost her balance, trampling over a patch

of unseen mushrooms with a sickening squelch. A cloud of shimmering, deep purple dust exploded around her. She coughed violently, waving her hand in front of her, but it was too late.

The effects of the Plum Mushroom quickly took effect. The world warped around her. Surrounding branches twisted into writhing serpents, their bark cracking as they suddenly lunged for her. The forest dissolved into a horrifying kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. Distant howls and deep roars intensified, sounding impossibly close. Deafening shrieks from unseen creatures pierced the distorted soundscape, disorienting her further.

Aly stumbled blindly, tripping over roots until she collided with a hard, flat surface, sending her sprawling to the ground. Gasping for breath, she coughed until her lungs ached. Rubbing the stinging dust from her eyes, the world slowly came back into focus.

The wild calls had stopped. The trees no longer reached for her. Glancing around, she began wondering where she was and why she was there. And in the eerie quiet of the woods, a small yellow door stood within a stark white frame. Nothing more.

Instinctively, Aly's hand flew up to her chest, wrapping around her father's Tahansa Key. She hadn't used it. In truth, she'd forgotten about it entirely. Even now, holding it in her hand, the memory of its purpose seemed hazy, lost in the swirling fog of the mushroom dust's effects. With a sigh, she let the key fall beneath her blouse and climbed to her feet, surveying her surroundings with a deepening sense of unease.

"Now, where did this come from?" She wondered aloud. Nothing held the door in place, much like the doors conjured by the Tahansa Keys. "Where do you suppose it goes?"

Gradually twisting the knob, she opened the door an inch or two, a sliver of warm sunlight spilling through the gap. Taking a deep breath, she peeked through, her eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. A verdant landscape stretched out before her, bathed in the golden glow of an unseen sun. Birdsong filled the air, a stark contrast to the quiet darkness Aly stood in. Just as she was about to push the door open wider, a sudden POP echoed through the small clearing, making her jump.

"You should go in there." spoke an unfamiliar voice.

Snapping her attention left, Aly faced a creature unlike anything she'd ever seen. Perched nonchalantly on the edge of a crumbling wall was a short, wiry man. His skin an unhealthy shade of pale, stretched taut over his bony frame. But it was what flowed beneath the surface that sent shivers down her spine. A strange, almost translucent, current of shimmering green dust flowed just above the surface of his skin, tracing the veins beneath. The luminescent flow converged in his chest, erupting into a swirling vortex that released outward from strands of his otherwise dark mane.

This creature, this imp, radiated an otherworldly unnaturalness that sent a primal tremor through her, yet there was something about him that sparked a question in her mind. Who was he, and what did he know about the strange world beckoning from beyond the door? Every instinct screamed at her to run, but a strange compulsion held her rooted to the spot.

Instead, she asked, "Who are you?"

The imp's voice, when he spoke, was high-pitched and grating, laced with an underlying amusement. "You've been wrong! The first thing in a visit is to say 'How d'ye do?' and shake hands!"

Aly stared at him, dumbfounded. Had this strange creature just chastised her for manners? A flicker of annoyance sparked within her, quickly extinguished by a wave of confusion. Was he serious, or simply toying with her?

"What?" she finally managed, her voice barely a whisper.

"No, you're right," he conceded, waving a dismissive hand. "We haven't the time for pleasantries. Besides..." He leaned in slightly and fixed her with an unsettlingly intense stare. "The question you should be asking is, 'Who are you?'"

Aly grimaced. "I know who I am," she spoke before thinking, the words tumbling out in a rush of defiance. When the imp raised his brows with impatience, she rolled her eyes, trying to project a confidence she didn't feel. "I'm—" she stopped short. Her brows furrowed in concentration, and after a deep breath, she tried again, "My name is—" Her frown deepened as the word refused to form on her lips. "That is...I mean to say, the name's—" She took her eyes off the imp, desperately trying to remember what her name was.

Her mind was a blank slate. She felt her name on the tip of her tongue, a familiar warmth that refused to resolve into a word. It was there, just out of reach, like a wisp of smoke teasing her with forgotten memories. A single thought hammered in her skull: Who am I? The forest around her seemed to blur at the edges, replaced by a hazy confusion that mirrored the growing emptiness in her mind. She was certain she had a name. But what was it?

"That's what I thought." The imp seemed to frown a little.

Aly tore her gaze away from him, her eyes landing on the small yellow door. Beside it lay the forgotten recurve bow. The sight of it sparked a flicker of recognition, but the memory of its purpose remained frustratingly elusive. A cold dread seeped into her stomach. Was this happening with everything? Was her entire past, her entire identity, slipping away like grains of sand?

"You won't be needing that on the other side," the imp remarked, his voice laced with a casualness that grated on her already frayed nerves.

She glanced back at him. "But, it is mine...?" Her voice was a mere echo, devoid of conviction.

The imp's grin widened. "Don't worry," he reassured her, his voice laced with an honesty she didn't understand. "I'll take good care of it until you return." The bow disappeared, as did the quiver latched at her hip.

"I can't even remember why I had it...whatever it is." The realization struck Aly with a force that left her breathless. It wasn't just her name; it was everything. The names of common objects, the memories of how to use them, all seemed to vanish into a swirling mist. "This must be the wood where things have no names." She frowned, her eyes scanning the unfamiliar forest around her.

"Right you are."

“What’ll become of my name...I shouldn’t like to lose it at all—they’d have to give me another, and it would almost certainly be an ugly one.” Aly’s voice trailed off. Her eyes fell back to the yellow door. A sliver of sunlight peeked through the opening, its warmth a beacon in the gloom. A faint melody, like wind chimes tinkling in a gentle breeze, drifted from the unknown.

“Your name is Charlie.” The imp’s voice startled her, sharp and clear.

A flicker of doubt crossed her face. “Is it? That doesn’t feel right.” A voice echoed in her mind, Cyfri. But Cyfri wasn’t a name. Was it? Maybe the small voice meant to say Carly? That didn’t feel right, either. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps her name was Charlie.

“It is in there.” He nodded towards the door and with another sharp POP, vanished into thin air.

Aly...now Charlie...frowned. The name felt foreign on her tongue.

Despite the nagging fear in her gut, a strange pull, an irresistible curiosity, drew Aly towards the unknown. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and stepped through the opening, the yellow door sighing shut behind her with an ominous thud.