

Gender Mischief:
Trickster Characters and Non-binary Identity in Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract

This creative research project investigates how authors may apply the trickster character type and ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (Hynes, 1993, p.214) in mythological-inspired fantasy to explore, articulate, and affirm non-binary gender identities in adolescent narrative. The use of a trickster god, a magical, non-mimetic setting, and an omniscient folkloric narrative voice are deployed to expand the current corpus of non-binary storytelling available in young adult (YA) literature. Specifically, by interweaving these fantastical, folkloric elements with contemporary conceptions of gender identity, I explore some of the limitations and implications of prevalent contemporary trends in YA fiction, and how staple elements of fantasy fiction may be renewed in the context of queer YA literature to offer new ranges of representational possibility.

Through the creative artefact and accompanying exegesis, I argue that the trickster’s characteristic shapeshifting, marginality, and oppositional placement to (and reckoning with) authority figures, resonate with both queer and adolescent storytelling. Accordingly, I present *Children of the Dusk*, a myth-inspired YA fantasy manuscript featuring a non-binary, teenaged trickster god, central to an ensemble cast of queer characters. In contextualising this creative work, the project documents contemporary, evolving trends in non-binary representation in young adult literature and explores the ways in which marginalised identities may be rendered ‘possible’ when articulated in fiction.

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Children of the Dusk, a novel

Prelude

Notice, if you will, the strange space between night and day—neither one nor the other, but a third quiet creature cloaked in violet and blue, dotted with the silver of the first winking stars. You may pass us by as you forge ahead towards evening. You may not look up. You may not hear us.

And yet, you may. Our call may resonate, beneath the skin, deep in your chest, prickling up the back of your neck. You hear us now, do you not?

Yes, you. You there, who stepped into the dusk and sang out to the stars. Now, mortal, do not look so shocked! The stars can hear, and, should we deem you worthy, the stars may sing back.

What shall we sing of? Well, we stars have seen many things. We have many tales to tell. Of the oldest days this world has seen, of the reign of magic and monsters. Of gods, of heroes, of tricksters. Of kingdoms beneath the sea, of swords that dream, of girls who slay otherworldly beasts and become beastly themselves. Of boys with tears that can heal any wound, of storytellers who charm even Death. Of the strange twists and tastes of foresight, of whispering trees and singing skies. And of love, of course, always of love, in all the many complicated shapes it can be woven into.

Ah, we see you are listening, our light reflected in your eyes. Worry not, for while the stars might be ancient, the night is young.

Now, where shall we begin? Perhaps, as is customary, somewhere near the start.

Part I

An Age of Gods

The Child of the Dusk and the Daughter of the Dawn

First there was only the land itself, breathing with magic as if in a deep sleep. Watched over, of course, by the stars, and our other celestial companions.

Then there were the monsters, heaving out of broiling bogs, wriggling from between tree roots, crashing down to earth in strikes of lightning. They were born from a raw, wild magic that thrummed from the ocean floor to the highest mountain peak.

But then there were the gods. Immortal beings with magic in their veins, making them bleed gold; able to twine spells between their fingers and hold them in their fists. Perhaps it is needless flattery to call this people *gods*, but that is how they have been written. They had a name for themselves, once, in their humbler days. But it has since been lost to tide and time and even to the far-reaching eye of starlight. So for now, and forevermore in this tale, gods they shall be.

They came, striding across the land to conquer it. There was an age of war, the sky scorched scarlet and drumming with thunder, the ground underfoot shaking with the beats of hammering hooves and gnashing claws and chariot wheels. The gods—so we shall call them—were victorious, bridling the creatures that would bow, slaughtering those that would not. Mountains were formed from the backs of felled beasts, valleys were carved from the force of their falling.

In the carnage, the leader of the gods was lost. She fought to the last second, locked in combat with the mightiest of the creatures, drenched in blood and steaming with battle fury. At last she slew the beast, and it collapsed with such force that the ground beneath it gave way, shattering and falling into the roiling ocean and changing the shape of the coast forever.

The warrior knelt on the edge of the cliff. Drained but triumphant. Then one of her generals walked up behind her, stabbed her in the back, and kicked her into the sea.

‘Our leader has perished in the battle!’ the general lamented. ‘She fought valiantly to the last drop of blood. We must honour her and continue in her stead!’

A roar of agreement went up from the gods. The once-a-queen sank below the seething tide, and with her final gurgling breaths a new era began.

The general named himself Lorcán, High King of all the Divine, and divided up the new territory among his remaining companions. They ordered the lower-ranked, lesser gods to build a palace for the victors. They used the bones of defeated monsters: a structure all of sharp angles and bloody triumph that shone in shifting rainbow hues when the sun hit. It stood at the centre of their conquered land, the crystalline, atrophied, dazzling heart of Lorcán’s kingdoms.

All the High King needed now was something other than his own might to tie him to the throne. As is perhaps expected from a man who had thrown his own leader into the roaring jaws of the sea, Lorcán was concerned about matters of loyalty.

‘I must get myself an heir,’ he declared. ‘Or two. Ah yes, one for my right side and one for my left! Their loyalty shall be unwavering, and no one shall dare usurp me. This progeny of mine will glow like the skies and blind all fools who seek to strike us!’

Lorcán was, like the other gods, immortal: unageing and unable to die unless struck through with particular magic or (as they had discovered during the invasion) monster teeth. By his own hand, there were few free-roaming monsters like that left, so he need not have worried. But he was—and here we must remind you, once more, how patiently he had waited for the opportunity to spear his queen through—always planning ahead.

Heirs, yes, heirs would cement his rule, create a ring of power around him that no one would dare try to penetrate. But where to acquire them?

Lorcán was mulling over the problem one evening, looking upon the first diamond-dust stars peeking out of the veil of dusk, when he came upon an idea. He seized a handful of the night and tore it from the sky. The shock and pain of it shook the very constellations, but Lorcán barely noticed. The night recoiled and did not have time to warn the day, and as the sun rose, Lorcán seized a handful of the dawn as well.

From the fistful of dusk he fashioned one child, with hair black as the midnight dark and eyes the strange and shifting silver of starlight. From the fistful of dawn he fashioned another, with golden curls that glowed like a summer noon and eyes the piercing green of sunshine through leaves.

The dawn-child poured like morning light into the form of a sweet-faced girl, and called herself so. The dusk-child did not settle in the same way. Every time Lorcán looked upon the dusk-child they seemed to be in a different shape. He grew impatient. He was so fond of symmetry, you see, and oh how geometric it would be to have a boy and a girl, a piece of the moon and a shard of the sun, a weapon he could wield in each hand. So he asked the shape-changer: ‘Damn you, are you my son, or my daughter?’

‘I am neither,’ the child of the stars retorted, as simple a truth as the green of the trees and the blue of the ocean.

Lorcán scowled, then turned away with a shake of his head. This business of having children was becoming more complicated than he had anticipated. He decided he had much more dire things to worry about, such as going hunting with his retainers.

The daughter of the dawn came to be called Maebh, and the child of the dusk came to be called Cillian. Though of course, these were the names they took for show; their True

Names remained a secret kept close to their heart as an artefact of powerful magic. The gods know this, and so do we. It never does you well to underestimate the power of names.

Ageing, for gods, is strange business. But for our purposes here these two were children, freshly flung into an odd and shifting world, born under a cloud of unrest and greed and raised under the palm of a man who saw their purpose before he saw their personhood.

Two options presented themselves: the siblings could forge themselves together in their father's selfish fire, coming out stronger than any alloy known to the land in those days, bonded inseparably. Or they could shatter apart under their father's hammer, with only broken edges to show.

We shall get to all that in time. First we must consider what else was happening in the land while Maebh and Cillian were tottering through their immortal childhoods. For something had appeared on the horizon that this place was as yet unfamiliar with.

Humans.

Rickety wooden ships had beached themselves, gasping their last breaths, upon the rocky shores. Mortals—shaped somewhat like the gods, but lesser, you understand, all stained with salt and pocked with injuries—had pulled themselves up over the cliffs and called for aid. Their tiny voices sang out for refuge, for shelter. Cillian, hearing tales of this, wondered what they sounded like, for Cillian only knew the great booming tones of gods and the glittering whisper of starlight.

There was to be a meeting held among the gods about these new creatures. Both Cillian and Maebh were distraught to discover they weren't invited.

'It is not fair,' young Maebh declared. Picture the sky-siblings walking the covered archways of the palace, banished from the proceedings within the throne room. Maebh in a flowing gown of pristine white-gold, Cillian in an indigo robe they never seemed able to keep

clean. ‘How am I to stand by Father if I do not know such things? Does he not trust me to carry such knowledge, to advise him in such matters?’

‘It is because you are so tiny,’ Cillian laughed. They changed their shape, stretching their little body out, sprouting towards the gleaming archway above, and broadening their shoulders. In the place of their youthful form stood a warrior with biceps the size of boulders and a beard like the wild shrubbery of the moors to the south of the palace. ‘You must make yourself a shape that Father can count on.’

Maebh kicked Cillian in the knee, giggling, and they collapsed back down to their usual size. ‘Stop fooling about.’

‘*Ouch!*’ Cillian laughed with their sister. ‘Well, perhaps we ought to stay small, then.’ They thought to themselves for a moment, then, as they had a curious knack to do, turned into a bird. A raven, slight and shining like oil, though smaller than one you might find in the wild. ‘Perhaps it is being tiny that will help us.’

‘He said not to go in!’ Maebh hissed.

‘Then *you* stay and cower,’ cawed Cillian. ‘And I will be the wiser of us!’

Maebh called out again, but Cillian took off, leaving her behind. They fluttered unseen through the angular archway to the throne room where council was being held, nesting on one of the rafters in the high ceiling.

Below was a gallery of royal gods and their closest retainers, Lorcán’s old comrades whom he had gifted domains to. On the raised crystal throne looking down upon them was Lorcán himself, tall and broad and bearded.

‘These mortal creatures are a pest,’ declared Cliodhna, Queen of the Great Forest. Her voice carried up to the beam where Cillian was perched, almost making it shake. Beside her, a

pack of huntresses nodded with brutal force. Cillian had always been a little frightened of the forest court. Cliodhna and her party had quivers of feathered arrows on their strong backs, and they walked with a swift silence that meant they were always catching Cillian by surprise.

‘They cut down the trees and kill the animals *my* hunting party should have claim to.’

‘What of it?’ scoffed Nessa, Queen of the Sea. Upon her head was a crown fashioned from shells and coral, carved to points sharp as shark’s teeth. ‘As you say, they are mortal; they will perish soon enough. This is a harsh land and they will not survive unless they learn.’

‘And what if they learn?’ Her husband Murcu growled, voice like waves upon craggy rock. ‘We were strangers to this place once, and now we rule it.’

‘When we arrived, this land was full of naught but... *beasts*. Do you suggest we are no better?’ Nessa scowled at him. Someone at the back of the crowd groaned. The King and Queen of the Sea were always bickering. Many of the country’s rivers and streams traced the escape routes of their children, who had tired of the constant quarrels filling their parents’ underwater palace and moved inland.

‘But he is right!’ Trasa, Queen of the Mountains, spoke up, words avalanching through the room. ‘Mortal though they be, we must not underestimate these creatures! They *say* they seek refuge, but how are we to trust them? They may plot! They may bring disease to our kingdoms!’

A clamour rose in the hall, but was silenced by a thunderclap of laughter from the head of the room. All eyes turned to Lorcán, who was grinning from his throne. ‘Such creatures shall never vanquish us. They are tiny and weak.’

Another murmur went through the assembled court of gods, and Lorcán turned to look to the man standing by his side like a solid shadow. ‘That is where *I* should be standing,’ Cillian grumbled to himself, high in the rafters.

‘Speak, seer,’ demanded Lorcán. ‘Do any of these foolish little animals stand a chance at killing me, High King of the Gods?’

Croiadh the Crow, they called him; hair and clothes as black as tar. Across his face he wore a strip of black fabric, for he had lost his eyes in the war with the monsters. It was said that if you looked beneath it, even as a fellow immortal, you would go mad. It was said that since his blinding he had gained the ability to see through the annals of time.

Croiadh spoke. ‘No human born of a woman’s womb can kill you, my king.’

‘See? They cannot kill us. We have nothing to fear. Consider them as you would the creatures who live in your dominions. Perhaps they will even be useful for bringing in harvests and hunts. Ha! Let them graze, and strike them down if they cause trouble. There can be no objections.’

Lorcán spread his great hands and glared around in the throne room in challenge. The rest of the court conceded. Lorcán was not a ruler you reckoned with without good reason, and without a good chance of winning. One immortal had challenged him to a duel for his right to the throne when he had first claimed it, and had not been seen since.

‘They could surely eradicate these mortals easy as blinking,’ said Cillian to himself, with an amused caw. ‘If they were not so busy fighting with each other.’

Cillian was startled from this thought when they noticed a white butterfly perched in the Queen of the Forest’s woven-fern crown. They squinted a moment, then realised it was Maebh. ‘When did she come in!’ Cillian raged, and swooped down to try and eat her, all the better for maintaining gloating rights. But the butterfly hid in Cliodhna’s hair, safe and deep in the Queen’s braids. She did not seem to notice this, but she did notice the raven landing violently on top of her head.

A fresh cacophony went up from the assembly. Cillian fled back to the rafters, but froze mid-flight as they spotted another bird on their previous spying-perch. An owl, feathers the colour of tarnished gold and with tawny eyes as fathomless as the far off seas. Cillian tried to evade, but claws encased their middle.

The owl dropped them, unceremoniously, back into the corridor outside. Cillian sprawled across the polished bone floor in a mess of ravenfeathers before shifting back into their godly form, all gangly limbs and fumbling hands and a face contorted in disdain. A moment later a second bird fluttered out of the throne room, this one feathered ashen grey and pinching a butterfly in its beak.

‘Clamouring for the king’s approval as you are,’ said the golden owl, in Croiadh’s voice. ‘You would do well to keep quiet.’

Cillian and Maebh did not take this advice, and argued back and forth about whose fault it was they had been spotted. Much as they raged, they stood no chance of getting back inside. And with no solution and no one else to reckon with, they turned upon each other.

A great scrabbling of hooves and claws echoed throughout the palace, a great tumult of shifting black and gold. Maebh became a nimble young wolf, sending Cillian fleeing as a swift hare. Cillian turned to face her as a snarling fox, only to receive an antler to the gut as Maebh took the form of a pure white deer.

The palace servants and guards watched them pass with awe, for never before had there been a pair of divines so strangely *liquid* in their construction nor so rambunctious in their bickering. No one, it should be noted, tried to stop them. Perhaps because siblings were a rarity among the immortals and no one knew how to proceed.

Perhaps because they found it entertaining. They were in a palace built from bones, after all.

At the end of the day the twins brought their grievances before Loracán's throne. At his feet, they wept and hollered and pointed to one another, detailing the fight and throwing accusations of attempted murder.

And their father simply tipped his head and said 'Show me.'

Cillian half-laughed. 'But Father—'

Yet they had no chance to finish their plea, for Maebh was at their throat before Cillian could take another breath.

At the time, the young god could not place it, but something about her movement was different—this was a lunge, not a pounce, a snarl in place of a sister's teasing. Had it been simply a game, before, the two of them tumbling through the halls as bickering beasts? Perhaps it had. It did not feel like a game now.

And so, in turn, Cillian bared their own sharp teeth. And so, in Loracán's court, the sky-siblings tried the deadly dance again. The flashing of their fangs and claws reflected in Loracán's golden eyes, and he watched them in repose, drinking in the sport.

Maebh emerged the victor with her white lioness teeth around Cillian's sleek black otter body. Loracán let out a cheer and ordered the golden blood be mopped from the floor. He invited his daughter to sit by his side, his hand draped over her head as though it was the pommel of a fine weapon. Cillian slunk away to lick their wounds, their father's cheers echoing behind them.

Oh, to be the one by Loracán's side, to bask in that lightning-strike glow, to be looked upon tenderly by those golden eyes that matched the spilled blood on the floor! It was what those children longed for more than anything else.

The stars could only watch, with a heartache that dulled the glow of constellations.

But Cillian was still glowing, all ignited with silver fire. ‘Fine,’ they said to themselves.
‘I cannot win with my fangs, perhaps—but there are other methods left to me!’

The Tale of the Stolen Song

To their credit, not all the gods found the vicious bouts between Lorcán's children as amusing as he did. Cliodhna, Queen of the Forest, admonished him the next morn. 'Are you proud, High King, to have the blood of your heirs spilled before your feet? Wild wolves raise their pups with greater civility.'

The air around Lorcán prickled, crackled, the electric thrum of the beginnings of a storm. Cliodhna's hair stood on end, but she remained immovable, fixing her former comrade with a wry stare. 'What manner of creature are you concocting, carving the stars and the sunrise into such dreadful beasts?'

'Now, my dearest Clio, you presume these fledgling *battle* skills are the only ones my children possess.' Lorcán did his best to keep the lightning under his skin at bay. Lorcán had what we would have called *a soft spot* for the Huntress Queen, had he been a less atrocious person. Crowning her a monarch was his own convoluted invitation for her to join him in his bedchamber; one that Cliodhna pointedly ignored. She spent her time hunting with her fellow goddesses, and, much to Lorcán's bafflement, trying to speak to trees.

In his court, however, there were no roots nor branches, only shimmering pillars of bone. While she was here for the meeting of the monarchs, Lorcán had her attention. 'Observe.' He tugged Maebh and Cillian across the throne room with a gesture. 'Children, hear me. My bards are boring me desperately, and I have half a mind to have their tongues pulled out. Stand to the task and entertain us! Whoever can sing Queen Cliodhna and I a more beautiful song, is worthiest.'

Cillian did not see what this had to do with proving their worth, but logic of that nature was always secondary to winning Lorcán's praise. They opened their mouth and sang, tangled notes unspooling from their throat.

Lorcán frowned when Cillian had finished, and turned instead to Maebh. Maebh's voice came out sweet and light as honey, a soothing trill like a songbird's. Cillian could not match the beauty of the sound, and when they tried again, Lorcán just scowled and waved them down. 'That is enough of that.' Cliodhna did not look impressed.

Maebh smiled, and Cillian fumed. 'No matter,' they said to themselves. 'If I cannot sing, I will simply borrow the voice of someone who can.'

And so that night as the palace slept, Cillian flitted through the halls in search of a song to steal. 'A bird would be too obvious,' they reasoned, avoiding the orchards and grand gardens that ringed the royal abode. 'Perhaps the melodic burble of a stream? Or the whistle of the wind?'

Cillian plucked these sounds from the night air and tried them out, but found, beautiful as they were, they were too natural and thus not convincing. They tried borrowing the sound of a harp that was lying in the gardens, but it sounded, to Cillian's dismay, far too much like a harp. What they needed was the song of a fellow god, notes from divine vocal cords. 'If I borrow Maebh's, it will be too obvious,' Cillian muttered, so they did not steal their sister's voice, merely settled for tying her hair in a knot as she slept.

Just as they were losing hope, their pacing took them past a burbling fountain in the palace gardens. Symmetrical arcs of water danced above a deep pool, sometimes used as guest chambers for travellers from underwater domains. Moonlight obscured the rooms below the water, turning its surface into a rippling silver silk. But bubbles were rushing to the

surface, and when they popped, fragments of a strange and lilting song fizzed in Cillian's ears.

They stuck their head beneath the surface, their black hair swirling about their face. In lieu of pushing it out of their eyes, they simply grew it shorter: the wavering shocks shifting like light on water until Cillian's hair was close-cropped about their ears. The darkness still obscured the chambers below, but most importantly, Cillian could reach out and catch the floating bubbles of sound.

'Now what is the Queen of the Sea doing singing such a strange and entrancing song so late at night?' Cillian wondered. They dipped their hands into the water and coaxed the lilting tones into their fingers, drawing the song to the surface.

The next evening, Cillian approached Lorcán in the great dining hall and asked to attempt the challenge once more. Lorcán rolled his eyes and drank deeply from his wine-goblet, but noticed Cliodhna observing him and relented. Maebh sang first, the same wind-chime voice as before. Cillian made a great show of being bored throughout her performance.

Then the Child of the Dusk stepped up to sing. They summoned the stolen song from where they had hidden it deep within their throat, and it flowed out of their mouth to dance in the air. It filled the hall to the monster-bone rafters, it made Lorcán's eyes light up, it caused songbirds outside to pause and pay attention. The guest monarchs paused their meals and servants paused momentarily in their skittering. Even Croiadh seemed to be listening, occupied as he was with feeding scraps to his owls.

Cillian felt joy unwind in their chest.

When Cillian finished singing, a cheer went up to fill the silence. Trasa, Queen of the Mountains, banged her goblet appreciatively on the table, and her retainers mirrored her, a drumming that rocked the hall. Croiadh's owls hooted, perhaps appreciatively (Cillian did not

speak owl). Maebh had her arms folded petulantly across her chest, buffeted by the audience's praise. Clíodhna simply shook her head.

Silent as death sat the King and Queen of the Sea. They were both staring at Cillian in a concoction of embarrassment and horror.

Lorcán halted his own applause, then smirked down at his child. 'A beautiful song, Cillian. And whom did you steal it from?'

Cillian did their best to look innocent, one hand splayed across their chest. They even shifted the features of their face to be rounder, sweeter, more babyish, harder to argue with. 'Father, you did not *say* it had to be a song in my *own* voice.'

Lorcán chuckled, seeming, for a moment, proud. It caused Cillian's heart to lift. Until Lorcán turned his grin on Nessa. 'Why do you look so shocked, Lady of the Waves? It cannot be *your* song that Cillian has sung for us?'

Nessa began to splutter that she did not know what he meant, but her husband, in a surprising display of nobility, cut her off. 'How dare you!' cried he. His anger would have caused the sea to roil, but he was too far inland. This, Cillian was thankful for. 'You would steal into our bedchamber like a deviant thief and rip the song of *pleasure* from my lady at her most intimate, vulnerable moment! You would broadcast this lover's cry to the world, making such a tender thing into a vulgarity?'

'*Oh.*' Cillian covered their mouth, swallowing laughter, commanding it to hide among the remains of the stolen pleasure-cry. 'I apologise, I could not tell. It was such a melodic noise, I presumed when I went by last night that—'

'You would better presume to know your place!' Murcu, lacking an ocean, picked up a jug of water and tossed it at Cillian's head. Cillian ducked, and it smashed into the wall. It

would have hit Croiadh, but he stepped aside without a sound. That was an understated advantage of being a seer, Cillian supposed.

‘Do all we gods sound like that in the throes of passion?’ Cillian asked, still trying not to smile.

‘You will never know,’ replied Maebh.

Cillian glared at her, insults building at the back of their throat. At the other end of the table, Nessa was looking at her raging husband with the moon in her eyes. ‘Murcu! Such a gesture of valiant romance!’

‘Of course!’ he scoffed. ‘A song like that is to be shared between lovers, between those who have sworn themselves to each other! I could not...’ he trailed off, brow creasing. ‘Did the child say *last night*?’

‘Aye, last night,’ Cillian confirmed, wondering if another jug of water was about to take flight. The court’s cupbearer was moving to clean up the shards behind them. ‘The moon was high, the shadows were long, and your wife was very loud.’

‘Vulgar brat,’ Nessa snapped, her lip curled like a cresting wave. Then froze as her husband spoke.

‘I was not with you last night. I returned home to tend my pet sea-beast, and travelled here from the ocean’s edge this morning.’

Lorcán’s eyes flashed, like a hunter who had just spotted the tail of fleeing game. ‘Oh, your ladyship! Who would you have been singing for, if not the husband you vowed yourself to all those years ago?’

Nessa pointed viciously at him. ‘You would condemn me? As if *you* have not encouraged me to stray in the past?’

‘You *what?*’ cried Murcu.

Another godly clamour erupted in the dining hall, accusations and speculations about who was making love to whom whizzing around the room with the speed and danger of arrowheads. Cillian decided it was perhaps time to leave. They turned into a raven again and shot out the doors, artfully dodging around the exhausted-looking cupbearer who was mopping up the divine mess.

For the next three days a hunt took place throughout the palace for the god who had been in Nessa’s bedroom. Rumours spread like wildfire, duels broke out, and a minor god ended up transformed into a sheep and sent fleeing into the Great Forest. The palace shook with the ruckus of it all.

If one is counting the incident with Queen Cliodhna’s crown, this is largely recorded as the second great moment of chaos Cillian caused among the gods.

It was chaos enough that Cliodhna could slip out unnoticed, eager for the relative quiet of her leafy kingdom.

Well. Unnoticed by most.

The Forest unfurled from the edge of the palace grounds, a wild and untamed green ocean compared to the neat and segmented gardens of the High King. As she crossed the threshold and wandered into the trees, Cliodhna felt herself breathe more evenly.

Until Lorcán had the misfortune to step on a particularly loud twig. She turned and faced him, arrow nocked.

‘Please,’ he grinned. ‘T’is only me.’ She lowered her weapon with a sigh.

‘You know I have no tongue for small talk, old friend,’ she replied. ‘We were blood-siblings as soldiers, but now call yourself High King. A stranger stands before me, a stranger

for whom I have no patience. Return to your palace and your chaos-children. I will not be coming with you.’

He gave her a smile like the edge of a lightning strike. ‘But why not? I can offer you so much more than this life of savagery you lead now.’

‘Your vanity undoes you. I refused your offer of marriage as we sailed to these shores. I refuse your offer now.’

‘Who spoke of *marriage*?’ He stepped towards her. ‘Stay for a night at least. Given the chance, I’m sure I can change your mind...’

She lifted her bow, arrowhead glaring at him, glinting with promise in the dappled shade of the trees. The trees, which were still, silent. Watching. “I said,” hissed Cliodhna. “No.”

Lorcán, High King of the Divine, did not like to be told *no*.

Lorcán moved with the speed of striking lightning. She loosed the arrow, sending it biting through the still air. It slashed Lorcán’s left ear in half, a dart of golden blood flashing in the dimness. But he was across the grove before Cliodhna could nock another arrow. His hands went for her throat, pulsing with magic. ‘I see you have yet to understand the folly of rejecting your High King. Well, let us see if you truly do prefer the company of your precious forest!’

‘Lorcán—’

He raised a hand as if to strike her, and with a heartbeat, turned her into a tree. Cliodhna took root where she stood, bow and quiver dropping to the ground, branches spreading out verdant and fresh against the canopy.

Lorcán's laughter crackled in the stillness as he ran a hand over her bark. 'When you are willing to accept my proposal, I shall be waiting!'

The spell, as he made it, was set to dissolve when Cliodhna relented, and she would only change back into her humanoid form once she was ready to come to the palace and to Lorcán's arms. But, as time would pass, Lorcán would be enraged to discover that no matter how long he waited, the tree remained a tree.

Many nights, he snuck into the forest to throw stones at her, but Cliodhna did not budge, barely rustled a leaf at him. He summoned lightning and dreadful winds to strike and buffet her, but she stayed where she was. He wheedled and apologised and piled promises upon her, and she seemed to sink her roots even deeper into the soil.

Cliodhna's royal hunting party eventually found her. They tried everything they could think of, but the spell did not relent. One by one, the huntresses peeled away, their heads low, camouflaged as loyal ladies in the godly court lest Lorcán make oaks or lovers of them as well.

All but one. But we shall get to her in time.

And so the great tree stood, slightly out of place, in the Great Forest. Until those mortal folk the gods had been arguing about made their way stubbornly inland, seeking wood to build their settlements. They brought their ropes and axes and cut away at the woods until the tree that had been Cliodhna was on the Forest's edge, and a group of settlers were looking up at it in confusion.

For try as they might, they could not fell the tree. The roots were dug too deep, and there was an odd obstruction in the centre. Carefully, the woodsmen cut away at the trunk until they reached the middle, where they were shocked to discover a sword.

It was like no weapon they had seen before, intricate leafy curls carved into the hilt, the metal gleaming like none their own smiths knew. The woodcutters ran and retrieved their chieftain, who looked upon the sword in wary awe. He seized the grip and tried to pull the sword out of the tree, but it would not move. The woodcutters leapt to slice away more of the trunk, but all of a sudden their axes became blunt and useless.

Their strongest warrior pulled with all his might but could not remove it. An industrious farmer tied the hilt to his hardiest cattle, but even their strength could not make the sword so much as wobble. Neighbouring settlers heard of the weapon and began to wander up the coast to try their own hand at it. But it moved for no one.

And so the sword stood in the remains of the great tree, not rusting even in rain. Seeming, somehow, as if it was patiently waiting for something.

The Godly Cattle-raid

We can, and will, return to the matter of swords and trees. But first we must speak of the business with the bull.

It was not a magic bull, but a mortal creature belonging to mortal settlers—those same humans whom Lorcán had instructed his monarchs to treat, in essence, as cattle. A group of these mortal folk had huddled by the elbow of a river on the plains south of the palace, grateful for the solace of freshwater and fields. And, for a short, blissful time, unaware that they took refuge on lands claimed by the High King.

The gods had a dungeon full of shackled monsters, but they had never set their eyes on oxen before. Croiadh's owls had spotted the farm, and Lorcán had coveted them ever since. He was High King of all the Divine, after all, and felt insulted that a mere human could possess a creature so curious and so fine. He was still reeling from the insult that he could not possess Cliodhna. A prize beast would have to do.

It would have been easy enough to storm the human village, raze the place, curse any remaining inhabitants, and make off with the herd. But Lorcán had always prided himself on his ability to delegate.

'There is a white bull to the south of here,' he told his children. 'It is a fine creature and I want it for the royal stock. Whoever brings it back to me shall be declared champion!'

A chance, even a chance, to sit in the glow of their Father's pride, was enough to get the hearts of those two sky-children racing. Cillian and Maebh both fled the palace in the direction of the field, Maebh gathering her charioteers and Cillian simply transforming into a raven and flying there.

The Great Forest sprawled below them for a time, then fell away to wide windswept plains with a few strange speckles upon them. These, Cillian realised, were human lodgings, huts and fences and cooking fires. Cillian thought how tiny and unsightly it all looked, such dull colours compared to the shimmering spires of the monster-bone palace.

Soon enough Cillian spotted the bull. They could see why Lorcán wanted it: not only did it shine with a moonlike paleness, but it was bursting with the sort of brute strength that he so admired. ‘Well then!’ they cawed. ‘I shall bring a trophy home for my father, and he will at last invite me to his side!’

They were distraught to see Maebh had gotten there already... but amused to see that she was not making much progress. She thrust out a hand and her charioteer placed a golden spear into it, around which she curled her fingers. She shook and twirled it, attempting to command the bull, drawing herself up to her full height and puffing out her chest. Maebh resembled her father for an eerie moment, but it was not enough to move the bull.

‘You have a way to go before you are a deadly military leader, princess,’ called Cillian from above. She acted as if she had not heard them.

Cillian perched at the edge of the field, and tried to think what to do. Clearly, might and intimidation would not work. A bull would be more difficult to steal than a voice. ‘How do you move someone that does not want to be moved?’ Cillian wondered. ‘Ah, you must *make* them *want* to move.’

An onlooker would have seen a curious scene play out. Maebh was standing, regally, watching her charioteers flee across the field (she had ordered them to go and poke the bull with the spear). Something seemed to catch the princess’ eye and she turned her head. The field was dotted with livestock, but striding across it was an animal that had not been there before. It was a cow, every bit as glossy and well-kept as the bull, though midnight black.

The heifer trotted past, swishing its tail, and the bull ground to a halt. It diverted course, leaving Maebh's charioteer cowering against the fence, and rumbled after the shiny black cow. The bull leaned in to give the black cow's tail a sniff, but it trotted just out of reach. The bull stumbled, and the cow continued to swagger across the field, giving her tail another coy flick. They continued in this stilted game of chase until they had crossed the border of the field and seemed to be making for the forest.

Beneath its thick, dark lashes, the cow's eyes were sparkling silver—that same starry hue as Cillian's.

Cillian led the prized bull all the way to the palace, waving their tail and letting out the occasional flirtatious *moo*. The enthralled bull followed them all the way to the gates.

Once inside, Cillian changed shape, resuming their godly form—that day, a slight and boyish youth, for they had tried on girlish features and found they did not quite fit. They dusted the last of the enchantment off their tunic. 'Thank you *so* much,' they smiled at the bull, who stared at them, utterly vexed.

As Cillian was preening and practising their victory speech, the bull himself seemed to realise—with that flash of intuition animals sometimes have when it comes to magic—what had happened. Pent-up lust and rage puffed the creature up to twice its size, and before Cillian realised what was happening, the bull had set off on a rampage.

Lorcán returned home from a hunting trip to find the grounds of his palace in tatters. Though the mortal bull could not dent the monster bone of the palace itself, it had trampled dirt into the halls with furious hooves, torn holes in tapestries and banners with charging horns, laid ruinous waste to the gardens and orchards, and left Cillian cowering atop one of the towers as it raged in circles round their feet.

Lorcán roared in fury and struck the bull down with one slash of his hunting spear, with such force that the creature's head flew off its steaming body and crashed, tongue lolling, through a window and into the palace kitchen. The cupbearer screamed and fled as it rolled after her.

What a sight it was—and Cillian would have laughed, had the look on Lorcán's face not struck burning fear into their entire body.

He glared up at his child, weapon still in hand, scars twisted up by his ferocious expression. This child, who had caused such mess in his pristine palace. This child, who refused to take the shape Lorcán had wished for when he snatched their makings from the sky. This child, who, if he twisted things just so, was responsible for Cliodhna slipping out of his grasp. This child, this child, this child.

Cillian began to insist that *technically* they *had* got the bull to the palace and won the challenge, but the words perished on their tongue. All they managed to squeak out was 'Father—' before a burning fist seized around their ankle and wrenched them down from their perch.

The shaft of Lorcán's spear slammed down upon Cillian, once, twice, thrice, with such force that it broke. Cillian's world turned red and white and gold, they gave up trying to move, to flee, to fight, to even flinch, no air left in their lungs with which to protest or plead. 'Foolish damned child!' Lorcán roared, thunder in Cillian's ears. 'You shall sleep with the horses, if you are intent on creating such mess!'

He gripped Cillian by the throat and flung them from the palace, leaving them tumbling across the ground like a broken doll. 'Guards! Let it be known that this *disappointment* is not permitted within these walls until I say so!'

Oh, that thunderous voice, that lightning strike glow. Was that not a glow Cillian had wished to bask in? Was that not what they had been fighting for? Lying bloody and bruised on the grass, Cillian stared into the spinning abyss and wondered how this felt so wrong.

Yes, Lorcán was brutal, of course he was, that was how he had won his throne, why he was King, why his children admired him so and wished for his praise. Was that not right? It had been the simple truth for so long, but as Cillian gurgled golden blood into the bull-torn soil they felt as though they had been betrayed. Lorcán had not always been this vicious, truly? Lorcán had hand-picked the makings of Cillian from the evening sky. Surely he would take his child back? Surely he would pat them on the head, at least, apologise, tell them they were worthy?

Gods, as we have said, do not age as humans do. It was no passage of time, no arrival at a certain year, that marked the end of Cillian's childhood. If the death of childhood can happen in a moment, this was it. Flung from the palace like a shattered thing, onto the cold ground of their adolescence.

Maebh and her charioteer returned to the palace just as Lorcán's rage was cooling down. She had brought some milk, artfully bargained from the mortal cows, and some wildflowers to help replant the gardens. She walked, gracefully, past the guards tasked with keeping that Cillian out.

On her journey round the gardens in the following days, planting seeds, she caught a glimpse of Cillian, and shot them a smile like an arrowhead to the heart.

And, like arrowheads, this smile of hers was not easy to remove without tearing the flesh around it. So the image of that smile and everything it meant stayed buried in Cillian's heart, where it began to slowly fester.

Any attempted entry to the palace was blocked by spears and swords. Cillian frequently woke up with a war-horse licking their hair, flicking the black locks up into an unruly mess. While Cillian grew stiff sleeping on piles of hay, Maebh chortled from her lush chambers, drinking purple wine poured by the long-suffering cupbearer.

‘Why do I work to impress that cruel man?’ Cillian seethed. The only response they received was the lowing of the livestock.

A year and a day, and no answer came. Their wounds healed, but they never quite stopped hurting. Cillian occasionally heard Lorcán’s voice echo from within the walls of the palace, and every time they flinched. The voice of a parent should not make someone flinch, surely? It was the first time Cillian had thought of such a thing.

In the long nights that followed, we sang down to Cillian in voices as soft as our starlight, lamenting that we could not even descend to wrap our relative, so violently taken, in an embrace. The stars have many stories to tell, and so we offered them as comfort, sang to Cillian in a twinkling, echoing voice. Tales of the time before even the gods had arrived, when monsters had roamed, or even earlier when the land had been all covered in ice and the wind and snow had only had each other for company. The stories brought Cillian comfort, even if some of them were quite sad.

‘Is that the ending?’ they asked one night, stretched out on the grass under the canopy of the night sky. ‘But it is so unhappy!’

‘Not every tale can end in happiness,’ we counselled.

Cillian frowned. ‘Well *I* shall not have an unhappy ending. My story shall be one of celebration, not tragedy. Of victory. Of vengeance.’

The midnight glittered with amusement. ‘You would reckon with the storytellers themselves?’

‘I would.’ Cillian smiled, and drifted off to sleep with that promise upon their lips. They would become a story worthy of the stars, a figure sketched into the constellations for generations after to see, even if they did not quite know what it meant; and it would be a glorious tale, with Cillian the victor.

‘I shall rule the gods myself, one day,’ they whispered. ‘I shall bring them all to ruin—my sister and father first.’

Is this truly a tale of victory and vengeance? Well, perhaps. Keep listening, and see for yourself.

Cillian's Causeways

Thrown to the boundaries of Lorcán's rule, Cillian began to discover that the world was a different shape to what they had first imagined.

Cillian, they had discovered, had a curious knack for grasping the edges of what should have been intangible. Stealing the song from Nessa's very mouth, as well as those other midnight sounds, was simply one example. They had, on occasion, been known to pluck the scent from a particularly lovely flower or fruit tree and keep it for later (they were amazing at improving one's mood).

As with their lack of a fixed form, they realised, as they got older, that this was something of an oddity. Other gods kept their beautiful visages frozen in place, all sharp polished cheekbones and marble-smooth skin, the same every day for eons. Cillian changed their shape almost every time they woke. Other young people take to playing with their appearances; Cillian was simply doing so with their whole body. Here a little broader in the shoulders, here a little rounder in the face, here a little longer in the leg or larger of the breast, whatever they felt most suited them that sunrise.

And this was not taking into account their penchant for changing into animals. It made them an outlier, even though they *knew* Maebh could do it too. They had practiced it together when they were small, slipping and sliding between different forms and trying make each other laugh. 'It's simply uncivilised,' one of the gods had said once. 'To bring dirty paws indoors! To fly through the air when you could have your servants carry you! It is... *unbecoming.*'

Cillian had not forgotten the feel of Maebh's she-lion teeth around their windpipe. But Maebh, they supposed, had simply *grown out of* her rowdy shapeshifting. Was Cillian supposed to do the same?

Cillian, in their banishment, realised there was a whole strangely-shaped world beyond the palace walls and beyond Lorcán's games. And they *knew* it was strangely-shaped because they could *feel* it.

Truth be told, they tripped on it at first. One afternoon, patrolling guards had tossed Cillian from the royal orchard, the glorious copse of flower-heavy fruit trees that formed a corridor of sorts into the heart of the gardens. Cillian had a bruise on one cheek, a stolen apple in one hand, and a fallen branch in the other. They swatted at the air with it. 'Begone, vile child!' they intoned, making their voice deep and raspy in their best and pettiest imitation of the guard. Their balance tipped as they thrust their makeshift sword—

—and as they threw out a hand to steady themselves, instinctively, they found that they momentarily stopped falling. Their fingertips had snagged on a patch of empty air.

Now this was new.

Cillian lay their sword aside.

Concentrate, and they discovered they could nudge the edges of things that were not visible, brush their fingertips over the bumps and grooves and frays in what we shall describe, for convenience, as the Fabric of Reality. Perhaps it was their essence as a child of twilight, by nature betwixt and between. Perhaps it was simply that they had become more observant when the black eye Lorcán gave them healed. But Cillian could feel the shape of magic itself. And, as a next step from that, they could touch and lift and move it.

It was sometimes finicky, slippery, hard to grip, but sometimes terrifyingly easy. Cillian tangled their fingers round the edges of the Fabric of the magic that hung in the very air, unseen and unsmelling and unrefined. One day they managed to pull it back and let it drape around them, dipping underneath it as though slipping behind a curtain.

Behind that curtain was a curious place: a place that was cluttered and empty all at once, filled with an ancient silence yet dripping with the echo of all the history of the world. Behind that curtain, Cillian found pathways: rigid roads of geometric stone that looked as though they had been laid by giants, tunnels through the violet nothingness that seemed to mark the shape of some long-forgotten migratory creature.

For a second, Cillian's heart jumped with an old instinct to run and find Maebh, to show her their discovery, to make it a shared hideaway. Then they remembered—the arrowhead lodged in their chest panged, sharp and bitter. 'No,' hissed Cillian. 'This place is for no one but I.'

So Cillian explored.

They learned, soon, to pay attention not just to the road in front of them but to the spaces alongside it; the shifting cool Fabric that might catch the absence-of-light in a certain way that signified a fold, a loose thread to be plucked at. Cillian felt the nothingness and got their fingertips under an edge, pulling it back and peeking through.

They discovered they were back in the sunlight, and they were somewhere else entirely. The palace, and Lorcán, and Maebh, were nowhere to be seen.

Cillian felt himself smile for the first time in months, a catlike curve of the lips.

For days and days they practiced, paced, tried to make a mental map of these strange pathways. Where did they lead, and who exactly had built them? Even we cannot say, for

behind the Fabric is out of our sight—we have only heard it described second-hand from star-speakers who have travelled them.

Like the wooden causeways mortals laid out to make bogs less treacherous, these strange paths led Cillian safely around the tumultuous world of gods, and so Causeways is how they came to be known. If, of course, they could be knowable at all.

The Causeways were, by their nature, slippery and intangible and beyond human logic, but Cillian figured that two could play at that game.

In a breath they could move from the palace edges to the highest peaks of the snow-harried mountains to the country's north, the realm of Queen Trasa, days' journey away on foot or by chariot. Cillian could say this with certainty, for Trasa's keep was the first place the pathways had accidentally spat them out, leaving them stranded waist-deep in snow.

Taking flight as an eagle (their raven form, though favoured, might have blown away in the wind), Cillian realised that the mountains were in fact the arched backs of two slain beasts, Trasa's keep nestled between them built from tumbled stone. Even from afar, Cillian could hear the booming laughter and clinking goblets of a feast. They had been living off the scraps that the palace kitchenhands threw to them, if anyone remembered that Cillian needed feeding. The thought of a hot, fresh meal nearly made Cillian turn to liquid.

Yet when they approached, Cillian was blocked by spear-shafts and barked admonishments. 'Hark, now, begone with you!' bellowed Trasa. 'I have not invited you to my hearth! Guards, throw them out!'

Cillian found himself face down in the snow, once more cursing the gods. No matter, though, they figured: those surly guards were blocking the door to the keep, but Cillian had little need of doors.

They returned to their Causeways, skittering up and down the tunnels and paths until they pried open a gap in the Fabric that led them into what smelled like a cellar. A laugh of triumph, and Cillian was in: undetected and surrounded by barrels of wine and great hunks of salted meat. They piled their arms full of Trasa's finest, the ruckus of the feast continuing, oblivious, above their head. 'What a fine thief I make,' hummed Cillian.

Then nearly dropped their stolen treasures. For when they stepped back into the Causeways, they were not alone.

A figure stood on the curving horizon of the serpentine path, a shadow that would not stay still. It seethed around the edges, a writhing cloud of something softly rustling.

Feathers, Cillian realised, *wings*. The beating, shifting wings of a thousand birds of a thousand different colours, all unfurling and fanning in a cloud the vague shape of a person. From what might have been its head sprang a pair of massive antlers, casting great pronged shadows across the stone floor even in the absence of a light source.

The figure did not have a face—at least, not one visible among the tide of wings. Yet Cillian knew in their bones that this thing was looking at them. An ancient gaze, unmoved and immovable by petty concerns such as time.

A human figure, slight and scrawny, was lying in—well, where its arms might have been. Carried, cradled, as if deep asleep.

For the first time, Cillian felt the profound sense that they were not supposed to be there. This was something unfamiliar, something no god had ever had cause to warn them about, that no god had ever considered coming face to faceless with.

And so they ran, dropping food, sending wine spilling and spiralling across the Causeway roads. They scrabbled at the Fabric, tugging at the material of the world, their heart

beating *let me out let me out*. Resentment at having to share this space that *they*, surely, had discovered, would come later. For then, terror propelled Cillian through the tapestry of magic, their fingernails catching in it.

They tumbled out of the Fabric, panting. Threads were tangled around them, stuck like spider-silk to the fingers that had pried the gap open, curling down Cillian's wrists almost lighter than air. They rubbed and scraped at their arms, shuddering as the echo of rushing feathers tickled their ears.

It was a moment before they realised where they had been spat out: back at the edge of the palace orchards.

'Cillian?'

At the sound of their sister's voice, they snapped into the form of a raven and hopped into the branches of the nearest tree. Maebh approached, a basket of golden apples in one hand and a delicate expression on her features. 'Why, there you are. I was wondering where you had been.'

Cillian cawed, all sardonic malice. 'I suppose you've been having a *terrible* time, having Father all to yourself.'

Maebh did not snap or snarl, simply lifted her chin and smiled quietly. 'Of course. I have missed you terribly, Cillian—oh, I could not stand to be parted any further! You simply must come back.'

Come back. For a moment they contemplated it: running home, beside their sister, appearing before the court as a perfect matching pair of gold and silver. The invitation should have spread warmth through their chest, they knew, yet it only sent a molten shame and panic burning down their spine.

‘Why do you cower so, my dearest sibling?’ Maebh was smiling the same sweet smile she had worn when she passed Cillian’s broken body and swanned into the palace, that day of the cattle raid. ‘I’m sure if you come home, if you be good, Father will let you stay.’

The image of Lorcán looming over them wavered like the reflection in a pond struck with a stone. It glowed red and gold, awoke the aches and echoes of all Cillian’s injuries, sent them flinching.

‘You had best make your choice soon. If Father finds you in the orchard, and I am not around to vouch for you, there may be trouble.’

Cillian cawed at her, with all the violence they could muster, and swooped free of the branches in a flurry of inky black feathers. They soared into the sky and fled. ‘A thousand curses on that sister of mine!’ They cast a glance down and saw Maebh watching them go, her golden curls swaying in the breeze.

For a moment, for a moment, it had been tempting. But no: Cillian had made a resolution. They would not return to that palace because Maebh had *invited* them. They would return when it was time for Cillian to claim that throne for themselves.

Cillian in the Kingdom Beneath the Sea

However, as winter set in, Cillian began to miss the enclosed walls of a palace. Even the enclosed walls of Lorcán's stables.

For a time, they wandered the Causeways with little destination in mind. It was strange to be in there for too long, however—the ancient heartbeat of quiet in the place made their ears ring, and they shuddered at the thought of running into that horned figure again. Yet the open air, too, lost its sense of freedom as the wind grew icy cold and threatened to fling them in all directions. Cillian took little comfort in the woods: the green depths of it seemed hungry to swallow Cillian whole.

So they flew towards the sea.

At the southern coast they came across a human village clinging to white cliffs. At first, they mistook it for a particularly geometric mess of sticks. 'How can they live like this?' Cillian scoffed. Then they smelled food.

The divine kitchens were the one thing Cillian truly missed about living under Lorcán's roof. They could shift into fox or predator-bird and catch small game, but their skills left much to be desired. The smell of proper-cooked meat with salt and herbs tugged them in like a fishhook.

Cillian had not seen mortal folk so close before. How odd they were in their proportions, so messily put together compared to the symmetry and shine of divine bodies. River systems of red capillaries cracked across their cheeks, constellations of freckles and birthmarks dotted their skin. Their clothes had none of the glow and colour of the looms of

the immortals, and their homes were ramshackle arrangements of wood. Some even looked like ships, hauled onto shore and turned upside down.

Most strangely of all, they had children. Not star-forged, sunlight-woven children, but youths of all shapes and sizes, teetering on chubby feet or leaning long and lanky like tree saplings. The adults, the most weathered of the bunch, tended to these smaller creatures: rocked them in their arms, sang stories with them as they cooked and mended, dabbed water and poultice on their scratches and scrapes.

Of the whole dizzying display, Cillian understood one thing: the small ones were the ones getting the most food.

Cillian took their raven form and skittered up to a ship-house with a small mortal in it, an infant all swaddled in furs. It gurgled grumpily at Cillian. Cillian squawked back. Then flicked their feathers over the baby, transforming it in a whisper into a seagull.

It stumbled confusedly on its webbed feet. Cillian, then, turned themselves into a baby, crawling into the fur wrap and bundling themselves in it as best they could before the parents turned around.

The seagull followed them everywhere, shrieking relentlessly, but the humans did not pay it much heed. They were too concerned with finding food, making clothing, repairing their huts and the spiked wooden walls around the village. Chariots would ride past without warning, gods cloaked in seal pelts and the shell-shaped emblems of Murcu and Nessa, demanding tribute in exchange for *not* wreaking havoc on the settlement.

Cillian watched humans stagger up, offering nets full of fish and oysters and sometimes crude metal trinkets. How odd it was, to see these lowly soldiers, who bowed their heads to Lorcán and the other monarchs, parade their might here as though they were as good as kings. They towered over the salt-stained, wind-torn mortals. Cillian stayed hidden, stayed

an infant, and watched them ride away with sea-harvest enough to feed the village. And once, when the net was not full to their satisfaction, with a pair of mortal women under their arms instead.

Cillian started to doubt their plan of living off the mortal family. Besides, it was boring being a baby, and Cillian became glad they had never had to be one. But more than that, Cillian was still *hungry*.

So they took to raiding the family's store of food as they slept. Humans, they supposed, must have small stomachs, or the gods would not be taking so much of their extra food. Cillian ventured further outwards, sneaking fish, oysters, crabs, and bread from all around the village. The mortals became concerned about where their food was going and held a meeting that Cillian slept through (you could do that when everyone thought you were a baby).

When the moon rose, Cillian rose with it, fresh from their nap and ravenous. But that night when they snuck to the food store, they found a man with a spear waiting for them.

The man was struck still for a moment, unsure of exactly how to react to a thieving infant. Cillian wondered if they should roll over and start crying; usually that earned attention and sympathy. But then the man cried 'Look at the eyes! This is no human child!' and lunged forward.

Cillian shrieked and shifted form, launching into the air as a sea eagle. The villagers shook their weapons at them, the points of swords and spears nearly brushing Cillian's belly as they soared. Their shouts of vengeance and vitriol followed Cillian out over the sea, until the wind drowned them out.

'At last,' they sighed. 'What an ordeal!'

And from the ocean shot a great pillar of water, strong as a fist, which wrapped itself around Cillian and dragged them down into the waves.

THIEF! The word cascaded around them, hammering into their ears with the force of deepwater currents. *THIEF!* They plummeted below the ice-cold waves, water shoving itself up their nose and into their lungs. Cillian shook, not sure which way was up.

Then, shimmering in the moonlight, a figure came into view: Nessa, wreathed in swirling bubbles with her hair floating around her like a storm.

‘I *knew* that was you!’ Her voice carried through the water with a different quality to how it moved on land, and it hit Cillian with a ripple that tumbled them over. ‘Cillian of the silver eyes, Child of the Dusk, thieving bastard!’

‘I answer to all these things,’ Cillian announced, trying to right himself. They shifted from bird into fish, then back into a form they hoped Nessa would find sympathetic: a handsome, slender youth with a hint of more masculine features. If overheard, secretly snatched palace gossip was anything to go by, that seemed to be her type.

Nessa glowered, currents roiling around her. One of them had Cillian in its centre, a vice-grip of moving water. ‘You steal my voice,’ she hissed. ‘And you presume to lie among my fisherfolk like a decadent houseguest, devouring the food that belongs to the Kingdom of the Sea?’

‘Lady of the Waves, forgive me!’ Cillian quickly fashioned a smile. ‘In truth, I came all this way to apologise to you! But oh, I arrived in such a state from my travels, I was simply not *presentable*. What an insult to your house it would be, to fling myself through your doors hungry and dirt-ridden? I merely took advantage of the hospitality of your territory’s peasant folk, so that I might greet you better equipped.’

‘An insult to my house,’ she scoffed. ‘An insult, such as humiliating me in the middle of Lorcán’s court? Shaming me?’

‘Shame! No, my lady, you became a *hero* that day!’ Cillian spread their hands empathetically, as much as they could while clamped in a serpent of rushing water. ‘To follow your heart so, to fulfil your passions so, when you were unhappy in your marriage! Why, I heard people *applauding* you! It is your husband that people were laughing at, my lady. And what a fool he was, to drive away a beauty such as yourself! If *I* were a lover of yours, Queen of the Sea, I would cherish you for the treasure that you are.’

‘Flattery,’ accused Nessa. Yet the expression on her face had shifted. Flickered in the oceanic moonlight.

‘Merely truth.’ Cillian wriggled, carefully, and found they sat a little more loosely in the grip of the current. ‘Please, my sweet, great lady of the waves, I had little understanding of things back then. I was a child, as much a fool as your neglectful husband.’ They smiled again, doing their best not to shiver from the cold grip of the sea. ‘But now I am grown, older and wiser, and ready to listen should you seek to air your grievances. Ready to hear your voice again, if, this time, you give it willingly.’

‘Speak not of such things! It would give Lorcán no end of grief, to hear his son was acting in such a way.’ Cillian bristled at being called a *son*, yet felt a dart of hope at the growing smirk on Nessa’s face. ‘Oh, it would give him *no* end of grief to think that one of his monarchs would take his own heir into her bedchamber...’

‘The drama of it all,’ Cillian agreed. ‘Yet Lorcán does not need to know. Nor does the Undersea King. This apologetic visitation is between you and I, your Ladyship. It must be dreadfully lonely down here. Allow me to bring some of the overland starshine home.’

Nessa looked them up and down and was seduced by the thought of petty vengeance: seizing back some power from the one who had caused her such trouble, snatching back some secrets after Loracán had made hers so public. Cillian felt the queen's eyes rove over them and was seduced by—well, first by the thought of *not drowning*, nor being pulled to the Undersea Keep's barnacle-encrusted dungeons. There were sea-beasts around here, and, some said, even the roving waterlogged ghost of the deposed old queen.

But this was also the first time Cillian had felt such a gaze upon them, upon this ever-shifting body that was so often and so loudly deemed unacceptable. There was intent and desire in Nessa's eyes that made Cillian's heart dance. They felt a longing they did not have the words for.

Longing, oh, longing can be a dreadful beast. It claws and gnaws at the belly until you feel as hollow as if you were starving. Cillian was ravenous for love. As they dived with Nessa towards the castle under the waves, into those dark depths where the starlight could not reach, they felt as though they were plunging into loving arms. Banished, welcome nowhere, being pulled into this drowning embrace felt like coming home.

Our dearest child. They were not to know.

Cillian found himself in an odd new role: a monarch's favourite, as they had once dreamed of, though residing in Nessa's chambers rather than Loracán's throne room.

They were her lover and her confidant—oh how very mature! Cillian stretched out in her bedchamber as she floated back and forth ranting about her husband, Cillian nodding and cooing and curling their lip at the right moments. They felt the arrowhead lodged in their heart loosen. Here, they had attention, respect. Having the Sea on their side when it came to

snatching the throne from Lorcán and Maebh was an advantage they could not afford to miss. Perhaps they could be Monarch of the Divines and Little Prince of the Sea as well.

Yet they found that Nessa could tire of them as easily as the tides shifted. ‘Ugh,’ she would sigh, and clap her hands, setting off a current that sent Cillian tipping over and floating, disorientated. ‘I grow bored, dusk-child. You, do that thing you do—that strange shape-changing, that way you can turn from a girl into a boy and back again. It vexes me so.’

Cillian argued that they never *did* change from a boy into a girl. They may have appeared more masculine or feminine at one time or another, but the core of their true self remained the same, and the core of their true self remained neither maiden nor man. But Nessa groaned with such tedium that a current sent Cillian flying across the room. So they mentioned it no more.

Such time had passed since Cillian had felt *welcome* anywhere that they were willing to sing and dance for their bed if need be. If they ever complained, Nessa simply smiled thinly and inquired ‘Well, where *else* have you to go? You owe me a debt, remember? Would you rather I bring you home to your father?’

It took some time to get used to the constant saltwater on their skin, of their hair floating about their head like dark seaweed. Seeing the shadows of great grey whales passing by the windows of the palace, and hearing the deep rumble of the sea serpent Murcu kept. ‘Nasty beast,’ Nessa called it. ‘He calls it a war trophy, a pet. It stinks up the whole kingdom and he spends all his time preening it!’

The light moved strangely down there, and it was more difficult to get a grasp on the shape of magic. But perhaps if Nessa loved them, they had no need for Causeways. They were comfortable and they were free.

It was all going fantastically, in theory. Until one day the King of the Sea walked into his cellar to find Cillian there.

‘What are you doing here?’ Murcu asked, voice like the scrape of waves against stone. Cillian, arms full of cured fish, offered him their most winning smile.

‘Why,’ they said. ‘Waiting... for you, Lord of the Tides! I have come down here to pay you a visit, to apologise for my earlier misdeeds.’

‘Indeed,’ scoffed Murcu. ‘When you made a fool of me in front of the whole court!’

‘A fool? Oh, my lord, you are no fool! Why, you became a *hero* that day! To show your heart to all, to have it broken so, shows bravery and valour the likes of which no battlefield has yet to see! It is your wife people were laughing at, my lord. For what a fool she is, to stray from a handsome figure such as yourself!’ Cillian beamed. ‘I was foolish then, and young, and I wish to redeem myself for my brazen troublemaking. Is there...’ They fluttered their lashes. ‘...anything I can offer you?’

The King looked perplexed for a moment, then settled into an expression of contemplation. ‘Talk with me a while, Child of the Dusk. You are here as my guest.’

So Cillian became the bedchamber jester of both the King and Queen of the Sea—not that either of them knew about it. Cillian spun praise for Murcu in the craggy rock chambers by day, and swam up to the wave-capped towers where Nessa made her home by night, painting on a bardic smile and trying to forget every grievance her husband had just unloaded.

By day, it was Nessa who was the fool, oh yes my King; by night it was Murcu who was the idiot, of course my Queen. They were sent to feed Murcu’s sea serpent more than once, flinging meat down into the caged depths of the seafloor, catching the gleam of three pairs of humongous, feverish eyes in the dark and swimming away as fast as they could.

They could scarce complain. ‘You owe me a debt,’ said Murcu. ‘Besides, fallen star, where else have you to go?’

They began to miss the stars, for the sky was veiled from them by a ceiling of shifting water, and watching the sunlight spear through the ocean’s surface was beginning to make Cillian feel trapped.

Perhaps it was this restlessness than rendered them clumsy. One morning as the dawn broke, Cillian slipped out of Nessa’s chambers and towards Murcu’s, sliding off one visage and pulling on another. Nessa liked the shapeshifting games, but preferred Cillian as a handsome, more boyish lover. Murcu tended to favour curves and short stature. They were altering their chest, half-asleep, wondering absently if one breast was bigger than the other, when they bumped into Murcu on the staircase.

They found themselves with the King at their front and the Queen behind them, caught between the gazes of the two oceanic gods. A silver-eyed statue with their hair floating around their head and their body halfway transformed.

They had nothing else to offer, so they extended the King and Queen a sheepish smile.

Cillian found himself flung from the sea, arcing through the air before crashing down onto the beach. They lay, for a moment, in a puddle of themselves: body not quite sure how to shape, seawater evacuating their lungs in a disorderly fashion.

Cillian plucked a stray crab from their sodden tunic. They felt bare and exposed in the open air, lonesome once more. ‘No matter,’ they grumbled. ‘This is how I prefer it. I have no need for allies.’

They staggered inland and peered round, vexed. The village was larger than they remembered, thicker with voices, singing with the smell of cooking fish. The sea, it seemed, had been oddly calm for the past few years—as if something or someone was distracting it and keeping its wrath at bay—and the fisherfolk had been able to draw home harvest bountiful enough to feed themselves *and* pay the tax.

One loses track of time beneath the sea. Cillian was not sure how long they had been gone.

We were, however. When night fell, we sang out. There was news we felt we needed to pass down—news Cillian had missed.

The Tale of Rowan the Treasure-thief

Dance backwards in time with us a moment, and envision this: Cillian is beneath the sea, the sun overhead is high, and a human boy is sneaking into the Great Forest.

The boy's name was Rowan, chosen for the hardy trees at the edge of the Forest. Though, in truth, he had not been named Rowan at his birth. His parents had looked upon their child's body and declared it was a daughter, and so named 'her' accordingly. That first name of Rowan's is not known; it has perished into the mists of time, and so we shall not speak it.

Rowan knew his parents cared, they were just practical people, most concerned with keeping their village protected from roving gods. Their settlement rested on Lorcán's territory. As well as the raids where his soldiers demanded 'tribute', every harvest season he demanded one of their finest oxen. Rowan knew this. Rowan knew the ruthlessness of the gods. Knew the tales of their palace made of crystal, of their treasures beyond imagining.

Rowan knew he would go surely mad if he spent another day caged within the fortified walls of his village.

So one day, dressed in men's clothing he had borrowed from one of the blacksmiths, and with twin daggers tucked into his belt, Rowan slipped through the village unseen and out through the gateway that hunters used. The Great Forest lay before him, a deep and seething ocean of trees.

At the edge of the green darkness, a sword poked out of a gnarled trunk. Still there, unmoved and unruined. It was tradition for the village youths to take a turn at tugging the sword free when they turned sixteen. It was a coming-of-age ceremony that merited feasts and

music and a rare journey beyond the walls. Feeling decadent, Rowan gave the sword another pull, but it stayed stuck fast just as it had the first time. Humming with a gentle fizz beneath his fingers that Rowan had learnt was the feel of magic. He shook his head and ventured onwards.

The trees watched Rowan go by. They were wary of mortals, and none too fond of gods: the trees had been there first, some with roots deep enough that they touched the magic in the bedrock of the earth. Trees, like stars, have much to say if simply you will listen, but most living beings do not. And so they watched young Rowan with an instinctive sense of curiosity and spite.

The trees thought they would have a bit of fun, with this mortal who had ventured further than any of his fellows. They rearranged their roots and leaves and forest paths, tangling behind Rowan as quietly as they could, so that when he looked over his shoulder, the way he had come was gone.

Rowan called out ‘Who’s there?’ into the living hush of the woods. The trees whispered in reply, in an ancient language Rowan could not understand, a susurrus of voices tremoring through the green darkness. Colourful insects glimmered in the undergrowth, birds fluttered through the quiet above, and every now and then something unseen made the fallen leaves on the forest floor *hiss* with movement.

But Rowan continued on. The forest, in its own way, could appreciate that. *He did not come with axe nor hunting bow*, the trees murmured to one another. *Perhaps he is different...*

Their whispers were silenced by a thundering of hooves upon the delicate earthen paths. Leaves were shaken from trees, small creatures fled into the underbrush, and Rowan jumped.

Out of the heavy shade came a radiant hunting party—hounds with coats white as winter and scarlet in their fangs, pacing round the young man and backing him up against a tree trunk. After them followed what Rowan wanted to call *people*, but were simply too strange and beautiful. They were the same shape as humans, though seemingly fashioned from a finer material: each angle and plane ornately carved, taller and lither than any human, glowing from within. They looked down at Rowan with eyes as bright as jewels, and he looked back in awe.

‘I will not panic,’ he promised himself, defiantly speaking over his pounding heartbeat. Then his heart stuttered to a halt as the most terrifyingly beautiful man he’d ever seen rode into the glade.

Lorcán, High King of all the Divine, upon a pure white stag; his body toned and chiselled, radiating power. His bearded face was framed by the hart’s massive red-gold antlers as he stared down at Rowan, one eyebrow arched inquisitively.

‘And what are you doing this deep in my forest, mortal?’ he asked, voice like thunder in the sudden hush.

‘I have come to meet the gods.’ Rowan tried not to sound too breathless. Any tales of Lorcán’s tyranny had flown from his addled mind. Longing, as we know from Cillian’s misadventures under the sea, may be a dreadful thing. This strange, impossible, handsome creature was looking at Rowan as no mortal had ever looked at him, with eyes the colour of molten gold.

And what did Lorcán see? Lorcán was hunting, in truth, not game but distraction. For that morning he had received news that caused him great distress.

As Croiadh’s owls returned from their wanderings, soaring in over the feasting table, Lorcán asked ‘What news?’ Croiadh, ever diligent as the High King’s eyes, reported what the

owls had scouted. Lorcán tuned out the mundane details and ate his breakfast, thrusting out a goblet for refilling and nearly knocking over the cupbearer.

He asked once more, ‘Do these humans pose a threat?’

The seer replied, ‘No mortal alive today can harm you.’

The High King seemed satisfied, ’til he noticed Croiadh tending attentively to the golden-brown owl. ‘What is it?’ he demanded.

‘Saoirse has seen some curious happenings on her travels,’ said Croiadh. ‘Though it is merely gossip. I do not wish to distract you with it, when you have worked so hard to put Cillian from your mind.’

‘Cillian? What is that fool up to?’

‘As I said, my King, nothing of consequence.’

‘Damn you, you blind old bird, tell me.’

Croiadh stroked the tarnished-gold owl along her head. ‘It seems both Nessa and Murcu have taken Cillian as their lover. The dusk-child resides with them beneath the sea.’

Lorcán scoffed violently. ‘Impossible.’

Croiadh shrugged. ‘Perhaps. My visions and my owls are divine, yet they may still prove imperfect.’

Lorcán had waved the debacle off as ridiculous. Yet it ate at him, with tiny pernicious teeth. It could *not* be true. It simply could *not*, for that would mean... why, that would mean that his rowdy sky-child had more lovers than Lorcán. And such a thing was unthinkable. Against the laws and orders of things.

Never more dangerous than when his ego was injured, Lorcán had gone hunting. And come across Rowan.

‘Indeed, you have met the gods,’ he smiled. ‘You have your wish; will you be on your way now? Or do you seek to venture deeper?’

Rowan’s head felt as though it was on fire. He did not need to respond, for Lorcán boomed a genial laugh and extended a hand to the stunned youth. Rowan took the hand, marvelling at its simultaneous smoothness and roughness, and was lifted effortlessly up onto the back of the stag. The world fell away beneath him.

Clinging to Lorcán’s broad back as the stag began to move, Rowan felt as though he was being swept up into the beginnings of a grand romantic tale. The hero of a tale does not, we must remember, always know what genre they inhabit.

The trees, however, had some idea. Rowan was startled to hear a whisper through the rushing wind. *Be careful*, they spoke, and he realised that, though they were not speaking any language he knew, somehow he understood. *This is the High King of the immortals, a cruel and dangerous man. Do not eat the food at his table, and do not let him speak your True Name, or you will never be able to cross back out of the Forest again...*

The warning words nearly flew from Rowan’s mind when the trees parted to reveal the palace. Rowan, who had never seen a building greater than the chieftain’s feasting hall, let out a gasp. Lorcán chuckled. ‘Look upon the wonders of the gods.’

Lorcán did not dismount as he passed through the gates, but trotted regally along on the back of the magnificent stag. Rowan was able to look down at all the servants and courtiers that they passed, all figures with that same ethereal beauty as Lorcán himself, all dressed in cloth that seemed to shimmer. Lorcán rode through decorated halls, every surface

ornate and symmetrical and blindingly sharp, out into elaborate gardens and orchards overflowing with fruit.

He offered Rowan a golden apple. The Forest's warning tickled Rowan's ear, and he politely said he was not hungry.

In the gardens a dance was in full swing, the winter-kissed air warmed by flickering fires. The gods were laughing, feasting on fresh fruits that sent juice running between their fingers. A table groaned under the weight of the feast upon it: roast boar crackling and glistening, great slabs of beef and heads of oxen, piles upon piles of fish. *So this*, Rowan thought numbly. *Is where all our food goes*. He watched a god take one messy bite of meat before throwing the rest to the hunting dogs, who snarled and yelped and tore at each other as they tried to get the biggest share.

Lorcán tugged Rowan's attention back to him. 'Do you humans know how to dance?'

'Not the dances of the gods,' Rowan admitted.

Lorcán smiled that lightning strike smile. 'Learn, then.'

Music swelled around them, plucked from divine strings, and Rowan was swept into a dance, held in Lorcán's arms. Immortal faces flashed around him as he spun, all with perfect skin and luscious hair woven with jewels or topped with angular crowns made of metals he had no name for. He spun into a haze, wrapped in the overwhelming sweetness of floral scents and bursting fruits, the buzz of chatter, the gemstone glitter of the divine, the heady warmth of Lorcán's arms.

He danced until his feet ached, until he did not know which way was up; he danced, he danced, with the King of the Gods, up stairs of iridescent bone, right into his bedchamber.

That was where Rowan awoke, wearing naught but the morning sunshine, curled up in sheets so soft they seemed unreal. The world beyond the walls was everything he had dreamed of and more: the overflowing cauldrons, the fountains of wine, the endless gardens, the halls of gemstones. And Lorcán, practically glowing beside him, who had chosen him.

Rowan gazed at his lover in dazzled awe, and Lorcán smiled back at him—the smile of a satisfied hunter, spent and triumphant.

‘You have proved entertaining enough to keep,’ Lorcán said, mostly to himself, grinning his hunting-cat’s grin. ‘Yes, I think you shall make a fine trophy.’

‘Trophy?’ Rowan blinked, curling up a little tighter upon the soft sheets. ‘But I thought...’

A tremor, an echo of the trees’ warning, murmured at the back of his mind. What had they said? He tried to remember, through a soupy haze. He felt like he was drunk, though he had consumed no wine or food. Lorcán saw Rowan’s vexed expression and laughed, lightning sparking in his golden eyes.

Lorcán spoke a spell to bind Rowan to that place, to make the human youth his possession. He spoke his name, the greatest and simplest word of magic. The threads in the fabric of reality tugged tight, knotting together, twining around Rowan in myriad unseen places, anchoring him to Lorcán’s rules.

At least, they would have. Lorcán, in his cunning, had asked Croiadh what they called this mortal youth at home, all the better to bind him. Yet *what do they call you?* and *what is your name?* are two different questions. Lorcán had asked the wrong one.

As the name, that name, hit Rowan's ears he felt no magic, only felt as though Lorcán had thrown a stone at him. The rosy haze cleared, replaced by a coal-burning anger that settled deep in Rowan's belly.

Lorcán, unaware of his mistake, contentedly fell back asleep. Rowan watched him, wondering if he really was so beautiful after all.

He thought, *I must flee from this place.*

He thought, *I am going to steal this man's things.*

Rowan dressed and gathered his daggers, then went about the bedchamber gathering treasure. He grabbed whatever shiny things he thought could be useful to sell or trade with other villages: a gemstone-studded brooch here, a torc of braided gold there. A curved horn, its mouth carved with a set of monstrous fangs. Rowan bundled all this together in a silken blanket and hauled it over his shoulder, Lorcán snoring all the while.

He slipped out, quiet as a cat, and found his way through the halls. Other immortals wandered by, but none paid Rowan any heed—it was merely Lorcán's new pet, never mind it. Rowan made it all the way to the palace gates before he was stopped by guards, and he simply told them he was out on an errand for the High King. They shrugged, for who were they to deny the whims of their monarch? And let him go.

The trees parted for him, and Rowan ran, bundle bumping on his back, until he reached the village gates. He leaned against them, breathless, shaky with relief that they were real under his hands.

When the watchmen recognised him, the entire village flew into chaos. Rowan's parents flung themselves at him howling in grief and anger, other folk gathered around him gasping in wonder. 'Please, please, do not cry.' Rowan hugged his weeping parents.

‘You would vanish into the realm of the gods, and ask us not to weep!’ they retorted.
‘What happened to you, child? We thought you dead or lost for good!’

His fellows gathered him into their village hall, and as his treasure trove was dispersed through the village, he told them what had happened. For the moment, Rowan decided to leave out the detail that he had slept with Lorcán. His parents and neighbours did not need to know that for the story to be exciting, he figured—the dancing divine and glittering bone-palace were enough to keep their eyes wide.

What a tale it made. So far as they were all concerned, Rowan returning with his spoils was the ending.

Then Lorcán awoke. Searched his palace. Began to realise that his *trophy* had gone missing. He enquired with the guards, diligent and polite. The guards told him they had let the mortal go, and a bolt of lightning smashed them both into the ground.

Storm clouds drummed overhead. Rowan’s settlement looked up in wonder as the daylight perished. Lightning crackled, forks of it lashing at the earth, too close, too close.

Rowan’s father had time to whisper ‘*Run*’ before the village walls exploded into splinters.

Lorcán burst in, upon that same white hart, one fist brandishing a spear and the other full of lightning. ‘Where is she?’ he demanded. His voice knocked the settlers to their knees, blew out their cooking fires. Gods swarmed into the village, chariot wheels churning up the earth. The godly hunting dogs bared their teeth. ‘Where is the fool girl who dares steal from the gods?’

He spoke that name, that old name, calling for its bearer to come forth. Rowan's mother stood her ground before the King and said 'You are mistaken, lordship! There is no one here by that name!'

A snarl of rage, a bolt of lightning. She fell to the broken earth as Lorcán turned away with a huff. 'Raze these traitors to the ground.'

'Run!' hissed Rowan's father, once again, and he ran. Rowan fled, white-hot chaos erupting behind him, guilt spearing through his chest. Where could he run? Where could he go that could possibly be safe from this sort of wrath?

There was a whisper in his ears, a whisper like wind through leaves. *Hide*. He looked to the Forest, past the sword in the tree, and saw the trunks beyond moving. Parting like a curtain, creating a long, throat-like path into the green depths.

He dived into the woods, sprinting down the pathway. He heard it close behind him, roots and foliage rearranging themselves. *Hide. Hide away*. He ran, until, exhausted, he flung himself into the roots of a berry-laden rowan tree. It draped its branches down to shield him, and he lay, breathless, feeling close to death yet painfully, biting, aware of the fact he was alive.

He will not find you here, whispered the trees. *We will be sure of it*.

But what mortal could ever be safe, truly safe, in a world where someone like Lorcán held power? The question rose into the air with the far-off smell of smoke, carrying with the wind to the settlements on the coast. How could anyone bring an end to such tyranny, when no one alive could hope to stand their ground against such a king?

We will protect you, the trees repeated, as days, then weeks, passed by with Rowan weeping under their canopies. *We will keep you both from the reach of gods*.

‘Both?’ whispered Rowan.

Oh, said the trees.

That is how Rowan discovered he was pregnant.

There were herbs, the Forest said, that could remedy this. They would tell Rowan where to find them if he so sought. But he shook his head. He instead set to making himself a home in the Forest. Deep in the woods was an ancient yew, wider yet than some of the huts in Rowan’s old village, with a hollow at its centre. Rowan made this hollow a house, carpeted with moss, a makeshift cooking hearth at its mouth made of stones and branches. The trees whispered what berries and mushrooms were safe to eat, and Rowan asked if he could set traps for rabbits and other small creatures.

He sneaked back to the wreckage of his village—empty, now, naught left but the blackened bones of meeting places—and took cauldrons and clothes, whatever he could scavenge. *Thief*, he thought. As if in mockery, the gods had left the treasures behind: the golden torc, the brooch, the carved horn. Rowan stole them a second time, all spite.

He learned where rivers rushed through the woods. When he was overcome with illness, he was surprised to see foxes and deer and birds in the yew tree’s makeshift doorway, leaving him healing herbs and fresh food.

He listened to the tales of the trees. As we know, stories may keep a person company even if they are alone in the world. Cillian, we remind you, was still under the sea.

Rowan’s child was born at midnight, between one day and another. They were small but healthy, with a downy fluff of bronze-coloured hair upon their head, to match Rowan’s. They

looked up at him with eyes the colour of gold, sweet and beautiful and already marked as otherworldly.

‘I will name you Willow, for the trees that sway like protective veils,’ he whispered to his child—for he announced them as neither daughter nor son. That, he figured, they could decide for themselves. ‘But you may change it later, if you so wish. I will not mind.’

In the soft green darkness, Willow lay against their father’s breast and slept, blissfully unaware of the business of gods and mortals. Blissfully unaware of their two half-siblings, of the palace made of bone, of the wreckage of the village where they might otherwise have been born, of the sword catching the moonlight at the Forest’s southern edge. Dreaming, for now, of nothing.

Willow of the Wandering Woods

Rowan dearly wished for his child to have an ordinary upbringing. With each passing day it became more and more apparent how impossible this would be.

Willow cried, as babies cry; it is the only language they know. Rowan, exhausted, found himself at a loss for what to do. He was surprised to hear the leafy susurrus of the Forest: *let us try*. A forked branch creaked down from the yew, like an extended hand.

Rowan tucked the babe into the crook in the wood, and the branch began to softly sway. Sound began to fill the misty morning air: soft and delicate as a spring breeze, whispering through the forest with a melodic lilt. It was like no music he had heard before, but there was no mistaking that it was a song, a lullaby to warm the heart and still the mind.

He watched in awe as Willow quieted, one final gurgle before sliding into slumber. Their golden eyes fell shut and they began to chew on their own thumb. Rowan was so relieved he melted to the forest floor. Fern fronds folded inwards, blanketing him.

So it was that Rowan found himself not only living among, but co-parenting with, the trees.

Willow grew in the deep green shadow of the yew. They learned to walk on the twisting pathways that snuck between ancient trees, ducking beneath fallen logs crowned with mushrooms, clambering over slumbering boulders cloaked in heavy moss. They learned to speak in the language of Rowan's people and the language of the Forest, words of wild magic slipping from their mouth as naturally as breathing though no human had spoken them before.

They played hide-and-seek with flitting birds and spotted fawns, learned to swim from the fish in the deep springs and burbling creeks. They followed Rowan as he picked herbs and

set his traps, first bundled on his back then running alongside him. When Willow stopped to sleep upon the forest floor, they often woke to find that a protective ring of mushrooms had sprung up around them.

Rowan taught Willow how to start a cooking fire, how to heal the nicks and scratches they got from rambling barefoot. And of the tales of his people, legends they had brought with them from far across the sea.

‘Why did they have to leave?’ Willow asked, one night, tucked up in his arms. The glow of the fading fire danced in their golden eyes.

‘It became frightening to live there,’ Rowan combed a stray leaf from their hair, which had grown out into unruly waves of bronze. ‘The country battered them with storms and floods, and so they had to flee. That is what I am told, in any case. I was born here, the sound of the waves in my ears and fortified walls around me.’

‘Walls?’ spoke the child, and Rowan explained what he meant. Willow crinkled their nose. ‘Oh, how sad that would be, Father—to be trapped in, to never be able to wander. I wish someone could do something!’

Rowan smiled, rocking them to slumber, and thought to himself *what a tender child I have*.

The next day, Willow lifted a fallen tree with their bare hands.

They were venturing out to find berries when they came across a trunk blocking their usual path. The tree had keeled over in the night, its root system jutting into the air like a thousand petrified veins, leaves and bird’s nests scattered on the forest floor in a cacophony of debris. There was a jagged black scar, singed and brutal, down its trunk. ‘It was struck by

lightning,’ explained Rowan, as Willow looked on in horror. He remembered the storm that had flashed in Lorcán’s hand and was struck shaking, but said no more.

‘You poor thing,’ said Willow, and slipped their hands under the burnt trunk.

The tree, ancient and wise and for so long immovable, lifted into the air. Willow, the child of seven summers, hoisted it up off the ground and carried it, staggering towards a clear grove and setting the great tree down there instead. It hit the ground with a force that echoed through the woods, sending out a rippling wind, scattering birds from treetops. Rowan was nearly knocked backwards, and could only stare at his child in awe as they dusted off their hands.

‘The path is clear!’ Willow beamed. ‘And it will be much better for the tree to sleep here instead.’ They patted the burnt trunk and bid it farewell in the language of the leaves.

The echo of that falling tree was heard around the Great Forest.

The next day while checking the traps, a prickling up Rowan’s neck alerted him to a presence. It was as if he’d heard something, but no—it was the absence of sound that made him shiver, a strange and calculated silence pressing through the leaves.

He slipped Willow behind him and looked up to see a figure peeking from behind a mossy rock. There stood a shadow: tall, lithe, impossibly beautiful, seeming to catch the light in ways that mortal creatures did not.

‘Speak, goddess,’ Rowan snapped, hand going for his knife. ‘I know you are there.’

Goddess echoed through the woodland, travelling to the silhouette and causing her to blink as if brushed by an unexpected wind. She stepped into view, strong arms and broad shoulders and quiver full of feathered arrows. She carried the most massive bow Rowan had

ever seen. It looked like the antler of an impossibly huge deer, prongs shooting off battle-sharp yet never seeming to break her skin. Flanking her were a pair of pure white hunting hounds, all swiftness and ferocity, snouts pointed forward.

The icy silence was shattered by a delighted gasp from Willow. ‘Hello!’ they cried. ‘What creatures are *you*?’

Willow had launched herself towards the hounds before Rowan could scarcely breathe, arms wide and face beaming. The dogs’ ears flattened and their tails began to wag.

Rowan hissed ‘Careful, child!’ and the goddess snapped ‘Back, stay!’ But Willow was already swarmed, beset by snuffling noses and licking tongues, laughing.

Rowan and the goddess looked at each other, a wide-hipped man and a broad-shouldered woman. For a split second, a sort of cracked-mirror recognition washed through them both.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded. Though it was difficult to be commanding with barking and giggles in the background.

‘I am Aisling, most trusted retainer to Queen Cliodhna of the Forest. I come to speak with the half-god.’ Her eyes scanned downwards to the writhing puddle of happy dogs. ‘Yes, that must be the being, but they are so... *tiny*.’

‘They are no half-god,’ Rowan retorted. ‘Where have you heard such a thing?’

She lifted her chin. ‘Cliodhna’s kingdom is these very woods. Or, it... was. They spoke to her, and they speak to me, the last of her loyal huntresses. There were whispers in the leaves that Loracán’s once-lover had escaped his wrath and was hiding. When I felt the echo of godly strength in the forest...’

Aisling squinted at Willow. Willow offered her a genial wave. ‘...I wondered if that lover might have been carrying something when they fled.’

‘*Lover* is a strong word,’ Rowan muttered. ‘What do you seek of the child?’

‘To meet them, of course, and to determine their allegiance. Loracán, their father, callously took our queen from us.’ A hiss went through the trees. ‘If they follow him, they are my enemy.’

‘They follow *no one!*’ cried Rowan. ‘Their age is *seven!*’

‘I follow you,’ Willow pointed out, arms hugged around one of Aisling’s dogs. ‘You taught me all the pathways through the trees and how not to get lost and...’

‘Dearest, hush. This woman is dangerous.’

Something flickered in Aisling’s expression, that same flame-flutter as when he had called her *goddess*. ‘Pardon me,’ she said, more softly. ‘You are... you have given birth to Loracán’s heir, but you are...’

‘This is *my child*, no heir nor ally of Loracán.’

‘You are this child’s father,’ Aisling pressed.

‘Yes. And I cannot help you.’

‘Your child might be able to,’ said Aisling. ‘There is a prophecy. A captured handful of the future glimpsed and delivered by the court’s seer. I remember it as clearly as an echo among the trees. *No human born of a woman’s womb can kill you.*’

Rowan was already shaking his head.

‘These words filled Loracán with confidence, and yet I see a crack in them,’ Aisling continued. ‘Your offspring slips between the gaps in those words. They show the kind of

strength that could reckon with the divine. I believe they could be the key to unseating the cruel king. Perhaps... if not bringing my queen back, getting vengeance in her stead.'

Prophecies are strange things, as you may imagine. They are slippery and often difficult to see unless certain light catches them, and yet they can hang menacingly over one's head, like a spiderweb twinkling in the dewy dawn. In our time overseeing this world, we have seen prophecies aplenty—true and false and half-true alike. Those are the most dangerous ones. Attempts to avoid them seem only to invite them closer and with greater speed, with a sense of irony that is only often funny in the distant retelling of the tale.

Rowan saw a path unfurl before his child now, a blood-soaked trail towards legend. 'They cannot defeat him,' Rowan snapped. Some mortals seek to be heroes, but, we can assure you, their parents often do not share the wish. 'They are but a child.'

Aisling's jaw was clenched. 'Children grow, so I am told.'

'You will not enlist my child in this petty war of yours!' Rowan shouted. 'We are safe here!'

'Please, stop!' Willow flung herself between Aisling and Rowan, bare feet planted among the ferns, hands outstretched. Aisling blinked down at them, struck still. Willow pointed up at her. 'You are making my father upset! Cease this now and say you're sorry!'

Mortal and immortal alike averted their eyes. Aisling cleared her throat. 'I... apologise for my intrusion.'

'Speak as though you mean it.'

A flush crossed Aisling's cheeks. She dropped down to one knee, her antler-bow brushing the floor of the glade. 'Forgive me. Pray, what is your name?'

‘I am Willow of the Wandering Woods,’ the child announced. ‘Child of Rowan and the Forest.’

Rowan remembered the way Lorcán had held his old name like a poisoned blade, tried to use it for the spell. He watched Aisling, hawklike, but she simply bent her head. ‘Forgive me, Willow of the Wandering Woods.’

Willow patted Aisling on the head. ‘Now, let us speak nicely. What is all this about fighting?’

‘There will be no fighting,’ frowned Rowan. He paused, watching Willow. ‘Unless that is what you choose.’

Aisling scoffed. ‘It is fate.’

‘Fate be damned. I care not for your seer, with his divine eyes. If Willow does not choose to fight, they will not. You cannot walk this path for them, anymore than I can.’

There was a silence in which the trees whispered to each other, watching the scene unfold. Aisling was still a moment, then bowed her head. ‘Very well. Willow, Child of the Forest, should you choose to use your strength for the warrior’s path, I swear to fight by your side. I swear you my loyalty if you shall take me, and any mentorship you seek.’ A pause. ‘And I promise... not to make your father unhappy.’

Willow nodded their assent, giving Aisling another pat. ‘Good. Let us share a meal. Trees, may we use some wood to make a cooking fire?’

It was better diplomacy than the palace of the gods had seen in all its days. Aisling built a pit of firewood and hot stones and brought forth a deer she had slain before, with one clean arrow through the eye. She and Rowan removed the pelt, prepared the meat, and soon it was crackling over the flames, sending fragrant smoke swirling up through the tree branches.

‘It seems we are in an alliance,’ Aisling suggested, sounding vexed, as though not entirely sure how she had gotten to where she was—seated cross-legged beside Rowan at the head of the makeshift party. Willow was playing with the hunting dogs again, rubbing their white bellies.

‘It seems.’ Rowan watched the flames dance. ‘You said you were the last of Cliodhna’s hunting party. Where did the rest of them venture?’

‘We were as sisters, once. We ran together through the Forest, slew monsters that managed to evade even the invasion of the gods. This bow is all that remains of The Great Stag, who roamed the western woods for years before Cliodhna and I tracked it down.’ A strange mix of pride and sadness mingled in Aisling’s voice. ‘Cliodhna saw me as I was when every other god could not believe... my desire to change. She saw me as a woman, loved me as one. And then Lorcán transformed her into a tree. Ripped her voice from her throat and stole the swiftness from her legs. And we fell apart.’

‘So it is with fury that you seek my child’s help. Fury and vengeance.’

‘Fury and love,’ said Aisling. ‘Can the two not go together?’

Rowan prodded at the fire. ‘You said she saw you as a woman. You... you are like me, aren’t you? You are a woman, though you were not called one when you were... are gods *born?*’

‘I grew from the seeds that our former leader planted in our homeland’s black soil, meant to be the perfect warrior.’

‘Ah. Of course.’ Rowan shrugged. ‘I do not know what I expected.’

Their attention was tugged to Willow, running across the glade with Aisling’s dogs. ‘Your hounds have names!’ they announced, all delight. ‘Did you know that? They told me

that they like the names you gave them well enough, but they have their own True Names too!’

Aisling told them hunting stories, of the valiant deeds of each of those dogs. Her voice danced towards the sky with the cooking smoke, escaping the canopy and reaching, as all things do, the stars.

We watched them eat together, that night: the lonely goddess, the runaway mortal, the demi-god, the dogs. We watched as Aisling hunted yet more creatures for the father and child, furs for them to line the hollow yew with, making it a soft paradise even in the dead of winter. Rowan taught her to weave, for as a ground-grown warrior Aisling had never learned.

Aisling taught Willow how to aim and shoot an arrow, how to use their strength if they needed to defend themselves. Willow learned they were strong enough to knock even a goddess flying, and we watched them, alongside a fretful Rowan, as huntress and apprentice tumbled and crashed through the Forest, ending up in a hopeless laughing pile. We watched Rowan and Aisling talk, and talk, unfamiliar muscles loosening as they found themselves at last in the company of someone who understood.

We watched, and we remained quiet. Patient, as all ancient things are. Though, we must admit, itching a little.

So it was that Cillian emerged, at last, from the sea—and was startled to learn they had gained a twelve-year-old sibling.

Eyes of Silver, Eyes of Gold

Cillian, ever their father's child, did two things: panic, then plot to get rid of Willow.

Again, prophecies are strange and slippery things—like liquids, they take the shape of whatever they are poured into. We told Cillian of Willow's existence, of their unusual nature as a half-god and a child born from the womb of a man. The details were lost in the howl and fizz filling Cillian's ears. A sibling? A *sibling*, one perhaps uniquely placed to topple Lorcán from his throne. Whereas this idea made Aisling hopeful, made Rowan sceptical, to Cillian it rang the harsh metal of rivalry. They already had Maebh to contend with, they would not let some other half-mortal bastard trouble their chance at power.

The arrowhead ached in their heart. Yes, they would find this child, and destroy them. What alternative was there?

Cillian scouted through the Great Forest on black wings, passing days and nights until they at last spotted Willow, their chaos of auburn hair nearly blending in with the autumnal leaves. They were picking berries, singing to themselves. They *looked* harmless, docile even. 'A cunning ruse,' Cillian muttered. 'But you do not fool me.'

Willow looked up, golden eyes seeking Cillian out. Cillian went rigid among the leaves, snapping their beak shut.

'Hello, little bird. You are like no winged creature I have met before.' The child's eyes were the same gold as Lorcán's, conjuring memories of striking spears and booming voices. Yet Willow's eyes were round and shiny, in a face beset by a galaxy of freckles. Cillian avoided their gaze, pretending to preen their black feathers.

‘Little bird, I can tell that you are trying to hide something from me. Will you please tell me what it is? I promise I shall do you no harm.’

Cillian declined to respond. Willow’s brow creased. ‘Well, I asked you nicely,’ they said, and promptly slammed a hand against the tree trunk.

It sent a quaking force up through the wood, enough to send Cillian flying from their perch. They were launched with such force they fell entirely from their bird disguise, crashing to the ground in a muddle of humanoid arms and legs. Spitting out leaves, they pulled themselves back into shape. ‘How dare you!’

‘So you were not a bird at all!’ Willow was looking down at them with awe. Cillian frowned, and took the form of a child about Willow’s size, meeting them eye to eye. Gold to silver.

Cillian tipped their head. Willow tipped theirs. The two stood, mismatching reflections of one another. Willow broke the freeze by stepping forward, reaching out to touch Cillian’s nose. Cillian wrinkled it under their touch, shifting it back into the shape of a beak. Willow retracted their fingers with a gasp, then burst out laughing.

‘What is your name, little bird? You do not have to tell me your True one, if you do not wish, but I would like a name to call you all the same. I am Willow of the Wandering Woods.’

How strange, to be met with such hospitality—by a relative, no less. Cillian thought *all the better*. ‘My name is Cillian Silver-eyes, at your service.’ They dipped into a steep bow, making Willow giggle again. ‘I fly from place to place seeking friends and playmates. Tell me, you must be bored dwelling among the woods like this?’

‘Oh, not at all!’ Willow sounded earnestly shocked by the thought. ‘If the wind is feeling playful, it gives me swirling breezes full of leaves to chase. I can climb the trees and play in their branches...’

‘So you like games of hiding and chasing?’ Cillian switched their shiny beak for an equally glittering smile. ‘I have a game for you, then, Willow the Wisp. There is a place near here with formations of rock. Some say it was tossed and arranged in place by giants in ancient days. They would be wonderful to climb upon and hide in. Alas, I have always thought this, yet had no friends to play with. Would you go with me?’

A frown alighted upon Willow’s brow. ‘Aisling says to stay away from the standing stones. Nearby is the home of the Great Boar. She says its tusks are sharp enough to kill even a god, and try as they might her group was never able to hunt it!’

‘Really? I have not heard of such a thing!’ Cillian lied in a sing-song. ‘Surely it cannot exist? We should be fine to play among the rocks. A myth cannot hurt us.’

‘It does exist!’

‘It cannot! For if I have never seen it, how can it be?’

‘What a thing to declare!’ Willow, not used to being teased, puffed up like a seed-ball. They took Cillian by the hand and marched through the woods. ‘Come, I will show you!’

Cillian made sure to complain in their lilting, playful voice. They grinned to themselves, hardly able to believe Willow was leading the charge to their own demise.

As Cillian was towed through the undergrowth, something compelled them to enquire, ‘Willow the Wisp, are you a boy or a girl?’

‘No,’ they replied. ‘I do not think so. Are *you* a boy or a girl?’

‘I am a nuisance,’ said Cillian. Willow laughed, the sound coming so easily. *Dear sweet fool*, thought Cillian. All worries about this child being stronger, cleverer, or mightier than Cillian fled their mind. Willow’s little half-mortal head seemed empty of any machinations. Now, all they had to do was find the Great Boar and set it in their direction. *This shall be easier than I thought.*

The stones soon rose up around them, tumbled grey rocks that formed a spiral, overgrown with ferns and mottled with moss. The ground was gnashed with hoof marks. Cillian kept their grin to themselves. ‘Oh! Well, these certainly look like the stones of the tales. Perhaps you were right.’

‘There, now you have seen it. Let us retreat, lest we anger the Boar.’

‘Oho? You are not *frightened*, are you?’ Cillian clambered atop one of the stones and grinned down at Willow.

Cillian was used to appealing to the vanity of gods, but Willow just looked sincere. ‘Come, Silver-eyes, we must go.’

‘Play a moment.’ Cillian tried to keep their grimace as a grin. A stubborn creature, this child. This child, looking up at them with honest eyes the colour of divine blood. This child, who had come into existence unannounced and uninvited. This child, who lived among the leaves and soil. This child, this child, this child—

From behind them came a noise.

It began with an echo. A colossal cracking and crunching, chilling as the snapping of bones. Cillian slowly turned, though they felt the presence before they saw it. A shape in the trees, monolithic, two crescent-moons of white catching the dappled light.

And then, movement.

From the trees burst The Great Boar, wide as an ancient trunk, heavy as stone, yet moving with the eerie swiftness of approaching mist. Its tusks curled and shone like knives, its eyes were red and swirling, and its hooves gnashed at the ground, carving deep paths through the woods. Cillian offered the monster a genial greeting, and received only a steaming, tree-shaking snort in reply. They slipped on the moss and fell from the stone, crashing to Willow's feet.

'Be careful!' Willow cried. Cillian scrambled and their back hit another standing stone—there was nowhere to go, at least not in their current form.

'Child, can you change shape as I can?' they asked. Willow shook their head, and Cillian felt themselves smile. It would be so easy to sprout wings and leave this mortal at the mercy of this beast. Though there was a chance that Willow was strong enough to contend with it... they had moved a great tree, had they not? They had stilled the hand of a goddess? Perhaps they would not perish in this encounter, and perhaps afterwards they may take vengeance...

Visions of Lorcán's anger, bearing down on them like a stormfront, clouded Cillian's mind. Their thoughts tangled, and only when they heard Willow scream did their eyes refocus—in time to see the Boar barrelling towards them.

Cillian darted out of the way, yet they were not quite fast enough. The world became a white-hot blur. A tearing, searing pain lanced through them, and they saw a flash of gold, oh, that horrible colour, the colour of Lorcán's burning hateful eyes.

Cillian's vision pitched and for a moment that was all they could see: their father looming over them, face twisted into a spiteful grin. Lording on his throne, standing over Cillian, flinging their remains out to the mercy of the night. Burning, burning, with all the cruelty and quick heat of lightning.

Cillian snapped back to the moment at the sound of a colossal *crunch*. They looked up to see Willow with their arms around one of the Boar's tusks, steering the beast away and flinging it against a tree with such force that it sent a shockwave singing through the forest. The Boar squealed high enough to shatter the sky, loud enough to send birds scattering for miles around. But then it fled, head down, storming through the trees.

Willow turned to Cillian, panting, and let out a gasp. Cillian, finally, looked down at their own body and realised that they were lying on their side in a pile of splintered stone and shredded leaves, and in a pool of golden blood.

Cillian recalled, dizzily, that gods were hard to kill. But Cillian and Maebh were not purebred gods but creatures of Loracán's own making, part stardust and dawn light. And, in any case, there had been something truly legendary about that boar—its fellows had no doubt slain Loracán's comrades in the war.

As gold spilled from the gaping gash in Cillian's side, pouring helplessly between their fingers, they felt the knife-edge terror of mortality. They felt very small, strangely fragile, and Willow looked very big standing over them. Their ears began to hum, the pulsing sound somehow, strangely, reminding them of the flutter of many wings.

Cillian wondered, for the first time, what it might be like to die. Would it happen fast, perhaps, as swift and simple as ducking through the Fabric of magic? Or would they slide slowly down the slope into nothingness? Was death a nothingness, or was it a great unknown something?

They felt a throb of fear that made yet more blood spill out between their fingers. Then, to their surprise, they felt arms around them, and they felt the ground give way.

'What are you doing?' Gilded blood dripped from Cillian's mouth, soaking their curious words.

‘I must get you somewhere safe!’ There was a rawness to the voice in Cillian’s ear.

Cillian realised it was panic. Cillian realised it was *Willow*. ‘You are badly wounded!’

Cillian blinked. ‘You will not leave me to die?’

‘*No!*’ cried Willow. ‘Why would I do that?’

The question rattled around Cillian’s dizzy head as they bounced over roots and leaves and mushrooms, in the strange warmth of Willow’s arms.

Part II

An Age of Heroes

Aidan of the Healing Tears

Quite a sight, it was, little Willow running into the yew-tree glen carrying a mangled form and covered in glittering blood. ‘Father!’ they cried. ‘Aisling! They are hurt! We must help them!’

Rowan and Aisling both came running to the sound of Willow’s voice, and found them laying the prone and bloodied Cillian on a bed of moss. Cillian’s head lolled, their breathing fluttered like a trapped bird in their chest, and it could not be said if all their organs were where they were meant to be. Their eyes, though, were open for just long enough for Aisling to catch the shine of silver in them.

‘That—!’ The huntress’ lips curled back like one of her hounds on a blood scent. ‘That is Cillian, Child of the Dusk, one of—’

‘It matters not who they are!’ Willow shouted. ‘They are *dying!* The Great Boar attacked them, and their blood will not cease, and none of our healing herbs are working!’

‘That boar is a remnant of the Age of Monsters,’ Rowan cautioned. ‘Its tusks can reckon even with immortality—’

‘It matters not about the boar!’ Tears sprang from Willow’s eyes. ‘There must be a way to fix this!’

Aisling and Rowan looked at each other, suspended and helpless. Then Aisling straightened. ‘Ah—I know of someone who may be able to assist. The trees tell stories of a human youth in a settlement at the western edge of the Forest, a boy with healing magic.’

‘A human cannot reckon with magic, surely?’

‘There was a healing pool, an ancient waterway from before we gods arrived. His mother supped from it while pregnant, to heal a sickness that was threatening her and the baby. The whispers say it worked, and the babe was born with tears that can heal any wound they wash over.’

‘And are the tales true?’ Rowan asked.

Aisling frowned at him. ‘The trees would not lie.’

And neither would the stars. Aisling was a clever goddess.

Aisling, too, was right: that water had bubbled up from deep within the earth, from the very roots of magic, infused with the ability to heal, to mend, to transform. That mortal mother had been one of the last to use it, for shortly after her drink a battalion of gods had swept in to siphon it off to the bone palace. The last drinker had named her child Aidan.

The people of Aidan’s village had every reason, as all mortals did, to contemplate magic from down the shaft of a spear. Yet the magic Aidan possessed proved useful. As the boy grew, he found himself called from his bed or from his fishing nets to tend to the ill or injured. Oftentimes, the boy was so moved by their pain that his tears flowed freely, pouring down his fair and freckled cheeks to splash, like glimmering starbursts, on the open wounds. He would wipe his eyes, and all other gathered parties would widen theirs, watching in awe as the cuts and gashes and burns bubbled over and sealed themselves shut.

Aidan’s parents had earned the birthweight of their son in gold, not to mention meat and favours, by the time he had seen five summers. By the time he had seen fourteen, however, his eyes were growing weary. It is much to ask, after all, for a child to be dragged from their dreamings to look upon the horrors of battle-wound or creature-bite. It is much to ask your own dear son to weep upon command, so that you may turn your own dry eyes upon the sight of gold.

The stars care little for economics, but we understand just enough to see it working its own kind of magic here. As Aidan began to turn away, in fear and exhaustion, from the work he had been assigned at birth, his parents simply raised their prices. His tears became as good as gold—his father had been known to follow the boy around with jugs and vials, ready to catch each teardrop that snuck from Aidan’s eyes. If he so much as yawned, if he so much as sniffled, the boy was pounced upon like a baby bird under the wary eyes of foxes.

Was he truly loved, or only valued for his priceless tears? Was his empathy admirable, or only worth the magic it could work? These queries weighed in Aidan’s chest, enough to move him to weeping. Or it would have been, had he not grown terrified of shedding a tear, lest parents and potential patients leap at him with bowls and bottles.

It was towards this situation that Willow and Rowan walked, trekking through the Forest to find the village at its western edge (the trees, helpfully, shuffling and shifting to form a straight path). Willow looked in wonder at the wood-carved walls and the scattering of mortals, more than they had ever laid eyes upon in their life.

The mortals, too, could not help but stare at the cloaked newcomers, the man who moved with wariness and the child who skittered alongside him with impeccable balance and speed. Tales had spread up from the coast across the years, warnings to be watchful of *silver* eyes; for a being with such a glimmer could be a thieving god in disguise. But golden? No such tales floated on the trade winds about a child with golden eyes. Not yet.

‘You seek Aidan of the Healing Tears?’ a villager scoffed, when Rowan stated their purpose. ‘You had best be ready to pay a high price.’

‘My friend is dying!’ Willow cried. The villager merely shrugged. Again, we must muse that while economics make little sense to the stars (and to children raised in forests), many humans see them as second nature.

‘Worry not, we can pay,’ said Rowan, and produced Lorcán’s brooch, so long ago stolen, from within his cloak. The vibrant gemstones danced in the sunlight, flashing as Rowan was rapidly escorted to a dwelling in the centre of the settlement.

Aidan’s parents eagerly ushered them inside, inspecting the bejewelled brooch. They called for their son, and, failing that, went to his bed and tugged him out. It gave Rowan a memory of seeing cattle herded in his childhood, and it set him on edge.

Moreso, however, did the sight of Aidan himself: a boy with red-rimmed eyes and straggly hair that might have been called golden in better circumstances, but as yet was more like the colour of trodden straw. He looked as exhausted as any youth ever could, Rowan thought, his lips drooped permanently down as if weighed by bolts of bronze.

‘They have already paid,’ his father sang, biting surreptitiously at the edge of the brooch. ‘Go, my son, work your magic. Give these good people what you owe.’

Aidan, silent and sleepless, nodded and followed the guests out of the village and into the Forest.

Willow seemed fascinated by the sight of a fellow youth. They flitted round Aidan in circles, studying him the same way they investigated rock formations and animal tracks. Aidan remained drooped, like a leaf heavy with rainwater, plodding towards his duty with a look of apathy.

Indeed, when they arrived at Cillian’s side, a problem presented itself: Aidan looked upon them, and did not start to cry.

‘Look at them!’ Willow’s circling became frantic. ‘They are wounded, they are dying! They were hurt by a monstrous boar!’

‘I have seen worse,’ Aidan replied, voice flat as a river-washed pebble. ‘Gods raid my village every time the moon is high. This world is one that cuts and maims. I have wept all the tears in my body, and yet it barely makes a difference.’

‘Every teardrop makes a difference,’ Rowan assured him. Aidan let out a heavy sigh, gusty and desolate enough to stir Cillian from their rest.

They grimaced in pain. ‘What’s going on? Who is this walking sack of sadness?’

‘I am Aidan of the Healing Tears,’ Aidan replied, river-pebble voice still stuck in his throat. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am, so far as I can tell, about to die,’ replied Cillian.

Aidan just sighed again. ‘I am sorry. It is just that I have shed so many tears they have long-since lost their meaning.’

‘Oh, do not fear! You could still have a career in poetry.’ Cillian grinned, then grimaced. A ripple of pain went through their body, and their form shuddered with it: flickering, liquefying, oozing at the edges. Their face contorted, eyes sliding in all directions, mouth wiggling like a startled serpent.

Aidan recoiled, staring at Cillian. ‘What is happening?’

‘What, this?’ Cillian did it again, sending their nose gliding up into the middle of their forehead. A spluttering sound leapt, unbidden, from Aidan’s mouth, seeming to escape from the depths of his chest.

‘Cillian, don’t!’ Willow scolded. ‘You will hurt yourself more!’

‘As I mentioned before, I am already dying,’ they retorted. ‘I may as well make a spectacle of myself as I do so.’ They concentrated their efforts, and shifted form, elongating

their mouth into one long line across their jaw—then snapping it back into the middle, puckered like a fish, making a cacophonous wet noise that echoed around the glade.

Aidan stared at them for a moment, breathless. Then a rumble began in his chest, climbing up his ribs, shaking his throat, escaping out his mouth—the boy burst out laughing, an explosive sound that seemed to surprise even him.

‘Oh, my death throes are amusing, are they?’ Cillian sprouted fox ears from their head, wagging in time to the flapping of their contorted lips. A fresh peal of laughter rattled from Aidan’s mouth. ‘Fine, laugh, human! Watch this!’

‘I am sorry!’ Aidan wailed, between heaving gasps of laughter. ‘You just look so...’ Cillian had turned their eyes to cat’s eyes, bulging out of their face. Aidan bent double, nearly falling onto Cillian’s prone form, wheezing and cackling.

As the boy giggled unrelentingly, tears began to gather at the corners of his eyes, trickling down his cheeks as he fought for breath. A teardrop fell, catching the light and glittering like crystal for a moment. It landed on Cillian’s wound, mingling with the golden blood.

Willow, Rowan, and Aisling watched, not daring to move, as the liquids sparkled and merged in the soft light of the setting sun. As Aidan wept with merriment, Cillian’s wounds began to heal: the gash in their side sewing itself shut, their breathing evening, their heart calming, and, it seemed, their organs rearranging themselves and returning to their homes in an orderly fashion.

Aidan’s laughter finally faded, leaving him lying, winded, on the forest floor. Cillian sat up, setting their face back to something that could be called ordinary: everything where it ought to be, no combinations of human and animal, fashioned into a shape similar to a youth

of Aidan's age. With their new visage, they looked down at themselves in bemusement. 'You saved me. You saved me?'

Their injuries were very nearly reopened when Willow flung herself at Cillian, embracing them with the strength that had once moved a tree. 'Of course!' they exclaimed. 'You were hurt! But oh, now you are healed! Thank you, Aidan!'

'Healed though they may be, they should still rest a while,' Rowan cautioned, carefully removing his child. Cillian, lying prone once again on the moss, had little choice but to agree. Aidan, beside them, began once more to giggle.

The sun had turned its face away by now, leaving night to cloak the Forest and us to settle into our dusky domain. We watched as Rowan insisted Aidan stay, for traveling through the woods (particularly when you were not on speaking terms with them) was treacherous. 'Rest by our fire, Aidan of the Healing Tears,' he said. 'You need not earn your keep, we offer this freely.'

So it was that Rowan, Willow, and Aisling found themselves with two more lives beneath their proverbial, leafy roof. They turned a fish over the flames and grilled a batch of mushrooms. Willow turned to Cillian, bundled in moss and lying on their back. 'Do gods need to eat?'

Cillian intended to deny this, wary of this so-called hospitality. Were those mushrooms poisonous? They had to assume so. Yet their stomach grumbled before they could speak. Willow laughed, that strange, sweet springtime sound. There was a sincerity to it that was wholly unfamiliar, and it echoed curiously in Cillian's ears.

'*I like to eat,*' they mumbled instead.

‘Then you shall have your share,’ said Rowan. He paused as he turned the fish. ‘You are truly Cillian, Child of the Dusk, as Aisling says? You are Lorcán’s child?’

‘Unfortunately, I must admit to being that man’s progeny,’ Cillian replied, and they saw a smile sneak up the side of Aisling’s lips. ‘I suppose that makes me your enemy.’

‘For now, you are our patient. We shall figure out the rest in due time.’ Rowan turned to talk to Aidan, who was remarking on the mushrooms—speaking much more freely now, sounding far less river-beaten.

Cillian was unsure whether they should feel trapped, safe, or simply tired. Their body ached, from the tear of the tusk and from the tingle of unfamiliar magic. And their heart, most of all, was spinning in confusion. ‘Perhaps,’ they supposed. ‘Willow will kill me in my sleep. It would be a dirty trick, but one I would accept.’

‘No one is being killed!’ Willow spluttered, and patted Cillian softly on their dark locks of hair. ‘Rest, and heal. Then you and I may play again, this time far away from any monsters.’

There was something in the soft touch of their hand—another unfamiliar magic, perhaps?—that sent Cillian sliding into sleep as though into a cool river in summertime.

The Growth of Plants in Spring

In the arms of the Forest, Cillian of the Silver Eyes slept.

A wound from legendary tusks is quite an ordeal to recover from, even with the aid of magic tears. In truth, they were not sure how long they slumbered. They were roused at the smell of food, cooking meat or fragrant herbs or crackling salt, or, later, rising bread, kneaded and made from the wheat that Aidan brought from his village. Aidan appeared, here and then there and then here again, seemingly learning the shifting woodland paths that kept the yew-tree glade safe and hidden.

Cillian woke to the sound of singing, lullabies for Willow or legends from the past, sometimes in Rowan's soft voice and sometimes a chorus of Aisling and her howling hounds. Willow invited Cillian to sing too. Cillian recoiled, the salt of the kingdom beneath the sea still clinging to their tongue. Willow saw them pull a face and said, simply, 'You do not have to sing if you do not wish to.'

So Cillian lay, silent, for many more days. But they found they were drawn in by the sound of rising and falling voices, of twisting and turning tales. They found that they wanted to speak.

And so they told tales of their escapades: boasts of their trick stealing Nessa's voice, comedic laments about Maebh. Talk of Lorcán set the taste of blood in their mouth, and so Cillian dwelled, instead, on more amusing tales.

They slept, shifting into the form of a grey fox to conserve heat, curled into a ball of silvery fur on the moss. From between their dreams they caught glimpses of Aisling teaching Willow to spar with a sword, of Rowan cleaning his hunting daggers while Willow braided

wildflowers into his hair. Of Aidan, laughing more each time, bringing tales of life in the world beyond the woods. Of Willow, hauling home a giant snail they had found, asking if it was safe to cook and eat. Of Aisling's hounds, moving swift and sharp as a winter breeze, or sleeping belly-up by the fire.

Of Rowan scooping fox-Cillian up and moving them, carefully, to the hollowed-out yew tree. Of frost spreading its delicate fingers across the ground, encasing plants in a glassy chill, making everyone's breath dance before them in clouds, like the smoke-spitting serpents the gods said dwelled in the far south.

Of a day when Cillian felt well enough to follow Willow through the powdery snow as they collected berries and branches. Cillian darted around them, drawing shapes with their pawprints. Willow built a figure out of fistfuls of snow and ice, a snow-stag with broken branches for antlers and smooth stones for eyes. Cillian wondered, not for the first time, when exactly this half-sibling of theirs was going to try to injure or (at least!) insult them.

And yet, the snow melted, and no turnabout had come. And yet, a rainbow of wildflowers sprouted in the clearings and glades of the Great Forest, the air filled with their colourful scent and the warble of birds and the buzz of bees, and the moment did not come.

Cillian found themselves, one day, curled up foxform beside Rowan as he mended one of the fishing nets they used to catch salmon in the deep streams that wove through the Forest. They sat up and stretched out into their godly body, a yawn splitting their face. Rowan jumped, then softly sighed. 'Just as I think I've become used to you changing shape, you always manage to catch me off guard.'

Cillian planted themselves across from the man, cross-legged, studying him. 'Rowan, I have a query for you,' they said. They adjusted their height, their curves, their facial features,

so they formed a silver-eyed mirror image of him. ‘Willow speaks of choosing how we name ourselves, how you are a man despite being named a girl at birth. Why sit in *that* body, then? Why not transform, change your form to match your true self?’

Rowan raised his eyebrows at Cillian. ‘Humans... cannot do that.’

‘They *what?*’ Cillian cried. ‘You *cannot change?*’

‘Well, that is not so true. Humans change all the time. But turning into birds or growing two feet taller whenever we please? No.’

Cillian shifted between three different visages in pure distress. Rowan began cautioning ‘Careful of your wound—’ but alas, too late, Cillian flinched in pain and collapsed in a heap of flesh and feathers, long curls of black hair spilling around them. When they regained their strength and composure, they sat up groggily in a form closer to Willow’s age, small and lanky. ‘What did I tell you?’ Rowan scolded.

Cillian grumbled, yet noticed that Rowan’s admonitions did not make them flinch the way that Loracán’s did. He was always so quiet and careful around Willow, an alien and vexing image of parenthood. ‘In truth,’ he said. ‘I do not think I would transform even if I could. I do not loathe my body. My child looks upon me and calls me ‘father’, and speaks it truly. I look upon my reflection and see a man looking back at me.’

He rubbed a hand along his jaw, in thought. ‘Though sometimes I think I might fancy a deeper voice. I think I could sound quite dashing.’

‘I would go mad if I could not change,’ Cillian grimaced. ‘It is so much of who I am.’

‘Do the gods change often, as you do?’

‘Not as *I* do. They remain in their forms, unmoving, polished, like precious stones, like jewellery or the trinkets at the hilt of deadly blades. I am more like molten silver. But I

am an oddity. The gods are not fond of change, I do not think. Perhaps that is why they find me so abhorrent.’

The last word danced off their tongue in jest. Cillian was surprised to see that Rowan was not laughing. There was sympathy in his eyes that struck Cillian off guard.

‘If the gods are stone and metal, perhaps mortals are more like trees.’ He looked up, and Cillian followed his gaze, watching the green canopy unfold above. ‘Always growing, shifting with the seasons. You can never tell which way a sprout will grow, even if you train it or plant it for harvest.’

What a strange thought, for the twilight child who had been moulded with a purpose in mind. A quiet fell between them, and Cillian listened to the sounds of the Forest: a rustling of leaves, a subtle music of water over mossy stone, a cry of birds in all their languages. Rowan continued with his mending, asking nothing.

‘If you seek a deeper voice,’ said Cillian, slowly. ‘I am sure I could help with that.’

Rowan looked upon them. Cillian shrugged. ‘Consider it repayment for your tending to me. I do not like to be in debt.’ They thought, once more, of their time under the sea, and suppressed a shudder.

‘And how would you go about such a thing?’ asked Rowan. His voice was cautious, sensible. Yet his eyes betrayed a curiosity that made Cillian grin.

It had been some time, but Cillian remembered how to coax a voice from within another person’s chest—though this one was given willingly, not stolen in the night. Cillian gently pulled Rowan’s voice, threading it between their fingers with care. Rowan watched, struck silent, as Cillian plucked segments of sounds from the air and wove them together in their long fingers. A dash of that hushed river burble, here, a touch of the shadowy footfall of

distant stags, there. Tuned like a shapeless harp, tugged and tightened and prodded as the Child of Dusk stuck their tongue out in concentration.

They handed the voice back to Rowan, slipping it between his parted lips, letting it sink and settle back into him, make its home behind his ribs. Rowan breathed, a moment, unsure. ‘Did it work?’ he asked, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

The voice that had sprung from him had been his, no doubt, though an adjusted version, mingled with the rich and dark sounds of nature to bring it down. When Rowan spoke, there was a husky rush of stormy wind behind his words.

‘Ha!’ Cillian let out a triumphant chortle. ‘You look as shocked as if you’ve seen monsters anew! Speak, then, Rowan the Treasure Thief!’

‘It is just as I imagined it to be,’ Rowan barked out a laugh. ‘When I would play at deepening it as a child, copying my father and the male bards. I wonder what it sounds like when I sing?’

‘There is an easy way to answer that question,’ shrugged Cillian.

And so Rowan sang, testing the range of his new voice, spinning it to familiar highs and new fantastic lows, practising lullabies and folk songs of heroes of old. His voice rang to the highest branches, carried on such joy that it stirred the birds to attention, drew them in to listen. It carried such richness and sweetness that Cillian found himself lulled back to sleep, melting back down into the shape of a fox, curling up by Rowan’s side and drifting into dreams.

How strange it was, to sleep as a gift-giver rather than a thief. Cillian felt oddly lighter, but told himself it was because their debt was paid, nothing more. When they awoke, then, they would get back to their quest for the throne.

The Scarlet Beast

Yet Cillian was soon to learn that this quiet could not last. One day they were hauled from their slumber by Aidan's voice, a frantic call and a rush of leaves as the trees parted to let him into the glade. 'Willow!' cried he. 'I need your help!'

'It is too early,' Cillian complained, curling into a vulpine ball. Willow scooped them up and ran out to greet Aidan.

'There is a... a *beast!* Terrorising the settlements south of mine. Some strange new kind of monster, that looks like a human girl before it warps and goes on a rampage. With your godly strength, you may be the only one able to stop this creature!'

Willow was already nodding. 'How far?'

'It has taken me two days' ride to bring you this news.' Tears, those priceless things, were beading in his eyes. 'Oh, what more carnage will have taken place in another two days?'

Cillian contemplated going back to sleep. This was no matter of their concern, of course. Monsters were always something for *someone else* to deal with—cocky gods with fighting spirit, gods like Lorcán. If a monster was destroying humans, was that not simply nature at play?

Aidan and Willow's voices burbled overhead. Should they wait for Rowan and Aisling to return from their hunt? No, time was scarce enough as it was. Should they bring weapons? It was no matter of Cillian's.

And yet... when they looked at the concern in Aidan's tearful eyes, at Willow, who looked as though they bore all the worry of the world. Something twinged in their chest. Something different to the arrowhead ache. Something unfamiliar and frankly disconcerting.

The grey fox with the silver eyes raised its voice, startling them both. ‘It will only take two days if you *ride*,’ said Cillian. ‘But I know another way to get around.’

Willow and Aidan took their first journey through the Causeways. They followed Cillian as they pinched and pulled back a segment of the Fabric of the world. It was strange and eerie, to be sharing that space, to hear other breaths and footfalls on the ancient and impossible tumbled stone pathways.

The three traversed the in-between spaces until, with some trial and error, they stepped out near the area that so needed their help. They did not, mercifully, see the horned and feathered being.

‘I don’t know that I care for that,’ mumbled Aidan. He plucked something off his shoulder, a thread as thin and clingy as spider-silk. ‘And what is this?’

‘Nothing to mind,’ Cillian shrugged.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Willow. ‘It seems there are some threads tangled round you, too. Is that truly alright, to move back and forth through holes in the world like that?’

Cillian followed their pointing finger and noticed some nearly-imperceptible pieces of Fabric twined around their arms, trailing between their fingers; and one that seemed to have braided itself through their hair. ‘Oh yes,’ they waved a hand, discreetly trying to flick them away. They did not seem to untangle, but they did vanish. ‘It happens every time. It is fine. Now where is this beastie of yours?’

The three youths—of silver eyes, golden eyes, and healing eyes—followed the plumes of smoke on the horizon ’til they came upon its source. A wreckage stood before them, a

settlement shot through with an arrow-straight path of sheer destruction, acrid black fog swirling in the wake of... *something*.

Willow exclaimed 'What *happened* here?'

And what, indeed?

The answer was that the gods had gotten bored.

When the gods had turned the tide against the monsters in days gone by, most had been slain... but some had been kept, locked beneath the palace. In that cavern writhed and hissed all manner of creatures that, it was agreed, should be better kept away from the light.

Yet Lorcán's voice boomed through the palace like the beginning of a storm: 'I tire of stags and wolves! Bring me something to hunt that will truly *excite* and *challenge* me!' And his courtiers had no choice but to scurry to the deep hollow and pull a monster from the dark, ensnared in chains and rippling with a rage most primal.

So into the palace spilled the beast: a creature wreathed in black smoke, moving like a flow of oil. Its body had the consistency sometimes of thick mud and sometimes of garish black steam, fangs of onyx catching the light where they sprouted from the charcoal-coloured mist. It writhed against its chains with a reckless malice, but Lorcán only looked upon it with a wolfish grin. 'A worthy opponent! Ready my gear, and I shall bring this beast back as a trophy.'

From beside him, speaking from the shadows, came the voice of Croiadh the Crow. 'My king,' he cautioned. 'I see a tangled future for you and this creature. There is danger between those fangs, and it is with a spirit of valour and vengeance that this beast will be your undoing.'

Lorcán scoffed. ‘My undoing! You mean to suggest I, Lorcán, champion of the gods, leader of the great massacre of these creatures, *your High King*, cannot best a walking puddle?’

The Crow dipped his head graciously. ‘I meant no offense, my king. Only warning.’

‘Warning! I shall slay this monster twice over, Crow, just for you. Fetch your eyeballs from where *you* lost them to a beast of this nature, and watch me.’

‘Oh, listen to him not, Father!’ Maebh cooed. ‘Our court’s pet Crow is merely nervous. The rest of us do not doubt you so. I will wait here, Father, and prepare a feast to celebrate your victorious return!’

Lorcán, puffed up like a peacock and snarling for blood like one of his own hunting hounds, set off with the beast in chains. Maebh and Croiadh watched him go.

‘Your visions,’ she asked, delicate as lace. ‘How exactly do they work?’

‘They are not always clear,’ Croiadh replied. ‘The future does not lay ahead in a straight line. It is more as if it lies beneath a pool of water, and occasionally the ripples pause and I may glimpse beneath the surface. I merely try to make sense of what I glance within those murky depths.’

Maebh nodded, thoughtfully. The Crow inclined his head. ‘Are you worried for your father’s safety, princess, now that I have twice foretold his downfall?’

The Daughter of the Dawn fixed him with a radiant smile. ‘Oh, not at all. My father is the bravest and strongest of all the gods. It would take something truly great and powerful to dethrone him.’

With that, she left, flowing down the hall like sunshine.

And the beast, meanwhile, was making its exit as well—fleeing across the plains trailing its chains behind it. For the trouble with legendary ancient beasts, as you may imagine, is that they are seldom willing to demote themselves to hunting trophies. Even at the behest of the bravest and strongest of all the gods.

So it was that Lorcán's hunting party found themselves outrun, outmatched, and outside the palace boundaries with the king's frustration for company. And the nearest human village found itself in the path of the beast.

With little more than its rage propelling it, the beast tore through the town, leaving roofs caved in with their thatch smoking black, cauldrons overturned, and great sooty pawprints gnashed into the earth. The mortal folk were torn asunder, bitten in half, or simply broken on impact as they were tossed aside by the creature powering past. Where it was going, it did not know, merely spurred on by the desire to be *away*, and to get there fast.

When it found itself facing a young girl, defending herself with a broken piece of wood that had once been part of her home, it saw no reason to stop.

Of fourteen summers she was, scrawny and swaying on her feet, yet in that moment she looked immovable as a mountain. She wielded the stick with the ferocity and focus of a warrior with a spear. She cried out in vengeance against the monster who had upturned her home. Yet the beast cared not for the affairs of gods, and even less for the affairs of mortals. And so it surged forward, letting out a roar like smoke gurgling from a doused fire, dripping muck from its black fangs. The beast was wholly surprised when it impaled itself upon the broken wood.

A curious thing then happened. There was a momentary pause as the splintering wood poked out the back of the beast's muddy body, visible through the seething black smoke.

Then an ear-shattering, stomach-churning, blood-freezing cry ripped itself from the throat of the beast, so loud it was heard for miles around.

Writhing, smoking, bleeding black grime all over the place, the beast buckled to a chaotic mess of dark mist. And then, like some sort of strange backwards sneeze, exploded inwards and sucked itself into the body of the girl who had killed it.

The girl sat in the midst of the rubble with wide, shocked eyes, her impromptu weapon still clutched in her hands. Black smoke was curling out of her ears, but by all accounts she seemed fine.

After a moment of acrid silence, the girl picked herself up and set off.

The girl in question's name was Elinor. She had grown up upon the turbulent farmland between the grip of the gods and the gnashing teeth of the sea, and considered herself quite mature and brave for her age. Certainly, she had done the courageous thing by defending herself against the hissing tower of smoke and grime that was the beast, and now she was doing the sensible thing by venturing to the next set of reliable adults to ask for help. She tried not to dwell upon the fact that her parents had just been killed and her home destroyed, for it would surely make her knees quake, and that was not a very mature thing for knees to do.

Diligently placing one foot in front of the other, she made her way to the next village on the grassy plains, and enquired with the guards at the entrance to the fortified walls.

The guards saw a scrawny, slightly-bloodied, slightly-dirtied girl approaching, and rushed forward to greet her. 'Little one!' the first cried. 'What has befallen you?'

Elinor bristled at her designation as *little one*, but kept her chin raised high. 'I have come to tell you of a tragedy,' she announced. 'And ask for aid.'

‘Oh, you poor wee thing!’ the second guard cooed. Both had leaned down to be at eye-level. ‘What happened? You look like you’ve been dragged backwards through a bog.’

Elinor felt heat rising in her chest, but did her best to push it down and explain. She tried not to dwell in the realm of *how dare they?* She had just slain a mighty beast, the likes of which had not been seen in generations! Escaped from the chains of the gods themselves, ripped from myth! How dare they talk to her as though she was a mere youth, an infant in need of rescue?

Elinor was doing her best to retain composure, but the guard patting her on the head was the final straw.

An angry girl is a force to be reckoned with on her own, true, but *most* angry girls do not start breathing out black smoke.

It began with a hiss, and then a snap: Elinor’s body jerked, her limbs going out in a spasm, her eyes rolling back in her head. Her mouth fell open with a great, sickening crack as her jaw unhinged itself. Thick plumes of black smoke poured out from between her teeth, which had become elongated and sharp, flanked by enormous fang-like canines. Her knees twisted round so they were facing backwards, her hair writhed and stood out as though a mass of furious snakes had taken up residence upon her head. Her back arched, her muscles bulged and burned within her skin, her eyes snapped open to reveal sunken pits of glassy black.

All this in a matter of seconds, all this in a roar of grief and fury. All this gave the guards just enough time to stagger backwards and flee. Elinor drew back her lips like a wild hound falling on its prey, and took off after them.

It was to the remnants of this smoky wrath that Cillian, Willow, and Aidan arrived: a scorching path shot through the centre of the village. There, every structure had been trampled and splintered, and one dwelling had what appeared to be a bite mark in its thatch. No mortals were to be found. ‘They must have fled to the hillfort,’ said Aidan. With a groan, Cillian followed him and Willow further through the scorched country, perking up only when they crested a ridge and spotted a flurry of smoke and movement.

A fort was nestled, quivering, atop a slope, beside a winding river and ringed by a perfect circle of burning grass. A twisted, snarling, smoke-trailing creature was running around the fort, smashing a burnt black trench into the soil.

‘How peculiar,’ said Cillian, doing their best to sound bored, doing their damndest not to betray the cold sweat that had prickled across their skin. Willow was watching the circling beast with a gathering frown.

‘Will it not cease?’ fretted Aidan. ‘What does it *want*?’

‘I shall ask,’ said Willow. Before either Aidan or Cillian could process that, Willow was tying back their curls and setting off towards the hillfort.

‘Great Smoky Beast!’ they called out. A noise of exasperated horror crawled from somewhere deep in Aidan’s throat. The beast itself did not stop, merely snarled past Willow in another flurry of claws and fog. Willow fluttered a hand in front of their face and dispelled the smoke. ‘Please, stop and lend me your ears! We wish you no harm!’

Cillian watched with growing amusement, wondering if this rampaging creature would do the honour of getting rid of Willow *for* them. ‘They shall get nowhere with diplomacy,’ they scoffed. ‘We all know monsters cannot speak nor reason, it is why the gods were able to defeat them.’

Elinor sped past Willow a third time, thrice now paying them no heed, thrice now belching smoke in her wake. Cillian watched as Willow's freckled nose screwed up, their mouth hardened into a flat line. 'I *said*,' they announced. '*Please stop!*'

There is a phenomena we stars have long known, but mortals have more recently given a name to: the words you use are *an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object*. Lacking this phrase, people of the time may have used Willow and Elinor's first contact as an example to describe what it meant.

Willow launched forward, into the path of the speeding beast. The force of the two youths colliding was such that it sent a shockwave across the land, flattening grass, swaying trees. It is said that this collision was even felt far to the north in Trasa's mountain kingdom, and the queen was stirred from her afternoon slumber by the subtle shifting of rock. Cillian and Aidan scarce had time for their mouths to fall open in horror before they were flung backwards, flattened onto the grassy knoll.

With great effort, Willow wrestled Elinor to the ground. Elinor, in kind, gnashed and roared at her captor, spewing smoke into Willow's face. In a tangle of limbs and claws the two of them tumbled down the rise towards the nearby river, where Willow successfully shifted their weight to slam Elinor into the water.

The two of them smashed through the surface and sank to the depths, bobbing up a moment later in a waterlogged mess.

Once, Willow shoved Elinor beneath the frigid water. Once, Elinor emerged, roaring with her fangs trailing water. Once more, Willow pushed the beast-slaying-beast-girl into the depths, and once more the monstrous youth splashed free. Once more, and with a hiss and a gurgle, a girl's head burst free through a curtain of steam. Elinor, her fangs shrunken, her kneecaps back where they had been at the beginning of the ordeal, the whites returned to her

eyes. Back to her old self, you might say, save for the fact that her hair had turned a vivid, bloodred scarlet.

She and Willow clambered towards the shore and collapsed there, laid out on the riverbank like sodden clothes flung there to dry. Elinor was emitting fine curls of steam. Willow was pushing their hair out of their eyes. ‘Now,’ they panted. ‘Will you lend me your ear?’

The commotion and ensuing silence had stirred the terrified mortals in the fort. Guards and warriors (and curious onlookers who could not be restrained) poured forth from the gates and gathered around the once-beast. Cillian and Aidan, too, hauled themselves towards the scene.

‘You were bested by a *child*?’ someone roared, presumably at the guards who had first incurred Elinor’s wrath. At the indignance in their tone, Elinor began to bristle again, baring her teeth (which seemed to be a little sharper round the edges now, if one looked closely). But she did not seem to possess the strength to get up and defend herself. She remained slumped on the wet grass.

‘That is no child!’ someone else cried. ‘That is a monster deceiving us, wearing a human form! It must be destroyed!’

Cillian, who it must be noted was *also* a divine creature in human form, slipped carefully behind Aidan as they made their way to the riverbank. ‘Wait,’ Willow was saying, struggling to be heard over the ruckus. ‘Wait, please, just listen to what she has to say! She is human, like you—’

‘No human I have ever seen has hair like that!’ a voice rang out. ‘She is one with the beast now! That means we cannot trust her!’

‘Nay!’ rang another. ‘She is a victim! She must be cared for!’

‘How can we care for her when she may fly into another spasm and destroy us all?’

Voices rang out, clashing against one another. Elinor, once vicious, seemed to be shrinking. A hundred eyes were fixed on her with a seething mix of awe, disgust, and fear. Willow was looking on in terror, and no one seemed to be listening.

Cillian, once more, groaned. Then shifted discreetly into the form of an adult, taller and broader than any guard they could spot. ‘Worry not!’ They did their best to echo Rowan’s new, deeper voice. Heads, including Elinor and Willow’s, swivelled towards Cillian.

‘We are a party of monster-hunters, and our business is containing and disposing of such creatures, beasties, and aberrations. Set your fears at bay, for my valiant companions and I...’ They slapped Aidan on the shoulder, making him wince forward. ‘Shall take things from here.’

‘Yes!’ spluttered Aidan. ‘Yes, that is who we are and what we shall do!’

A collective, dubious expression rippled through the crowd. But too late, Cillian was striding forward to scoop Elinor off the ground. ‘Some help,’ they grumbled. ‘Would be wonderful.’ Willow supported Elinor’s other side, and between them they hauled her away and over the hill.

‘You lied,’ said Willow, seeming vexed.

‘*Ugh*. And thank the stars I did.’ Cillian shrank, gratefully, back into a scrawny and youthful body. ‘Calls for truth and justice taste stale to a crowd as hungry for violence as that. Convenient lies are much more delicious. Oh, it is *exhausting* pretending to be big and manly.’

‘Did I hurt you?’ asked Willow. Elinor seemed perplexed by the question, by the sincerity in their voice. ‘Know that I did not wish to.’

‘I am not hurt,’ protested Elinor. Yet the chaos of the day was eating away at her sinew and bone, heart and soul. ‘But I... am tired.’

‘Come,’ said Aidan. ‘I am tearing up from the distress of this whole business, so I will surely be able to heal your wounds.’

Cillian flicked open another passageway through the Fabric, and the four of them made their way back to the Forest.

Rowan and Aisling came back from their work to find another guest at their cooking fire, already wrapped in a fur cloak and drying out. Willow and Aidan scrambled to explain the situation, and Rowan could only rub at his brow and say ‘Well, I shall need to get more food.’

In the palace of bone, Maebh passed her father in the hall. ‘How fared the hunt? Where lies the beast?’

‘Fool girl, it matters not,’ he snorted, and pushed past her.

‘Oh,’ she bowed politely out of the way, dipped low into a curtsy. ‘Of course, Father.’

Maebh went and sat in the gardens, looking out into the orchard with her hands delicately folded in her lap, still and beautiful as an ornament. Simply sitting, with all the quiet and patience of a lady.

A Reckoning of Monsters

Making sure Elinor had a warm place to sleep necessitated sorting through the furs and blankets in the hollow yew. Rowan upturned a bag in his search and out tumbled the horn, carved and fanged and glittering enough to catch Cillian's eye. 'What is this?' they cooed, picking it up and admiring its decorations.

'I stole it from your... Lorcán,' replied Rowan. 'I think we may have to build another structure, to keep off the rain and snow, if we are to accommodate Elinor *and* Aidan when he visits...'

Cillian put the horn into their mouth and blew. A low whine filled the glade, making the leaves bristle but otherwise not creating much fanfare. One of Aisling's hunting hounds barked. 'This instrument's song is worse than mine,' Cillian scoffed.

Then—a crashing in the trees. A groaning of wood broken and tossed aside. A demonic snorting from the depths of the Forest.

Willow had time to say 'That sounds like...' before The Great Boar itself smashed into the clearing.

Fear overtook Cillian, shrinking their body before their mind could even process the sight before them. They were a bird in a flash, streaking across the glade and into the canopy in a whirl of black. The Boar crashed through the camp, overturning the cooking cauldron and shredding blankets and fishing nets, sending the hunting dogs baying and snarling.

Rowan seized Willow by the shoulder and dragged them into the hollow tree, but there was not time to reach the others in the glade—Aidan, who had tumbled backwards with the force of the beast's entrance, and Elinor, who had been tossed aside by its passing.

Elinor had been a guest there for a night and a day by now, still reeling from the death of her family, still reeling from the way Willow had said ‘Stay, please’ even whilst Elinor stank of blood and smoke. She was scarce able to believe what she heard, but there was something about the way that Willow spoke that made her want to believe it. Nay, more than that, when Willow spoke words like ‘It is alright’ and ‘You are welcome here’, they *were* true. Like a spell, they became so when spoken.

Elinor had, in that glade, felt safe for the first time in days. Watching the Boar make a chaos out of this sanctuary made her blood boil. She began to whisper ‘How dare you,’ but the words were lost into a guttural growl that tasted all of smoke.

It came more naturally the second time: the twist of muscle, the crack of bone, the eruption of fangs. With her half-formed claws Elinor seized one of the training spears and shot out in front of Aidan, shielding him. The Great Boar noticed her, and the two monsters locked eyes.

‘Get back,’ she growled to Aidan, the voice of ancient wrath. Aidan leapt at her behest.

Aisling herself heard commotion and sprinted back towards the glade, heeding the trees. She sprang through the ferns, headfirst into the makings of a legend: Elinor, her hair spiralling around her head like a flame in the wind, her eyes black, her sharp teeth bared in a vicious grin, black smoke spilling from between them. Her hands, clawed with onyx black, gripped around a spear dripping with The Great Boar’s steaming blood.

They faced each other across a tempest of churned earth and broken ferns, felled trees framing their battle. The Boar struck forward with force enough to level an army, but Elinor was faster. She drove the butt of her spear into the tattered soil and vaulted herself over the charging monster’s back, spinning mid-air and driving the point into The Great Boar’s spine.

It thrashed against death with a roar that rang to the sky, but Elinor attacked with ferocity enough to still it, driving the beast down, hanging on even as it bucked. This conflict left a crater in the clearing that, if you search for it, some believe is still visible to this day, although overgrown with plants. At that moment, it looked as though a star had fallen and hit the earth, smoke billowing from the girl atop the monster.

Cillian watched from the treetops as the creature that had nearly killed them died, life pouring out of it with a howl. It was a dreadful sight, but something else caught Cillian's eye.

A hush of feathers in the corner of their vision, a silhouette of antlers between the trees. A figure, still yet constantly moving. That *thing* from the Causeways, gliding through the shade.

Cillian stared, until Willow's voice tugged their attention back down to the glade. 'Are you alright?'

'Are you a *fool*?' shouted Aisling. She brandished the horn, which had been tossed into the ferns. 'This is a relic from after the invasion, a curse of rage crafted for the idiotic pit fights Lorcán and Murcu would host between captured monsters!'

'I was not to know that!' cawed Cillian. 'I was too busy being pit-fought against my own sister to know my father's *other* habits!'

Willow looked distressed by the thought of this, and said 'Come down, little bird.' Cillian reluctantly perched on their offered hand, sheltering from Aisling's glare. Willow stroked their feathered head, and Cillian would never have admitted how nice it felt, that it soothed their pounding heartbeat. So they settled down in begrudging, fluffy silence.

In the meantime, Elinor turned and spoke, her voice uncurling back towards something more human. 'Are *you* alright?'

Aidan looked up at her—towering over him, blood-splattered with her claws still out, her hair swirling over her shoulders red and rowdy—and had never seen anything more beautiful.

He gulped, cheeks flaring with colour that almost matched Elinor's hair. His tongue had tied itself in a knot. The lad simply nodded, vigorously.

With everyone deemed safe and well, all eyes turned to the legendary corpse in the centre of their home. 'Hmm,' said Rowan.

Rowan skinned the creature and prepared it for cooking, and stood over it for some time trying to figure out exactly how to cure and keep the unusually colossal amount of meat before him. Aisling carefully removed the tusks, those same living weapons that had nearly taken Cillian's life. One she carved into a spearhead, attached to a shaft of oak sturdy enough for even Elinor, the other she worked into a curved dagger with a simple metal hilt.

'These weapons can fell even gods, I am sure,' she said, handing the spear to Elinor. 'Carry it well.'

She offered the dagger to Willow, who shook their head. 'I do not wish to fight with gods.'

'I know, my dear. But gods may wish to fight with you.'

Willow sighed, deflating with great sadness. Rowan offered to hold the dagger in the meantime. Elinor spun her new spear, twirling it above her head then striking out into the ferns. 'I think I shall name it *Godsbane*. What say you to this?' she laughed. Aidan still could not speak, and turned pink again when she looked to him.

Together, the folk of the forest repaired and cleaned the damage the Boar had done in its final moments. They also built a wooden hut for Elinor to sleep in, adding a roof of thatched sticks and leaves to a deep groove between two gnarled, wide-set oak roots. She emerged to eat and mend with the others, and went with Willow to their training sessions with Aisling, learning to control her claws and teeth.

Aidan visited when he could, the trees making a path for him but always reforming afterwards to keep any outsiders off the trail. ‘This is as secure as any fortified keep,’ he said, impressed. ‘A keep all made of trees.’

‘Perhaps it should be named so,’ suggested Rowan. ‘Yew Tree Keep.’

‘Oh, Rowantree Keep, surely!’ smiled Willow. As they said it, the air sparked and glimmered with the sound of the name. ‘For the rowans who gave you your name, who first protected you years ago!’

In that odd way that names can stick, so did Rowantree Keep. It settled in the soil, between the dew-dropped ferns and flowers, and quietly it grew until it was part of the landscape. Part of the Forest, all golden and umber again, lush, gilded leaves peeking out between the evergreens and whirling round Cillian like warm snow. It had been autumn when they first came here, they recalled. Had a *year* passed since then? Yes, they had slept for much of it as they healed, but... surely not.

Time is slippery for immortals: Cillian had passed a decade lounging and languishing under the sea, so this turn of the seasons startled them. They felt strangely as though time moved more slowly, yet more quickly, here in the woods. A rotation of dawns and moonrises simultaneously endless and finite, each day noted by its foraging and singing and the gentle ruckus of mealtimes.

Willow had gotten taller since they had first met. Cillian found themselves stretching to match their half-sibling's height whenever they took their form for the day.

Willow had not tried to kill Cillian yet.

Perhaps, thought Cillian, perhaps. A beastly girl with a spear. A half-god strong enough to topple her, born in the snug loophole of a prophecy. A boy with tears magic enough to heal the wounds of an immortal. Cillian had always fancied taking back the throne alone, but perhaps. Perhaps these strange folk could be of use.

That was the reason Cillian stayed, of course. To watch this personal army strengthen, to gather them to their cause. They were merely tolerating the rowdy, story-singing mealtimes, the long days flitting alongside Willow and Rowan as they hunted and foraged, the nights bundled warmly in the tree-hollow when they slept deeply enough to forgo even dreams. There was nothing here for Cillian save for strategic advantage. Of course.

Elinor and the Sea Serpent

Aidan eventually found his voice again, and soon was telling everyone he knew about The Scarlet Beast and her monster-killing spear. The legend spread, tales handed over with market produce, whispers brushing the tops of barley fields with the passing wind. They blended with the earlier reports of Elinor's beastly debut and soon the land was awash with the tales.

Not everyone shared Aidan's enthusiasm, however. 'They speak of you as a monster!' he cried, forlorn, bringing the news back to the Forest, leaving footprints in the gathering snow. 'Some people say you are a human and a creature sewn together by some terrible magic of the gods, meant to cause chaos in our lands!'

'*What!*' Elinor leapt to her feet, sending the bowl of stew in her lap flying across the clearing. Aisling shot out a hand and caught it. 'I am no monster! I am a *slayer of* monsters! I am...' She grasped at the air for what she was, but no word would come. She sank back down, dismayed, black smoke beginning to curl from her ears.

'She *did* put a hole in that village,' said Cillian. 'On her way to harass the hillfort.'

'She is *heroic!*' insisted Aidan. 'They just cannot see it! They gain nothing from you slaying The Great Boar, and do not see its significance.'

'It *is* significant!' grumbled Elinor. Significant enough to make up for the destruction she had caused, the ire she had drawn, on that first day? Oh, she hoped so—dreadful, needy hope was written all over her face. Cillian watched her curiously, then turned their attention back to their own bowl of stew.

‘It is!’ agreed Aidan, flushed with fervour. ‘Elinor, you must do some sort of daring deed that the people of these lands can *see* is good, so they sing your songs as a hero! The hero that I—that we!—know you to be!’

Rowan delicately exchanged a glance with Aisling. Cillian licked stew off their fingers with a small smile. ‘Aidan of the Healing Tears, have you considered that you are perhaps not an amazing storyteller, and so Elinor’s greatness has gotten lost in the telling?’

Aidan blushed a deeper red. Willow stepped between them. ‘Cillian, do not be rude. Aidan, we must not send Elinor into a battle just to get people to like her!’

‘But battles are where you earn your greatest esteem!’ Elinor knocked a hand against her chest. ‘The best stories are war stories! Oh, to think they look down upon me, call me monster!’

‘Are you not monstrous?’ shrugged Cillian. ‘And consider, before you attack me, that you may only prove my point.’

Elinor shot them a glare. Aidan interjected again. ‘Last time I was in the marketplace I heard tell of a sea-beast on the southern coast, off The Bay of Glass. Holding a settlement in its grip, demanding they sacrifice youths to it. It is causing great distress, and seems like the kind of monster that would earn you a Great Deed, should you destroy it!’

The mention of the southern coast, the very shore where Cillian had been thrown after their dalliance with Murcu and Nessa ended, made them shudder—an echo of the ocean’s chill playing on their spine. ‘Perfect!’ announced Elinor. ‘We leave at first light!’

‘Shall we walk, or take the Causeways?’

Discussion swelled like the tide, over Cillian’s head. And, it seemed, over Willow’s. They rested their chin on their knees as they curled up by the fire. ‘Why must they be seen as

heroic? The humans were so cruel to her, speaking of her as if she were not there before them, speaking of her as a mindless monster.’

‘Is it so nonsensical, to crave approval from someone who has been cruel to you?’

Cillian, masterfully, kept their tone light when asking such a question.

Willow considered this, then looked a little guilty. ‘I do not know. I cannot say I have encountered much cruelty in my days. Such heartlessness can only vex me.’

Cillian laughed, poking out their tongue. ‘Then be vexed, Child of the Forest, sheltered in the leaves and beloved by every mushroom and twig. Come with us and quarrel with a sea monster. It will be fun.’

At dawn they opened a gap in the Fabric and led a party through to the southern coast. Cillian, Willow, Aidan, and Elinor stepped out into a wicked wind scraping saltwater over the cliffs.

Cillian was startled to touch hard ground instead of grainy sand, but that was the nature of The Bay of Glass: a battle site where it is said that gods threw fire magic with such force that the sand along the beach was instantly and forevermore turned to glass. Some say it was a fire-breathing beast, but Cillian had always heard Lorcán and his lightning take credit.

The ocean seethed against the glass shore, reaching for Cillian’s feet with frothy fingertips. They resisted the urge to crawl back under the Fabric. They noticed Willow looking upon them with concern, so loudly said ‘It is cold! Aidan, you are our mortal envoy. Tell us where this wicked fish is to be found, and we can all go home!’

The group walked, slipping at times, and soon discovered a village clinging to an uneven, hilly stretch of coast above waves that lashed the glassy beach. Further out to sea, a rocky island jutted from the roiling waves like the head of a skulking predator. ‘This must be

the place,' said Aidan. 'The merchants spoke of an island cave where the sea-dragon keeps its prisoners.'

'How awful,' frowned Willow. Elinor was already striding forward, clambering up the rocky cliff-face towards the village atop.

'What a story it would make if she fell down and dashed her head before she even got to complete her Great Deeds!' grinned Cillian.

Willow surprised Cillian by asking 'What is wrong?'

'What? Nothing is wrong.' Willow, as we mentioned, had a disarming chime of sincerity to the way they spoke. It stung Cillian's skin like the salty wind. 'Well, I... am reminiscing, that is all. I spent some time beneath the sea before I met you.' They laughed, twirling a hand, catching fragments of the scent of brine between their fingers. 'As I may have mentioned. In the greatest feat of my youth, I managed to bed and then deeply offend both the Queen and King of the Sea.'

Aidan turned, ears pink. 'You b... *bedded* them both?'

'Oh? Is such a thought so foreign?' Cillian shrugged coyly. 'Does it make you blush so rosy-red?'

'No! Hush! Speak not of such things!' Aidan hunched into his cloak and hurried up the beach. Then spun on his heel and doubled back. 'What was it like?'

'Rather a chore, in the end. Yet even the dark depths of the ocean seemed preferable to going home to my father, so I played their little games.'

Cillian realised neither Willow nor Aidan was laughing with them. 'Don't be prudish,' they muttered.

‘That sounds dreadful,’ frowned Willow. ‘To be *trapped* in someone’s bed, with nowhere else to go. To be playing games and completing chores, not being loved.’

They looked forlorn, thoughtful, worry brushing across Willow’s freckled face. In their confusion, Cillian’s grip on the world slipped, for a moment. The wind vanished between their fingers, snatching at their dark hair, making their eyes water.

But at that moment Elinor bellowed ‘Hark! I’ve found a fisherman’s path up this cliff!’ And such was the end of the conversation. It is quite difficult to unpack one’s troubles when scaling a rocky cliff.

A strange ensemble they must have looked, arriving at the village gates; yet someone came out to greet them nonetheless. Elinor explained their purpose and, to everyone’s surprise, the guard laughed.

‘Every summer the creature demands we gift it a maiden as its “bride”, someone who will sing to it and tell it tales. It has eaten every offering so far, save for the last girl we sent—a lass named Brigit. She, it seems, can keep the monster calm, and has been there for near to two years.’

‘Two years!’ cried Willow.

‘Why always a maiden?’ Cillian asked. Elinor was already talking over the top of them, slamming the end of her spear against the ground.

‘I shall slay this beast, and free this Brigit! Where do I find it?’

As if in reply, the ocean rumbled.

Three massive, snakelike heads lurched from the water, trailing cloaks of ocean spray. Its scales glittered emerald green in the light of daybreak, and its eyes were black as the depths of the sea from which no living thing returns. It faced the gathered party on the cliff, and snarled in a voice like a typhoon.

With a jolt of icy horror, Cillian realised they recognised the six eyes glinting at them with malice in the sunlight. ‘This is Murcu’s horrid pet!’ they exclaimed. Leaning to Aidan, they added ‘My former lover. Murcu, that is, not the serpent.’

Aidan shot Cillian a pleading look. They were all startled by Elinor letting out a gurgling roar, directly at the trio of boat-sized heads rising out of the ocean. The mingling, monstrous voices seemed to hit the inside of the listener’s skulls before the wind off the sea hit their faces.

Cillian, once more, froze. ‘Are you *speaking* to it?’

‘What does it say?’ asked Willow.

Elinor curled her lip, revealing a flash of fang. ‘It asks if I intend to challenge it. I said I do.’

‘The... what? The monsters cannot *speak*. They are animals, not intelligent beings. That is... that is how the gods were able to vanquish them so easily.’

No one was listening to Cillian. They barely heard their own words, as if they were echoed from far away. Willow stepped forward. ‘You must tell it to give back the girl! There must be something else you can exchange with these people for peace!’

Elinor spoke, flinging the language of monsters into the salt-stained air. All three heads let out a fathoms-deep rattle that it was hard to miss as laughter.

Elinor breathed in. ‘It says no. It says “there shall be no peace, for this is *my* cliffside—for your folly in even asking me to lower myself further, I shall destroy this puny settlement once and for all!”.’

‘No!’ Willow shouted. The guard began to panic, but they were all silenced by a blur of scarlet.

Elinor launched forward, hammering towards the cliff edge, her hair writhing free of its braid as she went. ‘You will do nothing—’ When she opened her mouth to speak, her teeth were sharp as knives. ‘Save for *perish!*’

She opened her eyes to meet the creature’s sixfold glare, and her eyes were black too—though hers were the black of jet, the black of oil. Smoke belched from her defiant grin, and she propelled herself towards the ocean.

She lifted her spear above her head, and slammed the shaft of it down onto the water’s surface so hard that the sea had no choice but to recoil. It burst backwards and away from her, the waves rearing up like terrified horses, the ocean floor giving way before her.

Walls of water rose up around her as she picked up the spear and powered ahead, faster than the wind, leaving great gashes in the wet sand. She sprang up onto a rock jutting out of the water and launched herself off it, flying through the air, spear spinning in her hand to point its cursed tip at the three-headed beast. She let out a battle cry to shake the cliffs themselves, a burning, smouldering, unstoppable force.

One of the heads dipped down and snapped her up into its jaws. A bulge appeared in its long scaly throat as it swallowed.

‘Ah,’ said Cillian. ‘Shit.’

Willow let out a shriek. The guard collapsed hopelessly to the ground. Tears leapt to Aidan's eyes, wordless grief rocking through him like a wave. The teardrops pooled and dripped down his cheeks as he stared out to sea. He would not notice this for moments more, but plants and flowers were coiling from the ground where his tears fell, stems and fronds curling round his feet.

They all watched as the creature cackled, the sound echoing off the rocks.

They watched as the middle head coughed, the lump in its throat jittering.

They watched as the throat exploded into an arc of white flesh and dark blood, the head atop it swaying backwards. As a figure burst forth, sending gore spinning into the sea below, swinging a spear above her head. As Elinor flung herself through the air sweeping her spear, its point glittering like a spark. As a second head snapped and snarled at her and she latched onto one monstrous tooth, the same height as her.

The monster hissed, in that ancient tongue of seething tides. Later, when Elinor recounted and translated the altercation, everyone would learn that it had demanded to know: 'What *are* you? What manner of beast is this girl?'

'I am not a beast,' Elinor grinned. 'I am *the* Beast.'

And she jammed her spear into the roof of the serpent's mouth, so hard that the top of its head disconnected from the rest of its body.

One head remained, hissing and snapping at her. Elinor sank Godsbane into its neck for purchase, hanging onto the shaft as it swayed. 'She is making short work of this,' remarked the guard, once so full of mockery, not watching transfixed with one hand on his head.

‘She is making a mess,’ countered Cillian. A thought occurred to them as they watched the arc of carnage from the clifftop. Fingers of salty wind ran through their hair and they shuddered. Such a ruckus, in the Kingdom of the Sea, and its monarchs so quick to anger, so ready to channel their petty vengeance into churning tides. It would not be long before Murcu was alerted to the injury of his favourite trophy pet. Elinor in all her bluff and bluster was eager to battle, but she had not reckoned before with gods. Cillian knew, too well, that eager grasping for attention could leave a person burnt and broken.

Unless, thought Cillian. Unless.

Cillian took a run at the cliff’s edge and transformed into a flurry of feathers. A dark grey gull with silver eyes swooped through the salt-and-blood wind, avoiding the writhing serpent head with a squawk and flapping as close to Elinor as they could get.

‘Delay one moment!’ cried Cillian. ‘Translate something for me!’

Elinor, still hanging from the shaft of her spear, twisted her head around to stare at them. ‘*What?!*’

‘O mighty serpent! You thrash about here in folly, set upon these mortals for the entertainment of your captor!’ Cillian shouted this into the wind, and with a groan Elinor repeated it in the monster-tongue. ‘He grows bored of you and lazy in his duties, so sends you to keep his smallfolk in check! He calls himself *King of the Sea*, yet it seems like *you*, ancient and marvellous, should hold that title? Is that not so?’

‘Do you insist on being so *wordy*?’ roared Elinor.

The serpent growled, spitting blood and ichor. ‘Begone with you now, and take up your quarrel with the man who calls himself Murcu!’ Cillian flew up so they were level with

the final remaining pair of ancient eyes. ‘Leave these mortals behind, and take back your ocean realm!’

The eyes fixed Cillian a moment, then vanished in a flurry of blood and scales—down and down, towards the depths, clumsily trailing the stubs of its other two necks. Elinor detached herself, tossed in the waves among the viscera, and swam with all her strength towards the rocky island.

Cillian circled away, spinning towards land on their grey wings. ‘Let that be a final parting gift from Murcu’s once-trapped *lover*.’ They tumbled onto the clifftop in a bundle of half-transformed legs and feathers, and Willow was waiting there to catch them.

Out at the island, Elinor hauled herself onto the sand. ‘Brigit!’ she roared, all warrior’s triumph. ‘I have come to retrieve you!’

From out of a cave in the outcrop, a young woman emerged. Her cheeks were hollow and the skin beneath her eyes dark, but there was no mistaking how beautiful she was. Her hair hung down her back, the colour of chestnuts, and her eyes were dark and soulful as they blinked in shock at Elinor. ‘Why, I go by that name,’ she replied, voice like springtime dew. ‘And who might you be?’

Elinor had suddenly become very aware that she was dripping with rancid monster blood, emitting steam, and half-warped into something unrecognisable as human. ‘Oh! I...’ Her beastly form collapsed in fits and starts, her hair falling around her face in messy red curls, her legs buckling back into their usual shape and propelling her forward onto her knees in the pebbly sand. ‘Um! I, I am Elinor, the... the Beast of Rowantree Keep! And I...’ She pushed her hair frantically out of her face. ‘I have come to save you!’

‘How gracious!’ Brigit clasped her hands to her chest. ‘And yet I see you have brought no boat, my saviour. How are we to get home?’

Elinor turned and looked blankly at the ocean.

After some shouting and arm-waving, Elinor convinced Cillian to snip a gap in the Fabric and try to find a Causeway that opened near the island. Though Cillian had been content to watch her flounder, chuckling to himself, Willow had gently elbowed them until they had gone to help. They found a pathway that opened in the middle of the nearby ocean, and with some shouted organisation Elinor and Brigit swam through and made their way, dripping, through the tunnel and back to shore.

The villagers swarmed around the arrivals, scooping Brigit into their arms and Elinor up onto their shoulders. ‘The Beast of Rowantree Keep!’ they cried. ‘She has defeated the tyrant creature! She has saved us!’

Willow was watching the floating remains of the sea monster’s heads. ‘Some things cannot be reasoned with,’ said Cillian, for Willow looked so sad they felt they ought to say *something*. It was an instinct they were unfamiliar with, but they tried their best. ‘Some things simply want to eat you.’

Willow seemed reluctant to believe this, yet said no more.

Murcu sat in his castle beneath the sea, surprised when a shadow fell across his chambers and a great, steely eye appeared at his window.

‘What do you want?’ he snapped, prodding at the sea-beast’s pupil with a barnacled quarterstaff. ‘Have you tired of the toys and treats I organised for you? You know not your place, *beast*, if you dare to rise above your station.’

Murcu threw out a hand, summoning the enchanted chains he favoured when it came to controlling this creature. They rattled, deep within the trench, the crevasse, the darkness where the monster dwelled. The remaining head knew the sound well. The remaining head was filled with a pain and wrath it had not allowed itself to feel for centuries. The words of that bird had burrowed deep into its bones.

The so-called King of the Sea had a second to look shocked before his chamber walls caved in. The self-styled King of the Sea had another second to cry out before he found himself looking down the throat of the sea-beast. The stolen-name King of the Sea had no time to speak for himself before mighty teeth clamped down around him.

As the ocean turned golden, a figure flickered above the waves. All shifting shades, feathers and antlers and a whisper of bone.

Sleep at last. A voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. Rest, great serpent, join your fellows knowing some justice has been done. And you...

I am not used to greeting folk such as you. But come along.

The voice spoke Murcu's True Name, the name no one called him, not even his wife. The name secreted away as the deepest magic there was.

Come along, said the voice, as if to a sleepy child. And the wings and horns and shadows vanished, leaving a gilded sea behind.

The Light Chasers

Upon that cliff over the Bay of Glass, to this day, stands a blossoming tree—the sprouts that grew from Aidan’s tears. It flowers even in the deepest winter, even wracked by the harshest salty winds. Its arching, blooming branches stand monument to Aidan’s grief at losing Elinor, and his joy at gaining her back... and his grief anew at seeing the way she looked at Brigit once they had returned to shore.

Love is strange, Cillian thought, watching the villagers dance. The triumphant heroes were treated to a feast, all fish and wine and blazing fires that staved off the frosty breath of the winter sea. For a night, Elinor’s monstrosity was forgiven. For a night, even Silver-eyes the Thief was forgotten, and it became a game: Cillian would shift as they danced round the fire, from slender and narrow to curvy and soft and back again, their moonlight eyes the only thing giving them away. Spot the silver, dance with the trickster, and you could whoop and cheer and tell the tale once they had vanished in the morning like a dream.

The ocean hissed and hushed against the cliffs, and Cillian could not help but think of the arms of the sea, its King and Queen. The discomfiting gaze Willow and Aidan had cast upon hearing their tale. Cillian watched couples twirl together, laughing, tangling themselves round one another like ribbons. They looked to the sapling, sprouting from the clifftop from sheer love. They observed Elinor and Brigit talking, animated and flushed. All silhouettes in firelight, ringing false to Cillian’s memories. They shifted into a raven and hopped away into the cool shadow.

Willow found them, and sat beside the covetous corvid. ‘What troubles you, little bird?’

‘This grand romance of heroes and maidens tires me,’ Cillian cawed. ‘It is sickening, seeing all this love in such a confined space. Is that what it’s meant to look like?’

The question escaped unbidden. Willow gently stroked Cillian’s feathered head, a soft curl of the knuckles against midnight plumage. ‘It is dreadful what happened to you, your broken affair with the monarchs of the Sea. They were older and wiser, surely, and should not have used you so.’ A sigh, all the weight of the waters of the world on their shoulders. ‘The gods truly treat people—monsters, mortals, even their own—as playthings. I am sorry.’

Cillian searched for something clever and cutting to say, but had been silenced by some terrible curse—some lump in their throat, some pebble that sat alongside the aching arrowhead that Maebh had left. They fluttered up onto Willow’s shoulder and buried their beak in Willow’s hair, attempting to deafen the music of people with love in their lives.

The Rowantree party motioned to leave, before the night drew on too long. They bid farewell to the town on the cliff, and made to go... but discovered a figure was running up the slope after them. Elinor’s face went as red as her hair.

‘I wondered,’ called Brigit, wrapped in a new cloak of wool, but otherwise dressed in the same rags she had worn on the island. ‘If I might come with you? To this Rowantree Keep, wherever it may be?’

‘You do not wish to return to your home?’ Willow blinked.

Brigit smiled wanly. ‘My family are little more than embarrassed to see me return. They were hasty to volunteer me for the duty of serpent-singer. I suspect they had been looking for a chance to be rid of me for some time.’

‘You should come with us!’ blurted Elinor. ‘We... well, Rowantree is not so much a *keep* as a little protected piece of forest... but since you’ve lived in a cave telling tales to a monster for so long, it will probably feel like luxury! Um! That is to say...’

Upon observation, Aidan looked like he was about to shatter to pieces. But he surprised them all by saying ‘Come with us. We will make sure that you have somewhere you are safe and you are wanted.’

Willow nodded, beaming at him. Cillian just peered out from Willow’s curls in confusion.

So the day came to an end, and Elinor’s first great victory fell, like a stone thrown into the sea, into legend. For many people had asked Brigit what had happened on the island, what she had seen of the fight, and it transpired that Brigit was a much better weaver of stories than poor Aidan.

It was stories that Brigit brought to Rowantree Keep, that she offered in exchange for room and board (such as it was). Rowan said she owed nothing, and merely cut another portion of cured meat from the Great Boar. ‘It is becoming crowded here,’ Aisling remarked. Without malice.

There were considerations to be made for Rowantree’s growing populace. One night Brigit mused ‘It’s certainly dark here, is it not, beyond the firelight and out of reach of the moon’s beams?’ Elinor instantly leapt to her feet and agreed.

‘Light!’ she cried. ‘We ought to have light! Carrying a torch is too cumbersome and too dangerous!’

She was right, for Willow had never been as good at reasoning with flames as she was at reasoning with the trees, and they proved temperamental. Something in their nature, perhaps, their crackling, flickering stubbornness. Cillian wondered if it was because fire was the distant cousin to lightning.

Willow had grown up among the trees, and knew their way around; darkness was no threat, for the Forest would not let them be harmed. Cillian, too, was half-dusk and no stranger to darkness. But for Elinor, Aidan, and now Brigit, the deep darkness of the woods was an unfamiliar companion. Brigit was protesting that they need not accommodate her, but Elinor was already flush with determination. ‘If we had moonlight closer to the ground, perhaps hanging reliably in the trees...’

Cillian realised that Willow was looking at them, quite conspicuously. Cillian gusted out a sigh. ‘I may be able to help.’

Fire may have been a petulant thing. But moonlight? Moonlight is sibling to the glimmer of stars, and much more willing to play, especially with Cillian. And so they persuaded the moonshine to peek between the trees, to slide into their hands. With a delicacy they had first practiced with Rowan’s voice, Cillian wove the moonlight between their fingers and fashioned it into a sphere, like a tiny reflection of the moon high above, and set it floating around the glade where Rowan and Aisling had built their home.

Night by night, more moon-drops were added, ’til the forest camp was ringed with orbs casting their silvery light, illuminating pathways and tree-ladders, and bobbing gently in the air as if on the surface of some invisible river. ‘Amazing!’ gasped Brigit. ‘It is so beautiful, like stars stolen down to earth! Can you control them?’

‘Why yes!’ grinned Cillian. ‘See?’ With a whisper, the light vanished, the moon-drops politely plunging the glade into pitch darkness.

Through this fresh darkness cut a shriek.

‘Ah, forgive me!’ Cillian exclaimed. ‘I *completely* forgot you were so scared of the dark...’

Silver light flooded the space again, illuminating Elinor’s snarling face. ‘I am not scared of the dark!’

‘No, of course not,’ Cillian cooed. ‘That time I hid the light from your torch when you were relieving yourself, and you screamed loud enough for the stars to hear, that was surely no sign of *fear* from The Scarlet Beast...’

They were not allowed to finish their quip, for Elinor barrelled across the glade, unhinged her jaw, and snapped Cillian up in one bite.

Fortunately, their struggle was cut short by Aisling, who heard the commotion and sprang to investigate. With the instincts gathered after years of training hounds, she fixed her gaze upon Elinor in her beast-form. ‘What is in your mouth?’ she demanded. ‘Spit it out!’

With much snarling and heaving, Elinor relinquished Cillian, and they tumbled from behind her teeth in a muddy cloud of black smoke. A boggy scent of sulphur clung to Elinor and Cillian for several days, and neither forgave each other for nine more days beyond that. Brigit refrained, gracefully, from mentioning the incident, but Elinor could not stand to face her without turning scarlet, and took to hiding in the high branches of the yew tree.

Willow was distraught. They had the strength to shake Cillian from a tree, but Elinor remained stuck fast regardless of how nicely they asked or how hard they knocked the trunk.

Thus, they formulated a plan. ‘A hunt like no other!’ Willow declared. ‘A hunt for colour, to further illuminate this place!’

The thought of further impressing Brigit was enough to lure Elinor from the tree, and the thought of catching runaway colour was enough to intrigue Cillian. So it was that Trickster and Beast found themselves dragged from their beds on a rainy morning. ‘Come, come!’ exclaimed Willow, hauling Elinor by her ankles. ‘Our mark flees across the sky after the rain, and if we hurry now we will stand a chance of catching it!’

They left the Forest and made for the plains, the wet grass glittering in the shy sunlight. A rainbow was arcing across the sky, vanishing into the horizon. ‘I will bring it back first!’ cried Cillian. Shifting into a silvery stag, fleet as the wind, they sprinted across the plains in search of the edge of the world, almost oblivious to Willow’s cries that they should work together.

‘Together?’ Cillian pondered. ‘But then how shall we decide who wins?’

Baffling as it was, Cillian sunk to collaboration: Willow rode on their back and Elinor ran alongside them, smoke winding out from between her grinning teeth, kicking up puddles into sparkling starbursts of water behind her. At Willow’s direction, they rounded on the rainbow, even as it threatened to fade, and flanked it on both sides until they had cornered it.

It almost got away from them, but not before Elinor had pounced on it. As she wrangled it in place, Cillian pulled down handfuls of colour, spilling between their fingers and splashing down their wrists, splattering Willow’s face and leaving them freckled with rosy reds and sunset oranges, crystalline blues and greens greener than even the rolling plains around them; greener perhaps than even the idea of green.

‘You see?’ Willow declared. ‘You work well together! Quarrel no longer.’

Cillian and Elinor eyed each other, bathed in radiant colour. ‘I shall start no quarrel,’ Elinor growled. ‘But I am a warrior, and if my warrior’s pride is questioned, I must respond!’

‘Warrior’s pride!’ Cillian gasped. ‘Why, I apologise! I mistook your fear of the dark for the quakings of a wee child, but surely if you carry such *pride*...’

Elinor’s hackles rose and acrid smoke began to spiral from her ears. Willow shouted ‘*Stop it!*’ stamping their foot and sending out a shockwave that knocked both Elinor and Cillian flying. ‘Oh, goodness. I am sorry. Are you alright?’

The three of them carried their catch across the field towards home. They passed farmers on the way and Willow shared some of the bounty, throwing a handful of vibrant purple for a family to dye their wool with, filling an old woman’s clay bowl with sunny yellow so that she might keep her hut warmly lit even in the bitter grip of white winter, passing some children a ribbon of rosy pink to play with.

Cillian was hiding on Willow’s shoulder in raven-form. Yet the technique with which the children were trying to weave and loop the light... it was so disgraceful Cillian fluttered down and sprouted hands to correct them.

‘See, like this.’ They twined the stream of vivid light between their fingers, twisting it into spirals, making the shapes of animals while the children watched with big, fascinated eyes. Cillian smirked. ‘And see, like this!’ And wrapped the trail of pure pink round one little boy’s head, twirling it into a bow atop his hair. He stumbled, blinded, but he was laughing, high-pitched and sincere as the trilling of bells.

A girl who looked a bit like him—ah, but who could tell, for all humans looked so similar, really—paused him in his spinning and helped free him from his ribbon-wrapped fate. Cillian felt the arrowhead twinge in their chest and decided it was time to become a bird again.

‘Begone from here,’ advised one of the older farmfolk. ‘For we are overdue for a godly raid, and should they find these riches they will surely rob you of them, alongside our barley.’

Willow let the colour in their hands go limp, ruby red trailing despondent upon the ground. ‘You cannot reason with them? You cannot make them cease?’

A laugh, not unkind but bitter and husky; a weathered laugh, a way-of-things laugh. ‘What a pretty idea that is. But what can we do against the might of gods?’

‘I am the Scarlet Beast, slayer and speaker of monsters!’ Elinor declared. ‘And now I have harvested the sky itself! Not even gods shall stand in my way!’

‘Ah yes. If we convince our Beastie that godslaying would impress Brigit the Songbird,’ smiled Cillian. ‘Perhaps immortality itself could be defied.’

A faint curl of steam emerged from her ears. ‘I know not of what you speak.’

‘Just tell her that you’re fond of her, you dithering monstrosity.’

They bickered half the way home, Willow following cloaked in quiet.

Overhead, the farmfolk spotted an owl: an odd sight for the time of day, silent as a cloud, cutting through the sky on wings the colour of tarnished gold.

Cillian, Willow, and Elinor returned home with just enough colour left to add to the moon-drops. The light around the encampment became a spectrum rather than a sea of silver: here a glowing pool of yellow, there a rich indigo deeper than the blue under the sea. Aisling could, now and then, be seen trying to nudge them into different places where the colours would not

clash, but soon realised the drops of borrowed light preferred to move around of their own accord.

‘What a feat!’ Rowan beamed, deftly dodging a bauble of glowing orange that was bobbing past his head. ‘You must tell us all of your adventures.’

They sang and boasted of their hunt, Elinor the loudest, compelling Cillian to chime in with quips and braggings of their own. Brigit and Aidan laughed along and listened in awe, Aidan’s gaze lingering on Brigit as her gaze lingered on Elinor.

‘There is so much of the world I have not seen,’ she breathed.

‘Come along on the next rainbow-hunt then,’ Cillian suggested, waggling their eyebrows at Elinor. ‘I know our Beast would *adore*—’

Elinor had them in a headlock before they could speak further, and Cillian had shifted into a hare and slid from her grasp before she could trap them in place. A clamour erupted among the colour, all flashing laughter and a spectrum of taunts, punctuated by the occasional concerned cry from Aidan as the chase drew too close to the fire. Even Rowan laughed along, as he tried to part the two and mend the spectacle.

‘Yes,’ muttered Aisling. ‘This place is becoming lively.’

Following the light-chase, rainbows were cautious not to let their ends touch the ground lest they be harvested as well. Yet there were plenty other hunts to occupy the Rowantree gathering: rambling through the Great Forest, Brigit and Aidan and Elinor learning all the secret pathways Willow had found when the trees were helping teach them to walk. They peeked into nests of baby birds and dens of tiny foxes, watched fawns wobbling on their spindly legs as they grew into their spots. Cillian went with them, to learn the names of all the

flowers and herbs, to fall asleep among them 'til the fronds tickled everyone's ears and told them to return before dark.

Yet a summer dusk is a warm embrace, and Cillian found himself dancing among the soft starlight with the others, bare toes marking the steps on a mossy carpet. Cillian repeated the ancient tales the stars had spoken to them, and soon the Rowantree Folk were all exchanging stories from their childhoods. Lullabies from the trees for Willow, rhymes for shepherd's luck for Aidan, songs of the sea and songs of the plains from Brigit and Elinor. Aisling and Rowan were content to let them wander. It left time for exchanged songs and clumsy dances of their own, the two dear friends falling peacefully asleep covered in snoring hunting dogs and the soft glow of the moon-lights.

A time or two, Cillian glanced over to see Brigit and Elinor laughing together, braiding petals into one another's hair—and Aidan glancing upon them, looking mournful. A time or two, Cillian transformed their head into that of a deer's, springing antlers from their temples and wiggling their floppy ears, dancing about unbalanced until the boy on the verge of tears laughed instead.

Summer stretched like a sleepy cat. The season tasted of sticky fruit juice and smelled of fresh river water. The unlikely band ventured out to show Brigit the rolling moors and barley fields, sometimes taking Rowan with them too. His instinct was always, first, to flinch, to hide, to cloak his wards and cart them home to the safety of the trees. At the first echo of godsmetal chariot wheels, he shoved them all into a Causeway.

But there were times of stillness, too. Harvest days where Willow and Elinor offered their strength and Brigit offered songs of inspiration, and the Rowantree Folk were granted bread and honey in return. Festivals where voices lifted in farewell songs to summer, prayers to winter to be kind; where Rowan joined in and even took a dance or two. Memorial stones

where they all paused, Willow kneeling with their fingertips brushing the too-fresh rock, the burial marker of a stranger that shook them silently to their knees.

Not all settlements welcomed them. Some saw scarlet hair and golden eyes and cried *begone*, and Cillian asked, once more, ‘Why not be monsters? Let them cower. We shall dance with the moonlight in ways only we can, and they can sit at their hearths feeling sorry for themselves.’ Willow said that was unkind, but Rowan suppressed a sad little smile. And he carried them safely home, to the home he had built, and bid them all sleep soundly.

There was a world out there, so strangely vibrant, though it lacked the symmetry and colour of the palace of bone. Cillian woke up one morning, nestled in the crook of the yew tree, and realised that countless dawns had passed without them thinking of their plans to take the throne.

Let the gods stay in their keep of bone, let Lorcán warmonger and simper over Maebh. Cillian could slit open a Causeway and vanish at the first sign of raiding parties, ‘tax-collectors’, snapping banners in their father’s colours. Let the humans deal with them. Let Cillian and these strange people live out their days in the mossy music of the woods. The hunting goddess, the treasure-thief, the demi-god, the weeping healer, the proud beast, the songbird. And Cillian, in their midst. Perhaps they could let this be.

But the trouble with golden summers is that they must become brittle and break away into autumn. And the trouble with travelling in a group that generated such delightful and adventurous stories, is that those stories eventually make their way to the gods.

The Tale of Brigit the Songbird

The gods, as you should be keenly aware by now, think highly of treasure and little of people. So when Trasa, Queen of the Mountains, heard of a wandering mortal songbird so enchanting she had kept a sea-beast in check for two years, naturally she said ‘I want her here!’

Fiercest of the monarchs, crowned with spikes of hardy metal from the mines in her mountains and foothills. Trasa was fond of grand feasts: tales abound of her mighty warriors eating from cauldrons that never emptied and drinking wine that never stopped flowing. She had cellars stocked with food enough to feed a village, yet sent her raiders to collect the dues that she felt she was owed. This included, upon occasion, mortals to tend the fires in her blazing kitchens and clean up after the raucous parties. And, of course, mortals to keep her fellows entertained.

As fond as Trasa was of hosting feasts, she was not practiced at the art of extending invitations. She simply ordered her warriors to ride throughout the land and, should they find this songbird, scoop her up and bring her in.

Willow and Brigit were picking wildflowers at the northern edge of the Forest. They had planned to turn them into further decoration for the Keep, in its expanding ruckus of shelters and forges and meat carveries. If they asked the plants nicely, Willow had concluded, they might keep their colour and their scent even when plucked and hung up among the branches. But the chance did not come, for a god’s chariot thundered across the meadow and took Brigit with it.

Willow found herself alone in the scarred, charred field, hair swaying in the chariot’s wake, frozen still in a way that only helplessness in the face of violence can freeze

someone. A strange fiery fear roiled in their chest for a moment, burning their throat, preventing them from speaking.

By the time they called out ‘No, please! Come back!’ the chariot was gone. The plea floated in the empty air.

It is a terrible thing to note what terrible things people become used to. As Brigit was carted off by Trasa’s riders, she reflected that she was no stranger to being in the capture of monsters. How, then, would being the captive of gods be different? In a way, she was curious.

The first clear deviation, she soon discovered, was the manner of her prison. Trasa’s keep had been carved from the side of the mountain, all cold stone. It was somewhat more comfortable than the island cave where Brigit had sung to the sea serpent. The gods, at the very least, had fire, in great hearths that lined the feasting hall. They shoved Brigit beside Trasa’s rocky throne, as though she was an ornament that would brighten the grey room.

‘Songbird!’ The Queen sat down with seismic force, seizing a goblet of wine from a passing servant. A frayed and mortal-looking servant, Brigit had to note. ‘I have heard of your skills in the art of speech and song, and I wish to hear them for myself.’

‘How grand!’ Brigit offered a smile to the hall, which was filling up with Trasa’s warriors. Brigit had not trained formally as a bard, had undergone no apprenticeship from any master. But she knew the first step was always to smile and nod. ‘Oh! I only hope that I can live up to your expectations!’

Trasa grinned and settled deeper into her seat. ‘Go on, then. Sing to us.’

‘But my queen, what shall I sing of? Surely you have no interest in the tales I weaved for the sea serpent. Such a vulgar monster, and so unlike the... refined warrior spirit I see here in this hall.’

A rowdy cheer of agreement erupted from the crowd. ‘True!’ cried Trasa. ‘Well, sing us a tale of gods, then!’

Brigit looked around the room and her gaze alighted on a scraggly fighter with only one eye, sitting at one of the long tables. ‘What is the name of that valiant warrior there?’

‘That is Cathbad the Cruel,’ said Trasa, with a slight frown.

‘Ah, of course! I have heard of Cathbad the Cruel!’ Brigit beamed. ‘Cathbad who fought against The Great Wolf itself for nine days and nine nights! In the end the beast conceded, bowing its white head, and said “you have bested me—with my dying breaths, I beg you to give me one of your eyes, so that I may bring some trophy to my cubs and not return home in shame”.’

All eyes in the hall turned to Cathbad, who had perked up considerably. ‘I do not remember that happening,’ mumbled someone across the table.

Brigit continued. ‘And Cathbad agreed, for he is a man of honour... ah, but he is also a man of Trasa’s army, and he knows not the taste of defeat! So as the wolf slunk away, he threw his axe, and with a flash of silver it embedded itself in the beast’s spine! With its last breaths, it howled, *howled*, so high that the moon could hear it, cursing Cathbad’s deception and might. They say this rang out through the world of monsters, and to this day every beast that remains knows to cower and flee when they sense his presence!’

A clamour clashed around Cathbad, who was grinning and nodding, raising his drink. Such a thing, of course, had never happened. Cathbad had lost his eye in the war, but in a

brawl with far less romance and valour attached. The Great Wolf was one of the ancient monsters that remained (unlike the poor Great Boar, whose tusk was on Elinor's spearpoint) unaccounted for.

But that was of little consequence to Brigit. She need only tell her tales with such beauty and conviction that they became better than the truth.

Trasa shifted on her throne. 'Tell another hero-tale!'

Brigit sought out a broad-shouldered warrior from the middle of the table. 'Ah! My queen, who is that there, with the golden braid?'

'That is Niamh of the Nine Knives,' grumbled Trasa.

'Of course! Nine Knives,' smiled Brigit. 'For once you had thirteen, but the missing four are buried in the throats of the rivals who dared to reckon with you. Is that not so?'

Niamh nodded, vigorously. For who would deny it? Brigit spun her tales with such majesty that even a god could not dream of *not* listening; with such flair that in a way they became realer than the truth. By the time Brigit had finished detailing how Niamh had lost her knives, the hall was cheering, hammering their fists, gathering around her, raising toasts so energetic that wine was sloshing all over the floor.

'Who else should I sing of?' asked Brigit, sweetly, and the hall filled with voices. She could feel the queen's ego stirring and bubbling beside her, like a pot beginning to boil.

At Rowantree Keep, there was commotion. Rowan was fretting. Elinor was raging. And Aidan was doing his best to calm her down. 'I will tear that mountain to shreds!' she growled.

‘There will be no tearing,’ Aisling interjected. ‘Cillian, use a Causeway. You have been inside Trasa’s keep before, have you not?’

‘Once,’ they admitted. ‘Albeit only her cellar.’

‘I will go with you,’ announced Willow. ‘If we are inside the keep, I wish to speak with Trasa and see if I may bring us to an arrangement.’

‘There will scarce be time,’ Elinor gathered her spear and swallowed the smoke in her throat. ‘For I will take that wretch’s head off before she has a chance to utter a word!’

‘Your faith in the gods’ diplomacy is admirable,’ said Cillian to a distressed-looking Willow, as they opened a gap in the Fabric. Before they stepped inside, they caught Rowan kissing Willow’s forehead and begging them to *be careful*. ‘Let us away.’

By memory, though it felt like a memory from a different lifetime, they found their way to the gap that opened into Trasa’s cellar. Cillian poked their head out, met with the telltale scent of wine and dried meat.

And, this time, an overwhelming fragrance of wet dog.

Cillian was face to face with a pair of massive hounds—sitting nearly as high as the roof of the cave, rank saliva dripping from their arm-long fangs. They snapped their jaws at Cillian and Cillian jolted back into the Causeway, tugging the Fabric shut in front of themselves.

‘We have what you might call a problem,’ they said.

Elinor glared. ‘Whatever manner of beast is in there, it is no match for me!’

‘They take up most of the room, and your brazen ego will fill what little space remains.’ Cillian arched their eyebrows. ‘Can you fight in such close quarters? And without alerting the whole mountain to our presence?’

‘Maybe we do not have to fight them,’ suggested Willow. They earnestly peeked out through the Fabric, and nearly lost their head in a racket of teeth. ‘Oh. They do not want to speak to me.’

‘Well, now what do we do?’ huffed Elinor. Smoke was starting to curl from her ears, though curiously it took to spiralling around her head in the windless tunnel of the Causeway.

‘There must be another way in.’

Cillian thought, for a moment, then smiled. ‘There is always the front gate.’

At the edge of Trasa’s territory stood a guard, one of her less-formidable (but still, we must note, boulder-sized) warriors, gifted the grave duty of seeking and stopping trespassers. He shivered as the icy mountain behind him breathed down his neck, and wished he was inside the firelight with his fellows, and with the Songbird to listen to. He stamped his feet to ward off the cold, and mused that it had not been so chilly in the land the gods had come from. He wished he could remember it better.

His attention was drawn to a trio of shuffling figures, advancing out of the gathering dusk: a tall girl with a scarlet braid, and a much shorter silhouette with a cacophony of bronze curls and something bundled in their arms. ‘Halt!’ he thrust out his spear. ‘I am under orders from Queen Trasa herself to let no mortal pass. What business have you on this road?’

Elinor shuffled, not quite sure where to look. Willow cuddled the bundle in their arms and looked imploringly at the guard. ‘Please. My infant, newly born, needs medicine—we make for the village in the foothills.’

‘None shall pass,’ grumbled the guard, squaring his shoulders.

‘Please!’ Willow implored. They were still growing accustomed to lying, but under the circumstances, were inspired. ‘Have you no compassion? We mortals are not as hardy as you! You cannot simply toss us aside as if we are nothing!’

The guard did not budge. Elinor muttered ‘It is not *working!*’

In Willow’s arms, Cillian rolled their eyes, took a breath, and let out the most colossal, ear-shattering wail they could conjure.

The baby’s cries filled the air, piercing, warbling, causing the guard to flinch. ‘There there,’ cooed Willow. Cillian sucked in another lungful of chill air and wailed again, forlorn as any innocent infant could be.

The guard was shuddering, quaking round the edges. He gave in and clapped his hands over his ears. ‘Oh, take it then!’ he shouted, barely audible over Cillian’s newborn laments. ‘Take it down the road!’

The three of them passed by. Cillian waited a moment before they stopped howling, then grinned toothlessly up at Willow and Elinor. ‘A stellar performance, my sibling.’

‘He still did not seem moved by our plight,’ Willow sighed.

‘Well, when are they ever?’

‘Change back,’ ordered Elinor. ‘Do not make us carry you the whole way.’

Snow began to gather on the ground, the peaks rising up around them veiled in white. A second guard reared up on the horizon, taller and broader than the first. ‘Your first trick may not work again,’ Willow cautioned. Cillian contemplated this for a moment, then buckled down into a withered, elderly figure. They wrapped themselves in the same cloak that had swaddled them as a baby, ’til all that peeked out was a gnarled and warty nose.

‘Halt!’ the guard stamped the butt of her spear against the ground. ‘None shall pass, by orders of Queen Trasa.’

‘Oh, please!’ Willow wrapped an arm through Cillian’s. ‘My great-grandmother is deathly ill, and needs medicine or healing water from the keep. She may die!’

Again the guard snorted. ‘None shall pass.’

Willow began to weep, hot tears gathering in their eyes. The border between their role in the trick and their own feelings was blurring like the horizon. ‘Have you no compassion? Have you no elders of your own?’

Cillian spoke, voice creaky like ancient wood in the wind. ‘Worry not, my dear child... we shall find another place... let us rest here a moment... ah, and in my last moments upon this earth, let me tell you the tales of my youth, that they may be preserved for your children and your children’s children, too...’

Cillian settled, achingly, down on the ground, right at the feet of the guard. ‘This tale begins when I am just of five summers... or was it six? Or was it four? Ah, it must have been six, for the year before we had a bountiful harvest, I remember it so strangely clearly, those golden fields as far as the eye could see...’

They sat, bones creaking, and, speaking as slowly as they could, concocted a tale about the economics of barley. After an hour had passed they paused and asked ‘What was I speaking of?’ Willow helpfully reminded them. They beamed. ‘Ah! Yes, it was when I was of five summers... or was it four?’

The guard, trembling and twitching above them, let out a garbled groan. ‘Pass onwards!’ she spluttered. ‘The entrance to the keep is not too far from here!’

Cillian took fifteen minutes to thank her, then allowed themselves to be carted off by Willow and Elinor.

They checked over their shoulders to make sure they were out of earshot, then Cillian began to snicker. To their surprise, Willow joined in, giggling under their breath, and Elinor let out a splutter of her own.

‘You are an adept nuisance,’ she noted, half-grinning.

Cillian grinned in reply, letting their teeth grow back in. ‘Correct.’

‘We are nearly there,’ said Willow, pressing down on their smile. ‘I can only hope the next guard has more pity.’

‘Pity is not in the repertoire of gods,’ Cillian warned them. Willow shook their head and surged ahead.

The mountain-keep loomed above them, ringed by a wall of spiked and icy rock and attended by nine different guards. ‘We may have to speak their language to get past,’ muttered Cillian. They drew themselves up, stretching to a height greater than even Elinor, broadening their shoulders and setting their brow forward. They (carefully) seized Willow in one hand and Elinor in the other, and marched towards the guards at the gateway to the fort.

‘Halt!’ they boomed—of course—‘None shall pass!’

‘I have two runaways,’ Cillian announced, dropping their voice, making it deep as the steepest ravine. ‘I seek to bring them to justice before Queen Trasa.’

‘No!’ Willow let out a shriek. ‘No, let me go!’

‘N-no,’ Elinor agreed, doing her best to duck her head and not look intimidating.

‘Help. Set us free.’

The guards narrowed their eyes. ‘Speak your name,’ the first said. ‘I do not recognise you.’

‘Look at the eyes!’ cried the second, gripping for her spear. ‘Silver as the moonlight! This is not one of us! This is Lorcán’s child!’

Cillian took a step back as the guards lifted their weapons. Their spearpoints glinted in the rising moonlight, and in the distance there was the creak of a bowstring going taut. ‘Ah. Now, I see there has been some—’

Elinor launched forward and disarmed the nearest guards in a flurry of scarlet. They were sprawled on the ground and her spear was in her hands, point glittering, before another word could be spoken. ‘I think your method may have run dry for now, Silver-eyes.’ Smoke coiled from between her teeth as she spoke. ‘Leave the rest to me!’

The other seven guards charged forward, and she let out a roar. Her hair whipped loose and her claws sprang free, and she moved with a speed and ferocity that not even the archers above could keep up with. Willow pleaded ‘Stop it! We simply want to speak to the queen!’

‘I told you,’ said Cillian. ‘They are not—’ Then let out a shriek of pain as an arrow spat down from the peak and lanced through their shoulder.

‘No!’ cried Willow. They snatched a fallen stone from the snowy ground and flung it upwards with all their godly strength, sending it whizzing skywards in a great arc. There was a rattling sound and a noise of pain from far above. ‘How dare you!’ Willow shouted once more, and flung another stone. This one, carried as it was on such love and fury, missed the mark entirely and shot upwards and upwards until it crashed into the snowy peak of the mountain itself.

The snow shuddered on impact. Then shifted.

Willow said, 'Oh.'

Cillian said, 'Nice throw.'

And all around the chaos stopped, for Elinor had finished slaying Trasa's gatekeepers. Fighting, and winning, against any one god is no mean feat, but with her spear and her rage Elinor had managed nine. She could not dwell on this, however, for she was distracted by the opening of the keep doors.

Brigit stood there, flanked and followed by a host of shivering humans. 'Oh,' she said. 'What in the world are you doing here?'

'What are we...?' Smoke was still blooming around Elinor, a tornado of beastly black. But as she ran to Brigit she shrank back into her human form, her fangs retreating, her claws retracting, her knee joints returning with a creak and a crack to where they were meant to be. 'What are we doing here? We are *saving you*, you fool girl! We are here to take you home!'

The two collided, a rush of smoke. The plume cleared and unveiled a vexed Brigit hanging in Elinor's embrace, staring at the sky in bewilderment. 'Home?'

'We have to flee!' called Willow. Above, the snow and ice on the peak continued to shiver. With a great groan, it began to slide. 'Follow us!'

They fled, towing all the human captives, carrying those who could not run. Cillian, hissing in pain, fumbled for grip enough on the Fabric to slit open a Causeway, and gathered everyone inside. They leapt through the gap as snow and ice began to roar down the slope, crashing over the fortress, enveloping it in a spray of ceaseless white.

That, we can tell you, is where Trasa and her court still lie: buried beneath an avalanche, sealed forever within their magnificent feasting hall. For Brigit incited a fight that would rage with such intensity that it would be nearly nine years before the gods noticed that they had been encased inside.

You see, at last Trasa had grown tired of all the grand tales about her retainers. She had turned to Brigit and demanded one of her own. Brigit had simply, politely, said ‘Oh, but my queen, I... I cannot think of any! No, I have not heard of any tales of valour and prowess about you!’

Cathbad the Cruel had laughed. Trasa had leapt over and punched him with such force that his single remaining eye had shot out of his skull and flown across the room, landing in someone else’s drink.

From there, the hall erupted, each warrior declaring themselves the greatest. As chairs and goblets and teeth flew round the room, Brigit quietly slipped out and snuck through the keep until she found the cavern where several raids worth of mortal prisoners were huddled.

The mortal captives were returned home, and in their settlements they sang. They sang of Brigit, the clever songstress, and they sang of Cillian’s ruse and Elinor’s victory, and of the single stone that Willow used to topple the tyrant of the north. They sang of how they would begin to rebuild, how they hoped that one day their children would not have to live in such fear.

Cillian sat in the middle of it all, nursing the wound in their shoulder—the raw sting that remained when an arrowhead was removed. Brigit, unusually quiet, took a seat beside them.

‘Admirable work, Trickster,’ they told her. ‘You have ceased your songs for tonight?’

‘I am resting my voice.’

‘Ah, yes. It is tiring business, outwitting and overthrowing an army of gods. Drains your vitality.’

‘I am feeling more well and vital than I have in a while. What a strange thing to feel. And strangest yet is Elinor... embracing me like that. Saying she was here to bring me home.’ Brigit smiled softly. ‘I have not had such an embrace before, I do not think. Is that sad?’

‘Miserable,’ agreed Cillian. Brigit laughed. ‘But such is the way of things. Or... well, I suppose that need not be true.’ They glanced over at Willow, who was sitting amidst the dancing crowd. Their hands were locked round one another in their lap, their fingernails etching marks like tree bark into their skin. The same hands that had thrown that stone, that had condemned so many, all in the name of protecting Cillian from harm.

Cillian wondered—thinking like Willow might think—if they should go and ask if Willow was alright.

Brigit, clearly, was still thinking of Elinor. She interrupted Cillian’s thoughts with the softest of laughs, mostly to herself. ‘Elinor is... so unstoppable, all made of teeth and claws. But I can never bring myself to be frightened of her. I feel more drawn to her every day. Now that, surely, is strange.’

‘Love is the strangest thing I have encountered in all my many days,’ countered Cillian. ‘Elinor has acted all manner of strange around you, it is only fair you take a share of oddity as well.’

The Songbird’s eyes fluttered wide. ‘Love? You do not suppose she feels that way about me?’

Cillian turned to stare at her with such speed and force it nearly reopened their bandaged wound. ‘By the stars,’ they breathed. ‘You are both so stupid.’

In a glade in the Wandering Wood, some days later, Elinor once more faced down a formidable foe: Aidan and Cillian facing her with their arms folded. Aidan’s form was all determination; Cillian copied it, matching his height and shifting his face into the sort of high-cheekboned handsome that suited a scowl.

The Scarlet Beast collapsed to the ground and wailed ‘I cannot do it!’

‘Come now,’ said Aidan. ‘Just do as we practiced.’

(Cillian had attempted to help, taking the form of a busty and long-lashed maiden to which Elinor could gift flowers and confessions. The results had been... varied.)

‘I cannot, I cannot! What if she thinks me a fool? What if this makes things strange between us, between the whole Forest?’

Frustration flashed across Aidan’s face. ‘What? *What?*’ His voice rose, building in his chest before bursting forth. ‘You have slain an ancient monster and taken its powers! You have struck terror and awe into the hearts of mortals the land over! You have sliced a many-headed leviathan into fragments even as it tried to devour you! And now you have fought and won against no less than nine gods! You are *Elinor the Scarlet Beast!* You have conquered so much, and you mean to tell me you cannot muster the courage for *telling a girl you love her?*’

‘This is different!’

‘Who! Who is this imposter before me?!’ Aidan, with strength never before seen, scooped Elinor up off the ground and threw her into an ungainly standing position. ‘March ahead bravely!’ He slammed his hands against her back, driving her forward even as she dug

her heels into the soil. ‘March always ahead, warrior! March into the monster’s jaws with your teeth bared!’

‘Brigit might not like my teeth!’

‘Nonsense!’ Cillian chimed in. ‘She admires them.’

Elinor twisted around. ‘Did she say that to you? Truly?’

‘*March!*’ Aidan kept shoving at her back, but she refused to budge. Cillian groaned and shifted into a hefty bull. The bull rammed forward—albeit with forehead, not horns—into Elinor and Aidan, sending them both flying across the grove. Elinor launched through the trees with a yelp, and Aidan fell flat on his face in the underbrush.

Cillian shifted back to something humanoid and helped pick Aidan up. Gingerly, he dusted himself off, then they both tiptoed to the tree line.

‘You are a better liar and hypocrite than I gave you credit for, Healer,’ whispered Cillian.

Aidan blushed. ‘What can you mean?’

‘You admonish her for not speaking her feelings, yet your own broken heart remains unmentioned. You will never tell her how you feel?’

‘That is different,’ he grumbled, with some nobility. ‘My beloved loves another.’

Cillian thought of Cliodhna, the tree who had once been a goddess who had once dared to reject Lorcán’s advances. ‘So why drive that beloved away from you, and towards Brigit? Why not sabotage, sow chaos, draw her towards you?’

Aidan looked horrified. ‘No! Speak not of such things! Sometimes I forget you are a god, and then you say something like that.’

The arrowhead in Cillian's chest—the wound from years before, the wound from Maebh, the wound not even Aidan could cry out—panged.

Aidan shook his head. 'If her heart lies with Brigit, I shall ensure that it is received and taken care of. I will do everything in my power to see them happy together.'

'But why?'

'Because I wish to see Elinor happy, even if it is not with me.' Aidan's lip wobbled, but his eyes were resolute. 'I will watch over her, care for her, even if only from afar.'

'*Why?*'

It was Aidan's turn to look upon Cillian in bewilderment. 'It is what you do when you love someone.'

Cillian had no words to match this. And so they just settled in beside Aidan, peeking through the ferns as Elinor crossed the clearing.

Brigit was sitting atop a mossy rock. She looked down upon Elinor as the blushing beast thrust a handful of flowers upwards. 'What a lovely coincidence!' Brigit cooed. 'I have a gift for you as well...'

A song filled the woods, sweet and soulful enough that even the birds paused to listen. It was a tale of valour, of a maiden lost at sea, lonely and forgotten, until a great warrior came to save her. It seemed to weave the story of their meeting with the elements themselves: Cillian swore they could taste saltwater on the breeze, sense the rough rock of the cave wall against their back, feel the deep pit of desolation carving itself in their chest as they watched their parents sail away. Their heart dared to flutter as they sensed the sea crash and churn, heard the death throes of the sea-beast, watched a strange girl clamber onto their island.

It was not a story about the valour of heroes and monsters, truly. It was a story about finally coming home.

Cillian noticed that flowers were sprouting around their feet, vines climbing their ankles and ferns uncoiling about their knees. Beside them, Aidan was crying, each tear a diamond, each tear for himself and his own broken heart, petals unfurling where each drop hit the ground. Yet he was smiling, too.

‘You are *all* so stupid,’ tutted Cillian, but wrapped an arm around Aidan’s shoulders, patting the poor boy on his golden head.

Brigit slid from the rock and Elinor caught her, spinning her around the glade in an embrace, both of them flushed and laughing. And Cillian wondered, dimly, what it felt like to feel like you were home.

In the Hall of the Gods

Far away, the palace of bone was quiet—a stillness that did not betray the writhing monsters imprisoned in the dungeons beneath, nor the wrath and war in its very pillars. An owl flew through the archways, wings as silent yet solid as memory.

‘Covered by snow?’ Lorcán let out a scoff. ‘Trust Trasa to be defeated by her own terrain.’

Nessa, seated at the dining table, let out a long sigh. She was cloaked in the silken veils deemed for widowed gods, wondering how long her official mourning period ought to last for politeness’ sake. There was a handsome stable boy she had her eyes on. ‘How dreadful.’

‘It was not just the mountain’s rebellion.’ Croiadh spoke, owl perched on his shoulder. ‘The smallfolk are singing of strange heroes who emerge from the mist when they are needed most. Slayers of beasts, bane of gods.’

‘Pretty stories,’ shrugged Lorcán. ‘Let them sing. It gives them something to do while they harvest and herd for us.’

‘There can be no truth to them,’ Nessa clicked her fingers. The cupbearer scuttled over, refilling the queen’s goblet. ‘I heard mutterings on the wind of a beastly girl with fangs and claws, and a child with golden eyes. A babe with eyes the colour of blood! Pah. An imp of the mortals’ own invention, perhaps even made to try and frighten us.’

The quiet of the palace shifted its weight. Lorcán slowly turned to look at her.

‘Golden eyes?’ His voice was cool as iron. Croiadh’s owl began to preen its feathers.

‘As I said, most likely some grim invention.’ Nessa drank deeply. The cupbearer took her goblet when she was finished. ‘I do not concern myself with the goings-on of my peasants.’

Maebh, seated as always beside her father, spoke for the first time, all contemplation. ‘Why, humans do not *come* with golden eyes, do they Father?’

Lorcán curled and uncurled his fingers atop the armrest of his throne. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘No, my dearest daughter, they do not.’

Branwen the Bull and the Wise Old Salmon

The tales of Trasa's defeat and the freeing of the north hopped and skipped and scattered, like flat pebbles tossed onto water, making ripples all the way. With no godly chariots dashing their wheels into the earth, crops could regrow. Traders could travel with less fear of ambush. So travel they did, and with them they brought tales. Tales, intangible but weighty, priceless and a form of their own currency.

One day, they found their way to the ears of a certain boyish youth who lived in a village by a river: a youth called Branwen the Bull.

Boyish is something we must emphasise, for though this young fellow was broad as an ox (hence the name), strong as an oak, and beset with the facial scruff that is usually the mark of young men, *boy* was not what they were. There had always been something about *boy* that had never sat evenly with them. Manhood for Branwen was alike a wool blanket in summertime: to be truly comfortable, they needed to stick a leg out from underneath it.

Branwen's people were practical people, hardy and unfussed with what might be convention elsewhere. Men and women alike took up tools and arms, if they were strong enough. Men and women alike tended to children, if tending was needed. In a world of harsh winters and pernicious gods, there was little time to flutter and fuss over the roles folk should or should not take. And aye, perhaps someone named a girl at birth asked to be seen as a man as he grew up? No time to fuss, no time; a man he shall be so long as he earns his keep.

So surely Branwen should have felt unfettered, unfollied, unfooled, by notions of manhood and womanhood. And yet, and yet: something nibbled at them from deep within, a gnawing discomfort they had no name for. Not 'til they were older, and tales reached their ears.

The tales skipped to Branwen while they were working in a barley field. Branwen had no parents to speak of, and after a certain incident (which we shall get to shortly) most folk in the settlement were reticent to take them in. But a farmer with no children of his own employed Branwen, and was fond of saying, loudly and wine-drunkenly, that Branwen was like the son he had never had. Branwen had always been too polite to correct him, had never quite been able to put into words how damning that praise felt.

Until the day the trading folk trundled down the path, their cart all full of fruits and grain and pottery. ‘I thought you dead!’ cried Branwen, sprinting through the field. ‘You have not passed by for months on end!’

‘Aye, the route was not safe—folk kept getting snatched up by gods from the hall of the mountain queen! But she has been defeated, and once more they are free!’

Branwen gaped, and the travellers told them the tales we have just told you. Branwen listened ’til the sun dipped low in the sky, rapt, unable to look away. Even once the traders and their carts rolled onwards, Branwen found themselves unable to stop thinking about the stories.

The bravery, yes; the feats of trickery, certainly! But what stuck in their mind was the description of Cillian and Willow: a pair of youths, by the sounds of it about Branwen’s own age, who claimed to be neither man nor maiden. One silver-eyed, whose appearance was fluid, and one fire-haired who said they had never been named with a gender and had no intention of taking one up.

‘Could it be?’ Branwen asked the barley field.

Branwen stuck the back of their hand in their mouth, and sucked.

It may seem an odd gesture, but bear with them. Some years ago, you see, there had been a certain incident with a fish.

Branwen, as we have noted, was an orphan, one of many left parentless by Lorcán's petty raids. The child wandered the world, singed and starving, hiding from the rain under trees and in the nooks beneath waterfalls. They did not know how to speak to the trees and ask for food, and found themselves weak with hunger as they trudged through the wilderness. When they smelled a cooking fire they dashed towards it, to find a burbling river and a wizened old fisherman sitting stalwartly beside a crackling flame.

'When you catch some fish,' Branwen pleaded. 'May I have one?'

'No!' snapped the fisherman. 'The fish I catch will not be for your eating! Have you not heard, boy, of the Wise Old Salmon who swims these waters?'

Branwen, even then, was already tall and wide, and so seemingly commanded the title *boy* without even breathing. That familiar discomfort gnawed at their heart. But it was quieter than the hunger gnawing at their stomach. 'The Wise Old Salmon?'

'They say that when the gods invaded, they fought a deadly war with the monsters who lived in these lands. A warrior named Croiadh the Crow was struck across the face in battle, instantly blinded. But with the loss of his sight, he was granted the ability to see the future!' The fisherman waved his gnarled hands. 'And where the blood from his ruined eyes fell, a tree sprouted! And from that tree grew nuts, and one of those nuts fell into the river below, and in that river lived a salmon, who ate the fallen produce and gained the gift of foresight!'

'You want to ask the salmon for wisdom?'

‘No, fool boy! If the salmon can gain wisdom from eating the nuts, I can gain wisdom twice over from eating the salmon. And then, ha! I shall be able to foresee where fortune may lie and where trouble may be avoided. With this wisdom, I shall become the richest, luckiest man in the lands. And I have *no intention* of sharing it with some ragged passerby.’

‘I have no need for riches or power,’ Branwen begged. ‘Just food.’

The fisherman grumbled and groused but conceded that if he fished up any *unwise* creatures, Branwen could share in the flesh—so long as they cooked it. So Branwen sat by his side and fantasised about The Great Salmon, another monster of myth, and how much meat there would be if the fisherman happened to haul it in.

Luckily, it did not take long for the fisherman’s net to tug. He let out a rusty ‘Aha!’ and hauled it in. The fish glittered, opalescent, magic singing off its very scales. ‘Do you think the creature foresaw its own demise? Ha! No matter. All its knowledge shall soon be mine!’

The fisherman spiked the Wise Old Salmon on a cooking spit and turned it over the fire. ‘Now,’ he announced, all giddy with triumph. ‘I’ve been sitting there for hours on end and dearly need to piss. Do not dare move from that spot, boy, and *do not* dare take a bite of my prize. Or I shall bring a reckoning upon you with my newfound power!’

Branwen did as they were told, turning the fish over the fire as its skin crackled with oil and the smell of cooking meat filled the air. Their mouth watered and their belly ached, but they had no friends in all the world save for that old man, so they dared not move.

Until the salmon’s searing skin crackled and popped and spat a bead of oil onto the back of Branwen’s hand. They cried out in pain and, on instinct, shoved the burned skin into their mouth.

The river snapped away and Branwen found themselves standing in front of a great tree, hollowed out and turned into a makeshift hut. Baubles of rainbow light hovered between the branches and clothes and furs hung up to dry on the gnarled and arching roots. Before them stood a figure with sprigs of bronze-coloured hair, and atop their head sat a black bird with eyes that glinted silver. Laughter echoed round them, and the crackling sound of a cooking fire.

In this vision, Branwen had the strangest, chest-softening sense of comfort, something they had no words to explain.

The image snapped away and Branwen found themselves staring at the salmon. Experimentally, they licked the back of their hand once more, where the fish's oil had stung it. A second image flared: this one, of the fisherman cursing, and chasing after someone shaking his fist.

Branwen did not act upon that drop of wisdom in time. The fisherman returned and roared 'Thief! Thief!' Branwen protested they had not touched the salmon, that its knowledge would be intact, but a glance told them this was not true: the opaline glow had gone from the fish's scales, leaving it hanging over the fire growing crispy like any ordinary member of its species.

'I did not mean to! I do not want this!' Branwen began, but the fisherman hollered and sprang. In his fury, he snatched the flame-hot spit and swung it at Branwen, trailing sparks and embers. Branwen fled, flames nipping at their back. Branwen was strong and fast, even in their feeble state, and was able to sprint far enough that the fisherman never caught up.

When they came across settlements, Branwen was eager to tell people of their adventures. But when they stuffed their hand into their mouth, most folk just recoiled. 'That is the magic of the gods!' they cried. 'Renounce it if you want to stay!'

They tried washing their hand, but the little oil burn remained. Even when some villagers dunked Branwen in the river headfirst, the magic clung fast.

‘Begone with you,’ the settlers said. ‘What if the gods can see through your eyes now? We shall have no spy in our midst!’

Branwen politely tried to explain their situation, but they found fortified walls closed to them. Until they came across the farmer, who needed someone strong to help with the harvest. ‘Come, boy, let us get you some food,’ he said, and Branwen had no heart left to correct him. If that was what was needed for survival, *boy* they would have to be.

Branwen knew, somewhere deep in their heart, that it would not always be like this. That sometime, somewhere, there would be a place where they felt at home. Where or when they might find it, they had no idea. But it gave them the strength to lift and pull and harvest and carry, ignoring the glares from those who believed Branwen was magic-touched and malignant, and ignoring the kind but callous calls of ‘boy’ from the farmer.

And now! Perhaps they had discovered the people in that vision? Well, there was only one way to find out.

Branwen asked a young woman in the village to help the farmer in their absence, and she agreed. ‘Go and find them,’ she urged. ‘And bring back tales—my parents think these monster-slayers and rainbow-catchers are more troublesome than heroic, but I don’t believe that for a moment.’

Branwen thanked her and set off by the dawn’s light, striding down the paths that traders had carved into the land with their cartwheels. An onlooker would see a young person marching under the sun with great purpose, occasionally pausing to lick the back of their knuckles, look thoughtful, then continue on their way.

Branwen's fish-flavoured visions were scattered at first, but they had learned to control them and to divine more directly. Thinking as hard as they could of the silver-eyed and fire-haired people, they caught glimpses of certain rivers, of particular hills, of treelines with a precise shape. With this, they set off in search of the way to Rowantree Keep, guided by the burn scar on their hand and the gnawing feeling in their heart.

Along a shaded road, they came across a little girl—golden-haired and dressed in white, weeping and rubbing her eyes. 'Little one!' they cried, running to her aid. 'Are you alright?'

'I am lost,' the child whimpered. She looked up at Branwen with big green eyes that shone like pools of water. 'Please, could you take me with you?'

'Of course!' If Branwen arrived in the Forest with a heroic deed or two in hand, perhaps they would be welcomed. They scooped the girl up onto one of their shoulders, broad enough that she could sit, and carried her along the road to the nearest plot of farming land.

'Oh?' the little girl sniffled. 'This is not the way you were going.'

'No, little one, but I am going deep into the woods, and it is not safe!' Branwen dropped her off with the first farmer they found. 'Farewell now, child, and do not get into any more trouble!'

The little girl beamed at Branwen and waved goodbye, sweetness dripping from her face.

Branwen got back on track, and was striding along the edge of a great field when they came across a woman leaning over on her cane. 'Please, young man,' she croaked (there it was again). 'I am feeble... could you be so kind as to help me along the road?'

‘Of course!’ beamed Branwen, unable to believe their luck—that they should come across *two* heroic deeds in one day! They scooped the woman up and carried her until they passed an oxen cart trundling along the trade route. ‘These fine fellows will take you to safety.’

‘Oh,’ the old woman creaked. ‘I will not continue with you?’

‘The way I am going is deep into the woods, and not safe. Please, stay with these good people, and be well!’

Branwen strode off once more, and felt a strange burning sensation as the old woman glared at them from the back of the cart.

At last they reached the Wandering Wood and set off into the thick of the trees, who watched Branwen curiously and whispered of them through the leaves. Branwen sucked on their hand and followed their visions, outmanoeuvring the trees when they moved.

Branwen was deep in the forest when they heard a strange scuffling behind them. ‘Are you following me?’ they asked, and found themselves looking at a pure white owl.

The owl said nothing, but it watched them with strangely intelligent, deep green eyes. Branwen frowned warily. Branwen had known salmon to swim about with the gift of foresight, so it stood to reason that an owl would have its own business. Still, with no answer they shrugged and kept walking.

As they walked, they felt their heart begin to stir. A sense of bone-deep recognition tugged them forward. Yes, that moss-covered stone. Yes, that tree root. Yes, there, peeking out from between the trunks—a floating bauble of softly glowing blue, snatched from the sky itself.

And, standing among it all with a basket full of mushrooms, a bewildered looking Rowan.

‘Well met!’ Branwen called out, thumping a fist against their chest. ‘I am Branwen the Bull, keeper of the knowledge of the Wise Old Salmon! I come to seek an audience with Cillian, Child of the Dusk, and Willow of the Wandering Woods!’ They paused, bouncing on their heels. ‘And Aidan of the Healing Tears and Elinor the Scarlet Beast, if they are also here!’

Aisling appeared in a flash, standing protectively in front of Rowan with an arrow nocked. ‘Halt!’

‘Oh!’ Branwen’s eyes glittered. ‘What a fine bow! Is that made of an antler? Why, but the size of the creature...’

Rowan peeked around her. ‘Aisling, I do not think he is a threat. Or...’ Rowan’s eyes met Branwen’s. ‘Is “he” what we should call you? I am a he myself, but that address does not suit everyone.’

Branwen felt something they could not quite describe, one of a multitude of feelings they had no name for. It swelled in their chest like a gust of wind, yet it also left them feeling more anchored to the earth than they ever had. ‘No,’ they stammered. ‘I am not.’ The first time they had been afforded the chance to say such a thing aloud. Something in Aisling’s expression softened as she watched this realisation rock through them. ‘Nor a “she”, though I confess I don’t quite know what the alternative is!’

‘I see. Well, “they” tends to be most useful, so perhaps you can try that on?’ Rowan offered them a smile, the easiest yet the most meaningful thing a person can offer. ‘Please, child, you look like you have travelled long and far. Come drink something and tell us where you have come from.’

Aisling kept a hawklike eye on Branwen as they walked through the forest into the Keep, though she began to relax as she watched them stare around with moon-sized eyes. In the glade with the home-tree, they saw the gathered group: Willow weaving something, Elinor cleaning her spearpoint, Cillian and Brigit playing some game of reflexes while Aidan watched and flinched. They all looked up at Branwen, who promptly forgot the long and impressive speech they had been planning the whole journey.

Instead they stammered, ‘Hello! The fish showed me a vision of this place, and I’m here now!’

‘Who are you?’ blinked Willow.

‘Tired and delirious, it seems,’ smirked Cillian.

‘What fish?’ frowned Aisling, and the group gathered as Branwen stumbled through their story.

‘Ah! So this place is still impossible for humans to find, unless they already know the way.’ Aidan breathed out. ‘Whether by having been there before, or by means of Salmon Wisdom.’

‘Oh yes, worry not!’ Branwen tapped the side of their head. ‘Your sanctuary is safe! No one followed me here. Save except for the owl, perhaps.’

A feeling like frost tingled up Cillian’s neck. ‘An owl?’

‘Aye, a pure white owl. I saw it thrice on the way through the woods. Though it could have been three different owls...’

Cillian pushed forwards, head-to-head with Branwen. ‘What colour were its eyes?’

They thought a moment, then: ‘Green, this piercing green! Like gemstones, like leaves struck through with midday sunlight...’

An ancient ache throbbed white-hot in Cillian’s chest. In their panic they flung out a hand and gripped at the first thing they could seek purchase on—it happened to be the Fabric of magic itself.

Their fingers dug into empty air, knuckles white, causing a shimmer to ripple through the glade. ‘Cillian?’ Willow’s voice flickered through the haze that had overcome them.

‘What is it?’

‘Stay here,’ they snapped. ‘Stay here and stay hidden.’

A Goddess in the Woods

Cillian seized the magic of the world and tugged.

It unravelled and re-formed in their grasp, pulled along by the force of their determination. As though drawing a great curtain, Cillian pulled magic behind them. When they glanced over their shoulder, Willow, Rowan, Branwen, the whole family, had vanished. Where they stood was only a softly seething fog, mist leaking out from between the seams in the tapestry of reality. They had been shut, haphazardly, in a little pocket of space betwixt and between.

Threads of Fabric had come off, more than usual, and tangled around Cillian's wrists—so tight and so spider-silk-fine they swiftly vanished into Cillian's skin, as if they had never been there at all.

There was not time to dwell on this. There was an owl in the woods. A pure white owl—not Croiadh's owls, then, not the seer's eyes in the Forest. No, these eyes were green. Cillian moved through the mist as it spilled across the woods, searching through the trees, their heart a ball of frost in their throat.

There she was, standing serene as carved stone, ferns and fog curling reverently around her. She was dressed in white, unmarred as polished ivory; her hair poured down over her shoulders in looping curls of spun gold, impossible to tarnish. And her eyes, yes, Branwen the Bull had been right about her eyes. They looked so hard and polished next to the living, breathing green of the leaves and the moss. There were no hints of other hues in them, not a wisp of blue or hazel. Bejewelled and unchanging and looking right at Cillian.

Maebh smiled, radiant as dawn. 'Hello, Cillian. I was wondering where you had been hiding.'

Her skin, too—her skin was so clear and bright, no scratches from handling firewood, no callouses from practising with weapons, no sunburn, no freckles, no spots. All the gods looked this perfect. It was what Cillian had once been used to. But oh, now it looked so *strange*. ‘Hiding, dear sister? Never. Merely taking extended leave.’

‘Oh yes, we have heard all about it.’ Maebh tipped her head. ‘Such pretty songs, the mortal peasants sing! Of monster-slayings and queen-trickings and travellers handing out portions of rainbow. And, my my, a creature with silver eyes who may be anywhere and everywhere at once—sometimes stealing your food, sometimes re-tuning your voice, dancing among moonbeams in a secret forest lair.’

Cillian bristled, feeling suddenly small. They stared at Maebh, trying to figure out if she looked older. Years had passed, and even in only a short time they had seen marked changes in the humans. Aidan’s voice had dipped deeper, Elinor had gotten taller with more muscles and more curves alike. Willow, once so tiny, was sprouting towards the sky, their face changing shape and settling into angles and expressions that much resembled Rowan’s. Like the change of seasons, it seemed to happen slowly and then all at once.

Yet Maebh looked every bit the young princess, soft and golden and wonderful, save for that piercing gaze she was fixing on her sibling.

It made Cillian wonder, suddenly and with a cold flush, if *they* looked the same. If Cillian, like her, was frozen and unmoving, the child who had never truly had a childhood and so could not grow up; who was always transforming and yet could never, like the gods, truly change.

Cillian did their best to set that thought aside. ‘And you became envious, perhaps?’ they said, slashing at the silence. ‘You have chambers in the palace, for certain, but you do not have a *lair*.’

‘I have come,’ Maebh smiled like a cat. ‘To bring you home. You have had time enough playing silly games among mortals, and among these... things. Humans who dare to steal the healing magic of the gods! Who sprout fangs and claws!’ She made a delicate expression of distaste. ‘Your courtly manners were already shameful, and I can only imagine how they’ve deteriorated out here.’

They kept their voice as even as possible, balanced like a knife on their fingertip. ‘Did Father send you?’

‘Cillian,’ she pouted, pityingly. ‘You think I care not for you at all? I have come of my own volition. It will be inflating your ego, no doubt, to spend time among these creatures that are so beneath you. But it cannot last. Humans are mortal, you must remember, and a terrible choice of pet.’

‘I have never had reason to assume that you care for me,’ Cillian spat. The memory of Maebh walking delicately across the palace threshold, her arms full of flowers, while Cillian lay banished and broken, rang in their mind. It caused bile to flicker in their throat, that arrowhead in their heart to spasm. ‘You’re surely glad to have me gone, for it assures no one will threaten your place as Father’s favourite.’

‘Cillian,’ she said their name again, holding it like a fragile thing in her hands, cradling it, poised to snap it. ‘Do I look like I am threatening you? Why should we not try working together, now that we are older and wiser? Things are not as they were when we were newly-made. *Father* is not as he was.’

Cillian could not help but laugh. ‘Dear Maebh, you are a beautiful songstress, but you are a terrible liar. If we were to work together, it would be a ploy: you would find a way to use me, and, failing that, find a way to set me up for a fall. You delight in nothing more than

seeing Lorcán reduce me to shreds. Clearly you are only here because you miss the sight of my blood.’

Maebh regarded them for a moment, then sighed. ‘That is what I imagined you’d say.’

She moved before Cillian could react. A wind rushed through the forest, scattering the mist, flattening the curling ferns, and Cillian found himself on the ground.

They seemed to have no arms and no legs. They seemed to be a long, wriggling creature covered in scales, a forked tongue flickering inside their mouth.

They seemed to be unable to change.

Panic gripped Cillian, pinning them under the weight of a mountain. They tried to shift, but their body did not respond. Communication with their very being seemed cut off, silenced, as if their heart and soul and their vessel of flesh were suddenly speaking unfamiliar languages. They thrashed and slithered on the ground, trying to cry out but only succeeding in hissing.

‘What have you done to me?’ Cillian tried to scream, but their forked tongue tangled.

‘Now, hush. You really have become even more wild and rowdy out here in the nothingness.’ Maebh bent over them, beaming down like the sun itself. She plucked Cillian up between two fingers and held their thrashing form up to the light. ‘The question is, should I leave you here to be picked up by some nesting bird? Or should I carry you home to make a decoration for my chambers? I think you’d look quite fine in a bauble of glass, but ah, in there all alone you might suffocate, or else go mad as you watched me go about—’

An arrow whipped through the air, thudding into the trunk of a nearby tree. Cillian dropped like a dead weight towards the ground. When they stilled their dizzy head, they saw

Maebh fleeing in a whirl of white skirts, shifting into white wings. She cast a furtive look in Cillian's direction, then vanished through the trees.

If Cillian could use the Causeways, perhaps their sister could use them too? They suddenly wondered if she had ever learned how. Certainly Cillian had never shared the knowledge with her. They had not shared anything in so long.

'You!' Aisling strode out of the mist, bow drawn, eyes hawkish. 'Princess! What are you doing here?'

'She's already gone,' Cillian tried to say, but again, no words came out. They slithered and writhed among the leaf litter, attempting once more to change. Their body remained stationary. They clawed at the borders of their being with hands they did not have.

Rowan was behind Aisling, scouting around with a frown on his face. His eyes swiftly followed the movement and fell on Cillian. 'What in the world is that?'

'A snake,' said Aisling. 'We had them in our old country, but they do not seem native to this place.'

They both peered down at Cillian. Aisling's arrow was still nocked. Fear flooded their serpentine prison in a second—were snakes venomous? Were they food? Would Aisling's first instinct be to bolt an arrowhead through Cillian's spine?

'Look at the eyes,' breathed Rowan. 'Cillian?'

Snakes, traditionally, do not weep. But this one came close.

For nine days and nine nights, everyone tried to reverse Maebh's spell. Aidan wept until Cillian was slick with diamond tears, but nothing changed. Willow covered them in every

healing herb and moss they knew, but nothing changed. Brigit sang to them to soothe their anguish, but it was only a salve. Even Elinor worked away in the backdrop, hunting small birds or slicing meat so Cillian could eat it with their tiny mouth. Branwen went with her, did everything they could—a stranger in this place, yet so ready to show Cillian their care.

Cillian remained a snake, coiled up helplessly on the rocks or around Willow's shoulders, starving for warmth, unable to speak or even gesture. Crushed to the earth with a sadness and desperation that felt like the edge of death.

They would writhe and thrash and bite at the grass with useless fangs, for some sense of *movement*, some sense of control over this body. Rowan would pick them up and stroke their scaly head and hush them, whispering 'Cillian, Cillian, I know that is you in there. You in all your multitudes.' And most of the time, it managed to anchor them, lessen the sense that they were spiralling into nothingness.

As dawn broke, ending the ninth night, Cillian sprang back into humanlike form. They shrieked with relief enough to wake the whole camp, leaping and sprinting on the legs they had missed so dearly, waving their arms in loops, changing their body a thousand times. Tall! Short! Narrow hips! A curved bust! A long neck, a round face! A square jaw, full rosy lips! They collapsed, nude and sobbing with joy, on the grass in the middle of the glade. Willow, when they found them, politely lay a wool cloak over Cillian.

When they told everyone what had happened, an uproar burned around the group. 'If she found us,' Rowan spoke through gritted teeth. 'Then this place is not safe, from humans or from gods.'

'The trees have moved around, twisting paths enough to disorientate any travellers,' Aisling sighed. 'But even in a Wandering Wood that will not last forever.'

‘I’ll protect us!’ Elinor thumped a fist against her chest. ‘Not even an army of gods could get past me!’

‘I apologise!’ Branwen threw herself down on the grass. ‘I led her here! This is my doing!’

‘It is not your fault,’ Willow consoled.

‘The fault is mine,’ seethed Cillian. ‘That wretch of a goddess! No matter where I go, she and my father would find a way to spread their poison towards me!’

‘Cillian, it is not your fault either.’ Willow’s golden eyes were distant. ‘This was Maebh’s decision, Maebh my... half-sister.’ They tasted the words, the idea. Curiosity tremored through their voice, curiosity and hope. ‘Do you think she sought to meet me as well?’

‘She sought to ruin the one piece of happiness I have.’ Cillian leapt towards the place where they had drawn the Fabric across like a great invisible curtain. The threads had come apart, but a fragment of the cloaking was still there. ‘Let me think.’

For the next weeks, Cillian ran back and forth around the forest, speaking with the trees, tweaking and tugging at the shape of magic. They used their knack for weaving the intangible and fashioned a veil of sorts, thin but practical, a sheet of pure magic that rippled in a cosmic breeze and served as a border between the heart of the Rowantree camp and the rest of the woods, the rest of the world. There were gaps in it, strategically placed, at the base of waterfalls, between the standing stones where the Great Boar had once lived, under the arches of some fallen trees.

Cillian toured Rowan through them all. He nodded sternly. ‘This should be enough to keep most people out.’

‘Most people?’

‘It is wonderful, Cillian. You have worked hard.’

Cillian pondered that. It felt an unfamiliar statement. They had worked hard before, surely? To steal Nessa’s voice, in days gone by; to wrangle themselves a safe place at the Undersea court, to steal food from villagers, to plot Willow’s demise. They winced at the memories. They seemed from another lifetime.

It occurred to Cillian that, for the first time, they had a place they did not wish to leave. In fact, they had a place they wished to protect.

Part III

An Age of Tricksters

An Interlude, of Sorts

Let us linger a moment, on a summer afternoon. For once again it was summer, spring easing into warmer days. The forest was lush with the smell of fruit and flowers, musical with the burbling of streams and the twitterings of birds. Fawns teetered after their mothers in the underbrush, fledglings peeked tentatively over the edges of their nests.

Elinor, for once, was still, stretched out on the grass with her head pillowed in Brigit's lap. Brigit had one hand in her beloved's scarlet hair, the other gesturing as she spoke with Aidan, plotting out new tales and asking that he be her first audience. He was listening eagerly, not to a rival but to a friend. He was shocked to hear himself laughing and gasping along with her jokes and her shocking twists, swept up in the sunshine giving no thought to his broken heart. The beast, asleep; the captive maiden, free; the boy defined by his tears, happy.

Rowan was chopping firewood, tunic to the wayside, letting the sun soak his bare back—a habit he had fallen into in his time in the Forest, not something he could have done in his youth. Sweat prickled on his bared skin, the ache of good work echoed in the muscles he had carved over the years, and he gave no thought to the shape of his chest or his hips nor what any passerby might think of them. He moved with the quiet strength of someone who knew who he was. Aisling arrived with more logs, considered this a moment, then stripped off her own cloak and tunic, letting her long hair drape over her shoulders, letting the sun kiss the body she could not change, the body she loved.

Cillian, Willow, and Branwen had been playing in a river. They built structures from the flat stones, little henges and forts decorated with twigs and flowers. Cillian turned into a fish and ignited a game of chase, testing their fellows to see if they could catch their slippery

silver scales. The three trawled themselves up the bank and lay themselves, like so much laundry, on the sunny slope of the riverbank to dry out.

‘Can you shape the water too?’ Branwen asked. ‘As you can shape the moonlight?’

‘Water is no friend to me,’ admitted Cillian. ‘Perhaps because of what it is made of— heavier and slipperier than starshine and magic. Perhaps because I made enemies of the King and Queen of the Sea.’

‘I have not heard this tale!’ Branwen perked up.

‘We do not need to speak of it,’ said Willow. ‘If you do not wish to.’ Cillian regarded them with surprise, and Willow merely offered them a significant shrug.

‘No, no. It is a tale worth telling.’ So Cillian told it, rolling the details around on their tongue like Brigit might. It tasted different, this time: more tragedy than comedy, less boastful.

‘And good riddance to them both,’ spat Cillian at the end. ‘I hope that sea-beast did go back into the depths and eat Murcu and Nessa both, one bite each.’

‘I am sorry that happened to you,’ whispered Willow, once more. Cillian was not so vexed this time.

‘What fickle folk,’ huffed Branwen. ‘And all that foolishness about *changing into a boy or a girl*. Why, you are neither of those, are you Cillian?’

‘Indeed. Some days different forms may suit me, but I never settle.’ Cillian shivered, feeling the echo of snake-scales on their skin. ‘The sky someday is blue, someday grey, sometimes red awash with sunset, sometimes heavy with rain—yet it is still the sky. It is the same for me. I may look many different ways, as the weather in me changes, but Cillian I remain.’

‘I sometimes wonder,’ said Willow, surprising them. Willow was lying on their back in the grass, their flaming copper hair fanned around them, frowning contemplatively at the dappled canopy of leaves.

Fifteen summertimes had passed since Willow had been born among the trees. Cillian was countless years older than them, yet Willow had a gravitas to their expression that made Cillian feel like a child. ‘My father wished for me to have the choice, and the choice not to choose. I am grateful for this, as it is apparently most odd,’ said Willow. Branwen nodded in confirmation. ‘Yet sometimes... sometimes I feel a comfort in the bell-chime sound of *Lady of the Forest*, or the cadence of *daughter*. Sometimes I think that may suit me. Yet like the waning and waxing of the moon, the feeling passes.’

‘Well, who is to say it should not ebb and flow?’ Cillian rolled towards their sibling, flopping an arm across Willow’s chest and making them splutter and laugh. ‘Perhaps by the waxing of the moon you should be a woman, and by the waning you should shrug womanhood off. No one could stop you.’

Willow laughed. ‘Perhaps, perhaps! But is womanliness or manliness or inbetweenedness so easy to take on or off, like a cloak?’

‘I could not tell you. I have never partaken in such things. As I said, I am simply Cillian, as much as this vexes the folk around me.’

‘It is not vexing!’ declared Branwen. ‘It makes all the sense in the world to me!’

‘Do you fancy manliness a cloak to remove or rug up in, as the weather demands?’

Branwen puffed up their chest. ‘I fancy you may be as manly as you please without being a *man*. All this, for me—it is not about cloaks as far as I see it, but something from within.’

Willow nodded, studiously. 'Is that how it feels for you, Cillian?'

'I believe my father wanted a son and a daughter,' they replied. The words fell pebble-heavy from their lips. 'A matched set, day and night. Had I truly wished to impress him, I suppose I could have gone along with it. It would have been as simple as staying in one boy-shaped form, pretending, answering to *he* and to *son* and to *prince*.'

'Oh, but it would not have been simple at all!' exclaimed Branwen. 'I had no such battle as yours to fight, Silver-eyes, but it was exhausting all the same! It makes you tired down to your bones, to go along with an identity that does not fit you. It would have been a lie.'

'A lie. Yes! And not a *fun* lie, either!' Cillian scoffed, and Branwen laughed. 'I am neither man nor maiden, and this is a truth as true as the silver of my eyes and the starlight in my blood and the obnoxious nature of my presence.' They prodded Willow in the stomach and made them giggle again. 'So yes, I wager that it is something to do with the heart.'

'Is that where the truth of the self lies?' Willow tossed a handful of grass at Cillian, deterring their poking fingertips. 'Or is it in the mouth, and such things become true when spoken, like some forms of magic?'

'I believe such truths are true, whether spoken aloud or not,' nodded Branwen. 'But like some magics, I believe they can feel strengthened when spoken. Especially to ears that understand.'

Cillian dodged Willow's grassy assault, and the blades hit Branwen in the face. They sneezed violently, blowing greenery asunder. 'Forgive me!' squeaked Willow.

'Never!' cried Cillian. 'What have you done? How they sneeze! How they snuffle!'

‘You must pay for your misdeeds!’ agreed Branwen, springing forward. ‘Back into the stream with you to wash away your villainy!’

The three of them chased one another around the riverbank, their bare feet dirty with water and sand and loose grass, their hearts full and for a moment unworried. Cillian did not think of the veil, did not think of Maebh, did not think of the world beyond. Through no trick or flair of magic, those three managed to make it so that nothing outside that burbling glade existed.

Like handfuls of starlight, they managed to steal moments of peace.

‘I am so happy here,’ said Branwen, out of breath, soaked through with river water and joy. ‘I am so glad that salmon spat its oil at me.’

‘If that is what brought such a friend to us,’ grinned Willow. ‘Then I am glad as well.’

‘How does it work?’ Cillian, currently a fox, shook water violently from their fur. It spun and splattered all over the others, causing them to splutter.

‘I can show you!’ Branwen jammed the back of their hand into their mouth. Muffled, they announced ‘I am seeking a vision of your future right this moment.’

Cillian snorted with laughter. Willow had more tact. ‘What do you see?’

‘I see you pulling the threads of magic,’ Branwen said, around their hand. Cillian giggled. ‘All twined about your hands, your arms. I see you facing a golden-haired girl, your sister I suppose. Ah...’

‘What is wrong?’ Cillian chirped. ‘Did you get your fist stuck in your mouth?’

Branwen slowly lowered their hand. Quiet trickled through the woods. Cillian’s fur began to stand on end.

‘I see you facing Maebh,’ whispered Branwen. ‘But then I do not see you at all. You simply... vanish.’

‘Vanish?’ It was Willow who spoke first. ‘What can you mean, vanish?’

‘I do not know. I can see them clearly, and then... I cannot.’

Like handfuls of starlight, they managed to steal moments of peace.

But moments are only momentary.

Blood and Fire

It was a sun-drenched afternoon when—

Ah. Forgive us. This part is always a little difficult, even in the retelling. We are storytellers, overseers, but though we are distant we are not impartial.

It was a sunny afternoon, before the sky began to darken and the light that shone through the leaves winked out and vanished. An acrid smell began to shove through the air, slowly overriding the scent of freshwater and green growth.

Aisling's hounds noticed it first, lifting their noses, flattening their ears. Aisling herself looked up, following their gaze, and spotted the white-hot wisps of embers drifting on the breeze between the rainbow baubles that lit the woodland.

Willow heard the whispers of trees first, passing the message along, worry in the rustling of their leaves as the scent of burning wood spread. Then Willow heard a rising undercurrent of panic that sank into their very veins, sent them clambering to the top of the tallest tree in the Rowantree camp.

A wave of smoke hit them as they broke the canopy, great plumes blowing in from far away. The great ocean of green that made up the Wandering Wood was broken by a thick gust of black and a flash underneath of red.

Willow screamed, in shared fear for the animals, in shared pain for the trees. As they cried out smoke pushed itself into their mouth, down their throat, myriad ashy hands choking them from the inside. Willow buckled, coughing, and fell through the branches. The great tree caught them and lowered them to the ground safely, fretful mushrooms sprouting around Willow's feet as they touched the forest floor.

‘Help!’ they shouted, but their voice rasped. ‘We must help! There is fire in the wood!’

What followed was a flurry of movement: embers dancing between trees, bodies rushing back and forth. ‘Beware!’ ordered Aisling. ‘This may not have started naturally. As I smell smoke on the air, I sense the presence of gods.’

Cillian, who had been watching this all play out from their perch in a tree, shuddered. It was a visceral motion, unprecedented and unwarranted, their body moving without meaning. A flinch so instinctive they lost majesty over their own limbs.

But it could not be Lorcán, could it? What business had he, in the forest?

Even as Cillian asked this question of themselves, they felt the answer settle like a metallic weight in their stomach.

‘Cillian!’ But there was no time to waver, because—‘Cillian!’ Willow was calling out their name, searching for them in the trees. ‘We must help the trees! Is there a Causeway that can connect the nearby river to the site of the flames?’

Willow stood, undeterred by the floating embers, their golden eyes set with such determination it could have moved the world. Cillian moved, once more, against their own will. Though not a flinch, this time, not a recoil. They moved towards Willow, for their presence was such that it made you want to leap forwards. To run alongside them, to see the world as they saw it.

‘You stay here.’ Elinor was cautioning Brigit, who was glaring at her. ‘We need someone to tend the keep.’

‘Tend the keep!’ Brigit scoffed. ‘What use will I be here, if the flames approach?’

‘Please.’ Elinor was unusually quiet. She rested her forehead against Brigit’s, with such softness that it made Brigit go still. ‘I can fight all the beasts of this world, but I would be utterly defeated if I let anything befall you.’

Brigit sighed, and leaned into Elinor. ‘Be careful.’

‘Never mind *careful*.’ Elinor half-grinned. ‘What I shall be is victorious!’

Cillian pulled open a Causeway and the group ran through: Willow leading the charge, followed swiftly behind by Branwen and Elinor, and Aidan in case there were injured folk. Rowan surprised them by stepping through, his cloak wrapped tight around him. ‘This forest has cared for me for nearly sixteen years,’ he said. ‘I owe it my life.’

Cillian went last, closing the gap in the Fabric, making sure the veil they had made around the camp was pulled tight.

They ran, for a moment, in that hollow space. In the Causeway, there was silence, five bodies panting through an ancient breathless space. Cillian felt the threads tug at them, oddly tight, twining round their fingers where they pulled open the gap, digging into their skin.

When they came out the other side, there was noise, unbearable noise. All around was a roaring that could be matched by no beast, mortal nor monstrous, and all around was the smell of life crumbling to ashes. Birds scattered to the blackened sky, deer and wolves fled in tandem, rushing past with no heed to the people who had suddenly appeared in their midst. A fox nearly knocked into Cillian’s ankles, and they twisted round to watch the sleek creature run for its life.

Cillian was not fond of fire. Few folk are, in fairness, but there was a particular terror in those leaping white-hot flames. They could not be reckoned with, as Cillian could reckon

with light or with sound. They were made of something else, strangely liquid in its motion, strangely sharp and carnivorous.

‘Water!’ cried Rowan. ‘We must douse the ground so it does not spread!’

Cillian followed Willow’s plan, opening a pathway between the river and the burning thicket. They let the water pour across the flames, sending great screams of steam and vapour into the air. The world stank of the war between flame and freshwater, and the ruined, black ground sloshed underfoot like a wicked mud.

‘Advance!’ called Willow. ‘This area is cooling, but there is more ahead! If we—’

Through the smoke, through the chaos, a shape. The silhouette of a person, though somehow different. Broader in the shoulders. Taller than an average man. More angular, somehow, even as a seething shadow—metallic, geometric, perfectly carved.

From within this shape, a flash: a crackling, a burning, hovering at an odd angle and distance above the ground. What manner of fire could this be, they wondered? All of them save for Cillian, who knew that spark better than anyone else.

This was not a leaping flame as nature would construct it, but a snarling ball of sparks held in someone’s fist.

Lorcán stepped out of the smoke, spear lashed across his back, stark against the blackened trees. He strode through the ashes and embers as if overseeing a minor disappointment, marched through the carnage of searing sap and burning wood as if it meant nothing.

He turned, and for a second his golden eyes met Cillian’s, for the first time in years. He said, in a voice like a brewing storm, ‘There you are.’

An echo of his raging voice shuddered through Cillian's skull, a phantom pain of the wounds from the spear shaft now slung across his back. Lorcán only smiled. 'Do not quaver so, pathetic child. What manner of god are you? What manner of child of mine?'

They stood before their father, and they had never felt more tangible, more rooted to the earth. To slip between places, to weave with moonbeams and colour, to steal songs— Cillian's hands could do so much, yet now they hung limply by their side, useless and heavy.

'I am not afraid of you,' they declared. Cillian, you may recall, is an excellent liar. But this one fell flat and metallic from their tongue. Lorcán scoffed, amused.

He faced Cillian across the field of burnt trees, all framed in dead black and hungry red. There was a flurry of movement in front of them, and they braced themselves for pain. They crumpled to the ground in a ball, uncaring of the heat still wavering off the burnt remains of the forest floor, hands in their black hair, waiting for the impact.

But it did not come. Branwen's voice cut through the smoking silence. 'You lay a hand on them,' they boomed. 'And you shall answer to us!'

'You move a hair on your head,' growled Elinor. 'And you shall be dead before you hit the ground!'

Cillian opened their eyes and saw those two standing over them, spears brandished. Willow was poised there too, and Rowan, and even Aidan on the flank. 'What are you doing?' they breathed.

'You are a pain in the ass, Silver-eyes, but you are a pain in *my* ass,' snarled Elinor. 'Let no other villain claim you.'

Lorcán cast a derisive glance over the group. His eyes passed over Rowan and showed no glimmer of recognition. ‘So the tales are true. You have taken up with this pack of half-monsters and fool mortals.’

His gaze at last settled on Willow, two pairs of golden eyes meeting. He tipped his head. ‘I see the stories of *you* are true as well.’

‘Lorcán.’ Willow’s voice rang across the carnage like a bell. ‘At last we meet. We have witnessed many of your deeds second-hand. I wish to speak with you.’

‘I had hoped if I found one brat, I might find the other.’ Lorcán spoke as if he had not heard them. He instead turned his head to address someone else. Croiadh the Crow appeared between the burnt tree trunks, almost blending in with his black cloak and inky hair. The strip of silken fabric across his eyes glinted as an ember fluttered past his face. ‘Crow?’

‘My king.’

‘This cannot be the child the mortal folk speak of. She has my eyes, yet she is miniscule. There is little about this tiny girl that is godly.’

Cillian winced, on Willow’s behalf. Willow stood firm, calling out once more. ‘Lorcán!’

‘Cease your yapping just one moment,’ he growled. Elinor struck out her spear, flashing Godsbane in front of him.

‘You will lay no hand on *them*, either.’ She bared her teeth, blackness swirling out from between them.

Lorcán regarded them both, letting the lightning crack and fizz in his palm, fidgeting idly with power enough to burn down a forest. ‘Crow, what threat does the golden-eyed child pose to me?’

‘No man or woman can harm you, my king,’ said Croiadh. ‘Be they mortal or god.’

‘And that one spitting smoke,’ Lorcán inquired. ‘That is the Beast who was supposed to be the end of me, is it not?’

The Crow nodded, watching the group with his unseeing eyes. ‘Indeed it is. And the golden-haired boy is the one with healing tears.’

‘Lorcán!’ Willow raised their voice. They stepped forward. They had their hands over their heart. ‘Please! We must speak. We must come to an arrangement so this bloodshed can end.’

Cillian stared at them with something like fiery bile in their throat.

Willow looked up at the High King of the Gods, and he sneered back, looking amusedly down his nose. If he felt any connection with this being he had helped bring into the world, his face did not betray it. ‘An arrangement? You stand before me in a burning field and think to offer me peace?’ He chuckled, the mirth of it echoing among the ashes.

‘Please,’ repeated Willow. ‘I am Willow of the Wandering Wood, child of Rowan and child of the Forest. You and I share blood, and surely, even with the circumstances of my birth, this is a bridge between us. I wish for nothing more than peace.’ A hopeful glow sparked behind their eyes. The same blood-gold eyes as his. ‘Please. We have so much to talk of. We have so much to offer one another, if only we are reasonable.’

‘Oh, you are here to make me an offer?’ Lorcán stepped forward. That spear, that hateful spear, was suddenly in his hand. Cillian wanted to crawl beneath the burnt grass and become one with the worms, but they could not look away.

They were dimly aware of Rowan's voice, behind them, impossibly far away. Saying their name, saying their name, burning whispers of *Cillian, Cillian, open a Causeway, we must go, we must get away from him, Cillian? Cillian?* They could not move.

Lorcán moved again, closing the distance one charred footstep at a time. 'Perhaps, if I had raised you myself, you may have been of use to me. Then again...' He glanced to Cillian with a snort. Cillian could not move. 'Never mind that now. I smoked you out to meet this *legendary hero*, but I find myself beset by little more than a pack of strange, feral children. There is little of value here.'

He had nearly reached Willow, only Elinor between them. They were half his height, slight as a sapling next to him.

Cillian could not move.

'You have nothing to offer me, bastard,' he said. 'Save for the satisfaction of your demise.'

Willow whispered, 'What...?'

Rowan screamed, '*Willow!*'

Elinor's hair whipped free of its braid and lashed around her head. She darted forward with a snarl, spewing smoke, spear thrust out.

Lorcán blocked her, knocked her spearpoint towards the sky, and stabbed his own through her chest. A flick of the wrist. An afterthought. The swatting of a fly.

The world turned red as Cillian watched Elinor dangle midair for a moment, suspended, skewered on Lorcán's spear. Then it slid out of her and she collapsed to the ground like a sack of broken bones.

Smoke trailed off her for a moment more, then dissipated into empty air.

Lorcán looked disdainfully at the scarlet blood dripping thick and viscous down his spear. ‘I am beginning to lose faith in these prophecies of yours, Crow. They are scarcely even entertaining anymore.’

Someone was screaming. Cillian could not tell who. Cillian could not move. Cillian could not breathe.

Yet they heard, clear as ice, Lorcán ask, ‘You are not going to fight back?’

A wavering sound from Willow. A faint ‘Please.’ Nothing more.

‘Let us away,’ Lorcán drawled. ‘This was a most unsatisfying hunt. Ah,’ he cast a glance downwards again. ‘But bring the golden-haired one. Healing tears could prove useful, and if nothing else, he could be something to keep Nessa distracted while she toils away on land.’

‘No!’ The voices wavered and danced around Cillian, burning the air. ‘*No! Let him go!*’

‘*Help!*’

‘*Aidan!*’

Cillian could not move.

Cillian could not breathe.

Cillian could not, could not, could not.

Someone was saying their name. Someone was tugging on their shoulder. ‘Please,’ they were whimpering. ‘Please, you have to get up. We have to help them.’ Willow. Willow was sobbing into Cillian’s hair. ‘We have to—’

‘Do not *touch me!*’ Cillian finally moved, flinching away and transforming.

Transforming into what, they could not say. They could not get a grip on their limbs or their tongue or their spine. They moved in a flurry of scattered blackness towards the broken, burnt husk of a tree, and stowed themselves there, seething behind the charred wall of wood.

Willow approached, looking on in fear. ‘Cillian? Cillian, please...’

They felt as though they were made of the shards of myriad broken things, unable to move without cutting themselves and the world around them. ‘You offered him *peace*,’ they snarled, voice all shattered glass. ‘He caused me such pain, and you offered him peace!’

Horror crossed Willow’s face. ‘I wanted to try,’ they whispered.

Cillian curled into a ball against the burned trunk. ‘What hope have we to *try*? I am all stardust, so easily ground to nothingness between his fingers. I can weave the glow of the moon, I can spin the spectrum, but what use is that? I can tug at the fabric of magic, but only to hide, quaking, behind a veil.’

They shrank, smaller and smaller, wondering if they could vanish down to nothingness if they kept going. ‘I cannot fight. I cannot protect anyone. The folk will sing of my petty tricks and my *amusing* shape-changing and how I slide like liquid, shapeless and weightless and hopeless, in the palm of the very hand that stole me from the sky. While *you*,’ they hissed. ‘You stood there and *offered that man peace!*’

‘I only wanted to try.’ Willow’s voice came from deep within their chest, the confession tucked somewhere nervous and safe behind their heart. ‘I thought I could talk my way to happiness and prosperity for this land, for its people, that I could make the gods and mortals love each other as we love in our home in the forest...’

‘Well you are *stupid!*’ Cillian shouted. ‘Speak not to me! Go and simper at the feet of that murderer, that tyrant, that thief of the stars! Maybe if you ask nicely enough he will *say sorry* for breaking my bones! Maybe he will see the error of his ways and help rebuild all the settlements he has razed!’

They heard a scuffle of movement, saw Willow reaching out them, and cried ‘*Do not touch me!*’ in a voice they barely recognised. They sprouted four warped and broken wings and took to the burning sky.

A Song for Broken Children

Cillian ran. Blind in the darkness of the forest, scarcely a drop of moonlight finding its way between the trees. They stumbled, staggered, stuttered, spluttered, *sprinted*, simply remaking their legs where tree roots knocked their shins, letting their palms bleed gold where brambles and branches scratched at their hands.

Where will you go, my child? we asked, calling down to earth. *Where do you flee?*

‘It matters not! I will run!’ Cillian spat, crying it to the stars to make it true. ‘I have done it once, and I will do it once more!’

Yes, Cillian ran, ran, and planned to run yet more: it was what they knew best, after all, that slippery wandering, that shifting and settling and ducking between the Fabric. They would pull a cloak of nothingness around them and vanish into the Causeways, letting the threads tangle round them, even if it meant they were endlessly watched by that eyeless figure all made of feathers and horns.

They would become one with the wind and scatter to the sky like petals. They would borrow the moonlight and construct from it a raft and a sail, and rush over the waves, over the spires of the Kingdom of the Sea, to the world beyond this country, beyond the reach of the gods.

Run, run, like a hare with its ears back, with its heart beating like a hammer in its fragile ribs. Run, trickster, run, become invisible, become someone else, become as starlight, vanished by the morning and never to be found.

Cillian pictured it all, saw it so clearly. They reached the edge of the Forest and poised to leap, to flee one final time, to disappear in a blink of silver.

And yet.

And yet, my child, and yet.

They found they could not move, could not cross the threshold of the woods into the clear, free field beyond. Could scarcely form a grip on the Fabric, their fingers were shaking so. Their chest heaved, their skin prickled, and their feet refused to move.

When Cillian had fled from the palace, they had been leaving nothing behind. Lorcán had broken their bones, Maebh had broken their heart, and there were no friends there to offer mending. Yet now they could not unthink of the folk in the forest, all gathered and mourning around Elinor's body. Sobbing for Aidan, stolen away. Weeping around the fracture Lorcán had cut into their family.

Family! No, Cillian had no need of such a thing. When they had first fled, they had vowed vengeance on their father and sister, walked the world alone. Cillian had no family to speak of. Willow was of their blood, perhaps, but they...

They had carried Cillian to a healing bed, when Cillian had plotted to do them harm. They had offered peace to the most ruthless being Cillian had ever met. Cillian buried their face in their bleeding hands and let out a muffled howl, sinking to the earthen floor at the edge of the woods. What did they seek, that forest-raised fool?

Aidan sought happiness. Elinor sought approval. Brigit sought to be loved. Branwen sought community, a place where they could look into the eyes of their fellows and see something familiar reflected back. Such human follies, such mortal needs. Yet Cillian had looked upon them all and seen something of themselves, with such clarity and brightness they had wanted to look away.

And now Cillian had left them all behind.

Dawn broke, golden light peeking over the plains, and Cillian had not been able to make themselves move. A voice in their head screamed *go, now, before the sun rises. Disappear into the last breaths of the night.* A voice in their heart whispered *go back, go home.* The voice in their throat just wept.

The pink-hued hush of sunrise was broken by footsteps in the ferns behind them. A voice rang out, sweet as a songbird's, wielded like a flat knife.

'Don't you dare run,' said Brigit.

Cillian remained rooted to the forest floor, but twisted round and looked up at her.

Grief, sometimes, can be a dull burning, coals throbbing with an ever-present radiant heat. Grief, in Brigit's eyes, was roaring flame. 'I am sorry,' Cillian croaked.

'Do not apologise,' she scoffed. 'Repair this.'

'There is no way this can be repaired.'

'She cannot die,' Brigit announced. 'I will not stand for it.'

'Unfortunately,' Cillian snapped. 'There is little we can do. Elinor is mortal, fangs or none.'

'Perhaps we could not stop her from dying. But we can stop her from *staying* dead.' She approached, all clad in fire. 'You are the one tied up with boundaries, with the space between, with the breaking of the rules. There must be some wedge you can drive between life and death.'

'I know of no magic to breathe life back into the deceased.' Cillian found their voice was broken in their throat, their words creaking and cracking like frost underfoot. 'Elinor is in *no space between.* She is...'

They paused, thinking of that figure, that mess of wings, walking in the silent strange Causeways as if it owned the place. They thought of its unfamiliarity, the alien nature of the thing that had struck such visceral fear into Cillian the first time they had crossed its path. The shape of the figure in its arms, guided and guarded.

‘The space between,’ they breathed. ‘The Causeways are the realm of Death. Death walks those paths, able to be wherever it needs.’

Brigit seemed unfazed by this. ‘And Death is an ancient thing, like the stars and the woods. We may speak to them, so I fail to see why we cannot speak with Death, too.’

‘You want to *speak* to it?’

‘I am,’ said Brigit. ‘Very persuasive.’

Cillian stared at her a moment, all illuminated in shades of red and gold, deep shadows under her eyes. ‘Is that love?’ they asked. ‘To reckon with even the grip of death?’

‘As a bard, I ought to be able to come up with a poetic answer to that, to list off all the things that love is. But I am not in the mood.’

Slowly, Cillian stood, their back to the rising sun. And offered her their hand. ‘Come, then, poet. I shall find you a doorway.’

Willow, too, was not still that night. Stillness made their skin crawl; stillness was for corpses. Elinor’s was laid out upon a flat stone surrounded by what flowers they could salvage. The body remained, but something had clearly left it. Had their eyes been more focused, Willow may have noticed a shift in the shadows as night fell. A soft and subtle beating of wings, of hoofs, of hearts, descending to carry Elinor away.

Brigit had said, ‘Do not bury nor burn her yet. She deserves a hero’s rest, but her tale is not done.’ Bewildered with their eyes full of ashes, they had all obliged, and they had all watched her disappear between the trees as the Forest moved to make a path for her.

Willow could not make themself weep, even as smoke stung their eyes.

‘What do we do?’ asked Branwen, pacing back and forth. ‘What *can* we do?’

Willow knew they must answer them, must speak some words of wisdom, of kindness, but their tongue was dry as ashes. All they could see was Lorcán’s twisted, haughty smile. Elinor, falling. Aidan, reaching out for help. And the echoing silhouette of Cillian, fleeing, fleeing, fleeing.

‘I am so glad you are safe,’ Rowan had said. Willow had barely heard him. Lorcán had come to find them, to find Willow, to burn his way through the woods as a means of drawing them out. Yes, Willow was safe; safe in a sea of carnage. Safe in a Forest that was too still.

Willow suspected that Rowan would not sleep that night, but they did him the courtesy of at least waiting until he looked like he was at rest. Then Willow snuck away from the cluster of trees and cooking cauldrons and flowers they called a Keep, a Keep that could barely protect anything, and walked.

They walked, and walked, scarcely knowing the path before their feet. Trees flowed past like water. Creatures slunk back, out of their way, letting them pass. The eyes of great deer and fleet foxes and silent owls all glinted in the moonlight, watching Willow go. No breeze wove between the trunks, stirred the leaves. Even the trickle of rivers and creeks seemed hushed. The world was silent in mourning, and in anticipation.

Willow emerged, as the sun was rising, into the clearing where the sword in the tree stood.

The dawn was pink and violet, glinting off the exposed part of the blade. The hilt was carved with leaves, intricate and seeming to waver in the wind rolling in off the sea.

Willow contemplated that, some fifteen years before, a village had stood not too far from that place. Rowan had been born there, behind those quaking walls, the roaring ocean at his back and the unforgiving realm of the gods ahead. There had been many other children, families, people committing the crime of simply wanting to live. And Lorcán had reduced it all to ash and rubble on a whim, in a single flash of selfish rage.

Yet here Willow still stood, because their father had protected them. Because, in spite of everything, Willow had been loved. Willow had been tucked away in a forest daydream all their life, surrounded by flowers and kindness, while the world raged on outside.

Elinor, falling. Aidan, reaching. Cillian, fleeing.

Willow reached out and touched the hilt of the sword. It tingled beneath their fingertips.

‘Aisling says I have a destiny,’ they whispered. ‘She says this is what I was born to do.’

Willow wrapped their hand around the sword’s grip and pulled. ‘Speak not to me of fate. No path led me here but my own fury.’

It slipped from the trunk easy as breathing, the metal sighing against the unmoving wood. Its long blade glittered into view, glowing in the sunlight, almost as long as Willow was tall. They lifted it above their head, holding the blade towards the sky, feeling it thrum in their hand.

The sword shouted, '*Finally we meet!*'

The Dreaming Blade and the Singing Wind

Gods do not dream. Not in the sense that humans do, at least.

Perhaps Dream is a land related to the Causeways, not commonly traversed by gods—and only outliers like Cillian, who seek to venture there, can find it. Perhaps because dreams would give them a place to explore different possibilities, different fears, and such vulnerability would not sit well with gods. Perhaps because they are like marble: unchanging, unmoving, even beneath the surface.

In any case, Cliodhna was most vexed when she was turned into a tree, and dreamed for the first time.

Trees dream, you see—they have memories, and they can listen to the memories of all the creatures in their midst. Cliodhna the tree rested, and she found that she could hear the whispers of every earthworm in the soil, every follicle of fungus, every slumbering twitch of a wolf or a deer running in their sleep. She could feel the memories of all the other trees, as their root systems touched hers. She learned their language, learned their history. She came to understand the land itself, not just walk upon it.

She dreamed of flying above the treetops, from the memories of birds. She dreamed of running through the underbrush, from the memories of boars. She dreamed of stretching, growing, seeking light. She dreamed of a better world.

She dreamed of Aisling, her dearest Aisling, and wondered when she would see her again.

She waited, and these dreams solidified into a sword, which a group of mortal settlers were surprised to find at the centre of her trunk. They made it a game of sorts, a rite of

passage: come of age, and see if you can pull the blade loose. Cliodhna let them have their fun.

She knew she only needed to be patient. She had dreamed, too, of a pair of angry hands pulling her free. It was a righteous anger, white-hot from the flames of injustice. ‘Speak not to me of fate,’ came a young, raw voice, and Cliodhna knew that it was time.

‘I am pleased to meet you at last,’ she announced. She was unpracticed at speaking, and her voice rang sharply from the metal. ‘I am Cliodhna, Queen of the Great Forest, Huntress of Monsters. And, if we are lucky, Slayer of Kings.’

‘I am Willow,’ said the young person who had pulled her free. They held the massive sword with ease. ‘I am deserving of no titles. I am simply Willow, and I need to do something before more people get hurt.’

Swords could not smile, either, but the dawn light burst and twinkled off the blade in a way that conveyed the same feeling. ‘Come, then. Let us not think of destiny, as you say. Let us go make a reckoning.’

Cillian steadied their hands enough to pull open a gap in the Fabric. Threads came loose and coiled through their fingers, curling serpentine around their knuckles and tickling their wrists. ‘Perhaps I should go with you,’ they murmured.

Brigit shook her head. ‘Go back to help. The Rowantree folk need your skills more than I do, now that you have opened the door.’

Cillian scoffed, bristling with broken black feathers from the night before. ‘They have no need of me, and I no need of them.’

Brigit gave them a withering look. ‘I thought you were meant to be a gifted liar, Cillian Silver-eyes?’

She stepped into the Causeway, her footsteps drumming out the faintest echo on the ancient, impossible stone. Cillian let the Fabric drape shut, almost all the way, leaving a breath of space for her return.

They looked at their hands, into which the threads had disappeared. They had paid it no heed at first, when this had all been play. But now they had to wonder how many threads of magic were twining round their tendons, flickering in their blood. Each time Cillian went through the veil, they were not simply passing through, a tourist in the void. They left their mark on the world, tears in its material and footprints in its pathways. And, like all places we move through, it became slowly part of them.

Cillian looked at the sky, scarred with the smoke that remained from the fire. With the dark sunlight peeking through, it was somewhat difficult to tell if it was dawn or dusk.

They shifted into a raven—with surety this time—and flew with all their strength to Rowantree Keep.

Yet when they arrived, they found the place empty. It was eerie in its stillness, haunted in its quiet, empty of talk and laughter. Morning mist draped the ground, clinging to the waists of the trees, and the air smelled of smoke. Cillian found a figure lying down, as if asleep, and balked when they realised it was Elinor. All laid out in a bed of flowers. Accustomed as they were to her proud ferocity, the look of peace on her face made Cillian’s skin crawl.

How fragile humans are. How frightening a thought.

The vision of Elinor falling, bleeding and silent, dashed across Cillian's eyes. In their cowering, they had blinded themselves to the image of Aidan being captured, carried away as if he weighed nothing, meant nothing.

But they remembered the vision of Willow, staring at them in fear. Their compassionate sibling, the child they had once meant to murder. And for what?

Cillian spoke into the grey silence. 'O Forest, lend me your aid: where can I find your child Willow?'

At first there was no reply. Then a conflicted, seething susurrus. Pain from their burns. Anguish over the human consequences. Loathing for the gods. All the trees had ever wanted was to exist, to grow towards the sun, to spread their roots and get through their lives.

Cillian forced himself to pay attention, but the ancient whispers were a jumble Cillian could not make sense of. They tried to snatch the voices from the air and weave them into something more sensible, but their fingers trembled and stumbled and the words of the trees disappeared into the mist. 'Please,' Cillian hissed, and the trees heard love among the fury of their words. 'I must find them.'

Slowly, the trees began to move.

Without a word, they shifted, carefully, almost imperceptibly. Cillian felt their movement before they heard it—a tingle over the skin as the breeze changed, a prickling at the back of the neck as something ancient adjusted its weight. They looked up, and before them was a tunnel: a pathway of trunks and branches, leading them in a wavering line towards a pinpoint of light.

Cillian could not quite see what lay at the end, but they had some idea. They flinched, quavered.

But they sprouted wings once more, and they flew.

And across the land, things were taking flight.

Willow walked, Cliodhna strapped to their back, out of the Forest and towards the palace of bone. Branwen walked beside them, never wavering for a second, Elinor's spear in one hand. Rowan flanked Willow's other side, protective and staring ahead. Aisling took up the rear, her hounds patrolling with their heads down.

Cliodhna had said, 'It is good to see you again, my love.' Aisling had said nothing, simply started weeping, the silent tears of the impossible coming true.

There was little to say. They had their plan. They were marching on Lorcán, to challenge the king to a duel of rights. 'Demand to face his best fighter,' said Rowan. 'For in his vanity he will select himself, and walk straight into your blade.'

Willow shook their head. As they walked, they tied back their hair—tightly braided, no longer bouncing freely round their face and shoulders as it had when they were a child. 'I wish for no trickery. I will call Lorcán out, and if Lorcán does not come, I will go to him.'

Rowan bowed his head. 'Such an unshakeable will, my child. I only pray that you be careful.'

Willow faltered—the tiny youth with the god-sword strapped to their back. 'I... I have no lust for violence. My whole life, all I have ever sought is peace.' They balled up their hands, then dropped them, as if grasping for something they could not name. 'But I am... I am *so angry*.'

'Anger can be a gift,' said Rowan, softly. He reached out and tucked a wayward curl of Willow's hair behind their ear. 'It is all about how you use it.'

‘I feel like I must do *something*. I... I am of his blood. He stole you away, was so dreadful to you, and you were left with me as a reminder. I have lazed away in a woodland dream for fifteen years, and I must—’

‘You must nothing.’ Rowan ceased his march and clasped his child’s face gently in his hands. Willow was forced to pause. ‘Willow of the Wandering Wood, look at me. I do not regret you, would not exchange you for anything in the world. You may be of Lorcán’s blood, strictly speaking, but in my heart you are mine and mine alone. I have loved you your whole life, and I will love you when we are both reduced to soil and faded into legend.’

He smiled a crooked yet certain smile. ‘Now, dearest, do not fight back tears. Save your fight for Lorcán. Fight with fury, but fight with love. For me, for Elinor, for Cillian, for the grandparents you never knew. For everyone else who has been lost. Fight so that others may grow up only knowing peace, so they may live without this anger you carry.’

‘Love and fury.’ Willow sniffled. They let the tears bead on their eyelashes, let them pour down their cheeks. ‘Can such things go together?’

Rowan offered them a smile. ‘I would say it is the most powerful combination on this earth.’

He looked to Aisling, who nodded surely. ‘Love and fury.’

It carried on the wind, and in the wind, something changed.

As they walked, they passed a settlement, all spiked walls and fortified gates. ‘Where do you wander, travellers?’ called the guard. Before anyone could respond, Branwen called out ‘We march to fight Lorcán, he who calls himself High King of all the Gods! We fight with love and fury!’

‘You are mad!’ gasped the guard, but then her eyes settled on the shining sword on Willow’s back. Something about the way the light caught the impossible metal made the breath vanish from her chest. A glint, perhaps, of potential.

‘Perhaps,’ said Willow. ‘But I have to try.’

Those words, too, were swept up by the gathering wind.

‘We could not ask you to abandon your post,’ said Branwen. ‘For you must protect what is yours, first. But if your folk have blades and hearts to spare...’

Willow looked to them in surprise. ‘I do not wish to put anyone else in danger.’

Branwen shrugged, lifting Godsbane so its blade shimmered in the sunlight; once the tusk of a Great Beast, now all that remained of a friend. ‘A fight with the gods is not a fight for you alone. Fury is bled into these lands.’

And lo, within moments, humans were rushing out of the gates. Young and old, their weapons clattering on their backs like chattering teeth. The guard cried ‘We will come with you!’

‘You said it was madness!’

‘Aye, perhaps it is! But we have to try!’

They walked onwards, gods and mortals, and passed a field of wheat. The farmers called ‘Travellers! Where are you going?’ And once more Branwen boomed ‘We march to defeat Lorcán, he who calls himself High King of all the Gods! We fight with love and fury!’

The farmers brought them bread and milk, waved them on their way. The youths in the family vaulted over the fence and followed Willow down the road, mingling with

Aisling's hunting dogs. 'Let us fight with you!' they shouted. 'For we have fury in our hearts as well!'

'It will be dangerous,' cautioned Rowan. 'You may not return alive.'

'Perhaps!' The siblings looked at one another, then raised their fists. 'But we have to try!'

The wind picked up, a growing tempest pushing the group across the plains. 'Take us with you!' Voices swirled into the air. 'Let us join you!'

'Fight with us!' called Branwen, holding Elinor's spear aloft. 'Fight for those you lost! Fight so we may lose no one else!'

'Reckon with the gods!' the mortals cried. More and more of them, gathering with each settlement or remote hut they passed. It seemed they were coming out of the hills themselves, from places that the news could not possibly have reached. But the wind is a canny thing. It travels far, ruffling the surface of the sea into whitecaps, communing with the trees as it swings through their canopies, winding between mountain peaks and stirring the still, silent snow into whirls of dancing white.

That day, it carried voices. It carried the spirit of hope that lifted Branwen's voice. It carried the love and affirmation in Rowan's words. It carried the love and fury of Willow, blowing it through doorways and across great fields of grass, blowing it into the hearts of all who heard it.

Hope is, by nature, a reckless thing. It is something we have not witnessed in such a way, save for in humans.

And flying above, Cillian witnessed all this, too. As they neared the palace of bone, they soared over a mismatched army of mortals, all shaking their spears and their farmer's tools, crying out in a thousand scattered voices that somehow all spoke the same.

They swooped low, in the nervous hands of an updraft from that singing wind. 'Willow?' they called out, but their voice was swallowed by the clamour from below, the clamour of war and justice. Even if the march had been in silence, the gathered mortals would not have heard them over the beating of blood in their ears. 'Willow! Where are they?'

They could not see their sibling's head, but they spotted Branwen holding Elinor's spear at the front of the crowd. 'Branwen!' They soared downwards, tumbling to the earth in human form, their dark hair swept back from their face by the rushing wind. 'What is happening? Where is Willow?'

'Willow rides to challenge Lorcán to a duel! And we ride to challenge the gods!'

'That is folly!'

A chorus rang out from the mortals, louder and stronger than the wind: 'We have to try!'

'Cillian.' Branwen smiled crookedly, dropping their voice from war-cry to well-wish. 'Worry not. I have something to fight for, and I will not let this be a day without triumph. Please, find Rowan. He slipped away to get into the palace and find Aidan—he said he remembered the way.'

Cillian shivered, frozen to the spot. But, perhaps moved by that raging wind, they blustered forward and wrapped Branwen in an awkward embrace.

‘Fight, Branwen the Bull,’ they whispered. ‘Your story thus far involves the accidental acquisition of Fish Knowledge, which is ridiculous. Fight on, and live another day, so you may gather more glorious tales to your name.’

Branwen laughed, a sound free of malice. ‘The same to you, Cillian Silver-eyes.’

They thought of Branwen’s vision, of vanishing into nothingness. But they did not speak of it. Instead, once more, they flew, carried on that rowdy wind.

In the palace, Lorcán sat upon his throne examining his fingernails. Some of Elinor’s blood had gotten underneath them. He was doing his best to scrub it off, scowling in a bored sort of way, while Maebh sat quietly beside him. Statuesque, radiant, everything a god should be.

The Crow entered, a living liquid shadow, one of his birds perched on his shoulder. ‘That child will be here soon,’ he simply said. ‘Carrying a sword and a sense of finality. Will you go to meet them?’

Lorcán snorted. ‘Persistent creatures, are they not? Fetch my finest swords and spears. Let us end this once and for all, so that I may sit down to dinner in peace.’

‘Oh, do be careful!’ Maebh looked up at her father, tremulous like a sapling in the wind. ‘Even if The Scarlet Beast is gone, there may be other things out there that can wound you still!’

‘Nonsense,’ Lorcán snapped, and she ducked her head, braced against the outburst. ‘You think this petty little half-breed creature offers a threat to me?’

‘No, no,’ smiled Maebh. ‘For you are the strongest and bravest warrior these lands have ever known.’

Lorcán stormed across the throne room. ‘Where do you envision this pest fighting me?’ he called over his shoulder.

‘The plain to the east.’ Croiadh remained still, quiet, as Lorcán blustered past. As an afterthought, he added, ‘And there are humans gathering at the palace entrance, my king. They seem distressed.’

‘Have the guards take care of them,’ Lorcán snorted. And that was that.

Croiadh dipped his dark head. ‘As you command, my king.’

No one could not see The Crow’s eyes, of course, hidden as they were beneath that strip of fabric. Yet we are beholden to say, we are *sure* he shot a sideways glance at Princess Maebh before he followed the High King out of the hall.

The Wrath of Mortals

There is always a silence before great and terrible things occur. A moment where the world draws its breath, where everything pauses, afflicted by a momentary vertigo as things teeter on the edge of change.

There was a silence like this when the gods first arrived, a heartbeat between their ships touching the shore and the landscape changing irrevocably. There was a silence like this when the first human ships were seen on the horizon, too. The gods may not have noticed them at first, but we did— pausing for a second to better position ourselves to see what would happen next.

There was a silence, a stillness, in the moment where Branwen and Aisling and all the hopeful mortals stopped outside the palace gates. The reckless wind dropped. The sea, distantly, halted in its churning. Not a leaf stirred in the Forest. Not a cloud moved in the sky.

Godsbane glinted in Branwen's hand, and behind them, the gathered mortal folk went still.

And then the immortal palace guards burst out through the gates, and the moment was over.

Chaos rushed in to fill the space left by the silence: a crashing, a clashing, a clattering, a clamour. The guards were minor gods, but gods they were still, and they moved with that gemstone-hardness and stony ferocity that defined their kind. They broke upon the crowd of humans, shattering and scattering them. It was, in many ways, like any godly attack on a human settlement that had happened before, that had so defined history.

Yet this was different, too. No, not because they had Aisling among their ranks. Not because Branwen was wielding a weapon that could take down legendary beasts. This was a matter of the mortals. They were ready. They were angry. They had come this far, and they were not willing to let this be the end of anything.

Resilience, like hope, is a trait we find bemusing and admirable. We call you mortals because you are, alas, so defined by your mortality. You burn bright as supernovae, but you are gone as soon as that light catches our attention. In such an ancient world, you spark and fizz in what amounts to seconds. You are so tiny, all the way down there, but you reach for such great and giant things.

You live so briefly, but so fiercely. You glare every day into the eyes of Death, simply by being. You refuse to bend to the rules that we cosmic features take for granted. You change, and that is the source of your power. Never still, never heading towards a fixed point, always coming up with something new.

Perhaps it was folly for this gathered band of mortals to march to the palace gates and *try*, yet what is more human than trying? What is more human than stubbornness, than willpower, than love?

We watched as these star-bright lives fought for themselves, led by a roaring Branwen, and we could not help but admire them. Even as they fell, they shouted their defiance at their tyrants. It was enough to give the gods pause, for they, too, were unfamiliar with these mortal traits. They were smooth as stone, what need had they for *resilience*? They were the victors, what need had they for *hope*?

The gods were used to a certain kind of fight. When Branwen swung Godsbane and lopped the heads off two of the supposedly immortal guards, something in them changed.

The gods, unusually, felt shock and fear. The mortals, unusually, felt a rush of triumph.

The wind picked up again, carrying their war cries, carrying the sounds of their defiance and the smell of their blood.

Yet in the palace orchard, it was eerily silent. Rowan was peering through the trees, one hand on the boar-tusk dagger tied at his hip.

He jumped when a black raven alighted by his feet, and relaxed as it unfolded outwards into Cillian. They were out of breath, wind-harried, their silver eyes wide and rimmed with red. Rowan could not help thinking, in that strange little moment, how young they looked, barely Willow's age. And yet, how much they seemed to have grown since Rowan first came upon them.

'You have returned,' he said. Cillian stood, tucking himself next to Rowan beside one of the blooming fruit trees.

'There is something here that I must do,' swallowed Cillian. They steadied their breath. 'It is strange to be back.'

'Indeed.' Rowan looked ahead, eyes set. 'But as you say, there is work to do.'

Cillian looked to Rowan, suddenly wondering, with a dreadful flash, if this would be the last time they saw him. 'I have brought you so much ruin,' they whispered. 'You never asked for me, yet I fell into your life and now it is this.'

Rowan took an even breath. 'Ruin has always been an expected guest in my life. My only wish was to give my child a haven from the unyielding cruelty of the world, even if only

for a short time. To show them it need not be the whole truth of things, the only way of things.’

‘When I came to you, I came to harm Willow.’ The words, thus far unspoken, stuck like a stone in Cillian’s throat.

He simply nodded. ‘I expected as much.’

‘Then *why* did you take me in? I was hurt. You could have let me die and been done with the whole business of gods.’

Rowan closed his eyes a moment, tired beyond his years. When he spoke, his voice was soft. ‘Perhaps. But Willow saw something in you that they wished to protect, and I was in no position to deny them. And as you healed, I saw the threat in you die away. As you grew, I saw you change. It was a risk, for certain, but I wished to give you the space to choose your own fate.’

They thought of Branwen’s vision: Cillian facing Maebh, then vanishing. ‘Do you think that we can choose our fates, then?’

Rowan shrugged. ‘Why not? Given the body I was born into, you could say it was fate that I grow up into a woman. But I have defied such a destiny. You were born to be a loyal pawn of Lorcán’s, yet here you stand by my side. Only you can decide what happens next. Only you can decide who you are.’

Cillian, in a rare occasion, was speechless. Rowan gave their shoulder a squeeze. ‘And now, we must away. Before we lose any more time.’

They nodded. ‘Go into the palace through the gardens. There is a pool, an ornamental fountain—I imagine it is near there you will find Aidan.’

‘I think I remember the way,’ Rowan grimaced. ‘Not much appears to have changed here.’

‘No. It does not tend to.’

A flicker of silence between them. Rowan whispered, ‘Be careful.’ Then darted out into the orchard, poised to skirt through the trees into the heart of the palace. Cillian watched him go with that stone stuck in their throat.

Yet they found the strength to speak. ‘Lorcán may have pulled me from the sky, but it is you who I think of as my father!’

Cillian transformed into a fox and sped through the gardens before Rowan could reply.

Lorcán and Willow faced each other across the field, a stretch of grass behind the palace grounds.

Lorcán’s guards flanked the makeshift arena, statuesque. Not a single blade of grass dared move, the clouds were halted in the sky, the wind still as death. So Lorcán’s voice carried like a rumble of thunder when he asked, ‘You have come here to offer me a fight, have you?’

Willow stood their ground, feet planted, Clíodhna heavy on their back. Their golden eyes met Lorcán’s, the one thing they seemed to have in common. When Willow spoke, their voice rose to the curve of the unmoving sky. ‘I have come here to offer you peace.’

Lorcán laughed, a booming sound that shattered the quiet. ‘Peace! You recall how our last meeting went?’

Willow swallowed. Their eyes shone. ‘And it need not repeat. Once again, I offer you peace.’

‘Look at me, child.’ Lorcán strode towards them, swinging the sword in his hand. ‘Look *up* at me, for you are so far down. You are grovelling at my feet, you are crawling over my toes, and yet you have the gall to presume you can look me in the eye and offer *me* peace?’

‘I can try.’

He slammed the point of his sword into the ground. Great cracks flowed forth, rippling through the earth. Willow lifted as the grass beneath them buckled, but they did not break their stance.

‘There will be no *peace* between us until every last one of your kind has perished from these lands.’ Lorcán glowered at Willow, looming over them, mountainous and immovable. ‘Your mortal kin, and your magic-touched misfits—your beasts, your weeping boys, your “seers” whose only claim to fame is eating one bad fish. Your foolish mother, who was so easily swayed by some pretty words from a god. Do me a favour and begone from this place, or otherwise perish. *Those* are my conditions of peace.’

Willow still did not move, though they were beginning to shake at the edges. ‘Peace is our destruction, then?’

‘Did you imagine it could ever have been anything else?’

‘I had hoped it might.’

‘Your hope,’ snorted Lorcán. ‘Is foolish.’

‘Perhaps.’ Willow’s voice stuck in their throat, but they swallowed. ‘Perhaps you are right. But if it is foolish to hope... if it is foolish to dream of peace, if it is foolish to be kind, if it is foolish to try and protect what you love...’

They met Lorcán’s eye, looking up at him, unwavering. ‘Then I am the greatest fool this land has ever seen, and I will gladly go down in legend as such!’

For a moment, nothing dared move. Then the wind began to blow.

Lorcán let out a dark laugh. ‘So be it, little one. You will die like a fool.’

He pulled his sword from the ground, hauling it through the air in a heavy arc. He brought it down towards Willow with the force of a falling cliff.

In one swift movement they slid Cliodhna from their back, and swung her upwards to block Lorcán’s attack. The two swords clashed, the ringing of metal sending out a shockwave that flattened the grass for a mile around. A great circle formed around the High King and the half-god, a shudder going through the earth.

‘I said I would be kind,’ growled Willow. ‘I did not say I would let you kill me.’

Lorcán had a split second to be shocked, and then Cliodhna was arcing towards him.

‘*Lorcán!*’ Cliodhna’s voice ripped forth from the metal, ringing across the plain. Unaccustomed was the blade to speaking, still, yet her fury sent the words bursting free. ‘Your days of cruelty and menace are at an end!’

‘Cliodhna!’ he cried. ‘My darling, it has been so long since I had the pleasure of your company! You look well!’

The sword shot forward, half-propelled by Willow, half dragging them behind it, and sliced through Lorcán's thigh with a starburst of golden blood. He grunted in pain, rolling out of the way. 'Bitch!'

'How quickly your tone changes,' muttered Cliodhna. Willow adjusted their grip on the sword, holding her two-handed, pointing forward over their shoulder. 'Willow, be careful. It was centuries ago now, but we were sparring partners once. He gets muddled when he is angry, but as he becomes less precise he also becomes more vicious.'

To demonstrate her point, Lorcán lunged at Willow. They blocked him again, but he knew now to strike with more force. The weight of his sword coming down on Cliodhna was enough to sink Willow into the ground, the earth buckling. A crater blossomed under their feet with a colossal *crack*.

He struck again, swinging, but Willow fled from the path of the blade. They dodged past Lorcán and slashed at his back. They missed, Cliodhna slamming through empty air and then into the ground, sending stone and grass flying. When the dust cleared, a channel had been carved into the ground, as long and deep as a riverbed.

Lorcán circled Willow, twirling the sword in his hand. 'Impressive. It seems you really are of my blood. If only I'd had you by my side instead of that useless Cillian.'

Willow let out a noise of disgust. 'You are no blood of mine. And you are no family to Cillian, either!'

'You can surely have no affection for that useless pile of stardust.' Lorcán shot towards them, kicking up soil. He would have struck Willow, but they dodged sideways at the last second, swift as the wind—yet not swift enough, for when they took stance again they realised their cheek was wet. A hand against the skin came away slick with golden liquid. 'Well,' smiled Lorcán. 'Look at that. I wondered what colour you would bleed.'

‘You will spill no more blood!’ Willow shouted, barrelling towards him, Cliodhna thrust out. Their blades clashed, sending out a ripple of air that scared off the wind. The clouds fled from the sky, and the sun hid behind the horizon, flinging out long shadows, tugging the day towards dusk.

Or was it sunrise? It was hard to tell. Overhead the cloudless backdrop was the colour of blood—a mix of godly gold and mortal scarlet. The sky burned that tarnished orange as Willow and Lorcán slammed their blades against one another, swarmed by shadow, churning the ground under their feet. Cliodhna’s blade flashed in the lifeless light, Lorcán’s sent sparks scorching the air. Lorcán overpowered Willow, shoving them down onto the ground, but before he could strike a final blow they slid between his legs and launched to their feet behind him.

He swung, they blocked, they lashed forward, he parried, swinging upwards and sending Willow flying off their feet, suspended in mid-air for a moment. They crashed back to earth, leaving another small crater, then lunged forward. ‘You will spill no blood!’ Willow repeated. ‘Not today, not ever!’

As they decreed it, they felt something slash across their back, a hard bite of metal. Yet Lorcán was in front of them, so how—?

Ah, one of his guards, you see, had struck out onto the field at Lorcán’s behest. The guard came at Willow with a spear, whipping it through the air and dashing the glittering point across their spine. They let out a cry as their tunic tore and an arc of golden blood flickered into the air. They spun with Cliodhna, but only collided with a second guard. He knocked them to the ground, and Willow’s vision scattered into light and colour as their head hit the dirt.

‘This is not a fair duel!’ They rolled, narrowly avoiding being skewered by the second guard’s spear. They spotted the first in the corner of their vision, and whirled with Cliodhna, the sword leading. Cliodhna slashed low, cutting through the guard’s knees as though they were butter. He fell with a yelp, his calves and feet detached from his body and his spear half-buried in the grass.

Lorcán was looking down upon them with a hunter’s glee in his golden eyes. ‘I have called you a fool enough times today, so I shall not repeat myself again.’

‘Where is your warrior’s pride?’ Willow blocked a darting attack from the remaining spear. They guided the point towards the ground and stepped on the shaft, shattering it into splinters. The guard was in too close a range to hit with the sword, so Willow settled for headbutting him in the forehead, sending him flying across the field trailing pieces of his skull and helmet.

Lorcán answered with a wolfish grin. ‘Warrior’s pride did not make me High King.’

Willow spun to face him, eyes alight, a righteous cry on their lips, but there was no time to speak it. Lorcán was already striking down, his sword blazing in the rusty sunlight.

Cliodhna leapt up to block him, carrying Willow’s arm with her. And so Willow’s head was spared, but the god-king’s mighty blade cleaved through his child’s arm.

Brigit in the Land of the Dead

The Causeways were, as always, quiet.

This place, we admit, the stars cannot see. The world behind the Fabric, the realm of Death, is not beneath our skies: it is the place where mortals go when they perish, slipping from our sight as if slipping into sleep. Worry not. This portion of the tale has been relayed to us by the parties present, and so we shall do our best to sing it back to you.

Brigit walked the strange and ancient paths, finding herself upside-down upon occasion but held perfectly in place, not feeling vertigo 'til she thought about it. She traversed the ruins that seemed at once new and impossibly old, wondering what had worn the structures down if there was no wind or rain in this place between places. Wondering who had sat upon these thrones, if indeed thrones is what these tumbled stones were. Wondering where they had gone, what they thought of life outside.

But it was not all rock and tunnels. Brigit soon found herself among plants.

She stepped out through a crumbling archway into a garden, of sorts. Brigit walked through an overflowing, blooming forest, under a copper-coloured sky. Shadows stretched long across the ground, tangling among the draping vines and curling ferns and wavering wildflowers, though it was difficult to say where the light that cast them was coming from.

Of course, she thought. Plants were living things, too, and so any realm of the dead would have to be a garden. Every flower and tree and shrub that had ever died in winters, storms, and at the end of their seasons bloomed around Brigit in the ghostly glow, their leaves shifting shyly in a breeze that was not there.

Brigit journeyed through an endless orchard thick with bright pink blossoms, their petals drifting around her. She spotted one figure, then another, among the trees: far off silhouettes at first, their edges sharpening as she neared. They were dressed simply, their hair long and streaked with salt and their skin scarred. Travellers, seafarers. Their skin had an odd glow to it, as if the strange light was reflecting onto them from a non-existent glass.

‘Who are you?’ one asked. He looked very young, not much older than Brigit.

‘A travelling bard,’ she answered him. ‘Come to speak to Death.’

‘We were travellers once,’ he said. ‘We were on the first crossing, seeking new lands after ours became unwelcome. But the King of the Sea sent great waves to hunt after us, knocking us from our ships.’

He pointed, and Brigit saw, nestled among the fruit trees and tangled tenderly with climbing ivy, a great wooden ship. It was turned on its side, its mast broken yet majestic. Pink petals were gathering in what remained of the sail, weighing it down.

‘I am sorry you could not find your way home.’ Brigit’s voice was tight in her throat. ‘Please, I seek an audience with Death. Do they take guests?’

The seafarers exchanged a glance. Petals continued to dance down around them. ‘I have not heard of Death taking guests while their hearts still beat.’

‘I have to try.’

The navigators sent her what may have been north, if such a thing existed in that place. She passed many more ships in the orchard, peeking out from between the trees, fallen fruits and blossoms scattered across their decks and stuck in their sails. She passed yet more faces, eyes that followed her as she went.

Brigit continued through the blooming trees until she came across an open glade with a trickling pool in the centre. Where the water was coming from, she could not say. She was too distracted by the creature dipping its massive head to drink from it.

A deer stood before her, almost as tall as the sky, its coat pure white and its antlers shining like bronze. Moss and vines hung from the points, swaying as it raised its eyes to Brigit. ‘Hello, traveller,’ it said.

‘Salutations, O Great Stag,’ replied Brigit. ‘I take it that is your name? For truly I have seen no beast of your ilk that is greater.’

‘In your tales you shall call me The Great Stag,’ it said. Its voice was like a whisper, spoken not necessarily from the mouth. The words simply danced into Brigit’s mind. ‘I have many names, True Names, secret names, in the ancient language of monsters and in the hush of magic itself. But no mortal shall ever be privy to those, so The Great Stag I shall be.’

‘I was not aware that creatures such as yourself could find themselves among the mortal Dead.’ Brigit wondered if the Great Boar was down here somewhere too, snuffling among tree roots.

‘I was slain by a pair of huntress goddesses. My remains have been claimed, as they should be, by the earth, but my spirit found its way here.’

‘I seek an audience with Death. Do you know where I may find them?’

The Great Stag snorted, sending ripples across the water. ‘You think you can reckon with the way of things. The arrogance of gods and humans.’

‘I am arrogant,’ Brigit agreed. ‘But do not be so unkind as to compare me to the gods. I am cleverer than them. Now, please, great beast, which way ought I to wander?’

The Great Stag dipped its great head once more, the tendrils of moss in its antlers falling across its face like a veil. Its points directed her onwards, and she set off in that direction, leaving the creature behind.

Brigit walked, past flower bushes bursting out of cracked stone pots, past reclining thrones overgrown with berries and their thorns, past fields of herbs all mixed together, singing to one another in a choir of scents. She passed people of all ages, all with that odd glow.

‘My sister was taken by Lorcán and his hunting party, and I was struck down by their arrows when I tried to follow her,’ they said.

‘I fell down sick when the gods enchanted our settlement’s water,’ they whispered.

‘Lorcán’s lightning razed my village to the ground,’ they smiled, mournful.

Brigit carried each of their deaths with her as she walked. She did not have Willow’s sights for justice and for goodness. She knew firsthand the cruelty of the world, of gods and monsters and humans alike. But in her heart, something twinged, a wrong-struck note on the lyre of her soul. She wished she could do something to help.

But all she could do was promise, ‘There will be justice done. There will be fewer souls like you. There will be a different future for your children and their children.’ Again and again, hoping that like a spell it would become true in the saying of it.

And so they pointed her to the house of Death, and so at last she arrived there.

Death shifted and shimmered, never still, their wings beating in an endless swirl of feathers in every colour. Antlers sprouted from what might have been their head. Slender arms extended from the mass, gleaming almost opalescent. Planting a flower in the soil, patting the dirt down around it.

‘Speak, mortal.’ The voice of Death was as fathomless and full as the rest of their figure. It sounded, to Brigit, as though a great chorus of people were all speaking at once, in a thousand languages layered and intertwined with birdcalls and howls. ‘You have come all this way for an audience, and I must commend you for that.’

Brigit, for perhaps the first time in her life, was struck silent. She had expected... why, she was not sure. Resistance. Waves of malice rolling off this dark figure. Yet Death was not wicked, it simply was. Death simply stood before her, stretching up into what could be mistaken for a standing position, all its wings and hooves and human-ish silhouettes settling into a shape only a little taller than Brigit.

‘I seek a trade. I seek the return of one of the souls who resides here.’

Death brushed soil off their hands. Hands that shifted, too: at once gnarled and wrinkled, smooth and child-small, never staying on a single image. ‘The dead cannot return to the world above. It is not the way of things.’ The hands disappeared inside the mass of wings. ‘What can you have to offer, that weighs the same as a life?’

Brigit breathed in. ‘I have a story.’

Death’s horns twitched with interest. Eleven points on those glorious antlers, then, in another breath, only nine—and in another, they were not antlers at all, but the curving horns of an ox. ‘I have plenty of stories,’ Death replied.

‘Ah, but you have not heard the way I tell them.’ She lifted her head and offered Death a smile. ‘For I am Brigit the Songbird, with a voice that can quell the violence of monsters and incite the vengeance of gods. I may spin the world on my fingertip and remake it anew with my tales. Stories are the blood of this world, its fabric, the makeup of its reality. I have stories passed to me from the Stars and the Forest, myriad voices and perspectives all woven together into something new.’

‘Stories are the fabric of this world,’ Death agreed, with a thousand, thousand voices that still managed to sound like a soft whisper. ‘And it is these stories from above that you seek to exchange for a life?’

‘One particular life,’ Brigit added. It never did well to bargain with a blank contract. ‘Elinor the Scarlet Beast.’

‘Sweet creature,’ murmured Death. ‘I carried her down here recently. What gives you the right to rip her from the arms of her own demise?’

Brigit tried to keep her voice even. ‘I love her.’

‘Many beloved souls come down these pathways with me,’ Death said, gently.

‘At least lend me your ears. Take one story, perhaps two. And then decide.’

The feathers whirled. A pair of wolfen ears pricked up atop Death’s head. ‘I admit,’ they whispered. ‘I am curious.’

Curiosity was all Brigit needed. Curiosity opens a door, even just a crack, and it is enough for a storyteller to step inside and coax the listener out. And so she began to speak, to sing, to weave.

The tale of two siblings stolen from the sky, fashioned by ruthless hands and taught to loathe one another. The tale of a heartbroken god who found gaps in the Fabric of the very world, and took their chance to flee. The tale of a mortal boy stolen away by a cruel king, who fled and made his home among the trees.

Of boys with healing tears, of girls who slay great beasts and become beastly themselves. Of songbirds abandoned on rocks in the middle of the sea, only to be shown love once more. Of heroes who followed the vision of a fish-bite to a place they believed they

could call home. Of borrowed moonlight, of laughter echoing off tall trees, of hunts and feasts and daring adventures.

Of love, of course, of love. The best stories are always about love, whatever form it may take. Even if it does not seem that way at first.

Brigit spun these tales with such clarity and poetry that they came alive around her. The dead ships seemed to sail once more. The harsh light became softer. The perfume of the petals grew stronger, sweeter, until it tickled her nose.

Death listened, their form never ceasing its movement. There was no face among the wings, but Brigit knew they were paying attention.

When she finished speaking, there came, from within the depths of that being, a rush, a hush, an audible flicker. A laugh, a sigh, a weeping sound all at once.

‘Stories are the fabric of the world.’ The words fluttered through the air like so many falling petals. Death laughed again, simultaneously melancholy and rapturous. ‘I am Death. I have been here for as long as the Stars and the Sea and the Forest. I have ferried the souls of monsters and mortals for countless, ceaseless days, gathering them in my arms, keeping them safe at the end of their story. Stories, child. Stories are what a life is built from.’

‘Stories are what keep us alive.’

‘Stories are what brings you to life.’ A chuckle from the depths of eternity. ‘Songbird, you have spun me a tale the likes of which I have not heard in a long, long time. I find myself wishing to honour your bargain.’

Brigit’s heart leapt. ‘Is that true?’

‘Let me add another condition. For Death is never fair.’ A hand extended from the swirl of wings once more, pointing at Brigit. ‘Live, songbird. Live long and live well, and

gather more tales. One day I will cradle you and bring you here again, and when I do, I order you to have enough stories in your heart to light this place for the great stretch of eternity.’

‘I will,’ she dipped her head. ‘I will.’

‘Come, then. Let us make haste. A battle rages outside, and I feel I can delay no longer. There are souls who need me.’

They found Elinor sitting in a ring of bushes with bright purple flowers, dangling her long legs in a pool. It was strange to see her so still, so quiet, her scarlet hair hanging down her back and her silhouette tinged with that otherside glow in place of her angry black smoke. When she heard Brigit behind her, she perked up, attuned to her lover’s footfalls. She hesitated, as if afraid of some cruel trick. But she turned, and there Brigit was, trying not to cry.

‘Go now,’ said Death. ‘Go from this place without looking back, and I will trust your resolve. And know that I will hold you to your promise—live long and brilliant lives, and gather the greatest stories in the world to bring back to me.’

‘This promise I shall keep!’ Brigit interlaced her fingers with Elinor’s and ran, unspeaking, not looking back once. Through the flurrying petals, through the fragrant forests of herbs, past The Great Stag who watched them through its veil of moss and ivy.

They reached the entrance to Cillian’s Causeway, the almost imperceptible stitch in the horizon of stony paths. Brigit peeled it open and they tumbled back into the sunlight, under a sky that was blue, onto grass that swayed in a breeze they could truly feel. They swept each other up in their arms, spinning, laughing, weeping, collapsing onto the green and barely feeling the fall.

In the yew tree glade, far away, Elinor's cadaver disintegrated into petals—the world quietly righting itself, for it could only handle one of such a girl at once. The rules had been broken, but that did not mean things had to get untidy.

'You came for me,' Elinor said, over and over. 'You charmed Death itself.'

'Of course,' said Brigit, as if it was nothing. They both knew it was not. 'It will take more than Death to keep us apart.'

They lay together for a moment, feeling the warmth of each other, the ache in their cheeks from smiling, the soft grass against their skin. A stolen moment of peace, in defiance of the nature of the world.

They knew it had to end. But they promised it was not an ending so much as an interlude.

Elinor whispered, 'Where is Lorcán? Where is the man who killed me? And most importantly, where is Willow?'

'I think you may find them in the same place,' admitted Brigit. 'I fear, my love, that you have stepped back into the Land of the Living and straight onto a battlefield.'

'Well,' Elinor grinned her monstrous grin. 'I cannot miss out if there is a battle with gods.'

Brigit kissed her, with no fear of her fangs. 'Go raise chaos, my dearest.'

Twilight of the Gods

The palace was filled with the decadent quiet of those who do not care that great violence is happening outside.

Rowan slipped through the halls, finding them empty and gleaming. The monster bone glinted like an oil slick in the sunlight, but under the strange light of the burning, restless sky, its colours were dark and heavy. As Rowan darted through the shadows they felt thick as treacle, thick as blood. But the palace halls were, as always, impeccably clean.

Rowan remembered how this world had glowed, those years ago. Barely older than Willow, he had danced in a daze through this very place, and it had felt like it held promise when all it held was captives.

What would have been different, if he had remained at home that day? If he had simply been content to keep his feet still and his head down, and not let either carry him to the lofty idea of freedom and adventure beyond the walls? If Rowan had not been 'Rowan', had simply remained within the ring of sharpened logs and within his parents' expectations?

Such questions were folly, he knew. He was here now, and that was what he must attend to.

And, in his heart, it was hard to say what he may have done differently, while still being himself.

He darted through the long, sticky shadows, peeking into each chamber. The first sign of life was a small, slim goddess gathering fallen cups from a marble table. She met Rowan's eyes, and her face was as smooth and symmetrical and sweet as any of the ancient folk. But

there was a smudge of something, perhaps soot, on her perfect porcelain cheek that gave Rowan pause.

‘Do not hurt me,’ she blurted. ‘I have no power here, I have never done any harm to mortals. I am just the cupbearer.’

Rowan blinked. ‘If you do me no harm, I will do you no harm. Could you tell me, are there mortals being held captive here? And where can I find them?’

She pointed west. ‘There are many in the interior gardens. They sort of wander there, as if dreaming. But the one they brought in yesterday, he looked different. Fresher. More awake.’

Rowan’s heart dipped. ‘Where would I find him?’

‘In Queen Nessa’s chambers, I imagine. Lorcán handed him over as a gift.’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’

‘In truth, I cannot say.’ The cupbearer to the gods averted her eyes. ‘Things are changing here. I do not know.’

The two of them eyed each other for a curious moment, then Rowan thanked her and slipped back into the shadows. After a moment, he doubled back, and said, ‘May I borrow that tray?’

Nessa was sitting, blissfully and deliberately oblivious to the chaos outside, on the edge of the pool that contained her guest chamber. Yes, that same place she and her still-a-mystery lover had lain the night Cillian stole her voice. She had tired of her widow’s veils and made herself beautiful, dressed like the ocean itself: her flowing gown the colour of seafoam, her hair

adorned with shells and fragments of coral. Aidan was sitting beside her, expression downcast though his face was thrust upwards.

‘I am so fond of curious creatures like you,’ cooed Nessa. She held Aidan’s face in her hands, examining his eyes. ‘Mm, and such a handsome young thing, too. But humans tend not to do well underwater. They drown, or otherwise go all wrinkled and soggy. I wonder... ah, but turning you into a fish might ruin these beautiful eyes, and I so wish to see them at work...’

‘Let go of me,’ muttered Aidan. Words he had never spoken aloud, words he was somewhat surprised to hear escape his lips.

Nessa merely looked amused. ‘Is that what you want? You would spurn the attentions of the Queen of the Sea?’

‘Let go of me,’ he repeated. He hesitated a second, then reached up to slap her hand away. ‘You cannot have me. All my life, I have been a commodity to trade, a tool to bargain and barter with. My tears do not belong to you, nor does the rest of me!’

Nessa blinked thrice, before her face knitted into a scowl. Aidan glared up at her, trembling but steadfast. ‘And what—’

They were both distracted by the figure that appeared across the courtyard. Rowan, stepping out of an archway with the borrowed drinks-platter in his hands. ‘Your majesty,’ he intoned. ‘Refreshments.’

Nessa squeezed Aidan’s cheeks in irritation. ‘Who are you? You are not one of the servants here.’

‘Well,’ Rowan muttered. ‘That did not work. Perhaps I should leave the disguises to Cillian.’

‘You what?’ she snapped, then recoiled as he threw the goblet full of wine into her face.

Aidan wriggled free. ‘Quickly!’ cried Rowan, but Nessa had already shot out a hand and seized him around the wrist. It had been long enough, Rowan had forgotten that even the most delicate of the gods had speed and strength to topple any mortal. Nessa slammed Rowan against the courtyard tiles, fingers wrapped around his throat, before Rowan could register the pain.

‘How dare you!’ Her gown billowed around her like a roiling wave. ‘That does not belong to you!’

Rowan choked. She was glaring down at him, her face so porcelain-smooth, her eyes so perfectly jewel-toned, her hair floating softly around her like impossible folds of silk. They looked so eerily beautiful, the gods. Rowan thought of how entranced he had been by Lorcán, those sixteen years before. How he had been struck still by the unchanging face of immortality, by the power in that presence.

He was not still now. He jerked his boar-tusk dagger free from his belt and struck it across Nessa’s perfect face.

Her head snapped back, a spray of golden blood arcing through the air above it. Her shell-pink mouth gaped open in a howl, her elegant hands leapt up to cover her eyes. Rowan, gasping for breath, rolled away.

‘How dare you!’ she shrieked again. ‘Boy! Heal me, boy!’ She flung out one hand, grappling for Aidan, golden blood leaking down between her fingers. ‘I cannot be marked like this! No one will ever want me again! *Heal me, damn you!*’

Aidan stood steadfast above her. ‘I told you, my tears are mine. I shed none for gods such as you.’

Nessa let out a cry of rage, building deep in her throat. She lunged for him, yet Aidan shook free of her. With a clumsy shout he shoved her, sending the Queen of the Sea staggering backwards towards the edge of the fountain. ‘And *that* is for Cillian!’

Nessa toppled, with a final squeak, backwards into her underwater chambers—giving one final view of the golden laceration dividing her face in two and ruining one eye, dripping thick globules of gold down her cheeks and her chin. She vanished with a splash, swallowed by the water.

Aidan helped Rowan to his feet, hauling him up and into a sprint. They fled from the courtyard, leaving the waves in the pool to thrash, the surface of the fountain swirling with gold.

‘Are you hurt?’ asked Rowan. ‘Did you eat any food?’

Aidan shook his head. ‘I remembered what you said. And they did not learn my True Name.’ He flashed a smile. ‘I thought of one, not Aidan but another that I think I like more. But I kept it secret from them, deep in my heart.’

‘Good lad.’ Rowan wiped a droplet of gold off his dagger. ‘Now, where are the other humans? Perhaps we can save them too.’

‘This way. Rowan, are the others here? Are they alright?’

‘There is a battle outside. I cannot tell you with certainty whether all of us will make it home.’ Rowan grimaced. Then drew in a breath, reaching for his belt again. ‘But perhaps there is one last thing we can do to help turn the tide.’

Hanging from his belt beside his daggers was a curious item: a horn, curved and carved with fangs. ‘What is that?’ Aidan asked.

‘Something I stole from here. It may be time to return it.’

Rowan lifted the horn to his lips and blew. It made no sound perceptible to human ears.

Yet underneath the palace, oh.

Every monster in that dungeon jolted as if struck by lightning. Awakening, unlatching their jaws, renewed fury and furore bubbling up in their blood.

Fury enough to, like the Great Boar before them, break through their confines, crash through the fortifications keeping them apart from the gods. Fury enough to take flight through the palace with fresh strength, spitting fire and bile, a mass of claws and teeth moving almost as one. Up, and up, and up, through the palace built from the bones of their fallen fellows.

Any guards who attempted to stand in their way quickly found themselves between the fangs of their own war trophies.

The ground outside the palace of bone was awash with blood, scarlet mingling with gold. Branwen’s throat was raw as rock crystal, their skin slick with sweat, their every muscle aching. But still they shouted ‘*Fight on!* Fight inside the palace gates!’ Yet more red dripped down to feed the soil, and the gates had not come any closer.

A god struck them in the leg with the butt of his spear. Branwen at last buckled to their knees, and found themselves at eye level with the carnage: fallen, crumpled bodies, lifeless eyes, broken companions. ‘Fight,’ they rasped. The shaft of Godsbane was sliding round in

their stinging palm. They gripped it with such force their knuckles nearly popped free from their skin. ‘We must *fight!*’

The guard kicked them across the chest, and like a toppling oak Branwen fell. They faced the scorched sky, and pondered how sad it would be to die when they had only just figured out who they truly were.

Yet across the burnt sunset came a streak of black. A comet of smoke. A bolt of whirling darkness.

The spearpoint aimed at Branwen’s throat vanished, knocked aside, torn away with a wet scream.

Branwen bolted upright, and saw, standing over them, a bestial creature. Knees backwards, hands clawed, taller and more muscular than any person should have been. Her hair lashed and snapped around her head like snakes, her eyes were black pits, and smoke swirled from her fanged mouth as though a fire was burning in her chest.

‘Elinor!’ they yelled. ‘How is this possible? You died!’

The Scarlet Beast turned to Branwen. In a voice like charcoal, she laughed. ‘It takes more than dying to kill me!’

Branwen offered her Godsbane. ‘Keep that,’ grinned Elinor. ‘It suits you.’

And with a guttural roar, the world changed once again. She shot across the battlefield, toppling guards, ripping into them with tooth and claw. The remaining mortals watched her in awe. They felt a tug in their chests, something ignited by the sparks flying off her.

Branwen hauled herself to their feet, and raised Godsbane to the sky. ‘To the gates!’ It was almost a song. ‘To the gates!’

Willow lay in the fractured earth in a sea of agony. All they could see was gold. Their ears rang. In their blurry vision, they saw Cliodhna glinting in the bloodied sunlight a few feet away, some poor fool's disembodied arm still clinging to the grip. Willow realised, somewhere deep in the swirling mess of panic and pain, that the arm belonged to them.

Willow dimly wished that they could go home, curl up in the mossy shade of a tree, and go to sleep.

'Willow.' A voice, from seemingly far away. Cliodhna, lying on the shards of earth and grass. 'Willow. Get up. You must get up.'

Lorcán was approaching, casting a shadow dark and merciless as plague. 'You were never supposed to be born,' he snarled. 'Let us end this madness once and for all.'

Willow wondered, for a moment, what death would feel like. They wished they could have asked Elinor.

Then the world... *shivered*.

As though someone had tugged on the corner of the Fabric of reality, creasing existence itself, crinkling the very essence of magic.

For a moment, Lorcán froze, staring at the sky in shock.

A moment, some would say, is not enough to accomplish anything. Yet in a moment, much can come to pass. Trust us, for we have seen countless moments upon the earth below. Some are small, and flow into one another without consequence. Some still the world, and see it changed when they are done.

It only took a moment for fresh hope to flare in Willow's chest. It only took a moment for them to will their body back into motion, gritting their teeth against the pain in their arm, trying not to pay attention to the slick of blood pouring loose. It took a moment for them to haul themselves to their feet. A moment for them to grab Cliodhna, shaking off the remnants of their right hand, still clinging to it with the fervour of a righteous hero.

By the time Lorcán turned his head, the moment had passed. Willow had a sword in their single remaining hand and a look of shattered malice on their face. They had no quip or battle cry on their lips. They merely lunged forward, striking out across the distance between them, across the broken ground.

Lorcán's fingertips crackled with lightning, arcs of magic leaping and spitting like venom in his hand. He flung a handful of electricity at Willow, the bolts snaking towards them, baring sparked fangs. Willow, wholly sick of Lorcán's dirty tactics by now, simply let out a roar of frustration and swung Cliodhna up to block.

The lightning hit the sword, igniting the god-metal for a split second—before ricocheting off and shooting back in the direction it had come.

Lorcán had no time to flinch before his own magic struck him in the eyes. He thundered in pain, blinded and staggering backwards. Willow clasped the sword and bolted towards him, feeling as though the world was sliding out from under them.

But as their body cried out in pain, they ran. As their blood made rivers on the grassy ground behind them, they ran. As their hair came loose and their vision blurred, they ran, and they leapt, and they seemed to fly, propelled off a jagged fraction of stone jutting from the torn earth.

Lorcán's vision returned just long enough for him to open his eyes on the sight of Willow leaping towards him, sword brandished in their left hand. They seemed to float, time

slowing as their hair flew about their bloodied face and their eyes, those golden eyes, bored into Lorcán with all the rage of the world.

Lorcán had a moment to take all this in. A moment of confusion. For he was High King of the Divine, ruthless, immovable, always victorious—always moulding the world the way he wanted it to be, always crushing anyone who would disrupt his perfect vision. He was... strong, he was the strongest. Mightiest. Lorcán always won.

He had a moment for all these thoughts, these truths, to filter through his brain, attempting to reconcile themselves with the vision before him. As we have said, some moments are long, some short. This one lingered, for just long enough, and then Willow ripped the sword through the air.

The blade connected with Lorcán's throat and cleaved through the flesh there, sending his head flying from his broad shoulders in a single movement.

Willow lay in the shredded soil, in the wreckage of the duel. All around them was the metallic scent of blood, theirs and Lorcán's and his guards', glittering and gilded in the orange haze. Clíodhna's voice was in their ears again, sounding even further away.

'I cannot die,' Willow rasped. 'I cannot die here. This is... this is surely only the beginning. Brigit would not have the tale end here. It would be... too sad.'

Their eyes drooped shut. There was movement, a shifting deep within the earth. Something wriggled underneath them, and they were dimly aware of their body being lifted off the ground.

Tree roots coiled up around Willow, twining around them, supporting their prone body. The roots slithered across the land, passing Willow along, bearing them back towards the nearest grove of trees.

The plants carried their wounded charge to a thicket shaded even from the strange and broken sky, and lowered Willow onto a bed of moss. Mushrooms sprang up around them, ringing them in and keeping watch, like when Willow had been a sleeping infant. Birds and foxes and deer gathered, prey and predator aligned in their task and leaving their quarrels behind.

Willow lay still as vines and roots curled around them, petals soft and cool against their eyes, sinewy wood a rough caress against their skin. They twirled and spiraled and enclosed Willow until they were all covered with leaves and moss and flowers.

All the plants of the world seemed to raise their voices into one whispered song that sent a tremor through the air. You would not have felt it unless you had been paying strict attention, and even then you may have only thought it was a chill from the window, a shiver down your spine. *Rest, my child,* sang the trees. *This is not the end of your work. But now, rest.*

Dawn of an Era

In the palace of bone, monsters ripped through the halls. From one side, an assault of disgustingly hopeful humans. From the other, a rising tide of vengeful creatures driven into a frenzy by the howl of a horn from an age long past. All about, carnage. Chaos. Calamity.

Maebh sat calmly in the midst of it, adjusting her gown around her legs, settling comfortably down upon the throne in the empty hall.

Ah, yes, Maebh. Let us spare a verse in this tale for her, shall we?

Lorcán so adored to divide things by two. Allies and enemies. Living and dead. Emotions and reason. Son and daughter, night and day, the unworthy child and the worthy child—the one who rebelled and the one who would never betray him. As we have seen, not all things split so nicely into pairs.

But, if you can stand to slot yourself into it, such a scaffold can be an efficient place to hide.

The day of the bull's rampage, Maebh heard Lorcán's fury echoing from the palace. She heard the cries of pain that she knew belonged to Cillian. She knew this with a certainty no child should ever have. She curled into herself, an instinctive flinch, as if sharing her twin's agony. Some part of her said, *go to them, make sure they are alright*. But what would have happened if she had run straight into that scene of carnage?

So she hung back, careful, quiet, and only made her entrance when she knew it would be safe.

She looked at Cillian, lying broken and banished in the churned earth. She vowed to herself, *that shall never be me*.

No, Maebh would be the good girl, the golden child, the delicate princess. Never a word against her dear father, never a raised voice, never a trick or a smirk. She would keep her shape small and soft: round in the cheeks like an infant, even as she got older. Sweetly smiling, even as she loathed Lorcán more by the day.

Maebh was a darling, everyone agreed. Gods visiting from other regions doted on her, admired her as they would admire a delicate jewel sitting in velvet. Though they complained relentlessly of Cillian when they came inland, neither Murcu nor Nessa would have said a bad word against Maebh for all the gold in the world. Even Trasa was fond of her, for Maebh always sat attentively and called her Great Warrior Queen and asked to be regaled of her achievements. She was polite to the lesser gods, too, the retainers and the nobles and the second-in-commands of sea and stone alike.

She was even nice to the servants. In fact, she danced up a particular friendship with the cupbearer, beginning one night when she was cleaning spilled wine from a flung goblet off the floor of the feasting hall.

‘Dear thing, you work so diligently,’ Maebh clutched her hands over her heart. ‘Tell me, what is your name?’

‘Ciara,’ said the cupbearer, forgetting, dazzled as she was by Maebh’s beauty and kindness, that it was unwise to share your name, to hand it out in an open palm or dangle it so visibly from your fingers.

‘Oh, Ciara. I apologise on behalf of my father. He can be loud, brutish, he can make a mess... but he means well. Please, let me help you.’

Maebh wavered her delicate fingers over the puddle of wine. The liquid rippled, as if waking from a deep sleep, and slowly yawned and stretched its way towards her hand. She

guided it between her fingertips, and gently urged it into Ciara's cleaning bucket. 'There,' Maebh smiled.

Ciara was looking at her in awe. 'I did not know you had such mastery over the elements, my princess. Is it inherited from your father, who commands lightning in his fists?'

In truth, Maebh did not know why she could do this—weave with light, play with colour, even string sound into different shapes if she wanted. She had never talked about it with Cillian.

This lack of knowing, this hole in her wisdom, enraged Maebh, but it did not do to *appear* so. She was not an angry woman, she was a sweet, quiet girl. So she giggled and said 'I do not know, in all honesty! But it does come in handy.' She leaned close, fixing Ciara in the full glow of her radiant face. 'But now that I have offered you my help, I wonder if I could be so bold as to ask of you a favour?'

Ciara was being double-charged on this favour, as the help was supposedly an apology in the first instance. But as with her name, the cupbearer forgot to be cautious. She agreed, and Maebh clasped her hands together and said, 'How wonderful.'

Cillian, as we know, learned to play with voices. Maebh, practising behind the walls of glittering bone, learned to deal in secrets.

It was a simple matter of talking to the wine, asking it a favour the same way she had asked one of Ciara—politely, sweetly, with just a touch more of magic. Every night the gods feasted, drank their fill, threw food and curses across the tables. Sometimes there were mortals in attendance, on the laps of the gods who had claimed them or dancing for their entertainment.

Maebh watched the light go out of the humans as the fruit of the golden garden passed their lips, less and less of a glow in their eyes with every passing evening. Maebh watched the various flirtations and ruinations taking place in the hall. Most carefully, Maebh watched her father, always seated on that throne. With an empty spot on his other side where Cillian would have been, had they not caused such chaos and trouble. If they had just behaved and fit the pattern.

And, at the end of the night when everyone drawled and drooled their way to their bedchambers, Maebh alighted to the kitchens, or the courtyards, or some other quiet meeting place, and Ciara gave her the cups she had gathered.

In the dregs of the wine were the words of gods: their drunken outbursts, their laughter, and most importantly, their secrets.

There was more than one reason the King and Queen of the Sea could never say a bad word against Maebh. Oh, she was so sweet, of course, such a sweet little girl—and she had oh so sweetly implied one day that she knew the names of each dalliance they had each taken at the palace, and would happily tell the other spouse if given a reason. She had oh so sweetly dripped information from her lips like the juice of a ripe fruit, only to lick it away at the last minute unless proper compensation was offered.

Soon, oh so sweetly, she had a cluster of alliances. Most importantly, the one man she had never been able to fool.

The Crow had always been troublesome—after all, how did you trick someone who could see the future, see right through you? Yet at that meeting, years before, when they had all discussed the matter of humans, he had said something that caught her attention. At least, before foolish Cillian had swooped in and ruined her surveillance.

The wording of his prophecy, careful and incomplete, arranged just so. Arranged to please Lorcán—for that was the greatest imperative of all—while clearly protecting something. Concealing something, carefully and prettily.

Croiadh never asked her about her various dealings with wine and secrets. When she approached one evening when she was sure they were alone, he simply said ‘I knew you would come to me, one day. I was waiting.’

Ah, and there is nothing so terrible as a patient immortal. Maebh could appreciate that.

‘What ill will do you bear against my father?’ she asked.

‘None. I merely understand that he is a temporary measure.’ Croiadh had looked at her with his unseeing, all-seeing eyes. ‘I was second-in-command to our previous leader. If I had foreseen Lorcán feeding her to the sea, perhaps I would have tried to prevent it. Yet with the loss of my eyes and the gift of my new sight, I gained a certain perspective. The future cannot be changed. You must simply wait for it to arrive.’

‘And what does fate have in store for me?’

A smile, like the flutter of a bird’s wing, twitched the corner of his lips. ‘Be cautious, Daughter of the Dawn. Ask not the future of me. Ask yourself, first, if you wish to truly see the path ahead of you, or if you would rather lay it yourself.’

‘I am not here to get philosophical with you,’ she smiled, sharp as a shaft of early sunlight. ‘I am here for power.’

He tipped his head. ‘Then be patient.’

And patient she was. People loved patient girls.

Patiently, she stoked Loracán's ego, a fire that would keep her warm and safe. Patiently, she advised him: cooed over his safety and sent him raging against the monster prophesised to kill him. Patiently, she made sure each of his guards and strongest warriors knew her, loved her, would bow their heads to her should there be, say, some sort of issue of succession.

Patiently, she made herself comfortable on Loracán's throne in the empty palace, and waited for Willow to drive a sword through his heart. She arranged her golden hair and mused that she had never needed to get a drop of blood on her lily-white hands. A few drops of wine, perhaps, a childhood full of anguish, but altogether it had been very neat.

Until Cillian walked into the throne room.

They were dressed raggedly, their dark tunic torn and stuck with leaves and burs. Their features were an odd (to her) concoction of long eyelashes, a strong jawline scuffed with the beginnings of stubble, subtle curves beneath that mess of mortal-hewn fabrics. Even as children Cillian had always been changing, shifting, transforming, blabbering about how *not choosing* a form was their choice. Maebh had thought it ridiculous. She knew who she was. She was still as ice, lovely as an undying flower, radiant as the dawn.

Shifting visage and all, she recognised Cillian. It was the eyes, the same starry silver as the day they were both born. Yet it felt like an eternity stretched between the siblings now.

She shook the thought away.

'You look comfortable,' said Cillian.

Maebh smiled. 'You look terrible.'

'Thank you. What are you doing?'

‘What a silly question. Surely you know that your little plant-speaking friend is challenging our father to a duel?’ Maebh fluttered her eyelashes. ‘I recall a small prophecy that said such a thing would not go well for him. And goodness, it simply would not do to leave this seat empty. That would be chaos. Fortunately, Lorcán made himself two heirs.’

Cillian laughed, bitter and metallic. It echoed in the hall, up to the high ceiling where they had flurried and fought as bird and butterfly. ‘You think the gods will simply let you ascend the throne, no questions asked?’

‘Why not? Who could object to rule under me? Dear, sweet princess Maebh, who has not an ill thought in her golden head?’ She placed a hand over her heart. ‘Who has stood so diligently by her father’s side, and weeps so tenderly for his loss?’

‘I see no tears.’

‘I am saving my energy for a different audience.’

Cillian looked at her, the shining statue of a girl upon the throne. So poised, so perfect, so polished. ‘Maebh,’ they said, and the words surprised even them. ‘Come with me.’

A flicker passed over the princess’ posture. ‘What?’

‘Come away from this place. Come away from all this greed and anger and ruin. You do not have to sit in a hall where blood stains the floor. You do not have to sleep in the bed where you wept for so many nights.’

She curled her lip. ‘And where would you have me go instead?’

‘There is a place for the displaced. We have built it for ourselves, from sticks and stones and bits of borrowed moonlight. Or,’ Cillian moved closer to her. ‘Or you could wander, as I used to. You could go anywhere you pleased, Maebh. You could be *free*. These walls of bone need not hold you.’

Cillian extended a hand, across the expanse between them.

In a voice like sunshine, Maebh said ‘No.’

A flicker of silence. ‘What?’

‘I would sooner wilt and wither than reside in that wild patch of woods you call a home. With you and your mangy collection of so-sung heroes and beasts and healers, cast out because no one else wanted them. You did not accept my invitation to join me. Why should I accept yours?’

‘You turned me into a *snake!*’

‘For a venomous creature is what you have always been!’ Maebh’s voice shattered into a scream. ‘You *left me*, Cillian! You left me to fester while you frolicked in fields and played court jester under the sea! To... sup rainbow from your fingertips and make a mockery of your *real* family by siding with our bastard sibling!’

Cillian moved to speak, but she slammed her fist down on the arm of the throne, with such force all the lamps in the hall flickered out in fear.

Maebh composed herself, taking a dainty breath. ‘This is a palace of glittering decay,’ she said evenly. ‘But it is mine. And I have worked and waited too long to simply let you dance in and ruin things again.’

‘Maebh,’ said Cillian.

She did not ask them to leave. She lashed towards them in a flurry of golden talons and white feathers.

Cillian cried out as their sister slammed into them, tearing at their flesh. Cillian shifted into a raven, flapping towards the ceiling in a panic. Maebh swooped again with a screech, sinking her beak into the back of their neck.

Cillian fought past the blinding white pain and transformed into the first thing they could think of—something bigger, something heavy enough to push them both to the ground. Their body remembered the pain from The Great Boar’s tusks, and so a boar they became, barrelling against Maebh and sending her crashing to the floor under their hooves.

Yet even as her back hit the shimmering flagstones, she turned to liquid, changing shape. She unfurled into a white wolf, claws dashing at Cillian’s belly, fangs snapping at their throat. Cillian leapt back in the form of a doe, landing a swift kick to Maebh’s jaw and sending her spinning across the floor.

She lay by the throne for a moment, looking like nothing more than a pile of snowy fur. Then she was a falcon again, screeching for Cillian’s face, claws in their eyes, wings beating a deafening tattoo around their ears.

Weasel. Snake. Swift silver fox. Cillian surged through different forms trying to find the one that could defeat her, could make her cease to hurt them. But they quickly realised, with a clarity that was more painful than all the claws and teeth of the world, that such a thing did not exist.

Cillian would always be Cillian, and Maebh would always want them dead.

The truth of it rang around the throne room. Cillian lay on the flagstones in a splattered scattering of their own golden blood, and felt a nostalgia for their childhood. It had been so simple then. Before they had left the palace, discovered the Causeways, discovered Willow. Before they had known that family did not have to be this.

Maebh was in her she-wolf form again, stalking towards Cillian with her teeth bared and dripping golden. Cillian realised they had fallen back into a human-ish form when they opened their eyes and saw their own hand, grasping at the empty air in front of them.

But as Cillian knew, air was rarely empty. Not truly. Not when there was magic about. There was always something there, if only you knew how to catch the edge of it.

‘Is this truly the way you wish to begin your reign?’ Cillian spat a globule of liquid gold and pulled themselves to their feet. ‘With blood on your finest gown?’

‘Gowns and floors can be cleaned,’ snarled Maebh. ‘It is *you* who is the most persistent stain in my life.’

‘You always had such a way with words, my darling sister.’ Cillian twitched their fingers, grabbing hold of a thread in the Fabric. They felt the tension in it, the tug on the world. Something in their chest thrummed. They shot Maebh one last grin. ‘Long live the queen, I suppose.’

And they pulled. And the world moved.

Cillian gathered the threads, carefully chosen, around their hands—twined between their fingertips, wrapped all the way down their wrists. They felt the Fabric under their skin, in their blood, in their very being. They felt the shuddering of all the magic in the world in their pulse, felt the tapestry of life billow in and out with each breath. And they let it: they drew it in, tangled more and more around their arms, let magic fill their lungs and their stomach and their eyes.

They tugged it tight. They made it theirs.

‘Stay here in your heartless domain,’ Cillian declared, and their words and their intent wove themselves in with the threads. They felt their hair standing on end, flying around their

head like black wings. ‘Remain behind this veil in your divine realm, and let the mortals be free!’

Stars cannot hold their breath, but in that moment we came close.

Cillian *pulled*. The Fabric collapsed around them. All the colours of the spectrum flashed before their eyes, all the cold and heat of history whipped around them in a frenzied wind.

‘Remain,’ they repeated, their breath and their words becoming one with the threads, binding around them, the fibres intertwined. ‘Remain—’

Before the Fabric enclosed on Cillian and enveloped them in darkness, they caught one last look at Maebh. She was staring at her sibling with a very human expression on her lupine face.

She looked shocked. She looked angry. She looked, almost, as if she wanted to cry out *take me with you*.

But she remained, and Cillian vanished, and a great gasp of magic rippled over the world.

In a tower room in the palace of bone, safe from the monstrosity below, Croiadh the Crow jerked his head up from his reverie. His owls fluffed their feathers in surprise, letting out a troubled *hoot*.

A shift. A shiver. Stillness. Croiadh stared into nothingness for a moment, his hands clasped round empty air.

‘I,’ he whispered after a moment. ‘Did not see that coming.’

God of the Boundary

It was a shiver Willow felt, enough to stall Lorcán and turn the tide.

It was a wave that hit Branwen and Elinor and the human fighters, as they stormed their way into the palace. It blew them back like a wind, washing over them, leaving them suspended for a moment before scattering them around the bloodied plain.

It was an electric shudder that shook Rowan and Aidan at the edge of the palace gardens, sending them both, and the gathered human prisoners, tripping and tumbling. It was enough to shock some of them awake, glancing around, seeming to wonder where they were.

It was a spark and fizz and shift that made even the land itself prick up and pay attention. The wind, the sea, the trees, and of course the stars, and even Death, all tilted what stood in for their heads. We said, to one another, in our ancient wordless languages, *how interesting*.

It was the feeling of something changing, though no one could name quite what yet. Until Branwen lifted their head and cried out because the palace of bone was gone.

In the Bay of Glass, the villagers watched light dance across the broken teeth of their cliffs. They felt a shift in the air, a rolling and unfolding.

This same feeling echoed through the winds all across the country. In the hillfort where Elinor's beastly footsteps were burnt into the ground in a great smoky ring, mortal folk ventured out to find Lorcán's soldiers running up and down the grassy plain, searching for a way home but somehow, always, managing to loop back around and end up where they started. In places, trees seemed to have carefully yet casually rearranged themselves. Stone

formations had shuffled slightly to the left, and paths that were there before had simply vanished.

No gods, save for the stranded few, walked the lands. They seemed to have been tucked away behind some border that no one could quite spot the dimensions of. A veil, folk began to call it—a curtain between the worlds of mortal and immortal, of human society and wild magic.

The news of this danced along the winds, along the rivers, bouncing on the backs of leaping salmon and tangled in the antlers of wandering stags.

The folk sang *the world has changed, the world has changed*.

Rowan and Aidan emerged through a rose-twined archway at the edge of Lorcán's gardens, stumbling onto the battlefield leading a disorientated charge of mortals. Look backwards, and the gardens were gone: all their golden fruit, their bright flowers, the courtyard tiles and bone pillars. Vanished as morning dew at noon, disappeared as if a dream.

Elinor and Brigit crashed into Aidan and wrapped him in an embrace that nearly crushed him, and he hugged them back, weeping with relief enough to grow a fresh grove of young, shy trees on that bloodied field. Aisling clasped Rowan in her arms, never less stoic in her immortal life, singing her friend's heroics. They all rushed forward to tend to Branwen, brave Branwen, who was leaning their weight on Godsbane. 'Now this,' they said. 'Shall make a fine tale.'

Lovers, parents, siblings, friends, fellows, all rushed forward to wrap their lost or nearly-lost ones in their arms. They wept for the dead. They cheered for the living. The monsters fled into the deep wilderness, the mortals returned to their villages. And they sang, and they told the stories.

In time, Brigit would codify many of these tales and make sure they carried on the wind in her melodic voice, a voice that chimed and flowed with the happiness of a lifelong love. For now, though, they were sapling stories, sprouting and coiling tentatively towards the sun as the details fell into place.

‘Where are Willow and Cillian?’ Rowan asked, cutting through the beginnings of a song for a new world. ‘Where are my children?’

Branwen stuck their hand in their mouth, frowning for a moment before melting with relief. ‘I do not know. But we will see them again.’

Hope spread like the warmth of spring throughout the land.

Cillian awoke and realised they had no idea where they were, or even if ‘where’ was a useful question.

They were in the deep, colourless quiet of a Causeway, but it was not familiar to them. They reached out and tried to touch the Fabric, but their fingers tremored with exhaustion, and the magic was greasy in their grasp.

No, that was not quite it. They could not get a grip on the Fabric, but they *could* feel it. Keenly aware of the thrum of magic under their skin, attuned to the distant ripple of threads though they could not see them. They were at the centre of a colossal and delicate web, a tremor going through them each time a faraway fibre was disturbed.

‘Shit,’ muttered Cillian, for it was all they had the energy for.

An ethereal whisper stirred them to sit up. ‘What in the world have you done?’

Death’s tone was not accusatory—like the rest of the world, they were mostly curious. They stood over Cillian as the magic-weaver scrambled to their feet, Death watching

impassively with their eyeless visage. 'There are new Causeways to navigate. A veil, hung lightly and splitting the world in two. The shape of everything has changed.'

'Well,' scoffed Cillian, pulling themselves to their wobbly feet. 'You cannot expect people to walk the same ancient-paved paths forever, can you?'

'Cillian World-Weaver,' said Death. 'You have caused trouble.'

Cillian stood, pulled to their full height, and made eyeless eye contact with Death. 'Indeed I have,' they acknowledged. 'And I shall keep causing more.'

'The force of that should well have killed you.'

'Well.' With a sweep of their arm and a kick of their foot, Cillian bent low into a bow. 'Catch me if you can.'

And the weaver of worlds scattered away into the Causeways.

Cillian was still bleeding, covered in gilded scratches from Maebh's various talons. Aidan could have fixed it, they pondered, if only they could see him again.

'Perhaps this really is the end for me,' Cillian mused. They leaned against a broken stone and closed their eyes once more. 'Perhaps this is my bittersweet heroic conclusion. Is that a worthy end to a life, do you think? To vanish in a flourish after doing the best you could to be good? Pah.' They grimaced. 'How dull.'

Something scuffed against the stones, cacophonous in the silence. A figure stepped out of the grey. Cillian felt their heart shatter and put itself back together all at once.

Willow was walking towards them, looking bewildered. There were flowers of a thousand colours woven through their hair, vines curled around their neck like a many-layered

torc, their clothes replaced by a drapery of dark moss. Their feet were bare and dirty, and they carried Cliodhna in their right hand.

It was difficult to spot at first, for all the vines and petals and greenery around them, but Willow's right arm was, in fact, not made of flesh. It seemed to be made of wood, though not wood as one would carve to make a tool or a weapon. It looked like the living wood of a tree, sprouting little leaves from the wrist and thumb and knotted in the middle of the forearm. At Willow's elbow it blended with their skin, bare and freckled.

'Hello, little bird,' said Willow.

Cillian shot towards them, scooping them into an embrace. Willow gasped, unfolding into laughter. 'Ouch! My star-sibling, what is the matter?'

'The matter!' shouted Cillian. 'What are you talking about? You were fighting the King of the Gods! You might have perished! What happened to your bloody arm?!'

'Cillian, never mind that! What on earth has happened? The world itself seems changed in the very way it is stitched together!'

'Answer my question first!'

They glared at each other a moment, then seemed to realise, amongst the strange ringing silence of the space between worlds, that Cillian still had Willow bundled in their arms. They slid forward and tightened the embrace, feeling Willow cling to the back of their tattered tunic with their fingers—skin and wood alike. 'Forgive me,' Cillian whispered. 'Forgive me, Willow. I felt as though I sent you to your death, to fight my father without saying so much as farewell.'

‘Forgive me,’ Willow wept, tears soaking into Cillian’s shoulder. ‘I felt I had done the same, offering peace to the man who had done you such harm. I may as well have lodged my own blade into your heart. It was only natural that you should rage and roil and flee.’

‘Did he wound you?’

Willow stepped out of the embrace and wiggled the fingers on their tree-branch hand. ‘I did not come away unscathed. But perhaps it does you comfort to know that he fared worse?’

‘What does me comfort is seeing you alive!’ spluttered Cillian. ‘If a little more leafy than before.’

Willow laughed, the sound like a bell chime in the liminal quiet around them. ‘How do you fare?’

‘I think I may have eaten the universe. Now, do not panic. I have changed the world, yes, but only because I let the Fabric under my skin. I can feel the frayed edges of it, distant though they may be. I am... *pricklingly* aware of each tear and hole in this tapestry I have made.’ They offered Willow a lopsided grin. ‘I am part of this, now, woven into it.’

‘Does that mean you can never leave this space in-between?’

‘Bugger that. No walls may contain me, no matter what they are made of.’

Willow laughed. That chiming, earnest laugh. ‘Come, then. Let us find our way home.’

Together they walked, hand in hand like wandering children, tethered to one another in the great shifting nothingness. They spoke and filled in the tales of the day: the two duels, each alike yet disparate, that they had undergone.

‘So Maebh is queen of her realm,’ said Willow.

‘Yes. Trapped, I hope, behind a veil. The same sort I used to shield Rowantree Keep from the world, but... bigger. I want to wish that she will cause us no more trouble. But she is made from the same stuff as me.’ Cillian grimaced. ‘Causing trouble is in our nature.’

Willow smiled. ‘I am proud of you for offering her peace.’

‘I am proud of you for chopping our father’s head off.’

They looked at each other, shaking their heads at the absurdity of it all.

‘Ah... what is that?’ Cillian lifted a fingertip and brushed it over a hovering movement in the great fabric. They felt the semblance of an edge, a shivering seam, a pinprick of possibility. ‘It could be a way out,’ they grumbled. ‘But I cannot unpluck it...’

Willow picked up Cliodhna and pressed the sword’s point against the stitch. It gave way with more of a sigh than a tear, a rushing sound like a breath of warm wind between trees, like a thousand stars exhaling in relief.

The siblings stepped out and found themselves beside a lake, glittering under the moonlight like a dropped coin. The air tasted different, as if a certain fizz on the back of the tongue had dissipated, flattened, lost its flavour. They both flopped down and lay on the grass, silver-black more than green in the bright nightshine. ‘Where in the world are we?’

‘Lost,’ groaned Cillian. ‘I have no memory of this place, do you?’

‘Not at all.’ Willow sighed. ‘But I can always ask the trees for directions home. Come.’

They moved to leave, and hesitated when they realised Cillian was not following. Their dusk-sibling remained on the threshold of the hole in the Fabric, the gap in the Veil.

Silver threads were twined around their arms, curled around their fingers. The night sky had generously descended to replace their ruined tunic, and they looked to be wearing a gown all made of midnight.

Willow swallowed. ‘Cillian?’

‘This is such a beautiful world, is it not?’ Their black hair was long, floating over their shoulders. Their eyes had never been more silver, gleaming by the light of the moon and the magic in their veins. ‘Well, in truth, I never thought so. Not ’til I stayed with you. This world is one that Willow of the Wandering Wood seeks to protect, and so I must honour that with every fibre...’ Cillian fashioned a cat’s cradle from the cosmic threads in their fingers. ‘Of my being.’

‘Cillian.’ Willow rushed back towards them. ‘Where will you go, if not home?’

‘As I said, I can feel each stitch and tear in this convoluted tapestry I’ve made.’ Cillian grimaced. ‘And each of those is a gap where the gods may push through. I need to make sure our friends and fellows are safe.’

Willow stared at them for a moment, then their face broke into a smile. ‘Child of the Dusk, Silver-eyes, Weaver of Worlds, God of Transformation and Guardian of the Boundary.’ They cupped Cillian’s cheeks with their hands and planted a kiss upon their forehead. ‘Trick and tangle the world to protect us all. I will do my own work, for there is work yet to be done. And when there is time to rest, come and see us.’

‘I will.’

‘Take care of yourself,’ said Willow.

Cillian smiled, twinkling like twilight. ‘If you need to find me before then,’ they grinned. ‘Sing to the stars, and call for this name...’

And they spoke it: not Cillian, not any of the names they had accumulated, but their True Name, the artefact of magic that could be used against them. The name that could call them by their very spirit, tug them to attention by their heart, no matter where in the worlds they were.

Willow said ‘If you need to find me before then, sing to the trees, and ask for me...’ And spoke the name at their very centre, a name in the language of the leaves, utterly theirs though never spoken aloud before.

They passed their Names to one another, clasped delicately in their scarred and soft palms. And they carried them into the night.

Perhaps you have heard, too, to speak to the stars or listen to the wind. Perhaps you have been carried by stories: tales of the veil between worlds, mortal safety and reason on one side, undying magic and chaos on the other.

You may know to be careful of gaps and tears, like waterfalls or caves, the shadows behind standing stones and the remains of hillforts. Things do not always divide neatly into two. There will always be places where the threshold is troubled.

You may shiver at stories of the clever Queen Maebh and her immortal court, where, should you dance, you shall never return. You may delicately step around mushroom circles, if you see them, for that marks a resting place of the Child of the Forest, and it would be doing Willow a great insult to plant your boot on that gentle grass. You may catch yourself looking for coloured lights when you venture past the local woods. Peeking through the trees for a rainbow-hued glint, thinking *perhaps, perhaps*.

Perhaps you have even been told to watch out for animals or strangers with silver eyes. Perhaps you glimpsed a fox once, skittering down the road, and for a moment it glanced at you with eyes that seemed to glimmer like the stars on a clear night. Perhaps this gave you a flush of hope.

Perhaps it is your imagination. Perhaps it is Cillian, god of the boundary, weaving back and forth between the land of humans and the realm of gods. Checking the perimeter, protecting what is theirs. Never still, never remaining on one side. Always weaving something new.

Forgive us, for the night is waning, and even stars must rest. But just as another night will come, so too will other tales. Gods and monsters, swords and songbirds, tricks and trees and kings and fools and love—above all else, it always comes back to love.

Sing out to the stars, friend. You are not alone, and we will hear you.

THE END

Introduction: Making Mischief

In their essay in *Growing Up Queer in Australia*, Oliver Reeson ponders: ‘How could I have grown up as a non-binary person when it was not a story I had ever heard?’ (2019, p.37).

When Reeson writes of their (in retrospect) queer adolescence, they return constantly to narrative as a motif: how the gender identity they were assigned at birth was built from the stories that ‘accumulated on’ them, only some of which turned out to apply (p.39); reminiscing on ‘the feeling of being adrift, isolated, because you don’t have the language to articulate your life’ (p.37); and how they ‘never came out because [they] didn’t have any words, no story yet’ (p.35). The stories that we tell, and the stories we are audience to, may have a profound impact on what becomes ‘possible’ in our perception of the world and in our sense of self. This idea of feeling possible is no small matter; as Judith Butler argues,

Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent. (2004, p.29)

It is widely acknowledged that ‘representation in media is a vital site of political struggle, through which the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities might find greater purchase’ (Harper et al., 2018, p.7). As well as the validation, affirmation, and self-discovery marginalised readers may experience by seeing ‘their own faces reflected in the pages of a book’ (Jenkins and Cart, 2018, p.3), novels with marginalised protagonists may also serve to educate about, and encourage empathy with, identities and experiences the reader does not personally share. This ethos underlines much of the scholarship on diversity in literature, especially in the fields of children’s and young adult (YA) literature (Epstein, 2013; Jenkins and Cart, 2018; Booth and Narayan, 2020; Corbett, 2020; Bowden, 2021; Potter, 2022).

This framework becomes particularly important when considering the depiction of queer identities such as non-binary. Non-binary people, while increasing in visibility, remain relatively misunderstood in mainstream media. Both binary transgender and non-binary people are consistently the target of discriminatory social discourse via self-styled ‘gender critical’¹ actors who influence public perception as well as legislation (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Nicholas and Clark, 2020). A prominent voice in these discourses is J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* saga and one of the most recognisable and influential voices in children’s and young adult literature. In recent years—gaining significant attention in 2020—Rowling has used her platform to advocate for transphobic and trans-exclusionary rhetoric, in longform essays but particularly on social media (Romano, 2020). The example of Rowling has stirred discussion regarding the ways that anti-trans discourses tangibly cross over into the publishing world and place young queer readers in an especially vulnerable position. Many binary trans and non-binary authors, including some cited in this project, wrote open responses exploring the impact of Rowling’s work on the literary field and the responsibilities faced by writers of fiction for young people (see Kacen Callender’s *‘Harry Potter Saved My*

¹ ‘Gender critical’ is an ideological framework under which much trans-exclusionary and transphobic discourse takes place, not limited to, but most chiefly associated with, a group that has been termed trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). Radical second-wave feminist writers such as Janice Raymond and Mary Daly are associated with the movement. While investigating the history of these dialogues in academia, activism, and their proliferation onto social media is beyond the scope of this project, it warrants mentioning.

To briefly summarise, TERF rhetoric often uses gender essentialist arguments to dismiss binary trans and non-binary identities, rejecting the possibility of identifying with a gender other than the one assigned at birth and reinforcing the inflexibility of the gender binary. This logic is used to advocate for discrimination against trans people on social and legal levels, such as prohibiting them from gendered spaces or making it difficult to obtain legal and medical recognition of their gender. TERF arguments often rely on essentialist stereotypes, such as that all men are violent and dangerous, and thus trans women—‘really’ men—will bring uniquely masculine hazards into women’s spaces (Zanghellini, 2020, p.2). As Julia Serano discusses at length (2007; 2013), trans-exclusionary feminist arguments often hyperfocus on the perceived danger and artificiality of trans women while erasing or infantilising trans men. Another common theme is framing trans identities as a passing trend, with Abigail Shrier’s 2020 book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* being a recent example.

Non-binary identifications have received criticism and dismissal that intersects with these ideas. Essayists such as Rebecca Reilly-Cooper and Katie Herzog, for instance, have quoted selectively from non-binary writing and community resources to suggest non-binary identifications as ‘whimsical, ad-hoc, self-indulgent choices, placed in opposition to real “stable” gender identities’ (Nicholas and Clark, 2020, p.41). These essentialist positions that rely on a reinforcement of the gender binary and on cisgender norms are relevant because they are not just intracommunity discourses, but publicly platformed arguments that have the potential to affect policy decisions and influence the dominant public perception of binary trans and non-binary people.

For a more detailed breakdown of TERF philosophy and its flaws, see Zanghellini (2020); for a more detailed examination of ‘gender critical’ discussion of non-binary identifications see Nicholas and Clark (2020).

Life. J.K. Rowling is Now Endangering Trans People Like Me’, and Alison Evans’ ‘Being a Caretaker: A Response to J.K. Rowling’). This context makes the increased industry presence of queer young adult fiction, and the emerging subset of non-binary young adult fiction, significant and worthy of examination.

This creative research project explores non-binary representation in young adult fiction and investigates the techniques and literary devices authors may employ to explore and embrace queer agency in these texts. This exegesis contextualises the creative work—*Children of the Dusk*, a YA fantasy novel—among contemporary, evolving trends in the literary field of queer adolescent fiction. The following chapters examine the depiction of non-binary characters in YA fiction through a narrative study lens, arguing that authors may use devices such as speculative worldbuilding and narrative voice to create queer stories that make mischief with established convention, whilst simultaneously operating within a familiar codex of tropes and narrative types. I explore in particular how the frameworks and expectations of mythological-inspired fantasy—character tropes like the trickster god, a magical setting that eschews the conventions of contemporary realism, and omniscient folkloric narration—open new opportunities for the exploration of thus-far underrepresented and marginalised gender identities. New representational possibilities result from interweaving these fantastical, folkloric elements with contemporary conceptions of gender identity and adolescent narrative.

Notes on terminology

The terminology surrounding non-binary gender identity is constantly evolving and in flux. As I lay out the definitions and frameworks I will be using in this exegesis, I do so with the acknowledgement that they are not necessarily universal, nor are they static. Indeed, in several years they may become outdated as writers, activists, and community members

continue to '[coin] new terms that capture the individuality of their experiences' (Twist et al., 2020, p.19). Rather than having a strict, singular definition, I use 'non-binary' here as an umbrella term indicating gender identity outside of, beyond, or in between the categories of female and male. This may take many different forms. As Jos Twist and their fellow editors elaborate in the introduction to the essay anthology *Non-binary Lives*,

'Non-binary' can include those who conceptualise gender as a spectrum, rather than two discrete categories. Some people experience themselves as existing at a point between these two poles, and some experience their gender as shifting between these poles at different times and/or in different contexts. 'Non-binary' can also include those who feel that gender is more complicated than one single spectrum, or those who disagree with the notion that gender is a spectrum at all. It can also include those who experience themselves as not having a gender or who take a political stance against the concept of gender. (2020, p.18)

Many more specific identity labels with which non-binary people might self-identify exist under this umbrella, including genderfluid, agender, demiboy, demigirl, neutrois, and others². The fact that non-binary identity encompasses so many experiences and intersections may make the process of trying to codify it with identity labels seem reductive or even 'redundant' (Reilly-Cooper, 2016, n.p.). However, acknowledging and articulating non-binary as a category is valuable precisely because 'once fluidity is named, it becomes a space which people can inhabit' (Monro, 2005, p.37). As will be discussed further throughout the exegesis, much non-binary writing places great value on self-identification and articulation of one's own felt sense of gender using whatever terminology brings comfort and gender euphoria³. As

² Resources such as the Nonbinary Wiki (https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/List_of_nonbinary_identities) attempt to document the evolving language of gender identity.

³ Notions of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria are important to any discussion of gender identity. Dysphoria is most commonly defined as 'distress arising from conflicts between a person's gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex' (Beischel et al., 2021, p.1). In many places a diagnosis of this acute psychological distress is required for transgender status to be medically and legally recognised (Bettcher, 2014; Johnson, 2016; Barker and Iantaffi, 2019). While it is considered that all trans people experience varying degrees of dysphoria (Badgely, 2021), many binary trans and non-binary scholars and activists critique the medicalist narrative that renders dysphoria synonymous with trans identity. To disrupt and expand on this social narrative, much contemporary discourse seeks to additionally or alternatively highlight gender *euphoria*, often described as 'joy and contentment' or 'elation or connection with one's gender' (Beischel et al., 2021, p.8).

with other queer gender and sexuality labels, non-binary identity is formed, made recognisable, and made possible through language of identification and disidentification.

While non-binary is in itself an umbrella category, it is generally regarded as falling under the broader framework of transgender identity, based on the definition of trans people as those who identify with a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth (Barker and Scheele, 2019, p.125). This construction of transgender is frequently placed in a binary relation to ‘cisgender’, a term used to describe those who identify with their assigned gender. The usefulness of conceptualising non-binary identities as a subset of transgender or ‘trans’ is worth interrogating further, however. To elaborate on Twist’s point, ‘the language of non-binary does not only articulate an identity position [...] it also describes a way of relating to the gender binary that is broader than this’ (McCann and Monaghan, 2020, p.175).

Additionally, not every person who identifies as non-binary identifies as trans, problematising a universal conflation of the two categories (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; Barker and Scheele, 2019). There are also situations in which the definition based on disidentification with assigned gender may not, or cannot, apply—for example, a child raised gender-neutral and *not* assigned a gender. Uncoupling ‘non-binary’ from the transgender umbrella helps keep contemporary discourses of gender flexible and inclusive. When this framing is applied in the context of discussing fiction, it may also open new avenues of queer analysis: specific non-binary terminology, and its associated concepts, may be usefully applied when discussing characters whose gender falls outside the binary in narrative settings where contemporary conceptions of the male/female binary (or the trans/cis binary) may not exist or be applicable (see Chapter Two). Articulating non-binary as its own queer category also works to reject the notion that being non-binary is a lesser version of being trans; an in-between step before the individual transitions ‘properly’ to one of the binary genders (Johnson, 2016; Verman, 2018; Kennedy, 2021).

To differentiate when discussing different facets of transgender identity, I will follow from Twist et al. and use ‘binary trans’ to refer specifically to trans people who identify comfortably as men and women, as opposed to people who identify as *non*-binary. Where relevant, I will refer to this collective group as ‘binary trans and non-binary people’. I choose this over ‘trans and non-binary people’, which is often used to refer broadly to a non-cisgender group. This has been regarded as an inclusive phrase as it acknowledges, as noted above, that not all non-binary people are trans. However, as Twist explains, ‘the critique of this phrasing is that it risks implying that non-binary people are a discrete category separate to trans [...] people’ (2020, p.19). It could be argued that ‘binary trans and non-binary people’ is equally exclusive, as it risks suggesting a ‘binary/non-binary binary’ (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019, p.79). There are complex issues to be considered here, and the search for terminology that applies across a variety of identifications⁴ is valuable. However, as Twist and company suggest, in fixating on the search for a single, universally effective term ‘we end up risking going around in circles’ (2020, p.20). The evolution of language surrounding gender identification and queerness is not a process that will meet a perfect end point: the goal is ‘expand[ing] the scope of possibility, feeling our way towards being able to better account for our relation to the internal and external alike’ (Pearce et al., 2020, p.6).

Accounting for all of this, I seek a working definition of ‘non-binary’ that intersects with broader notions of the trans experience while also highlighting non-binary identity’s unique properties and possibilities. To keep my conceptualisation of non-binary open, yet precise, I use ‘non-binary’ henceforth to indicate a queer relation with gender that engages with possibilities beyond the binary and beyond notions of linear transition and static gender identity.

⁴ Other terms such as ‘queer gender’, ‘gender diverse’, or ‘trans*’ have also been used to refer to a non-cisgender collective.

In terms of ‘a queer relation with gender’, I refer to the framework of ‘queer’, which I use throughout this project as another umbrella phrase (referring to non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender sexualities and genders) as well as a theoretical viewpoint. ‘Queer’ in the context of queer theory and queer criticism operates as ‘a different kind of thinking and engagement with questions of sexuality, gender, identity, power and the politics of oppression’ (McCann and Monaghan, 2020, p.3). In *Queerness in Play*, Harper, Adams, and Taylor suggest that queer describes

a point of view that questions existing structures and binaries and a diverse range of theoretical work that has, at its core, a critique of how heteronormative power structures serve to limit and compress our understanding of the world. (2018, p.1)

Queer as a framework works to deconstruct and question social norms that have been naturalised and framed as essential, including the assumption that everyone is (or ought to be) heterosexual (‘heteronormativity’) and cisgender (‘cisnormativity’) and how these norms are reinforced by and structured around a series of binary oppositions (Butler, 1990; Barker and Scheele, 2019). ‘Queer’ may be used as an adjective or identity label to describe identifications outside of this presumed matrix but also as a verb, referring to a process of *queering* these norms. By this metric, ‘queer narrative’ may refer not just to a fictional story with LGBTQIA+⁵ content, but to a subversive creative and theoretical framework through which that story is approached.

Not every non-binary individual considers their gender identity to be subversive and deconstructive (see the discussion of ‘genderqueer’ terminology below). However, regardless of individual experience of gender, the presence of non-binary identifications in culture invokes an interrogation of the heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and the binary assumptions

⁵ Standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic, with the plus connoting the ever-evolving nature of queer identity formation and queer identity language.

surrounding gender and gender roles that cannot be understated. Therefore, examining non-binary discourse and fiction through a queer framework acknowledges the challenge these identifications pose to hegemonic norms, structures, and social narratives.

Non-binary gender: history and scholarship

While non-binary is sometimes considered a “new” gender identity’ (Vijlbrief et al., 2020, p.91) due to its relatively recent recognition in mainstream culture, and to the rapid growth of non-binary communities over the Internet (McNabb, 2018, p.xvi), it is by no means a modern invention. Much community and academic discourse recognises that the binary gender system is largely a Western, colonial paradigm, and should by no means be considered universal (Yeadon-Lee, 2016; McNabb, 2018; Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; Twist et al., 2020; Vaid-Menon, 2020). Many cultures have historically recognised, and still recognise, gender identities outside of the male/female binary, some legally acknowledged as a third gender and some fulfilling particular cultural or spiritual roles. These include, among many others, *fa’afafine* in Samoa, *māhū* in Hawaii, *hijra* in India, and a variety of locally- and tribally-specific identities throughout the Americas.

In 1990, the term ‘Two-Spirit’ was coined ‘as an intertribal umbrella term for indigenous gender and sexual identities outside the European binaries’ (McNabb, 2018, p. 40). This was intended to replace the offensive anthropological term that had previously been used, and to articulate a sense of specific identity distinct from the non-Native queer community. The ‘slippery, complex, and fluid’ nature (p.40) of ‘Two-Spirit’ has been celebrated by some but critiqued by others, with concerns that it risks ‘paint[ing] an overly wide brush of Native culture, conveniently overlooking distinct cultural and language differences that Native peoples hold crucial to their identity’ (Pember, 2016, n.p.). Rather than seeking ‘definitive’ modern terminology for any of these groups, it is important to consider

these notions in constant evolution, as cultures reclaim or reinvent these historical identities in conversation with, or in resistance to, contemporary discourse (Medicine, 2002; Alexeyeff and Besnier, 2014). A deeper exploration of these conversations (in the US and around the world) is beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to acknowledge that they are occurring alongside the English-language queer theory I primarily build on and reference.

Non-binary identity as it is commonly conceptualised and discussed today in Anglophone contexts has grown out of this rich pre-colonial history as well as queer theory and activism across the twentieth century (Barker and Scheele, 2019). Modern articulations of identity outside of the male/female binary gained traction within queer movements in the 1990s. For example, Kate Bornstein openly explores gender fluidity and gender non-conformity as a specific form of identity in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994). Trans activist Rikki Wilchins is credited with coining the term ‘genderqueer’ in 1995 ‘in an attempt to describe those who were both queer with respect to their sexuality and “the kind of gendertrash society rejected” with respect to their gender intelligibility in public spaces’ (Dembroff, 2020, p.3). Wilchins’ terminology was a specific extension of the political connotations of ‘queer’—to queer gender was to challenge the binary assumptions of man and woman, masculine and feminine, and genderqueer could be used as a self-descriptor for one’s political motives to trouble such ideas (McNabb, 2018; Dembroff, 2020).

Across the twenty-first century, public knowledge of gender identity outside the male/female binary increased thanks to the rise of social media and online communities (Yeadon-Lee, 2016; McNabb, 2018; Barker and Iantaffi, 2019). The term ‘non-binary’ emerged and gained popularity in the 2010s and is now generally more widely used than ‘genderqueer’ (McNabb, 2018, p.9). The explicitly political origins of genderqueer are often cited as the key difference between that phrase and the newer ‘non-binary’. McNabb suggests this as one possible reason for the preference for the latter term, as ‘some people do not

identify their gender as being inherently political’ (2018, p.19) and do not wish to signal it as such. Of course, it may be argued that ‘non-binary and genderqueer are political, they cannot help but be so in a world in which they lack power, where gender is so imbued with power’ (Nicholas, 2020, p.5). As outlined above, the matter is complex. No one phrase is technically more ‘correct’ than the other, and it should be an individual’s decision which identification label—if any—they feel articulates their relationship to gender. Due to its position as the more widely-used contemporary label, this project primarily uses ‘non-binary’ as its key umbrella term; though where its specific political connotations as laid out by Wilchins make it the more appropriate phrase (or where quoting directly), I will also deploy ‘genderqueer’.

Alongside community discourses (online and offline), a body of work that could be called a foundation of non-binary theory has gradually emerged. Surya Monro cites the 2001 collection *Unseen Genders: Beyond the Binaries* as one of the first publications to specifically discuss non-binary identity and terminology (2019, p.126); and McCann and Monaghan credit the 2017 resource book *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders* as the first full-length publication on the topic (2020, p.175). In the introduction to *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders*, editors Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker note that when calling for contributions ‘[t]here was no jumping-off point—no “Here is the literature and here is how I am adding to it”, no body of work to form a firm grip from which to leap’ (2017, p.1). Since then, however, the foundation has expanded: followed by other essay collections such as Jos Twist et al.’s *Non-binary Lives: An Anthology of Intersecting Identities* (2020), guidebooks such as Charlie McNabb’s *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources* (2018), and theoretical/therapeutic works such as Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi’s *Life Isn’t Binary: On Being Both, Beyond, and In-between* (2019). There have also been a number of studies on non-binary identifications in groups at various intersections of

marginalised identity (for instance Nicolazzo, 2016; Yeadon-Lee, 2016; Vijlbrief et al., 2020; Zwickl, 2020; and McDonald, 2021).

This project builds on this theory and, in conversation with literary scholarship, focuses on the ways that non-binary identity is made visible in fictional texts, and the way authors use language and narrative to articulate something often dismissed as ethereal and immaterial due to its lack of singular definition (Nicholas and Clark, 2020; Vaid-Menon, 2020). Just as non-binary identifications encompass a rich variety of intersecting experiences and personhoods, there can be no single non-binary archetype in literature. Thus, I explore the ways this identity might be applied to a rich variety of scenarios, tropes, and character types, and what narrative effects result from these combinations.

Tricksters

The trickster is often tricky to define; William J. Hynes even suggests that ‘[t]he sheer richness of the trickster phenomena can easily lead one to conclude that the trickster is indefinable’ (1993b, p.33). What makes a trickster may vary across disciplines as well as across individual scholars: the language of ‘tricksters’ as a sociological and anthropological archetype has been invoked to describe psychological impulses (Jung, 1959), the energy of places (Waddell, 2010), and even psychic phenomena (Hansen, 2001). This project focuses on the trickster as a literary character type, drawing from its origins in mythology. The most well-known examples of mythic tricksters include the Norse Loki, the Greek Hermes, the West African Anansi/Ananse, the Polynesian Maui, and various versions of the archetype that appear in Native American storytelling in the form of the Coyote, Raven, and Hare characters. Many more figures have been read through a trickster lens, including, among others, the Japanese deity Susa-No-O (Ellwood, 1993) and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*’ narrator Scheherazade (Landay, 1998).

Trickster in its current conceptualisation as a character type derives from the work of structuralist mythographers and anthropologists working throughout the mid-twentieth century, including Paul Radin (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958), and Mary Douglas (1966). However, these foundational scholars have been subject to significant critique. Later writers have especially scrutinised the tendency to homogenise cultural storytelling traditions in the name of a formulating a ‘universal’ cross-cultural archetype. Doty and Hynes identify the key problem with Radin’s approach as his ‘treatment of “the trickster” in simplified and accultural terms’ (1993, p.17), and Michael P. Carroll notes the ‘incorrect ethnographic generalizations’ that underpin some of Lévi-Strauss’ analyses (1981, p.302). Anne Douhei reminds readers that a power imbalance is inherent when the storytelling traditions of so-called primitive peoples, in many cases Native American and African, are catalogued and ‘explained’ through the lens of white scholarship. The definitions developed in the trickster studies of the 1950s and 1960s were largely informed by, and inextricable from, ‘Western conceptions of the sacred and profane, of myth and literature, and of origin, evolution, and degeneration’ (Douhei, 1993, p.195). T.O Beidelman similarly observes that

Disparate figures have all frequently been termed tricksters, yet this term is clearly the product of the analysts’ ethnocentric evaluations of deviance and disorder that does not always derive squarely from the evaluations held by the members of the cultures in which they appear. (1993, p.189)

While any subsequent academic discussion of the trickster owes its existence to the works of the structuralist mythographers, it is important to recognise the colonial mindset that underlines many early conceptions of the trickster and work to build more nuanced and flexible contemporary studies of the character type (in and outside of mythological contexts). This project does not attempt new study of existing mythological tricksters, nor attempt to read those symbolic patterns back onto diverse cultural situations to derive anthropological or other insights. I do not intend to retell, reuse, or appropriate indigenous storytelling traditions

of which I am not a part. I follow scholars such as Lori Landay (1998) and Helena Bassil-Morozow (2012; 2015; 2017) in my attempt to explore broader notions of the trickster as a literary device with certain thematic and narrative functions, and their potential applications in contemporary fiction. There are authors currently working in the YA demographic who utilise the trickster character type in the context of their own cultural traditions: the *Trickster* trilogy (2017 – 2021) by Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations member Eden Robinson draws on Native North American storytelling practices, as does Lipan Apache author Darcie Little Badger's *A Snake Falls to Earth* (2021). These novels and their use of trickster characters are valuable, though examination of them is largely beyond the scope of this project, and I do not intend to replicate their methods with my own creative work.

The trickster is not confined to its mythic origins: '[f]or centuries [the trickster] has, in his various incarnations, run, flown, galloped, and most recently motorcycled through the literary imagination' (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p.158). Scholars like Landay and Bassil-Morozow study the trickster in the context of contemporary media, and suggest that this character type, and the thematic and narrative function it represents, has evolved to suit and reflect the anxieties, restrictions, and taboos of the social framework in which the stories are produced. While the label of trickster can thus cover a wide variety of storytelling contexts and, by its very nature, may 'confound categorisation' (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p.165), there remains a central set of thematic roles and character traits that inform the use of the character type in this project.

The behaviours and traits (regarding personality and magical abilities) of these characters are of equal importance to their thematic role and positionality in the narrative, and I use a combination of these to suggest existing fictional characters as tricksters in my analyses as well as to construct the trickster protagonist of the creative artefact. These traits often include some combination of the following: shapeshifting and transformation,

troublemaking and trick-playing, existing on and crossing established boundaries (social or literal), embodying irony and paradox (e.g., being simultaneously clever and foolish), breaking taboos, troubling established binaries and categories, and a sense of playful, cheeky, and inappropriate humour. Tricksters are not necessarily bound within good or evil: they are ‘amoral, not *immoral*’ (Hyde, 1998, p.10, emphasis in original), and their antics ‘can be malicious, playful or heroic—and sometimes all three at once’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.16). They serve as ‘simultaneously a selfish-buffoon and a culture hero’ (Carroll, 1984, p.125) in their stories, wielding their wits as their greatest weapon yet also subject to failure and hubris when their clever transgression gets them in trouble.

As well as not sitting neatly within black-and-white moral codes, the trickster never sits neatly within their story world’s power structures or dominant vision of power and strength. So entangled is the trickster with this marginal, underdog status that Lewis Hyde asserts ‘[i]f trickster were to ever get power, he would stop being a trickster’ (1998, p.13). Because they are outside the dominant sphere, tricksters are uniquely positioned to question, trouble, and sometimes even break these power structures. Consistent to most typologies is the notion ‘that the trickster figure serves as a chaos-inducing element intent on challenging the order of things’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.11) and, regardless of context, that ‘trickster figures are representations of liminality, duality, subversion, and irony’ (Landay, 1998, p.2). These themes resonate through both the characterisation of a trickster and their role in the narrative.

In terms of narrative function, Bassil-Morozow suggests that

the trickster represents an unpredictable element which is introduced into an existing order of things, then challenges or demolishes this order, and the new order is introduced at the end of the narrative—often after the trickster’s disappearance. (2017, p.86)

Terrie Waddell similarly defines a trickster by their story role as ‘an archetypal agent of change’ (2010, p.1). Often, tricksters star in ‘stealing fire from the gods’ narratives in which they bring benefits to humankind either heroically or by accident, ‘[managing] to break a given taboo, pass on the relative cultural gift, and deflect respective punishment from the recipients of the cultural benefit onto himself’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.213). Their ‘anarchic assault on the status quo’ (Lock, 2002, n.p.) may take many forms, but tricksters are tied to thematic narratives about challenging norms and breaking rules, using their positionality on the threshold of a power structure to topple (or at least make trouble for) it, often for the benefit of those disempowered by that structure.

Most importantly, said anarchic assault on the status quo is also ‘fun’ (Lock, 2002, n.p.). Trickster tales not only feature the laughter of the trickster themselves, but encourage the audience to laugh along too, often at scathing satire of the story’s systemic power structure: because ‘[to] defy the system is to laugh at it, and laughter is the trickster’s main tool’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.4). Bassil-Morozow describes the trickster as ‘the raw energy of the new struggling to break through the surface of old structures’ (2015, p.31) to create a ‘new order [...] born out of mischief and play’ (p.20 – 21). I argue that this notion of creative mischief can be applied to the structure and metanarrative of stories themselves.

Tricksterish metaplay

In the ‘Inconclusive Conclusions’ (p.202) to the 1993 collection *Mythical Trickster Figures*, William J. Hynes suggests various narrative functions for trickster tales. Trickster myths, Hynes writes, are ‘deeply satisfying entertainment’ (p.202) that work as ‘ritual vents for social frustration’ (p.206) and are able to ‘act as escape mechanisms while being both entertaining and educational’ (p.207). Hynes suggests that ‘tricksters seem to have an affinity for linking foolishness and play with wisdom and work’ (p.206), using the hyperbole and silliness of their tales to cleverly highlight inequities, injustices, and rigid norms. Granted,

Hynes argues that this is often in service of reaffirming the very boundaries that the trickster is pushing:

Every time the trickster breaks a taboo or boundary, the same taboo or boundary is underlined for non-tricksters. [...] Because tricksters are so often the official ritual profaners of the central beliefs of a given system, they can act as a camera obscura in which the reversed mirror image serves as a valuable index to the sacred beliefs of that system (p.208).

While some tales may have these cautionary elements, however, the moral ambiguity of tricksters prevents them from straightforwardly being framed as villains (Hyde, 1998; Bassil-Morozow, 2012). More accurately, the trickster ‘brings to the surface the underside or reverse of dominant values’ and ‘plays out subterranean forbiddens in a dreamlike fashion’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.210). Landay echoes this notion when she suggests that tricksters are constructed as ‘fantasy figures who do what we cannot or dare not’ and who ‘call our attention to where we draw the lines that separate what is appropriate and shocking, possible and impossible’ (1998, p.xi). Ultimately, Hynes frames tricksters as ‘metaplayers and revealers’ (p.202). In their stories, the trickster’s antics draw attention to, or ‘reveal’, structures, norms, and social rules, in service of playing with and subverting them for the audience’s entertainment, perhaps with an educational or social message attached.

Hynes suggests this concept of ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (p.214) in the collection’s concluding pages and leaves it open to further interpretation. I contend that Hynes’ term can be applied in the context of contemporary literature, specifically to a process of queering and playing with narrative expectations and the structures, norms, and social rules they echo or represent. ‘Metaplay’ suggests metanarrative, a ‘story about story’ (Bond, 2008, p.36)—not necessarily requiring a metafictional device, such as breaking the fourth wall, but existing somehow in conversation with its reader and their assumed knowledge about the typical functions of narratives, genres, and genre conventions. In this project, I borrow Hynes’ concept of ‘tricksterish metaplay’ to consider queer stories that use trickster characters and/or

embrace trickster sensibilities—mischief, subversion, irony—to play with and subvert familiar narrative structures in order to ‘[bring] to the surface the underside or reverse of dominant values’ (p.210). I deploy this method of metaplay to challenge existing conventions and to open new representational possibilities in queer fiction.

Landay suggests that tricksters are primed for this sort of play within a narrative structure:

The trickster presides over both poles of play: the childlike fantasy of the subjunctive mood and the game rules and genre conventions in which play is experienced. The oscillation between the two poles characterizes the trickster, who is a rule-breaker and yet exploiter of the rules of the game. (1998, p.25)

Hynes writes that ‘when the trickster engages in metaplay he places the normal order of things under question’ (p.215). In the context of queer fiction, ‘[exploitations] of the rules of the game’ (Landay, 1998, p.25) may be used to place familiar literary norms ‘under question’ and to invite the audience to imagine alternative, broader possibilities. Queer, tricky metaplay may draw the audience’s attention to familiar tropes and ‘game rules’—for example, the associations between queerness and tragedy that are outlined further in the section below—before swerving away from them, the subversion visible and cathartic. Given the long-standing assumptions that a heterosexual, cisgender protagonist represents the universal, relatable ‘default’ (Kubowitz, 2012), casting queer characters into defined character types and recognisable genre patterns may function as a subversion in and of itself. Writers may queer these patterns to challenge the centrality and ‘default’ status of hetero-cis personhood. Satirical, hyperbolic depictions of heteronormativity or gendered expectations may also fall under queer metaplay, providing ‘vents for social frustration’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.206) for the audience disempowered and marginalised by these structures in reality.

A specific trickster character is not strictly necessary for these forms of metanarrative play to take place in a work. However, as Hynes notes, a trickster character serves as the

mischievous ‘revealer’ that plays a central role in drawing the audience’s eye to the structures and orders being questioned, and thus to the subversions taking place. As I discuss further in Chapter One, the trickster character resonates into queer fiction for this reason. The trickster provides a narrative tool with which an author may draw attention to (‘reveal’) the playful subversions of structure (be they social structures or the structures of genre) taking place within the story. This metaplay with genre, expectations, or tropes for an audience’s recognition, entertainment, and catharsis is one of the character type’s potential ‘media transformations’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.205) and one of its applications to contemporary queer adolescent narrative.

Whilst beginning in the mythological tradition, the trickster has evolved through time and media, with the methods and modes changing while the same core components and functions of the character remain. Bassil-Morozow defines the distinction thus: ‘[w]hereas mythological tricksters fight with personified representations of the deterministic principle—Zeus, Thor, Odin—[contemporary] cinematic tricksters attempt to cause socio-political Ragnarök’ (2012, p.123). This idea of ‘socio-political Ragnarök’ and ‘new order [...] born out of mischief and play’ are crucial to the trickster’s resonance (Ruberg, 2019) as a marginal, rebellious figure that may be applied in various artistic contexts. The trickster’s liminal status and narrative function as a symbolic prankster who upsets the structural powers have resonated with many different storytelling modes and subject matters across history. I argue that these thematic elements lend the trickster character resonance with two overlapping genres: non-binary narrative and adolescent narrative. As Chapter One will explore, tricksters are characteristically ‘notorious border-breakers’ (Hynes, 1993b, p.33) who are ‘not fully delimited by one side or the other of a binary distinction’ (p.34), thematic elements that allow them to resonate with non-binary identifications, even prior to consideration of the many gender transformations that occur within trickster myths. Likewise, the categorical liminal

positionality of the trickster in relation to power structures, and the trickster's state of flux and change, resonate with the positionality of adolescents and the marginality and movement that is often central to the narratives in YA literature.

While there is much to discuss about depictions of trickster figures that directly draw on pre-existing narrative traditions—for example, those in Robinson's and Little Badger's novels, or the multiple YA reimaginings of Loki from recent years—this project is not wholly concerned with direct adaptations. Instead, I argue that authors of queer YA fiction might deploy marginalised characters with trickster attributes to explore and invoke narratives of playful rebellion, liminality, agency, and Bassil-Morozow's 'socio-political Ragnarök' (2012, p.123). Rather than adapting any pre-existing mythic figure for the creative work, I have instead constructed an original fantasy setting inspired by Irish mythology and an original protagonist based on the categorical idea of a trickster. Many works of YA fantasy borrow and remix 'structural and aesthetic elements' (Fimi, 2017, p.5) from mythology, elements that have, by pop cultural osmosis, become familiar to genre readers. Using familiar tropes and concepts from mythology for this world, story, and characters enables the creative process of tricksterish metaplay that subverts and plays with convention on multiple metatextual levels. This queer metaplay that embraces and explores the entertaining rebellion inherent to tricksters and their tales could be aimed at any audience, but I argue that it has a particularly strong resonance with the adolescent narratives found within YA literature.

Queer young adult fiction

While this project primarily focuses on examples of non-binary representation in contemporary fiction, as with acknowledging culturally-specific and pre-colonial gender identities it is crucial to address the long non-binary storytelling history that precedes the current literary landscape. While applying contemporary gender terminology to mythic or

fictional figures created in different historical contexts can be reductive, it remains true that mythology from around the world is rife with characters we can read through a binary trans or non-binary lens from a contemporary perspective. As Chapter One will discuss, the transgressions and transformations of trickster figures like Loki enable genderqueer readings and allow Loki to resonate with non-binary audiences (Munsen, 2015; Sprenkle, 2020). Other mythologies (as we understand them through their transcriptions, translations, and literary versions) feature genderless beings and characters who undergo physical transformations with the assistance of the gods. For some prominent examples, we can look to Classical mythology; as Simone Chess writes, '[s]ome of the most memorable episodes in [Ovid's] *Metamorphoses* center on genderqueer or trans or nonbinary characters' (2020, p.23) such as Caenus, Iphis, and Tiresias. As noted above, it risks anachronism to apply contemporary language to these ancient tales. However, placing them in conversation with contemporary queer theory and queer literature is warranted. As Vanda Zajko suggests,

A queer reading of Ovid's myths concerning sexual identity is in part defiantly contemporary [...yet] it is also indebted to, shaped by, and impossible without, the tradition of problematizing and representing the embodied subject that can be figured as beginning with Ovid and continued, for example, by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Freud, Lacan, and Sedgwick. (2009, p.186)

The conversation regarding these tales and the 'labyrinth of gender positions' (Zajko, 2009, p.192) they contain is complex, as is the distinction between what we term 'mythology' as opposed to still-living storytelling cultures; which, as expressed in the section on tricksters, I do not wish to speak over nor appropriate in this discussion of queer mythos. While largely beyond the scope of this project, the narrative history of binary-crossing transformations serves as an intriguing and important foundation for this creative project and for the broader discussion of non-binary (and binary trans) 'representation'.

These ideas continue to proliferate across literature and time: gender shapeshifting and pragmatic transformations of gender presentation (e.g., ‘cross-dressing’⁶) are present in a wide corpus of narratives, from folktales to Shakespeare (Barker and Scheele, 2019; Chess, 2020). Part of addressing these stories with nuance is acknowledging that presentation does not necessarily equal gender identity, but these ‘cross-dressing’ narratives often open avenues to play with gender roles and binary expectations in ways that make them nonetheless a valuable part of the genderqueer record. In a more recent literary context, novels that take a playful or speculative approach to the gender binary, such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) or Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), may also be considered prototypical genderqueer fiction. These examples, and how they lend themselves to contemporary conversations around non-binary fiction, will be examined more in Chapter Two.

At time of writing, non-binary characters appear in a variety of media for a variety of audiences⁷. This project examines the field of young adult literature specifically. Queer YA is a niche of traditional publishing that is growing year by year, and one that demands a commensurate growth in scholarly attention. Across the past decade there has been a significant rise in the presence of LGBTQIA+ characters in YA novels; a study by author and commentator Malinda Lo charts a ‘300% increase’ in queer YA titles released by mainstream American publishers from 2009 to 2018 (Lo, 2019, n.p.). As well as this statistical spike, Lo also notes a diversification of genre. While contemporary realist novels have historically been

⁶ I understand that ‘cross-dressing’ is a contentious term especially in the context of transgender history and narratives; and is language that risks reinforcing the gender binary even if the actual act of changing gendered presentation may be freeing and flexible. While a deeper examination of this narrative context is out of scope, I wish to acknowledge the imperfect interplay of evolving language when discussing these stories.

⁷ Some examples of non-binary characters in live-action television include Taylor Mason in Showtime’s *Billions* (2016 – present), Janet in Netflix’s *The Good Place* (2016 – 2020), and Cal in Netflix’s *Sex Education* (first appearing in 2021). In children’s animation, there is Double Trouble in Dreamworks’ *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018 – 2020), and the magical alien race of the Gems (as well as the human non-binary character, Shep, introduced in the final season) in Cartoon Network’s *Steven Universe* (2013 – 2020). Non-binary main characters are also increasingly featured in novels for other demographics: A.J. Sass’ *Ana on the Edge* (2020) is a middle grade book with a non-binary protagonist, and Anita Kelly’s adult romantic comedy *Love & Other Disasters* (2022) stars a non-binary chef as one of its two leads.

the main source of queer adolescent narratives (Jenkins and Cart, 2018), now queer characters appear in a broad swathe of teen genre fiction including fantasy, science fiction, horror, and historical fiction. As awareness and discussion grows surrounding the variety of identity formations within the queer spectrum across social, cultural, political, and medical contexts⁸, the range of sexual orientation and gender identities featured in these novels has also broadened, with an increased amount of asexual, aromantic, intersex, binary trans and non-binary characters appearing on the page. Naturally, many issues that affect binary trans people (and their representation in fiction) overlap and intersect with those that affect non-binary people (and characters). Where relevant, I will highlight intersections and commonalities, whilst remaining focused on non-binary representation and its own unique, emerging issues⁹. This project also does not cover intersex representation¹⁰, because—though some intersex people may identify as trans or non-binary (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019) and many issues affecting intersex people have historically intersected with those affecting trans people (Gill-Peterson, 2018)—these terms are far from synonymous.

Recent years have also seen emerging critique and interrogation of the narrative patterns and clichés that have become associated with fictional depictions of queer identities. A coming-of-age story with a queer protagonist traditionally involves them coming out, their experiences with homophobia and prejudice, and generally revolves around that character's otherness within a heteronormative world (Crisp, 2009; Jenkins and Cart, 2018). Historically, it is also convention that these narratives end in unhappiness, whether by tragic death, break-up of the queer romantic couple, or a general sense of ennui and isolation associated with

⁸ While the conflation of transgender identity with body-modifying medical procedures will be further discussed and problematised later in this exegesis, it must be noted that the increased accessibility of social and medical support structures for gender affirming care/gender transition arguably runs parallel to the increase and evolution in trans (binary and non-binary) portrayals in fiction and popular culture.

⁹ For other studies on trans representation in contemporary YA, see publications such as Corbett (2020), Bowden (2021), and Bulla (2021).

¹⁰ For a brief overview of the short history of intersex representation in YA, see Jenkins and Cart's *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018, p. 176 – 179).

queer identity (Epstein, 2013; Jenkins and Cart, 2018). Kira Deshler writes in her thesis *Not Another Dead Lesbian* that '[f]or many years, queerness, as portrayed in fantasy and as the lived experience of individuals, has been linked to death' (2017, p.33). In the context of YA, '[t]raditionally, the function of the queer character in young adult literature is to die' (Browne, 2020, p.13), either due to censorship regulations or as part of a didactic message about the dangers of alternative lifestyles. As Katelyn R. Browne elaborates,

queer teens have long been culturally *expected* to die: from AIDS; from homophobic violence; from suicide. For the queer teen who survives in body, coming out as queer is presumed to lead to social death [...] Developing into a healthy, productive queer adult has been presumed to be a contradiction in terms. (2020, p.7)

The general audience awareness of this convention, often shorthanded as 'Bury Your Gays', has led to a hunger for narratives that reject this association between queerness and tragedy¹¹. While nuanced stories that explore queer death and grief are still valuable, this harrowing literary history leaves ample room for contemporary narratives that interrogate or outright reject the associations between queerness and death, loneliness, and unhappiness.

These patterns of coming out narratives and unhappy endings apply to fictive depictions of binary trans and non-binary characters, with YA fiction featuring these identities historically and repeatedly 'contribut[ing] to the message that having a queer gender means not being able to escape the realities of hatred and bigotry' (Bowden, 2021, p.70). There are also tropes more specific to binary trans and non-binary characters that are worth interrogating on the same level. Many early YA novels with binary trans characters are anchored in the perspective of a cisgender narrator, focusing on their emotional reactions and educational journey as they observe (and learn to tolerate) a trans side character (Epstein,

¹¹ As Deshler's thesis explores at length, a key source of audience frustration is that this trope is not only part of queer media history but reoccurs frequently in contemporary television and film. Deshler's observations from 2017 regarding television writing and fan reactions unfortunately remain relevant: as recently as April 2022 the drama series *Killing Eve* killed off one of its queer protagonists (by proxy breaking up its central queer romance), sparking fresh discussion about the prevalence of the narrative device. For further examination of this specific example, see Cunningham (2022).

2013, p.145 – 149). When not in didactic roles, binary trans characters have frequently appeared as deceptive villains (Halberstam, 2005; Serano, 2007; Lamari and Greenhill, 2021), monstrous figures (Pearce et al., 2020; Eklund, 2021), or victims of horrific but socially expected violence (Coleman, 2019; Bowden, 2021). Versions of these patterns also play out for non-binary characters, which, in their relatively short literary history, have become associated with dehumanising characterisation: often depicted as aliens, robots, or other non-human entities (O’Shea, 2018; Prevas, 2018; Osworth, 2019; Kennedy, 2021; Lamari and Greenhill, 2021). As Chapter Two will explore, this trope warrants nuanced discussion as it may facilitate empowering non-conventional explorations of gender identity in these texts, but its status as a recognised cliché stands. As non-binary representation increasingly features in young adult texts, a valuable space emerges to imagine and present alternative images of non-binary personhood and adolescence that reject, or complicate, these repeating patterns.

Many cite the first YA text with a non-binary protagonist as Jeff Garvin’s 2016 coming-of-age novel *Symptoms of Being Human*, a contemporary realist narrative that navigates the familiar obstacles of coming out and facing bigotry (Coleman, 2019; Bowden, 2021). Since then, more have followed¹² in various genres. Linsey Miller’s *Mask of Shadows* (2017) and A.R. Capetta’s *The Brilliant Death* (2018) both open high fantasy duologies with non-binary protagonists. Alison Evans’ *Euphoria Kids* (2020), A.R. Capetta’s *The Heartbreak Bakery* (2021), and Anna-Marie McLemore’s *Lakelore* (2022) inject ordinary urban settings with whimsical magic and populate them with diverse ensemble casts including non-binary leads. Contemporary realist works are still staples of this niche of queer YA, with novels such as Mason Deaver’s *I Wish You All the Best* (2019), Alexandra Latos’ *Under Shifting Stars* (2020), and Kacen Callender’s *Felix Ever After* (2020) exploring coming out and growing up

¹² For a frequently-updated database of new titles, see author Ray Stoeve’s ‘YA/MG Trans and Nonbinary Voices Masterlist’ at <https://raystoeve.com/the-masterlist/>.

with a non-binary focus. Many other novels—Marieke Nijkamp’s cabin-in-the-woods horror *Even if We Break* (2020), M.K. England’s science-fantasy *Spellhacker* (2020), and Alice Oseman’s university coming-of-age story *Loveless* (2020) among them—feature non-binary characters as part of queer ensemble casts.

An earlier version of this exegesis attempted to catalogue every non-binary character appearing in YA fiction since 2016, an effort that swiftly became futile as I realised there were too many to cover with any significant depth in a single chapter—even when the criteria was narrowed to a study of non-binary protagonists¹³. Instead, this thesis examines a sample of texts that prove exemplary for the way they depict and explore non-binary gender. I explore these texts in conversation with the manuscript for *Children of the Dusk* and with regards to the three central topics of the exegesis.

Firstly, I argue for the potential of the trickster figure as a narrative device that can queer and play with established convention, and for the potential resonance this character type holds for queer adolescent narrative. Chapter Two will examine the potential benefits and risks of exploring non-binary identity in the fantasy genre. To explore the benefits, I interrogate how creative devices such as fantasy worldbuilding enable an author to empower their queer characters (and/or interrogate power structures) in a variety of ways. Alongside this I also attend to the risks of centring the fantastical and the magical, reflecting on the inadvertent ways this could reproduce tired clichés about both the ‘otherness’ and impossibility of non-binary bodies. Finally, in Chapter Three I contend that narrative voice and point of view play a large role in the construction and affirmation of non-binary identity within fictional texts, arguing for the underexplored queer potential of the omniscient

¹³ For a more in-depth study of YA works with non-binary main characters from 2016 – 2020, see my paper ‘From Painters to Pirates: A Study of Non-binary Protagonists in Young Adult Fiction’ (2022). This overview of the field touches on several key themes—such as the interaction between gender and genre fiction, and the way narration and language may be used to construct these characters’ gender identities—that are expanded upon in this exegesis in greater depth.

narrative voice. I explore all these facets in relation to existing examples of non-binary YA narratives and in relation to *Children of the Dusk*, which I argue fits into, as well as expands upon, this emerging field.

The Stars have told their tale, and now I invite you back down to Earth for the analytical exegesis that follows.

1. Teenaged Trickster Gods: Queer Resonance, Young Adult Fiction, and the Trickster Character Type

Of the many literary forms and functions of a contemporary trickster, I argue that it is a character type that has potentially rich applications in stories of non-binary adolescence, and with narratives of queer adolescent rebellion. A trickster is, as well as being characterised by their mischief and playfulness, characterised by being an in-between figure: positioned to cross established boundaries and binaries, defined by their outsider status relative to the dominant power structures of whatever world they inhabit. Because, at their heart, ‘Young Adult novels are about power’ (Trites, 2000, p.3), texts in the field of queer YA fiction often understandably find themselves concerned with the crossroads of marginality that LGBTQIA+ teenagers face and the intersecting net of power relations they must navigate. Systems of adult authority mean that teenagers are ‘by design deprived of civil rights and infantilized’ (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p.2), categorically lacking agency in many tangible ways (legal, economic) as well as caught in the marginal space between the socially-constructed borders of childhood and adulthood (Waller, 2009; Auten, 2020). The established structure that marks heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the norm, and the social, medical, and legal structures that accompany it, further systemically disempowers queer, and especially binary trans and non-binary, teenagers.

Lori Landay defines the pop cultural tricksters within her study by ‘their pursuit of autonomy’ (1998, p.30), and Terrie Waddell defines a trickster by their story role as ‘an archetypal agent of change’ (2010, p.1). These themes of autonomy, change, and power are also central to young adult fiction. As well as lending itself well to narratives that interrogate

power structures, a young, queer trickster character provides an avenue for queer agency in this narrative context. There is narrative pleasure and catharsis in the suggestion that marginalised characters deserve autonomy over themselves and the settings they inhabit. Not only that, but they may be the ones uniquely situated to change the world—not in the mode of a traditional heroic character type, but through the more ambiguous, rebellious, clever and funny figure of trickster. YA fiction is thus a playful creative space in which ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (Hynes, 1993a) may draw attention to structural inequalities and harmful systems, all through a fantastical and playful narrative mode that has the potential to resonate strongly with a similarly-marginalised audience.

In their 2019 book *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bonnie Ruberg develops a definition of ‘queer resonance’ that will be useful for drawing connections across these concepts. As Ruberg writes, queerness does not need to be intentionally inserted into a text (be that text a novel, film, game, or, for our purposes here, a set of character traits drawn from mythology) for queer readings of that text to have meaning. Ruberg describes fictional ‘sites of resonance’ as:

points of relationality, moments where the structures and messages of [stories] echo and are echoed by the structures of queer thinking. To resonate does not simply mean to replicate; resonances still allow for differences and even contradiction. At the places where video games [and other media] and queerness meet one another, they reverberate, calling to one another and calling to us to make new meanings by reading them in tandem. (2019, p. 20)

By examining the qualities of a trickster character and ‘reading them in tandem’ with non-binary identifications and the tropes and structures of adolescent narrative, ‘new meaning’ and new storytelling potential emerges. In this chapter, I explore the appeal of tricksters to queer YA storytelling, particularly in novels with non-binary protagonists: what makes tricksters queer (and what makes them genderqueer, by Wilchins’ initial definition), and how

they likewise resonate with narratives about the ‘liminality, alienation, and transgression associated with adolescence’ (Byers, 2017, p.161).

Following from the definitions established in the Introduction, this chapter considers the trickster as a collection of character traits and narrative functions and does not intend to homogenise or appropriate living storytelling traditions. I follow scholars such as Lori Landay and Helena Bassil-Morozow in my intent to track the narrative device of the trickster and what it can offer to various narrative forms when reimagined by contemporary writers drawing on their contemporary contexts. I also argue for the place of Hynes’ ‘tricksterish metaplay’ in queer YA, wherein authors draw attention to supposedly fixed binaries, structures, and narrative patterns by toying with them in the context of the fiction, with trickster characters leading these narratives and instigating these disruptions. After laying the groundwork for these ideas, I will contextualise this analysis within *Children of the Dusk*, primarily focusing on the form and function of the manuscript’s trickster protagonist, Cillian.

Trickster and gender

‘Queerness as playful or explorative is a common theme in queer theory’ and in queer literature (Harper et al., 2018, p.4). The trickster, too, has been associated with ideas of marginality, play, and rebellion. Examining the trickster in terms of its broader thematic undercurrents, its narrative functions, and the various instances of trickster characters crossing binary gender borderlines in myth, it is not difficult to imagine the storytelling potential of a queer trickster—and particularly of a *genderqueer* one. Despite this potential, however, the idea of a non-binary trickster remains relatively underexplored in both theory and fiction.

This is perhaps unsurprising, as it is only within the past few decades of trickster studies that scholars began to highlight and interrogate the concept of a *female* trickster. Early trickster scholarship focused almost exclusively on male trickster figures and on the idea of

tricksters as intrinsically male, for '[t]hough female mythological characters sometimes engage in deception, rarely are they included under the trickster rubric' (Hansen, 2001, p.36). One such rubric is Lewis Hyde's, developed in his 1998 study of the type in mythology, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*. Here, among his criteria, Hyde asserts that '[a]ll the standard tricksters are male' (p.335)¹⁴. Since (and contemporary to) Hyde's book there have been numerous studies that search for and identify the female trickster in myth and in popular culture. Deldon Anne McNeely's *Mercury Rising: Women, Evil and the Trickster Gods* (1996) describes the trickster as 'an androgynous archetype which is portrayed universally as masculine' (p.7). In *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (1998), Lori Landay suggests the oft-overlooked Scheherazade as the archetypal feminine trickster and traces her characteristics through the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In a 2002 paper responding in part to Hyde, Helen Lock points out that while the agency and education (or at least, cleverness) associated with the trickster have historically been more likely to belong to men, '[t]hese advantages are in themselves gender-neutral, but are gendered by cultural association. *Trickster* is not gendered—only cultural perceptions of the freedom and mobility necessary to *be* trickster' (n.p., emphasis in original). Elizabeth Dulemba (2021) additionally critiques Hyde's assertion of 'all the standard tricksters' being men by suggesting that many female folkloric characters with trickster characteristics were (mis)labelled as witches or other transgressive archetypes with more negative connotations.

Creative practice and research revolving around female tricksters is a rich and important field, but this project intends to take this question of the trickster and gender in a

¹⁴ Hyde attempts to complicate his own binarist criteria even if he comes to that conclusion, explaining 'I have been speaking of the trickster as "he" because all the regularly discussed trickster figures are male. There is no shortage of tricky women in this world, of course, or of women in myth fabled for acts of deception, but few of these have the elaborated career of deceit that tricksters have. There are several reasons that might be. Most obviously, all the canonical tricksters operate in patriarchal mythologies, and it would seem the patriarchy's prime actors, even at the margins, are male' (1998, p.8). Counterarguments from writers such as Landay, Lock, and Dulemba often stem from an alternate definition of 'an elaborated career of trickery'.

different direction. If the trickster is so defined by their ability to cross boundaries and challenge binaries, and is ‘an androgynous archetype’ (McNeely, 1996, p.7) only ‘gendered by cultural association’ (Lock, 2002, n.p.), there remains potential to create and explore trickster characters who do not fit within the gender binary in the first place. As Terrie Waddell points out in *Archetype, Myth and Identity in Screen Fiction*, ‘trickster [...] can be interpreted as a fluid, non-fixed image; intrinsically neither male nor female’ (2006, p.39). A fluid or non-traditional sense of gender is a key part of many scholars’ trickster criteria: Margaret A. Mills observes that ‘one prominent feature of the trickster’s personality is gender ambiguity’ (2001, p. 237), and Hyde writes that it is the duty of the trickster to ‘cross the line and confuse the distinction’ between supposedly fixed categories including ‘male and female’ (1998, p.7). These observations draw from mythic examples of tricksters moving back and forth across the borders of gendered roles, either through shapeshifting magic or disguise.

Commonly cited are the exploits of Loki¹⁵, ‘the trickster god who exists in a perpetual state of being “in between,” particularly in regard to his gender’ (Sprenkle, 2020, p.39). When Thor’s hammer is stolen, he and Loki dress as women to infiltrate the thief’s territory; Munsen (2015) notes that Loki is happy both borrowing a goddess’ cloak and later disguising himself as Thor’s bridesmaid, in sharp contrast to Thor’s discomfort. Likewise, Munsen argues that the text implies some degree of literal transformation for Loki, rather than Thor’s simply putting on a wedding dress. Another tale sees Loki transforming into a mare to seduce a workhorse, an interaction that leads to Loki giving birth to the eight-legged foal Sleipnir—making him ‘a mother in addition to a father’ (Sprenkle, 2020, p.40). Munsen also observes that ‘[d]espite the act of giving birth, Loki is still referred to with male pronouns here and in other myths, making this a mark of gender fluidity’ (2015, p.12). A reading or retelling of

¹⁵ As with the creative work, in this section I have made a conscious decision not to draw on analysis of examples from living storytelling traditions, hence focusing on the Norse Loki and not Native American instances where gender-shifting takes place.

Loki explicitly using contemporary concepts of non-binary gender comes to mind easily, and indeed Loki has been reimagined as such in recent novels by Mackenzi Lee and Julia Ember (albeit with mixed results—see below and Chapter Two).

As well as drawing on a literary history of specific examples, we may also look more broadly to the *thematic* genderqueerness of tricksters. If tricksters ‘act as a camera obscura’ to the dominant norms, beliefs, and desired attributes of a society (Hynes, 1993a, p.208), a trickster that emerges in a heteronormative, cisnormative setting could logically be queer. The trickster’s key attributes—border-crossing, boundary-troubling, existing outside dominant cultural power structures—resonate strongly with queer experience and lend themselves well to queer reading. It is crucial to Doty and Hynes’ definition of tricksters that they ‘possess marginal status’ and are, thus, able to ‘bring into the social institution new possibilities for action and self-understanding’ (1993, p.20). ‘Queer’, too, ‘evokes images of deconstruction and liminality, a point of view that questions existing structures’ (Harper et al., 2018, p.1). Tricksters are outsiders, considered ‘other’ and ‘deviant’ by normative powers, but they embrace this positionality and use it to impact change. The labelling of tricksters as taboo and profane (Hynes, 1993b) brings Rikki Wilchins’ notion of ‘gendertrash’ to mind, as well as many other queer rallying cries or theoretical positions that reclaim and celebrate the power to be found in ‘otherness’, so-called deviance, and a refusal to conform to dominant (hetero)norms.

There is strong evidence supporting a non-binary reading or reimagining of the trickster character type. However, this remains an underexplored area in both literature and theory. While there are studies approaching existing tricksters through a queer lens, or at least a lens that acknowledges gender fluidity (for example, Munsen’s (2015) and Sprenkle’s (2020) analyses of Loki), historically within academic study, it is more common to have the trickster ‘always [end] up being male in the final image’ (Mills, 2001, p. 237) unless

specifically discussing the female version of the archetype (as in Landay, 1998; Dulemba, 2021, etc.). The trickster's gender fluidity is most often seen as part of magical hijinks 'with comical and highly disorderly results' (Mills, 2001, p.237) rather than part of these characters' gender identity. Hyde's analysis of the story of Sleipnir's conception, and a thematically similar gender-shifting tale from Native American storytelling, is that they 'do not [...] seem to indicate "uncertain sexual status". In both cases, a *male figure* becomes briefly female and then reverts to being male' (1998, p.336, emphasis in original). While there are some contemporary retellings that attempt to embrace the trickster's connection to gender beyond the binary, there remains a gap in the field when it comes to viewing the character type through this lens and with a degree of nuance beyond 'comical and highly disorderly results' (Mills, 2001, p.237). Explicitly framing a trickster character through the lens of non-binary identity opens new possibilities for storytelling, creating new works in which much of the gender-playfulness and social critique of power structures in older tales may be rendered visible at the surface of the text. These narrative techniques may be used to playfully engage with newer conventions of queer storytelling for contemporary audiences.

Trickster and adolescent narrative

As Helena Bassil-Morozow states, '[f]or centuries, the trickster has been used in various narratives, including mythological, literary and cinematic, to convey the idea of agency and rebellion and, often turbulent, progress' (2015, p.i). That sense of 'agency and rebellion' coupled with the trickster's characteristic liminality and playfulness makes the character type not only resonant with non-binary storytelling, but with adolescent fiction.

A major source of resonance between trickster narrative and adolescent narrative is the notion of liminality. This phrase was popularised by anthropologist Victor Turner, drawing from and elaborating on Arnold van Gennep's 'liminaire' (1909) from his ethnographic

studies of rites of passage in preindustrial societies (Joseph, 2011, p.138). ‘Liminality’, as Turner coins it, is the middle state in the coming-of-age ritual: a state of being that is ‘ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification’ (Turner, 1974, p.232). While it refers to a specific anthropological concept, the language of liminality can be, and has been, mapped onto many different disciplines, including literary studies. Many scholars have applied the language and frameworks of liminality to the analysis of adolescent literature (Bigger, 2010; Joseph, 2011; Wilkinson, 2015; Hayes, 2018; Auten, 2020). It was coming-of-age rites that Turner first referred to with the language of ‘liminality’, describing the ‘rite of transition’, in between the ‘preliminal rites (rites of separation)’ and ‘postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)’ (Hayes, 2018, p.15). In a contemporary context, adolescence is ‘often perceived as liminal, in transition, and in constant growth’ and thus ‘always “other” to the more mature stage of adulthood’ (Waller, 2009, p.1). In this transitory otherness, a variety of contradictions present themselves, ripe for YA narratives to explore (Bowden, 2021, p.66).

Across their journeys, YA protagonists typically develop ‘an increasing awareness of the institutions constructing the individual’ (Trites, 2000, p.19); often coming to interrogate and problematise these social constructions along the way (p.20). This structure lends itself well to stories exploring queer autonomy; Chelsea Bowden argues that the characteristic liminality of YA storytelling ‘holds potential to advance much needed conversations about the liminality of queer gender’ (2021, p.66). As Julian Gill-Peterson explores, young binary trans and non-binary people are especially vulnerable as they navigate established structures of power, be they medical institutions that potentially deny them agency over their bodies, legal systems that block self-determination over their identity, or social mores that (ideologically if not legally) consider them ‘the *property* of adults’ (2018, p.viii, emphasis original). Drawing on these realities, a fictional non-binary teenager is thus an especially liminal, vulnerable

character based on their position in relation to ‘the institutions constructing the individual’ (Trites, 2000, p.19). This gives a non-binary YA protagonist plenty to interrogate in the genre’s characteristic deconstruction (whether symbolically, internally, or more literally) of systems of social power.

Because of this concern with power and agency, YA narratives—particularly queer ones—present themselves as an optimal place for familiar power (im)balances to be turned topsy-turvy and interrogated in ways that will satisfy their audiences. These are conventions that lend themselves well to tricksters. Kylee Auten argues that, especially in YA literature, ‘play and liminality are intricately intertwined’ (2020, p.6), and ‘liminal characters use play to [...] subvert authority figures’ (p.2). In a sense, a tricksterish subversion of the expected order is built into the conventions of the YA demographic. As Stephen Bigger writes,

the liminality betwixt and between childhood and adulthood features in fiction for young people. Turner talked of circumstances turned upside down, carnival-style; in a similar way, dependent children are described in story as independent, even world redeemers. (2010, p.3)

Adolescence is a liminal period rife with struggles for agency and self-determination, and YA fiction provides a space for that to be narrativized and explored in a rewarding way. YA is also a demographic in which there is more room for moral complexity and ambiguity, where ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ are not necessarily as clean-cut of a binary as they are in many works for younger audiences. The way YA narratives frequently problematise default adult authority and ‘interrogate social constructions foregrounding the relationship between society and the individual’ (Trites, 2000, p.20) also leaves room for questioning other complex social binaries. Into this framework, there is room for tricksters to emerge as YA culture-heroes: ‘amoral, not *immoral*’ (Hyde, 1998, p.10), representing taboo and existence outside the parent-approved circle, and ready to mock and displace the authorities that teenaged protagonists (and their implied readers) are beginning to interrogate. And, as Lock emphasises

in her 2002 paper, we cannot understate the fact that tricksters are *fun*. Their mischief and the ways in which it destabilises structure provides escapism, empowerment, and darkly humorous social commentary to young queer readers who may be worn down by their own lack of agency in a chaotic world—potentially a new form of the trickster tale’s function as ‘a ritual vent for social frustrations’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.206).

Trickster traits in YA protagonists

In the field of contemporary adolescent fiction, some writers have combined the concepts discussed above and applied trickster traits to non-binary characters within their YA texts. Across genres and contexts, I have located examples of non-binary YA characters utilising traits or tactics from the trickster rubrics explored in the Introduction. I also argue there are examples of Hynes’ concept of ‘tricksterish metaplay’ operating in various queer YA works, drawing on the tradition in new contexts even if no singular character directly fits the trickster role.

Multiple authors give their non-binary protagonists shapeshifting abilities that allow them to navigate, and interrogate, the expectations of the gender binary in their respective settings. In A.R. Capetta’s 2018 fantasy novel *The Brilliant Death*, protagonist Teo discovers a shapeshifting power that offers unique avenues for exploring the political intrigue at the story’s heart—as well as Teo’s non-binary identity. Teo uses their ability to inhabit different gendered roles and personas in order to access different parts of noble life: they can be a servant girl and, in the misogynistic hierarchy of the story world, go unnoticed in order to spy on people; or a young nobleman who has a place at the war table. Teo slipping into these gendered personas—while exploring their own gender identity along the way—highlights and exploits the inequalities in their world, using society’s preconceptions about each gender to Teo’s own gain. This literal ‘gender performance’ (Butler, 1990) throws the intrinsic nature of

gender and gendered roles into question by showing how easily they can be mimicked, essentially mocking them by playing into them. Teo utilises similar techniques to those outlined in Landay's study of the feminine trickster archetype (1998), albeit with a unique twist that draws on the character's specific non-binary identity.

The adolescent reimagining of Loki in Mackenzi Lee's Marvel Cinematic Universe tie-in novel, *Where Mischief Lies* (2019), uses similar techniques. Loki primarily presents as male but dons feminine disguises to perform tricks and espionage, no doubt inspired by mythological tales like the ones discussed by Munsen and Sprenkle above. In a scene that draws on and highlights the queer resonance of the Norse myths, Loki—when asked about this tendency to shift between male and female forms—clarifies that 'I don't change my gender. I exist as both' (Lee, 2019, p.265). In both Teo and Loki's case, gender-fluid disguises allow these characters to complete their goals, underpinned by a tongue-in-cheek critique of gender roles and expectations.

A more social form of shapeshifting takes place in Kacen Callender's contemporary realist novel *Felix Ever After* (2020). The titular Felix is a Black, non-binary (initially identifying as a trans boy, but coming to comfortably identify as non-binary by the novel's end) scholarship student at a prestigious art school, and is thus caught on the threshold of many social borders and binaries. The plot centres on the aftermath of an anonymous transphobic macroaggression in which photographs of Felix pre-transition are displayed in the school lobby, followed by a slew of untraceable hate messages. When the authorities are incapable of offering justice, Felix steps outside the structure and uses social media as a device to reclaim some autonomy. The Internet functions here as a liminal space that 'operates under different rules and exists outside the established order of things' (Wilkinson, 2015, p.114). Here, Felix uses trickster tactics and digital disguises to create a false persona with which to befriend and covertly investigate his classmates.

While the class divide between Felix's family and the well-moneyed school is portrayed as a disempowering structural force, the novel chiefly interrogates the power imbalances and gatekeeping discourses within the (supposedly inclusive) queer community. Felix's race, socioeconomic status, and gender identity marginalise him even within this marginalised group. As well as featuring a lesbian character who paints her transphobia as part of her feminism, the antagonist is revealed to be a cis, white, gay classmate angry that 'now we have to deal with people like [Felix] taking our identity, taking our space' (Callender, 2020, p.321). While Felix makes mistakes along the way, his unconventional search for justice ultimately succeeds in revealing the shortcomings of the school's administrative oversight as well as revealing and destabilising the exclusionary discourse within the local queer community. Felix transforms across the narrative, beginning as an outsider yet emerging as a 'culture hero' (Carroll, 1984), and provides an example of how trickster protagonists may be applied in a contemporary realist context.

I also argue that some queer YA novels employ a broader sense of tricksterish metaplay even while no single character fits the trickster role. These novels playfully respond to and move within a recognisable structure of norms and expectations—in this case, genre conventions. Marieke Nijkamp's *Even If We Break* (2020) uses the familiar framework of the slasher/horror genre to challenge the expectations of victimhood and villainy often found within fiction depicting queer characters. The novel follows five former friends when they reunite for a murder mystery roleplaying party. The event swiftly devolves into a horror scenario, as characters who are killed in the game are found brutally murdered. With regards to the mountain cabin setting, the atmosphere, and the haunting yet campy antics of the murderer, Nijkamp operates within the typical framework of the slasher. However, with those familiar anchor points in place, they then subvert expectations with regards to their casting decisions.

Firstly, the association between queerness and tragedy is teased but ultimately avoided when the novel's two binary trans and non-binary (respectively) characters survive the night while cisgender characters fill out the novel's body count. The historic patterns that mark binary trans and non-binary characters as unhinged villains (see Halberstam, 2005; Serano, 2007; Lamari and Greenhill, 2021) are also twisted. While some suspicion is initially cast on non-binary game-master Ever, the scheming murderer is revealed to be Liva, a cis, white, able-bodied, popular blonde girl—a character who would traditionally fit either the role of early victim or Final Girl (Clover, 1992). Liva, as if somewhat aware of the genre she inhabits, plays deliberately into these expectations: faking her death and covering her malicious pre-meditations by appearing stereotypically sweet and supportive to other characters. This sort of twist is not unique, but becomes noteworthy in the context of *Even If We Break* as a piece of queer genre fiction.

Nijkamp's creative decisions break the rules of 'the game' but also exploit them, as in Landay's definition of the trickster (1998, p.25). The murder mystery/slasher horror formula remains intact, but within the recognisable framework Nijkamp plays queerly with reader expectations. The characters who escape the night are queer, disabled, and neurodivergent; representing groups that are usually absent from genre fiction or marked as victims or villains within it¹⁶. Liva, meanwhile, is positioned as villainous, with her villainy anchored in her disregard for the agency of her marginalised classmates. *Even If We Break*, then, is simultaneously a perfectly conventional genre piece and a cheeky queer subversion of historical genre conventions, with the empowering queer 'metaplay' visible within the genre framing. As Hynes writes, 'when the trickster engages in metaplay he places the normal order

¹⁶ In the novel's acknowledgements, as well as highlighting the importance of queer representation, Nijkamp specifically notes their desire to see more neurodiverse (specifically, in this case, autistic) characters in fiction (2020, p.307 – 308). While it is beyond the scope of this project, the way Nijkamp and other authors use metaplay to subvert and question the typical tropes of neurodivergent representation is worthy of further study. I contend that this concept of metaplay can be applied to the representation of other (or intersecting) marginalised groups.

of things under question' (1993a, p.215). Nijkamp's metaplay within this campy horror invites the reader to question the 'normal order of things' by placing marginalised characters in opposition to villainous straight, cis hero(ines) who represent society's norms and desirable ideals. In a similar vein to *Felix Ever After*, casting characters that represent the acceptable norm and the top of the power structure as the villains helps to reveal these structures themselves as antagonistic. By proxy, this works to establish the marginalised protagonists as disempowered, liminal figures who must use trickster tactics to survive within, or overcome, these structures.

A tricksterish sense of humour is also a potential qualifier. By this metric, the speculative novels of M.K. England suggest themselves as trickster texts. *The Disasters* (2018) is a quippy, action-packed tale of failed space pilots saving the universe, and *Spellhacker* (2020) is a magical heist that culminates in a group of queer orphans taking down an evil megacorporation. Both operate within familiar genre frameworks, with metaplay taking place, as above, at the casting level, with characters from marginalised groups taking centre stage. Adults who represent the power structures of these novels' respective settings—corrupt officials in both cases—seek to eradicate these adolescents who subvert, transgress, or otherwise do not fit their norms.

Cartoonishly awful adults can be considered a staple of YA fiction. However, as in *Even If We Break*, the farcical construction of the villains, and the ideals they represent, warrant examination in the context of queer fiction. Like in the trickster storytelling framework that Hynes suggests, England uses humour and hyperbole to draw the audience's attention to the real-world analogues of the power structures and imbalances explored in their novels. In *The Disasters*, England critiques the military-industrial complex against an outer-space backdrop, and in *Spellhacker* a greedy company harms the environment in a fantasy setting. The central ensemble casts, in both cases, are disempowered young people who have

slipped out from the grasp of these power systems and into trickster positionality. While I do not identify a singular character in these novels that fits neatly within a trickster rubric, I contend that the casts as a collective—the respective rag-tag teams that lead *The Disasters* and *Spellhacker*—perform the trickster role. It is because of their outsider positions as systemic ‘failures’ that these protagonists are able to move outside the system and enact change to it (literally, in the case of *The Disasters*, as the main four characters survive the inciting incident because they have failed their pilot exams and are thus absent when a space station is attacked). These queer adolescents, pushed to the margins in their narrative contexts, ultimately attempt and achieve what the audience ‘cannot or dare not’ (Landay, 1998, p.xi) in a speculative context, all with a mischievous and often sarcastic sense of humour in both the dialogue and the narration. These novels demonstrate tricksterish metaplay applied on a broader, narrative level.

While these ideas of trickster traits and tricksterish metaplay are visible within some contemporary YA, however, there remains room for further exploration. Mackenzi Lee’s *Loki* may be one answer to a queer reading of the mythological character, but there is little to be said for his actual function as a *trickster* in the text, nor the text’s use of tricksterish metaplay to disrupt or critique power systems. Any true destabilisation of the story world is unfortunately prevented by virtue of Lee’s novel being a prequel to an established cinematic universe, thus stalling any meaningful influence *Loki* might have on the status quo¹⁷. The other examples certainly demonstrate trickster tactics at work and a playful, pointed critique of power dynamics and genre frameworks that readers may find familiar. However, a queer YA (anti)hero who fully fits the parameters of a trickster in terms of their iconic traits, abilities, and narrative function is yet to be found—especially in a text that engages and plays

¹⁷ The question of whether or not the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s version of *Loki* is, or can ever be, a trickster in a literary definition, is one that Bassil-Morozow contemplates in a 2017 paper. She concludes that MCU *Loki*’s function as a trickster is limited, and he is also not a particularly apt adaptation of his Norse counterpart, largely due to his sanitisation for the Disney market, which impacts both his characterisation and his transgressive potential.

with the mythic literary history and function of the trickster. In *Children of the Dusk* (henceforth *COTD*), I combine the ideas of the non-binary mythic trickster, the teenaged struggle for agency and identity, and metaplay, taking queer readings of the trickster type and creating a new character to serve as representation of these themes and resonances.

Constructing Cillian

Much contemporary fantasy draws from motifs, characters, and story types from myth and legend, reinvented to suit the fantasy work's sociocultural context and intended audience (Mendelsohn, 2008; Mendelsohn and James, 2009; Attebury, 2014; Fimi, 2017). Rather than retelling or remixing a pre-existing myth, I draw on 'structural and aesthetic elements' (Fimi, 2017, p.5) from Irish (and to a lesser degree, Norse and Greek) legends to create a cast and setting that is entirely original while still in conversation with mythological patterns that readers may be familiar with. I employ tricksterish metaplay, not just through the trickster character, Cillian, but in the overall play with established narrative 'game rules' (Landay, 1998, p.25) within the construction of the cast and the progression of the fantasy narrative. This is an attempt at queering and renewing fantasy genre staples familiar from ancient tales and their echoes in more modern literature and popular culture. I draw attention to the repetition of structures and patterns so subversions to them are visible and meaningful, thus emphasising the tricksterish overtones of the text itself as well as in the character of Cillian.

I primarily draw on Irish legend for the inspirations behind *Children of the Dusk*. As Dimitra Fimi (2017) chronicles, aspects from Irish (or more broadly 'Celtic') myths and legends inform and underpin many of the codes and conventions of contemporary fantasy. As well as this structural and aesthetic familiarity, and the connection to parts of my own heritage, I found Irish saga imaginatively rich as inspiration—particularly in its energetic, poetic, and emotional depictions in translations from Thomas Kinsella (1969) and Marie Heaney (1994). The interplay and dynamics between gods, monsters, and mortals offers an

intriguing background for a story about liminality, agency, and heroism, and there is arguably a degree of transgression and queerness at the core of many of these tales (Longman, 2023); as well as a playfulness and flexibility to (what we, as contemporary readers, recognise as) gender roles within the tales¹⁸ that offers a springboard for my own metaplay.

The heroes of Irish myth tend to be those who straddle the border between mortal and divine: ‘hybrid, edgy, liminal characters [...] both immensely powerful but also vulnerable, because they belong in neither camp and the gods cannot resist meddling with them’ (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, p.103). It is from this premise that I have developed *Children of the Dusk*’s cast of ‘hybrid, edgy, liminal characters’ who do not fit cleanly into the world of mortals nor the world of magic. This social displacement has undercurrents of queer resonance and renders the quest for agency paramount. The central characters are ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1974, p.232) the borders of magic and human society, and they are also young and queer. This structural position (see Chapter Two) victimises them, yet makes them uniquely capable of causing trouble for the dominant power structure in the story’s world.

Each of the teenaged cast represents a familiar mythic archetype with a queer or gendered twist: Elinor is a brash and superhuman warrior, primarily inspired by Cúchullain of the Ulster Cycle¹⁹. Aidan’s healing powers are a fantasy trope usually associated with female characters, a mythic example being Airmed, who wept over her fallen brother’s body and sprouted all the world’s healing herbs from her tears. Branwen’s fish-induced future-vision borrows from Fionn mac Cumhail, though in this case with a non-binary character inhabiting this masculine, heroic role. The positionality of the gods and humans also draws primarily

¹⁸ For instance, the casting in the tales is relatively flexible when it comes to crossovers of gender and character trope: e.g., Scathach is a woman in the warrior mentor role (one usually associated with masculinity), Diarmuid is a man enchanted to be beautiful (usually associated with femininity).

¹⁹Elinor was originally developed for my Honours project *Beast: A Hero Tale – Challenging the Gendered Nature of The Hero’s Journey Through Reimagining the Myths of Cúchullain* (2017). Prototype versions of Maebh and Brigit also appear in this novella.

from Irish saga, wherein, typically, '[g]ods and mortals encounter each only as actors in a shared drama' (Williams, 2016, p.98) rather than the pantheon being an all-powerful, distant site of religious reverence. Similarly, I sought to construct the so-called gods as powerful, but strikingly human in their flaws and vices; representation of a hegemonic power structure populated by greedy adults. This is encapsulated in Lorcán, a warrior-king with shades of Odin or Zeus who retains the status quo with physical might—the ideal foil and antagonist for a trickster to work against.

I conceptualised Cillian with the intention of creating a trickster character, drawing from the definitions outlined within scholarship such as Hyde's, Hynes and Doty's, and Bassil-Morozow's. Cillian is inspired in part by Loki, highlighted by plot points such as their shapeshifting to woo the prize bull; and also by the Greek Hermes, particularly in their role as guide between the worlds of the living and the dead and their thematic association with 'the twilight margins between daylight and darkness' (Doty, 1993, p.48). I also drew from the Irish figure Aengus Og, 'a wily, youthful trickster' that Mark Williams notes is 'remarkable for his rich emotionality' and who 'exhibits a range of humanly recognisable responses—reverie, love-longing, and suffering—and displays warmth to mortals' (2016, p.347). As Williams explores, many artists and writers of the Celtic Revival period, including W.B. Yeats, established a tradition of depicting Aengus Og as young and androgynously beautiful, drawing associations once again between trickster characters and gender non-conformity. Cillian has many of the 'shared characteristics that cluster together in a pattern that can serve as an index to the presence of the trickster' (Hynes, 1993b, p.34): shapeshifting abilities, a sense of mischief and an impulsive personality, grey morality, the power to move between worlds, and an eventual role as 'god of the threshold' (Hyde, 1998, p.7 – 8). As well as character traits, Cillian's position and role in the narrative was also paramount to their trickster-ness. As Bassil-Morozow writes,

Most trickster narratives (mythological, literary or cinematic) share a number of stock themes and motifs that serve as the backbone for the plot. Usually, a trickster narrative starts with the cunning creature being or feeling restricted (often physically), goes on to describe the trickster's escape and its adventures, and ends with the dissolution/transformation of the trickster. (2017, p. 85)

In Cillian, textually a non-binary character embodying the traits and functions of the trickster, the subtextual or metatextual (gender)queerness of the trickster is made visible at the surface of the text. Their narrative is entangled with core themes of liminality, rebellion, and the remaking of worlds, all in a narrative framework intended to draw the reader's attention to the transgressions and subversions taking place within it.

This creative decision to cast a non-binary character into the recognisable framework of the trickster is not one without its risks, however. Just as any work that draws on 'structural and aesthetic elements' from myth (Fimi, 2017, p.5) exists in conversation with those earlier stories, any work of queer fiction exists within a complex web of historical tropes and potentially harmful clichés: a queer mythos that writers need to navigate with nuance. Of chief concern here is the trickster's characterisation as 'deceiver and trick-player' (Hynes, 1993b, p.35), which risks running into historical stereotypes in which trans identity 'is equated with dishonesty and sickening deceit' (Halberstam, 2005, p.82). As Chapter Two will elaborate, while empowering in some respects, Cillian's shapeshifting and disguises potentially intersect with harmful clichés about the artificiality of the non-binary body and 'the notion that transgender folks are duplicitous, tricking others by misrepresenting themselves as someone they are not' (Lamari and Greenhill, 2021, p.175). As Halberstam (2005) and Serano (2007) explore, cinema is full of transgender antagonists based on this principle; their moral ambiguity connected to their 'deviant' gender identity. The trickster's characteristic dealings in the profane and the taboo also become potentially uncomfortable when linked to queerness. The tactical bovine flirting between Cillian and the prize bull

suggests a cross-species sexual encounter; and their affair(s) with the King and Queen of the Sea (despite being depicted clearly, I hope, as an unhealthy experience) potentially crosses into negative stereotypes about promiscuity, age-gap relationships, and the perverse intrigue of the non-binary body. In the context of the public reception of YA fiction, Cillian's story, if published, certainly risks being blacklisted by industry gatekeepers under the concern that they are a terrible role model to teenaged readers. Like all morally ambiguous queer characters, Cillian risks being spurned as 'bad representation' of a group that faces marginalisation and violence exacerbated by negative media stereotypes.

In *Children of the Dusk*, I have endeavoured to play with the material history has left me: writing Cillian as an ambiguous anti-hero, yet giving them the sympathy and interiority not always afforded to non-binary characters. I have also deployed Cillian, as the narrative's trickster, as a literary tool for playing with some of the negative tropes that have pervaded queer storytelling's past, giving them the power to overturn 'game rules' (Landay, 1998, p.25) such as queer characters being villainised or meeting tragic fates. The result of this experiment is a work of fantasy that reimagines older patterns in a contemporary context, embracing the troublesome messiness of the trickster in order to play out a story of queer agency.

Reckoning with the gods

The narrative of youthful, queer agency constructed within *Children of the Dusk* is essentially about stealing power back from authority figures that fundamentally disrespect and disavow individuals' autonomy. With Cillian at the heart of the narrative, the whole cast of characters develop the strength to reckon with the 'institutions constructing the individual' (Trites, 2000, p.19). Eventually they are able to assert their agency over not only themselves but their

environment, enhanced by the speculative elements: reckoning with prophecies, gods, and the world itself.

A recurring mythic element in *Children of the Dusk* is prophecy, chiefly those spoken by Croiadh, the immortal seer. The element of pre-determined fate introduces a further challenge to the characters' agency. However, rather than accepting prophecy as immovable, several characters actively fight to reassert their autonomy within this magical structure. Rowan is the first to voice his disdain for destiny, rejecting the prophecy that Willow will grow up to kill the king. 'You can never tell which way a sprout will grow, even if you train it or plant it for harvest,' he explains to Cillian (*COTD*, p.86). For Cillian, this idea of agency beyond a pre-determined path set out at birth is 'a strange thought, for the twilight child who had been moulded with a purpose in mind' (p.86). While magical destiny is not a direct stand-in for so-called 'biological destiny', it conceptually overlaps to form a broader queer thematic throughline about deviating from norms and expectations, particularly those of older (parental or pseudo-parental) authority figures. Further discussing this with Cillian, Rowan contextualises his rejection of fate with his own transgender identity:

'Given the body I was born into, you could say it was fate that I grow up into a woman. But I have defied such a destiny. You [Cillian] were born to be a loyal pawn of Loracán's, yet here you stand by my side. Only you can decide what happens next. Only you can decide who you are.' (p.205)

Self-determination over one's actions and one's personal identity are implied within this declaration. Across various character arcs, this theme of choosing one's own destiny—or, at the very least, subverting the system that seems to predetermine destiny—carries through to the novel's climax.

The climactic arc is an expression of queer revolt and agency through speculative means, and an encapsulation of the narrative power of the trickster character type. Cillian

begins as a typical mythic trickster: an amoral menace driven mostly by their own base impulses (desire for validation, anger, hunger, etc.), causing social upset wherever they go. As they develop and grow, however, and they learn the value of community, unconditional love, and friendship, they morph from general troublemaker into ‘culture-hero’ (Carroll, 1984). Eventually, they are able to use their magical abilities to change the world for good—and ‘manage to break a given taboo, pass on the relative cultural gift, and deflect respective punishment from the recipients of the cultural benefit onto [them]self’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.213) like many tricksters before. Cillian’s decision to create a boundary separating the gods and humans (a task also completed by some mythic tricksters, as discussed by Hyde) anchors them to the duty of maintaining it, showing their newfound maturity and leading to the ‘dissolution/transformation of the trickster’ required in Bassil-Morozow’s model (2017, p. 85). The decision is drastic, but necessary: in parallel scenes, Cillian extends a hand to Maebh just as Willow offers Lorcán peace. Both discover that the gods are eager to cling to their systemic power and there can thus be no significant change without revolution and reform—without changing the shape of the world, something the boundary-crossing trickster has the power to do.

It would be inaccurate to posit the ancient, unchanging gods as a metaphor for a singular form of bigotry. Rather, I intend for them to stand as a bombastic and fantastical portrayal of unchanging, greedy hegemonic power, their villainy cemented by their lack of respect for the autonomy of people they deem ‘below’ them. On the macro-level, the gods treat humans as indentured servants at best and livestock at worst; and on the micro-level Lorcán’s mistreatment of his children, and his seeing ‘their purpose before he saw their personhood’ (*COTD*, p.6), establishes him as an antagonist. This denial of others’ personhood is also his undoing, a theme that reverberates through the rest of the immortal court. The only god to escape the story unscathed (aside from Cliodhna, who switches sides) is Croiadh, yet

even his prophetic smugness is destabilised when the trickster plays with (his) narrative and Cillian does something the seer cannot predict. Cillian manages to *outrun* prophecy and upset the system of fate and foretelling with their decision to construct the Veil—an action Croiadh ‘did not see [...] coming’ (p.242). Even Death and the other omnipotent natural forces (the Forest, the Stars, etc.) are surprised by Cillian’s actions. Textually, weaving the Veil is a cosmic culmination of Cillian’s character development: given their selfish, mischievous, and vengeful nature early in the story, no one would have predicted such an act of heroism from them. Metatextually, it is an expression of the queer trickster’s ability to slip through power structures and alter the world, rejecting the narrative conventions that stand in for ‘fate’ in the literary climate readers may be familiar with.

Cillian playing with powerful magic has consequences, with their body increasingly tied into the Fabric of the World with every trip through it. Given that the Causeways are the realm of Death, this holds the haunting connotation that Cillian is increasingly becoming a hybrid being who cannot remain in the world of the living. The legacy of dead queers and gender transgressors (Love, 2007; Deshler, 2017) tugs at them with each thread that ties around their bones. However, I use tricksterish metaplay—through this trickster character—to draw the reader’s attention to this convention before subverting it. Instead of positioning their eventual integration into the Fabric as a punishment, Cillian claims these consequences as their own and invites the Fabric to enter and further warp their body on their own terms. The imagery is deliberate: Cillian is not constrained by these threads, they are weaving with them. Cillian does not die; they theatrically bow and then defiantly run from Death (*COTD*, p.246), cheekily rejecting the notion of queer self-sacrifice bettering the world. Cillian also refuses to let harm come to any of the other queer characters. They open the door to Death so that Brigit may play out a (successful) lesbian remix of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, distract Loracán for the crucial split-second Willow needs to regain the upper hand in their duel, and encourage

growth in other characters whether intentionally or otherwise. Cillian acts, in many large and small ways, as Waddell's 'archetypal agent of change' (2010, p.1).

Cillian, in contrast to the supernaturally-gifted fighters like Elinor or Willow who more concretely fit heroic roles, is not described as physically strong. Nor is Cillian straightforwardly a 'support' character; that role and the selfless kindness associated with it go to Aidan and his healing tears. Yet Cillian, despite where they begin their story, is not a villain, either. Cillian's initial motivation is revenge and power, but if Cillian had achieved this, they would lose their trickster positionality (Hyde, 1998, p.13), and cease to be the character with the ability to change the world. Through tricksters and through tricksterish metaplay, writers can play in the margins and play with the rules, poking fun at the rigid expectations of gendered roles and historic queer tropes. Specifically, by having tricksters shapeshift for their own personal gain or simply for fun, using them to explore potentially taboo topics, or villainising people in power who cling to the status quo, tricksters provide alternative visions of possibility in the form of a figure who rejects it all—while laughing—and creates change. Once the status quo has been disrupted, according to Bassil-Morozow the trickster must vanish. But, as the final chapter implies, Cillian is not gone, merely navigating back and forth across a new boundary: 'sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms' (Hyde, 1998, p.7 – 8).

The rejection of prophecies, defiance against intrinsic rules such as the permanence of death, and Cillian's eventual warping of the world into something new that no one predicted, all serve as fantastical expressions of queer adolescent agency within *Children of the Dusk*. In the construction of this mythic-inspired narrative I have attempted to explore and demonstrate the potential for the non-binary trickster figure in YA fiction, bringing the genderqueer subtext of the character type into text, playing on the themes of agency, change, and power,

and examining the applications the trickster has as a transgressive, mischievous adolescent figure. While there were risks I had to navigate to construct Cillian and their character arc, *Children of the Dusk* ultimately provides an example of the non-binary, teenaged trickster's narrative potential.

2. Non-binary Fantasy: Otherworldly Bodies and Queer Utopias

In his influential queer theory text *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz defined queerness itself as ‘essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world’ (2009, p.1). While Muñoz was discussing broader notions of queer philosophy rather than genre fiction, when exploring fictive queer elements—fantasy landscapes, magical queer bodies, and imagined communities—his insistence on queer potentiality and his imagery of ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with possibility’ (p.1) comes to mind.

Rather than exploring non-binary representation and possibility in contemporary realism, I have opted to anchor this project in speculative fiction—here considered by its commercial distinction as an umbrella term covering science fiction, fantasy, and ‘their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres’ (Oziewicz, 2017, n.p.). For the purposes of exploring queer narrative and identity, one advantage of speculative over realistic fiction ‘is that it does not need to take cultural conventions and limitations into account’ and can be a space ‘in which the authors are free to perform thought experiments and introduce new societal norms’ (Šporčič, 2018, p.53). For the author looking to explore non-binary possibility, speculative fiction is a vibrant stage, though not without its complications and caveats.

As Katelyn R. Browne observes, ‘[q]ueer YA has, for its entire existence, wrestled with the tension between depicting the queerphobic world as we know it and offering more optimistic roadmaps’ (2020, p.20). This chapter examines that tension, in relation to two key aspects of *Children of the Dusk*. The first aspect this chapter explores is the novel’s fantasy setting: chiefly, the narrative effects of different worldbuilding methods and the placement of

the story's conflict. On one hand, writers working in imaginary settings have the opportunity to construct queer narratives where their LGBTQIA+ characters are not marginalised, potentially creating a more escapist experience for their target audience (for examples of queer utopias within YA genre fiction, see the discussion of Malinda Lo's fantasy novels below). On the other hand, there is also value in more *dystopic* worlds where conflict is established between queer protagonists and an antagonistic power structure that renders them 'other' (for example, the *Iron Widow* novels by non-binary author Xiran Jay Zhao, in which a cathartically furious young woman and her queer, polyamorous partners are placed in opposition to a power structure that enforces the gender binary and gender roles to a horrific, dystopian extent). This establishes a system of norms for the protagonists to rebel against, placing the narrative enjoyment instead in the cathartic release when the characters triumph. Secondly, I examine the intersection between queer representation and fantasy conventions, in this case the decision to make the novel's main non-binary character a magical, non-human entity. Tropes like the shapeshifter provide escapism and resonance, yet they also risk falling into notions of 'otherness' invoked by the long-standing trope of the non-binary non-human. These are the tensions and balances explored in my creative process.

Non-binary fantasies and utopian (?) visions

It may seem like a logical step to locate a story exploring non-binary possibility in speculative genres oriented towards the future: reaching towards posthumanism, transhumanism, and images of a futuristic world where social concepts of gender have evolved (or perhaps dissolved)²⁰. For marginalised readers, there is potentially immense pleasure and emotional catharsis in texts that '[carve] pathways for queer young people to imagine themselves otherwise in the storyworlds of the future' (Coleman, 2019, p.4). Indeed, science fiction has a

²⁰ The creative, representative potential in combining queer/non-binary YA fiction with the genres of posthumanist and transhumanist science fiction is a rich vein, but beyond the scope of this project with its focus on fantasy.

rich history of exploring alternate gender possibilities and picking apart questions of identity against an otherworldly backdrop. Classic novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Octavia E. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy (1987 – 1989) feature alien societies with constructions of sex, gender, and gender roles that do not mirror Earth’s. This presents alternate possibilities to the binary system the Earthling protagonists (and readers) initially take as a universal constant (Barker and Scheele, 2019, p.152). Contemporary authors are also playing with these ideas in various contexts²¹ including in contemporary queer YA, with works such as Charlie Jane Anders’ *Victories Greater Than Death* (2021) continuing in Le Guin’s stead and featuring extra-terrestrials who conceptualise gender differently to humans. Other YA sci-fi novels feature human heroes who identify outside of the gender binary without facing in-text prejudice for doing so, such as in A.R. Capetta and Cori McCarthy’s *Once & Future* (2019) and M.K. England’s *Spellhacker* (2020)²². This balance between terrestrial and intergalactic explorations of non-binary gender is noteworthy for reasons this chapter will return to shortly.

For all the potential within genderqueer future fiction, it may seem counterintuitive to instead locate a story of non-binary possibility in a setting that invokes images of the distant past. As with many high fantasy settings, *Children of the Dusk* draws on imagery from myth and history, set in an ambiguous period described as an ‘age of gods’ (*COTD*, p.2), drawing its most tangible inspiration from Iron Age Ireland. While forward-looking science fiction and its imagined futures is powerful, I argue that there is equal—and perhaps even more radical—

²¹ Contemporary examples of adult sci-fi featuring alien or robotic non-binary characters (or otherwise exploring non-binary possibilities in a non-human context) include Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013), Becky Chambers’ *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2014), and Martha Wells’ *Murderbot Diaries* series (2017 – ongoing). In a neat example of my suggested model of a representational spectrum, Chambers’ *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) features a genderless robot and a human non-binary character as its two protagonists.

²² These examples are a handful in a field that is rapidly expanding—as noted in the Introduction, for a regularly-updated survey of non-binary characters in young adult fiction across genres, see resources such as Ray Stoeve’s ‘YA/MG Trans & Nonbinary Voices Masterlist’ or Dahlia Adler’s LGBTQ Reads website.

power in visions of non-binary identity in a setting evocative of the ancient world. The mythic framework opens a playful, fantastical exploration of gender. As outlined in the Introduction with examples such as Caenus, Iphis, and Tiresias, and as Chapter One highlighted with the case of Loki, mythology from around the world contains examples of characters who transform or transgress binary gender norms, often (though not always) in supernatural circumstances. Fantasy that draws on ‘structural and aesthetic elements’ (Fimi, 2017, p.5) from mythology thus has this flexible, fantastical approach to gender and the body as part of its genre toolbox. Exploring non-binary identity in settings that echo the ancient world allows contemporary writers to draw on these queer storytelling histories. It also allows for embracing and asserting the notion, drawn from activism, that *we have always been here*, rejecting the perception that non-binary identity is newly invented (Nicholas and Clark, 2020) and reliant on Internet subculture (Vynn, 2020) or contemporary activism (McNabb, 2018) to exist. In the context of fantasy fiction, this sets a stage on which authors can invite their readers to imagine rich, epic histories for marginalised groups, as I have attempted to do in this creative experiment.

Fantasy texts can provide the opportunity to explore ‘creative or disruptive play with representations of the real world’ (Attebury, 2014, p.33), thus setting the stage for elastic and creative explorations of non-binary identity. Notions of non-binary gender have been explored in this context historically, even if, as in classic science fiction examples such as Le Guin and Butler’s, contemporary terminology is not necessarily used and the authors may not have considered these characters as falling under that identity. Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando*, while not typically shelved as fantasy, can be read in conversation with the fantasy genre and as a prototypical genderqueer narrative. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas reads *Orlando* as ‘one of the most interesting paradigms of women’s fantasy fiction in the early decades of [the twentieth] century’, defining the novel within Tzvetan Todorov’s category of ‘the marvellous’

due to its ‘dealing with “otherworldly” matters’ (1993, p.143). The key otherworldly matter is the titular Orlando’s fantastical gender transition, in which the protagonist ‘simply falls into a deep sleep, and when he awakes, he is a she’ (Kaivola, 1999, p.235). This change comes without warning, but Orlando takes it in stride:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. (Woolf, 1928, p.138)

This passage matter-of-factly unsticks Orlando’s sense of self from Orlando’s gender identity, and gender identity from physicality; and slips into the gender-neutral they/them/their pronouns that many non-binary people use today. Orlando’s lack of distress—lack of dysphoria—following this transformation implies the character does ‘not [place] much importance on which body her or his mind resides’ (Räsänen, 2016, p.25). This suggests a felt sense of gender neutrality independent to the physical body, an intriguing aspect when reading *Orlando* as a non-binary fantasy narrative. The reader is invited to suspend their disbelief and to accept this rejection of the rules of reality (and society) in the same way they are invited to believe Orlando’s supernaturally long lifespan. Thus, here the fantastical elements ‘magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer [...] representation in realist media’ (Dunn, 2016, p.45).

Fantasy elements also allow for the matter-of-fact depiction of non-binary identity in the case of the ‘Fool’ in Robin Hobb’s *Realm of the Elderlings* novels. This magical character appears in multiple series within Hobb’s narrative universe (first in *Assassin’s Apprentice*, published in 1995), under different names and gender presentations: initially as the royal court’s Fool in the *Farseer* trilogy, then as a young, female shopkeeper named Amber in *The Liveship Traders* trilogy, then the dandy aristocrat Lord Golden in *The Tawny Man* trilogy. Across the cycle, ‘[t]he question of the Fool’s gender is never answered definitively’ (Prater,

2016, p.29), and the character's 'sex, background and even true name are left mostly ambiguous' (Räsänen, 2016, p.4). The genre framing allows for this ambiguity as it is one of many magical, unrealistic aspects the reader is encouraged to accept. This enables a form of non-binary embodiment outside the conventions or constrictions of realism, which allows the series to have a significant non-binary character without adhering to the tropes typically expected of realistic queer literature.

As well as providing a springboard for non-traditional depictions of gender, fantasy provides additional freedoms in that it invites the creation of a secondary setting with the author's choice of rules and norms. Queer fantasy is a space in which authors can follow Muñoz's call to 'dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds' (2009, p.1). A fantasy author can, if they wish, construct a queer utopia where queer characters do not face prejudice and othering. As YA author Malinda Lo explores in her 2011 essay on queer worldbuilding, '[t]he author simply has to decide: Are the people in this fantasy world homophobic? Or not?' (n.p.). Likewise, a fantasy world may be a space in which non-binary characters are not only given permission to exist, but to thrive, unconstrained by transphobia or binary gender²³.

In earlier drafts of *Children of the Dusk*, the worldbuilding was closer to the queer-friendly framework suggested in Lo's essay. However, the final manuscript is notably different, as I found I had to navigate what exactly 'queer worldbuilding' meant in the context of the story I wanted to tell. My earlier novella *Beast: A Hero Tale*, which features prototype versions of many characters and concepts that also appear in *Children of the Dusk*, was written more explicitly in a queer utopia, with same-sex romance going uncontested and queer

²³ While not common, this is a concept that has appeared in contemporary queer YA: for example, Jason June's 2022 fantasy romance *Out of the Blue* features a genderless society of merfolk. As will be discussed below, Alison Evans' *Euphoria Kids* (2020) features genderless dryads. Interestingly, both these examples are urban fantasy texts rather than high fantasy, with these non-binary societies and creatures existing on the fringes of a realistic setting, allowing human characters to interact with them and recognise the differences from their own social norms.

characters facing no discrimination²⁴. In this narrative, gender roles that mark women as caretakers and men as fighters were dissolved, with a female protagonist cast in the role of questing warrior as a metatextual critique of the hero archetype's masculine connotations. This, however, is where *Beast's* exploration of gender ends. Developing *Children of the Dusk* as a longer and more complex project called for a reckoning with the setting. In my quest for a joyful queer fantasy world, I faced two key conundrums: is queerness *queer* if it is the norm? Likewise, is a trickster a *trickster* if there is no power structure against which to pull their tricks?

These questions highlight the rocky landscape that authors who seek to populate their fantasy with queer characters must navigate. The first is the issue that queerness, fundamentally, 'names something discovered and encountered in relation to' something else: 'a perpetual twostep between disidentification with heteronormativity and identification with other queer persons and objects' (Phelan, 2015, p.78 – 79). The '*structural position of queerness*' (Edelman, 2004, p.27, emphasis in original) as something outside of an established, hegemonically maintained norm is crucial to its meaning. Non-binary identity, especially, is relational: to cisgender norms, to genders assigned at birth, and to the established binary itself. As Saoirse Caitlin O'Shea muses, 'we arrive at [a] contradiction—if I could undo binary gender there would be no collision or dysphoria and I would no longer be non-binary' (2018, p.23). An author could populate their speculative world with non-gendered beings, or suggest an alternate humanity in which binary gender categories are non-existent. This creates a cast of theoretically non-binary characters, which is certainly one vision of a

²⁴ In this tale, a prototypical Elinor is sent on a seemingly-impossible series of quests in order to win the right to marry Brigit, a narrative in the tradition of the 'wooing quest' common in Irish legend (Findon, 1994). The queen's reluctance to give Elinor her daughter's hand in marriage is explicitly nothing to do with gender and more to do with her anti-magic prejudice and her viewing Elinor as an outsider due to her supernatural powers.

genderqueer utopia. The question is whether these characters would be intelligible and relatable as non-binary to non-binary readers from our very binary reality.

Admittedly, there is discomfort in the suggestion that a non-binary (or binary trans) narrative or character is not recognisable without those elements of ‘collision or dysphoria’ that O’Shea highlights. Just as queer stories broadly are associated with unhappiness (Ahmed, 2010; Deshler, 2017), the dominant, established storytelling tropes surrounding binary trans and non-binary characters, especially young ones, are steeped in self-loathing, social othering, and misery (Epstein, 2013; Bowden, 2021; Bulla, 2021), because ‘happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach’ (Halberstam, 2005, p.82). As Sara Ahmed suggests, even the concept of happiness itself ‘tends to come with rather straight connotations’ (2010, p.100), attached to ‘scripts’ that do not align with the traditional trajectory of queer life and queer narrative. The impulse to buck this tradition and write fantasies in which young non-binary characters are not marked as ‘other’ and are thus not marked for doom is understandable. However—as Ahmed also muses—to wholly reject engagements with the unhappiness that stems from being queer in a normative world is to erase the emotional reality of many people’s lived experience. Stories that engage with the loss and pain inflicted upon queer people may ‘compel readers in a way that brighter stories of liberation do not’ (Love, 2007, p.3). However, ‘sad queer stories’ and ‘happy queer stories’ are not an immutable binary. For the purposes of this creative project, I attempted a blend of tragedy and triumph with the intention of providing recognition and thus empowerment to my target audience of adolescent queer readers. Alongside the potential in queer *escapism* is the potential in queer *catharsis*.

Malinda Lo’s ‘Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy’ essay discusses the creative process behind her YA fantasy novel *Ash* (2009), in which she deliberately created a setting where queer was *not* ‘other’ and queer stories could flourish (see Henderson, 2021a). While I

initially sought to mirror Lo's ethos, the queer worldbuilding that takes place in *Children of the Dusk* is closer to another, earlier queer YA novel, albeit one that is not strictly fantasy. David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* is set in a small American town where the queer and straight communities 'got all mixed up a while ago' (2003, p.1). Its visions of drag queen football stars, teen-friendly queer establishments like ice creameries and bookstores, and children growing up without experiencing homophobia, were perceived by some critics as 'utopian wish-fulfilment' (Epstein, 2013, p.91). As Thomas Crisp chronicles, discrimination against queer characters was frequently used 'as a literary mechanism employed to invoke "realism"' in queer YA fiction of the era (2009, p.337) leading to 'some readers [referring] to the book as a "fantasy" because they believe there is an absence of homophobia in the text' (p.342). Levithan's gay paradise, however, is not a wholly imaginary setting. The town exists within the structure of a broader and more normative world, one the reader will recognise as their own. It is a space of literal escapism for characters such as Tony, the gay son of religious parents, who lives in the unnamed and universal next town over. It is not that homophobia is absent from the novel's world, moreso that 'homophobia is not the foil which motivates so much of the action' (Crisp, 2009, p.342). *Boy Meets Boy* is a romantic comedy, and the author has crafted a queer-friendly otherplace as the stage on which this can play out. The characters are notably marginalised within the broader structure of the world, but this is what creates the narrative effect of catharsis and joy when an alternate space is found outside of that structure. Levithan's setting provides an example of queer potentiality that is evident to both the readers and the characters, and the utopian impulse in its construction is highlighted by the direct contrast of a more rigid, homophobic reality that exists just down the highway. This allows the novel to play with queer escapist visions while also remaining anchored in the factors that render its setting escapist *and queer* in the first place.

Similarly, the world of *Children of the Dusk* is not friendly to its young, non-binary characters, particularly within the gods' palace where Cillian grows up. As well as serving as a symbol for hegemonic power structures, Lorcán echoes bigoted behaviour readers may recognise from real-world encounters: he becomes frustrated when Cillian refuses to align with a binary gender, and misgenders Rowan and Willow multiple times. Cillian's banishment is what leads them to fellow outsiders who can relate in their own ways to the experience of being dehumanised by adults due to their nonconformity. Even seemingly gender-progressive spaces, such as Branwen's village, which pay little heed to traditional gender roles, still adhere to binary gender and leave non-binary Branwen feeling 'a gnawing discomfort they had no name for' (*COTD*, p.147). Readers may recognise the characters as queer by mapping contemporary notions of identity onto them, but they may also recognise them as queer for their positionality as 'other', as people who do not fit into the system of norms established in the story world.

The alternate kinships that form the community in the Forest mirror the process of recognition and solidarity that lead to queer community formations in the real world. Beginning with the 'cracked mirror recognition' (*COTD*, p.61) between Rowan and Aisling, then Willow and Cillian, each character sees echoes of their own experience of gender and sexuality in each other, discovering a sense of shared pathos and joy they have not found in their relationships before. It is because they are constructed as 'other' in the story world that this recognition can take place, and it is because the story world is constructed *to* construct them as 'other' that the solidarity between them will resonate with readers. This injects empowerment and catharsis into the narrative when the disempowered characters find solace in each other, and overcome the antagonists.

Just as '[t]he *structural position* of queerness' (Edelman 2004, p.27) is crucial to resonant queer storytelling, the structural position of the trickster figure is crucial to their

narrative function. The decision to centre the story around a trickster troubled the utopian vision I had initially planned for *Children of the Dusk*'s world. A trickster needs a rigid system to react to, a central power structure to exist on the margins of, or they cannot be(come) a trickster in the first place. As Hyde puts it, using Greek myth as a reference point,

Hermes cannot rightly be imagined without the more serious Apollo whose cattle he steals, or the grieving Demeter whose daughter he retrieves from the underworld. The god of roads needs more settled territories before his travelling means very much. (1998, p.13)

As discussed in Chapter One, recognition and resonance with the trickster requires recognition and resonance with a figure who is outside a dominant power structure, an underestimated outlier doing what the audience 'cannot or dare not' (Landay, 1998, p.xi). The queer affinity within the trickster relies on their playful, rebellious engagement with hegemonic power structures.

All this is not to say that there is no queer empowerment built into the magical world of *Children of the Dusk*. I have applied my own tricksterish agency as an author to create a world where queer characters may survive and thrive. The constructed secondary world, itself, intervenes to help and affirm the queer characters: the magic of 'True Name' recognises and affirms Rowan's gender identity, the Forest is sentient and moves to protect the characters, Death preserves Elinor and Brigit's love by bringing Elinor back to life, and 'the world quietly [rights] itself' to accommodate for Elinor's resurrection (*COTD*, p.220). Rather than the universe itself being positioned as unfriendly to queer characters, the forces of nature support and protect them. Thus, by locating difficulties in social rather than 'natural' forces, I reject the notion that queer people *inherently* must suffer, further framing the rigid gods (and mortals) as antagonistic.

Ahmed writes that '[t]here are of course good reasons for telling stories about queer happiness, in response to and as a response to the very presumption that a queer life is necessarily and inevitably an unhappy life' (2010, p.94). Likewise, in a genre narrative context, there is value in using speculative fiction to construct worlds where queer heroes are not marginalised. However, for this project a different setting was required. For Cillian to fulfil their role as an 'archetypal agent of change' (Waddell, 2010), I had to construct a world that needed changing: a world with injustice and prejudice built in, so that characters marked as Other could find one another and bond over their shared experience. This in turn allowed for both recognition and escapism, and located the joy of the narrative in the rebellion enabled by the trickster.

The tricky trope of non-human non-binary characters

There is great creative potential in non-binary narratives' intersection with fantasy. However, just as writing a non-binary trickster character risks invoking historical stereotypes in which being trans 'is equated with dishonesty and sickening deceit' (Halberstam, 2005, p.82), writing non-binary characters into speculative fiction comes with its own set of potentially troubling connotations and limitations. In this case, exploring the potentially empowering aspects of a non-binary shapeshifter, such as Cillian, involves navigating the trope of the non-human non-binary character present in many popular media depictions of the identity. As above, I argue for embracing the complexity and catharsis found in a combination of ideas from the past and present in this quest for queer futurity: a futurity where genderqueer shapeshifters exist alongside other forms of non-binary embodiment to create a nuanced spectrum of representation.

The non-human non-binary character is a specific stereotype under the more prominent trope of dehumanising transgender identity by associating it with monstrosity or

otherworldliness. Following from the ‘myth that transgendered people are malevolent, mentally ill, or monsters’ (Bornstein, 1994, p.13) that is clearly visible in a cinematic history of trans villains (Halberstam, 2005; Serano, 2007), the imagery of trans monstrosity is solidified in various transphobic works. In the radical feminist text *Gyn/ecology* (1969), for instance, Mary Daly compares gender-affirmation surgery to the artificiality and body horror of Frankenstein’s monster (Eklund, 2021, p.83 – 84). Alongside other complex reclamation efforts throughout the history of queer art, the imagery of trans-as-monstrous has been embraced by some over the years, including reclaiming Frankenstein’s creation himself in Susan Stryker’s ‘Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix’ (1993). In the introduction to the collection *The Emergence of Trans* (2020), the editors call for a movement to ‘reclaim this monstrosity as a source of possibility and determination [...] holding on joyously and stubbornly to the power that comes with strangeness and difference’ (2020, p.4). These issues, perceptions, and conversations—and the ways they appear in art and fiction—overlap onto non-binary identity, yet there are also unique problematics. With the broader foundation recognised, it is this specific niche of narrative tropes this section will explore.

If ‘one condition for being considered human is adherence to one of two binary gender categories’, non-binary people may be denied recognition as intrinsically human (McDonald 2021, p.83). Though discussing gender constructions in a different context²⁵, Judith Butler also observes that ‘[t]he mark of gender appears to “qualify” bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question “is it a boy or a girl?” is answered’ (1990, p.151). As Caitlin Saoirse O’Shea writes in the personal essay ‘I, Robot?’, *dehumanisation* may quickly follow the inability to answer that question: ‘It’s not a boy. It’s

²⁵ In this section of *Gender Trouble*, Butler unpacks Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. Butler’s discussion of the complexities and contradictions of sex assignment at birth, in this context, more closely aligns with intersex issues, though conceptually there is some crossover into discussion of non-binary identifications.

not a girl. It's a thing' (2018, p.14). These writers draw this conclusion from a sociocultural context, but the issues they observe filter into literature. Following from a greater pattern in which 'trans people are frequently portrayed as *monstrous*' (Pearce et al., 2020, p.3), non-binary fictional characters are frequently portrayed as inhuman, associated with robots (O'Shea, 2018), aliens (Osworth, 2019; Kennedy, 2021), shapeshifters (Lamrai and Greenhill, 2021), uncanny mutants or hybrid beings (Eklund, 2021), or other post- or non-human constructs with otherworldly bodies (Prevas, 2018; Henderson, 2021b).

The critical and creative dialogue surrounding this historical trend is complex. Some examples noted above—Le Guin's androgynous aliens, Hobb's magical shapeshifting Fool, and arguably even Orlando's immortal body—fall into this trend as well. Many non-binary critics call for fictional representation beyond the non-human model that has become familiar across the identity's relatively limited pop cultural history²⁶. Lamari and Greenhill point out that often this trope 'serves only to reinforce binaries by making the [non-binary] character exceptional and noting their unconventionality' (2021, p.170). Establishing non-binary characters as alien '[allows] their gender to be dismissed as alien too' (Kennedy 2021, p.241); something that no ordinary human could aspire to. Author A.E. Osworth 'long[s] for characters who fall somewhere outside the gender binary simply because they do', who are 'gloriously, blessedly human and still defy the contextual categories of the society that has raised them. Such characters are few and far between' (2019, n.p.). The issue lies in the fact that '[a]t a fundamental level, [non-binary people] are still having to argue for the very ability to exist' (Vaid-Menon 2020, p.13), and so limiting their representation to constructed beings or non-human entities undermines the validity of non-binary gender in a way that many non-binary audience members understandably find frustrating (Prevas, 2018).

²⁶ Notable examples from recent media include the cosmic artificial intelligence, Janet, from *The Good Place* (see Osworth, 2019), the alien Gems from *Steven Universe* (see Dunn, 2016; Kennedy, 2021), and the shapeshifting being Double Trouble from *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (see Lamari and Greenhill, 2021).

At the same time, however, many feel an affinity with these otherworldly characters and celebrate this sense of connection—including some of the above-cited authors. Just as the editors celebrate a reclamation of trans ‘monstrosity’ in the introduction to *The Emergence of Trans* (2020), many non-binary artists play with the imagery of the non-human, embracing and exploring the potentiality within these ‘uncannily appealing’ creatures (Eklund, 2021, p.85). Non-binary fantasy authors such as Tessa Gratton have discussed how their speculative work draws on associations between non-cisgender embodiment and otherworldly creatures (‘Horns, Feathers, and Scales’, 2020). Eklund (2021) catalogues the rise of the ‘genderpunk’ genre emerging in independent game design, which explores gender across a variety of lovable mutated, alien, or robotic characters. Collaborative blog sites like *Fuck Yeah Monster Enbies* call for submissions of art involving ‘[g]enderqueer demons, genderfluid shapeshifters, agender angels, demigirl harpies, trans nonbinary lizard-people, gender nonconforming centaurs: all of them and more come here to hang out’ (2020, n.p.). Some analysts, such as Dunn (2016) and Kennedy (2021), also acknowledge that while the recurring trope of the non-binary non-human is problematic in many ways, it is also a crucial avenue for non-binary representation. For instance, in some jurisdictions, alien or magical non-binary characters might skirt past censors concerned about more ‘explicit’ depictions of queer content, particularly regarding media aimed at young people, allowing a portrayal of non-binary identity to reach wider audiences.

The otherworldly non-binary character presents both a potential, ideological dehumanisation of non-binary identity *and* a playful space in which to trouble binary notions of gender and gendered bodies—potentially even a source of empowerment. Rather than accepting a binary of ‘good representation’ in which non-human characters are strictly problematic and human ones are progressive, I argue that the heart of the issue is a limited scope. *Only* depicting non-binary characters as otherworldly beings may restrict the public

perception of a group still ‘struggling to be conceived as persons’ (Butler, 2004, p.32; emphasis in original). While it is important to interrogate the issues with non-binary embodiment in older works such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* or *Realm of the Elderlings*, it would be ahistorical and counterintuitive to dismiss these examples and their speculative gender play simply because they do not fit more contemporary ideals of positive queer representation.

The solution is not to dismiss the more ambiguous and otherworldly portrayals, but to create new works to stand alongside them that increase the variety of the characterisation of non-binary identity and its imagery in the broader field of fiction. For instance, the increase in *human* non-binary characters in recent years (especially in fields such as YA literature) is beginning to counterbalance the cliché of non-binary gender *only* being possible in otherworldly settings and non-human bodies. Novels such as *I Wish You All the Best* (2019), *Felix Ever After* (2020), and *Under Shifting Stars* (2020) are all grounded in contemporary realism and portray (multiple!) human non-binary characters, each with different relationships to gender. Arguably, in the field of YA fiction the non-human non-binary character is an *underexplored* narrative device, despite being noted as an overdone cliché in other media. YA novels such as *Euphoria Kids* (2020) and *Out of Salem* (2019)—to be discussed further below—are two examples of speculative works with not-quite-human non-binary protagonists. They sit alongside their contemporaries to create a balanced spectrum of depictions that works to decouple the association between non-binary gender and non-humanity whilst still exploring and celebrating the potentiality that lies in that speculative space.

A spectrum of representation is something important to all queer content, and especially regarding groups that have faced as much marginalisation, misunderstanding, and literary othering as non-binary people. Within *Children of the Dusk*, I attempted to create a

spectrum of non-binary representation that would provide a microcosm of this suggested model. Initially imagined to embody the ‘fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body’ (Halberstam, 2005, p.76), as the project progressed I became increasingly conscious that Cillian fit some potential clichés. It thus became crucial to ensure Cillian was not the *only* representation of non-binary identity in the story. The solution was not to write Cillian’s magical gender expression out, but to give them non-binary friends who experience and express their gender differently, thus also creating a spectrum of different relationships between non-binary identity and the fantastic.

Spectrums across the gender spectrum

As with many newly-recognised queer identities, there remains a stereotype that non-binary people are outliers and oddities, and there surely cannot be more than one in the same place, family, peer group—or, for our purposes here, cast of characters. At a basic level, the presence of multiple non-binary characters in a text helps to dislodge the perception of non-binary people as ‘really rare, really weird, and somewhere else’ (Effinger-Weintraub, 2020, p.124). This is especially true for destabilising the connection between non-binary identity and non-humanity, showing it is *possible* in both playful fantasy contexts and ordinary human experience. Having multiple characters also provides multiple versions of non-binary identification, gender articulation, presentation, and personality within a single text, helping to prevent a singular non-binary archetype from crystallising. This is particularly relevant given the multitudinous ways of being non-binary, and crucial given the many different negative connotations that can become attached to queer characters when they stand isolated in a text.

A useful example of these potential issues is the depiction of Loki in *The Seafarer’s Kiss* (2017), Julia Ember’s Norse-inspired YA retelling of *The Little Mermaid*. Loki fills the

‘sea witch’ role and transforms the mermaid protagonist, putting a cruel twist on her request for legs by turning her lower half into an octopus. Loki is textually non-binary, coded with the use of they/them pronouns and a ‘gender incomprehensibility’ (Dembroff, 2020) generated by their shapeshifting. When they first appear, they are described as ‘slim and elegant, androgynous, with neither soft curves nor rippling muscle’ and the narrator cannot ‘decide if [she] was looking at a man or a woman’ (Ember, 2017, p.95). Loki here fits a standard of visual androgyny/ambiguity that many note is something of a non-binary cliché in itself (McNabb, 2018; Vaid-Menon, 2020; Kennedy, 2021).

The greater issue is that Ember’s Loki, unambiguously cast as the villain, is the *only* non-binary character in the cast. Here the negative connotations of the transgender ‘trickster’ arise: Loki’s lies and mind games echo the associations between genderqueer identity and deception, amplified when the victim of their cruel deceit is a cisgender woman (forced into non-consensual body-modification, no less). Loki’s gender ambiguity is interlinked with their transformation magic and thus the source of their villainy. While the problems that Loki’s portrayal represent would not necessarily be erased with the inclusion of other non-binary (or binary trans) characters, populating the cast with others would alleviate some issues by providing alternative visions of the identity. Since the *only* non-binary character is the twisted villain the cisgender protagonist must outwit, the *only* representation of non-binary personhood lies in this tangled net of negative tropes.

Consider, by contrast, other contemporary YA novels with non-binary characters and fantasy elements. In Alison Evans’ *Euphoria Kids* (2020), the non-binary protagonist, Iris, grew out of a seed in their mothers’ garden rather than being conceived biologically. This grants them the ability to speak with fae and forest spirits, and Iris can see their deuteragonist, Babs, even when she is cursed to be invisible. Examining Iris, it is not incorrect to draw the associations between non-binary gender and otherworldliness outlined above. However, Iris’

non-binary identity is never tied to their magical origin in a way that suggests cause-and-effect. Iris is not non-binary *because* of this connection to magic. Rather, the magic provides a non-normative space to explore and affirm their identity. Iris first learns of non-binary possibility from a local dryad named Vada:

Dryads don't have the same gender system as humans. [Vada] had laughed for a long time before choking out, *Why on the mother's earth would we?* And then I asked if I could not be a girl too. They nodded. (Evans, 2020, p.34)

Iris and the dryads provide an example wherein non-binary possibility is opened via the magical, but not universally associated with it. Otherworldly creatures outside of the gender binary exist in the story world, but they are not the sole depiction of non-binary identity in the novel nor the sole place that Iris gets their information. Iris also encounters queer identity outside of the magical space, in the 'real world': Babs is a trans girl and perfectly human (albeit under a spell), and the midpoint of the novel introduces a trans boy with no connection to magic at all. Each of the three youths have a different relationship to gender and are at a different stage in their gender explorations and transitions, representing a spectrum of binary trans and non-binary experience that does not leave the depiction anchored in any one character. The trio (and Iris' magical mentors) also form a spectrum, playing with the potential intersections of genderqueerness and fantasy elements while also avoiding anchoring non-binary identity to the fantastic.

Similarly, in Hal Schriever's *Out of Salem* (2019) genderqueer protagonist Z begins the novel freshly reanimated as a zombie. Their liminal state between life and death makes a quirky allegory for their in-between gender identity, and the body horror elements of their fraught relationship with their living corpse make for a grotesque and sympathetic exploration of dysphoria (an example of authors reclaiming the imagery of the trans monster). However, their identity as a member of the living dead and an individual under the non-binary umbrella

are never connected. Early chapters establish that Z was exploring their gender identity before their death/rebirth. Thus, as with Iris, Z is not non-binary *because* they are otherworldly; it is something intrinsic to who they are as a person, the exploration of which is facilitated by the fantasy elements. While Z is the only textually non-binary character in the novel, *Salem* features several binary trans characters cast as their friends and mentors, providing Z with a sense of solidarity.

These examples build upon the rich history of writers using speculative fiction to explore non-binary possibilities, but also draw upon more contemporary sensibilities that call for non-binary representation anchored in humanity and realism. These allow for reader identification with the supernatural as well as a more realistic reflection of contemporary, real-world non-binary experience. In their magic-touched genderqueer characters, Schriever and Evans work to reclaim and evolve the idea of the non-binary non-human, paving an intriguing path for the future of non-binary fiction—an evolving literary movement that I intend for *Children of the Dusk* to speak to.

The queer ensemble and the non-binary fantastic in *Children of the Dusk*

Conceived of as a trickster, Cillian was also constructed to explore the ways a fantastical framework may allow playful experiments with gender identity and expression. Cillian, and the other non-binary characters within the cast, draw from both the history of non-binary speculative fiction and emerging trends in non-binary representation in young adult texts, ultimately depicting a spectrum of non-binary experience through which the characters understand one another, and readers may understand the characters.

Cillian's shapeshifting ability, as well as being a feature of their trickster role, ties into the 'fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body' (Halberstam, 2005, p.76) realised and explored throughout speculative fiction (and much mythology). Cillian's

shapeshifting represents the fantasy of a body/mode of external presentation that can be completely altered at will to match and/or enhance a felt sense of gender euphoria. This constant fluctuation of Cillian’s appearance skews the traditional, linear transition narrative, in which a defined ‘point A and point B’ are expected and required for trans identity to be recognised (Johnson, 2016). Rather than Cillian settling on a definitive gender presentation, their continuous shapeshifting instead suggests ‘change without end, without perfection but not necessarily without purpose’ (Eklund, 2021, p.87), reflecting the more complex narrative of gender identity called for and celebrated by many contemporary theorists and audiences (Eklund, 2021). For Cillian, ‘[t]here is no “final form”’ (p.85), even where stability might seem like a natural narrative ‘reward’ for their character development²⁷. The one instance where Cillian’s form is static is when Maebh turns them into a snake, explicitly a traumatic experience. In stillness, and with their bodily autonomy removed, Cillian experiences something analogous to dysphoria: it feels ‘as if their heart and soul and their vessel of flesh were suddenly speaking unfamiliar languages’ (*COTD*, p.161). This control over their presentation is a source of escapism and empowerment, tying the shapeshifting ability to genderqueerness and to agency.

However, while I have endeavoured to write Cillian with humanity, the fact remains that they simply are not *human*—and are thus part of the complicated tradition wherein non-binary identity is interlinked with impossible, otherworldly bodies. I deployed two narrative devices to decouple the character from the trope whilst still ensuring I could draw upon the more joyful, exploratory aspects of it. First, as in *Euphoria Kids* and *Out of Salem*, I reject a

²⁷ While shapeshifting as a fantasy element offers great potential for exploring gender euphoria and fluidity of presentation, it may also be used to construct a character as unstable and immature. As Aja Romano explores in a personal essay regarding the *Harry Potter* series, the shapeshifting character Tonks initially lends herself to a non-binary reading, yet is ultimately written to ‘grow out of’ her fluid presentation. Introduced as a somewhat androgynous punk who happily shifts between gendered presentations and bodies, Tonks ends the series as ‘a married, fully binary woman, softer and gentler, letting her husband feminize her [with] a name she’d previously hated’ (2020, n.p.). Given Rowling’s public engagement with Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) rhetoric, having this shapeshifting character settle into a traditional, binary presentation and role to signify her character growth and maturity reads as ‘a conscious repudiation’ (2020, n.p) of non-binary identifications and notions of gender exploration. I tried to consciously avoid this trope within Cillian’s arc.

cause-and-effect relationship between Cillian's gender and their non-human status. This involves establishing contrasts within the cast: for example, Maebh, born from the same supernatural circumstances as Cillian, also possesses shapeshifting magic, but identifies clearly and consistently as female and does not share Cillian's inclination to alter their body. This contrast solidifies that Cillian's non-binary identity is not caused by their nature as an otherworldly creation, rather it is something intrinsic to Cillian as a person. Given Loracán's desire for 'a matched set' of son and daughter (*COTD*, p.170) we can consider Cillian as *expected* or *intended* to be male, but they are never technically assigned as such and have instead consistently identified with, and been identified by, a strong felt sense of non-binary gender that was present from the beginning of their life.

The second trope to navigate is the issue of a representational spectrum (or lack thereof) noted above, for which it was important to establish that Cillian, in their otherworldly body, was not the *only* vision of non-binary identity in the cast. First, the reader is introduced to Cillian's half-god half-sibling Willow, who also does not align with a binary gender and goes by they/them pronouns throughout. Willow's non-binary identity does not stem from otherworldly elements: it is their human parent, Rowan, who opts not to assign them a gender at birth. Willow grows up in a supportive environment happily and matter-of-factly declaring they 'do not think so' when asked if they are a boy or a girl (*COTD*, p.69). Different again is Branwen, the third non-binary character and the one who is, fish-induced foresight powers notwithstanding, completely human. Prior to meeting Cillian and Willow, Branwen feels displaced from the binary gendered system in which they live, and uncomfortable with being perceived as male even if they have no way of expressing this. When they find queer community in the Forest, they experience the euphoria of recognition, 'the strangest, chest-softening sense of comfort, something they had no words to explain' (*COTD*, p.151).

Branwen, Willow, and Cillian develop a shared language as they articulate their relationships to gender, comparing their experiences, validating one another's feelings, and encouraging one another to explore the possibilities they now understand to exist (p.168 – 171). The dialogue is framed as a peaceful, joyful experience. The trio form a relational web that provides multiple visions of non-binary life, ensuring that the tropes often affixed to non-binary representation are loosened and played with. Cillian's shapeshifting grants them a certain 'gender incomprehensibility', but Branwen appears and presents masculine, destabilising the expectation of visible androgyny. Branwen's humanity demonstrates that one does not have to be an otherworldly being to be non-binary, and Cillian and Branwen's strong, intrinsic felt sense of non-binary gender demonstrates that this self-identification can occur outside of gender-neutral childhoods. Given the multitudinous ways of being non-binary, three characters cannot cover every possibility, but the construction and characterisation of these individuals—and the friendship that grows between them—demonstrates the importance of, and potential in, spectrums of representation.

The 'warm illumination of a horizon imbued with possibility' (Muñoz, 2009, p.1) may take many forms. In this chapter I argued that fantasy fiction, drawing from and reimagining imagery of an ancient mythic past, is a stage on which authors can explore stories of non-binary possibility. Questions of what is gained and lost by imagining queer utopias, and tropes rooted simultaneously in harmful ideology and imaginative reclamation efforts, make up the rocky terrain of non-binary fantasy. I argue that it is a landscape worth navigating, finding new paths for storytelling that represents a variety of non-binary experience with nuance, empowerment, and the playfulness characteristic of queer narrative, and that *Children of the Dusk* provides an example of how writers may attempt this.

3. Identity Written in the Stars: The Potential of Point of View in YA Novels with Non-binary Protagonists

As I argue for the representational opportunities in framing non-binary narrative through mythic fantasy staples, I invite consideration of not just characterisation or the events of the story but the voice with which the story is told. A convention associated with written mythology is omniscient narrative voice, an all-seeing, all-knowing perspective that evokes the bardic modes of oral storytelling through which these myths and legends were initially spread (Bond, 2008; Fludernik, 2009). As with the trickster character type and fantastical elements, I argue that this omniscient voice—while unconventional and underexplored within YA—may be used to explore and affirm non-binary characters and centre their agency over their identifications on a metanarrative level. Using the ‘game rules’ (Landay, 1998, p.25) of genre convention to affirm queer identity in this way is yet another potential use of tricksterish metaplay, this time taking place in the construction of the prose itself.

Narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues ‘that questions of representation, and especially of queer representation, are as much questions of form as of content’ (2015, p.24). This chapter will explore the power of perspective and point of view in queer YA, and the benefits and risks of different narrative voice styles regarding the articulation of non-binary identity in the text. Firstly, I will discuss the YA fiction staple of first-person perspective and how this narration technique overlaps with Talia Bettcher’s concept of ‘first-person authority’ (2009). Secondly, I will turn to the less-common close third-person narration, and what visible pronouns and names may offer to a narrative of gender affirmation. Thirdly, and finally, I will discuss the underexplored realm of omniscient third-person narration and its potential to

affirm queer gender by using the mythic ‘voice of god’ as well as using this format to add layers of queerness to the story.

Self-identification and ‘first-person authority’

The notion of self-identification and self-actualisation has always been important to queer theory and activism, particularly where gender identity is concerned. Two years before Rikki Wilchins’ self-declaration of being ‘gendertrash’ (Dembroff, 2020), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick hypothesised

that there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person. (1993, p.8, emphasis original)

Sedgwick’s suggestion—deeply relevant and resonant with the decades of queer theory that would follow—also becomes interesting when applied to non-binary identifications specifically. Wilchins’ initial conceptualisation of ‘genderqueer’ emphasised a deliberate queering of gender as an expression of politics and personhood (see McNabb, 2018; Dembroff, 2020). That emphasis on self-definition, and authority and agency over the self, has carried through and evolved throughout more contemporary non-binary writings and activism (Barker and Iantaffi 2019; Twist et al. 2020; Vaid-Menon 2020). Naturally, it also underpins much of the articulation of non-binary identity within fiction.

Transgender philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher’s concept of ‘first-person authority’ also has useful applications here. In her 2009 chapter, Bettcher applies the epistemology of ‘first-person authority’ to the self-articulation of gender identity. While, in her own words, gender is not necessarily so simple as ‘because I say I am’ (2009, p.99), Bettcher’s concept places ethical weight on the ‘avowal of existential self-identity’ (p.115). The authoritative voice on any individual’s gender is the individual themselves, and Bettcher likens a denial of this

authority as a dismissal of personal agency akin to violence. This crucially shifts the narrative of gender identity to ‘a result of self-evaluation’ (Jas, 2020, p.73) rather than external classification, working to contradict models in which gender is determined by outside forces (Bettcher, 2014; Johnson, 2016; Barker and Iantaffi, 2019). In medical, legal, and social contexts, gender identity (for binary trans and non-binary people) has traditionally been associated with a gatekeeper’s judgement of a set of observable criteria. Within this system, ‘there exists very little room for trans people’s faculty or power to use their own agency in making decisions about their identification with and actualization of their individual gender identities’ (Johnson, 2016, p.5). Bettcher’s call for the recognition of self-identification is philosophical, but also highly practical, calling for a deconstruction of these systems and recognition that a person’s articulation of their own gender is the most authentic expression of it.

While Bettcher initially suggested this model in a binary trans context, it echoes and resonates with non-binary discourse as well—and proves a useful framework for exploring the importance of language and personal affirmation emphasised by much non-binary scholarship and activism. In *Beyond the Gender Binary*, activist Alok Vaid-Menon invites the reader to set aside the medicalist stigma discussed above and consider that ‘[g]ender is not what people look like to other people; it is what we know ourselves to be’ (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p.42). An emphasis on self-identification, based on a person’s own ‘unique understanding of how the multiple aspects of gender (roles, identity, expression, bodies, social gender, etc.) come together, intersect, and overlap’ (Twist et al., 2020, p.19), echoes through much contemporary discourse. This typically centres autonomy and self-knowing at the heart of non-binary identifications, and a constantly-evolving linguistic system has been created that allows for this to be vocalised (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; Twist et al., 2020). Many non-binary writers affirm that the answer to ‘how do you know you are non-binary?’ or ‘why do

you identify as non-binary?’ may be as simple yet complex as ‘because it feels *right*’ (Iantaffi and Barker, 2017); the ‘impulsion to use it in the first person’ (Sedgwick, 1993, p.8).

In the context of literature, exploring the ways that first-person authority may influence the construction of non-binary identity in texts opens new considerations for queer representation. Fiction is understood to be ‘a vital site [...] through which the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities might find greater purchase’ (Harper et al., 2018, p.7), but the presence of fictional characters under the non-binary umbrella is only one part of the equation when it comes to examining the potentiality in this space. It is prescient to ask, how has the author constructed the voice of this non-binary story, and what narrative effects does this produce?

Much of Susan S. Lanser’s work concerns the idea of ‘queer narratology’ and ‘[argues] for the inclusion of sex, gender and sexuality as important, intersecting elements of narrative poetics’ (2005, p.387). Across her career, Lanser has explored the ways narration is constructed around gender and gender is constructed through narration. Her scholarship on queer and feminist narratology has useful applications when considering how narration might be used to construct non-binary characters. In a 2018 paper, Lanser suggests that narrative voice itself may be considered queer, potentially following three different methods to achieve this textual queerness:

I take ‘queer voice’ to have one of three meanings corresponding to my three definitions of queer: (1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality; (2) a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality; and (3) a voice that confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative. (p.926)

The examples explored in this chapter are largely situated within type 1: novels narrated by characters the reader comes to understand as queer, through various linguistic cues in the

narration itself. Some examples, however—including *Children of the Dusk* to some degree—attempt to play with types 2 and 3, using narration to confound the expectations of gender identity *and* prose; confounding, or at least playing with, the expectations readers may hold about certain narrative conventions. In this chapter, I investigate an emerging corpus of texts with non-binary main characters that can be considered queer on multiple levels, their narration used to construct that queerness and to facilitate the non-binary narratives within.

First-person authority, first-person perspective

While not the only narration method used within the demographic, ‘first person is overwhelmingly the most honored and the most popular viewpoint within YA literature’ (Bond, 2008, p. 21). First-person perspective, ‘in which a character uses his [sic] own voice to tell about his [sic] experiences and thoughts’ (Thein and Sulzer, 2015, p.48), has been a staple of YA, particularly realist novels, since the mid-century texts largely credited with codifying the genre and its conventions, such as *The Outsiders* (1967) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). There are many reasons suggested for this preference, often centring on how first-person ‘offers great immediacy’ (Bond, 2008, p. 21) and ‘narrative intimacy’ (Day, 2013, p.4). Narration in first-person assists in the ‘construction of the narrator’s tale as disclosure, confession, or other interpersonal discourse’ (Day, 2013, p.4), inviting a sense of conversation between the protagonist and the implied reader. This ‘direct speech’ method ‘asks the reader to believe that the narrator gives the floor to the character, allowing the character to speak for him- or herself’ and provides an ‘intimate portrait’ of the protagonist’s ‘uncensored thoughts’ (Cadden, 2000, p.148).

As Cadden explores, there is some irony to the notion that first-person offers an ‘authentic’ storytelling experience, as the vast majority of YA novels are written by adults attempting to capture their version of an adolescent ‘truth’. While pertinent, especially

considering concerns of voice and authenticity in fiction about marginalised groups, this quandary of ‘the hidden adult’ in all writing for young people (Nodelman, 2008) is beyond the scope and interest of this project²⁸. For the purposes of this chapter, I seek to explore first-person narration’s function to ‘[read] as truth’ (Thein and Sulzer, 2015, p.47) and how that ties into Bettcher’s concepts of first-person authority.

In first-person narration, non-binary characters may be ‘[given] the floor’ (Cadden, 2000, p.148) and invited to ‘use [their] own voice’ (Thein and Sulzer, 2015, p.48) to express and articulate their identity to the reader in an intimate narrative conversation that the reader is invited, in turn, to take as ‘truth’. First-person narrators in YA literature may be unreliable in many ways and by their nature have limited knowledge (Cadden, 2000), but for this analysis let us consider that these protagonists are, at least, written to know *themselves* and their own gender identity.

First-person narration facilitates gender identity expressed directly by the narrator, whether in dialogue, internal narration, or both. Sometimes authors will use contemporary terminology and identity labels, and sometimes the articulation will instead rest on expressions of felt sense of gender from the characters. For example, Mason Deaver’s *I Wish You All the Best* (2019) is a realist coming-of-age story narrated in first-person, and the protagonist, Ben, is established as ‘a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject

²⁸ Though deeper discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis, any exploration of queer fiction—particularly YA—deserves a mention of the #OwnVoices movement. Coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis in 2015, #OwnVoices was intended as a shorthand phrase connoting that a novel’s author shared the marginalised identity of the novel’s protagonist. Initially pitched as a book recommendation tool that would help marginalised readers and reviewers seek more ‘authentic’ representation, the discussion surrounding #OwnVoices has bloomed far beyond its original context. Some industry professionals suggest that it has mutated into an unhelpfully vague ‘catch all’ marketing label (Lavoie, 2021). In some cases, the emphasis on ‘authenticity’ has led to authors feeling uncomfortably obligated to out themselves on a public platform, perhaps most famously queer YA author Becky Albertalli (see Albertalli, 2020).

The discussion around this topic is complex and, as with all things based primarily on social media, ever-evolving (Booth and Narayan, 2020). I have chosen not to place emphasis on the #OwnVoices status of the texts in this study, nor the gender identities of the authors, as for the purposes of this chapter I find it more important to examine the content and construction of the novels rather than attempting to measure the ‘authenticity’ of their narrative voice. As Cadden explores, this is a difficult thing to measure in YA in the first place, and I acknowledge the limitations of such a metric and how it might distract from the analysis.

by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality’ (Lanser, 2018, p.926). The reader learns of Ben’s gender identity and chosen identity label in Ben’s own internal narrative voice: ‘I said those three little words. *I am nonbinary*’ (Deaver, 2019, p.14, emphasis in original). In these scenes where Ben expresses their non-binary identity in internal narration, they come ““out” to the extradiegetic narratee who stands in for the reader’ (Lanser, 2018, p.928). There is, as Lanser explains, a differentiation between this and the narrator being ““out” to another character within the represented world’ (p.928). Ben also fulfills this early in the novel, explaining their identity and pronouns (which are otherwise obscured by the first-person narration—see below) to their sister and allowing the reader to learn them in the same instance (Deaver, 2019, p.20). This technique is repeated throughout various contemporary YA novels, including Mia Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* (2020) and Kacen Callender’s *Felix Ever After* (2020).

While specific identity labels—such as ‘non-binary’ or any other terms under the umbrella—are an important aspect of gender presentation to many people, they are not required for the expression of genderqueerness in these texts. Clare, the non-binary narrator in Alexandra Latos’ *Under Shifting Stars* (2020), does not settle on a single identity term within the novel, even admitting that she is ‘terrified of labels’ (2020, p.191 – 192). However, the reader still comes to understand Clare’s relationship to gender through dialogue and narration, where she explains ‘[s]ometimes I feel like a girl and sometimes I feel like a boy. I don’t know what to call myself yet’ (p.105). Thus, Clare retains first-person authority even without specific labels.

A similar technique is necessitated in speculative or historical settings where these labels do not exist. In these cases, authors play with language to convey and express their characters’ identity while ensuring their protagonists retain ‘first-person authority’. Linsey Miller’s dark fantasy *Mask of Shadows* (2017) features a genderfluid protagonist, and though

this terminology is present in some marketing copy (Corbett, 2020), it is not used in the text itself. The novel is narrated in first-person, but protagonist Sal expresses to other characters that Sal alternates between pronouns and gender presentation, explaining early on that ‘I dress how I like to be addressed—he, she, or they. It’s simple enough’ (Miller, 2017, p.38). While modern terminology is absent, the description of Sal’s gender as something that ‘ebbed and flowed’ (p.50) implies a genderfluid identity to a reader familiar with the concept (and may serve to explain it, in the abstract, to an unfamiliar reader).

Even in cases where the non-binary character is not the protagonist/narrator, authors often still employ first-person authority, most often in dialogue that conveys this information to the protagonist, who then factors it into their own first-person narration. In several instances the prose of *Euphoria Kids* (2020) defaults to they/them when describing a character whose pronouns are unknown to the narrator, adjusting to the appropriate pronouns when they are discovered. For example, when Iris first meets Babs, Iris describes Babs as ‘they’ and ‘the new person’ (p.6) until spotting the ‘SHE/HER’ patch on Babs’ jacket, at which point Babs becomes ‘she’ and ‘this girl’ (p.9) instead.

The avoidance of gendered language and pronouns until the narrator can ‘be sure’ is a technique gradually becoming more visible and common, particularly in these non-binary YA texts; also present in novels such as Emery Lee’s *Meet Cute Diary* (2021) and A.R. Capetta’s *The Heartbreak Bakery* (2021). These texts demonstrate authors playing on the unique limitations of first-person perspective, which may *only* include the scope of what is known and knowable to the narrator, ‘what the point of view character directly experiences or is able to express’ (Bond, 2008, p. 6). It would be easy to default to what the *author* knows as the correct pronouns for described characters, but this would create a disconnect: either slipping into omniscience, with the narration demonstrating knowledge the narrator-character cannot know, or characterising the narrator-character as a person who assumes the gender of others.

In many of these cases, that is clearly not the intention. It is in-character for Iris—themselves a non-binary young person—to respect the first-person authority of others, and this characterisation is built into their narrative voice. This element of these novels is an intriguing example of emerging queer practice in literary form.

As well as its intersection with ideas of first-person authority, first-person narration is relevant to a discussion of non-binary fiction because of its structural qualities. As Lanser explores, first-person narration opens the possibility for ‘narrative situations in which we have no way to know the sex, gender and/or sexuality of the narrating voice’ (2018, p.930). Because ‘first-person is less sex-specific than the third’ (Lanser, 2005, p. 394)—at least in English and other languages with neutral, non-gendered first-person pronouns—a character’s gender may be rendered invisible or ambiguous if they are the story’s ‘I’²⁹. This opens the possibility for a point of view character whose gender remains unknown, but I argue that it also opens possibilities for narrators who do not align with binary gender, and new possibilities for the kinds of flexible and elastic explorations of gender often featured in non-binary YA.

A character who changes pronouns throughout the story—whether due to genderfluidity, exploration of different options, or any other reason—does not have to change the way the prose is constructed around them if they remain as the story’s ‘I’. This is the case for Sal from *Mask of Shadows*, as described above, as well as other protagonists with alternating pronouns such as in Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* and Steven Salvatore’s *Can’t Take That Away* (2021). The non-gendered ‘I’ can also be used to facilitate a narrator

²⁹ Lanser’s work examines how readers may project their own assumptions based on what they perceive to be quirks of voice or descriptions that they read as masculine or feminine. As she explores, ‘[a]lthough the narrator’s *sex* is never identified in [Jeanette Winterson’s 1992 novel] *Written on the Body*, for example, that absence surely does not stop readers from looking for *gender* markers through which to constitute the narrator’s sex and with it his/her sexuality—and hence to stabilize the text’ (Lanser, 2005, p.389, emphasis in original). She codifies this tendency of readers to attempt to gender narration in order to ‘stabilize’ it as ‘Lanser’s rule’, however she returns to complicate the theory throughout her later work (see Lanser, 2018).

character with *no* pronouns, such as in A.R. Capetta's *The Heartbreak Bakery*. The narrator, Syd, tentatively identifies as agender and jokes that Syd's pronouns 'are *No, thanks*' (Capetta, 2021, p.79 – 80, emphasis in original). Syd admits to 'avoiding [pronouns] in my head for years' (p.71) and this reflects in, and is represented by, the narration itself, which does the exact same thing. As well as Syd's voice being clearly queer in the sense that it is 'a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality', Syd's narration could also be considered 'a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality' (Lanser, 2018, p.926). Capetta capitalises on the ambiguity afforded by the neutral first-person 'I' to create an unambiguously non-binary narrator, rejecting the notion that the text must be 'stabilized' (Lanser, 2005, p.389) by gendering Syd inside the binary and its grammatical rules. The first-person narration allows for Syd's lack of connection to any gendered (or even gender-neutral) markers, because at no point does telling the story require third-person pronouns of Syd. Capetta deftly avoids the logistics of structuring sentence and story around a pronoun-less character, and creates a metatextual space in which said character is not required to settle on a definitive set of descriptors—a gender exploration plotline enabled and enhanced by the narration style itself.

First-person narration offers many possibilities for the expression and affirmation of non-binary identity in YA novels. First-person narration ties with 'first-person authority' (Bettcher, 2009) and allows protagonists to 'use [their] own voice' (Thein and Sulzer, 2015, p.48) to express their felt sense of gender and establish themselves as textually non-binary in various ways the reader can recognise. However, while first-person and its characteristic embrace of first-person authority are to be celebrated, I also invite consideration of other point-of-view methods and what unique capabilities they may have for the expression and affirmation of non-binary identity in YA storytelling.

Third-person authority?

The majority of YA texts—particularly those of contemporary realism—use first-person narration, but many novels also use close, or limited, third-person. ‘In limited third person, the narrator focuses on a chosen character’ while still having a sense of being ‘outside’ that character (Bond, 2008, p.6); perhaps best conceptualised as looking over their shoulder rather than being in their head. Close third-person is common in novels with multiple focus characters, wherein the narration ‘alternates view points and the narrator takes on the voice and vision of the characters whose thoughts the young adult [reader] gets to hear though indirect address’ (Cadden, 2000, p.152). The ‘indirect address’ of close third-person may be seen to disrupt the text’s ‘narrative intimacy’ (Day, 2013, p.4) and create more psychic distance between the reader and narrator, with the personal ‘I’ replaced with visible names and descriptive pronouns. However, I argue that close third-person—and the even-less-common *omniscient* third-person—not only have their place in YA literature but can facilitate uniquely affirming ‘intimate portraits’ (Cadden, 2000, p.148) of non-binary experience, using the very structure of the narration mode itself.

First-person renders the pronouns and name of the narrator character invisible in the text—a device that might serve a story about non-binary characters well, especially in cases such as *Mask of Shadows* or *The Heartbreak Bakery*. However, rendering names and pronouns visible, as they are by necessity in third-person, also has its advantages. Much of this potential relates to the concept of narrative authority. As Lanser explores, ‘while the autodiegetic “I” remains a structurally “superior” voice mediating the voices of other characters, it does not carry the superhuman privileges that attach to authorial voice’ (1992, p. 19). While there is a marked difference between *close* third-person and *omniscient* third-person that I will return to shortly, it remains true that there is an unspoken notion of authority embedded in third-person. Whereas first-person is recognised to be limited to ‘what the point

of view character directly experiences or is able to express' (Bond, 2008, p.6) and is thus unreliable or biased to a degree based on that character's perception of the world, third-person narration is often used to infer a degree of narrative 'truth' outside the confines of the described protagonist's experience. It is my contention that this association between third-person voice and narrative authority can offer unique affirmative qualities to stories about non-binary characters.

Schriever's *Out of Salem* (2019) is narrated in close third-person, and thus the protagonist's chosen name, Z, and their they/them pronouns, are consistently present on the page. As well as immediately coding Z as non-binary, the visibility of Z's neutral pronouns renders them the 'truth' of the text: the 'rules' that the narration follows. This creates an intriguing dissonance when, having been introduced to Z as 'Z' and as a genderqueer³⁰ character, the reader then sees other characters referring to Z by she/her pronouns, as a girl, or by a different, feminine name. These characters are juxtaposed against the authorial third-person voice that is presented as objective and accurate, thus positioning these characters as visibly incorrect. As Cadden examines, close third-person may be less direct than first-person, but its successful execution still relies on building a connection to the described character and a sense of their personal truths. The reader is still invited to accept that the characters

do actually hold the thoughts attributed to them indirectly, and the portrayal of the character matches the thoughts reported from the narrator. Such indirect address has the same effect as first-person narration regarding the privileging of the YA consciousness in the text. (2000, p.151)

Close third-person, then, contains the 'privileging of the YA consciousness' and the links to first-person authority from first-person perspective, while also potentially imbuing the text with a degree of omnipotent authority. Just as the reader understands that the thoughts and

³⁰ Z's identification with the language of 'genderqueer' is, in the context of the novel, a neat historical detail as well as a form of expression. *Out of Salem* is set in an alternate, magical 1997, and (presuming a version of Rikki Wilchins exists in the book's alternate history) the terminology would have been coined two years before and would likely be in active use.

feelings of the characters are being reported accurately, narrative consistency leads them to understand that the building blocks of character description, such as names and pronouns, are being reported correctly by the third-person narrator. In *Out of Salem*, this creates an intimate narrative even if the novel is not directly narrated by Z: the juxtaposition between the narrator's description of 'Z' and Z's perception by other characters mirrors and amplifies the fact that Z is in the closet and their genderqueer identity is unknown and misunderstood by those around them. This invites a sense of empathy and intimacy in the constructed, implied reader in which they are invited into Z's personal sphere.

Crucially, Schriever's use of third-person narration creates a refreshing tone in which Z does not need to 'prove' their genderqueerness to any party before the narration—the authoritative voice reporting the story—describes them with their chosen name and pronouns. Z's first-person authority is respected by the third-person authority of the text itself. Even if contested by other characters within the fiction, the extradiegetic narrator accepts Z's identity as a fact of the story world and presents it as such in a way the reader cannot ignore. Given the misunderstandings and structural lack of agency non-binary people face, there is an empowering element to a narrative context where non-binary identifications are recognised and the chosen names and pronouns of a character are simply accepted and presented as truth. Close third-person provides a space to play this out, affirming non-binary identity within the construction of the narrative.

However, limited third-person is still *limited* and, as in first-person, the restricted perception has certain textual effects. Maggie Tokuda-Hall's *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* (2020) is told in close third-person with alternating perspectives, something the author ultimately uses to explore the genderfluidity of her protagonist and the way gender may be projected and presumed in different contexts. The non-binary protagonist alternates being referred to as Flora (with she/her pronouns on the page) and Florian (he/him) depending on

circumstance and upon which character the close third-person perspective is anchored in. Chapters directly reporting Flora's thoughts and actions use 'she', but a character observing the Florian persona (a masculine disguise in the tradition of 'crossdressing' female pirates) and reading the sailor as male will use 'he'. These assumptions about Flora/Florian's gender creates a cast full of unreliable narrators (save for Flora herself, in which first-person authority plays out in a third-person context: following that ethos, the reader can assume that the accurate report of this character's gender comes from within that character's perspective)³¹. This shifting point of view and the shifting pronouns that go with it 'mirrors the realistic nature of perspective' (Cadden, 2000, p.152), using situations in which the protagonist is effectively misgendered to capture the complicated and flawed nature of perception and the ways in which people make assumptions about the gender of others (Vaid-Menon, 2020).

Salem and *Mermaid* both use their narration to separate the internal truth of their non-binary characters from the way they are perceived by others, placing these protagonists in unfriendly worlds but nonetheless providing acceptance and affirmation of their identities on a textual level. These narration techniques create a space for non-binary possibility and sites in which non-binary identity is marked as fact and narrative truth. But this potentiality can go deeper still if we detach (almost) entirely from popular convention and consider the least common form of narrative voice in YA: omniscient third-person, or the so-called 'epic voice' or 'voice of god'.

³¹ For instance, I am presuming she/her are the correct pronouns for this character, as those are the ones used in Flora/Florian's own narration, even after she concludes she is 'a girl, and also a boy [...] herself, or himself. Both were equally true to her. Neither told the whole story' (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p.256) towards the end of the novel.

Omniscient narration

As YA author and scholar Gwenda Bond explores in her thesis *Eye for a God's Eye: The Bold Choice of the Omniscient Point of View in Fiction for Young Adults*, omniscient third-person is the least common choice of narrative voice in young adult fiction, save for a 'stray oddity' (2008, p.21). Omniscient third-person narrative voice is associated with, as the name implies, omniscience: the story told from a 'God's-eye view' (Morreal, 1994, p.432) wherein the narrator 'is located, godlike, above and beyond the world of the story; [and] sees and knows everything' (Fludernik, 2009, p.92). As Bond acknowledges, 'the very grandness of omniscience's "godlike" associations may have put off some writers—especially writers of ever-immediate teenage fiction—from using it' (2008, p.5). A narrative voice that 'floats above' (Fludernik, 2009, p.92) the characters and recounts their observations to the reader is yet another degree of psychic distance from the 'intimate portrait' (Cadden, 2000, p.148) that some consider central to YA. However, while it may not lend itself to every text, Bond argues for the potential of omniscient perspective in YA, citing works such as Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, and Judith Clarke's *One Whole and Perfect Day* as examples that execute it well. In particular, Bond suggests that the omniscient narrative voice lends itself well to 'the story about story' (2008, p.36), a playful, metatextual framework that adolescent readers are primed to engage with. Following from Bond's suggestions, I argue that omniscient narration also has unique applications for playful queer storytelling and metaplay, and may have an especially crucial role in stories of non-binary possibility. It is for these reasons I have used this form of narrative voice in *Children of the Dusk*.

Omniscient third-person is associated with early or traditional forms of storytelling, particularly epics, fairy tales, and myths. Narratologist Monica Fludernik calls the epic 'the prototypical narrative category' and notes that, typically, '[t]he epic has a bard, a narrator who

tells the story' (2009, p.4). At one point in history, this bard figure was literal: the orator who would recount the tale to a gathered group physically listening, allowing the stories to evolve through generations (Aldhouse-Green, 2015). As myths and epics were transcribed, the bardic voice that had allowed the spread and survival of the tales became codified in the narrative voice associated with the form: '[w]orks such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or even *Beowulf*, carry with them a storyteller or proto-omniscient narrator, with the ability to know all the story's secrets' (Bond, 2008, p.4). Convention constructs a scenario in which not only does the narrator 'know all the story's secrets', but 'enjoys the narratee's trust' that their recounting of these secrets is accurate (Fludernik, 2009, p.92). Some of the omniscient narrator's objectivity comes from the notion that they are 'nothing more than a disembodied voice' (p.31) observing the setting and events they are describing from afar. As Fludernik expands,

Such a narrator often assumes the role of an historian or a chronicler. S/he floats above things, as it were, and looks down on them knowledgeably. All traditional storytelling—Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, medieval romance—is, like history, 'authorial'. All these works share a narrator who is far removed from the events depicted and who reports on a world in which s/he (and frequently the narratees, too) does not live. (2009, p.92)

The omniscient, bardic narrator in Fludernik's definition is recounting tales from days gone by and/or lands far away—events that may be of great significance, yet the bard themselves, acting as 'disembodied voice', has no personal involvement in. As the narratees also do not live in these story worlds, trust is placed in the narrator as 'historian or chronicler'. It is not narrative convention to have an unreliable narrator at the omniscient level; the audience is not positioned to question the report of omniscient third-person in the same way they may accept the limitations and bias of first-person or close third-person.

Many modern retellings or transformations of mythic tales reconfigure the narrative voice so it is more conventional to the contemporary novel, particularly if adapting for an

adolescent audience. Mackenzi Lee's *Loki: Where Mischief Lies* (2019) is told in first-person, as is Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2012), both examples drawing on mythic tradition but reconfiguring these stories into 'direct speech'. As omniscient third-person is uncommon among YA texts, and the style may be considered counterintuitive to building 'narrative intimacy' (Day, 2013, p.4), this creative decision makes sense. For the myth-inspired *Children of the Dusk*, however, I have chosen to skew the contemporary YA convention of a focalised first-person narrator and opted to embrace the omniscient, bardic narration style. As I will explore below, this does not negate 'first-person authority' within the text itself; the characters are still given opportunities to speak for themselves on matters of identity. These articulations of identity are consistent with the descriptions of these characters in the omniscient narration, solidifying them as part of the narration's 'rules' as seen in texts such as *Out of Salem*, but cemented even further with the use of omniscient voice. The additional layer of affirmation that omniscient narration provides stems from the very "'godlike" associations' that may deter some writers from using it (Bond, 2008, p.5). If omniscient narration is the voice of an all-seeing and incontestable authority recounting the truth of the world and its events, then there is no arguing with this voice. When the Voice of God narrates that a character is non-binary, that is the immovable, accurate, omnipotent truth of the universe—queer affirmation at a cosmic level.

Yet I intend for the queerness of *Children of the Dusk*'s narration to extend beyond this usage. *Children of the Dusk*'s narration evokes the bardic tradition with a voice that resides 'above the world of the action' (Fludernik, 2009, p.38), but it is also inaccurate to say that this voice is 'a narrator who is far removed from the events' (p.92). *Children of the Dusk* is narrated in first-person by the collective entity of the Stars, speaking directly to an unnamed narratee with whom the reader is invited to identify. The Stars' narration draws upon mythic conventions, functioning in some ways like a chorus: a collective voice addressing the

audience directly. The collective voice is a narration style Lanser suggests can intersect with queer voice³². However, I also intend to ‘[baffle] our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative’ (2018, p.926) by playing with the objectivity of this omniscient voice by making the usually-detached bardic voice an active, emotive participant in the story. The construction of the Stars is one of the many instances of ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (Hynes, 1993a) in the manuscript, simultaneously playing into and playing with familiar archetypes.

Written in the Stars: Queer narrative voice in *Children of the Dusk*

Children of the Dusk is framed as a storytelling session addressed to an unnamed narratee. The reader is invited to consider the Stars’ report of events accurate and true, and this includes basic, yet crucial, details like character names and pronouns. The Stars describing the characters in third-person means that their pronouns are present in the text—Cillian, Willow, and Branwen are all referred to by they/them/theirs throughout (likewise, binary trans characters such as Rowan and Aisling are also consistently gendered correctly). The omnipotence of the Stars as a narrator implies a built-in sense of truth and authority; they are a biased narrator, perhaps, but still marked as ‘historian and chronicler’ recounting incontestable fact.

As in *Out of Salem*, the characters’ pronouns are simply placed in the text, a fact of the universe and a rule of the story. What omniscient third-person adds is the objectivity and incontestable correctness that comes with narrator omnipotence. Perspective (shifting or otherwise) is not anchored in any singular character and is thus not at the mercy of that character’s assumptions, observations, or bias. An omniscient narrator cannot tell a story like *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* in which a person is gendered based on how a given

³² Indeed, one of the few examples of an omniscient, chorus-style narrative voice in contemporary YA literature is a queer story: David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), which is narrated by the collective voice of the ghosts of gay men who died during the AIDS crisis.

focus character sees them. Likewise, an omniscient narrator cannot tell a story like *Euphoria Kids* where the unknowns of the first-person narrator impact the gendering of described characters. While an omniscient narrator is, like a close-third person narrator, ‘able to see into the characters’ minds’ this narration mode is not limited to the reported perspective of its characters: the placement of the story’s viewpoint ‘is unrestricted or unlimited in contrast to the limitations of internal and external focalization’ (Fludernik, 2009, p.38). This wide-ranging view is important to relaying the story to the reader/audience and helping establish its rules and context, to ‘create a system of norms intended to make it easier for the reader to interpret the text’ (p.27).

In this case, the matter-of-fact use of they/them pronouns is established as part of *Children of the Dusk*’s ‘system of norms’ early on. Even if other characters misgender Cillian, Willow, or Branwen, the omniscient narrator affirms their non-binary identity as the truth, the rules, the norm of the story. This technique also fends off gendered assumptions that may become attached to the characters. As Lanser suggests, readers may unconsciously feel the need to ‘stabilize the text’ (2005, p.389) by projecting binary gender onto characters with ambiguous gender identities. For instance, it may be tempting to read Cillian as a young man due to aspects of their characterisation, the fact that the trickster character type is usually male, or their position as Maebh’s twin, a situation that evokes imagery of sun/moon, male/female duality. The narration provokes the image of binary identity, yet rejects it, repeatedly and consistently using neutral pronouns to establish them, and the attached gender connotations, as part of the internal rules of the text and the world it represents.

Children of the Dusk’s genderqueer expression is not entirely located within this realm of omniscient authority—first-person authority, and the articulation of non-binary identity in spoken dialogue, is also crucial. The characters articulate their own felt sense of gender with their own voices, using, as in the above examples from *Under Shifting Stars* and *Mask of*

Shadows, expressive language in the absence of contemporary identity labels. My fantasy setting has not developed terms like ‘genderqueer’ or ‘non-binary’, aiming to demonstrate that these words do not need to exist for the identity they describe to exist. Cillian does not say ‘I am non-binary’, but they express their non-binary identity multiple times to multiple characters, in dialogue such as ‘I am neither man nor maiden, and this is a truth as true as the silver of my eyes and the starlight in my blood’ (*COTD*, p.170). Willow does not say they are experimenting with ideas of genderfluidity and a possible affinity for feminine-coded labels, instead they muse ‘I feel a comfort in the bell-chime sound of *Lady of the Forest*, or the cadence of *daughter*. Sometimes I think that may suit me. Yet like the waning and waxing of the moon, the feeling passes’ (p.169). The reader—ideally, whether familiar with non-binary terminology or not—will glean meaning from statements and conversations such as these, and this will further destabilise any perceived need to ‘stabilize the text’ by attempting to read binary gender onto these characters. I provide multiple levels of gender affirmation throughout the narrative: the characters articulate their felt sense of gender through dialogue, which comes to be understood as their truth via ‘first-person authority’, and this identity is recognised and cemented as truth by the omniscient narration.

However, the Stars retain a personhood uncharacteristic to transcribed epics. Far from being ‘nothing more than a disembodied voice’ (Fludernik, 2009, p.31) the Stars queer this notion by being a character within the saga itself as well as being its all-seeing narrator. Even though the Stars are quite literally ‘above the world of the action, look[ing] down on it’ (Fludernik, 2009, p.38) their construction troubles the distant, impersonal nature of the mythic narrator and thus the association between objective ‘truth’ and emotional disengagement. Their connection to the protagonist, Cillian, imbues the Stars with personal stakes (and at some points, involvement) in the unfolding story. The emotions and vulnerabilities of the Stars also trouble the notion of the omniscient narrator as ‘godlike’. It is established early that

even their ‘omniscient privilege’ (Lanser, 1992, p.19) has limits, as there some realms they cannot view (the Causeways, the realm of Death). The Stars make it clear to the reader/narratee that these sections of the story were recounted to them by the characters who experienced them firsthand (*COTD*, p.32; p.212), making the construction of the story a community effort rather than the product of an individual’s observation. Most importantly, they have also been a victim of the villain, Lorcán, and his power-hungry disregard for those around him, and this is an important part of the story’s prelude and worldbuilding (*COTD*, p.5). The Stars are capable of feeling pain and feeling emotions, even breaking the flow of their own narration to pause at harrowing moments, directly addressing the narratee and explaining ‘Forgive us. This part is always a little difficult, even in the retelling. We are storytellers, overseers, but though we are distant we are not impartial’ (*COTD*, p.173). Even the relationship between the Stars and the narratee, the framing device itself, can be considered a form of queer kinship. The Stars identify this narratee as someone for whom this tale of marginalised youth will resonate, and the final line—‘Sing out to the stars, friend. You are not alone, and we will hear you’ (*COTD*, p.252)—implies a sense of community and mentorship. The narratee is constructed as a ‘child of the dusk’ alongside the characters themselves, taken under the proverbial wing of the evening Stars.

The emotionality of the Stars adds a sense of immediacy that juxtaposes the usual expectations of the epic narrator as a detached, retrospective voice recounting events with unbiased clarity. This queers the text, ‘confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative’ (Lanser, 2018, p.926). Just as Bettcher’s ‘first-person authority’ rejects the construction of gender as an objective this-or-that outcome reached by external, scientific observation, the combination of the Stars’ omniscience and emotionality rejects the notion that a narrator must be a detached ‘historian and chronicler’ to recount the story correctly. The personality of the Stars—their occasional

cheekiness and emotional input—also further imbues this ‘story about story’ (Bond, 2008) with a playful, metanarrative quality. The omniscient narrator with characterisation allows for yet another layer of ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (Hynes, 1993a). The Stars as a chorus or bard makes for another character type that *Children of the Dusk* reimagines through a queer lens, adding to and rounding out the queer ensemble cast whose adventures make up the body of the story the Stars are recounting.

As Lanser explores across her body of work, narration itself can be considered queer, and should be considered as a lens through which to view queer representation in fictional texts. Narration and point of view should not be taken for granted as an element of non-binary storytelling, as different forms and styles can offer different benefits and risks to narratives exploring and expressing non-binary identity. First-person perspective facilitates Bettcher’s concept of ‘first-person authority’, using the expectations and conventions of this narrative form to allow non-binary characters to ‘use [their] own voice’ (Thein and Sulzer, 2015, p.48) to cement their identity as textual truth. First-person also allows authors to play with the gender-neutral parameters of the singular ‘I’. Close third-person, while often perceived as risking a loss of ‘narrative intimacy’ (Day, 2013), offers its own benefits by making neutral pronouns and chosen names visible, these aspects of gender presentation built into the text and marked as truthful via the authorial voice. Finally, omniscient third-person holds underexplored potential: it may use the ‘voice of god’ to affirm the existence and validity of trans identity on a cosmic level, the narration coded as incontestable and accurate. *Children of the Dusk* offers a world in which non-binary identity is made possible by its affirmation in the omnipotent, objective truth of the narration itself. The folkloric style draws the readers—like the unnamed, star-gazing narratee—into its world of magic and monsters, and offers non-binary identity a place there, at home among the fantastical conventions and cemented as a possibility.

Conclusion: Closing the Veil

In this project, I have explored the narrative effects of combining mythic elements, such as the trickster character and ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (Hynes, 1993a) with queer young adult narrative, particularly stories with central non-binary characters. I have opened and argued for the possibilities that emerge when these fantastical, folkloric elements are woven with contemporary conceptualisations of gender identity. Interlacing these concepts in the manuscript was a challenging experiment in voice, worldbuilding, character development, and in navigating queer literary tropes and issues of representation. With the end result, I argue that exploring these combinations in the context of queer YA literature opens new representational and creative possibilities that expand the existing, growing corpus of non-binary YA fiction and offers the queer adolescent readership renewed and valuable visions of possibility.

Tricksters

In *Children of the Dusk*, I have developed a trickster character and my own original pantheon of gods and heroes whilst drawing on ‘structural and aesthetic elements’ (Fimi, 2017, p.5) from Irish saga. This afforded me freedom of narrative movement within a set of flexible, yet grounded, genre expectations and enabled me to experiment with, and queer, concepts such as William J. Hynes’ ‘tricksterish metaplay’ (1993a, p.214). Hynes discussed the trickster as ‘metaplayer and revealer’, a figure who draws attention to social conventions, rules, and power structures for the purposes of social commentary or a ‘vent for social frustrations’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.206). In trickster tales, the trickster plays with and rebels against these structures that are familiar to the audience—often, Hynes argues, underlining and reinforcing them for the audience, but nonetheless demonstrating they can be reckoned with. The stories

this metaplay produces ‘act as escape mechanisms while being both entertaining and educational’ (p.207). I argue this function can be applied to queer YA fiction in ways that produce satisfying and empowering narratives for young queer audiences.

The metaplay in *Children of the Dusk* involves casting queer characters into an ensemble of mythic character types that are likely to be familiar to readers through their osmosis into many works of contemporary fantasy (Mendelsohn, 2008; Mendelsohn and James, 2009; Attebury, 2014; Fimi, 2017). The ancient setting, the semi-episodic structure that echoes a collection of legends, and the framing device of the bardic narrator all code this manuscript as a work of grand mythos or high fantasy. These frameworks remain intact while queer twists take place within them, with LGBTQIA+ characters stepping into the archetypes of destined demi-god, healer, hero, storyteller, and others; a disruption that will be visible to readers on a metanarrative level. I also use the conventions of mythic fantasy—an antagonistic interplay of gods and mortals, prophecies, grand villains—to cast figures who uphold hegemonic power structures as the key antagonists in opposition to the trickster. The trickster character, here cast as a non-binary youth, navigates these structures and not only draws the reader’s attention to their antagonistic elements, but ultimately undermines and breaks them down in the spirit of ‘socio-political Ragnarök’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2012, p.123). Having a non-binary character in this playful and pivotal role as ‘agent of change’ (Waddell, 2010, p.1) infuses Hynes’ concept of tricksterish metaplay with a rebellious queer overtone.

Certain personality traits, magical abilities, and narrative functions signify Cillian as a trickster and build a certain set of expectations. It is pleasurable, then, when Cillian follows the patterns while subverting the tradition in which the trickster character is almost universally conceptualised as male. This adherence to other aspects of the character type causes Cillian’s explicitly, ‘canonically’ non-binary identity to stand out. This queering of the character type is a renewal of its pre-existing genderqueer potential through a contemporary

lens. Throughout trickster studies, there is ample precedent for this character type being discussed as a non-binary figure, even if this terminology is not used nor acknowledged in the same way. Some notion of ‘gender ambiguity’ (Mills, 2001, p. 237) is integral to many scholars’ discussions of trickster characteristics, and tricksters always ‘cross the line and confuse the distinction’ between supposedly fixed categories, the gender binary included (Hyde, 1998, p.7). Specific instances of shapeshifting and cross-dressing, in tales such as Loki’s disguise as a bridesmaid, have also been read through a non-binary lens (Munsen, 2015; Sprenkle, 2020).

Following this, various YA fantasy authors have reimaged trickster characters within a non-binary frame of reference, most prominently Loki. Julia Ember (2017) writes Loki as a visibly androgynous figure who uses they/them pronouns, and Mackenzi Lee (2019) presents a version of the god who self-identifies ‘as both’ genders (p.265). While reimaginings that reconfigure this character through contemporary identity terminology have their value, I sought to investigate the narrative effects of casting an original non-binary character in the trickster role in an original story. The narrative effect is a playful exploration of different aspects of the trickster and their literary applications. As Cillian develops across the narrative, they transform from a more traditional folkloric trickster (more in line with the chaos, profanity, and moral ambiguity described by scholars such as Hyde, Hynes, and Carroll) to a pseudo-heroic figure who represents the social underdog in a more overstated way (more in line with the contemporary trickster rubrics suggested by Landay and Bassil-Morozow).

Invoking the language and expectations of the trickster is not without risks. Chiefly, it involves a careful navigation of the historic associations of binary trans and non-binary people as deceptive, attempting to ‘trick’ cisgender people (Halberstam, 2005; Serano, 2007). Cillian’s status as a magical, shapeshifting being also intersects with the stereotype in which

non-binary characters are dehumanised by being portrayed as non-human. Balancing the more cosmic and symbolic aspects of the character with humanistic, sympathetic writing was crucial for ensuring Cillian telegraphs as a complex adolescent protagonist whose development drives the narrative.

As Bassil-Morozow discusses across her body of work (2012; 2015; 2017) the trickster is a narrative device in constant evolution, shapeshifting to fit the sensibilities of each new social context they are written into. Through Cillian, I demonstrate the potential uses of a trickster in a queer YA text: the familiarity of their traits and tactics signifies the trickster archetype and that this work is in conversation with narratives that have come before it, and Cillian's characterisation and framing speaks to a contemporary literary context. The use of a non-binary trickster protagonist places the agency of young, non-binary characters at the thematic heart of the story.

Mythology-inspired fantasy

As well as the specific applications of the trickster, I argue that the conventions of myth-inspired fantasy set the stage for non-binary identity to be explored in new narrative contexts. I used a fantasy setting to map contemporary concepts of gender onto imagery and narrative frameworks from ancient literary traditions. Working within this framework allowed me to build an imaginative alternative to the notion that non-binary gender is a modern 'invention' (Nicholas and Clark, 2020) and invite my readers to imagine a rich and epic past and continuity for non-binary youth.

Speculative settings also enable authors to create worlds where their queer characters are not structurally othered or marginalised, locating the conflict of the narrative in plot structures other than the struggles associated with being queer and/or trans in a queer- and transphobic world. I initially experimented with a utopian, queer-friendly setting for this

manuscript. Ultimately, however, I surmised that the narrative pleasure associated with the young, queer trickster is located in dismantling power structures and troubling status quos. In the context of *Children of the Dusk*, this necessitated cementing an antagonistic power structure and a system of norms that rendered the non-binary characters unusual and unaccepted. Just as catharsis comes from Cillian upsetting this structure, the non-binary characters resonate and are recognisable as non-binary due to their disidentification with the binary norms of a wider society, and particularly with the rigid hegemony represented by the gods. Whilst ultimately beyond the intention and scope of this project, there remains room to explore other possibilities that non-binary fantasy generates: settings where the gender binary has dissolved, evolved, or never existed in the first place, for instance. There are potentially as many worldbuilding possibilities as there are authors willing to play with these ideas in a speculative framework, and within other genres.

Likewise, fantasy conventions open many possibilities for the depiction and embodiment of non-binary characters. Writing Cillian as a shapeshifter meant I was able to personify the ‘fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body’ (Halberstam, 2005, p.76). This also produced its own problematics, however, as it intersected with a media stereotype in which non-binary characters are frequently portrayed as non-human entities such as aliens, robots, and magical creatures. This combination of fantastical, mythic elements with contemporary discourses around non-binary representation produces a character that simultaneously represents imaginative empowerment and limiting cliché. Part of the reason that I decided to have Cillian accompanied by other non-binary characters with different embodiments and experiences was to create a crucial spectrum of representation within the text. These use of spectrum is a crucial part of non-binary YA’s continued evolution: they help to prevent a singular non-binary archetype from crystalising, and work to show these

marginalised characters ‘in the context of a community’ (Jenkins and Cart, 2018, p.xv) rather than as solitary figures in a heteronormative world.

Interestingly, while the non-human non-binary character is largely documented as an overdone trope, in the niche of queer YA fiction there are few examples relative to the number of ordinary, human non-binary characters. Arguably, the idea of a magical non-binary figure is *underexplored* in this field. Revisiting this trope with nuance and with the intent of portraying non-binary gender euphoria in a fantastical framework (re)opens creative possibilities for the depiction of non-binary characters, and this is an area that warrants further examination in fiction and scholarship.

Omniscient narrative voice

Finally, alongside the trickster and fantasy elements, I experimented with omniscient narration to explore and affirm non-binary identity within this work. Associated with epics, sagas, and fairy tales (Bond, 2008; Fludernik, 2009), the ‘voice of god’ narrative voice is uncommon in YA, due to the increased psychic distance and decreased ‘narrative intimacy’ (Day, 2013, p.4) between the characters and the implied reader. As Gwenda Bond acknowledges, ‘the very grandness of omniscience’s “godlike” associations’ is in many ways counterintuitive to writing protagonists with the interiority characteristic of the genre (2008, p.5). However, following from Bond, I argue that not only does the omniscient voice have its place in YA, but that it has useful applications in a narrative about non-binary empowerment.

Narrative voice may play a significant role in the construction of non-binary identity within a text. First-person narration—overwhelmingly the most common voice in YA—intersects with ‘first-person authority’ (Bettcher, 2009) and allows for authors to play with convention regarding the use (or lack of) pronouns in the text. Close third-person adds a layer of psychic distance between reader and character, but allows for that character’s chosen name

and pronouns to be consistently visible in the text and, thus, cemented as the ‘truth’ and ‘rules’ of the narration. Expanding upon this, omniscient third-person allows for affirmation of characters’ identities at a cosmic level—literally, in *Children of the Dusk*’s case, as I have chosen the Stars as the bardic narrator. Building on Bond’s arguments about the untapped potential of omniscient voice in YA fiction (2008), I contend that this narration style produces particularly interesting effects in playful, metafictional queer storytelling. The narrative voice of *Children of the Dusk* establishes its mythic overtones, signifying the codes and expectations in which the metaplay noted above take place. As above, affirming non-binary identifications within this epic voice interweaves contemporary notions of gender with ancient narrative conventions, thus troubling the implication that non-binary characters (and the readers who may identify with them) have no place in history or in narrative patterns that evoke the ancient, epic saga. I use the conventions and format already available and familiar from older works and use it to affirm contemporary, evolving discourse around gender identity.

Future directions

Children of the Dusk, with its Irish mythic influence, presents one culturally-specific interpretation of the trickster character and their role in narrative. Many different visions of, and uses for, this character type could emerge in the hands of writers drawing on different cultural backgrounds or mythic inspirations (see, for example, Eden Robinson and Darcie Little Badger’s novels). It is also imperative that, regardless of genre, authors present non-binary characters from a variety of backgrounds and intersections. In 2013 B.J. Epstein observed that most queer YA fiction is about protagonists for whom queerness is their only marginalisation (p.160; p.189). While diversity is gradually increasing in queer YA literature (for example, from within this niche, *Felix Ever After*, *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea*, and *Lakelore* all feature non-binary protagonists of colour), this remains a pertinent point a

decade later. Naturally, this involves inviting more diverse voices to the proverbial table, a systemic change that needs to happen on an industry scale.

I am also inevitably drawing on my own perspective of gender and the elements of non-binary identification I wish to see explored in fiction. As many writers note, non-binary identity is highly individual and may mean something different to each person (Talusán, 2017; Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; Twist et al., 2020). I do not posit my novel, and its three non-binary characters, as the definitive model of representation. Indeed, no single novel can be considered the definitive model of representation for any marginalised group, and that is not what I was searching for in this project. Crucial to the continued evolution of non-binary fiction is an acknowledgement of this need for variety, to prevent archetypes or stereotypes from crystallising. As noted above, this applies within individual texts and within the work of individual authors, but it also must take place on a broader level at the industry scale. In subsequent years, as more manuscripts with non-binary protagonists are bought and published, I hope to see these calls for variety answered and reflected in the books on shelves.

Drawing on different elements from literature, mythology, and genre fiction, as I have in this manuscript, allows an author to facilitate and explore diverse and exciting new narratives starring non-binary protagonists in a variety of forms. The YA novels with non-binary protagonists released across recent years have dramatically increased the presence of non-binary characters in fictional media. Within this small but valuable sample is a variety of depictions of non-binary personhood: some characters discovering their identity and coming out, some beginning the narrative confident with their genderqueerness and comfortable in their communities. While contemporary realism by and large remains a mainstay for the genre framing of queer YA, the amount of genre fiction featuring non-binary protagonists provides exciting alternatives in which non-binary readers may see themselves as the heroes of more fantastical, escapist tales. Texts like *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea*, *Euphoria Kids*, and

A.R. Capetta's fantasy novels embrace the potential for exploring non-binary gender against a fantastical backdrop, suggesting, as I have attempted with *Children of the Dusk*, that non-binary youth have a place in a wide variety of stories.

Michelle Byers observes that '[c]ontemporary YA writers engage in a labor of political enfranchisement that, while imperfect and incomplete, creates new spaces for [...] discursive formations' (2017, p.166). Because fictional representations of marginalised identities are inextricably entwined with the contexts in which they are published and the 'discursive formations' (Byers, 2017, p.166) they help to build, they demand scholarly attention. In our current social and political context, young people under the binary trans and non-binary umbrellas consistently find themselves the symbolic target of 'transphobic agitators involved in political campaigns focusing on bathrooms and schools' (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p.2). One of the most vocal and publicly platformed figures in these discourses is one associated with young people's literature. J.K. Rowling, whose fictional work provided a safe haven for many young marginalised readers, actively works to make the world an unsafe place for binary trans and non-binary people of all ages (Romano, 2020). As Kacen Callender and Alison Evans (among many others) write, YA literature is a fictive space that has a material effect on the world, and authors attempting to write for this audience have a responsibility to provide visions of possibility to the readers who are disempowered the most in society. In these times of violence (both physical and ideological), disempowerment, and erasure, where figures like Rowling and her body of work cast such a long shadow, affirming the agency of marginalised youth—affirming their right to exist—is 'crucial as bread' (Butler, 2004, p.29). Fiction that enables these marginalised readers to see their own experiences reflected is vital, but perhaps even more so is fiction that expands representational possibilities and offers empowering visions of potentiality: narratives that reject literary and

social ‘game rules’ (Landay, 1998, p.25) to centre genderqueer characters and their joy, kinship, and agency.

In their essay in *Growing Up Queer in Australia*, Oliver Reeson ponders: ‘How could I have grown up as a non-binary person when it was not a story I had ever heard?’ (‘St. Louis’, 2019, p.37). Speaking of my own youth, I have the same question. With no suggestion that non-binary identity even existed, in fiction or more general media, my own gender explorations simply were not able to occur until my adulthood. Like with many queer people, I catch myself sometimes wondering what may have been different if I had had access to any of the YA texts (or television shows, or video games, etc.) that explore and express non-binary identity not only as a possibility but as a source of joy. As Lo’s 2019 data highlights, the fictive landscape for today’s adolescents is vastly different to the one available only a decade earlier. Many authors speak about writing the book they needed as a young person; the dedications in many of my source texts position them as heartfelt gifts to ‘trans and non-binary youth’ (*Felix Ever After*), or ‘the fifteen year old me [...] who was so scared because they thought they were alone’ (*Euphoria Kids*). I can never say for certain what *Children of the Dusk* would have done for me if I had encountered it as a teenager—perhaps the empathetic connection with a non-binary protagonist, and the fantastical visions of non-binary kinship, would have provoked contemplation of non-binary possibility sooner. All I can hope is that my work, with its imaginative images of non-binary joy, agency, friendship, and cheeky rebellion, has some positive impact and contributes to a field that continues to evolve.

Many scholars have suggested that trickster tales functioned as ‘a ritual vent for social frustrations’ (Hynes, 1993a, p.206), a fictive space in which to discuss taboo topics and turning established norms and power dynamics topsy-turvy. In folkloric, literary, and cinematic forms alike, the trickster can be used ‘to convey the idea of agency and rebellion and, often turbulent, progress’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.i). The trickster ‘does not accept

“the way things are” and keeps attempting to redraw the map’ (p.15). While not intended as a direct allegory for any particular political motion or act of activism, Cillian’s spontaneous reshaping of the world and undermining of its ‘tightly controlled and well-preserved order’ (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.5) is intended to resonate with contemporary frustrations. This provides not only a non-binary protagonist in which non-binary readers may see ‘their own faces reflected in the pages of a book’ (Jenkins and Cart, 2018, p.3), but an empowering and playful narrative space in which the trickster suggests that change is possible—if one is willing to cause some trouble.

Throughout this exegesis, I have argued for the various methods authors can use to empower, explore, and play with representations of non-binary identity in YA fiction. Contextualising my own creative work, I argue for the potential that structures and elements from mythology can have for this field: trickster characters imagined as young, non-binary troublemakers who are empowered to change the world, fantasy elements such as shapeshifting applied to gender exploration and images of non-binary euphoria, and omniscient narrative voice used to cement non-binary identity as a simple truth of the universe. *Children of the Dusk*, and the scholarly work that contextualises it, joins and expands a field of fiction and research regarding a discursive space of queer identification that is constantly evolving and in flux as authors try new tricks.

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