



PART ONE : MCW THESIS

The Spider in the Heart

PART TWO : MCW EXEGESIS

A Symbol Speaks a Thousand Words

Suzanne Day

A thesis and exegesis submitted to AUT University in fulfilment of the degree
of Master of Creative Writing (MCW).

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

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Suzanne Day / 14 February 2014

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Permission for the use of song lyrics by Jimi Hendrix in *The Spider in the Heart* will be sought through Experience Hendrix, L.L.C., the company that manages the Jimi Hendrix legacy.

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ABSTRACT

The Spider in the Heart is a young adult (YA) novel, which uses the mode of magical realism to juxtapose an everyday reality with the magical domain of the underworld, and explore the relationship between man and nature, through the journey of the protagonist, Rachel. This occurs in both a physical sense, in her quest to retrieve the oracle cards from the underworld; and meta-physically in the search for her identity, her place in the world(s), and her sense of purpose.

The Spider in the Heart is book one of the *Children of the Stars* trilogy¹ — each using an alternative domain of the underworld, middleworld, and upperworld — in which Rachel ultimately fulfills her destiny according to an ancient prophecy written in the stars.

The exegesis *A Symbol Speaks a Thousand Words* aims to unravel the motivations and themes of *The Spider in the Heart*. The quest for individual identity, a concern common to the YA reader, is discussed in the context of how the YA reader identifies with characters in a narrative and uses their experiences as a mirror for defining their own identity; and on a deeper level how mythology is a means for the reader to connect with the universal concepts beyond narrative plot. The use of magical realism as a means of transgressing boundaries is investigated in relation to how an individual's sense of reality is determined by the understanding and relationship they have with nature; also considered is how the mode of magical realism provides a space for transformation to occur. Defining the importance of place as essential to constructing a sense of identity is looked at in the context of the challenges encountered by adolescents today in a global and technology-driven society that is largely disassociated with nature. Finally, the notion of having a conscious relationship with our natural environment is explored in a discourse of the language of nature, and how the universal languages of mythology symbols act as a key to a deeper understanding of self.

¹ As *The Spider in the Heart* is book one of a trilogy, the ultimate concepts of theme and character are only partly realised, and will be expanded on in the following two books.

PART ONE : MCW THESIS

The Spider in the Heart

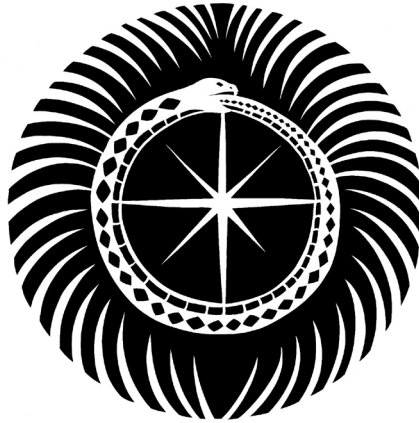
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LIST OF SYMBOLS

1. Ouroboros 3
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3. Bejewelled Beetle 21
4. Katipo 28
5. Puriri Moth 35
6. Manaia 37
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Rachel stared into the night as the car snaked through the landscape. The road-markings drew endless lines of white in the black and trees lurched in and out of the headlights, the searching beams finding the occasional eye-shine of a startled possum. In the dark phase of the moon, and away from city lights, the stars were bright. One star in particular, just above the horizon in the east, shone large and neon-pink. Rachel gazed, mesmerized, until the road wound through the hills and the star was obscured from sight.

She sighed. “How much further?”

“Ten minutes less than last time you asked,” said Rachel’s Dad. “How about a game of I-spy?”

“Dad, it’s dark. And — hello — I’m twelve.”

“Oh right, that’s way too old for I-spy.” Dad glanced at Rachel. “Hey, are you okay?”

She didn’t answer.

“I know this is difficult for you — Mum and I needing to travel so much, especially now Grandma’s gone, but you have to understand this dig in Egypt is critical. We could well make unprecedented discoveries. We need to go.”

“Yes but why can’t I just come with you?”

Dad sighed. “We’ve already been over this. You know it’s not possible, not this time.” He smiled. “Come on, cheer up chipmunk, it’s only for the summer.”

“Summer lasts like, forever, and I’ll probably die of boredom.”

“You never know — you might make some exciting discoveries yourself. You’re going to love Auntie B. We had fantastic adventures staying with her when we were kids — building huts, kayaking to the hot pools —”

“But she’s not even my real aunty. And I hate kayaking.”

“Well, technically, she is your real aunty. Well, great aunt, by marriage.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know. I know.”

Her cellphone chimed: a text from her friend Anneliese. “Well at least I can keep in touch with my friends.”

Dad cleared his throat. “Ah, one thing I forgot to mention.”

Rachel looked sideways at him. “Ye-ah?”

“There’s no cellphone reception at Auntie B’s.”

“You’ve seriously got to be kidding!”

Dad flashed his I’m-sorry-but-I-can’t-do-anything-about-it smile. “Come on Rach, a few weeks without a cellphone can’t be that catastrophic.”

She crossed her arms and turned towards the window.

Early the next morning a loud and discordant melody jolted Rachel from sleep. She wasn’t ready to wake up and pulled the pillow over her head. The sound crescendoed. She tried to place it but couldn’t, then remembered where she was: at Auntie B’s. Stuck in the middle of boring nowhere. For the entire summer break. She yanked open the curtain and the sun glared into the room. Condensation sweated on the window, which creaked as she pushed it open. In the kōwhai tree perched a tūi bird. Its white tuft bobbed up and down as it performed a crazy orchestra of whistles and bells and video game sounds. Rachel frowned and slammed the window shut, setting the thin old glass rattling in its frame. The tūi took flight, its wings a



TŪI
{ TOO-ee }



KŌWHAI
{ CAW-fye }

smudge of iridescent blue-green-black, and left her abandoned in silence. The empty window showed a pale reflection of her scowl, blurred by tears. She checked her cellphone. No signal. She chucked it on the bed, pulled on an oversized t-shirt dress and her new super-white Converse, and trudged down the hallway.

Rooms had been added to the main house in an organic accumulative way, to better accommodate Aunty B's ever-extending family. Rooms led to rooms intersected by passageways leading to more rooms, a maze of walls painted duck-egg blue, sunshine yellow and moss green. The house was quiet now as she navigated her way to the kitchen where the smell of baking bread steamed from the oven. A goat, patched brown and white, stood at the bench with its nose in the fruit bowl, it didn't acknowledge her as she edged around it and stepped outside.

Aunty B's backyard, bordered by dense forest, meandered all the way down to the lake. A rust-spotted caravan, white with a powder-blue stripe, squatted in long grass, and beside it leaned a stack of candy-coloured kayaks and their sun-washed paddles. Hydrangea bushes dotted the lawn in a spectrum from baby pink to inky purple. Chooks fossicked around the chicken-wire perimeter of a rambling garden.

Against the fence leaned Aunty B's walking stick. The handle was carved with an octopus, eight tentacles coiling down and around the length of wood, and a large head with mother-of-pearl shell eyes.

"Did you sleep well?"

Rachel jumped, startled by Aunty B's voice. She pulled her gaze from the octopus and found Aunty B halfway along a row of silverbeet, the leaves graffitied with holes.

"Ah yeah, until some crazy bird woke me up. Where's Dad?"

"He left early this morning and didn't want to wake you. He said they'd send a postcard as soon as they could."

Rachel brushed away sudden tears.

Aunty B was busy tying bean plants to bamboo stakes arranged like teepees pitched along the garden row. She wore a purple scarf wrapped around her head

like a turban. Her bright pink t-shirt hung long over a turquoise skirt and around her neck dangled a large greenstone teardrop pendant.

“I have work to do today, but there’s heaps of fun to have around here. Bit rough on the lake for kayaking this morning but it might calm down later.”

“Um, I’ve never really been in a kayak before.”

“Fishing off the jetty?”

“But what would I do if I caught one?”

“Eat it, of course.”

Rachel screwed up her nose. Aunty B chuckled.

“How about helping me string these beans then.”

“Okay, sure.”

Aunty B guided the curling tendrils of a plant around a stake. “You needed that rain didn’t you.”

Rachel looked up. “Pardon?”

“Just speaking with the plant.”

“Oh. Um, do you always talk to plants?”

“Of course. Plants are our wisest relatives. How would you like it if your relatives went around ignoring you?”

“So we eat our relatives then. That’s kind of gross.”

Aunty B laughed. “That’s life, eh girl. That’s life.”

Rachel looked out across the deserted grey lake.

“It’s so quiet here.” She spoke softly, almost to herself.

“Eh? Quiet?”

“I mean, there’s no traffic or sirens or planes or kids — ”

“Don’t worry girl, you’ll get used to it.”

Rachel frowned. She didn’t want to get used to it. She wanted desperately to be at home, with the noisiness and busyness of other people, with television, with wi-fi, with her friends.

After a lunch of fish cakes and salad relatives from the garden Rachel wandered to the end of the backyard. Wind whipped and tossed the surface of Lake Tarawera. A lone black swan bobbed in and out of view, its red bill sharp against the grey waves. In the distance the quiet hulk of Mount Tarawera hunched in its own shadow, its flat top stark against the blue sky. Rachel shivered. She turned from the mountain and trudged along the littered shore: a time-silvered branch writhed in the tide; the clean-picked skeleton of a fish; a lost tangle of weed; an old ten-cent coin. She stopped and picked up the coin. Grandma used to say: *see a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'd have good luck*. Rachel checked her cellphone. Still no reception. She sighed and flung the coin into the lake. Maybe it would give the lake good luck.

She reached for the gold ring on the fine silver chain around her neck and rolled it between her fingers. The ring, a snake biting its tail, was way too big for her to wear, even on her thumb. It had been Grandma's favourite, one she'd always worn. Rachel remembered the story of where it came from, and how Grandma came upon it. She missed the tales Grandma told. If only she were here now, to help fill the infinite summer until she could go home.

A pair of magpies swooped towards the shore like black and white pirates chasing the glitter of gold. As Rachel drew closer she saw the treasure they sought was a swarm of beetles. Beetles like no other that she'd ever seen. Their shiny gold walnut-sized shells, encrusted with sparkling rubies and emeralds and sapphires, zig-zagged across the sand, dodging the dive-bombing magpies, and scattering rainbows of light around them. The beetles were quick and Rachel jogged to keep up as they scurried for the cover of the forest.

Stepping into the shadow of the trees Rachel stopped and blinked until her eyes adjusted to the murky light filtering through the leaves. The bejewelled beetles crawled along a track. She followed them through the debris of bark and twigs and skeleton leaves on the forest floor. A little way along, the beetles disappeared. Rachel stopped. She scanned the ground for evidence of where they'd

gone, overturning leaves to reveal more leaves and undisturbed earth. No sign of burrowed holes. No sign of them climbing the trees. She turned full circle. The forest was quiet and still. Her Converse sneakers crunched in dry leaves, making the only sound. The leaf she held floated to the ground. The squawking magpies had not followed into the forest. There was no other birdsong. No hum of insects. No wind swishing leaves.

She staggered backwards. Spun to retrace her steps. Searched for the path she'd followed: it wasn't there. The forest fell abruptly into twilight. The canopy towered overhead, and clusters of tree ferns squeezed closer, their branches playing shadows across the path, fronds rolling out like searching tongues. It hadn't seemed like she had come this far. And it hadn't seemed this late. Her senses sharpened, eyes seeking the tiniest flicker of movement, ears reaching for the faintest sound. Her whole body pounded in time with her heart. She couldn't tell which way she'd come from or which way to go.

From the darkness emerged a figure. A cape of blue-black feathers shimmered in the twilight, cascading from wide shoulders to trail along the ground. The hood cast the face in shadow.

"Welcome to the Black Forest." The woman spoke, her words softening into one another like a soothing lullaby. "Delightful to finally meet you, Rachel." She stepped closer and smiled with lips painted blood-red. She wore a necklace that glowed the soft hue of amber. "My name is Circe." Between her long pale fingers she wove a strand of her raven-black hair.

Rachel felt her own hair charge with static electricity, like when she'd brushed it too much. She smoothed it down. And stared at Circe. It took her a moment to realize Circe's lips weren't moving as she spoke. That she was hearing the voice in her mind.

Circe raised an eyebrow. "You do speak, child?"

Rachel nodded.

Circe continued, “I do not have time to explain everything now, but our paths will weave together again soon. Until then, I need you to wear something. Something to ensure you are under my protection.”

Rachel swallowed. “Protection? But why? And how do you know my — ”

Circe’s eyes blazed from the depths of her hood. “You must trust me. And promise you will wear what I gift you. At all times.”

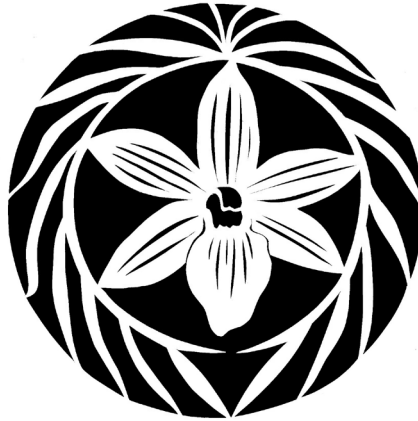
Rachel opened her mouth, closed it again, and nodded.

Circe turned away then glanced back over her shoulder. “And best if you don’t mention this to anyone.” She merged into the forest, leaving the echo of her words lingering in Rachel’s mind.

Rachel stared at the empty place where Circe had stood. The twilight reversed to the muted light of afternoon and the forest revived in a cacophony of birds making up for lost song. Small creatures trafficked through the undergrowth. Dragonflies helicoptered in circles above. Rachel gradually stopped trembling, and the hum in her mind eased. She felt something in her hand, warm and smooth, and unfurled her fingers.

A spider.

She shrieked. Flung it to the ground. The spider didn’t scurry away. It couldn’t. She peered cautiously at the spider trapped in the heart-shaped piece of kauri gum. The skin of her scalp crawled as she picked it up, holding the green patina ring at the top pinched between her fingertips. A row of scarlet diamond shapes, edged in gold, marked its hairy black body, magnified twice its real size by the convex bulge of the heart, and the eight long legs stretched to the edges of the heart, poised ready to creep away.



The dream slipped away as Rachel drifted awake. Keeping her eyes closed she tried to recall it, grabbing the tail of the dream and pulling it back into consciousness. She could almost hear the words now, could see Grandma holding something out to her, a white flower — the image grew clearer — it was an orchid, white star-shaped petals, green and purple in the centre. She stretched her fingers out for it —

The orchid was snatched away. Rachel jolted up; her eyes flew open. A creature stood before her, statue still, except for a slight twitch under his right eye. He squashed the flower into his pocket. Rachel covered her eyes with her hands then moved them away. “Weird, I’m dreaming that I’m awake.”

The creature reached about knee high. Silver-tipped wings poked from the back of his patchwork fur vest which fastened at the front with a row of possum claws. His leggings, scattered with silver stars, were tucked into woven flax boots. He clutched a small net: a star-shaped pattern stretched across the wooden hoop, and spotted owl feathers and strings of tiny beads dangled from the edges. A wisp of phosphorescent vapour swirled in the net, the tail of it hanging over the edge. Flickering in the vapour was the scene from Rachel’s dream.

She grabbed the end of the dream. The creature grunted and jerked the net closer towards him. Rachel held tight. The dream felt like silk in her hands, but lighter and harder to keep hold of. “Can you please give the dream back — it’s mine.”

He yanked the net again.

Rachel frowned. “What are you?”

He scowled.

“You’re not real anyway, whatever you are. I’ll probably wake up any second now.”

“The winika orchid.” His voice whispered into the room. “Could it be the key?”

“What are you talking about? Key to what?”

“And what’s the connection with the girl...”

“You’re not making any sense, at all.”

He squinted at Rachel.

She glared back. “Why do you want my dream anyway?”

“I’m searching for something.”

“So you just go around stealing dreams.”

“I don’t steal them. I *collect* them. Most humans don’t even miss them.”

“You can’t just go around taking people’s dreams. It’s not fair.”

He shrugged. “What do you need them for?”

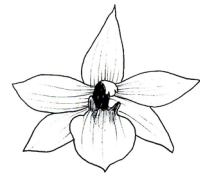
“Well — because — they might be important dreams.”

“Hah! You’re wasting my *important* dream-snatching time. If you don’t let go I’ll rip the dream in half.” He smirked. “And believe me, you don’t want that to happen.”

Rachel pulled the dream towards her. “Why not?”

The dream snatcher tugged it back, whistling through his teeth. “I’m warning you, if a fragment from a dream escapes it will tumble back into the dreamstream — which flows like a river through the night, filled with dreams bound for each and every being, and once in the dreamstream, the lost fragment will attract other pieces of lost dreams and form grotesque, horrific, disturbing dreams, more terrible than the worst nightmare you could ever imagine, and to experience such a dream can cause a sane person to become rav —”

His eyes popped wide as he noticed the kauri gum heart pendant around Rachel’s neck. Snatching the end of the dream from her, he swept it into his net and vanished.



WINIKA
{ WEE - nee - ka }

It was hot, even under the shade of trees. The track twisted and turned into the forest, and Rachel ducked under vines and ferns that had reclaimed the path and she crawled over hairy trunks of fallen ponga trees obscuring the way. She couldn't stop thinking about the dream snatcher. Her mind reasoned that he must have been a dream; the queasy feeling in her stomach suggested otherwise. She made a few wrong turns before finding the place Aunty B had told her about. She'd said they used to call it the Octopus Pool, and that they'd swum in it often as kids but for some reason — Aunty B couldn't remember what the reason was — they'd stopped swimming there.

Rocks surrounded the pool and tiny plants sprouted from every crevice like weeds poking through cracks in a pavement. Rachel peered into the water; the surface mirrored the sky above, obscuring the bottom of the pool. She tested the temperature with her toe — it was shockingly cold against the hotness of the afternoon. Inching her way in, she drifted on the surface, eyes closed, limbs stretched out like the arms, or legs, of a starfish. From underwater, the voice of the forest was hushed to a soft hum.

SPLASH!

A surge of water forced Rachel under. She flailed about then found her way to the surface and snorted water from her nose. A boy stood at the edge of the pool, hands on his hips, dripping with water, and grinning down at her.

“So you're the girl everyone's talking about eh.”

He looked about the same age as her. Tall and skinny, jet-black hair sticking up like a mohawk, and skin tanned a dark shade of brown. Khaki camouflage shorts hung down past his knees.

Rachel blew more water from her nose. “You could've drowned me.”

He raised one eyebrow and kept grinning.

“What are you doing here?” said Rachel.

“I'm Zac.”

“I didn't think anyone came here anymore.”

“They don’t. All too chicken.”

“What are they scared of?”

“Ghosts.”

Rachel looked around. “I don’t see any ghosts.”

“The legend says the ghost of a huge octopus lives right here in this pool. It’s name is Te Wheke. If anyone swims here Te Wheke will grab them and drag them to the bottom of the pool, squish them in his powerful tentacles, suck out their heart and eat it then leave the rest of them for the eels.”

Rachel scrambled out of the pool. She perched on a rock and eyed Zac from behind the dripping curtain of her hair.

Zac stared back at her. “You’re really white. You look a bit like them.”

“Like who?” She frowned, wondering if he meant the dead people being fed to the eels.

“The patupaiarehe.”

Rachel scoffed. “Fairies?” Auntie B had spoken about the mythological fair-skinned, red-haired, blue-eyed fairies that lived deep in the forests and high in the hills. How some nights you could hear music from their flutes drifting on the mist that they liked to hide in. “You don’t really believe that stuff.”

Zac scuffed his feet against the rock. “So you’re from Auckland, eh. The big city.”

“It’s not that big. Not like New York, or London, or Paris.”

“Spose not. So you’re staying with Auntie B all summer.”

“Is she your auntie too — like — your real auntie?”

“Nah, everyone just calls her Auntie B.”

“Why do you think she always wears a scarf around her head?”

Zac laughed. “Dad reckons its cause she doesn’t want to scare people with her snake-hair — like that freaky goddess.”

“Medusa.”

“Yeah.”

Rachel watched two tūi drunk on nectar, performing in acrobatic dives and

loops above the pool, singing their chiming cackling tunes. “Those birds make the craziest noises.”

“They can make heaps of sounds. Some that humans can’t even hear. You can teach them to speak too.”

“Like English?”

Zac nodded. “Koro Stan — my grandad — reckons there’s one that lives outside his house that yaks away to him all the time.”

“For real?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, there are those beetles again.” Rachel pointed to the convoy crawling across the rock where Zac stood. Sun reflected off their gem-encrusted shells, spinning arcs of colour around them. “There were some at the lake the other day. I’ve never seen beetles like that before.”

A mass of cloud barged in front of the sun and the forest fell into shadow. The steady cicada hum ceased, and the tūi disappeared along with their honey song.

Zac frowned at the sky, then at the beetles. “There’s something dodgy about those bugs.”

“They’re only beetles.” Rachel’s laugh sounded fake in the silence. A slight breeze brushed cool against her skin. She shivered.

Zac scanned the forest surrounding them. “Someone’s watching us.”

Rachel glimpsed a blur of black, a shine of amber, in the undergrowth on the far side of the Octopus Pool. “Circe?”

“Eh?”

Rachel looked away and shook her head. “Nothing.”

From across the pool a growl rumbled into the quiet. Rachel crept closer to Zac. “What’s that?”

Zac kept his eyes on the undergrowth. “Dunno, maybe a wild boar — doesn’t really sound like one though. Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound very friendly. Let’s get out of here.”

Rachel slipped quietly from the house the next morning; Aunty B was still asleep. She chose the least rusty bike from the carport and rode up the driveway, tyres crunching over the loose metal. Fog hung heavy on the dawn, and she couldn't see far ahead. The call of a rooster reached her before she saw the moss-covered gate where the bird perched on the lid of the mailbox; it bolstered its scrawny feathers, puffed its chest, and launched into another longwinded crow. Rachel swung open the mailbox. Empty. She let the lid bang shut, upsetting the bird from its perch.

She followed the rutted dirt track up and along a ridge; the bike wobbled and rattled along until it got too steep and she had to jump off and push it. Reaching a high point where the fog thinned, she stopped and checked her cellphone. No service, even up here.

Below, Lake Tarawera lay to her left and to the right Lake Rotomahana. Beyond the lakes Mount Tarawera lurked in a curtain of fog. Rachel covered her nose and mouth against the sudden rotten-egg-stink of sulphur staining the air. Around her the atmosphere felt thick like molasses and sickly hot. She watched mesmerised as the fog drew back from the lakes.

A huge pink marble-like staircase descended to the edge of Lake Rotomahana. At the top, two geysers spouted jets of steaming water, which flowed down the stepped terraces, through brimming pools of water, cerulean-blue. Rachel rubbed her eyes then opened them again. Beyond the terraces, nearer to Mount Tarawera, a larger staircase wrapped around the hillside and fanned down to the lake, its bleached surface dazzled white in the early sun.

Rachel fumbled for her cellphone. As she held it up to take a photo, fog crept back across the lake and stole the terraces away, restoring the landscape to a hillside covered in green shrub. She squeezed her eyes shut then looked again. Just green shrub. No Pink and White Terraces. It must have been a daydream. Just like meeting the dream snatcher. And Circe. She looked down at the kauri gum heart on her necklace and frowned. She turned and headed back along the ridge, after one last glance at the hillside — it was reassuringly green.

Rachel found the letterbox with the large hand-painted number 17: Zac's place. The house perched on stilts in a sea of green ferns, its wide windows facing the lake. Wide wooden steps led up to the front door. She started up the steps then yelped as something struck her shoulder and bounced into the grass. She picked up the wad of leaves rolled into a ball and grimaced; it smelt like rotten cabbages. Dropping it, she wiped her hand in the grass. There was a commotion in the bushes at the side of the house and Zac appeared, slingshot in hand.

Rachel crossed her arms and glared at him. "You gave me a fright."

He grinned. "Sorry citygirl."

The front door swung open. "Zac —" His mum stood in the doorway holding a banana like a gun. "Can you stop messing around in that stinkwood tree — I can smell it in the kitchen." She noticed Rachel. "Oh, hi, you must be Rachel, Zac mentioned he'd met you yesterday."

"Hi, Mrs... Zac's mum."

"I'm Laura, or Zac's mum is okay too." Zac's mum smiled. "Are you hungry? I'm just making smoothies."

"Yes, sounds great," said Rachel.

Zac groaned.

Rachel followed him as he grumbled and stomped up the steps.

Zac glared at his green smoothie. "Lettuce in a smoothie is just wrong."

"It's not lettuce — it's kale," said Zac's mum.

Rachel devoured hers. "It's super delicious, thank you."

"We're carnivores, not herbivores," said Zac. "It's not natural for humans to be vegetarians. We should be eating meat like the cavemen we came from, rather than leaves and bananas like a bunch of monkeys."

Zac's mum laughed. "Well, I'll leave you two monkeys to it. I'm off to pick up your sisters from netball Zac. And no computer games today please, do something outside."

“Sure, Mum.”

She called back to them as she walked from the room: “But stay away from Waimangu, there’s been a warning of volcanic activity in the area.”

“Sure, Mum.”

“And please tidy your room before you go anywhere.”

“Sure. Mum.”

Rachel followed Zac up a stairwell with large windows opening to the surrounding forest. The window in Zac’s room offered a glimpse of the lake. His bedroom walls were covered with charts of birds from all over the world, and posters of The Doors, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix.

Rachel stared at the huge orange and purple poster. “Who’s Jimi Hendrix?”

Zac stared at her. “You’re joking, right.”

Rachel shrugged. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s only the awesomest electric guitarist in the world — ever.”

“Oh.”

“I’m gonna be a guitarist just like him. Have my own band and everything.”

“Oh, cool.”

Zac gathered the clothes scattering the floor into one pile, and Rachel sat on the floor next to a tower of yellow spine National Geographic magazines, ordered by date, the most recent at the top.

“Pretty amazing magazine collection.”

“Yeah, my Dad started it for me when I was born. I’ve got a lifetime subscription.”

“Wow, they’ll fill up your whole room. Where is your Dad?”

“At work, as usual.”

“On a Sunday? What does he do?”

“Doctor.”

“Oh.”

“What do your olds do?”

“They’re archeologists. They travel heaps.”

“Cool.”

“Not really. I usually have to stay home, and now I’m stuck here for the whole boring summer. I used to always stay with Grandma, it was so much fun.”

“How come you can’t stay with your grandma now?”

Rachel felt for the snake ring around her neck and turned it between her fingers.

“She died.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Rachel shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“Do you miss her?”

She turned her face away from Zac to the window, where the lake outside swam in the watery gaze of her tears. She smudged the tears away with her sleeve and moved closer to the window. Along the sill perched a row of wooden carvings. The simple bold forms were not exactly like a bird, but you could tell that they were birds. Rachel picked one up and cradled it in her hand.

“Did you make these?”

“Yep, Koro Stan is teaching me to carve. You know Aunty B’s staff, with the octopus?”

Rachel shuddered. “Oh yeah, it totally gives me the creeps.”

“Koro Stan carved it.”

“Oh — right. Um, it’s really amazing though, even though it is scary.”

She picked up a pocketknife lying next to a half-finished carving. Wings were engraved on the greenstone handle, and etched on the steel flick-blade was the head of an eagle.

“Koro Stan gave me that,” said Zac. “He’s carved heaps of awesome stuff. He made this life-size carving of a hokioi — it’s at the museum.”

“A hokioi?”



“Man, what do they teach you at that posh city-school of yours — how to put on lipstick?”

“I don’t even wear lipstick. It’s lip gloss.”

“Hokioi was a megafauna, the biggest eagle in the world, they used to feed on moa, you know, the giant birds that couldn’t fly; they were megafauna too. The hokioi would swoop down out of the sky faster than you could see, snatch up a moa and carry it off and eat it. They ate people too.”

“Sure.”

“It’s true. Ask Aunty B if you don’t believe me.”

“Okay, I believe you.”

Rachel picked up another of Zac’s birds, viewing it from every angle. “These are really cool you know.”

Zac shrugged. “They’re all right.”

Rachel rearranged the birds on the windowsill. “I kinda saw something a bit kind of strange this morning, on my way here.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever seen something, and you’re not sure if it’s real or not?”

“Like a ghost?”

“Um...no.”

“What then?”

Rachel looked down and re-rearranged the birds. “Some steps... terraces... on the side of Lake Rotomahana.”

“You mean like the Pink and White Terraces. The terraces that were covered up in the eruption ages ago.”

“Yeah.” Rachel felt her face go red. “But I saw them.”

“Okay, let’s go have a look.”

“We can’t. They disappeared again.”

Zac frowned then grinned. “Nice one — you had me fooled for a nano second.”

“No, I...it’s true.” Rachel sighed and looked at the ground. “Just forget it.”

Zac scrutinized her through squinted eyes. “Maybe you’ve got sun-stroke, and were hallucinating.”

Rachel shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Let’s go check it out with Koro Stan — he knows about all kinds of weird stuff.”



Koro Stan's mint-green house nestled in an orchard. His front door was open and a large tawny-coloured cat sprawled on the verandah, flexing its long and sharp claws. The cat followed their approach with lazy yellow eyes.

"Watch out for Killer — he bites." Zac stepped over the cat and poked his head into the house. "Yo, Koro Stan."

There was no response.

"He must be out in the orchard." Zac flicked a small pebble at the cat as he walked past.

"That cat is massive. Is its name really Killer?" said Rachel.

"Nah — his name's Laurence."

"Weird name for a cat."

They walked under and around trees laden with peaches, plums, avocados, lemons and apples, and through grass that in places reached as high as their knees. Zac plucked ruby-red apples from a tree and handed one to Rachel; the flesh was crisp, and fizzy and warm from the sun.

Koro Stan was up a ladder, his head lost in a leafy avocado tree. All that stuck out were his navy and white striped t-shirt, tan corduroy trousers flecked with white paint, and brown leather boots. Zac called out and Koro Stan clambered down, the canvas pouch tied around his waist brimming with plump green avocados. He grinned as he recognized Zac. "Long time no see my boy." After

slapping Zac enthusiastically on the back he held his hand out to Rachel. “And who is this lovely young lady?”

Rachel stepped forward and shook his hand. “My name is Rachel. Pleased to meet you Sir.”

He chuckled. “I’m good with Koro Stan.”

“Okay, Koro Stan.”

Koro Stan turned to Zac. “How’s the family?”

“Annoying.”

Koro Stan laughed.

As they made their way back to the house Koro Stan walked with a limp, dragging his left foot behind him.

“What happened to his leg?” Rachel whispered to Zac.

Koro Stan overhead and turned. “I once found myself in a spot of bother with a wētā — a long, long time ago, before both of you were even a speck in the world.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “A wētā? But they’re not very big, and they don’t even bite.”

“Oh, they bite all right,” said Koro Stan. “This one was a giant — a wētāpunga — its spiky legs were as high as me and its eyes were as big as my head. Ugly too. Guess that’s why they’re named after the god of ugly things.”

Rachel giggled, thinking he was pulling her leg, but Koro Stan frowned and gazed off through the orchard. A dapple-grey mare frolicked over to the fence when she saw them approaching, she whinnied, swishing her silver tail from side to side.

“Hey Whinny,” Zac stroked the mare’s nose and held out an apple for her.

“Don’t spoil that horse too much boy — she’s getting lazy.” Koro Stan shook his head and went into the house. Rachel and Zac followed him into the kitchen — past Laurence who took a well-aimed swipe at Zac’s leg.

“Owww — Laurence,” Zac hollered; hopping around holding his leg lined with four bright-red scratches.



WĒTĀ
{ WEH-TAH }

“You’ve always been his favourite.” Koro Stan chuckled. He fetched some kawakawa ointment and cotton wool from the bathroom and swabbed the scratch on Zac’s leg.

“Geez — that stings.”

“It’s good for it,” said Koro Stan.

Rachel helped Koro Stan juice the freshly picked lemonades. She’d never seen lemonade fruit before — it looked almost like a lemon, but was a paler yellow, a bit rounder, and really did taste like fizzy lemonade. The room was crammed with Koro Stan’s carvings; mostly they were abstract birds with fluid sweeping curves, similar to Zac’s carvings, but bigger, bolder and more detailed. Each was a different wood, the swirling grain forming patterns of feathers, or winding into the shape of an eye. Some areas, like the tips of the wings or the eyes of the birds, were painted with fine steady brushstrokes. They seemed alive, like they might take flight at any moment.

“Wow. Your carvings are totally amazing,” said Rachel. “You’re really talented.”

“Thank you, I’ve been carving a long time. There’s always plenty to learn though.” Koro Stan eased into a chair. “So what are you two up to?”

Zac looked at Rachel. She gazed down at her feet. “I... um... I saw the... PinkandWhiteTerracethismorning.”

Koro Stan held his hands up. “Whoa, you might have to speak a little slower — ears aren’t as sharp as they used to be.”

“I think I saw the ah... Pink and White Terraces, this morning.”

Koro Stan stared at her for ages without blinking, then nodded. “Interesting.”

“I was on the ridge across the lake — I thought there might be some cellphone reception over there — I only saw the terraces for a minute, I tried to take a photo, then they disappeared. I guess I must have imagined it, or Zac thinks I could have sunstroke.”

Koro Stan smiled then his forehead creased in a frown. “I’m quite sure you weren’t imagining them.”

“But, how could they be there one minute and gone the next?” said Rachel.

“Well, they are an illusion of sorts, but also as real as anything else in this world,” said Koro Stan. “The veil between the visible and invisible worlds is thinning, and the other worlds are becoming more prevalent. When the worlds cross over they form an overlap, and since the underworld exists in the domain of the past, when it’s strong features from the past can return — ”

Koro Stan sighed. “Ah — what a blessing to see the Terraces in their splendor, declared the eighth wonder of the world you know. Tourists flocked to see them in the late 1800s, until the eruption of course. The terraces were thought to have been completely destroyed in the eruption, but recently they’ve discovered parts of them buried under the lake — quite fascinating...”

A sparrow landed on the windowsill, followed by another, and pecked at the walnuts Koro Stan had spread out to dry. Koro Stan moved on to the other wonders of the world, and Rachel and Zac shuffled in their seats. Rachel watched the sparrows, and Zac glared at Laurence who sprawled across Rachel’s lap, snoring loudly, his lip pulled back exposing a long canine fang.

Zac yawned.

“Right-o,” said Koro Stan. “I did I go off on a bit of a tangent — what was it we were talking about?”

“You were telling us about the underworld,” said Rachel.

“Yes, the underworld,” said Koro Stan.

“Have you been there?” said Rachel.

Koro Stan’s eyes shone brighter. “Oh yes, I’ve been there.”

“Huh?” said Zac.

“How’d you get there?” said Rachel.

“How come you’ve never told me this story before?” said Zac.

“Did you bring anything back?” said Rachel.

Koro Stan laughed. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know boy. And yes I do have a few souvenirs. Now, where is the key?” He stood then wandered around

the room, opening cupboards and drawers, finding things he thought he'd lost, or forgot he had: a small wooden bird — the first carving he'd ever done; a trophy from a fishing competition; a photo album that he started flicking through, reminiscing about the past. Rachel and Zac joined the search.

Eventually Zac held up a small brass key. "Hey, is this it?"

Koro Stan nodded. "That's the one."

They followed Koro Stan into his workroom, which adjoined the house. Along one side stretched a workbench, the pegboard above it crammed with tools. Chunks of wood were piled on the floor, which was covered in wood shavings, and a table bowed under carvings in all states of progress. Rows of books filled a wall of shelves. Koro Stan pulled a stool over to a shelf and pointed up. "It's the box up there, the kauri one." Zac climbed up, retrieved the large wooden box and handed it down. Koro Stan placed the box on the table and brushed the lid clean of dust. He unlocked the small brass catch and carefully removed a folded map and a bejewelled beetle. The gold shell of the beetle had tarnished almost black, the jewels faded and lifeless.

Rachel pointed to the beetle. "Is that from the underworld?"

Koro Stan nodded. He rummaged through a drawer, found a cloth and began polishing the dull surface of the beetle. When it was restored to its former shininess he smiled and handed it to Rachel.

Rachel hesitated before taking it. "I saw some of those beetles here, the other day when I met —" An image of Circe burst into her mind and the kauri gum heart on her necklace burned, like a warning, against her skin. She changed the subject. "But how can something that looks so nice be from the underworld?"

"The underworld is not simply a place of the things we fear or think are evil. It is a place of the ancestors, of the guardians, and it is the place you can find your true power."

Koro Stan gazed out the window. "Nothing exists in isolation, just as nature shows us. The forces of darkness and the power of light must both exist, and be in

an eternal struggle for balance.”

“Like in Star Wars.” Zac swung his arm in front of him like he was holding a light saber and said in the voice of Obi-wan: “Use the force Luke.”

Rachel laughed, and Koro Stan smiled and shook his head.

“So Koro Stan, where is the underworld? How do you get there? What does it look like?” said Rachel.

“Well, the different worlds are all here now, as you saw with the Pink and White Terraces this morning, the worlds slip into one another. When the energy starts shifting and changing it creates an overlap — like I was telling you about. Time doesn’t exist in these other worlds, not as we know it anyway, even in our world time is fluid, like how Einstein believed in the elasticity of time, and the difference between past, present and future is only an illusion.”

“So how did you even find the underworld Koro Stan?” Zac had the map open flat and was studying it and frowning. “This just looks like any other normal map.”

“It’s a different sort of map than you’re used to reading. Here, let me show you.” Koro Stan took the map, carefully refolded it then unfolded it again. Instead of opening out to the map Zac had been looking at, it unfolded to a map twice the size.

“Cool — how’d you do that?” said Zac.

“It’s all in the unfolding,” said Koro Stan. “If the map is unfolded in the manner intended it reveals both this world and the underworld.”

Rachel and Zac leaned over the map. The paper had a yellow patina and was smeared and watermarked in places, but still legible. Small drawings covered the map, and precise, detailed notes were handwritten alongside.

“In places the underworld looks as it does here, but here in the past, sometimes the present and possibly even in the future,” said Koro Stan. “In some places it’s dark and terrifying — like no place you’ve ever been before. It keeps changing too, so you can never be sure any place will be where you remembered it. You can access the other worlds through portals and, as you can see on the map, I’ve marked the portals

that I remember. Often the beetles will lead you to portals too.”

Rachel shuddered, remembering following the beetles into the forest, and how they’d all suddenly disappeared. Koro Stan glanced at her and she looked away.

Koro Stan pointed to a drawing of a black and broken tree on the map. “This is the only portal I’ve used. This lightning tree has been around as long as I can remember. It’s a huge old totara tree, split in half and scorched black.”

“Let’s go there — into the underworld,” said Rachel.

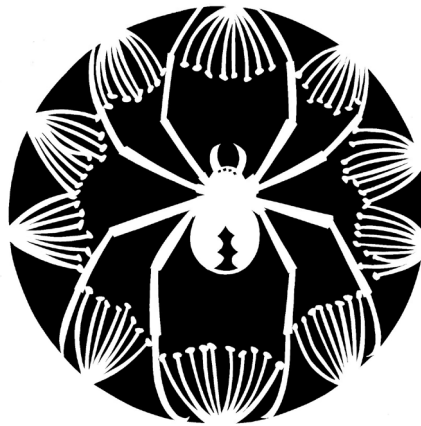
Koro Stan looked up in surprise and laughed. “My dear, no one in his, or her, right mind would willingly enter the underworld. To go there would most certainly mean you would not find your way out again.”

“But you’ve been there, and you came back,” said Zac.

“Not without scars,” said Koro Stan, shaking his head. “I’ve seeded far too many wild thoughts in your naïve young minds. The underworld is a frightening and dangerous place occupied with supernatural threats. No one will be going there.”

Koro Stan folded the map, stuffed it into the box, and snapped the lid closed, startling Laurence, who leapt from Rachel’s lap and stalked outside.

Rachel realized she was still holding the bejewelled beetle and started to lift her hand, then let it fall back down. She closed her palm around the beetle and slipped it into her pocket.



Rachel tossed and turned, she pushed the blankets off, pulled them back over her, pushed them off again. Snapshots of dreams drifted back and forth in her mind but she couldn't hold onto anything long enough to remember it. She thought of the dream snatcher, and kicked at the bottom of the bed to see if he was there; nothing but sheets twisted around her legs. She dragged her eyelids open. Koro Stan's shiny bejewelled beetle gleamed on the bedside table. The pit of her stomach knotted and she turned away, closed her eyes and drew the blankets back over her head.

Eventually she was drawn from bed by the smell of baking. Hiding the stolen beetle in the pocket of her jacket hanging on the bedroom door, she slouched into the kitchen.

"Morning sleepyhead. What's on the agenda for today?" said Aunty B.

Rachel slumped into a chair, sloshed fresh milk over her cereal and poured a glass of apple juice. "Zac said he'd take me to see the greatest tree in the world."

"Ah, Great Rātā. I'll cook up some kumara for you to take."

Rachel wondered if she'd heard Aunty B correctly. "Kumara?"

"Yep. Maybe you kids can help me this morning, then visit Great Rātā in the afternoon."

"Do you need to go into town?"

"No, why? Is there something you need?"

"Um, no. I just thought we could have a look around."

"Well, there isn't much to look at — just shops full of junk we don't want. We've

got everything we need here.”

The back screen-door squeaked open and Zac sauntered into the kitchen.

“Sweet — just in time for breakfast.” He snuck a handful of choc-chip cookies from the cooling rack as he passed and sat at the table.

“You forget I’ve got eyes in the back of my head, boy,” said Aunty B.

Zac grinned at Rachel. “Still in your nightie?”

Rachel glowered at him. “It’s not a nightie, it’s a dress.”

Zac grinned. “It’s okay, we don’t mind if you want to wear your nightie around.” He filled a large pudding bowl with three kinds of breakfast cereal.

Rachel squealed and jumped up, flicking her hair with her hand. A tiny spider dropped to the ground, scuttled across the floor and disappeared behind the oven.

Zac raised an eyebrow. “Sure you wanna go to the Black Forest?”

Rachel smoothed her hair and sat down again. “I wasn’t scared. I just got a fright, that’s all.”

The smell of hot tar hovered in hazy heat waves off the main road. Rachel and Zac walked along a goat track on the grass verge. Aunty B had packed them sandwiches, some cooked kumara, and what was left of the choc-chip cookies; Zac had already devoured nearly all of them and they’d only been walking five minutes.

On the hill ahead, a broken blackened tree speared charred branches into the blue sky. “Do you reckon that’s Koro Stan’s lightning tree?”

“Yeah, maybe. Race you there.”

Zac reached the tree and was already inside when Rachel glimpsed into the gloomy hollowed trunk. “Ew, look at all the cobwebs.”

“Come on citygirl, not scared of a few little creepy crawlies are you?”

“No.”

She squeezed through the opening, carefully avoiding the sticky threads of web.

“I don’t know how Koro Stan ever fit through here,” said Zac. “He must have been a skinny guy back then.”

Inside the tree trunk, the hard dirt was littered with stones and the stale droppings of small animals, and it smelt a bit like burnt toast. Rachel glanced at her white sneakers, and stayed close to the opening where there was enough light to see where she was stepping.

Zac circled around the interior wall of the tree, running his hands over the crevices and knots. “Seems like a normal tree to me — well, a normal struck by lightning tree.”

Something scratched in the inky depths of a crevice.

Rachel edged towards the opening. “I don’t think this is the tree that Koro Stan meant.” She scrambled out into daylight and inhaled deep breaths of clean air.

“Yeah, maybe not.” Zac climbed out after her.

“How far is it to Great Rātā from here?” said Rachel.

Zac broke into song, accompanied by frenzied air guitar strumming:

It’s very far away

It takes about a half and a day to get there

If we travel by my uh, dragon-fly

No it’s not in Spain

But all the same you know, it’s a groovy name

And the wind’s just right. Hey!

Rachel laughed. “But what if we don’t have a dragonfly?”

Zac shrugged. “About an hour, I guess.”

The path led into the Black Forest. Around them tree trunks stretched like power poles into the sky, their thick twisted roots weaving along the forest floor. A family of pīwakawaka birds darted about, flicking their fanned tails this way and that, as if they couldn’t decide which direction to go.



PĪWAKAWAKA
{ PEE-wah-ka-wah-ka }

Zac mimicked their *cheat cheat cheat* and the birds flitted nearer, swooping to investigate then spiraling away. One perched on a branch so close to Rachel she could have reached out and touched it. The pīwakawaka tilted its head to the side, spun in a full circle, showing off its tail from all directions, then flew past her, so close to her head that she ducked.

She stood back up. “I can’t believe they’re so friendly.”

“It’s cos we’re stirring up all the bugs, and they can get a good feed.”

“How do you make that sound that they make?”

“Easy.” Zac puckered his lips together, put his finger into his mouth, and sucked lightly, making a squeaky kissing noise, perfectly mimicking the pīwakawaka.

Rachel tried, but could only make a squeaky noise that sounded like a deflating balloon.

Zac laughed. “I bet you can’t roll your tongue either.” He poked out his tongue, perfectly formed into a U shape.

“Show off.”

As they walked Zac spoke of the lore of the forest, of how Tane the god created the forest after he and his brothers had pushed apart their parents, Papatuanuku the earth mother and Rangi the sky father, letting light into the darkness. How Tane clothed Rangi with stars and Papatuanuku with trees, shrubs, flowers and plants. Zac’s voice mixed with the sounds of the forest: the calls of birds, the constant harmony of cicadas, and the rustle of insects through leaves.

“Whoa.” Rachel stopped and took a step back.

Great Rātā rose like a skyscraper, piercing the forest canopy; dwarfing the neighbouring tree ferns and nīkau palms.

“It’s totally unbelievably ginormous,” she whispered.

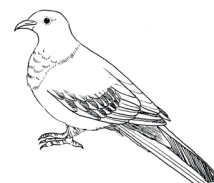
Zac nodded as he followed her gaze to where the tree disappeared from sight in a red burst of flowers.

“I’ve never seen a tree this... massive,” said Rachel. “It must be really, really, old.”

“Koro Stan reckons about 700 years.”

“Wow.”

The wide girth of Great Rātā was formed from dozens of vines fused together, and smaller trees and epiphytes sprouted from every available nook; trees growing on trees growing on trees. Climbers draped over branches in curtains of green, and tiny white orchids poked through the plant clutter, vying for a glimpse of sun. A kererū pigeon flapped clumsily through the hanging forest plucking berries, its soft *kuu* drowned by the chaotic symphony of the tūi and the koimako’s bell-like song.



KERERŪ
{ keh-reh-ROOH }



KOIMAKO / BELLBIRD
{ coy-MAH-caw }

“There must be a plethora of things living up there,” said Rachel.

“Yeah, like bats, and spiders,” said Zac.

Zac placed one of his tiny carved wooden birds at the base of the tree, along with the cooked kumara from Auntie B.

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think the tree is going to like that kumara much.”

A loud crack, like the splitting of a branch, came from high up in the tree. Rachel jumped, and looked up, eyes wide.

“Watch it — you don’t want to make the spirit of Great Rātā angry,” said Zac.

Leaves spiraled down as something rustled in the foliage above. Another crack sounded and Rachel took a step back.

“Do you really think I might have upset the tree?”

“Nah — I reckon it was just saying thanks for the kumara.”

Rachel glanced at him; he seemed serious. “I don’t get it — the kumara thing.”

“It’s an offering, to the spirit of Great Rātā, to the forest.”

“Oh, right,” she said, but she still didn’t really understand.

More leaves drifted down.

“What is that up there?” said Rachel.

“Probably just one of those greedy kererū.”

“It’s too big for a bird.”

“Maybe a possum then.”

“It’s too big for a possum too.” Rachel looked sideways at Zac. “They’re nocturnal anyway.”

Zac grinned. “So you do learn some stuff at your school citygirl.” He moved back from the tree and looked up, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun.

“Weird, the birds have all gone quiet. Hey, what is — that?”

Rachel backed away.

“Geez, it’s a spider — a huge mother too.” Zac spun around and ran straight into Rachel.

They tumbled to the ground, a tangle of limbs. Rachel staggered to her feet. The long telescopic legs of the spider descended the tree, swallowing metres with each step, bringing closer the bulbous black-velvet body, marked with a red diamond-shaped stripe edged with sparkling gold. Each of its eight shiny black eyes mirrored a fisheye version of Rachel and Zac as they stood rooted to the spot.

“RUN.”

Rachel sprinted after Zac as the spider scuttled down the remaining length of the trunk.

The light faded fast as they raced back along the forest path. Rachel tripped on a tree root and a sharp twig stabbed her knee. Her lungs felt like they might burst and the stitch in her side hurt so much she could barely get back to her feet. A short shrill call sounded behind them.

“Do spiders — make noises?” said Rachel.

“No,” said Zac.

“What’s that then?”

“A kiwi.”

Zac slowed to a walk then leaned against a tree, hands on his knees, chest heaving in and out. “The spider isn’t chasing us.”

Rachel dropped to the ground, and bent over, holding her side. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“But why?”

“Don’t know.”

Rachel reached her hand to her neck.

“My necklace is gone.” She crawled around frantically searching through rotting leaves and bark. “We have to go back.”

“Are you crazy!”

“It’s got Grandma’s ring on it, and the kauri gum heart.”

“What kauri gum heart?”

“It must have come off when you tripped me over.”

“I didn’t trip you over, you were running the wrong way and tripped over me.”

“No I didn’t.”

“You did, citygirl.” He stood up and crossed his arms. “There’s no way I’m going back near that freakish spider.”

“But — ” Rachel eyes stung with tears. She bit her lip and looked down at her bleeding knee.

“Hey, are you okay?” Zac pulled the drink bottle from his pack and rinsed the blood from her graze.

She jerked away. “That stings.”

“It’s good for it.”

“You sound like Koro Stan.”

Zac grinned. “We’ll see if he’ll go back with us tomorrow and find your necklace.”

Rachel sniffed; she looked at the blood congealing on her knee and the spots of red staining her white sneakers.

“It’ll have to be after lunch though,” said Zac, “Dad’s taking me fishing in the morning.”

“Yeah. Okay.”



Zac spun another stone out across the water, *skip, skip, skip, sink*. He wasn't having a good skimming day, even though the lake was calm and smooth, perfect for skimming — and for fishing. He turned and wandered back down the jetty, past the idle dinghy tethered to a post, and headed home. His dad had said maybe they could go fishing tomorrow instead. Sure. Probably just be called into work again, same old story.

He kicked a stone. It bounced ahead of him and came to rest at the edge of the track. When he caught up with the stone, a puriri moth was perched on it. Zac squatted down and watched as the moth opened and closed its large green and black wings then fluttered over to a staircase of tree roots that descended from the left of the path. He followed the moth over to the stairs. He'd walked this way hundreds of times and never noticed them before.



PURIRI
{ P00-ree-ree }

Although the day was bright, the passage leading down the staircase was dim. Dense forest grew on both sides and arched overhead, forming a tunnel. Zac paused, straining to hear the distant *knock-knock* that sounded like someone banging sticks together. Then there was silence. He moved forward and the sound started again. He stopped; the sound stopped. Glancing around, he jogged down the remaining steps.

He stood in a small glade encircled with toi toi grass. It was quiet and still. A shower fell from the cloudless sky then just as quickly ceased, leaving a vibrant

standing rainbow. The top of Zac's head tingled, like there was a bug crawling on it, and his breath barely made a sound.

Through the rainbow floated a ghost-like figure. It rode the wind like a bird, rising and dipping through the air, twisting and pulling with the currents, soaring higher and higher, a blur of white against the blue, then swooped down towards Zac.

He ducked as it skimmed through the air just above him. It was a kite, weathered white; the oval head was painted with two large almond-shaped eyes pinpricked with black, and a wide red mouth; the arms stretched broadly outwards, thin streamers trailing from the tip of each arm, and thin stick legs splayed from its billowing body. The kite darted back and forth above him then raced back across the clearing to where a man stood, holding the kite's string. The man hunched over a walking stick.

Zac called out. "Hey."

The man looked up, stared directly at Zac, briefly nodded, then reigned in the kite and disappeared through the toi toi grass, leaving it waving gently behind him.

The air sucked from Zac's lungs, like he'd been punched in the guts; He felt like he knew the man, he must have seen him somewhere before, but he couldn't think where.

Quor-quork.

Zac jumped at the call of a morepork owl. He'd never heard a morepork during the day; they were night hunters. He shivered.

"Geez, get a grip boy." Shaking his head, he turned back to the path and bounded up the steps without a backward glance.



RURU / MOREPORK
{ roo-roo }



The screen door banged behind Rachel as she burst outside holding a basket of pegs. Laurence lay sprawled across the path.

Reeow. He looked at her with wide yellow eyes. A tiny green gecko lay limp on the concrete in front of him.

“Oh, Laurence!”

Reeeeeooow.

Rachel walked around Laurence and the gecko and over to the clothesline where Aunty B was waiting for the pegs.

“Laurence caught a gecko.”

Aunty B frowned. “You sure it’s a gecko and not a skink?”

“I think it’s a gecko. It’s green. It’s got no tail.”

“It’s a bad omen, the gecko.”

“Poor little thing. What should I do with it?”

“Throw it on the compost, or something — just get rid of it before it brings us bad juju.”

“Do I have to pick it up?”

“Well, yes, unless you’re going to beam it there with your magic powers.”

Aunty B chuckled.

Rachel nudged the poor little limp gecko onto a shovel with a leaf of flax, and looked away from its wide lifeless eyes. She placed it in the coziest-looking corner of the compost, picking some bright yellow marigolds and arranging them on top.

Later, Rachel walked to Zac's house, followed by Laurence. Zac, wearing a black Jimi Hendrix t-shirt, stood on the deck throwing walnut shells at a pair of shrieking rosellas in a nīkau palm.

"Blimmin' rowdy Aussie birds."

"I think they're pretty," said Rachel. "They look like flying rainbows."

Zac fired a few more shells. "Pretty. Damn. Annoying." The birds flew off, circled overhead, and re-perched in the nīkau, resuming their squawking.

"Sorry I'm late, I got a bit lost," said Rachel.

"But you've been here before, how could you get lost?"

"I don't know, I just went a different way, and lost my sense of direction."

"Geez you're hopeless citygirl."

"Well, there's no street signs or anything, and all the paths look the same."

Zac shook his head.

"Are you ready to go and see Koro Stan?" said Rachel.

"You really sure you need your necklace back?"

"Yes."

Zac sighed. "All right then."

"Did you catch any fish?"

"Eh?"

"I thought you said you were going fishing with your dad this morning."

"Oh yeah, nah — he had to work."

They turned left on the main road in the direction of Koro Stan's house.

Laurence stalked along behind them.

Zac looked over his shoulder. "Why's that demon cat following us?"

Rachel told Zac about how Laurence had turned up at Auntie B's with a gecko this morning.

"See. Nothing but trouble, cats. Geckos are a bad omen too."

"It had no tail — the gecko."

"Yeah, their tails fall off when they're in danger, to trick the predator, so they can get away."

“That’s clever.”

“Not that clever — it didn’t work did it.”

“Oh, I suppose not.”

They headed down the track to Koro Stan’s. The forest was still. Rachel felt a chill on the back of her neck and glanced behind her; she felt they were being watched. She walked closer to Zac, bumping into him when he stopped suddenly.

“What the...”

In the middle of the path lay a pair of huia birds, their feathers disheveled and broken wings askew. Their talons lifelessly clawed the air. The plumage of the male was black with a green metallic tinge, and the tips of his tail feathers were pure white. The feathers of the female were completely white, as was her long slender curved beak.

Rachel gasped.

Zac’s face paled. “Laurence!”

“No, it couldn’t have been him — he’s been with us.”

“He’s been off killing things all over the place!”

“But not them.” Rachel pointed to the small dart

piercing the chest of each bird. “Well, not unless he can throw a dart.”

Zac crouched to inspect the small darts: their fine wooden barrels held a long fine steel point and blue-black feathers splayed from the shafts.

“Okay, so it wasn’t Laurence. Where is he anyway?”

Leaves crackled in the undergrowth to the left of the path. Rachel pushed through the ferns and found Laurence pawing at something in the end of a hollow black ponga log. The ponga had fallen long ago and been claimed by white and yellow lichen and spongy green moss. Gossamer spider webs stretched across the open end of the log.

Rachel called to Zac. “Can you come and hold Laurence please?”

Zac remained on the path. “There’s no way I’m picking up that killer cat.”

Rachel nudged Laurence out of the way. She parted the undergrowth



around the end of the log and reached through the sticky webs into the hollow. Goosebumps pricked her arms, and her fingers trembled as they alighted on a carefully wrapped hessian bundle.

She slid the bundle from the log and untied the plaited flax cord. The cloth, stiff with memory, remained folded around the contents.

“What’s over there?” Zac called out from the other side of the path where he was digging a hole. “Better not be another dead thing.”

Rachel didn’t answer.

She carefully drew back the cloth, revealing a finely carved wooden box. The surface was worn smooth by the hands of generations. She slid back the lid and a deck of cards dropped into her hands. The cards were polished to a shine by oily fingers, dirt etched deep into ancient creases. Some of the corners were folded back, others slightly torn. One side of the cards depicted a carved tiki head; large blue-green paua shell eyes stared from a face patterned with graphic lines, and a long tongue poked from a wide heart-shaped mouth. Rachel flipped over the top card: it showed a drawing of a tuatara. She traced the shape of the tuatara with her finger.

The echo of ancient voices rang in her ears, words from a language she didn’t understand, and images overlapped in her mind — scenes of ancient places and creatures — her head spun with them and she swayed, pulling her finger from the card and reaching out to the trunk of an upright ponga to steady herself.

Her breathing returned to normal and she gently laid her fingertips on the card again. Closing her eyes she saw an image of herself with a pink star in the centre of her forehead. It glowed neon-bright, burning the insides of her eyelids.

“Hello? Earth to Rachel —” Zac stood next to her. “What’s that?”

“Huh?” Rachel placed the card back onto the deck and handed it to Zac.

“Cards?” He plucked a card from the deck: it showed a carved figure of a warrior, the colour of red clay, the face and body covered with dark-green linear patterns, and its white eyes wide and fierce.

“What do you reckon these are?” Zac turned the card over then handed it

back to Rachel. An image rushed to her mind of Zac, holding a black feather with a white tip — a huia feather, with two lines of people stretched out on either side behind him.

“Hey.” Zac clicked his fingers in front of her face. “What’s up with you, you keep going all freaky.”

Rachel jumped. “No — nothing.” She shook the image from her head and placed the card back in the deck. “Who do you think could have shot the birds?”

“Dunno — I’ve got the darts to show Koro Stan.”

Zac had buried the birds, and laid strips of bark and a branch of bright-red tītoki berries on top of the earth.

A single tail feather, glossy black with a white tip, was caught in the leaves of a fern. Rachel freed it and held it out to Zac. He looked at the feather then slowly reached out for it, and turned and walked, head down and shoulders slumped, towards Koro Stan’s. Rachel followed a few steps behind him.



TĪTOKI
{ TEE - taw - key }

Rachel and Zac found Koro Stan in his workshop. Laurence leapt onto the bench and nudged his head against Koro Stan’s chest.

Koro Stan put down his chisel. “Hello, hello, I wondered where you’d got to.”

“He was at Aunty B’s this morning — he’d caught a gecko,” said Rachel. “Aunty B and Zac say they’re bad luck — geckos.”

“Are you superstitious?” said Koro Stan.

Rachel shrugged. “Maybe a little bit. Were you worried about Laurence?”

“No,” said Koro Stan. “He often disappears for days at a time and returns with his Cheshire Cat grin.”

“We found a couple of dead huia on the path,” said Zac.

“Huia?” Koro Stan frowned. “Are you certain?”

Zac showed Koro Stan the feather.

Koro Stan ran his fingers up the quill to the white-tip. His eyes were glassy with tears and as he spoke his strong voice wavered slightly. "This is a scared gift Zachary. A true taonga."

Zac nodded.

Koro Stan twisted the quill of the feather in his fingers. "I'll carve something for you to keep it in, a waka huia."

Zac looked down and wiped his face dry with the back of his hand. "That'd be really cool Koro Stan. Thanks."

Koro Stan handed the huia feather back to Zac.

"The female was white," said Zac.

Koro Stan flinched. "An albino. They were rare, very rare."

"Yeah, I don't get why someone would kill the birds, then just leave them lying there," said Zac.

"I think we can assume they didn't die of natural causes," said Koro Stan.

Zac held out the darts. "They were shot with these."

Koro Stan scrutinised the darts. "These feathers are from a raven."

"Ravens are extinct here," said Zac.

"Yes, since the 1500s. And huia have been extinct since the 1920s." He turned the darts over in his fingers. "I think these are from the underworld."

Rachel shivered as she thought of Circe's cape of blue-black feathers. She reached for the kauri gum heart but touched only bare skin and remembered her necklace was lost.

"When I was burying the huia, Rachel found some cards," said Zac.

"Well, Laurence found them actually." Rachel placed the bundle on the table.

Koro Stan unwrapped the wooden box. "I've never seen anything quite like this; the carving is exquisite. Looking at the patterning, I'd say it originates from the ancient ones."

"Who do you mean by the ancient ones?" said Rachel.

“The ancient people of this land were Nga Potiki and Nga-Uri-a-Maui. They were peoples of peace.” Koro Stan wandered over to his books, searching the titles on the spines. “I’m sure I have a book on ancient symbols somewhere.”

He returned empty-handed and carefully turned over one of the cards: it showed a figure with the head of a bird, the body of a man, and the tail of a fish. “The manaia — a sign of protection.” He frowned. “And also a warning of danger.”

Koro Stan stared at the symbol.

“Do you, um, see pictures in your head when you hold the cards?” said Rachel.

Koro Stan glanced up at her; his eyes were unfocused and it seemed like he was looking straight through her at something far in the distance. She shuffled in her seat, wishing she hadn’t said anything.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked her.

“I... I’m not sure. I kind of see a picture in my mind.”

“Psychic now are you?”

“No, I just — ” Rachel sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Did you say you found the cards near the huia?” said Koro Stan.

“Yeah, they were just off the path,” said Zac.

Koro Stan clicked his fingers in time with his thoughts. “I think the huia were the guardians of these cards. Someone was after the cards, but didn’t find them because you two came along. It seems you have a natural affinity with the cards Rachel; there must be a reason that you found them. I suggest we go and see Izzy, she might be able to enlighten us, and may even have some idea of where these originated from.”

“Who’s Izzy?” said Rachel.

Zac circled his finger around beside his head. “Some crazy hippy who talks to crystals, and dead people.”

Koro Stan gave Zac his stern-eye look. “Izzy is clairvoyant, and yes, Zac is quite correct, she does communicate with spirits.”

“Can we go and see if we can find my necklace on the way?” said Rachel.

“What necklace is this?” said Koro Stan.

“Oh yeah,” said Zac. “We haven’t even got round to telling you about being chased by a huge mother of a spider yesterday.”

Koro Stan hoisted himself off his stool. “Well that sounds like a story worth telling. Best we get moving, you can fill me in on the way.”

As they walked back to Great Rātā, looking for Rachel’s fallen necklace along the way, Zac told Koro Stan about the giant spider.

“From your description, it sounds like a katipo all right, but it’s most unusual for them to be so far inland. And I’ve never heard of one as large as you say this one is.”

“What if the spider’s still there?” said Rachel.

“I bought some Raid from home,” said Zac.

Rachel and Koro Stan cracked up laughing at the idea of Zac facing the giant katipo with a can of bug spray.

They grew quiet as they approached the tree. A fine web of tunnels was spun so thickly around Great Rātā that the trunk was barely visible. The threads were sprinkled with beads of dew — flashing gold and red in the sunlight. Rachel’s necklace hung from a small branch on Great Rātā, right at the centre of the web.

“How’re we going to get in?” said Rachel.

“We?” said Zac.

“I’m afraid we don’t want to disturb the web too much,” said Koro Stan. “As you’re the smallest Rachel, it does make sense for you to go in.”

Rachel gulped. “But what if the spider comes?”

“We’ll keep watch,” said Koro Stan. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. Zac’s got his Raid.” Zac held the Raid out in front of him with both hands, poised ready to shoot.

Rachel crept up to the web, clasping her trembling hands to stop them from shaking so much. She parted the threads, making an opening big enough to climb

through, then took a deep breath, and plunged in. Inside the tunnel the air was muggy. Streams of sweat slipped down the back of her neck and she wiped her sweaty palms on the thin cotton of her dress. Loose threads of web grabbed at her arms and caught in her hair. The web was woven so densely in places that she couldn't see through it. This was a lot of web for just one spider. Did spiders live by themselves, or in tribes: Zac would know. Could a spider eat a whole human, or would it just kill her with its venom. The threads around her wavered, the movement vibrating through the web. A thread floated down across her face. She jumped and brushed it away, her heart drumming so loudly that the spider must be able to hear it. She was almost to the necklace. Dangling from the chain were Grandma's snake ring and the kauri gum heart. But the heart was empty. The spider had disappeared. She ran the last few steps, plucked the necklace free and sprinted back down the tunnel and burst from the web. "It's gone."

"What's gone?" said Zac.

"The spider — the spider in the heart."

"You sure it was there before?" said Zac.

"Of course I'm sure!" Rachel opened her hand.

"Are you trying to have us on?" said Zac.

"What do you mean?" Rachel looked down at the kauri gum, with the spider embedded inside. "But — it wasn't there a minute ago, back at the tree —"

"May I take a look?" said Koro Stan.

Rachel handed the necklace to Koro Stan: the spider vanished. Koro Stan looked at the pendant then handed it back to Rachel: the spider reappeared. He frowned. "Interesting. Very interesting."

Izzy's khaki green house-truck was almost camouflaged in a grove of apple trees. Rickety wooden steps led to a tiny veranda with a faded chair and terracotta pots of assorted herbs. A bamboo wind chime knocked a soft harmony in the breeze.

Holding a large wooden bowl, Izzy descended the steps of the house-truck. She looked young, although her flyaway silver hair and the creases around her sapphire-coloured eyes suggested otherwise, and so petite that she was almost lost in the long kaftan she wore.

Izzy smiled wide. "Hello friends."

Koro Stan held out a bucket brimming with plums. "We come bearing produce freshly picked from the orchard. Oh, and Izzy this is Rachel, she's staying with Aunty B over the summer."

"Lovely to meet you Rachel." Izzy held out a slender hand. On her middle finger she wore a ring with a huge white stone set in silver claws.

"Hi." Rachel shook Izzy's hand, keeping her eyes on the stone which changed quickly from white to blue to pink.

Izzy smiled at Rachel. "Moonstone. It changes colour depending on the energy of the people I'm around."

"Wow, I've never seen one before."

"Very rare." Izzy turned to Koro Stan. "Thank you for the fruit, it must be about time I made another batch of plum jelly."

Koro Stan chuckled. "Yes, I must confess that was my motive."

Izzy laughed. "Please join me — I was on my way to pick blackberries." They followed her through the apple trees, past clucking chooks and a black and tan pig named Wolf, to a sprawl of blackberry brambles. The berries were fat and juicy, and they ate more than they collected, fingers stained with purple juice and arms raw with scratches.

Back at the house-truck Izzy offered them elderflower cordial served in silver cups, and tiny cakes with honey and passionfruit icing. Zac put two in his mouth at once.

"I had a feeling I'd be seeing you today Zac," said Izzy.

Zac sneaked a look at Rachel.

Izzy noticed, and smiled. "How's your carving going Koro Stan?"

“Good, I’m working on a few new pieces.”

While Koro Stan chatted about his work, Rachel wandered around the interior of the house-truck. Glass jars and bottles squashed into cupboards and lined the window sills, each containing different coloured liquids, some of them with one colour magically floating above another — a rose-pink over a deep magenta, pale yellow over bright turquoise, bright yellow over gold. Books were crammed into every other space. Rachel picked out a book with a wide black spine, embossed with gold gothic lettering: *The Book of Symbols*.

Koro Stan followed Rachel’s gaze. “Rachel and Zac found some cards — I thought you might be interested in seeing them and may have some clues as to their origin. It seems Rachel has some natural affinity for reading them.”

Rachel slid the book back onto the shelf and retrieved the bundle of cards from her pack, handing them to Izzy.

Izzy closed her eyes and smiled. “There is an ancient legend that speaks of this treasure.”

Rachel, Zac, and Koro Stan looked at her expectantly.

“The legend says the ancient oracle of the patupaiarehe will reappear from the mists, in a time when a new tribe comes together, a tribe of peace, a tribe known as Ngati Ra, one people, all wearing different cultural cloaks.”

Izzy placed her left palm on top of the deck.

“These oracle cards depict the ancient symbols of the green language — also known as the language of the birds, or the language of nature. You have a natural gift for this language Rachel. As do you Zac.”

Rachel stared wide-eyed at Izzy.

Zac shook his head. “I don’t know anything about any green language.”

Izzy smiled. “I’d love for you both to visit again and maybe I can teach you a little of what I understand.”

“Yes please, that’d be great,” said Rachel.

Zac wandered over to the doorway. “I’m probably too busy.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow at him as he passed.

Izzy smiled and refilled their glasses.

“That’s an unusual pendant you’re wearing Rachel.”

Rachel looked to her necklace, and held up the gold snake ring. “It was my grandma’s ring — it came from Egypt.”

“It’s actually the other one that I’m intrigued by, the kauri gum heart. Where is it from?”

“Oh, this. I... um... found it somewhere.” She shrugged and tucked her necklace under her t-shirt, crossing her fingers behind her back to cancel her lie.

Izzy glanced at Koro Stan then back to Rachel.

“The oracle cards must be protected — you must keep them with you always. And please be careful. Those who dwell in darkness do not wish for peace, and will use all the black magic in their power to prevent it.”



The sun snuck around the edges of the curtains into the room, resting light on Rachel's face. She sensed someone moving about; the muffled drum of footsteps, a voice muttering, a loud hiccup. She squinted open an eye to find the dream snatcher pacing back and forth across her dresser, swinging his empty net.

Rachel sighed. "Oh, you again."

"The sphinx —" said the dream snatcher.

"Can you see what people are dreaming about when they're asleep?" said Rachel.

He looked over at her and yawned. "Yes, it's something like watching a movie. Some are so boring I..." His chin nodded to his chest and he began snoring loudly, still standing up.

Rachel threw her pillow at him; it missed, and knocked her jacket off the door it was hanging on. Koro Stan's bejeweled beetle tumbled from the pocket.

The dream snatcher looked down at it then up at her.

Rachel felt her face redden.

"Being made to answer a riddle by a scary giant sphinx is hardly boring," she said.

He turned his head to one side. "Do you remember?"

"Remember what?"

"The answer to the riddle."

"No, I can't even remember what the riddle was."

He shook his head then vanished.

“I really hope I’m still dreaming.” She closed her eyes and pulled the pillow over her head.

Rachel paused at the top of the track to Koro Stan’s and sought his bejewelled beetle from the dark of her pocket. She held it up to the sun; the surface gleamed a soft gold and coloured light from the gems beamed softly in all directions. Reluctantly she hid it back in the dark of her pocket and started down the path to Koro Stan’s, devising a way to return his beetle to his treasure box without him noticing.

She followed the aria of Kiri Te Kanawa to Koro Stan’s workshop. The door stood open. Koro Stan leaned over his workbench facing away from Rachel. She knocked on the door. Laurence, sprawled across the windowsill in the sun, looked up at her standing in the doorway, yawned, and lay down again.

“Hello!” Rachel had to yell over the music.

Koro Stan looked up. “Oh hello. Come in. This is a surprise.” He turned down the music and stretched his arms. “I’m about ready for a break. Lemonade and biscuits?”

“Yes. That would be great, thank you.”

“Right-o. I’ll pick some lemonades while you forage for biscuits — they’re somewhere in the pantry.”

As soon as Koro Stan left, Rachel pulled a stool across to the bookshelf. Laurence watched her with lazy eyes. She found the box; the key was still in the lock and it turned easily. As she placed the bejewelled beetle back where it belonged she noticed a feather she had not seen when Koro Stan had opened the box the other day. Picking it up, she twirled it between her thumb and forefinger. The feather was as long as her forearm, but weightless; the central shaft was faded, and the vane was the colour of rich yellow gold.

Hearing Koro Stan approaching she snapped the lid closed and pushed the box back into place.

Rachel raced into the kitchen, found the biscuits in the pantry, and sat down at the table with a sigh of relief. Then her stomach dropped — she hadn't locked the box, or moved the stool back. It was too late to go back now; Koro Stan stepped into the kitchen with an armful of lemonades.

A shot rang out, like a canon being fired. The floor lurched. Rachel slipped sideways on the chair and Koro Stan lurched against the doorframe, spilling lemonades across the room. The earth returned to stillness.

Paintings and photographs rested askew on the walls and a single glass had slid from a shelf and shattered across the wooden floor. A lemonade rolled towards Rachel and came to rest against her foot.

Rachel spoke loudly over her ringing ears. "What happened?"

"Crikey," said Koro Stan. "That, my dear, was an earthquake, a mild one, but an earthquake never-the-less. Are you okay?"

Rachel nodded. "I didn't know what it was, I've never been in an earthquake."

Her legs shook as she followed Koro Stan out to the porch and sat on the step. She felt a bit dizzy. Mount Tarawera loomed on the far side of the lake, its mighty presence doubled as it reflected in the water below. Its jagged peak poked into the sky, puffing thick streams of purple-grey smoke into the blue.

"The mountain is angry." Koro Stan paced up and down the porch, clicking his fingers. "There hasn't been an earthquake here since the eruption in 1886. There've been warnings of activity in the area, but it usually comes to nothing." He stopped pacing. "Are we even in the present..."

"Is there going to be another one?" said Rachel.

"Hard to tell — probably not for a while."

"I was going to see Izzy. Do you think that'll be okay?"

"Yes, I believe so." Koro Stan resumed pacing and thinking. "Rachel, where are the oracle cards?"

“They’re in my bag.”

“Good. Make sure you keep them with you.”

She left Koro Stan pacing on the porch.

Rachel found Izzy trying to lure Wolf the pig off the roof of the chicken coop. It looked like there’d been a pillow fight inside.

“Hi Izzy. Are you okay?”

“Yes, although I’m afraid I can’t say the same for Wolf and the chooks. How about you?”

“Yeah, I’m okay, lucky I was at Koro Stan’s.”

Izzy frowned. “The earthquake was quite unexpected, it gave us all a bit of a fright.”

After coaxing Wolf back to the ground they let the chooks free to roam. Izzy poured glasses of elderflower juice and they sat outside the housetruck in the sun. Above them a large dragonfly circled in an ever-widening spiral, until it was a speck in the wide sky. Rachel placed the oracle cards on the table.

Izzy refilled her glass. “So, where to begin. Do you know much about symbols?”

“Not really,” said Rachel.

“Okay, so a symbol represents an idea.” She gestured towards Rachel’s necklace. “Like your grandma’s ouroboros ring: the serpent biting its tail symbolises transformation and wholeness.”

“Oh cool, I didn’t know that was what it was called — an ouroboros.” Rachel looked more closely at the ring. “But how do you figure out the meaning of a symbol?”

“Well, their meanings are universal, although they reveal their messages to each of us in different ways. Using your intuition is the best way to understand them, rather than thinking about what they mean — it’s said that symbols can only

be heard and understood with the all-seeing eye of the heart.”

“And so what’s the green language that you told us about yesterday?”

“It’s the language of nature, spoken in symbols. Much like a rainbow is perceived as a symbol of hope. Or the dragonfly we saw earlier can signify change by shining light on our illusions. We can use the green language to guide us and to help us understand the mysteries of life.”

Izzy continued: “The patupaiarehe are highly skilled in reading omens and symbols. The symbols on these cards are keys — keys for our future.”

“When I found the cards I picked out the tuatara and a picture popped into my mind, of a pink star on my forehead. It was like it was real, but it wasn’t.”

Izzy nodded. “The Magenta Star is a sign of a new time — it’s shining now in the eastern sky.”

“And what do you think the tuatara means?” said Rachel.

“The tuatara is an ancient and wondrous creature. They have a veiled third eye at the top of their head, which symbolically means they have a different way of looking at things. The tuatara holds the key of how to access the power of our divine self, and shows us our star song.”

“Oh — what’s a star song?”

“We each have a unique destiny to fill — one that is written in the stars at the moment we draw our first breath. This is known as our star song.”

“But what if we don’t have one?”

Izzy smiled. “We all have a star song. You will come to know yours, when the time is right.”

When Rachel arrived back at Aunty B’s, Laurence was sitting on the letterbox, resting his paw on another gecko. This one still alive, and its tail intact.

“What’s up with you catching all these poor little geckos?”

She checked the letterbox, it was empty, and reached to pat Laurence.

“Gosh Laurence, what’s happened to you?”

Hundreds of biddy-bids were entangled in his muddy and matted fur. His left eye was swollen shut and bleeding on the inside corner, and his tail had a kink in it — like it had been jammed in a door.

“What on earth have you been up to?”



Zac handed the pot of resin to his dad, who leaned over the dinghy. They'd dragged it onto the jetty to mend a leak.

"Is someone living over near Spooky Hill?" said Zac.

"Not that I've heard of," said Dad. "Why?"

"I saw someone near there the other day — old guy with white hair, flying some kind of ghost kite."

Dad looked up. "Why were you hanging around there?"

Zac shuffled his feet. "I — found a new path and went down it to have a look. There was this place I've never seen before."

Dad frowned. "I want you to stay away from around there."

"How come?"

"Some strange things have happened around that area."

"Like what?"

Dad mixed the resin with a spatula, and smeared it in the gap between the wood planks. "Like all sorts of things."

Wiping his hands on a rag, Dad gazed towards Spooky Hill. "Your great grandad lived up there for awhile, before you were born."

"Why would he want to live on his own up there?"

"It wasn't called Spooky Hill back then." Dad scratched the stubble on his chin. "Your great grandad was a strange man. Some claimed he had supernatural powers. I saw him turn a brown leaf back to green once, I was only young though — it was

probably some sort of sleight-of-hand trick. The locals feared him and wouldn't go near him; even we kids were a bit spooked by him. Eventually he moved to the hut and no one saw him for years, except Koro Stan of course; he visited him every day."

"Why were people scared of him if he only did things like changing the colour of leaves?"

Dad looked out across the lake.

"Most people don't really understand magic, so are inclined to fear it. People were afraid of his power, of the old ways."

"If he could do tricks, does that mean I might have some magic genes?"

Dad laughed. "The only magic trick you can do is making your legs stay so skinny with all the food that disappears into that bottomless stomach of yours."

They finished patching the leak and Dad slapped the bottom of the dinghy. "That should keep the old girl watertight for a while."

Quor-quork.

Dad frowned. "Was that a morepork?"

"That's the second time I've heard one during the day," said Zac.

Dad looked across the lake. A stream of smoke whispered from Mt Tarawera into the grey clouds gathering above.

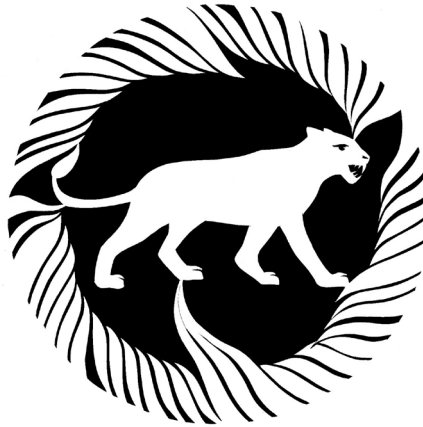
"Make sure you don't roam too far from home the next few days Zac. I've got a funny feeling there might be a few more quakes following that one we had this morning."

"Yeah, sure Dad."

Dad turned and walked back along the jetty. "Come on, let's get home for lunch before it rains."

Zac's stomach rumbled. "As long as it's not green smoothies."

Dad chuckled. "I second that."



The rain eased to a fine drizzle as Rachel cycled along the track to the Octopus Pool. The sun struggled to shine through the clouds, its warmth falling weakly on the afternoon. Laurence crouched in the middle of the path up ahead, one eye still swollen closed and the other fixed on something in the trees.

She stopped and jumped off her bike. “Hey Laurence — what’s in there?”

Rachel startled as Circe emerged from behind a totara tree. Circe glared at Laurence. “Cats have never been all that... fond of me. The feeling is mutual.”

She turned to Rachel. Ruby-red lips flashed a smile from the shadow cast by the hood of her cape. A swirling tendril of black hair escaped from the hood, snaking around her shoulders.

“Oh, hi,” said Rachel. “I thought I saw you the other day. At the Octopus Pool.”

Circe spiraled her hair through long elegant fingers. “I believe I was — elsewhere.” She paused a moment, holding Rachel’s gaze.

Rachel felt her hair go static and quickly smoothed it down with her hands. She felt sleepy, like she was being slowly pulled into a dream. She pulled her eyes away.

Circe spoke softly in Rachel’s mind. “You have some cards in your possession.”

“How do you know?” Rachel said aloud.

“The cards are coveted by many who have been waiting a very, very, very long time for them to return. These *people* will do anything to get hold of those cards.” She smiled. “I can hold onto them for you, protect them, and you.”

“But, Izzy’s teaching me about the symbols.”

Circe’s left eyebrow raised and the right side of her mouth pulled downward.

“Those cards are magical and powerful.” The words shrieked in Rachel’s head.

“Not to be toyed with.”

“But — ”

Circe glanced at Rachel’s backpack. “Do you have them here with you?”

Rachel gripped the straps of her backpack. “No, there’re at home — ”

Thick tendrils of syrupy mist reached in and curled around them. A *knock-knocking* sounded in the distance — like someone beating sticks together.

“What’s that sound... soound... soooound?” Rachel’s voice reverberated, slowly fading to silence. She rubbed her temples, trying to clear her head. She felt dizzy. Everything seemed out of focus and like it was happening much slower than it should.

The mist cleared. Circe was no longer there. Laurence looked up at Rachel, one eye open, one eye closed. She had an odd feeling he had just said something. She shook her head and walked her bike along until the fogginess in her head cleared, then climbed back on and rode down the path to the Octopus Pool.

Rachel glimpsed Zac’s bright yellow t-shirt through the trees as she approached the Octopus Pool. He perched on a flat rock, absorbed in carving one of his wooden birds. His army-green cap was back to front, and his t-shirt inside out. Rachel made her way around the edge of the Octopus Pool and sat beside him.

“Hi. Koro Stan said you’d gone for a ride on Whinny, I thought you’d be here.”

Zac kept his eyes on his carving. “Aren’t you hanging out with Izzy today?”

“She’s gone into town. Did you know your t-shirt’s inside out?” Rachel stared at the letters on the front, trying to work out what they read: *decneirepxe uoy era*.

Zac kept whittling. “Yeah, it’s National T-Shirt Day.”

“National T-Shirt Day?”

“Yeah, you have to wear your favourite t-shirt, and it has to be inside out.”

“Really, why?”

Zac glanced up and grinned. “Geez you’re gullible, citygirl.”

“I didn’t really believe you.” Rachel ignored her red-hot face. “Is the pool cold?”

“Nah, it’s warm as.”

Rachel crept her foot in then pulled it straight back out; the water was freezing.

“Chicken.” Zac pulled off his cap and t-shirt and dived to the bottom of the pool then returned to the surface and tossed a small stone to Rachel. “A souvenir from Te Wheke.”

Rachel dropped it then picked it up from where it had wedged between two rocks. “Is it a crystal?”

“Nah, just a chunk of old glass.”

She twirled the stone in the sunlight. “I wonder what it would have been like to live in Atlantis.”

“Eh?” Zac ducked under then popped up and spurted a mouthful of water in her direction. “Atlantis wasn’t real.” He climbed out and lay on the steaming flat rock.

Rachel frowned. “How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“Well, Izzy said — ”

“Of course *Izzy* believes in Atlantis.”

“I bet you’d like Izzy if you got to know her.”

“Nah, I don’t reckon. I’m not into all that hippy crystal stuff.”

“You’re quite stuck in your ways for a kid.”

“Who are you calling a kid? I’m older than you even.”

“Only by three months. That doesn’t count. Anyway, girls are more emotionally mature than boys.”

Zac splashed her and she squealed.

“Seriously, Izzy said that New Zealand belonged to an ancient land called Lemuria — ”

Zac shook his head. “Never heard of it.”

“ — it was around at the same time as Atlantis.”

“Well since everyone knows about Atlantis, why has no one heard of this other place?”

“Everyone only knows about Atlantis because of the Man from Atlantis. The Lemurian people came from Sirius and Pleiades, and — I can’t remember the other one — they’re known as the Star People.”

Zac rolled his eyes. “So where is this place then.”

“It sank, about twelve thousand years ago, after it was blown apart by massive supervolcanoes.”

“Supervolcanoes — cool.”

“Izzy said the Lemurians hid seed crystals here — like, right around here somewhere — imagine if we found one.”

“Well, I haven’t seen any supersize crystals lately. Izzy’s brainwashing you — you’ll start believing in aliens next.”

“Well — ”

A low growl sounded in the undergrowth on the far side the pool. Rachel and Zac froze. Another growl, clearer, and closer.

Zac scrambled to standing. “That’s no wild pig. It’s a panther.”

Rachel gawked at him. “You’re kidding, right.”

Zac shook his head. He wrestled into his t-shirt.

“But — it can’t be, we don’t have panthers here.”

The growl rolled into a snarl and sounded even closer. Black clouds prowled across the sun and unleashed a surge of rain. Rachel felt her heart beating crazily. She strained for sounds of the panther. All she could hear was rain slapping the leaves. She had to yell so Zac could hear her over the rain. “What’re we going to do?” Zac put his thumb and forefinger to his mouth and whistled. Whinny trotted

through the trees to him; her ears flattened forward and her flanks trembling. She whinnied. Grabbing the mare's mane, Zac vaulted onto her back. He looked down at Rachel. "Come on!"

"I've never been on a horse before — I don't know how to — "

Zac grunted, jumped off, grabbed Rachel around her waist and vaulted her onto Whinny's back. Then he leapt back on in front of her as she struggled to sit up without falling off. She locked her arms around his chest as Whinny raced away from the panther. Rain stung her eyes and trees blurred in washes of green. Keeping a grip on Zac's wet skin was like holding on to a slippery eel. She bounced and slid as Whinny dodged trees and vaulted across a stream. Rachel turned to look behind them. The forest was still, but she could imagine the sleek blue-black form of the panther weaving through the undergrowth, its huge claws shredding ferns and leaves. She squeezed her eyes closed. The images stayed. Although she couldn't see the panther, she knew it was gaining. Its snarls and screams snapped at the back of her neck, each time closer and wilder. She clung to Zac and could feel his heart thumping against his ribs. She silently willed Whinny to run faster.

The trees thinned as they neared the edge of the Black Forest. The rain eased. It was suddenly quiet behind them. She looked over her shoulder. The forest was still.

She felt her hair electrify. Above them the branches of a large pōhutukawa tree swayed. A growl sounded from behind the curtain of leaves and crimson flowers, as the panther bounded along the branch directly over them then leapt. Whinny snorted, Zac cursed, and Rachel held her breath.

Whinny bolted, crashing through the undergrowth. They broke free of the forest and widened their distance from the trees. Rachel turned and scanned behind them. The panther paced along the boundary of the forest, a black shadow amongst shadows, flinging its screams towards them. Then it turned away and merged into the dark of the forest.

Rachel slowly let out her breath. Whinny eased to a walk then came to a

standstill, her mouth foaming. Her coat was soaked with rain and sweat. Zac slid off and Rachel tumbled off after, her shaking knees giving way as her feet found the ground.

After taking Whinny back to Koro Stan's, Rachel and Zac walked to Aunty B's. Aunty B was firing up the barbeque; Koro Stan and Zac's family were there, along with Zac's Aunty Renee and Uncle Hone, who lived just up the road.

"We can always count on you to arrive just in time for a feed Zac," said Aunty B. "I said to everyone that as soon as I put the sausages on you two would turn up."

"Looks like you kids got caught in the rain," said Zac's mum.

"What have you been up to?" said Koro Stan.

Zac shrugged. "We've just been chased by a panther."

Aunty Renee and Aunty B laughed.

"It's true," said Zac.

Rachel nodded.

"You're not serious — are you — Zac?" said Zac's mum.

"Where?" said Koro Stan.

"Black Forest," said Zac.

"Did you actually see it?" said Koro Stan.

"Well, sort of — through the trees. It was huge, and black," said Rachel.

"We could sure hear it," said Zac. "Lucky Whinny was with us, otherwise we might have been goners."

"Are you certain it was a panther, and not just a large feral cat?" said Zac's dad.

"Geez Dad."

Zac's dad held his hands up. "Okay, it just seems a bit far-fetched, that's all."

Zac's mum frowned. "Are you sure you're both okay?"

Rachel and Zac nodded.

“Well you’ll be staying out of the forest from now on, at least until we can sort out what’s going on,” said Zac’s mum.

Aunty B piled plates of food on the table: charred sausages from the barbeque, fish head soup, corn-on-the-cobb, minted potatoes and bowls of garden salad. “I reckon you kids need a good feed after all that excitement.”

Rachel could hardly keep her eyes open through dinner — avoiding the fish head soup — and as soon as everyone had finished eating, she excused herself and went to her room. Zac and his sisters were staying over. Zac headed for the caravan to sleep — he reckoned it was better to sleep in there rather than anywhere near his sisters, who snored. Rachel pushed open the bedroom door. Her room was a mess. Clothes and shoes were strewn across the floor and the contents of her drawers tipped over the bed. Too tired to put anything away, she swept everything off her bed, climbed in and fell asleep.

She woke a little while later to a morepork calling right outside her window. She couldn’t get back to sleep and went to the kitchen for some water. The adults were still talking in the lounge; hearing her name mentioned, she crept over to the door.

“That would have given the kids a bit of a shock,” said Aunty Renee.

“Especially Rachel — she jumps at the sight of a caterpillar,” said Aunty B.

Rachel heard laughter.

“You going to tell Rachel’s parents?” said Aunty Renee.

“They’re out of contact for a couple of weeks,” said Aunty B.

“That’s just as well — Rachel’s mother would only worry,” said Zac’s mum.

“Panthers in Tarawera eh.” Uncle Hone chuckled.

“I’ve heard of a few sightings down South before,” said Aunty Renee. “But never around here.”

Koro Stan leaned forward in his chair. “It’s from the underworld.”

Rachel moved closer to the door, closer to the silence in the room.

Uncle Hone cleared his throat. “Now just hang on. If it is a panther, and I don’t think it is, it could have escaped from a zoo, or be one of those mascots they used in the war.”

“Or it probably was just a large feral cat,” said Zac’s mum. “You heard Rachel — she said they didn’t get a proper look at it.”

“It’d be an easy mistake to make — look at Koro Stan’s Laurence, he’s as big and ferocious as a lion.” Uncle Hone chuckled.

“Hah!” said Aunty Renee. “You just can’t face the truth can you, Hone. The signs are all there, plain as day: the Magenta Star is bright in the east; our mountain is angry; panthers from the underworld — ”

Uncle Hone threw his hands in the air. “And what does the underworld want with two kids?”

Aunty Renee tapped her fingers on the table. “You know, all this started around the time Rachel arrived — ”

“Just a coincidence,” said Zac’s dad.

“I wonder,” said Aunty B.

“The oracle cards the kids found, they’ve got something to do with it,” said Koro Stan. “Izzy believes the cards are the lost oracle of the patupaiarehe. The fact that they’ve turned up here may signal that young Rachel and Zac have a part to play in the ancient prophecy.”

Zac’s mum sighed. “I certainly hope not.”

Uncle Hone snorted. “You and that prophecy hoo-hah Stan — you’re getting old and silly in the head.”

“The oracle cards represent a key to keeping the balance,” said Koro Stan. “For them to be found at this time is of great importance. They represent hope for us, for the future. People have forgotten the sacred ways, lost respect for the earth and one another. Don’t pretend you can’t see it happening, the darkness spreading across the land into the hearts and minds of the people.”

“If those cards fall into the wrong hands...” Aunty Rene shook her head.

“I wonder how the kids were found so quickly?” said Koro Stan.

“Must have been luck, or more like bad luck for us,” said Aunty B. “There’s no other explanation — is there?”

Zac’s mum pursed her lips. “The sooner school starts the better.”

“Get them doing some work in the garden Aunty B, that’ll keep them from wandering around looking for trouble,” said Zac’s dad.

“Nothing will keep them safe if what Koro Stan says is true,” said Aunty Renee. “The danger for them will only increase.”

“Now don’t get too excited,” said Zac’s dad. “As long as they stay out of the Black Forest, they’ll be okay. We’ll just have to keep an eye on them.”

“Well I’ll make sure Zac stays well away from that forest — it’s unnerving in there at the best of times,” said Zac’s mum. “Can’t someone else look after the oracle cards?”

“No, it must be Rachel,” said Koro Stan. “She found the cards and she must be the one to safeguard them.”

“Our future depends on that girl,” said Aunty Renee.

Rachel choked on the mouthful of water she’d swallowed. The cup fell from her hand and clunked on the floor, water spilling across the lino. She froze, holding her breath, waiting to see if anyone had heard.

In the next room Aunty Renee started harassing Uncle Hone about something then laughed her wild laugh. Rachel quickly mopped the water with a tea towel and snuck back to bed, climbing under the covers, shutting out all that she had overheard.



The next morning Rachel started cleaning up the mess in her room. Outside the caravan door slammed, the back door squeaked open and banged shut, then Zac walked in. He shoved Laurence off the end of the bed and sat down.

“Geez, this is even messier than my room!”

“It’s not usually like this. I think someone was looking for the oracle cards.”

“Like who?” said Zac.

Rachel filled him in on most of the conversation she’d overheard the night before, while he reclined and watched her tidy up.

“So, what do you think we should do?” said Rachel.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?”

“Why does killer have to follow us everywhere?” Zac frowned at Laurence, who had reinstated himself on the bed and was noisily chewing on something. It was Zac’s sock. He wrestled it from Laurence and held it up to display a large hole chewed in the heel. “Geez killer, where’d you get my sock from?” He shook his head. “They were my favourite pair.” He threw the sock back at Laurence.

Rachel smiled. “I think it’s a sign that he likes you.”

“I hope not.”

“So you think we should do nothing?”

“About my sock?”

“No, I’m not talking about your dumb sock.”

“Oh right. You know adults always make a drama out of everything. Yeah, someone’s after those cards you’ve got, and yeah we were chased by a ferocious panther. But we got away. It was a freak thing, it’s not like we’re gonna to see a panther everyday.”

Rachel frowned. “If that is what it was.”

“You heard it — no ordinary cat growls like that.”

“Yes, but we didn’t actually see it up close.”

Zac folded his arms. “That doesn’t mean it wasn’t there. It was a panther. No doubt about it.”

Rachel chewed on her fingernail. “I really wish it wasn’t.”

“No need to freak out citygirl. We’ll be cool.”

Rachel frowned. She picked up the oracle cards: they felt heavy in her hands.

“Maybe someone else could look after them? Or do you think we could hide them somewhere?”

Zac shook his head. “Didn’t you say Koro Stan said you needed to keep hold of them?”

Rachel sighed and slumped to sit cross-legged on the floor.

Zac sat up. “Let’s go to Hot Water Beach today — take the dingy over.”

“But we’re supposed to stay close to home.”

Zac shrugged. “It’s not that far away. And at least we won’t be in the forest.”

“I guess if we’re on the lake we won’t run into the panther.”

“Panthers are ace swimmers you know.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, we’ve gotta do something, we can’t just sit around here all day.”

“I guess we’ll be safe enough if we’re in the boat.”

Aunty B cooked them a breakfast of sausages, eggs, and her secret recipe fried bread.

Zac put down his fork after his third helping. “Geez, I’m stuffed.” He held his stomach and leaned his chair back on two legs.

“Stuffed, or not, you can grab a tea towel.” Aunty B threw a tea towel to Rachel and Zac, and started washing the dishes.

“I’m going into town this afternoon to get some groceries,” said Aunty B.

“Oh, right,” said Rachel.

Aunty B raised her eyebrows. “You don’t want to come with me?”

“No thanks.” Rachel glanced at Zac. “We’re just going to hang around in the bay.”

“You make sure you stay in the bay too.” Aunty B eyeballed Rachel, then Zac. “Not only have I got eyes in the back of my head, I’ve also got eyes that can see you all the way from town.” Rachel glanced at Aunty B’s walking stick. The mother-of-pearl eyes of the octopus stared straight back at her. Goosebumps crawled up her arms and she turned away, then stifled a laugh as Zac pulled a cross-eyed look behind Aunty B’s back.

The yellow Datsun rattled down the gravel drive, one door held closed with a bungee rope. Aunty B tooted the horn as she turned onto the main road, and Rachel and Zac raced on their bikes around the lake to the jetty at the back of Zac’s place, where the dinghy was moored.

Rachel sat in the front of the boat as Zac started the tiny Yamaha motor; it sprang to life, bubbling and frothing the water, and they puttered away from the jetty. A fine spray of water flung from the prow onto Rachel’s face as they cruised across the smooth lake, the rev of the motor interrupting the chatter of a posse of black swans, and meandering ducks. She leaned over the edge and trailed a hand in the water.

“Watch out for the taniwha,” Zac yelled.

She laughed. “Koro Stan said there are no taniwha in this lake.”

“That’s just cos he hasn’t seen one.”

She pulled her hand out of the water, just in case.

Mount Tarawera loomed closer, its solid shape breaking into features: fissures and crevices, juts and gapes, slopes streaked with scoria, and mottles of small trees and shrubs. The day was bright yet the mountain looked like it was under a cloudy

sky. They continued round the point, leaving the mountain behind, and headed for the steamy shore.

Rachel helped Zac drag the dinghy up onto Hot Water Beach. Steam rose from the sand and hugged around the cliffs and hot water trickled down the cliff face into the lake. They dug a huge hole in the sand, which quickly filled up with steaming water. Zac knew all the best places to dig and they moved from one hot spot to another.

“This is just like being at the real hot pools.”

“These are the real hot pools citygirl.”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right. Do you come and hang out here with your friends?”

“We’ve camped here overnight a few times — it’s cool.”

“Where are they now — your friends?”

“They’ll all away for the holidays. Dad never has enough time off work to go away, and Mum reckons living here is like being on holiday anyway.”

“I like your mum, she’s really nice.”

“Yeah, she’s a bit of a weirdo, how she’s into all that vegetarian and yoga stuff, but she’s pretty cool for a mum I guess.”

“You’re so lucky you’ve got sisters too.”

“No way, they’re annoying.”

Rachel floated to a warmer spot in the water. “What do you think you want to be?”

“What do you mean?” said Zac.

“Like, when you grow up, what do you want to do?”

Zac strummed his air guitar. “Be in my band of course. How about you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not really sure I’m good at anything.”

“Everyone’s good at something.”

“Izzy said we’re all born with our own star song, our purpose in life. What if I don’t have one?”

“You can be in my band if you want.”

“I am learning to play the violin at school.”

He frowned. “It’s a Hendrix band — there won’t be any violins. How about drums?”

She laughed. “Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

The sun sank lower in the western sky. Rachel shivered in the cooling air. Her fingers were shriveled like raisins from spending ages in the pools. They pushed the dinghy into the water and Zac started the motor. It spluttered then died. He pulled the cord again. And again.

“Geez, I think we’re out of gas.”

“Seriously?” said Rachel. “What are we going to do?”

“Guess we’ll have to row back.”

The sunset had faded to dusk when they rowed up to the jetty. Rachel’s palms were chafed, her arms shaky with fatigue. She’d never felt so exhausted.

Zac’s mum stood at the end of the jetty, her arms crossed. “You’re lucky your father is not home Zachary.” She seized the rope Zac threw her and triple knotted the boat to the jetty.

“Sorry Mum, we — ”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses. No more taking the dinghy out without supervision and tomorrow you’re going to stay home and help me weed the garden. End. Of. Story.”

Zac’s mum drove Rachel back to Auntie B’s. Auntie B didn’t say anything when Rachel slunk into the kitchen, but there was a whole lot of noise coming from the pots and dishes she was washing.

The next afternoon was quiet and hot. Rachel wandered down to the jetty in the main bay and sat dangling her legs over the edge. A large bird, as black as coal, circled above the lake. Laurence sat on a post, eyeing up the weweia birds dipping in and out of the water. The birds would disappear underwater for long minutes, leaving only a trail of rising air bubbles to show where they were, then burst through the surface of the water far from where you expected them to be. Rachel looked down at the kauri gum heart on her necklace; it felt warm against her skin.

Laurence hissed.

Circe glided along the jetty, her feather cape trailing along the wood planks. She swept past growling Laurence and smiled widely. “Rachel, darling. I am pleased to see you. Unfortunately we were — interrupted — last time.”

“Where did you go? You just disappeared.”

“I have never felt much at home in the mist. It’s so damp and... misty. Cats and mist: my two least favourite things.” She scowled at Laurence then smiled. “So where were we before we were interrupted? Ah, yes, that’s right. You were going to give me the oracle cards.” She glanced at Rachel’s backpack as her fingers weaved through the loose waves of her hair.

“But I can’t give you the cards. I — ”

Rachel felt a buzz of static in her hair as Circe’s smooth voice flowed into her mind and wrapped around her thoughts. She felt a stabbing pain in her left temple. She shook her head trying to dislodge the fuzziness. She couldn’t think straight. Circe’s voice sounded above her thoughts. “I can protect you Rachel. You will be safe once you give me the cards, perfectly safe. Nothing will harm you.”

“Yes — ” Rachel was cut off by a hiss from Laurence. He stood facing Circe, his hackles raised, fangs bared.

Circe dropped to all fours and snarled back at Laurence.

Rachel shrieked. She scrambled backwards until she was wedged against a post at the end of the jetty. Her voice came out as a whisper. “I’m supposed to look after them.”

The wooden planks of the jetty rattled like bones as Circe screamed. Ripples spilled out towards the middle of the lake then rolled back in to slap against the jetty. Circe crouched low, like she was about to pounce, her feathered cape billowing behind her. Rachel cowered. She felt her head spinning until she could see and feel only blackness.

Circe's voice summoned her back. "It's okay Rachel, it's okay."

Rachel opened her eyes and looked at Circe.

"What happened?"

"You fainted. There's no need to be afraid. Not of me anyway, I want to help you."

"But you — "

Circe raised the hood of her cape, which had half-slipped from her head and smoothed the feathers of her cape. "Rachel sweetheart, you are so young, just a little lamb really, you shouldn't have to bear the weighty responsibility of the cards on your own. The others won't help you — but I can."

Rachel couldn't focus. Her thoughts unraveled like a ball of string and jumbled in a mess of knots. Koro Stan had said the cards were her responsibility — but maybe that wasn't true, maybe Circe could help her — could protect the cards better than she could.

"I won't let any harm to come to you Rachel. This is the right thing for you to do."

Through the haze of her mind Rachel watched herself unzip her pack and hand the small wooden box holding the oracle cards over to Circe.



The next day Rachel stayed in bed. And the next. She lay in the dark, the curtains drawn, playing the scene with Circe over and over in her head. Aunty B thought she had a stomach bug. She didn't, but she did feel sick. Sick with rage and despair. And disappointment. Koro Stan had said she needed to keep the cards safe, and Aunty Renee had said the future depended on her. She had failed, and now the oracle cards were gone. She slipped in and out of dreams and could no longer tell when she was sleeping or awake.

Laurence stood at the end of Rachel's bed with the tail of a gecko hanging from his mouth. Behind him a mound of dead geckos piled almost to the ceiling. Most of them lay lifeless, but a few wriggled and thrived about amongst the mass, searching for escape. Rachel rolled over and covered her head with the pillow.

Thunder hammered from the heavens, lightning flashed against the darkness, and the earth shuddered in another earthquake. Rachel disappeared further under the covers.

Something whacked against the window. Rachel ignored it. It was probably just a

bird. There was another whack, and another, then another, until it was a constant drumming. She crawled from bed and peered behind the curtain. Hundreds of pairs of black wings slapped against the window, rattling the thin glass. Tiny red eyes watched her in the darkness. Bats. Covering her ears against their high-pitched shrieking, she leapt back into the safety of bed.

Rachel felt the light pressure of a cool hand resting on her forehead.

Izzy spoke to her quietly. "Be strong child."

"I... I lost the oracle cards," said Rachel.

"I know."

"I'm so sorry."

"I know."

"I wish there was some way I could get them back."

Izzy smiled. "There is a way."

"But I have no idea how to find Circe."

"Circe resides in the underworld."

Rachel sat up. "I'll go there. And get the cards back."

Izzy nodded and handed her a tiny glass vial. It held a liquid rainbow of magenta, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet, held in place by a gold stopper with a small loop on the top. The colours swirled together, merging in and out of one another, mixing new colours then returning to their original hues.

"Wow."

"Magic," said Izzy. "To use when you are at your greatest need."

"What is it?"

"The vial holds a single precious drop of magic, made up of the eight colours of the rainbow."

"But doesn't the rainbow have seven colours?"

"Have you looked closely at a rainbow lately? The rainbow has a new band of

magenta, since the Magenta Star began to shine.”

Rachel stared at the swirling colours. “What does it do?”

“Whatever you need it to. But you must use it at the right time, and only when absolutely necessary. There is only one drop, and therefore only one chance.”

“But what if I get it wrong?”

“Trust and follow your heart my child. That is all any of us can ever do.”

Click click click, click click, click click click.

Rachel opened her eyes. Aunty B was knitting a yellow scarf. The colour was so bright it almost hurt to look at. Laurence sat on the end of her bed licking his paw.

“Ah, back in the land of the living at last.” Aunty B nodded to a plate on the table next to the bed stacked with triangle-cut vegemite sandwiches, and a glass of half-flat lemonade. Rachel devoured a sandwich, quickly followed by another.

“A postcard arrived for you yesterday, from Egypt.”

“Oh, thank you, I’ll read it later,” said Rachel, between mouthfuls. “Geckos, where are all the geckos?”

“Geckos? You still in a fever girl?”

“No, I feel much better. I was sure Laurence had caught hundreds of geckos and they were all in a huge pile in my room.”

“Well, there sure aren’t any geckos bringing their bad juju in here.”

“What about Izzy — when did she visit me?”

“Izzy hasn’t been here, she’s away for a few days.”

Rachel frowned. The rainbow vial was threaded next to the ouroboros ring and the kauri gum heart on her necklace, which lay on the bedside table. “That’s weird.”

“Eh?”

“Oh — nothing.”

Rachel heard Zac singing long before he arrived.

*No reason to get excited,
The thief, he kindly spoke
There are many here among us
Who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we've been through that
And this is not our fate —*

He sat on her bed and finished off the last of the vegemite sandwiches, while Rachel told him about how Circe had tricked her into handing over the oracle cards.

"Bummer. That lady is not cool at all."

"I need to get the oracle cards back."

"How?"

"I have to go and find Circe — in the underworld."

"Seriously? You want us to go into the underworld?"

"You don't have to come, I can go by myself."

"Yeah, right citygirl — you'd get lost in five seconds."

"I could take a compass."

"Nah, I'll come with you." Zac drummed his fingers on his leg, tapping the beat of a silent tune. "Got nothing better to do."

Rachel breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Zac nodded to the rainbow vial on her necklace. "What's that?"

"Izzy gave it to me. It's some kind of magic that does whatever you need it to. There's only one drop and I have to use it only when I really have to."

Zac muttered something.

"It's weird because I thought Izzy visited me, but Aunty B said she's away. I thought it was a dream, but the vial proves she must have been here."

Koro Stan was sitting on the porch step shelling walnuts when Rachel and Zac turned up at his house.

“It’s good to see you up and about Rachel. We were worried about you. Big scare you had, being chased by the panther and all.”

“I’m feeling much better now, thanks.”

“Good to hear.”

Zac looked at Rachel and nodded.

She cleared her throat. “I — we were wondering if... you could you tell us more about the underworld.”

Koro Stan gave her his stern-eye look. “The underworld?”

“Yeah,” said Zac.

Rachel swallowed. “Ah yes, please.”

“Hmm. Why?”

“Um, just curious,” said Rachel.

“What, exactly, do you want to know?”

“Like if someone needed to find someone in the underworld, how would they do that?” said Rachel.

“Well, it would depend on who that *someone* is of course. And who the *someone* is who is trying to find them. If your *someone* is well known I would say they should not be too hard to track down, but there are not many people to be trusted in the underworld to give an honest answer. No one, or anything, is ever as it seems. Your *someone* would be best to rely on following their own nose. There are signs they can look for of course. Not road signs like we have here, but symbols. Did I show you the golden feather I found last time I was there?”

“Ye — ” said Rachel.

“No,” said Zac, looking at Rachel.

Koro Stan retrieved the wooden box from the shelf and placed it onto the table.

“That’s odd, I’m certain I locked this. Crikey, maybe Hone’s right and I am

getting old and shaky in the head.”

Rachel looked down, hiding the flush on her face.

Koro Stan held the large golden feather up to light. “It is said that when you come across a golden feather it means you’ll find your way back home. This feather guided me home like a compass.”

“Did you think you weren’t going to make it back?” said Rachel.

“Oh, there were many times I was terrified I wouldn’t make it home. It’s easy enough to enter the underworld, getting out is a whole other kettle of fish.”

“Why did you have to go to the underworld?” asked Zac.

“Well. Umm — ” Koro Stan cleared his throat. “Had my reasons. Maybe I’ll share them with you another time. Yes, some other time.”

Koro Stan tapped his map. “A map such as this would certainly be helpful for your *someone*. And, most importantly, your *someone* must set an intention before they enter the underworld. And they must do what they need to there, and return immediately. Otherwise they may become dislodged, wandering aimlessly for eternity.”

“Well, till they die,” said Zac.

“I’m afraid not; you see there is no life or death in the underworld. It is a place where time and space don’t exist, or exist in a different way than we are used to. So, yes, they would be lost beyond life or death, forever in limbo.”

“Like zombies?” said Rachel.

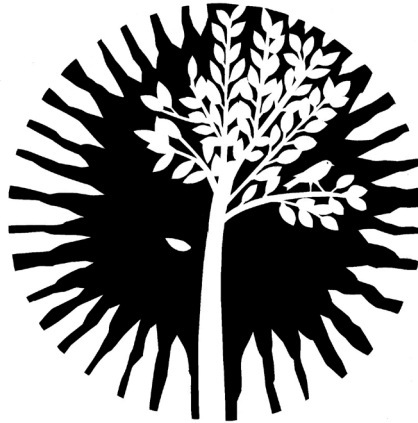
“In a sense, yes,” said Koro Stan.

“Cool,” said Zac.

Koro Stan flicked Zac his stern-eye look.

“Of course I would highly recommend that your *someone* does not enter the underworld at all. But I suppose, if they had a good enough reason, then that is a choice they must make for themselves. They would need to find their own path into the underworld, as each person has their own way of entering. Mine is — was — through the lightning tree, but I can’t imagine it is the same for others.”

Koro Stan packed up the contents of the box, except for the map, which he slipped into the pocket of Zac's sweatshirt which was slung over the back of a chair. Rachel and Zac snuck a smile to each other.



Rachel jogged down to the jetty, the light of her torch bouncing on the ground ahead. Dawn was breaking in the east but the west side of the mountain was still in darkness. Zac was by the boat sheds, exactly where he said he'd be.

"Yo, citygirl. Over here." He shone his torch on her face.

"Hi — so how are we going to find an entrance to the underworld?"

"Well we already know we can't get there through the lightning tree," said Zac.

"What about the Octopus Pool, or Great Rātā?"

"I reckon we should try Spooky Hill — we're not far from there now."

Rachel followed him into the Black Forest, the arcing beams of their torchlight roaming the darkness. She shone her light into the undergrowth, trying to catch sight of the kiwi as they called — *ki-wii ki-wii* — back and forth to one another. Something wrapped around her ankle and she tripped, then shrieked and dropped her torch.

Zac shone his light to where Rachel was standing. "Geez — you need to chill citygirl — it's just a fern."

"I thought it was a snake, or something."

"There's no snakes here."

"Well, officially there aren't meant to be panthers either."

The dawn chorus of the birds announced the sunrise. Their song was joined with the hissing of steam from underground vents and Rachel could smell sulphur.

“We must be near Waimangu Valley,” said Zac.

“Exactly where your mum told us not to go.”

“Yeah, well I’m sure she wouldn’t be too happy about us being in the Black Forest either, or going to the underworld.”

Zac found the place where the staircase of tree roots had led down to the glade where he’d seen the man with the kite. The steps were no longer there; it was now just a steep bank, overgrown with plants and trees and vines.

Zac looked around. “It’s changed, before there were steps — ”

“Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Yeah. Let’s go down and check it out.”

Rachel tramped after Zac through the thick tangle of vegetation, grasping vines and roots to stop her from sliding down the muddy bank. She lost her footing and slipped a few metres, bumping into Zac who fell over too.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay citygirl.”

Zac pulled her back to her feet and they continued down to the bottom of the bank.

The glade was quiet. A lone tree grew in the centre; its tall skinny trunk was slightly hunched and burst into green and red leaves at the top. A line of bejewelled beetles processioned past them to the tree, then burrowed into the earth near the trunk and disappeared.

“That’s a good sign that we’re close to the underworld,” said Rachel.

Zac rummaged in the leaf litter around the base of the trunk. “I wonder if we have to dig a tunnel.”

Rachel glanced around the glade: they were completely surrounded by thick green and black forest and bushes of toi toi. “Where did we come in? It all looks the same.”

“We came from up there — ” Zac turned and pointed at a patch of dense forest that looked identical to everywhere else; there was no sign of where they had come down.

Rachel sighed. "I guess there's no turning back now."

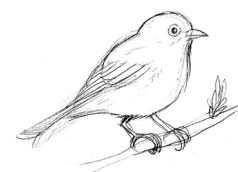
A tiny green and grey bird landed on the tree, flitting from leaf to leaf.

"Hey, it's a white-eye," said Rachel.

"Silvereye."

"But, why is it called a silvereye if the rings around its eyes are white? That doesn't make any sense."

The silvereye hopped from branch to branch, drinking the dew that clung to the leaves. It glanced up at them, called *cli-cli-cli*, and returned to drinking.



TAUHOU
{ taoh-hauw }
SILVEREYE

"I think it's telling us to drink the dew," said Zac.

"What if it's poisonous?"

Zac inspected a leaf: it was light-green with splotches of red. "Nah, this is a horopito tree. Koro Stan brews up this yuck tea from the leaves, and makes us drink it when we're sick. Anyway, the bird hasn't died has it."

Zac reached for a dew-covered leaf.

"Wait!" said Rachel. "Remember Koro Stan told us we need to say our intention, otherwise we might get stuck in the underworld."

"Oh yeah, lucky you're onto it citygirl. What's our intention?"

Rachel sighed. "To find Circe and get the oracle cards back."

Zac held a leaf up. "Cheers."

Rachel chinked her leaf against Zac's then drank the dew; it tasted sweet and slightly peppery, and left a burning sensation on her tongue. "What now?"

"Just wait."

"For what?"

Rachel looked around and shuffled her feet in the long grass.

The silvereye flitted around them trilling a song then darted across the clearing and flew down a path that had not been there a moment ago.

Zac grinned. "For that."

They ran across the clearing.

Rachel's heart thumped against her ribs. "You scared?"

"Nah. Not really. Maybe a bit."

Rachel shivered as she stepped onto the path.

The path edged uncertainly around a steep cliff. Below, in the valley, a stream boiled and bubbled its way across acid yellow and brown and green stained rocks. Steam burst from hidden crevices, hissing vapors of sulphur at Rachel and Zac as they inched around the cliff face, hugging the slimy clay wall. Rachel silently willed her shaking legs to steady, to keep moving, and she fixed her gaze ahead as the path crumbled away behind them. Around a bend the track ended at a cave yawning wide in the face of the cliff, its edges rowed with spikes of black obsidian. The silveryeye perched on the tip of a spike, it trilled *cli-cli-cli* then flew into the cave.

Rachel shone her torch into the dark interior; the light was gobbled by blackness. "Do you think someone lives in there?"

Zac shrugged.

"I don't want to go in."

"We have to citygirl, there's no other way."

Rachel looked back to where the path had eroded away from the cliff face, then into the darkness of the cave.

"Come on," said Zac.

Rachel walked closely behind Zac, clutching onto his backpack, and they crept into the belly of the cave. The floor was littered with feathers and stones and small bones and it stunk like Aunty B's compost heap. In the flickering torchlight their shadow selves leapt and trembled across the walls.

Rachel jumped, knocking into Zac, as a voice boomed from above: "Welcome O strangers, where are you from? Is it from the South, or is it from the North, the East, or the West?" The voice bounced around them, echoing off the cave walls.

Rachel swung her torch up. Hundreds of birdcages, different shapes and sizes, hung from the ceiling, the structures lashed together with twigs and plant fibres and moss. In each of the cages perched a tūi — two or three in some — their white tufts bright against the darkness.

“That tūi talked!” said Rachel.

“What a revelation!” said the tūi. A raucous snorting, warbling and croaking gongs sounded from the other birds.

She whispered to Zac. “What’s so funny?”

“You,” he said.

The riot quieted. The tūi who had first spoken poked her head through the gaps in the cage and eyeballed them. As she spoke she jumped up and down, her two white feathered tufts moved apart then back together: “Why do you dare enter the lair of Kurangaituku. What is it you seek in the underworld, where the shadows of life prevail...”

“Who’s Kurangaituku?” said Rachel. “We’re looking for someone else. Circe. She’s tall and wears a black feathered cape.”

The tūi turned and conferred with the others then turned back to them. “Your journey will lead you over trembling earth, across waters of deep sorrow, through a cauldron of fire, and on the breath of the wind...”

“O — kay,” said Rachel. She glanced at Zac, an eyebrow raised.

The tūi continued: “...you will find an island, an island with the same name forwards and backwards.”

“What’s its name — the island?” said Rachel.

“The same name forwards and backwards,” said the tūi, louder this time.

“Oh.” Rachel turned to Zac. “How do we know we can trust them?”

“A bird never lies,” said the tūi.

Rachel whispered to Zac. “Do you think they might be crazy?”

“Depends,” said Zac.

“On what?”

“If they know what they’re saying.”

“How do we know if they know what they’re saying?”

“We know what we say because what we say is what we know,” said the tūi.

“We don’t,” said Zac.

“But — ”

An anguished wail sounded in the distance.

The tūi shrieked in unison, “She returns, she returns, Kurangaituku returns.”

Zac reached up for the latch on one of the cages; it was jammed with rust. He pried and wiggled it open. The confined tūi flapped clumsily free and flew from the cave. Zac unlatched another, and another. Rachel began to do the same. The tūi blustered past them, racing for escape, their cries bouncing off the walls. “We fly free from Kurangaituku — we fly fast from Kurangaituku.”

A swoosh of large wings pushed a chill into the cave as the giant silhouette of Kurangaituku filled the entrance. The bird woman stood nearly as tall as the cave and half as wide. Feathered wings splayed from her wiry arms which hung at her sides, moving in sync with her round belly as it heaved quickly in and out with breath. Dark eyes bulged above her large hooked beak, which snapped wildly around her flailing pointed tongue. Her voice screeched like fingernails across a chalkboard, “Who has released my pets — I will feast on their still-beating heart!”

Stabbing the air with long clawed fingers, she speared a hapless tūi and flung its trembling carcass to the dirt. She stabbed another. The tūi frenzied for escape, their strong wings whipping up a whirlwind of dust. Feathers floated languidly down around the bird woman, some getting stuck in the smears of blood streaking her body. Her grotesque shadow devoured the cave walls as she rampaged toward Rachel and Zac, smashing cages out of her way, showering them with splinters and the foamy spit of her cries.

Rachel covered her mouth and nose as the stench of blood crammed her senses. Her whole body quaked as she turned and stumbled after Zac, seeking a means of escape.

Near the back of the cave a large triangular-shaped boulder covered what looked like another entrance. They pushed, heaved, strained; but the boulder would not budge.

Zac stopped, stood up, and said, “Te kowhatu nei, e, matiti, matata.”

The rock split straight through the centre.

Rachel gawked at Zac.

Zac, his face startled with surprise, shoved Rachel into the crevice then squeezed in after. The bird woman lunged behind them, bellowing, her monstrous filthy hands raking the air. Zac cried out as her claws tore through his t-shirt, scratching the back of his shoulder. He turned and hurled a rock towards the bird woman. She grunted as it clacked against her beak and bounced off, shattering into pieces.

The crack in the boulder sealed closed.

The bird woman wailed and sparks flung from her clawed fingers as she scraped uselessly against solid rock.

Inside the rock the darkness was absolute. Rachel and Zac fumbled through the crevice, grating their palms and knees across sharp-edged stones and grit. Gradually it widened into a space high enough to stand in, but so narrow they had to remove their backpacks and shuffle along sideways. The passageway descended steeply then opened into a chamber, and the cries of the bird woman morphed into a rhythmic *drip drip drip*, as water leaked from stalactites and formed spindly limestone towers around them. Glowworms draped the ceiling, twinkling blue-green. Rachel collapsed onto the damp earth, sucking in lungfuls of stale air. She shivered; her clothes and shoes were soaking wet, and caked with mud and feathers and blood. Zac groaned as he sat next to her and reached his hand to the back of his shoulder. Rachel gasped.

The back of Zac’s shirt was slashed and the marks from bird woman’s claws were swollen red and sticky, the edges already gathering with white-yellow pus.

“Is it bad?” said Zac.

“Umm...kind of.”

“I’ve got a first aid kit.” Zac rummaged through his backpack and fished out some of Koro Stan’s kawakawa ointment. He held it, awkwardly, looking at Rachel.

“Ah, I can’t really reach — ”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Rachel took the ointment, grimacing as she swabbed the festering wound. “Does it hurt?”

He flinched. “Nah, not much.”

Rachel covered the wound with a crisscross of plasters. “I think you’ll be okay.”

“Yeah,” said Zac. He glanced at Rachel then at the ground. “Hey citygirl — thanks.”

Rachel busied herself looking in her backpack then zipped it closed. “We better get going.” There was a slight wobble in her voice.

As they walked, the steep decline of the passage began to level out and grow lighter and eventually they burst from the dank tunnel into the underworld.

“This isn’t what I thought the underworld would look like,” said Rachel. “It’s kind of normal, but kind of weird — like there’s an eclipse, or something.”



A high emerald-green hedge stretched far into the distance in both directions from where they stood. In a small gap in the hedge stood a tall thin man, rhythmically tapping his finger against the plastic lime-green watch on his wrist. The man wore an immaculate navy pinstripe suit and a perfectly knotted yellow bowtie. Stuff bulged from his pockets, straining the finely stitched seams. His scraggly silver hair was tied into a ponytail, and a wild bushy beard stuck out from his chin. One of his eyes was warm-brown, the other a piercing kingfisher-blue.

The man looked up. “Ah, at last! We’ve been waiting forever.”

Laurence sat on the other side of the path, grooming himself.

“Laurence — what on earth are you doing here in the underworld?” Rachel ran over and crouched down to pat him. He purred, bumping his head affectionately against her hand.

Rachel turned to the man. “Um, hello? Why are you waiting for us? We’re looking for Circe. Do you know her?”

The man held up his hands and took a step backward. “Whoa, my dear, too many questions for a mere mortal. Through the labyrinth is the only answer. It’s the way here or there. It’s your choice to enter, but once you have, there is only one way to go: back and forth, back and forth, forth and back.”

He pulled a large ball of sky-blue string from his pocket, bounced it up and down a few times like a yo-yo, then tied one end of the string around a branch of the hedge. A small creature crawled out from under the hedge. It was covered in

short iridescent purple-blue spikes — it looked like a cross between a hedgehog and an armadillo that had been painted. It snuffled quietly as it scurried along.

Zac pointed to the creature. “What is that?”

“It’s really cute,” said Rachel.

Laurence growled.

The man frowned at Laurence then turned to Zac. “*That* is a paloot.”

“A pa-what?” said Zac.

Muttering to himself, the man strode into the labyrinth, feeding out the string behind him as he walked. “What goes on four legs in the morning?” The paloot snuffled along behind him.

Rachel peered down the path into the labyrinth. The impenetrable hedges growing on either side of the path appeared to join together as the path curved out of sight. She bit her lip and glanced at Zac. He shrugged and followed the man. Rachel trailed them reluctantly, shadowed by Laurence.

The path spiraled round and round, the man’s blue string drawing a line on the ground beside them. It seemed even darker in here, but when Rachel looked up, the sky was the same twilight as when they entered the underworld. As they moved deeper into the labyrinth she felt the hedges closing in and squashing the path. She swayed with dizziness, like she’d turned too many cartwheels in a row. “I think I’m feeling claustrophobic.”

“Four legs in the morning — ” The man stopped. “Ah, claustrophobia. I have just the remedy.” He rummaged through his pockets.

“Are you a doctor?” said Rachel.

“Yes, of sorts.”

Objects spilled to the ground from the doctor’s pockets as he rummaged: a chewed plastic pig, a ceramic dolls head that was missing one purple eye, two dominoes that kept changing the number of their dots, and a ballerina from a music box that was still twirling.

Zac picked up the dominoes, turning them over in his fingers. “Hey, cool.”

“Do you live here?” Rachel asked the doctor.

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know where you live?”

“Well, I don’t remember how I got here, and I don’t know how to leave,”

“You’re lost?”

“Maybe.”

Zac peered at the doctor. “You’re not a zombie are you?”

The doctor produced a jam-sized glass jar filled with pills of different colours and shapes and sizes. “One of these will do the trick. Ah, yes, the yellow one.” His stumbling fingers groped in the jar, and after a moment victoriously presented a round yellow pill the size of a peach stone. He frowned. “Or, maybe it was the green one?” he produced a lime green pill the size of a pinhead. He scratched his chin. “Yes, yes, now I remember, for relief from claustrophobia it is absolutely the orange one.” He held a tiny worm-like pill out to Rachel. It glowed neon orange and wriggled about on his palm.

Rachel grimaced. “Ah, no thanks. I think I’m feeling better now.”

“Ah, powerful thing the mind, very powerful indeed.” He swallowed the pill then crammed the jar back into his pocket. “On two legs at noon, on two legs at noon...”

They rounded another curve and Zac stopped in front of a plant in the centre of the path. Blue string was haphazardly wrapped around the plant several times.

“We’ve been past here before — ” said Zac. “I remember that plant. You’re taking us round in circles.”

“And on three legs in the evening...” said the doctor.

Rachel whispered to Zac, “I wish he’d talk sense.”

“You are taking us round in circles,” said Zac, louder this time.

“We’re in a labyrinth, round and round is the only way — oww!”

Laurence casually detached his fangs from the doctor’s leg and sauntered

across and sat behind Rachel.

“Nice one killer,” said Zac.

The doctor glared at Laurence.

Laurence glared back.

“Cat got ya tongue has it? Hah! If you’re really — Man! That’s it. Man. Man. Man. I’ve guessed it.” He skipped in mad happy circles.

“I don’t care if he’s a doctor or not, he’s loopy.” Zac spoke under his breath. “And that paloot is the stupidest looking animal I’ve ever seen. I reckon Doctor Frankenstein here made it.”

“There must be some way out of here!” said Rachel.

“Said the joker to the thief, there’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief,” said Zac.

“What!”

“Hendrix,” said Zac.

“I wish you’d say something useful instead of blimmin’ *Hendrix Hendrix Hendrix* every five seconds! You’re just as mad as the doctor.”

The earth quivered. A green gecko scurried in front of them and Laurence pounced on it.

The doctor’s nostrils flared and his odd-coloured eyes bulged. He made an X shape with his two fingers, holding them out in front of him. “Beware, the eyes of the dark ones, agents of evil, allies of sorcerers.” He looked suspiciously around then slowly slunk back the way they had come, glancing back every few steps. The paloot followed him, eating the trail of flotsam and jetsam that spilled from the doctor’s overflowing pockets.

Zac called after him, “You forgot your string.”

“What do you think he meant by the eyes of the dark ones?” said Rachel. “Do you think he means the geckos are spies? Laurence has been catching heaps of them lately, and in my dream —”

Zac kicked the half unravelled ball of string. “That doctor doesn’t know what

day it is — he's a spinner. And what's a stupid dream got to do with anything? Let's get out of here."

Abandoning the tangle of blue string they headed deeper into the labyrinth and the circles they walked became smaller and smaller. A melodic song floated towards them — drawing them closer to the heart of the labyrinth.

Rachel rounded a bend and almost ran into a large golden sphinx. Its eyes were closed and the music they'd heard seemed to come from within it. The head was human-like, although ten times as large. Giant wings spread from the shoulders of its lion's body, and its thick tail curled into the head of a serpent. It rested back on its hunches, but seemed as though it could spring forward any moment. Rachel walked around it.

"Weird, I dreamt about this sphinx the other night, and the dream sna — "

"The what?"

"Ah, nothing, just a stupid dream."

Rachel reached up and touched the surface of the creature's face; it was smooth and warm. The sphinx yawned open its gold-lidded eyes and fixed her in its topaz stare. Rachel jumped backwards.

The sphinx spoke: "What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?"

Rachel looked at Zac who shrugged.

"Wasn't that what the Doctor was just saying?" said Rachel.

"Dunno, I was trying to ignore him."

"It's a riddle. He said three legs in the evening, then he yelled... Man! That's it — he gave us the answer."

Zac looked blankly at her.

"You know — like a baby crawls on four legs, then learns to walk on two, then when they get old they use a walking stick — like Aunty B. So the answer is man."

The mouth of the sphinx cracked open and a tiny bird hopped out; its feathers were the vibrant blue of lapis lazuli and a stripe of bright multi-faceted diamonds

ran down its back. Its bill was yellow, and its eyes the same blue as its plumage.

The cracks around the mouth of the sphinx spread outwards to the rest of its body, until it was a completely covered in hairline fractures. The sphinx gave a colossal roar and sprang powerfully upward. It paused midair, outstretched its golden wings, then plummeted towards the ground. Rachel dove for cover next to Zac, wrapping her hands over her head.

Rachel and Zac were pelted with golden hail as the sphinx smashed into thousands of tiny pebbles. The rubble settled and they crawled to their feet. The blue diamond bird perched on top of the gold pyramid of rubble — the remnants of the shattered sphinx — and inspected them with one eye, then the other.

“Wow,” said Rachel.

“Yeah,” said Zac.

Laurence fixated on the bird, his tail flicking from side to side. He bared his teeth and emitted a chattering birdlike sound, his jaw moving up and down. The bird cocked its head to one side then it perfectly mimicked the sound Laurence had made. Laurence flattened his ears and lay down.

The bird coughed and convulsed, its feathers puffed in all directions and its tiny eyes squeezed shut.

“It’s going to die,” said Rachel. “Can’t we do something?”

With a final splutter the bird coughed up a small stone at Zac’s feet. It smoothed and preened its shining feathers, emitted a harp-like trill, and flew off.

Zac reached down and picked up the stone.

“What is it?” said Rachel.

“A lucky stone.”

“How do you know it’s lucky?”

“It’s got a hole in it — that means it’s lucky.”

“Great, we need some luck right about now.”

Zac handed the stone to Rachel. She held it up and peered at Zac through the hole.

“Rachel?” said Zac.

“What?”

“Where are you?”

“What do you mean, I’m right here.”

“I can’t see you. Can you see me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It’s the stone — it’s made you invisible.”

Rachel lowered the stone from her eye and came back into view.

“Invisible? Like completely? I didn’t feel any different.”

Zac grabbed the stone from her, held it up to his eye, and vanished.

“Zac!”

He pinched her arm then re-appeared, grinning. “This is supercool.” He disappeared again.

“Okay, come back,” said Rachel. “We need to keep going.”

She jumped as Zac re-appeared next to her. He handed her the stone, which she slipped onto her necklace along with the ouroboros, the kauri gum heart and the rainbow vial from Izzy.

Rachel wandered after Zac along the spiraling path leading out of the Labyrinth.

“Are we going to end up back where we started?”

“Probably,” said Zac.

“Then what?”

“I don’t know — guess we just have to wait and see what happens.”

They continued in silence, wearily finding one foot in front of the other. The words *eyes of evil, eyes of evil, eyes of evil* played a mantra in Rachel’s mind.

“Hey!” said Zac. He grabbed her, pulling her back and she landed on the ground on top of her pack.

“Ow — what are you doing?”

Zac pointed ahead. “Just saving your life.”

Rachel sat up. The path of the labyrinth ended abruptly at the edge of a high cliff, which she had been about to walk over. Far below, a deep blue-green crater-lake, rimmed with sulphur-yellow, steamed and boiled.

Rachel backed shakily away from the edge. “I was expecting to come back out where we started.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Zac. “Well at least we didn’t have to see that spin-doctor and his string again.”

“I kind of feel sorry for him. Maybe he’s a lost soul, like Koro Stan told us about.”

“Well he can get lost somewhere else.”

At the cliff edge a statue towered above them, its legs planted firmly into the earth and its torso tapering into the heavens. The body was engraved with swirling geometric patterns and its large paua shell eyes glittered lifelike. Rachel shivered, and rubbed the goose bumps from her skin.

“Rūaumoko — the god of volcanoes,” said Zac.

“He looks scary.”

The earth swayed and bucked. Rachel and Zac hunched close to the ground until the shaking subsided.

“Better watch what you say,” said Zac. “I wouldn’t want to mess with him.”

Rachel snuck at look at Rūaumoko, and slowly got back on her feet.

Zac consulted Koro Stan’s map. “So the crater below us is Frying Pan Lake — funny name, I guess it does sort of sound like sausages cooking. Geez, I could do with some of Aunty B’s sausages and fried bread right now.”

“Do you know where we’re supposed to be going?”

“Well, if Circe lives on an island, if the tūi were right, it must be this island here.” He pointed to a small island in the middle of Lake Rotomahana. “Aeaea. A-e-a-e-a, the same forwards and backwards, that must be it.”

“It must be — that wasn’t so hard was it.”

Zac tracked his finger along a path on the map. “So we go down and around Fried Bread Lake, across the gateway to Inferno Crater, through Fairy Crater, then Black Crater, then Rift Valley, then across Rotomahana Lake to Aeahea Island.”

Rachel’s shoulders slumped. “That sounds so epic, surely there’s an easier way.”

Zac tossed the map to her. “You got any better ideas?”

“No.”

Zac pointed down to the Crater Lake below them. “Now, we need to figure out how to get down there.”

Laurence meowed. He waited, looking back at them, on the far side of the Rūaumoko statue, at the start of an overgrown goat track leading down towards Frying Pan Lake.

“Nice work killer.” Zac nudged Laurence approvingly as he walked past.

Laurence sauntered off down the track after Zac.

Rachel followed. “Oh — best mates now are we.”

Wind blown manuka trees lined the path, their dainty white flowers bright, and fuchsia-coloured foxgloves popped up like submarine periscopes amongst the sea of undergrowth. As they drew closer to the lake they were enveloped in a sulphuric mist and the quiet was punctuated by eerie gurgles and howls.

“It’s like being in a haunted house,” said Rachel.

“Have you been in one?” said Zac.

“Um, no, but I think this is what it’d be like — , what are you doing Laurence? You nearly tripped me up.”

Laurence was weaving around her legs, meowing. “What is it?” Rachel stopped to stroke Laurence who purred loudly and head-butted her shin.

“Oi!” said Zac. “We haven’t got time to stand around smooching cats all day.”

They edged around the boiling lake then followed alongside a hissing stream, blue-green with algae. Mineral deposits — pale pink, emerald green, yellow and orange — spilled from the edges of the stream, painting a rainbow on the earth.

Steam rose from the middle of the stream ahead of them, becoming thicker

and thicker, turning from white to solid grey. A whistle shrilled and a fountain of water spewed from the centre of the stream. Rachel and Zac dove to the ground, hands over their heads shielding them from the black mud and pumice hurled from the geyser.

As abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

Zac jumped to his feet. "Geez, lucky we weren't any closer."

Rachel giggled.

"What?" said Zac.

"You should see yourself."

Large clumps of mud matted Zac's hair, some of it stuck straight up while the rest was pasted against his head, and his clothes were splattered with mud and sand.

"You look just as funny you know. Probably funnier."

Rachel's laughter petered out.

"Hey, where's Laurence?" She frantically looked around, calling him. "I hope he's okay."

"Don't worry about killer — he knows how to take care of himself."



They continued alongside the stream, watching for signs of another geyser. Rachel called Laurence again and again, but he was nowhere to be seen. The stream led to the edge of a small crater lake, bordered by a cliff face rugged with rocks and scoria, and patched with rusty-orange sediment. The lake sparkled a jewel-like turquoise and steam danced and whirled across the surface sprinkled with diamond light.

“Wow,” said Rachel. “This is amazing.”

Zac unfolded Koro Stan’s map. “This must be Inferno Crater.”

“It’s like totally unreal,” said Rachel.

“Yeah, but how do we get to the other side?”

“Could we swim?”

“Not unless you want your skin to melt off your bones.” Zac read from the map: “Inferno Crater can get as hot as 75 degrees Celsius — and it’s highly acidic.”

“Ooh, so that’s not such a good idea.”

“Koro Stan wrote here that the lake has a geyser at the bottom — it goes off, and fills the crater until it overflows and the lake empties out, then the geyser goes off and it starts all over again.”

“So we could just wait until it’s empty,” said Rachel.

Zac folded the map and tucked it into his pocket. “We might be waiting awhile — the map says it happens every 36 days.”

Rachel considered the steep cliffs around them. “Well we can’t climb up there.”

Zac skimmed a pebble across the surface of the turquoise water; it skipped

seven times.

Rachel frowned. "Shouldn't we be trying to think of a way across?"

"I am." Zac skimmed another pebble.

Rachel picked one up and flung it out over the lake; it arced high then plopped straight into the water and sank.

"What kind of throw was that citygirl?" Zac flicked another stone out across the lake. It skipped twelve times then rolled a short distance across the surface before sinking in a frenzy of bubbles.

He grinned. "Ace — a new world record!"

Rachel grabbed another pebble and threw it; it sank without skipping once.

"Don't try so hard," said Zac. "Just imagine it skipping perfectly in your mind. And you need a nice flat pebble."

Zac picked out a smooth pebble and handed it to Rachel. She lifted her arm to throw, then stopped.

A shaft of vivid purple light flickered in the centre of the turquoise lake, wavering, then beaming strongly and bathing them in a soft purple haze. The steam drifting on the surface of the lake was slowly drawn into the light, and as it gathered momentum it spun into a funnel, writhing upwards and whirling across the water towards them, gathering in size and strength.

"RUN," said Zac.

Rachel reached out and grabbed his arm. "No wait."

With her eyes squinted she looked across the lake.

A figure formed in the steam and resolved into a woman; she hovered above the surface of the water, her turquoise dress, threaded with tiny iridescent pearls, streamed across the lake, and her silver hair spilled in waves around her. The woman held Rachel and Zac in the luminous pool of her gaze. "For what purpose do you summon the Lady of the Lake?" Her words rippled out to them like the circles made by Zac's skipping stones.

"Ah, it wasn't us — " said Zac.

Rachel elbowed him in the ribs. “Yes, it was.”

The Lady of the Lake spoke: “You knocked twelve times on the lake. What is your wish, younglings?”

“To get across this lake,” Rachel blurted.

“To get back the oracle cards,” said Zac.

“Well, the wish stated first is the wish which shall be granted,” said the Lady of the Lake.

“Far out Rachel — why’d you wish that? Getting us across the lake still doesn’t mean we’ll get to Circe.” Zac dropped the pebble in his hand to the ground.

“Well, I didn’t think — ” Tears stung at the corner of her eyes and she looked away.

The Lady of the Lake skimmed across the surface of the water, chanting softly in words that ran together like drops of water gathering into a river.

On the far side of the lake, from the top of the cliff, shards of clear crystal grew outward, expanding across the width of the lake, building a bridge down towards them. The crystals interlinked, forming a lattice structure. Rods criss-crossed the sides of the bridge, supporting it from one end to the other.

Rachel stepped lightly onto the bridge; the structure hummed like a crystal singing bowl. The sound of Zac’s step was deeper and resonated around the crater. The ringing of each step ran into the next, making a constant vibration. Halfway across the bridge Rachel looked down; the Lady of the Lake had submerged, her presence lingering only in a fine stream of violet bubbles rising to the surface.

The incline of the bridge became steeper and their progress slower. As they neared the end of the bridge, the rhythmic chime of their steps was drowned in a bassy drone. A whirring cloud of wasps surged towards them, zooming at them like darts, piercing their clothes and skin. Rachel and Zac raced for the end of the bridge.

The wasps dispersed, leaving a discordant quiet.

The earth murmured, softly at first, then the earth jolted and they were hurled

to the bending floor of the bridge. Zac's backpack slid and tumbled down the incline; he lunged and caught the strap then it slipped from his fingers and lurched over the edge, splashing into the lake far below.

"ZAC!" Rachel clung hopelessly to the side of the bridge, as Zac slid towards the edge. His legs flung over the side just as he grabbed the railing. His fingers slipped then gripped tighter and he wrapped his arms around the railing. Kicking his legs up, he pulled himself back onto the bridge.

Crystal cracked around them and a deep fissure split the bridge, forcing its way to where Rachel and Zac clung. The whole structure twisted more to the left. Rachel raced for the end of the bridge, Zac close behind her. Shards of the bridge fell away in fragments, spearing the lake below. Rachel was almost at the edge of the cliff; she reached out then slipped on the smooth surface and slid backwards a few metres. She grabbed the railing and pulled herself back up. The bridge groaned and completely collapsed from under them. Zac leapt, tumbling next to Rachel as she scrambled from the bridge and collapsed onto solid ground. The remnants of the crystal bridge tumbled into lake and were swallowed by the foaming turquoise water.

Zac stood and looked down at the lake. "There goes half our food and the first aid kit."

"What about the map?" said Rachel.

Zac checked his pocket. "It's here."

"Whew, that's lucky."

They stood at the highest point of the surrounding landscape. Valleys fell away on all sides in a patchwork of steaming craters, lakes, ridges, and pieces of wild forest. Looking back Rachel could see the now tranquil turquoise water of the Inferno Crater; in front of them lay Fairy Crater and Black Crater, and between the craters Rift Valley led down to Lake Rotomahana — and the island of Aea. Across

the silver mirror of Lake Rotomahana crouched the foreboding hulk of Mount Tarawera, half shrouded in mist and huffing smoke into the infinite twilight.

Rachel peered down into Fairy Crater. The volcanic walls of the steep oval-shaped basin were covered in shrub. Tiny lights danced at the bottom of the crater. The lights were bright white, but intermittently flashed red, green and blue.

“What do you think those lights are?” said Rachel. “Do you think there are people down there?”

Zac, who was ahead of her, stopped and looked over the edge. “I can’t see any lights.” He vigorously scratched his arms.

“Stop scratching, you’re making me feel itchy too,” said Rachel.

“It must have been the wasps.” Zac pulled up his sleeves.

“Whoa, freaky.”

His arms were dotted with small white wriggling lumps that were rapidly growing.

“Oh, gross, they’re like aliens.” Rachel took a step away. She felt her arms tingling and tried to convince herself it was only her imagination. Then the tingling became an unbearable itchiness and she pulled up her sleeves to find the same white wriggling lumps. “Oh, this is totally disgusting.”

Rachel watched as tiny black spikes pierced out through her skin. She plucked at one of the spikes, pulling it free. “Oowh.” The spike was attached to a tiny wriggling barely-formed slug-like bug. She flung it away from her, and began plucking the remaining vermin writhing from her arms. “This is so, so unbelievably disgusting.” Rachel winced as she excavated another bug and hurled it as far away from her as she could.

Rachel’s skin still tingled, and small scabs had formed on her arms. As they

descended into Rift Valley the volcanic activity increased: fumaroles pocked the ground, and sulphurous steam whirled around them. The sky was still twilit, making it impossible to tell how long had they been here — it could have been hours, or it could have been days.

She tripped and fell hard on her knee. The cut that had only recently stopped bleeding, started again. She turned to see what she had tripped on. A single sky-blue string crossed the path, wrapped around a rock on one side and a small shrub on the other.

“Oh no, it’s the spin-doctor and his string,” said Rachel.

“*Shhh*,” said Zac.

From along the track the sound of whistling drifted closer.

Zac held out his hand to Rachel, pulled her to her feet, and scooted behind some shrubs, where they crouched, hidden from anyone who walked past.

Rachel grimaced and held her nose. “Of all the places to hide — you had to chose right in the middle of stinkwood trees.”

“*Shh*.”

Zac picked a few stinkwood leaves and rolled them into balls. The stench of rotten cabbages grew stronger. He threw the stink-balls out onto the track just as the doctor, followed by the paloot, came into view.

Rachel’s nose started to twitch. She held her breath and placed her hand firmly over her mouth. Zac glared at her, shaking his head.

“A... a... a... *choo!*”

The doctor froze mid step. He turned his head to one side then looked directly at where Rachel and Zac were hiding and the paloot snuffled its way towards them.

The doctor called out. “Who’s there? Come on, show your face.”

Reeeooooow. Laurence sprang onto the path a little way along from them.

“Lau — ” Rachel jumped up and Zac pulled her back down, clamped his hand over her mouth, and gave her a perfect imitation of Koro Stan’s stern-eye look.

“Oh, you again, cat.” The doctor flapped his arms at Laurence. “Off with you.”

Laurence hissed at the paloot, and it scampered back to the doctor. Laurence bounded into the undergrowth on the other side of the path.

The doctor sniffed, turning in a circle. "What is that terrible smell?" He looked at the paloot, raised an eyebrow then walked back in the same direction he had come, whistling his tune from precisely where he had left off.

"Geez, that was close," said Zac. "I can't believe you had to sneeze."

"I couldn't help it — it was those stinkwoods. I wonder where Laurence went."

Zac shook his head and started walking along the path. "He's just a cat. Don't worry about him."

"Where are you going?" said Rachel. "We came from that way."

Zac turned around. "No we didn't." He pointed in the other direction. "We came from that way."

Rachel looked one way then the other; both directions looked identical.

Zac kicked the dirt. "Oh man, that spin-doctor has messed with the path."

A matrix of blue string, woven around rocks and shrubs and single blades of grass, stretched in a pattern mirrored in both directions along the track as far as they could see.

"How did he do that?" said Rachel. "Why did he do that? I thought he was trying to help us before."

"I wouldn't trust him as far as I could kick him." Zac pointed to the left. "It's definitely this way."

"I'm sure it's this way." Rachel pointed to the right.

"Come on citygirl, you know your sense of direction is dodgy."

Rachel stood firm on the path. "I'm the one who found the oracle cards, so I should get to choose the way."

Zac shrugged. "Whatever."

Rachel set off along the path. Zac sighed then turned and followed her. Their progress was slow as they wove their way under and over and between zig-zaging

strings. Zac whistled as they walked, occasionally breaking into frenzied air guitar. Rachel felt a growing sense of déjà vu; but she had felt so certain this was the right way. It must be right.

The earth rumbled and they crouched to the ground till the shaking ceased. The trees and ferns alongside the path seemed to be fading, becoming increasingly transparent, until dissolving into nothing. They had been walking in a reflection of the other direction, and now the illusion had dissolved into reality; Rachel and Zac were left high and dry in the open space back at the top of Inferno Crater. Rachel gazed back down at the turquoise lake.

“Damn,” said Zac. He kicked a stone into the lake below.

Rachel pushed pointless tears back down past the lump in her throat. “I’m really sorry.”

“No stress.” Zac shuffled his feet in the dry dirt. “It’s cool.”

“No, it’s not cool, I was totally wrong, I made us come all the way back here. I’m so tired, I just want to go home.”

“It was that spin-doctor; he messed with the path,” said Zac. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

“Okay,” said Rachel.

Zac grinned. “And better listen to me next time eh.”

Rachel managed a half smile.

The roar of the waterfall reached them long before it came into view. Rachel stopped at the top and peered over the edge. Water merged from two streams, one cold and one hot, and gushed into a deep circular pool below.

“Awesome for dive bombing,” said Zac.

Rachel’s legs shook with fatigue, and from being up so high, and she backed away from the edge.

“How are we going to get down there?” said Rachel.

Zac pointed to the wall beside the waterfall.

Rachel gulped. “Seriously?”

Zac scampered down the wall, using vines and roots as handholds. Rachel followed slowly. Insects teemed around her, buzzing into her eyes up and up her nose. She clung to swamp ferns sprouting from the wall, her hands and feet slipping on the green slime oozing from cracks in the orange and white encrusted rocks. Finally her feet found the ground and she slumped against the slimy wall.

Zac had unfolded Koro Stan’s map and was tracking their path from the top of Fairy Crater, along the edge of Black Crater and now into Rift Valley.

“It looks like this place is called Fairy Falls, and Koro Stan’s map reckons it’s okay to swim here.” Zac stood up and pulled off his t-shirt.

Rachel stayed where she was. “Are you sure?”

“Soon find out.” Zac put his hand in the steaming water, whooped, and splashed in. “Ah — this is awesome — just like being in a massive bath.”

Rachel remained on the side of the pool. “I’ll just wait a bit, to make sure you’re not going to be eaten by acid or something.”

Zac floated around the pool, then stood under the waterfall, water bouncing off his skin, streaming in all directions. “Come on citygirl — you’re missing out.”

Rachel slid down the bank into the water. The scabs on her arms and the grazes on her knee stung in the hot water. “Hey — you didn’t say it makes your cuts sting.”

Zac grinned. “It’s g —

“Good for them. I know.”

Rachel floated around the pool, from scorching hot spots to places where the water flowed cool, then over to the waterfall where she stood under the cascade, letting the gushing water wash the grit and grime from her skin and the tiredness from her limbs.

A loud boom drowned out the splashing of the waterfall. The earth shuddered and small rocks slid and bounced down the face of the cliff, splashing around them

into the pool. The water swirled into a whirlpool, tugging Rachel into its flow.

Water sucked around her, spinning faster and faster. Zac held his hand out to her from the edge of the pool; it was just out of her reach. The tentacles of the whirlpool grabbed her; she kicked against their pull until her energy was sapped and she was swallowed into the vortex and spiraled faster and faster, until she lost sense of which way was up; water shoved into her mouth and nose as she knocked against rocks and sticks. Zac, balanced on a branch growing out over the pool, reached for her. She grabbed for his hand but it slipped from her grasp and she spun around the pool, trying to keep her head above water as she circled around again to Zac. She grasped his arm with both hands and kept hold as he hauled her from the water.

Rachel lay at the side of the pool. The whirlpool had petered out and the pool was calm except for the gushing waterfall.

“Thanks for rescuing me Zac. I was really scared, I thought I was going to be spun to death.”

“No worries, you would have done the same for me.”

“It seemed like the water was alive.”

“Could’ve been a taniwha.”

Rachel sat up. “Do you think so?”

“Nah.”

Rachel flicked a twig at him.

“Still think it’s boring here?” said Zac.

“What?”

“You said you were bummed out you had to come and stay here because it was so boring.”

“Did I really say that?”

“Yep.”

“Well it’s definitely not boring — this makes my life at home seem totally dull.”

“Yeah, you can only do so much shopping and texting.”

Rachel flicked another twig at Zac. “That life doesn’t even seem real anymore. But then again maybe that is real, and this isn’t, like what if we’re really dreaming right now?”

“The same dream?”

“Well, yeah. Or maybe it’s just my dream, and you’re in it.”

Zac skipped a pebble across the pool. “No way. I reckon it’s my dream, and you’re in it.”

“You’re not like my friends at home,” said Rachel.

“Yeah, I’m much funnier, eh.” Zac reached out and punched her on the arm.

Rachel frowned. “Why’d you do that?”

“It’s a sign of respect citygirl.”

“Oh.” Rachel looked away to hide her grin.



The scrawled notes on the map seemed illegible to Rachel and she left it to Zac who seemed to be able to decipher Koro Stan's writing. Zac tracked a path across the map with his finger. "We need to cross through Rift Valley then get around to this point here, where the Pink Terraces are — were — are — whatever. It's the shortest distance to the island from there."

"Sounds like a good plan."

Rachel pulled the last two apples from her backpack; she offered one to Zac and bit into hers, avoiding the bruises.

"Koro Stan's written to watch out for the stinging nettle in the valley, and the swamp — he's got something here about strangler vines — the writing is smudged though and I can't read it," said Zac.

A rustling sounded behind them. Rachel turned; her backpack lay open on the ground, and a trail of their food led to a kākā bird with its beak in a muesli bar wrapper. The kākā was large, olive and reddish-brown with rusty-orange patches around its neck and underneath its wings. Oblivious of them, it scoffed the bar, crunched up the wrapper, and strutted back to Rachel's backpack.

Zac clapped his hands together. "Oi, get outta there."

Kra-ka-ka-ah-kra-ah, krraaaark.

Rachel put her hands over her ears to dull the harsh grating cry of the kākā, until she realised the bird was speaking.



KĀKĀ
{ KAH-KAH }

The kākā stood on one leg watching her. “Giz a bite of that apple eh.”

“Huh?” said Rachel.

The kākā scratched its head.

“Apora. Pomme. What-language-do-you-speak-a? Take your pick pretty boy, I know ‘em all.”

“Girl, actually,” said Rachel.

Krraaaark. The kākā nudged its way back into her backpack.

“You’re very rude,” said Rachel.

The kākā fossicked through the contents. “Not much of a picnic eh? Where’re the donuts and sausage rolls?”

Rachel crossed her arms. “We’re not actually having a picnic.”

“Why not?” The kākā’s voice was muffled from inside the pack.

“Because we’re looking for Circe. Do you know her?” said Rachel.

The kākā poked its head out of the pack. “Circe, eh.”

“Do you know her?” said Rachel.

“Do you know her?” said the kākā.

“Can you please not parrot me.”

The kākā cocked its head to the side. “I tell ya what pretty boy — gimme that apple and I’ll tell ya everything I know.”

Rachel stared at the kākā, “How do we know we can trust you?”

“Cos birds don’t lie,” said the kākā.

Rachel reluctantly handed over the apple. Holding it with one clawed foot the kākā tore into it with its large hooked beak, flinging chunks of apple flesh and juice all over Rachel. The bird quickly devoured the apple, swallowed the last seed and burped.

Zac cracked up laughing.

Rachel glared at Zac. “Don’t laugh — you’ll encourage his bad behaviour.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet, pretty boy,” said the kākā. *Buuuurrrrrppp* —

The kākā laughed along with Zac, his head bobbing up and down.

“That’s disgusting.” Rachel set her hands on her hips. “Now how do we get to Circe?”

“Spoilsport,” said the kākā. “She’s on the island.”

“How far is that from here?” said Rachel.

“Not far as the kākā flies,” said the kākā.

“What if we’re not flying?” said Rachel.

“Eh — why not, pretty boy?” said the kākā.

“Well, for a start, we don’t have wings,” said Rachel.

“Bummer eh,” said the kākā.

“So how else can we get to the island,” said Rachel.

“What island?” said the kākā.

Rachel sighed. “Aeaea, where Circe is.”

“Aeaea, where Circe is.” The kākā grappled with opening the lid of a pack of raisons then ripped into them, devouring the cardboard as well.

Buuuurrpppp.

Zac put a hand over his grin and turned away from Rachel’s stormy glare.

“Dunno how you’re gonna get there if you can’t fly,” said the kākā.

“But you said —”

“I told ya all I know pretty boy, just like I said — *krraaaark* — that was the deal.”

“But you haven’t actually told us anything we didn’t already know,” said Rachel.

The kākā dug around in the earth and came up with a fat huhu grub and held it out to Rachel.

She screwed up her nose. “Eew.”

The kākā flicked the grub into the air, swallowed it whole, and headed for the paper bag of Aunty B’s choc-chip cookies. Zac’s grin morphed into a frown. “Hey, get your beady eyes off those.” He waved his arms at the kākā.

Zac and the kākā reached for the bag, grabbing a side each; it flew apart, cookies flinging onto the ground around them. The kākā scrambled about then flew off with a clutch of Aunty B’s choc-chip cookies in his claws.

Ka-ka.

“That damn bird eating all our food,” said Zac, for the eighth time. He stomped along the track leading through the valley of green and black vegetation, spotted with bright-yellow gorse and wild jasmine.

“Doesn’t seem so hilarious now does he,” said Rachel.

She had to jog to keep up with him, and held her necklace to stop it from thumping against her chest. “This is kinda weird, but the kauri gum heart seems to be getting hotter, and it sort of feels like its — moving.”

“Didn’t Circe give you that thing?” said Zac.

“Ah, yeah.”

“Don’t you reckon you should get rid of it?”

“But, she said it would protect me.”

“Geez, for someone so brainy, you’re not very smart.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s the one you need protection from,” said Zac. “She’s probably using it to keep, oh man, she’s been using it to follow you; hasn’t she always been able to find you? And remember how the spider disappeared from the necklace. Maybe she uses the spider — ”

He paused.

“But if she can use it to track you then maybe we can use it to track her. If it’s getting warmer it means we’re getting closer.”

They stopped on a ridge in the middle of Rift Valley. Lake Rotomahana lay beyond the valley, dotted with tiny island’s — one of which must be Aeaia. A crescent moon hung in the twilit sky over Mount Tarawera.

Rachel flopped down on a patch of soft green moss. “Weird how there’s a moon here, but never any sun.”

“Maybe we’ve only been here for one night,” said Zac.

“Do you think?”

Zac shrugged. He pointed through the valley. “I reckon if we cut through there and walk around the side of Lake Rotomahana we’ll get to the Pi — ”

Rachel sat up. “The ground’s moving.”

“Another earthquake,” said Zac.

Rachel placed her palms on the earth, which expanded and contracted beneath her hands. “It feels like its — breathing.”

Zac touched the ground; his hands rose and fell as the ground inhaled and exhaled. He put his ear to the earth then stood up and inspected the map. “Koro Stan hasn’t mentioned any breathing earth.”

Rachel felt herself yielding to the rhythmic breath. She yawned. “I’m so tired — it feels like we’ve been walking for a hundred years.”

Zac yawned too. He glanced around warily then sat down. “Yeah, and I’m starving — what’s there to eat?” He rummaged through Rachel’s backpack and pulled out two fruit bars, and some crumbled choc-chip cookies. “Is this all we’ve got? Didn’t you bring any other food? Half your wardrobe, two pairs of shoes, your lipstick, but no food.”

“It’s lip gloss — anyway you’re the one who lost your backpack with half our food in it. And then you let that precocious kākā eat most of mine too.” Rachel yawned and lay down.

“Well we wouldn’t be here at all if you hadn’t given the oracle cards to Circe.”

Rachel struggled to keep her eyes open. “I didn’t give them to her, she stole them from me. And I said you didn’t have to come with me.” She turned her back to Zac, curled her body in around her heart and tried not to cry. Her breath gradually synced with the ground moving beneath her and lulled her to sleep.

Zac resisted the heavy tug of sleepiness, the softness of the moss under him, and the rhythmic breath of the ground. He yawned then rubbed the drowsiness from his eyes and tried to think clearly. He yawned again. Surely if whatever they were lying on was going to harm them, it would have done so by now. Koro Stan’s

map didn't mention any breathing ground; maybe there was nothing to worry about. Yeah, of course there was nothing to worry about. Zac let his eyelids fall, surrendering to sleep.

Rachel woke with a start. The dream snatcher paced in circles around them.

"Well, well, well, look who the cat dragged in," he said.

"What are you doing here?" said Rachel. "Stealing our dreams?"

The dream snatcher kept pacing. "There are no dreams here in the underworld, dreams can only be had in the middleworld. This is a place of dreamlessness."

"Oh. Can you help us, we need —"

"No."

"But you don't even know what —"

"No."

"But, we need to get to Aeaea —"

"N — why?"

"Because someone on the island has something that belongs to me."

The dream snatcher raised an eyebrow.

"Well — its something I'm supposed to be looking after, anyway," said Rachel.

"I see."

"Anyhow, what're you doing here if you're not taking our dreams?"

The dream snatcher glanced at Zac, then away. "Nothing. Just happened to be passing." He vanished as Zac yawned and sat up.

"Who're you talking to?"

"No one."

Zac reached for his water bottle and gulped a few mouthfuls. He coughed and spat a mouthful of liquid. "Ooh — that's gross — it tastes like weeds."

"It's just normal water," said Rachel.

Zac handed her the bottle, she took a small sip and spat it out. “Ooh, it does taste like weeds.”

“It must have gone off.”

“How can water go off?” Rachel spoke into the silence; Zac had slumped back into sleep.

Hours later Rachel woke to a bitter frost; Zac was no longer lying next to her. She shook the chill from her limbs, and looked around for him. Her stomach gurgled and she rummaged through their meager supplies. Opening a fruit bar, she chewed, and waited for Zac to turn up. She finished the bar and still felt hungry, but there wasn't much left. She stood, stretched and stepped off the breathing mound; her stomach rolled with queasiness, like she'd stepped from a moving boat back onto land.

She called his name; it echoed back to her — *Zac Zac Zac* — flattening in the frost. She felt for her necklace: the lucky stone was still there, next to the ouroboros, the kauri gum heart and rainbow vial, so Zac wasn't playing a trick and using its powers of invisibility to hide from her. She searched around; there was no mark of where he had slept, no footprints on the icy ground, no sign that he had even been here at all.

Tree trunks towered silently around her, their branches bare, robbed of their colourful leaves, which lay trapped under a layer of frost. Far off, a lone bird cried. A chill seeped into her heart: Zac had left her here, alone.

Rachel had no idea how to get to Aeaia; Zac had been the navigator and now he was gone, along with the map. She collapsed to the soft ground and curled into a ball, pulling her jacket tighter around her. A sob-cough burst from the core of her belly and stinging salty tears streamed down her cheeks, soaking the front of her jacket; she cried until her eyeballs stung with emptiness.

Sensing someone watching her, Rachel snuck open an eyelid. A distorted version of herself gazed back in the mirror of a giant speckled bronze eye.

She leapt to her feet then fell to her knees as the ground shifted under her. The creature she was standing on separated itself from the earth and she tumbled off its back, sprawling onto solid ground. The enormous tuatara stared, unblinking, at Rachel, its nostril holes twitching. Its scaly olive-green skin was moss-covered in places and hung in saggy folds around its neck. Spiky white peaks jutted haphazardly down the length of its spine like the worn crooked teeth of an old man.

Rachel stood frozen like a possum in headlights. Zac would know what to do. Her memory scrambled as she tried to remember everything she knew about tuatara: they have a third eye, they have no ears but they can still hear, they're carnivorous —

The long pink tongue of the tuatara flicked towards her. She screamed, turned to run, stumbled. The tongue whooshed through the air above her, showering her with globs of saliva, and snapped a large dragonfly from the air and rolled it back into its waiting mouth.

Rachel scrambled along the ground, grabbed the last fruit bar from her backpack, unwrapped it and held it out to the tuatara in her trembling palms. The wet tongue of the tuatara sloshed briefly against her hand and the tuatara licked its wrinkly lips then grinned, showing two rows of small pointed teeth at the top of its mouth and one at the bottom.

Rachel willed her shaky and weak legs to run but her feet wouldn't budge.

The tuatara bowed its head then stretched forward, placed its head under her hand, and nudged her palm into a small indent above and between its two eyes where its ancient skin felt dry and cool: its veiled third eye. Rachel felt a sudden calm, and knew the tuatara would not hurt her.

Words formed in her head in the tuatara's deep and ancient croak: "Look beyond all that you see; nothing is ever as it seems." A kaleidoscope of patterns

turned in her mind and formed into an image of Zac trapped in a web that was spun around four towering black trunks under a twilit sky —

She dropped her hand from the tuatara, her heart racing; Zac was still here, in the underworld.

* * *



Zac regained consciousness as he was dragged along a dusty track. His limbs felt like they belonged to a puppet on a string; his legs juddered behind him, bouncing off roots and stones. He vaguely remembered being paddled through the sky in a canoe — no it hadn't been the sky, it had been something called the dreamstream. They had surged through the waves of the night realm, fragments of terrifying dreams grabbing at him as he passed. Splinters of terror lingered at the edges of his mind; he felt like he'd been through a thousand different nightmares that were now stuck with him.

His captor gripped him tightly under his arms. Zac turned his head away from the stench of pickled onion breath blowing hot on his face; his stomach churned and his tongue felt thick in his mouth and gritty with thirst.

"Who are you — " Zac's voice was slow and rough.

"The key will be mine," said his captor.

"Where're you taking me?"

"All mine."

The dream snatcher slumped Zac onto the hard dirt. They were in a small clearing ringed with ponga trees whose fallen fronds spread around them like copper-coloured skirts. Cobwebs draped the perimeter, strung across and around blackberry brambles. The space was bare except for four towering trunks clustered at the centre, in front of which stood Circe.

The dream snatcher ceremoniously bowed.

Circe scowled at him. “Did you take the scenic route?”

She stalked in slow circles around Zac. “Zac-har-y.” Circe’s voice travelled close then retreated, as if pushed away by an offshore breeze.

“My. Name. Is. Zac.” He lay still on the ground, his mouth pressed into the dirt. Circe loomed in and out of his focus: her glossy cape rippled in waves of feathers through the winding black streams of hair; her red lips were stark against her ivory skin, and her amber eyes flinty with fire.

Circe swung her scorching gaze to the dream snatcher. “How much of the black henbane potion did you give him —”

“All of it,” said the dream snatcher.

Circe hissed through her teeth. “I. Said. Half.” Her white-knuckled fists clenched around the box she was holding.

“Is that the key?” said the dream snatcher, noticing the box. His eyes glittered and his face flushed pink, he wrung his hands and hopped from one foot to the other. “The key, my reward, all mine.”

Circe spun to face him, her eyes darkening from amber to black. “Your reward, is that I shall let you live, and return to your pathetic little hobby of thieving worthless dreams.”

The dream snatcher cowered. “You promised me the key.”

Circe laughed. “You miniscule fool! There is no key.”

The dream snatcher shrank away from her, red-faced and trembling. “There is a key.” He looked at the box in her hands. “And I will find it, and you will — you will pay for deceiving me.”

“Oh, really?”

Circe reached down, scooped a fistful of dirt and blew it in a fine stream back to the ground. The dirt particles spiraled into a small twister: it spun and whirled, gathering fallen leaves and twigs and gaining momentum, it swirled higher and tore across the ground, collecting everything in its path, and encircled the dream

snatcher. His shrieks were stifled as he spun in the centre of the twister as it howled around the clearing.

The twister slowly lost its force and dissipated; in the residue of dust and leaves crouched a wide-eyed possum, its pink nose twitching, its bushy tail looped around its body like a scarf.

Circe clapped her hands. “How perfect!”

The dream snatcher hissed then, startled by the sound, whimpered and scampered into the brambles.

Circe smiled and turned towards Zac who still lay on the ground. “Zachary.”

“Zac,” said Zac.

“What shall we do with you, Zachary, while we wait for your silly little girlfriend to bumble her way here.”

“Leave her out of this.”

“Leave her out? But isn’t she the one coming after innocent *moi*?”

“Only cos you stole the oracle cards from her.”

“Well, it turns out that I do need her, after all.” Circe tapped her elegant fingers on the wooden box containing the oracle cards.

“She’s probably at home by now.”

Circe smiled. “Fortunately for me, Zachary, Rachel can’t leave the underworld until she’s done what she intended to do here — namely, to retrieve the oracle cards from me.”

Circe uttered a bird-like call, and a kākā landed on her shoulder.

“You — where are my cookies, thief?” said Zac.

“Of course,” said Circe, “silly me — you’re already acquainted.”

Krraaaark.

Zac pushed himself to sitting. His head rocked with dizziness and his stomach burned. He staggered to his feet and ran with slow-moving legs to the fringe of Circe’s abode without looking back. The ponga trees lifted their fallen fronds to block his path, the brittle fronds grasping for him, whispering words echoed from

Circe — *catch him catch him catch him* — Zac crashed his way through and flung himself at the webbed wall, slicing it apart with his pocketknife, then raced through tunnels of thorny brambles until he reached the edge of Lake Rotomahana where he stopped, gulping air into the far reaches of his lungs. The opposite shore was miles away. He looked around for the canoe the dream snatcher had brought him here in; there was no sign of it.

There was no other way across the lake: Zac stepped in. His feet were instantly numb with cold. Across the water, dark clouds stormed around the mountain, mingling with the smoke streaming from its insides; a ripple shuddered through the water as the mountain shook. Hornwort weed swayed in the shallows, its tooth-edged leaves grazing Zac's legs. He dived into the freezing lake and, kicking furiously, swam away from the island.

An icy cold speared his lungs and his clothes dragged heavy in the water; he fought to keep his sluggish limbs moving, until slowly his body began to warm and his strokes strengthened, pulling him forward. The dullness ebbed from his body, his senses cleared, and adrenaline pushed him along faster and faster.

He was jerked to a stop. Water forced up his nose and blood flooded his head. Arms of hornwort weed, reaching from the bottom of the lake, had snaked around his limbs. He was pulled under, deep. Blue-green-grey water swirled around him, alive with tiny bubbles. Wriggling free of the slimy grasp of the weed, he kicked upwards and broke the surface, gasping, before more strands of hornwort encircled his legs, and towed him back under. He pulled against the murky weed holding him, uprooting its leaves from the sediment at the bottom of the lake then pushed for the surface, his lungs rasping for air. The groping arms of weed pulled tighter around his limbs, the sharp edges biting into his skin, and he was lurched back to the shallows, where Circe waited, knotting her hair leisurely between her twirling fingers.

Zac stayed perfectly still as the giant katipo spun a web securing him to the huddle of black trunks at the centre of Circe's abode.

"I believe you're already met my spider ally." Circe circled around Zac. "It's a shame I need to keep you bound Zac, but it's for your own good. I can't have you running amok, this is a dangerous place and I wouldn't want you to come to any harm now, would I."

Woven into one of the webs was the small bird carving he had left Great Rātā as an offering.

"What are you doing with my bird?" said Zac.

"I was under the impression it was a gift."

"It was, but not for you."

"And who exactly was it meant for?"

"Great Rātā — for the spirit of the forest."

"Oh I wouldn't waste your precious gifts on that old tree Zachary; the rātā is practically dead and the great spirit of the forest is dying."

"No, that's not true."

Circe smiled. "Oh, I think you'll find soon enough that it is." She turned and stalked away.

Rachel placed her hands on the ancient skin near the nostril holes of the tuatara.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes blurring with tears, "thank you."

The tuatara nodded then closed its bronze-speckled eyes and sank its massive body back into the earth, its moss-covered skin blending into the landscape; Rachel could no longer tell where the tuatara ended and the landscape began.

A small speck of white poked out from the moss. Rachel reached down and tapped it; it was dense, like bone. Digging around the object she freed it from the earth and held it in her hand; the triangular-shaped tooth was almost the size of her palm. Her salty tears slid to the earth as she pulled a thread from her t-shirt and

knotted the gift from the tuatara to her necklace.

She stood and looked through the valley to Lake Rotomahana — Zac had said they needed to get to the Pink Terraces; that from there was the shortest distance to Aea. She just needed to figure out the best way to get down to the lake.

A plant with tiny white flowers sprang from the trunk of a totara tree next to her. She walked up to the plant; the white star-shaped petals had a purple and green centre. This was the orchid that Grandma had shown her in her dream. She followed the path of orchids growing on the trees to a trickling stream, a stream that flowed down to Lake Rotomahana.

Is that the stars in the sky, or is it

Rain fallin' down

Will it burn me if I touch the sun

So big, so round

Zac sung to stay awake. Circe had taken off somewhere, leaving him wrapped to the trunk in the dense web. The threads around him vibrated and he heard the katipo moving in the web high above him. Dullness lingered in his body from the potion of black henbane. He felt himself lured towards sleep then jerked his head up, as something flew past on swift and silent wings.

Quor-quork.

A man appeared in front of Zac.

“Hey,” said Zac. “I saw you in the clearing the other day — flying the kite.”

The man nodded.

Draped across the man’s shoulders was a cloak, the fibers worn thin. On his face deep pounamu-green lines etched an eternal tattoo. The large claw of a bird hung on a plaited fibre cord around his neck. He leaned lightly on a walking staff smooth with age and carved as an eagle with luminous eyes of mother-of-pearl.

The man bent forward and pressed the bridge of his nose against Zac’s, their

foreheads lightly touched. Zac felt the power and strength flowing from the man.

As he stepped away, the man spoke slowly, every word rich with meaning,
“Your ancestry is of the bird people Zachary.”

He shuffled his feet and changed his staff to the other hand.

“The ancient ones who fly their minds, who find their strength in music; in the song of the forest, the beauty of the dawn chorus.”

Zac kept his eyes on the man, his senses sharp to every word.

The man held out a small wooden flute. “This belongs to you Zachary; as it was your great grandfathers before you, and his before him.”

The man kept his eyes on the flute.

“You will find your totem animal here in the underworld. Your animal will show you your strengths, and your weaknesses. It will show you the qualities you require to align with the oneness of all things. When it comes to you, ask it three times if it is your totem animal. If it answers yes three times, then it is so.”

Zac opened his mouth then closed it again.

The man looked up at Zac. “You must remember from where you have come Zachary, in order to know where you are going.”

“Are you... my great grandad?”

The man knelt and placed the flute on the ground in front of Zac then turned away, becoming one with the trees.



Rachel followed the orchid-lined stream to a swamp edging onto Lake Rotomahana. The water was stagnant. Dragonflies scooped and skimmed above the congealed surface of sulphur-yellow slime, and branches, estranged from their trunks, jabbed through the bog. The Pink Terraces must be just beyond the swamp, around the next curve.

Rachel gripped the ouroboros ring, took a breath and plunged in: the swamp glugged around her, sucking at her legs, and coating her clothes in slime. The bottom was thick with mud, it sloshed over the edges of her sneakers. She pulled a branch free from the sludge and used it to help forge her way, balancing her backpack on her head to stop it from getting soaked as the water rose to her waist, then chest, then shoulders. She walked on the tips of her toes, barely keeping her head above the waterline until the level ebbed and it grew shallower and shallower and she stepped from the swamp onto dry ground.

She jogged alongside the lake, her sneakers sloppy with mud, and rounded the point. The Pink Terraces spanned the hillside, cascading in salmon-pink tiers down to the shore of the lake where she stood. Layers of silica formed the scallop-shaped pools, brimming with water of a clear cerulean-blue. Steam danced across the surface then sighed away. At the top of the terraces two geysers hissed water high into the air then fell quiet, then spouted again in never-ending cycles. Rachel dipped her hand in the water; it was warm and light and silky to touch.

A woman's voice sang across the lake, rising and falling in waves, bringing goose bumps to Rachel's arms.

A small waka rested at the lake edge. A woman stood at the bow, holding a paddle carved with the face of a tiki with large paua eyes. She was wrapped in a finely woven cloak dotted with single white feathers, around her neck hung a fishhook carved from bone, her chin was tattooed with patterns of swirling green, and a solitary vein of silver streaked her dark hair.

The woman smiled and held out her hand, continuing her chant. Rachel looked around her then waded through the shallows, took the woman's hand and stepped into the front of the waka. They glided swiftly away from the shore, through the floating reflection of the Pink Terraces. Rachel looked back to see figures at the base of the terraces, they stood lining the shore, their silhouettes hazy as they drifted in and out of steam. They gazed out towards Rachel and were singing, the same chant as the woman; Rachel didn't understand the words but she felt a tightness in her chest; the song sounded so sad and at the same time so beautiful.

The figures shrank in the steam as the waka drew away from the terraces and into the shadow of Mount Tarawera. Lightning flashed, briefly uniting the mountain with the heavens, and thunder rattled the earth, rippling the surface of the lake. Rachel wrapped her arms around her knees pulling them close to her chest, and observed the woman: she kept up her chant, paddling in rhythm with her words, and the waka glided swiftly and effortlessly through the water, the prow carving a smooth path to the island. The Pink Terraces slipped out of view as they drew closer to Aeaea. The kauri gum heart around her neck burned against her skin.

The waka nudged the stony shore of Aeaea. Rachel stepped on shaky legs into the shallows then turned back to the woman; the waka was already halfway back across

the lake. Rachel waved, and the woman turned and held up her hand in response then the waka vanished.

She faced a steep cliff. Pohutukawa trees, crimson with flowers, peered over the top, and their roots built a latticework across the face of the cliff. Rachel made sure the straps of her backpack were secure, and climbed the roots; this was much easier than climbing down the slimy wall at the waterfall. At the top of the cliff the ground was potholed with boiling pools, and wailing and sighing fumaroles. Rachel wove a path through them, sidestepping splashing water and hissing steam, and came to a forest of blackberry brambles.

A tunnel led into the brambles. She peered into it; the ground was smooth with dirt, and the tunnel was high enough for her to stand in. It was quiet. She took a few steps in. Twilight filtered through the leaves of the branches so that it wasn't completely dark. She walked until she came to a fork in the tunnel, turned left then came to a crossroad, where each of the four directions looked the same, and chose left again. She heard a faint scratching in the tunnel ahead. Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. She turned and ran back towards the crossroad. A possum darted across the path and disappeared in the brambles. She reached the crossroads and checked the next passage, something large and insect-like crawled towards her from the dark of the tunnel; she turned to the next passage to find another of the creatures; then she spun to the last tunnel: two long thin antennae swung from the passage, a long spiky leg stepped out, then another. Rachel edged backwards. The rest of the creature's body emerged and the oversized wētā peered down at her, its antennae flicking in the air. Its glossy brown armour creaked and groaned and long mandibles curved from between the bulging black eyes on its long face. This must be the wētā Koro Stan had told them about — the wētāpunga.

Rachel backed away and into the spiked leg of another wētāpunga. She spun in a circle; the armoured giants surrounded her. The wētā she'd bumped into hissed, arcing its hind legs up into the air, ready to strike. Rachel stumbled backwards and reached for the rainbow vial from Izzy; instead her fingers closed around the

lucky stone — the invisibility stone: she held it up and disappeared. Holding her breath she inched forward, sneaking a path between the legs of spikes and dodging the searching antennae, and sprinted down the thorny tunnel she had first turned down.

Rachel burst from the blackberry tunnel and glanced back; the wētāpunga had stopped halfway down the passage, they were no longer following her. She was in a clearing fenced with thick webs. At the centre, trapped in a web, was Zac.



“Zac!” She ran towards him.

He grinned. “I knew you’d make it citygirl.”

Circe appeared in front of Rachel; the kākā perched on her shoulder.

“Welcome. Welcome. Welcome.”

Rachel gawked at Circe. Gone was her feathered black cape; instead a shimmering gown of midnight cascaded around her down to the ground. Her glossy hair fell loose, making soft black waves around her luminous heart-shaped face, and her lips were painted blood-red.

Circe tapped her fingers on the wooden box containing the oracle cards. “You can’t imagine how pleased I am to see you *citygirl*. You see, little lamb, for some unfathomable reason, I cannot open this box. It is bound by a magic I have not encountered — a strange magic — not of this world, or any other I know of. As you might imagine, it’s mildly frustrating.”

She hurled the box at a trunk. Smashing against the bark, the box crashed to the ground, landing facing the right way up, unmarked.

“That’s because it’s not yours.” Rachel’s voice sounded small in the open space.

“Excuse me?”

Rachel spoke louder. “It’s because it doesn’t belong to you.”

Circe began to laugh, twinkling at first then rising to a shriek and fading, full circle, back to silence. She circled Rachel slowly. “Oh, my dear, you really are just a naïve little lamb. And I suppose you think it belongs to you — this powerful and

magical thing.”

“N — no. But I’m meant to be looking after it, meant to be the guardian of it.”

“Not doing such a good job of *looking after it* are you.” Circe smiled. “Now miss, *I’m so special I have to look after the oracle cards*, how about you open this now, or I set my eight-legged, eight-eyed friend on your scrawny little boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Oh, so you won’t mind if he’s — dinner.”

Circe turned to signal the spider.

Rachel stepped towards Circe. “Stop.”

“Yeah. Stop,” said Zac.

Circe smiled at Rachel. “Change of heart, sweetheart?”

“Never — ” Rachel was cut off by a hiss from Laurence as he leapt from the shadows at Circe. He clawed lines in her pale flesh and his fangs pierced her arm.

Circe screamed and flung Laurence away. “That. Demon. Cat.” She spat the words.

Laurence landed on his feet, wide yellow eyes fixed on Circe, fangs bared, his raised fur doubling him in size.

Rachel edged closer to Zac, who was wriggling frantically but held tight by the web.

Circe swung to face Rachel. “OPEN. THIS. NOW. Or I will kill you, your boyfriend, and that cat — oracle or no oracle.” Her skin stretched taut across her face, her eyes fell into the infinite black wells of their sockets, her red lips drew into a snarl, and her hair writhed behind her in wild swirls. Blood spilled from the wounds on her arm, dying the earth red.

“No.” Rachel’s voice shook as she spoke. “I’ll never open the oracle cards for you.”

“No?” Circe screamed. “No — is not — an option.” She shook her head wildly and paced in tight circles, curses wrapped in spit flinging from her tongue.

Rachel’s head throbbed. She felt nauseous. Circe’s words spun inside her head,

battling against her mind. She swayed and nearly fell, then righted herself.

Circe came to a halt and her face smoothed back into a mask of beauty. When she spoke her voice was calm and steady. “You really are trying my patience, little lamb. Quite determined aren’t you. You know, we are one and the same, you and I, we could make a great team, working together as one, for the greater — ”

“Never!” said Rachel.

“Ah, I see the black wolf in you — she is strong, stronger than the white wolf I think.”

“No!”

Circe glanced at Zac trapped in the web. The spider hovered above him, its bulbous eyes glistening, its fangs extended from its jaw. Circe stepped close and grabbed Rachel’s chin with claw-like fingers. “You grossly underestimate my power, my dear. You have no idea how easy it is for me to destroy you, here, now.”

Circe let go of Rachel and took a step back. She continued in a softer tone, “Although I don’t suppose anyone would miss you would they little lamb? Your parents too occupied with their highly important and all-consuming work, sweet little Granny in a grave, friends having fun without you, Auntie B who only agreed to have you because there was nowhere else — ”

Rachel’s head ached. “That’s not true!” A tear squeezed from her eye and she pushed it away.

Zac shouted at Circe. “Stop spinning lies!”

Circe laughed. “Curse me all you like, Zachary. Rachel knows in her heart of hearts that what I say is the truth.”

Circe spoke in Rachel’s mind. “Most people don’t get to choose their destiny, but you have a choice Rachel. I can see your potential, your future. I can teach you the way of the dark goddess and you can make your life everything you want it to be; greater and more powerful than you could ever imagine — you’ll be free.”

“Don’t listen to her — she’s a liar!” Zac yelled at Rachel.

The mountain rumbled and the earth bucked beneath them. Rachel and Circe

were knocked from their feet. The oracle cards fell from Circe's grasp and lay on the ground between them. Rachel crawled towards the cards. Circe pounced for them. And Laurence leapt at Circe.

Laurence sank his claws and fangs into Circe; she spun towards him, her human form twisting and turning into a spitting and snarling black panther. The kākā flew in screeching circles above them and Rachel tumbled out of the fight and scrambled over to Zac. The katipo hovered above him, Zac's reflection multiplied in its glassy eyes.

"My knife, in my pocket!" said Zac.

Rachel freed the knife and hacked at the sticky threads of web holding Zac.

"Hurry!" said Zac.

"I am!"

"Hurry faster —"

Silver wands of lightning struck the mountain, and flaming pillars shot into the twilight sky. The earth boomed and tore itself apart, swallowing trees whole. The katipo hovered over them; Rachel felt the long hairs on its leg graze her skin. Its fangs, extended from its jaw, quivered closer and closer to Zac. She gripped the pocketknife tightly and stabbed it upwards into one of the katipo's bulbous eyes. The spider squealed and reared, it tucked its legs tight to its body then froze for a split second before it dropped, writhing, to the ground.

Zac was yelling something to her but the wind ripped the words from his mouth and flung them away. He kicked his way out of the few remaining threads of web, picked the flute up off the ground, and began to play.

Rachel ran back to where the oracle cards lay in the dirt. A few paces away she stopped; the katipo scuttled towards her and she turned to find the black panther right behind.

A huge golden hokioi eagle sped into the clearing and hurled into the black panther; they tumbled in a knot of talons and fangs, and thrashing wings and limbs — a circling blur of gold and glistening black.

Zac cut across the path of the katipo with a string of web that was still attached to the four trunks; the katipo tripped, its legs buckling under its off-kilter body, and collapsed to the ground. Zac retrieved his pocketknife from its eye then wound threads of sticky web around the spider, wrapping it in its own web.

The panther snarled and hissed and clawed as the hokioi hauled her into the air. She twisted and turned in the grip of the great hokioi. Her sleek black coat rippled into glossy feathers, her giant rear paws morphed into talons, and her snarling jaw became the strong snapping beak of a black raven. She broke free of the hokioi then lunged back towards him, driving her beak into his chest. The hokioi turned a somersault, and hooked his beak into her belly. They chased each other upwards, spinning in clashing circles, until they were out of sight.

“Laurence!” Rachel grabbed the oracle cards and ran towards where Laurence lay still, his limbs skewed at angles they shouldn’t be, and tufts of his fur clotted with blood. She grabbed the rainbow vial on her necklace — the one precious drop that could save him — then was knocked from her feet as the earth quaked, and ripped a chasm through the centre of the clearing; Rachel on one side and Laurence on the other.

It began to rain, a rain of cold mud. Zac joined Rachel as she searched for a way over to Laurence. The chasm was too wide to jump across and it stretched the length of the clearing.

Above them the two great birds, talons locked together, plummeted in a spiral towards the water. Together they crashed through the surface and spun to the depths of the lake. The hokioi let go of the raven, beat his giant wings through the water, and burst from the lake. He swooped into the clearing and scooped Rachel, then Zac, from the ground.

“No! Laurence!” Rachel writhed and screamed trying to pry free of the talons encircling her. The golden hokioi soared upwards; his great wings steady in the wind and rain. Below them, Aeahea shrunk to a speck.



The hokioi flew in a downward spiral towards Rainbow Mountain. The wind pulled at Rachel's hair and clothes but the talons of the hokioi held her in a firm but gentle grip. She looked back across the lake to the island. A sullen cloud hovered over Mount Tarawera, its underbelly reflecting the fiery pits below, as the mountain spewed fireballs from its core. Her tears were lost in the muddy rain. "I can't believe we left Laurence down there."

"He'll find his way home," said Zac.

"How? He's probably dead by now." Her voice was just a whisper.

"Nah, not Laurence."

The hokioi eased them to the ground and perched on a large rock, resting his powerful wings at his sides. The feathers on the top of his wings were brilliant gold, and underneath the feathers were white, tipped with brown, the same as the plumage on his chest. His beak curved downward into a sharp point and was covered with dried blood and black feathers. He regarded them with keen eyes flecked with gold, then spoke, his deep voice reverberating in their minds: "You must return to your home with haste. For now, your purpose in the underworld is fulfilled."

Rachel glanced down at the oracle cards clutched tightly in her hands.

Zac bowed his head. "Thank you."

Rachel did the same.

The hokioi bowed in return. "We will meet again."

Rachel and Zac were pushed backwards by the force of his wings as the great hokioi took off, and glided away from Rainbow Mountain. A single golden feather floated down towards them and came to rest on the ground. Rachel reached for it.

“A golden feather — to show us the way home.”

“The way back to Aunty B’s fried bread.”

Rachel looked around them. A few low shrubs grew in clusters and near the top of the mountain was a lone tree, but otherwise the mountainside was bare. Rachel held up the feather. “But how does it work? I thought something would just happen.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, like we would magically be home.”

Rachel reached for the ouroboros ring, and found the kauri gum heart between her fingers instead. “Well, I think I can get rid of this now.”

“Hey!” said Zac.

“What?”

“Your spider’s gone.”

Rachel looked at the pendant. “What do you you think it mea — ”

Zac flicked Rachel’s arm with the back of his hand.

“Ow!” She followed Zac’s gaze to the spider that he’d flicked from her arm, scuttling away across the dirt.

Zac leapt onto the spider, crushing his sneaker down. The spider slipped out the side and disappeared into a crack in the earth. He kicked the dirt.

“I can’t believe that evil witch.”

“Zac — aren’t katipo poisonous?” Rachel’s voice trembled. Angry red welts tracked steadily up her arm from two tiny bite marks on her left wrist.

“I feel really — ” Rachel sucked in short gasps then began to wheeze. She desperately drew air into her lungs, but it felt like there was no space for it to go. Her head swam with the pain burning through her body. She doubled over, holding her stomach. Her body started to shake, then cramp, then convulse. Her mind numbed with hurt then the world ebbed into nothingness.

Zac reached for Rachel as she fainted. He lowered her to the ground, and looked hopelessly around the bare mountain; there was no one else in sight, no one at home even knew where they were, and he had no idea how to get back. The first aid kit was in his backpack, which lay at the bottom of Inferno Crater Lake. He only had the bird flute, and Koro Stan's map. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Come on citygirl, geez you can't die — not now — wake up!"

Rachel's necklace swung across her chest. The rainbow vial from Izzy glowed, its rainbow colours swirling together as one. Zac's heartbeat raced double-time. He yanked the vial from Rachel's necklace and with shaky hands extracted the stopper and held it upside down over the spider bite.

"This better work Izzy."

All eight colours swirled together and gathered in a single drop at the narrow opening of the vial. The drop paused, suspended, defying gravity, hugging the glass lip.

Zac shook the vial. "Come on, come on."

The drop gained momentum, then fell — splash — onto Rachel's arm.

A pearlescent glow appeared around the spider bite then slowly spread and embraced Rachel's whole body in a soft white aura. The light pulsed stronger and stronger; pulling on Rachel's body. Colours rippled through the white as the aura extended further. Zac was forced a few steps back as the aura pulsed stronger and transformed into a brilliant white-hot flame that radiated outwards from Rachel. He squinted his eyes against the intense light.

A long barb was sucked from Rachel's arm and slowly pushed away by the shimmering white aura. An arms length from her body the barb stopped and hovered. The aura nudged it further away and almost out of its confines then the barb pushed back with greater force against the aura and splintered into shards. The shards were thrust from the aura and all of them disintegrated in the air; all except one tiny shard that flew into Rachel's mouth. Zac heard a shriek. He couldn't tell if

it came from Rachel, or the thing, or him. Rachel's body convulsed. She coughed. The aura shimmered weaker then dissipated. Another shriek; it definitely wasn't coming from him. He took a step back, away from that sound, away from Rachel.

Rachel felt her strength returning, the warmth of life creeping back into her. The world fluttered into view. The landscape around her burst with colour: emerald-green grass, fire-red sky; she could feel the earth under her, the small stone pressing into her back; she could hear the song of the wind as it rushed across the mountain; and could smell wild jasmine under the reek of sulphur.

She sat up. Her head spun in dizzy circles.

Zac stood a few metres away from her, his palms held up in front of him.

"What happened?" she said.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"You sure?"

"Ah, yeah. Why are you all the way over there?"

Zac slowly walked towards her. "You sure you feel okay?"

"Um, yeah."

Zac flopped onto the ground. "Geez, I thought you were gonna cark it."

"I remember — spinning — then nothing."

"Lucky you had that hippy potion from Izzy. I tipped it on the bite and there was this freaky disco glow around you. Then —" He stopped. Shrugged. "Then you woke up."

Rachel held up her arm. The angry purple welts had faded to a soft lavender bruise. The earth quaked violently.

"We better get out of here before that mountain decides to really lose it," said Zac.

Rachel searched the ground around her. "The golden feather — I must have dropped it."

Zac glanced sideways at Rachel.

“What?” she said.

Zac held the feather up.

She laughed. “Thank goodness for that.”

Zac’s grin disappeared as a gust of wind tore the feather from his hand.

He raced after it, and Rachel stumbled after him, and the feather. The wind strengthened, picking up leaves and flinging them into the air and the golden feather was lost amidst the chaos. Rachel saw a flash of gold and followed it to the lone tree near the summit. The tree was tall and skinny and its trunk was slightly hunched, its leaves mostly clustered near the top. Rachel glimpsed gold amongst the red-splotched green leaves on the ground. As she bent to pick up the golden feather a leaf shimmied down from the tree and caught in her hair. She pulled the leaf free: it was pale green and splotched with red.

Zac ran over. “Find anything?”

Rachel held up the golden feather in one hand and the horopito leaf in the other.

Zac grinned. “Nice one citygirl.” He looked up at the horopito tree. “I think it’s even the same tree.”

Cli-cli-cli.

Rachel and Zac looked to the birdcall. A silvereye perched in a tree a little way down the mountain, next to a path. Tears made clean tracks down Rachel’s mud-stained face as they ran towards the silvereye, and stepped from the twilight underworld onto the path back into their world: the path home.

Day transformed to night as they journeyed home; their path lit by a waning moon.

“Wonder how long we’ve been gone,” said Zac.

“Feels like about seventeen million years.”

“Geez, no wonder I’m so hungry.”

A flute-like tune sounded over the quiet evening bird chatter.

“What bird is that?”

Zac stopped and listened. “It’s not a bird — I think it’s a patupaiarehe flute.”

Rachel searched the shadows, hoping to glimpse one of the mysterious patupaiarehe who had divined the oracle cards she clasped in her hands. A tentacle of mist wove through the trees, carrying the lilting harmonies. She heard voices, and laughter, but the patupaiarehe, for now, remained elusive.

Emerging from the Black Forest, Rachel looked across the lake, it was still and clear, a perfect reflection of Mount Tarawera streaming a ribbon of smoke and the Magenta Star in the sky above.

They turned towards Aunty B’s, where the windows glowed warm with light.

“Hey Rachel, you’re pretty cool you know. For a citygirl.”

Rachel grinned then reached out and punched his arm.

PART TWO : MCW EXEGESIS

A Symbol Speaks a Thousand Words

Suzanne Day

An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing (MCW).

2014 / School of Language and Culture

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Motivation for writing *The Spider in the Heart*

Today [...] trees rarely, if ever, speak to us; animals no longer approach us as emissaries from alien zones of intelligence; the sun and the moon no longer draw prayers from us but seem to arc blindly across the sky. How is it that these phenomena *no longer address us*, no longer compel our involvement or reciprocate our attention (Abram, 1996, p. 130, italics original).

Today we live in a fast-paced global society in which we spend much of our time immersed in technology and urban environments that are largely disassociated with nature. Not only are we losing touch with nature, but also with other people, and even ourselves. We construct our understanding of the world by pulling together the transient threads of our fragmented existence — using a diverse mix of cultural, social, and historical belief systems — to help make sense of who we are, and why we're here.

Over the past three years my journey of self-discovery has involved study through a medicine woman apprenticeship², which involves working with the healing wisdom of the native plants, trees and flowers of Aotearoa, and learning the sacred knowledge of the Kura Huna — the ancient Māori school of mystery. While the teachings involve aspects of Māori tradition, they are essentially about the concept of oneness, and are not determined by which cultural cloak you wear (mine being that of a Pākehā). The purpose of the studies is to foster a deeper connection with nature and gain a greater awareness of self and sense of purpose; consequently these teachings have been a major influence in writing *The Spider in the Heart*.

2 The medicine woman apprenticeship is facilitated by New Zealand born Franchelle Ofoske-Whyber, medicine woman and co-founder — along with Tony Whyber — of First Light Flower Essences, in collaboration with Māori Tohuna, Dr Rangimarie Turuki Akorangi Rose Pere. The teachings focus on the native teacher plants of New Zealand. Ofoske-Whyber (2010) describes the intention of working with the teacher plants: “Shaman and medicine men and women, throughout all ages and cultures have worked with teacher plants. The teacher plants are seen as wise beings that have been here for much longer than we have and who have much wisdom and experience with which to guide us. They invite us to enter into sacred relationship with plant intelligence and to re-remember the age-old green language of nature” (p. 2). A discourse on the Green Language appears on pp. 158-159 of this exegesis.

A quest for identity

The Spider in the Heart depicts a quest for identity by the protagonist Rachel, as she searches for a sense of self, and place, through her relationship with the unfamiliar landscape she is placed in. Campbell (2008) defined such a quest as the hero's journey — a universal path of adventure and transformation in which “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (p. 23). In considering a genre in which to place the work, I first explore what it is that makes the reader relate to the work.

The search for identity is a trope common to YA literature³ (Kaplan, 2005). Young adulthood is a universal life stage in which physical, psychological, and emotional changes are experienced that are strongly associated with the “development of a sense of self and individual identity, including a certainty in future goals and plans and personal values and judgments” (Rosenberg, 2012, p.6):

Within the text of the Young Adult Novel, despite the historical epoch, local setting, cast of characters, or even primary plot point, there is one universal thread, and that is the process of grappling with the formation of an individual identity during an emotional and psychological stage of the no-man's-land between childhood and adulthood. Young Adult Literature is important because young adults are reading it, and it means something to them; it means something to them because it is reflective of a life stage that is as collective as it is isolated (Rosenberg, 2012, p.31).

Bean and Moni (2003), in their experience of how YA literature is read and taught in classrooms, state that:

3 Young adult (YA) literature is term that entered the literary canon after the 1967 publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (Rosenberg, 2012). The term YA can vary widely within the age bracket of 10-20 year old readers; currently in the UK and the US the term children's literature is used to encompass writing directed at 0-16 year olds, 16 being the current school-leaving age (Reynolds, 2011, p. 29).

Due to the relatively recent emergence of the YA genre, the term 'children's literature' was historically, and in some cases remains, inclusive of a YA audience. In accordance with this, the instances I have quoted sources that use the term children's literature, include — or refer specifically to — a YA audience.

Adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teenagers (Bean & Rigoni, 2001). At the center of all of these themes are questions of character identity and values (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 368).

Bean and Moni also suggest that because YA novels deal with issues relevant to their readers they “provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life” (p. 368). As Rosenberg (2012) advocates: “Young Adult Literature is far more than merely a bunch of stories for teenagers. The genre exists, and remains pertinent, because the books act as a comfort and a mirror to the trying time of adolescence” (p. 29).

Rachel’s quest for identity in *The Spider and the Heart* becomes a mirror for the reader as they form their own identity. The age of the characters in the narrative is also an influence that determines the reader, and Joy Cowley states this is because YA readers can identify more easily with characters their own age, or with those who are slighter older (International Institute of Modern Letters, 2012). The primary characters in *The Spider and the Heart* are both 12 years old, which indicates that a reader of a similar age would relate to the specific concerns and experiences of the characters. Rosenberg (2012) suggests that “locating and relating to something similar, or seeing oneself in someone or something else, helps foster a stronger identity development” (p. 8):

The characters of a Young Adult Novel are at once — real individuals, and blank canvasses that allow room for projection that most certainly assists in personal self-understanding. The “hey, that reminds me of me” moment is what makes Young Adult Literature so important for the development of young adults, and, of course, can catalyze an understanding of interaction with text that is an important component in lifelong literacy (Rosenberg, 2012, p.31).

The introspective nature of the journey of adolescence allows for layers of complexity in a narrative, and as Rosenberg (2012) suggests, “Young Adult literature serves to create a reflective space for young readers as they traverse the

chaos of adolescence” (p.1). In their quest for a sense of self and individual identity, the YA reader is in search of a deeper connection with the characters and themes of a story, and not just the narrative plot. As Kaplan (2005) states, “young people hunger for readily identifiable markers so they can explore and define their ever-changing and cyber-reaching universe” (p. 16).

This notion of searching beyond the plot of a narrative corresponds with YA author Alan Garner’s thinking: “An onion can be peeled down through its layers, but it is always, at every layer, an onion, whole in itself. I try to write onions” (Meek et.al, 1977, p. 197). This approach is reflected in a review of Garner’s work:

Alan Garner’s books make demands on his readers as great as many an adult masterpiece, although they can always be read at the level of ‘what happens next’ (Meek et.al, 1977, p. 196).

White (1998) considers Garner’s novels as “multi-layered, carefully crafted, psychologically truthful works” (p. 75). Singling out *The Owl Service* (1967), White describes the novel as having “layers of psychological realism presented in the guise of fantasy” (p. 76) and contributes this to the four years of extensive research that Garner undertook prior to writing the work. I suggest that the depth of layering in this novel is also due to Garner’s use of mythology to construct his characters, plot and themes; and that the universal nature of mythology offers the YA reader a deeper knowledge and understanding that lies beyond the myth⁴.

While *The Spider in the Heart* works at a simple plot level, as a physical quest to retrieve the oracle cards from the underworld, it can also be mined for deeper universal truths: ideas and concepts from mythology and the medicine woman teachings — such as the concept that we are one with nature, and the belief that magic is inherent in everyday life — are woven throughout the narrative and

4 The notion of the universality of mythology is further discussed on pp. 156-157 of this exegesis.

explored through Rachel's search for individual identity and her engagement with nature; Rachel's experiences act as a means for the reader to identify with the universal concepts inherent in the narrative, and to reflect on their own relationship with nature, and magic.

Magical realism as a means of transgressing boundaries

The juxtaposition of an ordinary reality with the magical dimension of the underworld in *The Spider in the Heart* is the perfect setting to challenge the protagonist — and the reader — to question, and possibly reevaluate, the existing boundaries of their reality. Zamora and Faris (1995) observe the potential of the mode of magical realism to set up a space for transformation to occur:

[...] magical realism is a mode suited to exploring — and transgressing — boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds — in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 5).

Investigating the emergence of magical realism in children's literary texts, Hammer (2006) shows how the merging of realistic and magical events can create new lenses and help construct new perspectives:

Magical Realism is identified as a narrative mode because it is a discourse style that infiltrates realistic genres with an associated capacity to redirect textual interpretation (Hammer, 2006).

The Spider in the Heart utilises the polarities of magical realism: by grounding the narrative in an ordinary reality, the more magical aspects seem more believable than they might in a pure fantasy setting. This allows the seamless merging of

realities which is essential to the narrative. Rachel must not only adapt to a new rural reality, removed from the urban one she is familiar with, but also contend with the even more unfamiliar magical domain of the underworld. In doing so, she must transform her existing ideas about the reality she lives in, and create a new lens through which to see who she is, and determine her place among others, and in the world.

A review of Isabel Allende's (2012) YA novel *City of the Beasts* describes the work as "both palpable with detail and dense with illusion that blurs the line between magic and reality" (Martin, 2002). Magical realism is not a term Allende applies to her writing: "It's strange that my work has been classified as magic realism because I see my novels as just being realistic literature" (Rodden, 2004, p. 156), suggesting that what she writes about is simply the natural way of her Latin-American culture.

This notion of magic, and the supernatural being part of the natural fabric of everyday life is seen in many cultures, and is also evident in New Zealand YA novels which use ideas and concepts gleaned from Māori tradition.

Māori Gothic is a genre coined at the release of David Hair's (2010) *The Taniwha's Tear* — the second book of his YA fantasy *The Aotearoa Series* — to describe the "weaving together elements of fantasy, horror and Māori and Celtic mythology" (Harpercollins, n.d.).

The value of the term Māori Gothic is evaluated in a recent study of how New Zealand is depicted in YA literature (Jackson, Miles, Ricketts, Schaefer, & Walls, 2011). In a chapter dedicated to Māori Gothic, Miles (2011) reviews several New Zealand YA texts by both Māori and Pākehā authors, and surmises that while the selected texts may include moments of Māori Gothic, the term doesn't really work for any of them; Miles suggests that the Māori writers use the supernatural as part

of the natural fabric of the worlds they inhabit, so cannot be determined as Gothic⁵, and the intention of the Pākehā writers is more about defining a bicultural New Zealand identity (Jackson, 2011, p. 217).

Although I also agree the term Māori Gothic doesn't work, the idea behind it interests me, as the collection of texts Miles has collated for his investigation all show common themes that have inspired my own thinking and writing, and that are explored in *The Spider and the Heart*; in particular the relationship Māori tradition has with nature, and the connection between natural and supernatural.

Miles claims that many Māori writers take an anti-Gothic view of the supernatural, and cites Witi Ihimaera's (2003) *The Whale Rider* as showing how the story works to dissolve the barrier between the natural and the supernatural. As Koro Apirana, the grandfather of the central character, Paikea, says:

As [man] grew in his arrogance he started to drive a wedge through the original oneness of the world. In the passing of time he divided the world into that half he could believe in and that half he could not believe in. The real and the unreal. The natural and the supernatural. The present and the past. The scientific and the fantastic. He put a barrier between both worlds and everything on his side was called rational and everything on the other side was called irrational (Ihimaera, 2003, p. 116).

Patricia Grace's (1978) *Mutuwhenua*, and Kingi McKinnon's (2002) *When the Kehua Calls*, both have Gothic tendencies, but these are balanced by the values and practices of traditional Māori culture; Miles surmises that "the essence of being Māori, then, is a sense of the oneness of the world which seems to solder up the gaps through which Gothic Horror might enter" (Jackson, 2011, p. 196).

5 I use the notion of Gothic here in the context that Lawn (2011) suggests — that the term 'Gothic' requires circumspection when applied to a Māori context: "Whereas the ghost ought not to be there within a Western rationalist perspective, spiritual presences are expected and socially acknowledged in the Māori lived-world, through the intertwining of past, present and future in every moment" (Jackson, 2011, p. 195).

Pere (1991) attests that everything in nature has a mauri, or thymos, and “Māori tradition emphasizes the need to live as closely as possible with nature, to learn about it, to understand it” (p. 22). This explains the integration in Māori tradition of the supernatural into everyday, and also the understanding that Papatuanuku — the earth — is animate and accessible. These ideas are inherent in *The Spider in the Heart*, in that the underworld exists as an accessible domain within the everyday reality, and nature — the land and every living being on it — is perceived as alive and can be communicated with.

Pākehā writers using Māori material raises a concern of cultural appropriation, and Miles believes this is why Pākehā authors who use elements of Māori tradition often focus on themes of biculturalism and national identity. The texts of Joanna Orwin, Joy Cowley and Margeret Mahy — among others — are mentioned for featuring supernatural Māori motifs, and Miles suggests these motifs are used as part of the “machinery of the text rather than its actual subject, and as a means of exploring the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and drawing the young protagonists towards an awareness of their identity as citizens of a bicultural nation” (Jackson, 2011, p. 200).

While the notion of defining a national identity fits for the Pākehā writers Miles mentions, I propose another reason: that the use of these motifs signifies a growing interest in the underlying relationship that Māori tradition has with nature, and the motifs act as symbols, pointing to the beliefs that exist beyond them. *The Spider in the Heart* is largely influenced by, and uses concepts and teachings from, Māori tradition and mythology — this is largely due to my participation in the medicine woman apprenticeship, mentioned in my introduction, and my interest in exploring the relationship that Māori tradition has with nature.

As *The Spider in the Heart* explores the boundaries between the real and unreal, the natural and the supernatural, we see in the ways in which Rachel and Zac — due to their different cultural and social contexts — experience nature. Rachel's initial disconnection with the natural world is shown by her sense of displacement and isolation in her new environment, away from the busy urban life where she was seemingly more connected to the world. She views nature through an urban lens, and relates everything around her to the city: “leaves graffitied with holes” (*The Spider in the Heart*, p. 5); plants sprouted from every crevice like weeds poking through cracks in a pavement” (*The Spider in the Heart*, p. 12); “tree trunks stretched like power poles into the sky” (*The Spider in the Heart*, p. 30).

In contrast, Zac is innately connected to nature — through both his Māori ancestry, and by spending his childhood years in a rural area. Consequently, he recognises the magic and wonder of nature, and easily engages with the natural world around him, with an inherent understanding that he is part of the natural environment.

The location of place and non-place

In contrast to the apparently unlimited, global character of the technologically mediated world, the sensuous world — the world of our direct, unmediated interactions — is always local (Abram, 1996, p. 266).

The society we live in today is largely disassociated with nature. Studies by Turkle (2011) indicate that despite our greater opportunities of connecting globally with others, individuals are experiencing a greater sense of isolation and loneliness. Cohen (2013) expresses that this is the paradox of our growing global society: the more connections we make, the less connected we become. Through social media we accumulate cyberspace friends, yet shun any true interaction with living humans and the world around us, creating a sense of social and emotional loneliness.

By spending more time in a virtual world and less in the natural world, we become disorientated in determining a sense of place. Contemporary life for teenagers today is often spent in what McDonald (1999) refers to as “non-places” — such as shopping malls, leisure parks, supermarkets, and railways stations — and he defines these non-places as being “disconnected from local events and identities, local narratives and histories” (p. 148). In exploring the importance of place, Bean and Moni (2003) raise the question: “Given this postmodern world of convenience and transience, how do young people find themselves?” (p. 640):

Urban teens navigate through shopping malls, train stations, airports, freeways, and the Internet. These fluid spaces are disorienting, disrupting a fixed sense of place, and this spills over into teens’ interior worlds. Instead of clear anchors in family, community, and institutions like schools to forge a coherent identity, these fluid spaces engender feelings of disconnection and alienation. (Mansfield, 2000). Identity in a mall culture is constructed through consumption of goods, with selfhood vested in things. Because this is ephemeral, feelings of panic and anxiety flow into teens’ lives (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 640).

The contemporary notion of the non-place echoes a traditional concern of events that are not located in a specific place. In Western Apache storytelling, the importance of identifying the geographical location of a story is stressed by anthropologist Basso (1992): unless Apache listeners are able to picture a physical setting the events in the narrative will seem to “happen nowhere” — an idea viewed as both preposterous and disquieting (Abram, 1996, p. 161). Abram resolves this is because:

A particular place in the land is never, for an oral culture, just a passive or inert setting for the human events that occur there. *It is an active participant in those occurrences* (Abram, 1996, p. 162, original italics).

This signifies the importance of physical place, in which we exist and interact with — regardless of cultural or social history — as essential to constructing our sense of identity.

Charting the responses of New Zealand children's writers to the local landscape, Hebley (1998) explores how these writers have internalised the country's natural imagery, and gained power in their work when drawing directly on the landscape.

Margaret Mahy admits that British landscapes became her reality through reading British stories, and she had difficulty in writing a story set specifically in the New Zealand landscape:

It involves a whole lot of subtle and mysterious things like the ability to give landscape a mythical quality and for some reason I wasn't able to give the New Zealand landscape that quality [...] I was made the inhabitant of a country that didn't exist (Duder, 2005, p. 102).

In her YA novel *The Tricksters*, Mahy (1986) achieved her aim to "internalize the country I live in" (Hebley, 1998, p. 87). *The Tricksters* draws powerfully on the external landscape to shape the characters and themes of truth and illusion; and at the end of the novel the protagonist's self-possession becomes connected to her sense of possession of the land. Mahy describes the moment of union between the exterior and interior landscape as "when the inner landscape widens and coalesces with, and interprets the outer landscape, then it does so in words which are the closest approximations to the state it perceives" (Duder, 2005, p. 146):

As Lutwack says even more pertinently: "It is not knowing the place that counts, however, but knowing oneself or finding the truth about oneself in a place" (Hebley, 1998, p. 89).

My intention in *The Spider in the Heart* was to use the geothermal landscape around Lake Tarawera as an environment to interact with Rachel's internal process of transformation. Rachel and Zac's means of entering the underworld is by drinking the dew — the essence — from the leaves of a horopito⁶ tree. In the

⁶ Horopito is a First Light Flower Essence used in a meta-physical sense to access the underworld: the place of the past and the realm of the ancestors and spirits; the place to seek wisdom, information and healing; and the place to connect with one's power animal (Ofsoske-Whyber, 2013, p. 4).

underworld, Rachel must face not only the precarious external volcanic area, but she must also confront her equally volatile inner landscape. By using mimesis as a means of conveying the internal conflicts Rachel experiences through the external landscape, I was able to show-not-tell what was occurring and thereby enlist the imagination of the reader as part of the storytelling process.

The underworld in *The Spider in the Heart* is shaped by the volcanic area of Waimangu Valley leading down to Lake Rotomahana, and is specific to the existing landscape⁷ — although it also depicts localised features from the past, such as the Pink and White terraces. To gain familiarity with the area, I visited several times, and twice did the full walk through Waimangu Valley to Lake Rotomahana. The underworld portrayed in the narrative is largely based on the experiences of those visits: the sketches and photographs of the landscape that I constantly referred to (see Figure 1 on p. 154), and descriptions of the visuals, smells, and sounds.

In accordance with Māori tradition, everything has a mauri and is regarded as “having the same divine right” (Pere, 1991, p. 12). Abram (1996) suggests the land has its own voice, and that just as humans communicate through audible and visible movements and gestures so does the land. Spending time in Waimangu — listening to the land — I began to determine the many voices of the area, and in *The Spider in the Heart* endeavored to give a voice to this landscape: by using language to mimic the environment, and assonance and sibilants to convey the intensity of the landscape: “Mount Tarawera loomed closer, its solid shape breaking into features: fissures and crevices, juts and gapes, slopes streaked with scoria, and mottles of small trees and shrubs” (*The Spider in the Heart*, p. 68).

⁷ I have kept the place names consistent with the actual area, except for a few incidences, such as the changing the existing island in the centre of Lake Rotomahana — Patiti island — to Aea, in keeping with the mythological character of Circe who dwells on the island.

The decision to keep the place names true-to-life is based on an intention to locate the magical aspects of the narrative in a specific place with a tangible sense of physicality.

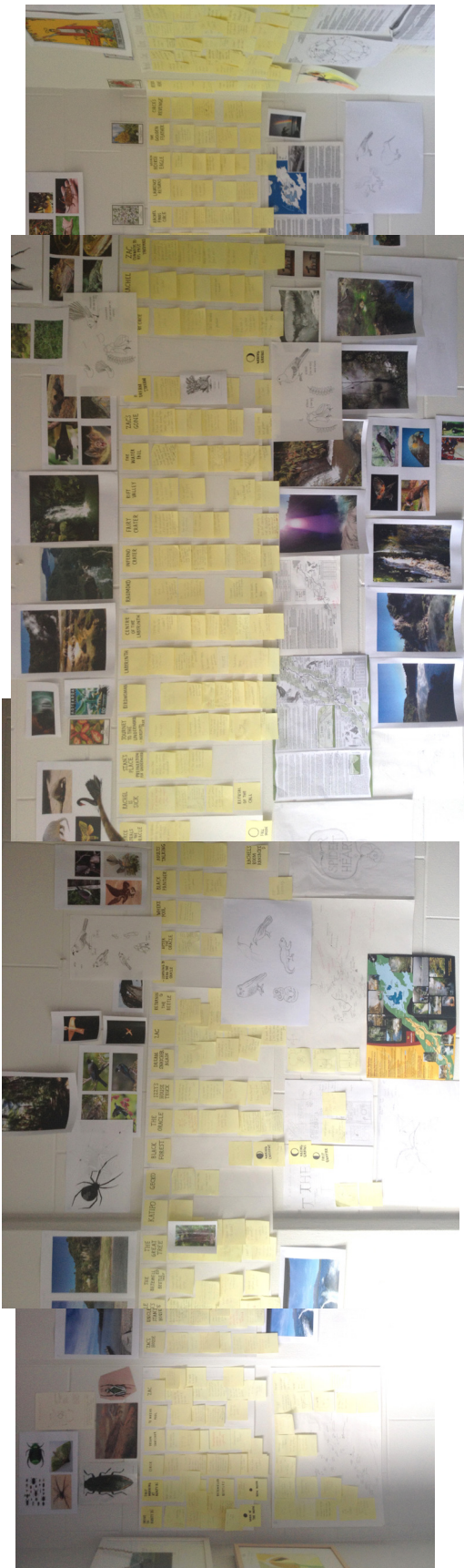


Figure 1. Visual reference wall in my studio with research photographs, sketches, and drawings relating to Waimangu Valley and the Lake Tarawera area.

The notion of language mimicking nature is also portrayed in how, as Abram (1996) suggests, the sounds and rhythms of an oral language are attuned to the voices of the local landscape: “The Koyukon names for birds are often highly onomatopoeic, so that in speaking their names one is also echoing their cries” (p. 146).

Similarly, onomatopoeia occurs in the names of many New Zealand birds: the call *ki-wii* of the kiwi, the *quor-quork* of the morepork, and the *ka-ka* of the kākā. As the reader may not be familiar with the Māori language, or the native flora and fauna featured in the narrative, these elements are conveyed in *The Spider in the Heart* by using pictorial footnotes: showing a drawing, the English and Māori name, and a guide for the Māori pronunciation⁸. As well as depicting the sound of the local environment, the pictorial footnotes also offer a means for the reader to engage with the narrative through a visual cue.

The language of symbols

Throughout *The Spider in the Heart* illustrations are used to signify chapter breaks; the illustrations — or symbols — depict the narrative in a visual and literal sense, by showing a motif relevant to a scene; and also by acting as a key to the concepts behind the symbol. An example is the symbol of the Ouroboros:

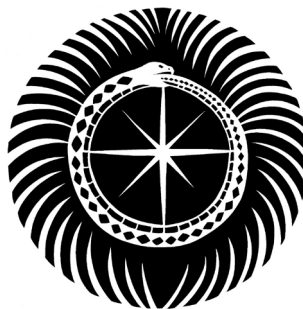


Figure 2. Ouroboros symbol

8 An example of this is: katipo (KAH-tee-paw). These guides to pronunciation have been checked over by Te Reo Māori consultant, Tearepa Kahi.

In a physical sense the Ouroboros appears in the narrative as the ring given to Rachel by her grandma that holds sentimental value; on a meta-physical level the symbol of the Ouroboros represents the transformative journey that Rachel undertakes. The symbol of the snake is universally associated with the notion of transformation — signified by its physical process of shedding skin — and Jung (1977) linked the Ouroboros with the practice of alchemy:

The alchemists, who in their own way knew more about the nature of the individuation process than we moderns do, expressed this paradox through the symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. The Ouroboros has been said to have a meaning of infinity or wholeness. In the age-old image of the Ouroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process, for it was clear to the more astute alchemists that the *prima materia* of the art was man himself. The Ouroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e. of the shadow (Jung, 1977, p. 513, original italics).

In *The Spider in the Heart* the Ouroboros represents Rachel's path of adventure and transformation: her hero's journey, and her venture into the underworld to meet her shadow self⁹. The Ouroboros ring is a source of comfort for Rachel, and while she relates to the ring tangibly, she is also unconsciously experiencing the universal message of the symbol. As Campbell stated: the function of mythological symbols is to give you a sense of "Aha! Yes. I know what it is, it's myself" (Rensma, 2009, p. 100).

Investigating the similarities of symbols and myths throughout various cultures, Campbell surmised that there is a unity in the universe and a unity in our own experience — that myth is a universal language — and suggests this is because "symbols of mythology are not manufactured [...] They are spontaneous

⁹ Rachel's shadow self is represented in *The Spider in the Heart* by the character of Circe, and is symbolised by the katipo spider in the kauri gum heart that Circe gives to Rachel — the spider in the heart. The notion of the shadow self will be more fully explored in the following books of the trilogy; this is why it is not part of the discourse in this exegesis.

productions of the psyche” (Campbell, 2008, p. 1). This supports Jung’s notion that myths are always the product of the collective unconscious¹⁰ (Segal, 1999, p. 70).

This notion of the universality of symbols suggests that we all have access to the knowledge and understanding that lies beyond the symbol. Campbell (2002) describes a symbol as “an energy-evoking and directing agent” (p. 143), and states that “symbols function evocatively, not referentially: like the beat of a shaman’s drum, not like a formula of Einstein (p. 152). The means of understanding a symbol, then, is not by using the rational mind, but by opening up to the mysteries of life — such as nature. Campbell (1990) suggests: myths place you “in accord with nature”(p. 7); I also suggest that being in accord with nature is a means of better understanding symbols, which in turn relates to a deeper understanding of self, and sense of oneness.

Working in accord with nature was traditionally the domain of the shaman. Investigating the relationship between traditional magic and the animate natural world, Abram (1996) found that the shaman¹¹ generally lived on the outskirts of a community, and would act as a mediator between the people of the community and the community beyond them — the plants, the trees, the elements — ensuring an appropriate flow of energy and nourishment between them. He observed that anthropologists have largely managed to overlook the ecological dimension of the shaman’s craft, while focusing instead on the shaman’s rapport with “supernatural entities” (p. 8). For them the supernatural was considered above and beyond nature; Abram suggests otherwise:

10 As Rensma (2009) describes: “Within each person there is what Jung called a collective unconscious. We are not only individuals with our unconscious intentions related to a specific social environment. We are also representatives of the species of homo sapiens” (p. 134).

11 The term shaman has many meanings throughout different cultures. Abram’s observations on the traditional or tribal shaman that he mentions here is one who “acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth” (Abram, 1996, p. 7).

That which is regarded with the greatest awe and wonder by indigenous, oral cultures is, I suggest, none other than what we view as nature itself. The deeply mysterious powers and entities with whom the shaman enters into a rapport are ultimately the same forces — the same plants, animals, forests and winds — that to “civilized” Europeans are just so much scenery, the pleasant backdrop to our more pressing concerns (Abram, 1996, p. 9).

My understanding of this is that magic — and the supernatural — reside in the shaman’s means of communicating with nature, using symbols. Bridges (2003) explores how the teachings of the ancients relied on the language of nature — spoken in symbols by the animals, the plants and the stones. This language — known as the Green Language — is the common language of initiation and illumination behind cultural expressions as different as the Christian, the Inca, the medieval troubadours and the ancient Greeks.

Divination is one of man’s oldest spiritual technologies, its origins lost in the shift from neolithic hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists. As the shaman developed into the priest, divination, along with all forms of spiritism, became codified into mythology. From a framework of mythic events and divination — literally readings of the divine — came language, which evolved over time into written forms based on the original symbolic elements. In turn, these symbolic elements became the focus of divinatory practices of their own, creating sub-sets of meaning within common words and phrases. From this intentional ambiguity arose the possibility of an initiate’s language, a language of the birds, or, as it was expressed by the medieval initiates, the Green Language (Bridges, 2003).

In essence, the Green Language is a means of communicating with nature, using the universal language of symbols. The Green Language is described by Ofsoske-Whyber (2012) as an “ageless language of symbols, a language that could be heard and understood only through the all-seeing eye of the heart” (p. 4).

The oracle cards that Rachel finds in *The Spider in the Heart*, are based on the *The Fairy Oracle of the Patupaiarehe* (2012)¹² — a set of 34 symbols relating to

12 *The Fairy Oracle of the Patupaiarehe* is an ancient oracle, depicting symbols of native fauna and taonga, used for thousands of years by Nga Potiki and Nga-Uri-a-Maui — the ancient people of Aotearoa (Ofsoske-Whyber, 2012, p. 1).

the patupaiarehe, the supernatural beings encountered in Māori legends and folk tales — and represent working with the mystery of the Green Language. Rachel is able to read the symbols — by receiving images and words — without really understanding how; essentially she is divining the symbols by means of the cosmic consciousness.

Rachel's experience of divining the symbols is similar to how the alethiometer, or golden compass, is used in Philip Pullman's (2008) *His Dark Materials*. Gresh (2007) notes that the alethiometer is a means of divination, much like the I Ching, which is also used in the text. Lyra uses the needles of the alethiometer and corresponding symbols to interpret events, just as Mary uses the hexagram symbols of the I Ching. In *His Dark Materials* both of these devices work as a means for Dust — dark matter — to communicate with humans. As Gresh observes:

Shamanism is closely related to the ideas behind the alethiometer and the I Ching; all three hinge on the notion of cosmic consciousness, the unity of the universe” (Gresh, 2007, p. 185).

The common link between shamanism and divining devices is that they all work with the mysteries — and forces — of nature. For the parts in the narrative where Rachel and Zac choose an oracle card, I have randomly selected a card for each of them from *The Fairy Oracle of the Patupaiarehe*. The symbol of the “Tuatara” selected for Rachel, represents the ability look at things from a different perspective — to look beyond all that she thinks she knows, as nothing is ever as it seems¹³. She faces this rite of passage in the underworld when she believes Zac has abandoned her, and this is a major turning point for her — a moment of seeing the truth beyond an illusion, and the beginning of seeing the world around her in a new way. The “Tekoteko” (ancestor) symbol selected for Zac connects him with the spirit of his great grandfather, and his power animal — the golden hokioi eagle,

¹³ These readings are based on my interpretation of the interpretation given in *The Fairy Oracle of the Patupaiarehe*.

and helps him stand, with a greater strength and level of understanding, in his turangawaewae¹⁴ — his standing place.

In this way the narrative embraces the sense of unknowingness required in working with the mysteries of nature¹⁵. This notion of unknowingness is reflected in my overall approach to writing *The Spider in the Heart*. Atwood (2002) states that the story is in the dark and we must journey to the underworld to find it (p. 176), suggesting that the writer must have something of the quality coined by Keats as “negative capability”¹⁶ (p. 139) — the conscious act of creating from the unconscious.

Along with my characters, I ventured into the underworld on a quest for transformation, and confronted many allies and enemies along the path. Utilising Keats’ notion of the conscious act of creating from the unconscious, I worked scene by-scene, guided by signs and symbols from nature¹⁷, and from *The Fairy Oracle of the Patupaiarehe*. Because of the metaphysical nature of symbols, the process of unraveling and making meaning of these symbols by writing — rather than thinking — helped gain a greater understanding of their messages. Further clarity

14 Turangawaewae is basically translated as the courtyard or home area of ones ancestors, where one feels she or he has the right to stand up and be counted (Pere, 1991, p. 50).

15 The notion of using an oracle as both a subject and meta-narrative device appears in texts such as Philip K. Dicks (1962) *The Man in the High Castle*. While this is a potentially interesting area to investigate, it is not a major concern of this exegesis.

16 In a letter to George and Thomas Keats, John Keats (1817) defined the term negative capability as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

17 The use of “signs and symbols from nature” here refers to the symbols that I encountered in everyday life: the blue diamond bird and bejewelled beetles that appeared in dreams; the image of a sphinx I randomly encountered as I was working on the labyrinth scene and trying to imagine what resided at the centre; and the swarm of wasps that passed over me in Waimangu which helped me to rewrite a scene — this time from experience rather than imagination.

Other synchronicities occurred while researching the area, such as meeting David Walmsley, whose wife Karen is a descendent of the local Tuhourangi Ngati Wahiao tribe, and of Guide Sophia — a guide on the tourist boats that frequented the Pink and White Terraces before they were buried in the 1886 Mount Tarawera eruption. Karen agreed to look over the completed manuscript to check it is appropriate to the area and iwi, and also pass it on to the local Kaumatua if necessary. In doing so, I can ensure the work is appropriate and respectful to the local people.

ensued through the research involved in writing this exegesis: I found a larger context for the themes and ideas I was exploring, which enabled me to redefine the story and develop more layers, or onions,¹⁸ of the story. And like all hero's journeys, I have returned from the underworld with a boon; a deeper understanding of myself and my process of writing, and an expanded perception of the world around me. As Vogler (2007) suggests:

The beauty of the Hero's Journey model is that it not only describes a pattern in myths and fairy tales, but it's also an accurate map of the territory one must travel to become a writer or, for that matter, a human being (Vogler, 2007, p. 293).

18 Refer to p. 145 of the exegesis for a discussion on the notion of "writing onions".

Conclusion

The inspiration to write *The Spider in the Heart* has largely stemmed from my studies of New Zealand's native plants, through the medicine woman apprenticeship. This work requires an act of stepping into the mystery of nature, as does the process of writing. It is in this manner of conversing with nature, by using symbols as keys, that we discover who we are, where we are from, and where we are going.

Dillard (1990) suggests that the pure vision for the work belongs outside of time, and is explored in the creative domain — the space between the vision and the work; yet the true and beautiful essence of the vision can never be fully expressed. “Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing” (p. 59).

Writing *The Spider in the Heart* has been an exploration of my vision: that it is in nature that we will find ourselves, as we are one and the same. If my reader is inspired to engage with nature in even the tiniest way, then I have in some way been successful; if not, then I can only hope they enjoyed the journey.

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