

A  
CLOCK  
OF  
STARS



THE SHADOW MOTH



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THE SHADOW MOTH

FRANCESCA GIBBONS

Illustrated by  
CHRIS RIDDELL



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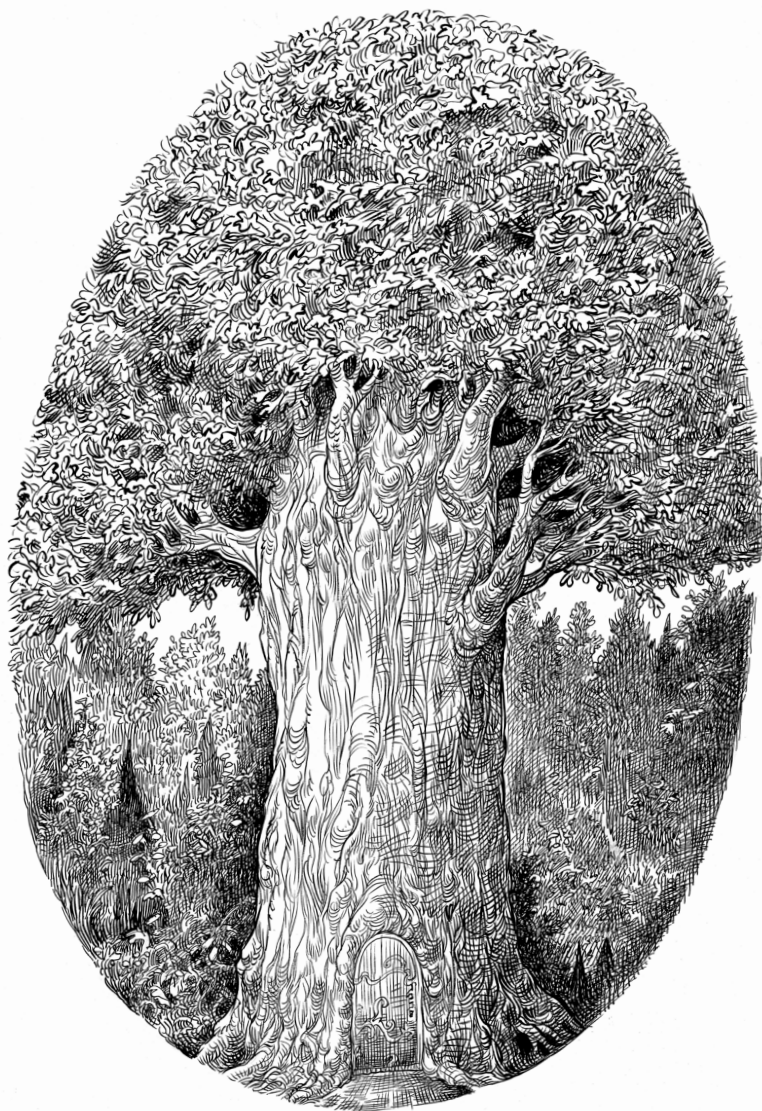


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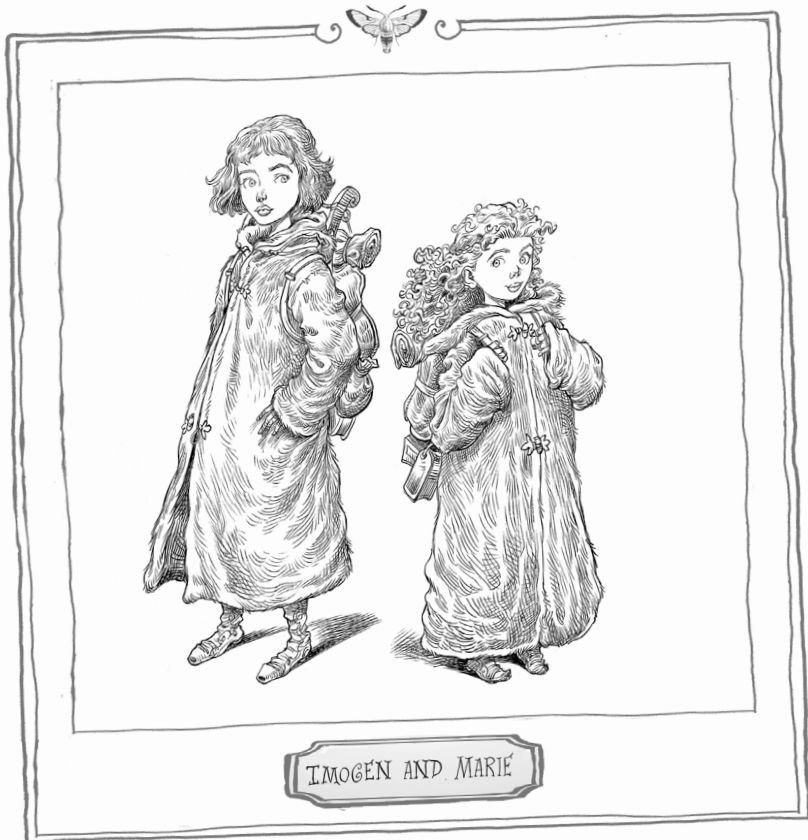
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*For Mini and Bonnie, who will always be little to me*



# A Cast of Characters





ZUBY





ANNESHKA MAZANAR



LOFKINYE LOLO



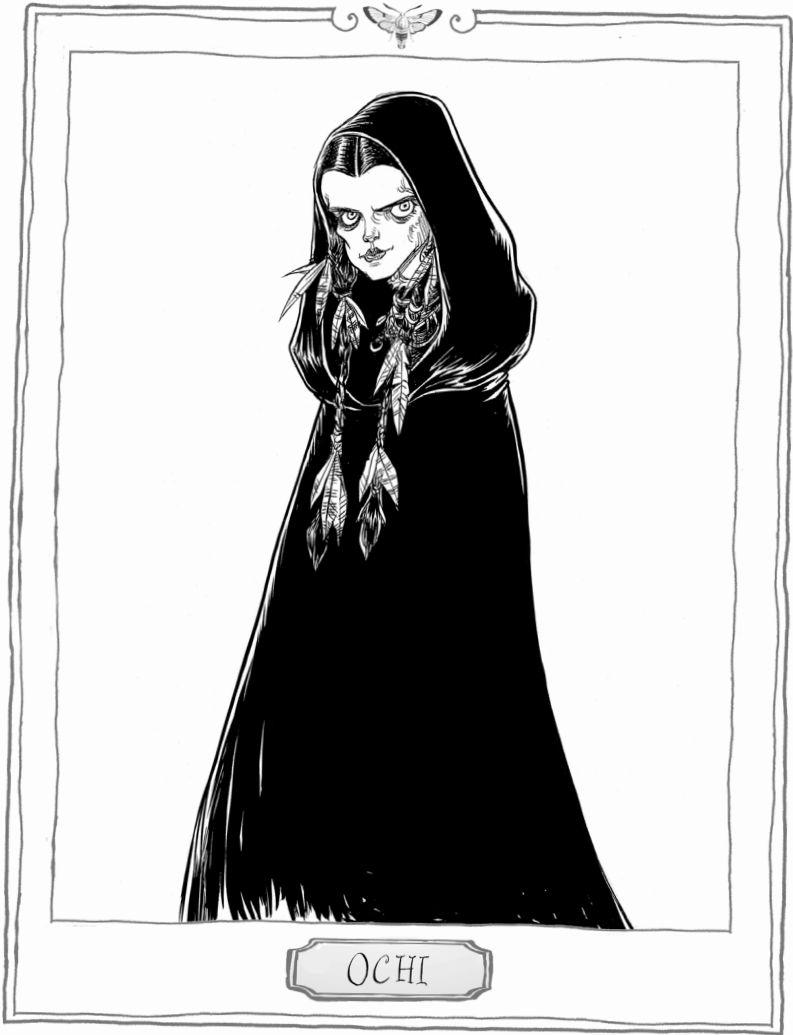
YEEDARSH LOKAI



BLAZEN BILBETZ



ANDEL



OCHI



## PROLOGUE

The monster stood alone on the side of the mountain.  
He held out his hands.

‘Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.’

He parted his claws so there was enough space for the moth to escape. It crawled over the back of his hand and circled his wrist. It had a silver-grey, fluffy body.

‘Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.’

The moth opened and closed its wings to show it was thinking. Then it travelled up the monster’s arm. ‘I’d forgotten how strange you creatures are,’ said the monster, scratching his bald head. ‘All the other moths just flew away.’

The moth’s tiny legs tickled the monster’s collarbone. He closed his eyes and repeated the words for a third time.

‘Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.’

The monster opened his eyes. The moth was crawling across his face, past his teeth, which stuck out like tusks,

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over his squished-in nose and on to the top of his head.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘You’ve reached the end of Zuby. There’s no more of me.’

There was a faint flutter and he looked up. The moth was flying away, but it wasn’t travelling across the forests, like the moths he’d released before. It was heading up the face of the mountain.

Zuby soon lost track of its shape in the darkness, even with his sensitive eyes.

‘Where are you going?’ he called. ‘You won’t find it among the stars!’







# PART 1





# CHAPTER 1

‘**N**ow, you slithering monster of the deep, prepare to die!’

The knight charged. The giant sea slug bared its teeth and growled, moving to protect the treasure. But the knight was quick. Her sword plunged into the soft, slimy flesh of the monster.

‘This is the bit where you die,’ said the knight.

‘I don’t want to die,’ said the sea slug.

‘But you have to. You’re the baddy.’

‘Why do I always play the baddy?’

‘Marie! You said you would.’

‘How about – this time – the knight dies and gets dragged away by the sea slug to—’

‘No. That’s not the story. That’s not how I wrote it. The knight kills the monster and reclaims the treasure and they all live happily ever after.’

‘All except the sea slug . . .’

‘It’s just a bit part.’

The sea slug began to peel off her costume.

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‘What are you doing?’ said the knight. ‘We haven’t finished yet.’

‘I have.’

‘But what about the dress rehearsal?’

The monster opened the treasure chest and ran her feelers over the gems. ‘Well, if I’m just a bit part, then you’ll be fine without me.’

‘Hands off – that’s my rock collection,’ said the knight. She dropped her sword and reached for the treasure chest. The lid moved more easily than she’d expected and it came down hard, squashing a few of the sea slug’s tentacles. The monster yowled.

This time they really fought. Underneath her outfit, the sea slug was a little girl with pinkish skin and wild red hair. Her name was Marie.

Marie stuffed the stolen rocks into her pockets. ‘You said I could keep one stone!’ she yelled.

The knight had short brown hair that she’d cut herself and smudges of freckles that ran across her pale cheeks like warpaint. Her armour was constructed from tinfoil and cereal boxes, and her name was Imogen. She was older than Marie, so she knew better – about pretty much everything.

‘I said you could keep one stone if you acted in my play,’ said Imogen, ‘and you haven’t.’ She grabbed Marie and emptied the stones from her pockets.

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‘Mum!’ cried Marie. ‘Imogen’s picking on me again!’

‘No, I’m not!’ yelled Imogen, releasing Marie’s arm.

Marie ran into the house with one hand in her pocket. Imogen wondered if she still had a stone. She’d extract it later.

Imogen picked up her rock collection as rain began to fall. If only she could act every character in the play herself, then she wouldn’t need Marie. It was hard work making her sister a star.

She followed Marie inside and dumped her cargo by the back door. Mum was standing in the hallway, wearing a long red dress that Imogen hadn’t seen before. Marie was hiding behind her, with just one eye and a few curls visible.

Imogen knew how this would go. She was about to get told off. Imogen hated being told off. After all, she hadn’t meant to squish Marie’s fingers in the treasure chest.

Imogen eyeballed her mum. ‘Why are you so dressed up?’ she said.

‘Never mind that,’ snapped Mum. ‘*You* are in trouble. I’m not putting up with this behaviour any more – the fighting with your sister, the mess you’ve made in the garden—’

‘It’s a sea-slug cave!’

‘Imogen! You’re too old for this nonsense! And you’re certainly too old to be making Marie cry.’

‘She started it.’

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‘Well, I’m finishing it,’ said Mum. ‘Grandma’s looking after you for the rest of the day and she’ll take you to the tea rooms if you’re good. Are you going to be good?’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Imogen.

‘It doesn’t matter where I’m going. I’ve left you homemade pizza for tonight. You’ll have a great time. Now promise me you’ll be nice to your sister.’

Marie’s face had turned blotchy from fake crying. She looked like a half-ripened raspberry. Imogen did *not* want to be nice to her sister.

‘Come on, Imogen,’ said Mum in a softer voice. ‘I’m counting on you.’

The doorbell rang and Mum turned in a circle. ‘He’s early!’ she cried.

‘Who’s early?’ asked Marie.

‘You’ll see,’ said Mum.

## CHAPTER 2

Mum opened the door and a man strode into the house. He was wearing a smart shirt and shiny black shoes. Imogen noticed the shoes because they squeaked with every step, as if he was walking on mice.

‘Cathy! You look gorgeous,’ said the man in his man voice. He gave Imogen’s mum a kiss on the cheek, then he turned to the girls. ‘And these must be the two little princesses I’ve heard so much about.’

‘I’m not a princess,’ said Imogen, looking down at her armour. ‘I’m a knight and she’s a giant sea slug. Who are you?’

‘Imogen!’ gasped Mum.

‘It’s all right,’ said the man. He looked down at Imogen and moved his lips into a smile. ‘My name’s Mark. I’m friends with your mother.’

‘She never had any friends called Mark before,’ said Imogen.

The man rocked forward in his squeaky shoes. ‘Is that so? Well, things change quickly in the grown-up world.’

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Imogen opened her mouth, but Mum cut across her: 'Girls, help me shut all the windows before Grandma arrives. It's turned nasty out there.'

Mum reached up to the little window facing the garden, but she must have seen something because she jumped back in horror.

'What is it?' said Imogen, running to Mum's side.

'Something moved! Something moved behind the curtain!'

Mark was there in an instant. 'Let me see,' he commanded, and he whipped back the curtain.

A moth crawled down the fabric towards Mark's hand. From one angle, its wings were grey; from another they were silver. Imogen wanted a closer look.

'Don't worry, Cathy,' said Mark, 'I've got this.' He moved as if to squash the moth and Imogen didn't have time to think. She darted in front of him and cupped her hands round the insect. Mark tried to nudge her aside, but she stamped down hard – right on the toe of his squeaky shoe.

Mark swore. Marie squealed. Mum was already telling her off, but Imogen ran away from them all. She opened the back door with her elbow and dashed out into the rain. She could hardly feel the moth inside her hands – it was so light. Only the gentle brush of its

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wings against her fingers gave it away.

Mum was shouting, but Imogen sprinted to the bottom of the garden and knelt by a low bush. She didn't care that she'd lost some of her armour on the way. Here, beneath all the greenery, the moth would be safe.

Imogen parted her hands and the moth crawled on to a leaf. Its silver-grey wings blended into the shadows. 'I shall call you the *shadow moth*,' said Imogen, wiping rain off her forehead.

The moth opened and closed its wings three times as if to say *thank you*.

'You're welcome,' said Imogen.

When the moth's wings were open, it was about the same size as the palm of her hand. When the wings were closed, they folded across its body so that it was hardly wider than a fingernail. Its back was covered in velvety fur.

'I didn't think moths came out in the day,' said Imogen.

The moth moved its antennae to the left and the right. They were shaped like feathers.

'I suppose you must be different from the others.'

Imogen looked at the house. Her mum was standing at the back door with her hands on her hips. Imogen narrowed her eyes. No one could make her say sorry.

She walked back to the house as slowly as she could.

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‘Apologise to Mark,’ said Mum. ‘You can’t go around stamping on people’s feet.’

‘You can’t go around murdering things either,’ said Imogen. ‘Why don’t you tell Mark *that*?’

## CHAPTER 3

**F**ive minutes later, Grandma arrived and Mum left. Imogen changed out of her tinfoil armour and put her rock collection under her bed.

‘Your mother tells me you’ve been badly behaved,’ said Grandma. ‘But we’re going to the tea rooms anyway. It’s not fair to punish Marie for your behaviour and I can’t leave a seven-year-old home alone.’

‘I’m eleven,’ said Imogen. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘Seven. Eleven. It’s all the same,’ said Grandma. ‘Just get in the car.’

Marie started humming as soon as they pulled out of the drive. It was one of her worst habits: humming tunes that she’d just made up. ‘Will you stop that?’ said Imogen.

Marie continued to hum, but very quietly.

‘Stop it!’ yelled Imogen.

‘That’s enough,’ snapped Grandma, ‘or neither of you will have any cake.’

That shut them up. Grandma didn’t mess about and it was best not to distract her when she was driving. Last

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time they'd argued, Grandma had run over a squirrel. She'd made the girls get out and say the funeral rites.

'Where has Mum gone?' said Imogen, locating Grandma's eyes in the car mirror. Grandma kept her eyes fixed on the road.

'Your mother has gone to the theatre.'

'Why?'

'She likes the theatre.'

'Does she like Mark too?'

For a brief moment, Grandma's eyes met Imogen's. 'Of course she likes Mark. They're good friends.'

'Friends,' said Imogen, turning the word over in her mouth as if it was a new one. 'Are you sure he's not another boyfriend?'

They stopped at traffic lights and Imogen pushed her face up against the car window, letting out a long breath in the shape of an O. Something caught her eye through the foggy glass and she wiped away the condensation to make a gap she could see through.

There, flying towards the car, was the shadow moth. It was struggling through the rain. *What an incredible insect*, thought Imogen. It looked like a messenger from ancient times, determined to deliver its message even at the cost of its life.

The traffic lights changed and the car jerked into motion.

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Imogen turned to look through the back window, but the moth was nowhere to be seen. *The poor thing's probably been squished by the rain, she thought. When you're that small, every droplet is a meteor.*

## CHAPTER 4

The tea rooms were part of a grand estate. Or rather they were part of what used to be a grand estate. These days the Haberdash Mansion was all shut up, apart from one room where Mrs Haberdash lived with her dogs.

Mrs Haberdash ran the tea rooms from a mobility scooter behind a counter. She would sit there in a faded lace dress, with antique earrings gleaming against her copper-brown skin and grey corkscrew hair piled up on her head.

Imogen and Marie sat in the corner of the tea rooms. They ate cake and drew in their sketchpads. Imogen was working on a portrait of Mrs Haberdash's dogs.

Grandma was talking at Mrs Haberdash. 'Winifred was a fool to trust a male hairdresser,' she said, leaning across the counter. 'I told her it was a ridiculous idea. You might as well ask your dogs to serve high tea.'

Mrs H nodded, making her earrings rattle.

Imogen tried to imagine the old lady's dogs balancing cups and saucers on their heads. Perhaps next time she'd draw

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that, but she'd had enough of sketching for today. She tried to get Grandma's attention, but Grandma was in full swing.

'I've finished,' said Marie, holding up her drawing. Imogen narrowed her eyes. It was nearly identical to her own dog portrait.

'Grandma! Marie's copying me!' cried Imogen.

Grandma pretended not to hear. She carried on talking to Mrs Haberdash: 'I told my GP that I'd already spoken to Bernie and Bernie said that if I took six paracetamol the problem would be gone in no time.'

Imogen directed a death stare at her sister and stomped out of the tea rooms. She marched across the car park, but Grandma's car was locked. Fine. She'd sulk outside instead. She'd sulk for the whole summer holidays if she had to. At least it had stopped raining. She looked around for a place to sit.

There was a gate in the corner of the car park that Imogen hadn't noticed before. Friendly letters hung above it, saying *Welcome to the Haberdash Gardens*. Less friendly letters were painted across the gate: *NO TRESPASSING!*

Imogen wasn't sure what 'trespassing' meant, but it sounded like fun. She glanced at the tea rooms. No one was watching. When she turned back to the gate, her moth was sitting on it. Or, at least, she *thought* it was her moth.

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She bent down to get a closer look and the moth stared right back.

‘It *is* you,’ said Imogen, smiling. ‘I thought the rain got you.’ The moth flew off the gate and into the Haberdash Gardens.

Imogen tried the gate’s lock. It had rusted and came off in her hand. *Well*, she thought, *Mrs Haberdash really should have had that fixed*. She dropped the lock and stepped into the gardens. ‘Wait for me!’ she called.

The gate swung shut behind her.

## CHAPTER 5

The Haberdash Gardens were at war. Trees battled under the weight of creepers and ivy strangled the roses. The weeds had almost succeeded in reclaiming what was rightfully theirs.

Imogen had to walk quickly to keep up with the moth. She wanted it to stop on something so she could get another close look. A twig snapped. Imogen turned on her heel, but there was no one behind her.

The moth flew on and Imogen followed. Tendrils threw themselves, kamikaze-style, across her path. She turned right and there was a river. Fat frogs lurked among the bulrushes.

In her haste, Imogen tottered too close to the water. A frog belched, hopping aside just before her heel plunged into the spongy earth. Cold water seeped in through her shoe, but there was no time to stop. The moth was getting away.

Imogen hurried along the riverbank, and the moth flew across the water. 'I can't follow you there,' she said,

looking around for a bridge. But in this place where everything was falling apart, things also fell into place. A dead tree lay across the river.

Imogen climbed up the roots and spread her arms out wide, placing her left foot on the trunk, then her right foot. Woodlice ran for cover as she disturbed their rotten paradise. She made her way across the dead tree slowly, hardly daring to breathe in case it affected her balance.

The last part of the tree was slippery so Imogen lowered herself on to her belly. She wriggled forward, rubbing dirt into her top. When the trunk was above earth instead of water, Imogen rolled off and landed on her feet. She smiled, pleased with herself, and continued on her way.

The plants on this side of the river had won the war against the gardeners. They had no interest in looking how people wanted them to look. Oversized shrubs had thorny throats. Wayward flowers bobbed their heads as Imogen swept by and the further she went into the Haberdash Gardens, the more she got the feeling that she wasn't welcome.

She heard a noise from somewhere behind, like the patter of feet. She turned. There was no one there.

Imogen did think about going back to the tea rooms,

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but she was sure that the moth was trying to show her something and she wanted to see what it was. A large drop of water landed on her forehead and she glanced up at the sky. Another drop splashed on her cheek and then the rain poured down. The moth flew faster. Imogen ran to keep up. Again, there was a sound behind her, but she couldn't turn back. She wouldn't turn back. She sprinted as fast as she could. Mud splattered up her legs.

The shadow moth led Imogen to an enormous tree. The highest branches seemed to touch the clouds and, under the jabbering of the rain, Imogen was sure she could hear roots drawing up water from the depths of the earth.

She stepped under the tree's canopy and put her hand on the rough trunk. The moth landed next to her fingers and moved its antennae in circles. In this light, it looked more grey than silver, camouflaged against the bark.

Imogen couldn't wait to tell Marie what she'd found: the biggest tree in the world. Marie would be amazed (and perhaps a little bit jealous).

The moth crawled away from Imogen's hand and she followed its progress. Soon it wasn't walking on gnarled bark, but smooth wood. Imogen ran her finger over this

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new texture. She knew what it was. She stepped back a few paces. Yes, it was as she'd thought.

There was a door in the tree.