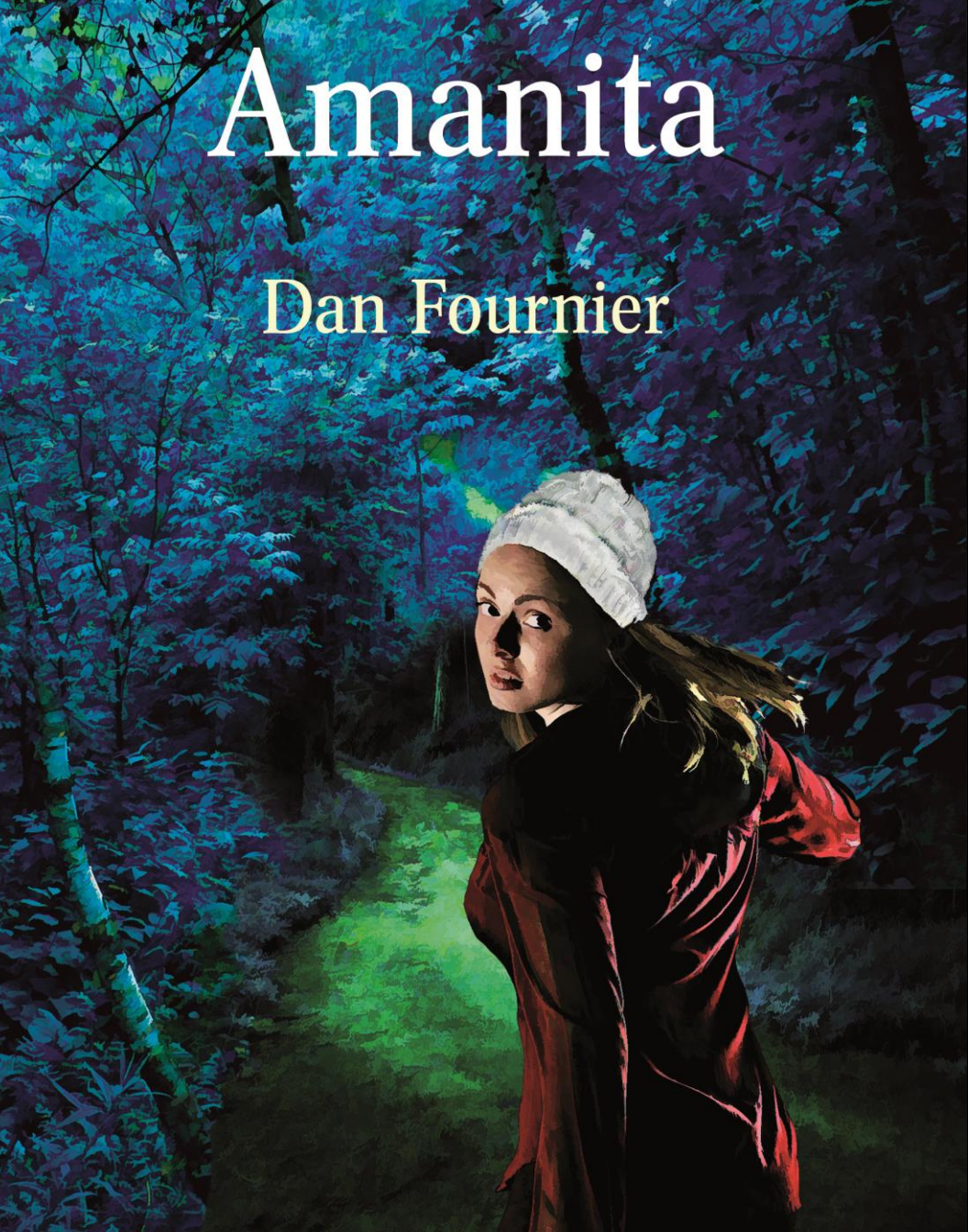


Amanita

Dan Fournier



This book is dedicated to my dear son, Kyle.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Michel Bertrand who designed the cover image.

Amanita

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1. The Escape

While the mid-term examination papers were being handout out, Amanita was anxiously staring out the classroom window wondering: “How can I possibly remember everything the teacher has dumped on us these past two months?” “You may begin,” spoke the grey-bearded instructor in a stern voice. “Keep your eyes on yours and no talking; you have fifty minutes.”

Though her mother had pushed her to study hard every night this week, Amanita struggled with many of the questions and kept replaying her mother’s repeated warning in her head: “You better do well on this mid-term or else you’re grounded for a month!” “Shut up. Shut up,” she vented abruptly. All her classmates immediately turned their heads towards her in amazement, and then giggled boorishly. The irritated teacher commanded angrily and loudly: “Miss A, I will remind you there is no talking during the test. This is my final warning.”

“How pointless.” she thought, adding “Why must I learn this useless garbage? How will any of this be of use to me in the future?” Embittered and headstrong, Amanita refused to answer any more questions on the

examination sheet and kept stone-faced for the remainder of the evaluation period.

By the time she got home, Amanita instantly realized that her mother had already heard from the teacher. “Amanita!” started the furious mother while the girl stood limply in front of her. “Look at me when I talk to you young lady!”, howled the mom. But the brown-haired girl kept her hazel eyes low to the floor in order to avoid her mother’s glare of fury and shame. “I’m too upset now; so, go to your room and we’ll talk about this later.”

A few hours had passed and while dinner was being served, Amanita had a weak appetite but forced herself to eat anyway, for fear of being scolded if she didn’t. Now that her mother had calmed down considerably, she proceeded to explain to her daughter that she ought to take her studies more seriously, for without focus and determination she would have trouble making it in the real world. The girl mostly listened and nodded agreeingly as the lecture dragged on for what felt like an eternity. At one point, though, she felt compelled to tell her mother: “I feel lost at school and in life. Why don’t I have a say?” continuing, “It seems like everything has already been decided for me, but I

want to find my own way, my own future. I feel trapped.”

“I felt the same way at your age, honey;” replied the mother, “but, you have to pick things up now, otherwise you’ll fail your term and won’t have a chance at a brighter future.”

Sensing as though her mother didn’t understand her hardship at all, Amanita abandoned her attempt by quickly agreeing with her so she could excuse herself back to her room. Feeling even more depressed and frustrated than before, the young girl laid on her soft bed for a while staring at the ceiling.

Amanita felt it was time for a change, real change, radical change.

The troubled girl got up at six the next day. She had a quick wash and bite, then packed a few things for her journey. Since it was rather chilly outdoors, Amanita dressed in thick long beige stockings, her red woolen coat, and a white tuque her grandmother had knitted for her. She wrote a brief note, placed it atop the dresser, then sneaked out of the house before her mother was any the wiser.

2. The Curse

Having walked all morning away from the town she had spent her entire life growing up in, Amanita was now at the far edge of Tuatara Pine Forest. Clear skies were leading the young girl further down the lesser known entrance to the forest famous for its pines and mysterious lake which nobody could ever seem to locate. She was already familiar with the concealed path, for she had hiked there with her best friend on several occasions. Amanita had always felt at peace in such surroundings.

As the solitary traveler was finding her way deeper into the forest, the pines were becoming noticeably taller and thicker, leaving scant amounts of sunlight on the narrow path. The forest was very much alive with a cacophony of bird and insect chirps echoing from all directions, an unmistakable scent of pine needles, and the snapping of twigs and pine cones by Amanita along the footpath.

This is as far as she had ever ventured along the narrow passageway, but she was decidedly determined to proceed further, if there was a chance at finding that magical lake she had heard so much about. So, she walked along the tricky path for a few more hours.

A short distance ahead, Amanita noticed some kind of opening, as there appeared to be slightly more sunlight peeking into the dense forest. “Finally,” she thought to herself. It took but a minute to reach the opening and the girl was practically blinded once she found her way out of the thick forest onto the open prairie. “Now that the land is more open, I think this just might be the way to Uraeus Lake; I might actually be able to find Snake Lake!” she excitedly thought to herself.

Amanita was increasingly encouraged, for she could now cover ground much quicker, as the flat land made it easier to stride along towards her destination.

In the afternoon, Amanita had just finished eating her small sandwich when she noticed up ahead the plain what seemed to be an old shack. There was a chimney on the side of the run-down, makeshift structure, but no smoke coming from it. “Does anyone live there?” she wondered. Always the curious type, Amanita dared to go ahead and investigate the premises, for it would be nice to talk with someone familiar with these parts. The young girl approached the lair and was surprised to find the door slightly open. “Is anybody there?” she interrogated after knocking three times on the wooden frame. Again, “Anyone home?” she continued. Since there was no response, she let herself in the dark and

decrepit quarters and was immediately repulsed by its foul stench. “How dare you!” erupted a voice in a shrieking, hysterical tone, terrifying the snooping child out of her wits. Amanita had never been so scared in her life; it felt as though her heart exploded out of her chest. “I’m sorry. Sorry. I knocked,” she nervously replied, “but nobody answered,” explained the frightened girl. “You have no business being in these parts child,” warned the hideous old woman.

Still shaken by the encounter, Amanita figured she might as well take a chance and make an inquiry: “Would you happen to know where Uraeus Lake can be found? Some people call it Snake Lake” “Snake Lake? Snake Lake;” replied the old hag, continuing “who do you think you are? Return from whence you came, child, and don’t ever step out-of-bounds again!” “I just,” began the girl, only to be promptly cut-off. “May you and your kinfolk suffer a bout of hindrance for a thousand years to come!” vehemently cursed the old hag in anger.

Amanita got so spooked that she immediately ran towards the path she had been on previously. She wanted to get as far away as she could from this hellcat, and that, as quickly as possible.

3. The Boar

Hours later, as Amanita is trekking up an old flattened path, she hears a quickened grunting sound coming from behind her. As she turns back, she sees what looks like a brown bear charging up the same path where she was just a minute ago. Nervously, she starts running speedily up the path and can't help but have a second look to see how fast the beast is moving. As she does so, she notices white tusks on each side of its elongated snout and immediately realizes that it is a wild boar. Without turning around again, she remains focused on charging up that hill as fast as she possibly can. Her heart is now pounding harder and harder, in same fashion as the beast's footsteps trodding up the path. Amanita then notices the bottom of a cliff a short distance ahead and starts to strategize as to how she might outsmart the faster creature. Upon reaching the sharp-angled rocky cliff, she climbs up swiftly and anchors her feet on stones firmly set on its façade. Now that she finds herself at a safe distance, she collects a couple of large rocks to throw at the beast. Since the boar is unable to climb up as she did, the girl breathes a large sigh of relief and is finally able to catch her breath. Looking directly into the predator's pitch-black eyes she throws her first rock and misses it by

just a few inches. But upon her second throw, she hits the beast smack right between the eyes. The boar emits a piercing screech, then just stands there waiting for her. “A small victory!” she proudly thought to herself.

The girl realizes that there is no turning back. She must continue to arduously, and most cautiously, clamber up the cliff since it has now become much steeper than at its base. “How am I ever going to make it up there without falling?” she wondered.

After what seems like almost an hour of intense toil, she finally reaches a flattened section. Following a well-deserved pause to regain her strength, she notices an entrance to a cave.

Considering it is now late in the afternoon and the wind has picked up, Amanita figures it might be a good idea to seek shelter inside the belly of that cave. “There can’t be any dangerous creatures in there at this height,” she thought to herself. So, she found her way inside the cave while there was still enough time and daylight to inspect it for her refuge.

4. The Cave

Although scarce light from outside still illuminates the mouth of the cave, it remains difficult for Amanita to tell how far it goes. She ventures further and further in, but there's really not much to see. Besides, the more she moves in, the darker it gets, almost to the point of absolute darkness. After becoming somewhat disoriented, Amanita clumsily pivots around finally locating the faintest glow of light which guides her back towards the entrance.

As it is nearly dusk, she figures it is time to settle for the night. So, she finds a spot not too distant from the entrance upon which to rest. "This will have to do," she concluded to herself.

Considering she hadn't eaten much and was subject to all that strenuous activity, she was quite starved and was most glad she had packed a plentiful portion of nuts which served as her dinner. After she washed it all down with the last of the water she had brought, she queried: "From where will I source more water in the coming days?" At any rate, Amanita had become terribly sleepy and was looking forward to a well-deserved rest.

Just as she was beginning to sink into a deep slumber, the fair-skinned maiden felt something odd brushing against her left leg. As it was now pitch-black, she couldn't see anything. She thus made the extraordinary effort to heighten her sense of hearing in order to find some clue as to what that thing was. But all she could hear were the echoes of water droplets dripping from the opposite wall of the cave along with some flickering which sounded like it could have been emanating from bats. "It's not unusual to have bats in caves," she surmised.

Whatever that thing was, it was now slithering up her thigh and what she had feared as a possibility was now becoming a frightening reality. A snake, she feared. Though her heart started pounding hard and fast, she induced herself to remain as calm and idle as possible. For if she didn't, the snake, or whatever creature it was, could most easily be provoked.

"Perhaps it just wants to snuggle and keep warm," she convinced herself. The creature, or at least part of it, remained curled around her leg, luckily not too firmly. At least it had stopped its ascent, she assured herself.

The girl remained surprisingly calm and almost immediately sunk into a deep sleep.

Strangely, Amanita awakens in her own bed following a loud caw from a crow perched on the old oak tree next to her house. “What a horrible nightmare that was!” she immediately thought to herself. While still in her warm and comfy bed she notices her Swan Lake porcelain ballerina music box atop her dresser. “Am I really back?” she wondered. Guided by a keen longing to hear that sweet melody from her prized possession, the girl rises from her bed towards the dresser. As she reaches to twist the crank at the back of the box, she is immediately struck on the wrist by a snake that was hiding behind it. Her precious music box falls to the hardwood floor, breaking the ballerina in pieces while the white swan remains undamaged. Amanita awakens once more, only to realize it was a dream.

As it is still pitch-black in the cave, she is unsure as to what time it could possibly be. She can no longer hear any fluttering sounds from the bats. So, “It must be dawn,” she surmised. As she recalled the general direction to the mouth of the cave, the girl found her way towards it and could make out some light. Upon reaching the entrance, she perceives a bright sunrise upon the horizon. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, but the air was chilly on this mid-November morning. Wasting no time, Amanita treks around the cave

mound towards the western side and is relieved to find that it is much less rocky and steep than on the eastern side. An additional stroke of luck emerges in that there is a discernible path not far-off leading down the ridge. Her descent would be much quicker than the previous day's climb; and it didn't take long for her to trot all the way down the mountain.

Once she reached the base of the mountain, the path split in two and the girl was unsure which direction might prove most fortunate. After a lingering pause, she was still uncertain about which path to follow since the wrong decision could prove perilous. At that moment she heard a caw, the same sound she had heard in her dream, and perceived a crow directly overhead which then drifted above the right-sided path. "This surely is a hint; I must follow its direction," speculated the girl. "Perhaps not, no," she retorted, "the bird is bad luck and it might be wisest to go along the other path." Yet when it came time to decide, she hesitated going left and, for whatever reason, opted to proceed along the right path.

A short while after, Amanita noticed a river bank about a half mile further down the ridge. "I made the right decision," she praised to herself. Still, at that particular moment she started to feel quite dizzy and short of

breath. The troubled girl sat on a large boulder to regain her senses and noticed two red marks on her right wrist. The small narrow wounds seemed quite fresh but she couldn't recall falling down or being stung by anything. "Something is definitely not right," she deduced. Additionally, her throat was becoming very parched and she was awfully thirsty. "I must make it to the river for some fresh water;" Amanita started, "otherwise, I won't recover suitably."

Despite her frail state, the girl got up and scantily moved along the pathway down the valley. As she was descending, her leg muscles started to cramp up – to the point that it became painful even to walk at a slow pace.

5. The Swarm

Yet again, Amanita's luck would run amiss. Perhaps it was the result of the old hag's curse after all. Already twinged in pain, she hears a heavy buzzing sound creeping up steadily behind her. A swarm of bees is heading right for her. Panicked, she musters all her remaining strength and hurriedly races down the path towards the river where she might have the chance of diving into to avoid getting stung. However, the bees prove much too quick and she is stung multiple times. The poor girl emits a hurling scream while swatting the bees frantically around her head to rid herself of them. Propitiously, however, the swarm begins to dissipate and, almost in an instant, disappears altogether.

Not giving up, Amanita continues slowly down the path. But after a few minutes, she begins to feel awfully warm and the skin all over her body is now covered in a lush cluster of reddish bumps. To make matters worse, the girl's breathing has become quite scant.

"I have to make it to that river," she wailed inside her tempestuous mind, "or else, that might be the end of me!"

All her life, Amanita had been a determined, persistent, and kindled spirit. So she was not about to call it quits

just yet. Looking in the distance she figured: “It’s only about fifty yards away. I can make it.” After halving the gap between herself and the river, her legs finally gave up. No longer able to walk, she pulled herself forward using only her arms and elbows even though her rash made every stroke excruciatingly painful.

Merely a few yards away from the riverbank, everything turns black and Amanita collapses.

6. The Healer

Nearly the entire day had passed and Amanita was still lying unconscious at the riverbank. As the autumn days were getting shorter and shorter, there was merely an hour left before it would get dark. And during this time of year, it can get quite cold, especially in a valley.

By happenstance, or divine providence, a woodsman happened to be walking along the river while returning from a fishing outing. He noticed the girl lying next to the bank and rushed his pace towards her. After failing to awaken the frail child, he took his gourd out and slid some water down her mouth which seemed to have no effect. He then picked her up, wrapped his blanket around her, put her on his shoulder and headed straight for the nearby forest.

After a short walk he arrived at his abode, quickly started a fire in the woodstove, then set her gently next to it to keep her warm.

The solitary man was quite solemn and worried that he could not help her regain her vitals. Yet, it had now become his calling to restore nature's most precious gift. The gift of life.

Upon examining his patient more closely, he noticed her hives and even the bite marks on her wrist. He recognized them immediately and wasted no time in preparing a restorative tonic.

The woodsman always kept a well-stocked supply of essentials, as life in the wilderness requires it. Opening his cabinet, he reached for some ingredients: a small jar labelled 'AS Brazil' filled with dried leaves, roots and pieces of bark, a small bunch of dried berries, a clove of garlic, basil, sesame seeds, salt, some tea leaves, and a small bottle of fresh honey.

The man then prepared two bowls. In the first, he inserted the leaves plus a few pieces of bark from the jar, the basil, some sesame seeds, a little salt, a teaspoonful of his dried berries, along with the tea leaves. He crushed the mixture repeatedly while adding boiling water to it.

The second concoction would wait, as the pressing need at the moment was to diminish her bad case of hives and high temperature. Whilst brewing the mixture, the woodsman fetched his pipe which he lit and blew smoke over the brew, as if to add a blessing quality to the medicine. Having finished preparing the tonic which was now in light paste form, he applied

some of it on her skin, especially on her face, neck, arms and legs. He also filtered some of the mix through a small makeshift strainer into a small cup and proceeded to pour its more liquid version down her mouth after opening her paled lips. Just a few spoonfuls would suffice for now.

The woodsman could now only wait to see whether the desired effect would be achieved. During the night he woke himself several times to replenish the girl with additional spoonfuls of the tonic.

By morning, the girl's rash had significantly subsided, as had her temperature. But there was still no waking her.

It rained all day which was just as well since the woodsman had much to prepare. Though Amanita's overall condition had somewhat stabilized, it remained a concern for the elder. He thus boiled more water to add to his first concoction into which he then soaked a fresh washcloth before proceeding to bathe and cleanse her skin once more.

After adding a log to the fire, he reached for her red coat he had set on his rocking chair. And as he was laying it on her, a hard object fell out of its right pocket and rolled along his cabin floor. He picked up the bulb-

like curiosity and, with the light from the fire radiating on its shiny surface, thought to himself: “What a pretty white swan.” The woodsman then gently placed it next to her in front of the fire.

The second night proved almost identical to the first with the exception that Amanita offered occasional moans as if she had been dreaming. The woodsman was slightly encouraged, but remained doubtful about her recovery. “Her future is in my hands,” he realized. “Physically, she’s improving,” he thought, “but more serious disturbances lie deeper underneath the surface.”

By noontime on the third day of Amanita’s dormant state, the woodsman concluded that the time had come for unworldly measures. Elsewise, the poor girl would remain trapped in a darkened swoon for who knows how long.

The second concoction included roughly the same ingredients as the first. But this time, the elder was to add more potency to the mix. His first order was to prepare a tincture using a more generous dose of leaves from the jar labeled ‘AS Brazil’ including some dried roots and bark from the same reserve, all of which he added to the bowl. Next, he added some

crushed garlic along with a few mushrooms that he had recently collected in the forest. After repeated crushing of the mixture, he emptied the contents of the bowl into a pan, added the honey and poured some rum, and placed it on the woodstove to boil and simmer for a while. The dark-skinned elder seemed to place a lot of importance on blowing smoke on the brew as he had done previously, for without it, the potion may prove ineffective.

Just before sunset, the woodsman retrieved an old tunic like garment made from hide of some animal. The garb hadn't been worn in ages and was adorned with very peculiar motifs. Its front side displayed some human figures near the neckline, a tree directly under it along with two circles – a smaller one inside the larger, and a tiger at its bottom. The sleeves had tassels, not uncommon in style to those of native peoples. The accompanying pants were strangely decorated with snakes and some other strange human-animal like creatures. After dressing in the peculiar outfit and accompanying feathered hat, the woodsman took out a belt with a curious assortment of metal objects including bells, discs, and other protective plaques, almost as if he was preparing for battle. Though there were no weapons, he did collect a shallow one-headed

tambourine drum made of wood and hide with a highly faded imprint of what resembled a horse on its surface. Lastly, he fetched his rattle and the girl's porcelain white swan which he tied against a short wooden handle.

Setting a fire outdoors nearby his encampment proved difficult, even for the woodsman, since the wind was raging and the first snowfall of the season had just arrived. Determined, he managed to get a good blaze going after adding some dried birch branches.

Before returning inside, he hung some ragged blue ribbons on a birch tree not too far from the campfire.

Upon returning inside, he shut the cabin door against a strong gust and proceeded to check on the girl though no change in her condition was forthcoming. The elder then poured a few spoonfuls of his latest concoction down the girl's mouth, after which he gathered all his gear along with a bowl of nuts, bread, and sunflower seeds and the bottle of rum.

The first thing he did outside was to drop to his knees in front of the fire and bow low to the ground several times before emptying the contents of the food bowl a little at a time into the fire. After that, he poured some rum onto the flames of the bonfire.

Next, the elder who had not consumed any food or drink in days, drank a generous serving of his potion and began banging on his drum at short intervals with the rattle tied around his wrist. He began an odd sounding chant as he circled the fire in an awkward dance.

A short while later, the snow had nearly stopped and the wind was much tamer. The man then laid the drum on the ground and switched the rattle for the girl's swan charm without missing a beat in his chanting and motion around the fire. His movements were becoming more and more intense, as did his chanting. It seemed as if he was working himself into a frenzy of some kind while amazingly not tripping himself, nor being subject to what ought to result in a bout of dizziness. Yet, at that particular moment, the woodsman collapses to the ground next to the fire.

Who knows how long had elapsed before the man awoke in a dazed plight. Trying to focus his eyes was tricky, as the snowy surroundings was blinding him fiercely against a cloudy white sky. Yet, as he was slowly regaining his focus, his line of sight fell directly upon the large eyes of a white owl perched against the birch tree on which he had hung his ribbons. It's as if there was some kind of mental or spiritual connection

between the two beings. It was an auspicious sign, for owls had always held a special place in his heart and were very similar in nature to him considering he was also a solitary and quiet soul.

7. The Renewal

Quite exhausted, the woodsman entered the cabin. He first checked on the girl and found that her hives had completely disappeared and her skin color was less pale than before. Though her fever was also now gone, he still couldn't wake the child. So, he headed towards his cot for a well-deserved rest.

During the morning Amanita showed an increase of activity in the form of slight tossing, turning, and occasional moaning. But it wasn't a painful type of moaning. Rather, it seemed more like some soothing, exhaling sighs.

Amanita once again found herself climbing on the cliff she was at a few days ago while evading the wild boar. Yet, this time, she could eerily perceive herself from a distance higher above the mountainside and was realizing how incredibly dangerous her climb was proving. The whole scene was quite bizarre to her. What made it even more odd, was that she noticed a strange looking being side by side with her on the mountainside. The being had angelic like qualities in that it had white wings from which were glimmering white and light blue rays of light. She then heard the most blissful voice she had ever listened to in all her

life. The voice sounded neither like a male or female one, but more like some mix of the two. It said: “You have nothing to worry about. Ever. For, your creator and protector is, and always has been, within you.” At that very moment, she realized that nothing could shake her and she wasn’t even afraid of dying.

That afternoon, the woodsman woke up and was worryingly pensive in that the girl was still dormant. Apart from his tonic, the girl hadn’t received much nutrition or food in days. He thought to himself: “I must get something, anything, in her that will help her regain her strength.” He thus prepared a light porridge on his woodstove. Immediately after, he took the girl in his arms and placed her on his cot in a slightly elevated position against two cushions. The elder then took a hollowed-out pliable branch with a narrow tip which served as a straw to channel the porridge down Amanita’s throat. He did so just a little at a time to ensure it would pass down to her stomach without a hitch. After feeding her a small amount, he then covered her with an extra blanket.

At dusk, the moon was blood red upon the horizon. Amanita found herself gazing upon the surreal spectacle from atop a high mountain. In an instant, the sky turned white and she was perched on a pine at the

peak of the rocky mountain. On this bright day, she could see miles afar – all the way up the valley. A very subtle sound caught her ear leading her to focus a distance away; and all the way down on the edge of the forest, a dark figure caught her sight. The movements were familiar. The prey was now in her sights, a wild boar roaming across the land adjacent to the forest. She lunged off the pine and leaped into the cool air of the valley in pursuit of the beast. After circling and observing its movements for a while, she waited for the most opportune moment and descended in a rapid glide towards the increasingly nervous boar. The beast swerved left and right to avoid the eagle but the effort was futile, for she swiftly grasped it around the neck with her sharp claws, propelled her majestic wings with great force back towards the heavens and carried it with her across the valley. She then ascended and flew directly for the cliff she had previously climbed and deposed the beast at the mouth of the cave.

The following day, the woodsman was encouraged since she was no longer exceedingly inanimate as in the previous days. He thus fed her more warm porridge, as it seemed to be helping the matter. He then grabbed his aged, but well maintained, bow along

with his quiver and arrows for a hunting excursion. Food was running low, after all.

During his absence, Amanita continued to show signs of life even though she remained in her usual state of dormancy.

Not long after the elder left the cabin, Amanita's eyelids slowly began to subtly twitch and then just barely cracked open. Her line of sight fell directly upon her white swan charm which was lying on the chair next to the cot. A radiating and flickering glow on the shiny surfaced object was caused by the fire roaring in the woodstove. The effect was somewhat hypnotic on the girl, for it was difficult to tell if she was actually awake or had fallen into some kind of tranced slumber.

It was a brilliant and very warm sunny Spring day with the most picturesque sight nature had to offer. Amanita had previously set up her easel on which stood a nearly finished painting of her daughter picking her favorites in the resplendent garden generously adorned with flowers of countless hues. The blond haired, bright-eyed child was as joyous and carefree as one could be.

The garden was abound in activity. Birds were singing happily, bees were busy pollinating flowers, flies were

buzzing around, and even the family kitten was struggling to find her way above the long, thick grass.

The glow around her daughter made it seem as though the child was an angel sent from above. Savoring it all, Amanita looked towards the sky while breathing in this moment, as to never ever forget it. She couldn't help but to think of how it all made sense now.

With the most genuine smile pasted on her daughter's face, Amanita had never been so cheerful. The sight of a child in a state of pure bliss was all that her soul required.

Having finished picking her favorite flowers, the child sprang towards the prettiest tree in the garden and plucked the biggest and reddest pomegranate she could reach. Eagerly racing towards her mother, she high-stepped the long grass and arrived in a flash and in the most pure and joyous voice said: "Mommy, mommy, these are for you! I love you." To which replied Amanita: "I know my precious Alya. I know."

Early that evening, the woodsman made his way back into the cabin. After storing his gear and hanging his coat on the rack, he immediately checked on Amanita.

Hearing slight, undecipherable muttering coming from the girl, he kneeled down next to the bed and observed her attentively. She opened her emerald green eyes fully, gifted him with a genuine, warm smile and spoke in a soft but firm voice: “I’m ready”.

THE END