

## Advance Praise for The Deep Forest

“From this book spill hundreds of tiny seed-like tales, ready to burrow into the soft soil of your mind. They are strange, sweet, ruthless and profound, each hinting at briar-twisted paths to darker, wilder glades beyond your sight.”

—Frances Hardinge

“A treasure chest of jeweled miniatures, all new fables and fairy tales from the fabulously rich imagination of Sofia Rhei.”

—Lisa Tuttle



# The Deep Forest

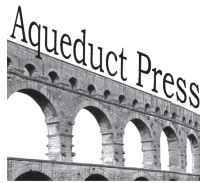


# The Deep Forest

by Sofia Rhei

A Translation of *El bosque profundo*

by Kendal Simmons



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*The tree opened, revealing its pages.*

*For Marian Womack and Rachel Pollack*

*Somewhere along the path of life,  
in the belly of the Deep Forest,  
to disorder the world decays,  
when what was once good is now pain.  
The path ahead tastes of escape,  
that which is left behind deemed foul.  
Nothing is certain, nor steady, nor complete,  
and doubt raises a toast to desire.  
The dark forest forces slow travel,  
and to reflection Freedom is bound  
when every memory, in a flood,  
confuses its likeness, and it is the gift  
lunacy, all love sickness,  
there is no difference between Vice and Virtue.*





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# Foreword

by José Carlos Somoza

## HEREIN LIES YOUR FUTURE

### SHUFFLING

Dear Reader,

An extraordinary future awaits you. I will disclose a few things to you first. Not many. The future is yours to experience. Let us begin.

### THE HERMIT

We tend to be one when we read. With this book, I foresee intense hours of peace and harmony. The solitude that is held in store for you is not abandonment: it is silence and a lamp, it is complete concentration, it is the company of invisible creatures.

### THE MAGE

Ah, she had to make an appearance at some point. If you have not had the pleasure of knowing Sofía Rhei before, now is your moment. She has crossed your path, and she has power: soon you will not be able to put her books down. She is capable—and has proven so with this collection—of creating stories from the implausible, of playing with words before your eyes, of hypnotizing you with her plots. I know her well. I warn you of the influence she will have on you. A magical narrator, architect of fables, what Sofía does is no trick: it is a constant struggle to become better with each book that she writes. Here is her most difficult challenge yet, and she overcomes it.

## THE LOVERS

Every book falls in love with its reader. The inverse does not always happen. But with this book, the love will be mutual, and at first sight. It is full of brilliant beauty and profound intelligence. How easy it is to fall in love! As Shakespeare once said of Cleopatra: age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. You will remain loyal to this book until the very last page.

Will you have children together? We shall see if Sofia ever writes a sequel.

## THE STARS

Dante concluded each one of his three Cantos with this word: “stars.” He knew intuitively, perfectly, that literature was the best—the only—way to reach the stars. Sofia Rhei sows her space with tiny lights, tiny tales, with traces left by an all-powerful Tom Thumb in a black forest. You choose the path that you wish to take, but you will, dear reader, invariably trek further into the darkness.

## THE WORLD

Each book is its own world. And those worlds are words. All words become a book. And each book is its own world.

## THE END

It does not exist: you will want to read it again and again.

*The Deep Forest is extensive, but its paths are those that are etched in the palm of your hand. You choose where you will enter. It is said that only three paths exist, but where do they lead? Uncertain. It is possible to pass several times through the same place, and even more probable is that many of its corners will remain unknown. There are places that will always be found when searched for, and others to which it may take decades to return.*

*You will cross through thirteen doors, you will contemplate your reflection in thirteen mirrors, you will stop in front of thirteen trees, you will admire thirteen statues, you will find thirteen golden words, you will find thirteen ways to not answer a question. The forest demands things of you. It asks of you respect, reverence, fear. It reminds you of your fragile, animal existence, of the ephemerality of your fluid existence. The forest is full of exchanges, of pacts, of favors.*

*The forest does not have just one center. Its depths do not permit measurement, and even those who know the forest well all have different ideas of the number of steps it would take to travel its entirety. Everyone thinks that the center of the forest is its most important place, its most secret, but nobody agrees on where that is. The butterflies' clearing? The abandoned cabin? The fountain of those who suffer?*

*As you walk through the enchanted forest, be mindful of where you step. The harm or the good that is done to a single creature reverberates through all those of its kind, through different species, through those that feel the emotions of others, and even through creatures who do not share kinship with any other. You may prefer to avoid the wrath of the people of the Stinging Nettle.*



# Chapter 1: Paths

# I

## THE BELLMAKER

THE BELLMAKER NEVER makes two bells quite the same. He gazes into the eyes of infants and entertains them in hopes that they laugh, though he also listens to their silences, which are not any less important. He designs rattles that turn the hasty patient and the lazy diligent. And, just a single glance will tell him all he needs to know about an individual. He knows which sound will cure them, and which will hurt them, and which will sadden them.

This artisan of bells lives in the River of the Turtles. He observes them, trying to make sense of the patterns on their shells, trying to make sense of the universe. Not once has he been able to make a bell for himself.




THE SEER FORETOLD a prophecy in which the princess would be made unhappiest by a man who possessed only one arm. So, the king ordered that the remaining arm of every one-armed man in the kingdom be cut off.

No one made the princess unhappy. But, scared of her father's brutality, no one took an interest in her either. Years passed, and she was offered neither affection nor company. The loneliness brought her to tears each night.

She asked the Healer for herbs so that she could sleep. That night, the princess dreamt that dozens of arms, all without bodies, invaded her father's bedroom.

The king woke the next morning, his skin full of scratches and bruises, all in patterns of five. They had torn one of his arms from his body. He then understood that the man destined to make his daughter unhappy was none other than himself.





JUST PAST THE towering rows of wild garlic, among fields of carmine flowers, and set right beside the Harp of the Rain, was a glass coffin. It contained the fragile body of the Girl of Thorns.

Her skin was a pale gray, her blue veins peeking through. With each breath, she would exhale an eloquent frost. Her thorns were of a darker gray, though almost black at their tips: a brilliant jet black, that of poison.

“Who will wake the Girl of Thorns?” sang the Harp whenever it rained. Her music was gentle with the passing of each summer shower, though thunderous when the clouds would storm. “Whoever wakes her shall die with the first touch, but only then will peace be brought to the forest.”

The knights, soldiers, and travelers who heard the musings of the harp admired her beauty, but they did not wish to die. Among them, a boy had also discovered the glass coffin, all while searching for bellflowers to play with. The girl seemed very beautiful, but she also scared him.

Many years passed.

The boy, who was no longer a boy, returned each summer, and every summer, the girl filled his chest with fear. Be that as it may, he thought her even more beautiful, and he felt his compassion for her grow. One night, through relentless rain and charged with love, he could no longer resist the temptation to kiss her. He died in the act.

The Girl of Thorns awoke and mourned the death of her savior for three days, until he himself grew thorns. She placed him in the glass coffin and went forth to fulfill her destiny.

## II

### THE HEALER

“There is a snaking line of sick people who wait patiently to be attended by the Healer. At the same house, there stands another line, winding still, in which people also exercise their patience. Hidden in the shade are those who wait to see the Witch so that she might help them exact revenge on those who have hurt them. The Healer tends to her patients while the sun still shines in the sky; the Witch tends to hers beneath a frigid mantle of darkness and stars. No one seems concerned that they both live in the same house, that they both share the same face.



The Devil attempted to grow a tree, one with fruit in the shape of voluptuous bodies, so as to tempt men and women and draw them toward the warmth of his refuge (though some may call it Hell). He did not realize, however, that as his tree grew, so would another, one with celestial roots that reached down from the heavens and acted as a blight upon his realm, contaminating it with peace. Each attempt to remove those celestial branches only resulted in damage to his own tree. His branches, terrible and red, would shrivel to dust, to ashes, only to be whistled away by the slightest breeze.

After much thought, the Devil decided to stop hacking at this celestial tree, despite the undesired invasion upon his dwellings. If he wished for his

mission to be successful, he should accept the presence of that steady spy.

When the men and women who devour the Devil's sensual fruit, who yield to loss and sin, reach Hell, they stop in front of that ashen, inverted tree and observe it, pensive, as if it reminds them of something, but they cannot quite make sense of its familiarity. The tree's merciful roots lick them and calm them, and from the tree flowers a fruit in the shape of their bodies, the bodies of the condemned.

WHEN A FAIRY drowns, which is a rather frequent occurrence, her spirit transforms into a round pebble and sinks to the bottom of the river. Only when another fairy, or perhaps a child, is able to recognize her among the rest of the pebbles and hold her in the palm of their hand will the pebble sprout wings and ascend to the sky, bestowing a wish upon the child or the fairy.

The little girl was so sad that she tripped and fell by the river. She felt as if she needed more than just her eyes to release all the tears she was holding back. She needed something more than what her body could give to express the immensity of her pain, the weight of it. All she wished for was to fade, to melt from sorrow and have the river's current carry her away.

When someone is that sad, it is difficult for them to recognize the fairies at the bottom of the river. And for that, her wish was not granted, and the girl lived.

And this is the truth about the pebbles in the river.

### III

#### THE SENSIBLE QUEEN

SHE WAS SO beautiful and virtuous that every time she spoke, from her mouth flowed blood-red roses. Those roses should not have been red, but only she knew their true color. Such wisdom had to be earned, however, as every rose has its thorns. And every thorn is sharp enough to slice.

THE MARKS LEFT by the wolf's claws were not disappearing, and her husband was set to return within a few days' time. She applied ointment in an attempt to hide from him the evidence of her infidelity. She loved her husband, but he could never give her the same passion, the same pain, that the wolf had aroused in her.

When her husband returned, his body was full of marks, like those made from a bird's beak. He said that he had been ambushed by the Master of Crows. She nodded and spoke not a word.

His wife knew the truth. She knew that this man-bird, so unsettling in his flocking form, had made love to her husband, destroying his skin, with an intensity that she herself could never match.

IT IS SAID that when a beautiful maiden dies before her time, the only way that her soul can reach its destination is by water. So, when misfortune strikes a family, prematurely robbing them of the most beautiful of their daughters, her funeral takes place by the river. Winter or summer, the children are sure to collect any visible flowers, keeping their petals from staining the untouched waters.

After night falls, at the river's hidden bend, she who gave birth to the maiden will examine its waters. If the water is white, she will breathe a sigh of relief. If the water is red, she will recite a prayer to the Earth. If the water is black, she will abandon the town forever.



SINCE SHE HAD never spoken a single word, everyone thought she was mute. She consumed only honey, which she ate with a golden spoon, one that was quite long and very small. She barely opened her lips, even to dine on such a fine treat.

There was a man who lusted after her, and he observed her for a long while. He planned his attack well, deciding he would kidnap her as she returned from the market. Since she could not scream for help, as she had never opened her mouth, never uttered even the gentlest sound, he would have every chance to do with her as he pleased. And there were so many things that he wished to do.

When he attacked the girl, her mouth gaped open in fear. The bees that lived inside her flew toward the assailant like irate arrows. They gouged out his eyes.

## IV

THE TWO WARRIORS lifted their swords, ready to duel. One of them spoke but a single word, and with that he struck the fatal blow.

### THE PROMISE

“YOU MUST MAKE good on your word,” said the prince after settling the kingdom’s debts. “You promised to marry me.”

“That was not what I promised,” she said as she took out a sharpened knife.

She did not allow him time to react. She severed her own hand with a clean and experienced cut. She had practiced this many times before, in the kitchen. She bandaged the wound carefully as the prince watched, horrified by what she had just done.

“Here is what you were promised,” she said, offering the prince her severed hand.



THE KING DID not trust his taster. So, he ordered the Mage to switch his eyes with those of a magical frog. He could now see even the smallest drop of poison.

The queen did not trust the king. So, she ordered the Mage to swap her eyes with those of a female wolf in heat. When she saw a red aura surrounding one of the courtesans, the queen knew that the woman genuinely desired her husband, not for his crown, but for his heart. The queen did not hesitate to have her killed.

The taster was in love with the queen. He spent years trying to poison the king, but, for some reason unbeknownst to him, the king had detected every piece of poisoned food.

The most beautiful of the palace cooks was in love with the taster. He never seemed to realize, though, because he was blinded by his own fascination with the queen. So, the most beautiful of the palace cooks gouged out her own eyes. She would never look at him again.

The Mage found the cook's eyes. Wanting to know the motive for which she had gouged them out, he placed them in a rabbit.

The rabbit went running to the taster. Frightened by its impetuosity, the taster killed the rabbit with a quick, fatal stab and brought it to the cook so that she could roast it. She put the rabbit in the oven without knowing that the animal bore her eyes and, as such, a piece of her very heart.

The queen tasted the smitten rabbit. She immediately burst into tears, washing away the wolf in her eyes. She finally saw the taster, who had never once shied his gaze.

The king could see that the meat was not poisoned. But, when he tasted it, his heart began to beat as it had not beat for a long time. It soon became too much. That echo of unrequited love reminded him of the rancor that colored his days. It sent him to the grave.

The Mage recovered the frog's eyes and gave them to the cook. She took a stroll in the woods and decided to stay there to live. What she saw in that forest was more than she had ever seen before.

## V

### THE MEMORY

SHE OPENED THE door that he had forbidden her from entering. Inside, a guardian owl suddenly appeared, as silent as the night. The owl devoured her right eye and ousted her from the room using his tremendous wings.

“Let that serve as a warning,” he said as she returned home.

But she could not forget what her left eye had managed to see.



THE RECLUSE PRAYED to the Hollow Stone that the man she loved would love her in return. Each night, she dreamt of his embrace, she dreamt that he would caress her cheek, that a deep voice would whisper sweet, incoherent words into the curve of her neck.


The following day, the man searched for her to tell her that he loved her. However, it seemed that a terrible accident had disfigured his face the night before, and the woman realized that her love for him had been nothing more than a caprice.

She decided then that she would instead love another man, the man who had always loved her. The next day, however, she tripped while holding scissors in her hand, and her face was left with a terrible gash. Her suitor fled, frightened by her disfigured appearance.

The recluse then prayed to the Hollow Stone that she would love herself. The following day, when she saw her wounded face in the mirror, she understood that a visible scar is much better



than one inside. She knew that, eventually, she could be content with what she had.

 SHE BELIEVED THAT all jewels were simply chains and shackles, representations of punishment, of possession. Necklaces were yokes, bracelets were shackles, and rings enslaved in the worst of ways. That is why she preferred to adorn herself with poppy and honeysuckle during the summer, with hellebore and crocus in the winter.

She gathered so many flowers that it drew the attention of the Herb King. He decided to punish her by taking away her beauty, thinking she would no longer feel the need for such ornamentation. Blood did not flow through the king's veins, but rather a phlegmatic sap incapable of producing fear, and so he did not understand why a woman would do such a thing if she did not believe herself to be beautiful. He did not understand that she was ashamed of her ugliness, of the wrinkles that would soon form.

Panicked by her rapidly aging face, she gathered more violets, more of the lovely leaves of red ivy, more of the tiny white flowers that grew between the rocks that paved the spring. She desiccated them and spread them over her body. She even ate some. The more flowers she picked, however, the more her skin withered and dried, the more her eyes sunk, the more her lips cracked.

The king finally realized that she could not hear the soft laments of the flowers as she uprooted them and was thus ignorant of the pain she caused. So, he decided to turn her into a plant, bestowing upon her the ability to hear the steady pulses of the earth. It was then that the bellflower was born.

When they are withered and aged, their pale green petals turned to gold, bellflowers will ring softly with each gentle brush of wind, as if to say that they have finally accepted the warm beauty of their years.