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They Who Welcome Chaos

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Portfolio submitted in full completion for the degree of

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They Who Welcome Chaos

Sophie Johnson

Chapter One

No Longer Children

“And only when Arthai and his beloved were united did the world become complete. There was balance across the land from that moment on. Night and day, sun and rain, light and dark. The world was fuelled by their covenant and their joy. For there is nothing purer or more sacred than the joining of two hearts.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 2, verse 9.

Venne’s wife-to-be had gone missing again and it fell to him to find her. So as twilight fell, when his day should have been over, he was instead wandering into the emerald forest to find the flighty girl. He felt indebted to her before their arranged marriage had even begun, as she had freed him from the evening’s prayers.

“No prayers,” he sighed happily. The birds in the trees made beautiful music in response. An autumn breeze blew through the forest, the sunset glowing through the canopy – a perfect day. Venne stopped at a nearby tree, plucking fruit from a low-lying branch. He bit into the sweet skin. *Where are you hiding this time?* The evening promised to be a good one. Away from mindless study and free to explore to his heart’s content, he found himself liking his prospective wife very much. He continued forwards, taking his time as he picked his way through the idyllic forest. A squirrel weaved across his path, watching him with curiosity. He stared back as he ate his fruit. Then he threw the core at it. It sprang away.

“Venne!” came a voice from behind him. He turned to the voice, groaning. A towering young man jogged up to him, cracking the leaves and twigs underfoot. The boy had dark wavy hair just past his

pointed ears, with tanned skin a golden brown. His shirt clung to his muscled body as he looked down at Venne. “Have you found her yet?” he said.

Venne shook his head and folded his arms. “Emiil,” he said. “I thought we agreed you would take the other side of the village.”

“I looked. She wasn’t there,” Emiil said, his brows knitting together. They made him look like a sad puppy, all hairy and wide eyed.

Venne’s expression soured as he turned away. “You just missed me, didn’t you?” he said, scanning the trees.

“This isn’t a joke, Venne,” Emiil growled.

Venne rolled his eyes. “Spare me the disapproval,” he replied. “Let’s just keep going. I’m sure she isn’t far. She could hardly escape this place alone.” They continued their trek through the golden wood together. A breeze sent autumn blooms and the scent of fruit towards them. It was sickly sweet in Venne’s mouth.

“It wouldn’t be the first time she had tried,” Emiil said.

Venne shrugged. “Our future wife is a spirited one,” he sighed. “But she could hardly cross the fences *and* the river *and* the mountains all by herself.”

“How do you know there is a river beyond the fence?” Emiil asked.

“How indeed,” Venne said with a smirk. He felt Emiil come up behind him like a beast ready to attack and he grinned wider. *Fight me, I dare you. Cause a little chaos.* Emiil said nothing and continued thundering through the wood. They passed a small glittering stream, the water crystal clear. Venne knelt to get a drink cupping his hands up to his mouth, just to waste time and enjoy his freedom a second longer. He rinsed his face with the cool waters and wet the back of his neck. Despite the season, it was unreasonably hot.

“Venne,” Emiil said. Venne ignored him. “Venne, we have to find her.”

Venne made an exasperated noise. *Boring, boring, boring.* “Yes, yes, the meeting, the prayers, the divine beauty that is our sanctuary, we must give thanks!” he exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air and splashing water at his companion. “I know Emiil; it only happens every *damn* day. The gods are still going to be there tonight, just calm down.”

“You shouldn’t use words like that,” Emiil said with a frown.

Venne smirked, standing up again and wiping his hands on his worn white pants. “I don’t see any elders to reprimand me. Do you?”

Emiil just looked at Venne. That’s all he did- just stared at things in that dumb way of his. Venne hopped over the stream, kicking pine cones out of his path. They continued in silence for a while.

“Why is she causing trouble?” Emiil said, breaking the blissful quiet. “Now, of all times?”

Venne glared over his shoulder at the other young man, his black hair falling over his face. “You know why,” he snapped. “It’s obvious.”

“But, if we’re both to be wed to her-” Emiil began.

“She wants to escape,” Venne said. “Before she’s stuck with the both of us for the rest of eternity.” Venne grimaced. “And I’m stuck with you.” Venne looked down at the brand on the back of his hand. A hollow diamond, caging his knuckles, binding him to a god and goddess forever more. Soon, he would have two marks on his wrist for the lives he would be responsible for. A marriage unlike any other- between himself, Emiil and their missing bride. Something writhed inside his blood.

“It is our fate,” Emiil said. “She cannot avoid it.”

“And yet, here we are, looking for our wayward wife. What does that tell you Emiil?” The other boy had gone silent. They came across a glade filled with wildflowers despite the harvest season, all glistening pure white in the fading sun. Venne picked one, pulling the petals off.

“You know where she is, don’t you?” Emiil said. Venne cocked his head.

“I have an idea, yes,” he admitted. “But there’s no certainty she’ll actually be there.”

“Then why are you wasting time? Let’s go,” Emiil said through gritted teeth.

Venne snorted. “How frightening,” he said but he continued forwards, adjusting his course to the high wooden fences in the distance. He tried to ignore Emiil behind him and pretend he was still free within the cage of his life.

Nadia saw them coming. Even through the thick canopy, sitting high upon a branch she could make them out. She felt her brows raise when she saw Venne. He had been spending more and more time on the outskirts these days- pushing his limits, harassing the guardians who patrolled the perimeter, testing everyone. She’d found him staring at her, not with the desire of a husband but with something else, entirely unreadable. Then she saw Emiil behind him. They looked a contrasting pair, Venne all secrets, tall limbs, black hair against shocking pale skin. Emiil, dark, freckled and full of the sunlight, strong and proud. Maybe if she leapt off the branches and made for the next tree over, she could avoid their notice and slip away down the southern path outlining the walls. She glanced at the wooden fence. It did not look intimidating, an ancient thing with ivy crawling up the interwoven wood, but the size was enormous. It seemed to go higher than the trees themselves. She had tried to climb it once but the guardians had found her before she had never seen the top. It could go on forever. Flowers sprouted in the cracks, shutting out the sunlight, covering up whatever mysteries lay beyond. She watched the two boys coming and decided to ignore them.

She dangled her pale scrawny legs off the edge. If she shoved herself off, how many bones would break? Would she die? What a beautiful sin it would be, to commit the gravest crime and defy the god Arthai and his goddess Laastra. She played with the long locks of her silver hair. Below, the two came up to the wall and looked around, squinting up at the trees. They had no idea where she was. She drew her bow and arrows from where they perched on another branch. She aimed precisely before Emiil’s feet and shot, just to show she could. The arrow landed with a thud at his toes. He flinched and glared up into the trees. She stuck her head out of the foliage to gloat.

“There she is!” Venne called to Nadia. “Looking as radiant as ever.”

He reads all those tomes and all he can do is say nothing. Nadia rolled her eyes. She glanced down at Venne in disdain. Sure enough, those bright eyes of emerald stared back at her, right through her body. His black hair looked unkempt. Everything about the tall, lanky young man was wild. And she hated to admit it about her betrothed, but she found him interesting.

“Why did you shoot at us?” Emiil shouted up at her.

She shrugged because she didn’t know herself. *Because I could.* “What do you want?”

“You already know,” Emiil said.

Venne snorted. “Is that how you would speak to your future lover?” he said to Emiil.

Nadia flinched at the words. As if she was capable of anything like love. “Don’t speak of such things,” She disappeared back into the trees, hugging her knees. The curve of her bow felt smooth in her hands, reassuring.

“Come down and talk to us!” Venne proclaimed. “Tell us what troubles you.”

Nadia wrinkled her nose.

“I’m going up there,” she heard Emiil say.

She felt the tree shudder against his weight as he began to climb. Nadia slid between the branches as she had done a thousand times, climbing back to earth with a sigh. Emiil had already made it halfway up by the time she appeared at the ancient gnarled roots. She sat with her back against the trunk, reaffirming that she was not going anywhere. Venne just grinned at her. She turned away from him towards that infernal wall. Emiil dropped back to earth.

“We need to get back,” he said. “Before the elders grow even more furious.”

“They’re always furious,” Nadia said, still not looking at them.

She heard Emiil sigh in frustration. Venne flopped down beside her, hands on the back of his head. He bathed in the fleeting sunlight, golden and aglow. Nadia couldn't help but take in the sight. Venne winked at her. She turned away again.

"Relax," Venne said to them both. "Enjoy the perfect sanctuary that is our lives. What is it the prayers say? 'Our lives are perfect, because of Arthai?'"

"Our lives are perfect, only because Arthai wills it'," Emiil corrected in a low, cautious tone.

Venne rolled his eyes. "Of course, you would know," he said. "The forest is perfect, the harvest is abundant, the water is pure. My hair is perfect, my shit is abundant, my piss is pure."

"Blasphemy," Emiil growled.

Nadia hid a smirk behind her hand, pretending to yawn. *Please don't make me laugh.* The more rebellious Venne grew, the closer she felt to him. And she felt as if she were in another realm entirely most of the time. Butterflies flitted past. They flew up to the wall and crawled through the cracked veins in the wood – mocking her. Her expression soured.

"You may as well leave, because I have no intention of returning any time soon," she declared. She stood, facing the wall and glaring at it.

Venne didn't move from his throne of earth and splendour. "What do you mean?" he asked. He didn't sound like he cared what the answer was.

"I won't do it," Nadia said.

"Nadia, we've talked about this-" Emiil began.

Nadia spun around turn her wrath upon him, as if looks alone could set a man aflame. "No. You talked. You lectured. I said nothing. Because there's nothing I can say that would satisfy you and your people."

“They are your people too,” Emiil croaked. He looked as if she had punched him in the stomach- and there was no man stronger than Emiil in the entire village.

“You’re the only one who thinks so,” Nadia said, turning away again. She took a tentative step forwards, then another. She began walking away.

Emiil was hot on her heels and Venne joined them after a groan.

“Let us at least try to understand one another,” Emiil said. He turned to Venne for help but the other man just shrugged. Emiil shook his head.

Nadia felt his stare boring into her. “Let me make it clear then,” she said, halting. She turned to them both. Her voice dropped to a deadly whisper.

“I will not marry you,” she vowed. Both boys flinched. “I will not become a part of you. I will not pray, I will not break, I will not worship anything or anyone. I will escape this forsaken land of hellish perfection. And I will damn the god and goddess until I die.”

Chapter Two

From Cursed Lips

“To sin is to hate- to hate is to kill your gods.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 7, Verse 1

Even in the rain, Emiil’s village was beautiful. He stared out of the cave he was resting in, watching the rain drops trickle off the trees around him. Even in the gloom, the fruit on the trees seemed to glow with their own light, inviting him to take a bite from their spotless flesh. Emiil finished sharpening his sword and grunted as he stood. The rain would be good for the harvest- food meant for his fast-approaching nuptials. It didn’t stir any great feelings inside him. He felt as hollow as the cavern he stood in. Shaking his head, he hurried out into the downpour to return home and complete his patrol. As a guardian in training, punctuality was required as much as strength and vigilance. What he was guarding the village from beyond the occasional wayward animals, he was unsure. The rain was warm against his bare arms. He weaved through the trees, across the path carved out by a thousand feet before him. In the distance, he could see the smoke from the bakers, the smiths and the elders hut. The flames never went out. Some things never changed.

I will not become a part of you. That is what Nadia had declared yesterday before she ran into the forest. Emiil had tried to chase after her but Venne had caught him and just shook his head. Defeated, the two boys had returned in time for the end of prayers and a stern lecture from the village elders. Emiil had expected a harsher punishment- a twenty-four-hour prayer vigil in a dark room alone, a private lesson with an elder, no food for two days, a beating. But seventeen years of good behaviour had led to nothing but a stern warning. He did not tell them what had really occurred. It had been the first time he

had been so dishonest. Lying to them was not as hard as he had thought. *I wonder where Nadia is now.* When he exited the forest, he found the answer all too soon.

The village was made up of a collection of stone huts, built into the hills of the glades. They weaved in and out of the trees and led to the tallest hill, where the main assembly hall was. At the centre of the village was a wide stretch of packed dirt with a fire pit in the centre. It was not often extinguished and acted as a centre point, a focus. Many chose to take their prayers around this fire, for warmth or for the symbolism of it all. The goddess Laastra was said to have wielded flames as bright as the sun. Someone sat dangerously close to the fire now, their limbs tied to a post. They were two days into their atonement prayers – they had eaten an extra apple for breakfast. There were more people than usual around the pit, a crowd. An anxious murmur was rising over the rain. Emiil's feet carried him faster.

“What's going on?” he asked to no one. *Please don't let it be her, not again, not now.*

Another guardian stood at the front, towering over the rest. “Nothing to be concerned about,” he called back to Emiil. “Go give your report to the elders.”

Out of habit, Emiil was turning away, averting his eyes to whatever slight imperfection he saw. *A catch of the light, nothing to see, everything is fine.* But he heard her laugh and instead he was shoving to the front.

At the centre, Nadia stood with a defiant grin, her face splattered with mud, her nose dripping red-black blood. She had the stance of someone ready to fight and he saw why. Her father stood straight backed over her with clenched fists, his white hair plastered to his forehead as if they had been out in the rain for a long time. Emiil caught Venne opposite him on the fringes of the crowd. He was anything but his usual amused self.

“Does it please you, child?” Nadia's father, Mikhail, asked. “To cause such a scene?” It was the same words as usual, the same glares that never reached her.

“Of course it does,” Nadia said, cocking her head. *Don't provoke him. You know what happens. You know.*

“Tell them!” Mikhail shouted. “Tell them why you revel in such folly.”

Nadia pushed her silver hair out of her face and sniffed. “What folly would that be?” she asked.

She did not look at the crowd. She seemed not to notice the fury around her, the whispers. *Demon, trickster, thief*, they murmured. Emiil wanted to go to her, to drag her away from the scene that played out every month, the pain that would no doubt come her way. Nadia picked dirt out of her nails, not even looking at her father anymore.

Mikhail turned a shade of purple. “You have stolen from your own people! You throw bread into the river, you spoil meat and for what? Why would you torture your kin?”

Nadia looked down at her tunic dress. The once pure white was now a wet and filthy brown, a hole in the shoulder where the soft material had ripped. Nadia’s clothes were always dirty- she seemed to shun the white the youths were made to wear. Scars lay beneath the cloth, memories of beatings, starvation, whippings. “Because my kin torture me,” Nadia said after a moment with a shrug. She sniffled again as blood dripped down onto her rosebud lips.

I can’t do anything; I can’t take sides. Peace, peace, there must be calm.

Nadia leaned forwards, taking a few steps towards her father. “Isn’t this anger, all this hate you throw at me, really about your own inadequacy?” she said. Mikhail’s hand whipped out, striking her across the face. She staggered backwards, holding her cheek. The grin did not leave her face. The crowd had already heard. A few words, and Nadia had dredged up every horrible rumour of adultery, of stolen kisses in the night, of broken vows. The crowd murmured, passing the stories around. Some just walked away.

“How dare you speak against your kin!” Mikhail said.

Nadia peered down at her hand and laughed. “Did they hit you father? Did they jeer at you too?” she asked. “What horrors did you commit before you married dear mother? Who was your other lover?”

Mikhail came closer to his daughter, now glowering down at her. But he did not strike her. He was shaking. “Wh-who?” he stuttered.

“Who told me? Who indeed.” Nadia leaned a fraction closer and that was all the provoking her father needed.

He lashed out again but somehow there was more menace this time. It wasn’t just to cause a reaction from the girl- it was to physically harm her. She hit the ground with a crunch, blood pouring out of her nose and a busted lip.

Emiil had stepped forwards without even realising. The murmur of the crowd grew louder, tossing words like “traitor” and “blasphemer” at her like stones. *No Nadia, you can’t take this, this is worse than before. Run, run, run!* Nadia ignored them, sitting back up and brushing her hair from her face. Her long ears twitched as she shifted her head, the joints cracking. She grinned still, blood staining her teeth. Venne had taken more than a few steps towards her. He was between two groups, where Emiil shrank back into the crowd, shaking his head.

Mikhail lashed out at her again, grabbing a fistful of her hair and smashing her face into his knee. Nadia’s head snapped back as she fell into the mud. She didn’t even make a sound, just took the blow. He hit her again.

“Nadia!” Emiil whispered, staggering forwards. *He’s not going to stop.* Mikhail kicked her in the ribs over and over. Emiil saw Venne roll up his sleeves and veer towards Mikhail, fists raised. Only that spurred him into action- not his wife being beaten but the thought of a brawl and all-out chaos.

“Mikhail!” Emiil called, stepping out of the crowd once more. “We must report this to the elders. It is for them to consult the gods and find a fitting punishment.”

Mikhail paused, glaring at Emiil, who dared speak against an older villager. “I am her father. I have the right to punish her,” he said. Nadia wasn’t moving. He wasn’t sure whether she was unconscious or just exhausted.

“She does not care, evidently. Let her leaders judge her instead,” Emiil said.

Venne hovered behind the attacker like a phantom, ready to pounce at any second. Then he smiled and patted the man on the back, the mask shifting back into place. “Besides, the job of discipline will soon belong to me,” Venne said with a grin. He cast a disdainful glance down at Nadia. “Let her relish in her freedom for a few more days. Then I will make sure she behaves.”

“*You* would punish her?” Mikhail said, flinching away from Venne’s touch.

“What is it Arthai said?” Venne mused. “For only my Root might know my own heart’?”

Mikhail straightened his shirt and ignored his bloody knuckles. “You have been studying?” he asked.

Venne shrugged.

Emiil fought the urge to pick Nadia off the floor there and then. But she wasn’t free of her father’s wrath just yet.

“I am a scribe in training, am I not?” Venne replied.

Mikhail looked between the two youths and then down at his daughter. He spat on her. “You are no daughter of mine,” he said.

“What sweet relief,” Nadia said from the floor. Either Mikhail didn’t hear over the roar of the rain or he chose to ignore her. He motioned up the hill, towards the elder’s hall. The crowd was dispersing, barely casting a backward glance at the bloodied girl on the floor. The scene was all too familiar.

“Move along,” Emiil was saying out of habit. “Please go about your duties.” Each word brought bile into his throat. He couldn’t look back. He couldn’t even make sure she was alright. *I’m trying to protect you.* He headed up the hill.

“Take my hand,” Venne said.

Nadia remained unmoving on the ground. She wondered how long she could lay there before she became deathly ill, if they would even bother healing her. She felt Venne standing beside her like a burning flame. His body seemed to emanate heat through the pouring rain. A fog had begun to settle and she couldn't see anyone else around. She heard Venne sigh. *I don't want your damn pity.*

"Laastra's stars, Nadia, take my damn hand and get up," he insisted. "They've gone. No one is here to see you act tough."

Nadia sunk her hands into the mud and tried to push herself up. A lance of ice cold pain ripped through her ribs, as if she had been struck again. She crumpled back to the dirt. *Pick me up or leave.*

"Why would you help? Because you're going to be my lover?" she growled. *Because you care? Never.* She tried to get up again, only to be greeted by the same agony.

Venne's blazing hot fingers wrapped around her waist and shoulders as he bent down over her. "Because I thought you were quite amazing," he said, his pale face inches from hers. His usual wild hair was plastered to his face and his teeth chattered from the cold. But he looked alert, strong. "Here. Lean on me."

"Don't think I owe you-" she began as he lifted her off the floor. She clung to his bony shoulders, cold wet bodies pressed together. It was a foreign feeling, being held by another and something she would be expected to grow accustomed to.

"Honestly, Nadia, if you do not drop this aloof act, I shall drop *you* in the mud and leave you to crawl home." He dug his fingers into her waist and she flinched as her ribs seemed to grind and creak together in her hollow body.

"If that hand goes any lower, I'll cut it off," Nadia said through gritted teeth. They began a clumsy, staggering pace through the rain, Venne leading her to some unknown location.

"As charming as ever, even when you're about to faint," Venne said. Nadia looked around. The fog had settled in all at once and now the village was quiet. Not even the distant noise of the smithy or the

wicker of cattle permeated the air. *The spectacle is over and you all leave as if nothing happened.*
Cowards.

“They’ll punish you too if we’re seen together,” Nadia said as they passed a house. Smoke poured out of the chimney poking through the stone cave roof. Voices were screaming inside, a man’s rising above a woman’s. Then a sharp crack.

Venne snorted. “I’ll tell them I lashed seven sins out of you,” he said with a smirk.

Nadia rolled her eyes, easing more of her weight on him as her energy drained with every step. “I doubt they’d believe that, given your recent behaviour,” she said.

“Hrm.” Venne headed towards the trees. He took them off the beaten path and into the gloom.

They continued in silence for a while before coming to his home- a stone building, a remnant of ruins that scattered the village. It was grey and unimposing, a warm orange light slipping between the cracks in the shuttered windows. Venne kicked the wooden door open with a bang and helped her inside.

“Sit down,” he said, releasing his grip on her.

She staggered forwards and leaned against the wall. Venne lived alone, the only youth to ever procure his own dwelling before marriage. He had to convince the elders that as a leader-in-training and wise scribe, he needed the peace of the forest so that he could study and pray without interruption. She knew for a fact that was elk shit and was more than certain he had something to threaten the elders with to be given such a gift. *Lucky bastard.* Still, it was tiny, with nothing but a small hearth, a beaten rug and a tangle of blankets on a mattress of dried grass. Most of the floor space was scattered with scrolls and books. Above the hearth was an array of knives, mostly ceremonial and useless. She picked the sharpest one.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Venne asked. He looked up from the small satchel he was rummaging through beside his bed.

Nadia gathered her hair in her hand. She slashed the knife through the strands, chopping off the soaking locks in one flick of her wrist. The silver threads fell to the floor. She kicked what she could towards the fire with her bare feet.

“What the heck did you do that for?” Venne asked, his bag slipping through his fingertips. His mouth hung open, his eyes wide.

Nadia spread her fingers through her short messy hair. “He touched it. It was dirty,” she said. Venne’s eyebrows knitted together. He looked at her in the same way as ever- like a text he could not translate, a book he could not read. Whatever he did glean from her, he seemed to like. He smiled widely.

“Well then,” he said. He reached a hand out to touch her new short hair. She leaned against the wall and didn’t know why she let him. His hands, dry clean fingers full of a thousand tiny papercuts, hung above her lips.

“It suits you,” he said with a nod and dropped his hand. He went back to his satchel and pulled out some bandages.

Nadia held out her hand for them. “I can look after myself,” she said.

Venne shook his head. “You won’t even let me dress your wounds? How stubborn you are.”

Nadia snatched the bandages from him and knelt in front of the fire to examine her wounds. Mostly grazes and scrapes and bruises on her insides she could do nothing about. The pain rattled around in her chest with every tiny movement, like stones grating against her bones. A moment later Venne appeared beside her with a basin and a jug of water. Nadia wiped the blood and dirt off her face, her nose still clogged and aching. He didn’t make a second attempt to aid her and instead chose to watch. She wound the cloth around for the worst of the scrapes.

“You’ve done this before,” Venne said.

Nadia shrugged then winced. “It’s happened enough times,” she replied.

“But you know what you’re doing. I’ve studied the healing arts and you know what needs to be done,” he said. He nodded to himself.

Once she had mended herself as much as she could, Nadia stood up and headed for the door. “Thank you for the water,” she said. “I suppose.”

“Don’t you want to know why I brought you back here?” Venne said, shooting up to his feet and going to block her exit.

Nadia narrowed her eyes. “If you think you can have your way with me, you’re mistaken,” she snarled. “I’ll break off anything that moves.”

“So scary,” said Venne, looking unamused. “Do you really think me so boorish?” Nadia didn’t answer. *I think you’re something else entirely.* He shook his head. “Have you really not noticed we’re on the same side?”

“Don’t pretend you understand why I do what I do,” Nadia said. She took another step towards the door.

Venne leaned towards her, grinning. “I know things you don’t,” he said. “Secret crevices even you have not found. Don’t you wonder why I grow weary of this place too?”

“What secrets?” Nadia said with a frown.

“Let me show you,” he said. He opened the door and looked back at her. The rain had stopped but the fog still hung around them. Venne held out his hand to her. Beyond was something she could not see, something unimaginable and new. She did not take his hand- but she followed him.

Chapter Three

Beneath

“And so Arthai began his slumber in the deepest depths of the earth – to dream of the day he would one day awaken to his goddess Laastra and the peace they wished for.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 20, Verse 33.

Root- One’s divine wedded partner. Modelled after Arthai and Laastra. Then what does this make us? Nadia is Laastra, but are Emiil and I both Arthai? We are an anomaly, the only group not a pair. Everyone else was matched up, so why not us?

Venne gave up trying to read the feverish notes in his journal and sat on his porch, watching the stars blink into existence one by one. The moon shone down on him like a guiding light. It was a perfect night for trespassing. He sucked at his lower lip, staring into the night and waiting for his betrothed. He hated calling her that - it sounded so stiff and boring. Everyone in the village had a wife or future wife, husband or in Nadia’s case, *husbands*, since there was a shortage of girls in his generation. Every eighteen years, the generation was wed and then two weeks of furious lovemaking later, all the girls became expectant mothers. There was nothing special about love at all. It had occurred exactly the same way for hundreds of years in their tribe and would no doubt go on for thousands more.

Just as he gave up on Nadia and went to make himself some tea she appeared, clad in a dark cloak that covered her pure white dress. All the youths wore white, some symbolic nonsense about being pure and chaste. In the cloak, Nadia looked like a bringer of doom. It made some hot feeling flash through Venne.

“Arthai’s balls, you scared me,” he declared, standing up. He grabbed his satchel and a tome before closing his door. He left the hearth burning dimly to create the illusion he was inside with his head stuck in a book. If the place burnt down, he would not care. All the villages precious archives would go with it.

“Why are you bringing a book?” Nadia said with a wrinkled nose.

Venne patted the heavy leather tome tucked under his arm. “Translation of ancient runes,” he said. “We are going back in time.”

“Fascinating,” Nadia said, deadpan, “Let’s go.” Venne rolled his eyes and motioned her towards the forest. They wandered through the moonlight, off the beaten track and into the unknown.

“This better be worth my time,” Nadia murmured. She was walking slowly behind him, one hand cradling her stomach. The bruises on her skin were already blooming like dark flowers.

“Have a little faith,” Venne said. *Does she trust anyone?* He glanced over his shoulder. She said nothing.

Venne shook his head. “You think you’re alone,” he said. He hopped over a dried-up stream.

“What?” Nadia said. She paused at the hollow earth.

“Do you really think you’re the only one who hates this world?” Venne asked, fingers drumming against the tome in his hand. Images flickered though his head- people’s blood spilled on new leaves, children crying lost in the woods and the elements for weeks, the elder forcing his head underwater when he got a question wrong.

Nadia stuck her chin out as if to look down on him as she hobbled across the gap. “You’re a well-loved scribe,” she said. “Don’t pretend you know anything about me.” It was something she said often, with a dismissing look and a flick of her hair.

He wondered whether she would grow tired of him and flee into the darkness as she so often did. He had grown used to seeing only her back, her distant figure walking away from everything.

“See that’s the thing,” Venne mused as he continued through the dark. “You isolate yourself entirely. What was it you said earlier to your high and mighty father? He was a rebel too?”

“He was,” Nadia said after a moment. “He loved someone other than my mother.”

“It is surprisingly common,” Venne said. He brushed his palm against a felled tree as he stepped over it, reading the map in his mind.

“I read the journals. Of the previous elders. A little.” Nadia said.

Venne snorted. He had sneaked a look at those old tomes as soon as he began elder training. It was nothing impressive. They continued down the path he had tread weeks before, marking off guideposts—a shrivelled bush, a rotten tree, a glade filled with rabbit holes.

“So...” Nadia said, looking at the stars between the canopy.

“So?” Venne said, looking at her.

“My father.”

Venne twisted his mouth. “Oh yes. One of a hundred rebels of his time. Disappointingly weak.” He shook his head. “I mean really, does everyone think we’re the only ones who have wondered what’s beyond the wall?” Venne had heard a hundred rumours, from a world of winged beings, to islands in the sky, to an endless stretch of water. They varied in ludicrousness – but all held an element of hope, of another world.

Nadia glanced at him, catching his eye for a second. There was a look of childlike wonder there, buried beneath the bitterness and the anger. “Has anyone...ever made it?” she asked.

“The records don’t say,” Venne said, shaking his head. He looked at the old leather bound book in his hands. “Perhaps they have been wiped from memory. Perhaps they were killed.” *Perhaps they are free.* He moved some branches out of the way as the forest grew denser. Nadia went the opposite way, ignoring him. *Not even a single reaction. I’m on your side, for goodness sake.*

“Why do you care?” she asked.

“About you?” he said with a chuckle. Even in the dim moonlight, he saw her grimace. Was she blushing? Perhaps honeyed words would bring about a different side of this girl. *What lies beneath all that stubborn passion?*

“About escaping.” Nadia said. Venne considered this, glad for the distraction. Nadia looked far too pretty in the starlight and it begged for his attention. *I don’t want to lead. I don’t want to be what they want me to be*, his mind screamed.

“If someone tells you not to do something, don’t you want to do it even more?” he mused. “If someone hides something, you want to see what it is, don’t you? It’s in our nature.”

“Bullshit,” she hissed.

Venne sighed. “Believe what you want. But don’t think for a second your conviction is any stronger than mine.”

They continued through the forest in silence. The only sound was the crunch of leaves and twigs underfoot. This was the most she had ever spoken to him. She had probably said no more than a few sentences to him up until that year. Somewhere the wind whispered through the trees, beyond the fence they were drawing ever closer to.

“Conviction won’t matter if you become my husband,” she said. Her voice dripped with disgust.

“What a horrible word. It sounds as if I own you,” Venne said, equally disquieted by the thought.

“You don’t think you own me already?” Nadia stopped walking. She put her hands on her hips, face grave. As if challenging him.

He couldn’t hide his smile. “I think you are a rare and strange thing indeed.” He threw his hands up in exasperation. “But not my wife. I shall never take a wife.” He couldn’t meet her eyes after that bold declaration.

“In two weeks, you will have no choice,” Nadia said. Her voice had grown quieter, as fleeting as the wind.

“Are we not going to escape together?” he asked. He forced himself to look at her. She was staring back, wide-eyed. They stopped short, coming to a steep slope. Unable to bear the scrutiny of that stare any longer, he shoved his tome into his bag and clapped his hands.

“Oh, we’re here,” he declared a little too loudly. “How sweetly we passed the time.” Nadia was already moving past him. He looked at her back, watched her move ahead of him as always. He could never quite see her expression clearly. *Another mystery I may never solve.*

At the foot of the slope was a set of old gnarled trees. Nestled between the dying bark was a small wooden hut, equally dilapidated and covered almost entirely in moss. Nadia went towards the hut, examining the door’s rusted lock. She took it in her hands and it fell to pieces. The wooden door creaked open. Venne hurried down the slope after her. He rummaged through his bag and brought out a lantern. He lit the candle inside, casting a warm glow across the decrepit structure.

“Why didn’t you light that earlier?” Nadia said with a glare. “I nearly fell five times.”

“And let the whole village know we’re gallivanting about after dark? I think not,” Venne said. Nadia turned away. *He’s done this before. Maybe more times than you.* She pushed through the doorway into the cramped space. Inside were several barrels and crates, a stack of wood long since rotted and a rusted set of tools scattered in the corner.

“You brought me to a storage shed,” she said. She felt the fury rise in her throat. How foolish she was to believe that anyone shared her need for answers. *This was all a ridiculous trick.* Perhaps Venne would kick her while she was wounded and have his way with her where no one could hear or care. She raised her voice. “You brought me to a rotten shit house! What is this? What do you think you’re playing at?!”

“Your lack of faith cuts deep,” Venne said at her side. “Why would I bring you to a store house?”

Nadia was quivering with anger now. Her emotions rose in her throat, clawing their way to her mouth, fighting for freedom. “If you so much as touch me, I will kill-”

“If I wanted to trick you, I would do it far better than this!” Venne insisted. He held up his arms, taking a step back.

“What is this?!” Nadia insisted.

“Let me show you,” Venne said. “No danger, no tricks, I promise.”

He strode past her, making sure to give her a wide berth. He held the lamp high, casting a light across the room. It was larger than she thought. Venne brought his light to the floor, examining a trapdoor. It was a small wooden square, big enough for them both to climb through at once. The same rusted lock held the door closed, only this one was still intact. Venne held out the lamp to her. “Hold this, please,” he asked, not looking at her.

Nadia hesitated before taking the lantern from him. She leaned forwards to help cast the light over the door.

Venne pulled out a saw. He brandished it with a flourish. “It took me two weeks to steal this from the blacksmith,” he said, watching the metal glint in the candlelight. “I wonder when they’ll notice it’s missing.”

Nadia said nothing. *What could possibly be under here that is so important?*

Venne shrugged and brought the blade down on the lock. He began sawing, grinding through the worn metal. It was noisy, slow work. Nadia kept glancing back at the door, expecting to hear the shouts of the elders any moment. Venne was unusually quiet, absorbed in his work. *This isn’t the first time*, she thought over and over. The lock snapped and rattled to the floor.

“I am truly amazing,” Venne declared. He wiped away the dust and metal to grasp at the door handle.

“Are you ready to welcome the unknown?” he asked.

“I’ve been ready for a long time,” Nadia murmured. *So dramatic.* She grasped the door handle with him and they pulled, sending clouds of dust swirling around them. They peered into the darkness, a set of worn stone steps leading down. Venne grinned at her and held out his hand. This time she took it.

Venne sneezed and then smashed his head onto the stone roof. He howled in pain, bending forwards as he rubbed his head. *Excellent. Now she really thinks you’re a dashing and intelligent adventurer. Perhaps you could piss your pants and make her really fall for you.*

“Be quiet,” Nadia hissed.

“We’re miles from town,” Venne said, continuing through the gloom. “No one ever comes anywhere near here. I’ve scouted it for weeks.”

The passageway smelled strange, like all manner of metals and earth. Somewhere in the distance, water dripped. The air was cold and gnawing at Venne’s bare arms. It was not the most comfortable adventure he had been on. Nadia did not answer. She was at the mercy of following him into the darkness.

“How did you find this?” she asked.

Venne held the lantern a little higher. “There are a few around the village like this. I’ve not been able to explore them all. This one was out of the way and long forgotten.”

“What have you found in the others?”

“Stories.” Venne’s voice sounded faint, far away. His usual humour was gone.

“Don’t be so cryptic. I deserve to know,” Nadia said.

“Why?” Venne asked. He paused as the steps ended. He looked back at her. “Perhaps you won’t like what you see.”

“I seldom see things I like,” Nadia said with a grim expression matching Venne’s own. “The truth is one of them though.”

Venne looked back into the shadows, stepping forwards and casting the lamplight into the darkness. They were in a stone room, carved out of the earth. It was empty. On the opposite side, was a painted mural. Venne hurried up to it, Nadia behind him. There were deep runes carved into the floor but it wasn’t anything Nadia could read. Venne was too busy with the mural. It depicted the god and goddess. On one side, Laastra sat amongst the stars, reaching out. Her skin was moonlight pale, almost luminescent against the stonework. Her lavender hair streamed down her back, weaving between the stars. She carried her customary staff on her back, made of pale wood and adorned with crystals. She was slightly different in every illustration but always bore an unearthly grace than made Nadia cringe. *You can’t be real.* On the other side was Arthai amidst burning trees, also pining for his beloved. His skin the colour of sand was painted with such detail, each freckle on his cheeks marked out. He stood bold and strong, a bow and quiver around his shoulders. Whoever had painted the mural had taken a long time painting his brown locks, weaved with honey and gold. He was earth and she was the night—a classic depiction of the slumber the god and goddess remained in until the day the “world was at peace” and they could return. *Or maybe they never existed and it’s just a painting.*

“It’s an old temple,” Nadia said, smoothing her hands across the chipping paint. Venne shook his head.

“No,” he said, turning back to the floor. “No, there’s something more to it. Why abandon something like this?” He crouched over the runes, his finger running across the marks. He brought out his tome and cast his lantern over them. The mural disappeared back into the shadows.

Nadia wandered over to join Venne. “What does it say?” she asked.

“I don’t...I don’t recognise these runes,” he stammered. “Some are familiar.” He pointed to a swirling arrow. “This means “path” but I’ve never seen the runes after it.” Nadia flicked through Venne’s tome, to his annoyance. She scanned the pages but all the symbols blurred together into pointless nonsense.

Venne snatched his book back. “This will take time,” he said. “Let me take a proper look at this.”

“Fine,” Nadia said as she resigned herself to waiting.

Venne made disapproving noises as she rummaged through his bag and found a candle. She lit it and went to stare at the mural. *Why hide something that took so much time?* She chipped away at one of the stars with her fingernail.

“*Path. Heaven. Seed. Eternal Hell,*” Venne said. “There, that makes perfect sense.”

“I’m leaving,” Nadia said. Laastra’s eyes seemed to bore into her from the painting. It all felt wrong. They weren’t supposed to be down there but not just because of rules set down by the elders – something was meant to be hidden down there. She shot up from where she was sat in the corner, shivering. Venne scrambled after her as she headed back towards the stairs with her candle.

“No, wait, I’ll decipher it eventually!” he called after her.

She turned to him, the candlelight casting frightening shadows across her face. “All you have is old words,” she said. “Words that have been said a thousand times and never meant anything.”

“But look at this mural!” Venne said, scooping up his bag and hurrying back to the painting. “Why would they leave something so huge and beautiful down here?”

“It is not beautiful,” she said but she followed him back to the mural nonetheless.

Venne edged closer to her, smoothing his hands over the old paint. “Don’t you feel it?” he said, his voice cracking a little in desperation. “Nadia, I have seen things, I know there is something here.”

“Then tell me these things!” she shouted.

Nadia placed her palm on the image of Laastra one last time. There was a rumbling noise from deep within the earth. The cavern shook as a sound of metal scraping against stone roared around them. Nadia covered her ears. Venne was shouting something to her. He grabbed her hand and she wasn’t sure

whether it was because he was scared or he saw how afraid she was. They fell to the floor together as the cavern continued to quake. The mural before them glowed brighter than any fire, searing into Nadia's brain. She closed her eyes against the glare. All at once the shaking ceased and the room fell silent. Nadia drew her arm away from her face to find the cave pitch black again. The candle and lantern had both extinguished.

"What was that?" Nadia asked the darkness.

"Give me a moment," he said, tentatively letting go of her hand. There was a clatter and a hiss as he relit the lantern. He held it over her, shining the flame in her face. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she muttered, glancing at him.

His face was ashen white but he was grinning from ear to ear. He swung the lantern to the mural. The god and goddess were joined now, two stone panels sliding together in an embrace. Where they had been straining at opposite sides was now a dark doorway.

"I told you there was a story here!" Venne said, leaping up. He hurried to the mural, barely able to contain himself. He let out an excited yell as he peered into the new doorway.

"Now you'll see," he continued. "What secrets really are."

Chapter Four

In Reality, A Dreamer

“To die is to slumber with the God and Goddess themselves. There is no greater honour.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 21, Verse 22.

The darkness yawned before them, a gaping chasm. Something felt very wrong about it, as if Nadia were about step into the jaws of a wolf. She and Venne stood parallel to one another, at separate doorways. Nadia watched him. He took a deep breath and strode into the darkness, lantern at his side. The two doorways joined into a single passageway leading behind the mural. The temperature dropped, Venne’s breath clouding in front of him as he shivered. Nadia hurried ahead without a word, finding another set of stairs. There were only a few before they came through an archway, dripping with clear water from an unknown source. Ahead, a glimmer of blue light pierced the darkness like a star. Venne counted dozens of lights in the distance. Nadia had disappeared into the gloom.

“Don’t run off like a child,” Venne said, making his way into the cavern. The tunnel seemed to go on forever, a twisting passageway winding its way through the earth. The twinkling stars disappeared around a corner.

Nadia was bent over staring at a wall to his right. “Venne,” she said. Her tone was cold and distant. “Venne, come here. Bring the lamp.”

He wandered over to her, still entranced by the passage filled with the night sky beyond. He held his lantern up, approaching Nadia. The wall was smooth rock and then something suddenly protruded from it, half merged into the rock itself. A women’s body, her arms spread wide as she hung from the wall. She was snow white, her skin hard stone, her hair the same marble that spilled across her body. On her

breast, just above her heart, was a cluster of quartz. The light inside it was bright and it pulsed like a flickering heartbeat. The woman's face was frozen in serene sleep, entirely undisturbed by the stasis she was suspended in. Venne dropped his lantern. The flame guttered out.

Nadia's eyes shone in the azure light of the quartz. "What are they?" Nadia asked.

"I don't know," he said. Venne groped for the words. *Corpses. Statues. Relics. Secrets.* Nadia narrowed her eyes and turned back to the statue. Her hand hovered above the crystal, fingers twitching with every pulse of light. Venne reached out with her. Their fingers grazed as they grasped the crystal before immediately snatching their hands away again.

"It's warm," Nadia said. "But the skin is cold." She ran a finger along the folds of the woman's tunic, perfectly rendered in the stone. "Have you seen anything like this before?"

"Never," Venne breathed, looking down at his shaking hands in the darkness.

"You said you had seen secrets," Nadia pressed.

Venne shook his head, trying to smile. "Stories. Lost copies of scriptures where Laastra kills. Where Arthai returns. Bits and pieces." He laughed. "But this? This is..."

Nadia went to the next flickering light. Venne looked at the lantern at his feet. *This was supposed to be for fun. A little secret, a hint of the things they hide.* Nadia was already at another statue. This one was of a man, sleeping just like the woman, only he laid on his back on a stone slab. The same quartz protruded from his chest, flickering. By the time Venne made it to the body, Nadia was moving on. Venne followed as if in a dream.

"Look for runes," Nadia said. She handed him back the lantern, staring at him. Her fingers stroked his for a second as she passed him it. Was he imagining it or was she frightened? Or even concerned? Perhaps it was wishful thinking in his shocked state.

"You're right," he said, lighting the lantern once again. The warm orange light did nothing to settle the chill in his bones.

He traced his steps back to the first statue of the woman and scanned the shadows. He had never seen such smooth work in stone- the level of artistry was astounding. He found himself caressing the creases in her palms, the locks of her hair, the gaps between her delicate toes. Where her heels melded into the stone he caught another shadow. There were words, carved in the old language of the gods. Most people in the village were fluent in the two languages- the people's tongue and the language of the gods, which the holy book *Aii Staanastra* was written in. Venne was also well versed in a series of runes sometimes used in older texts but what he had seen before the mural seemed to predate even his vast knowledge. He examined the inscription at the woman's feet, speaking aloud so Nadia could hear.

“Here Sleeps Theodosia-Hanna. A kind and patient Healer. Root of Fedden. May the God and Goddess Return Soon.” Venne frowned. *Sleeps? As if something is alive here?* Nadia joined his side, looking at the inscription.

“It's like a grave,” Nadia said. “What do the graves say by the fields?” Venne could see the graveyard in his mind, the lines of trees representing the deceased below the earth. Each tree had a stone plaque hammered into the bark, stating who the grave belonged to.

“They just have names,” Venne said, trying to swallow past the lump in his throat. “And the usual inscription. ‘Now they sleep amongst the stars.’”

“Do you recognise this name?” Nadia asked. “Surely you've looked at old records.”

Venne shook his head as he wracked his brain. “No,” he said.

Nadia set her jaw, nodding. “Let's keep going,” she said, standing again. “What do the others say?”

Venne paused, pondering. “Laastra and Arthai are supposedly asleep. Yet there are villagers here asleep. Is it mimicry? The elders, putting bodies down here as some sort of echo of the original story? What if Laastra is down here? Hah! Wouldn't that be a surprise.” Nadia regarded him with a cool stare before continuing. They examined various other statues. Each one was inscribed in a similar fashion, with the name, occupation and partner of the person. Even a child, unwed and innocent, had his Roots named inscribed, the one he was to be forever joined to. They continued down the cavern in silence,

eyes darting across the dozens and dozens of statues and small blinking stones. Venne ground his teeth together. *Think, you fool. Why would they hide this? What is wrong here?* Nadia was tense beside him, her shoulders hiking up near her long ears. Every time they heard water drip in the distance or kicked a stray pebble, they both jumped, ready for some monster to take them unawares. It was quiet, as if the earth itself were holding its breath.

“There,” Nadia hissed. She grabbed Venne by the wrist, dragging him to a hollow in the wall. A frail and bony woman sat curled up, face pressed against the stone. “I know her.”

“She’s a statue,” Venne scoffed but he felt his fingers go numb.

“You’re a future elder and you don’t even recognise one of your own?” Nadia asked. “Remember the sickness last year? The elders were shocked any of us could get so sick and we had to pray for two days straight. And they still died.”

“Yes,” Venne said, kneeling before the stone form. “Her name was...Cal. Only two people died that year.”

“She hated it here,” Nadia said. “So did her Root. What was his name?”

“Mathias,” Venne said, his voice shrinking back inside him. “They both died.” He stared at the statue, the slightly parted lips, the harsh cheekbones that consumed her face. She had been quiet and miserable, always staying out of the way and never smiling. Her Root and future husband had all the strength and fire. Venne held the lamp over the inscription. Sure enough, her name was written there. *‘Here Sleeps’*. *As if she could awaken*. Venne ran his hands through his tangled hair, sitting on the floor. Nadia didn’t seem to know what to do either, so she propped herself next to him. Venne looked at the starlight beyond.

And then he saw her face. She looked as young and pretty as she had when she first gave birth, as if she was happy again. As if blood did not pour from the wound in her head, her eyes frozen in horror.

He closed his eyes. *It's not real, it's not real.* But when he opened his eyes, she was still there on the other side of the cave, half melted into the roof, her hands clinging to the stone.

"Nadia," Venne said, his voice hoarse. "Nadia, that's my mother. Nadia." He was grasping her shoulder, her skin cool and calming beneath him.

"What?" she snapped. She stared at the woman and swore. She was up in a second, going to examine the woman's face as best she could. The lantern cast a warm glow across his mother's face, like she was sat before a hearth in the evening, reading to him.

"This isn't right," Venne said. "I saw her body. I saw her dead." He watched the crystal on her chest flicker. In a moment he was there, his hands clasped around the warm stone. He wrenched at it, hit it, trying to free it. *Here she sleeps. Like Laastra. To come home.*

"It's her," Nadia said, her voice distant and echoing through Venne's head. "Venne." She grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to look at her. "Venne," she said more firmly. "These aren't statues or monuments. These are people."

Chapter Five

There Lies the Question

“In youth lies an innocence that shall never again be attained. Only the divine slumber will bring about true rebirth.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 2, Verse 1.

Everything we know is a lie. That was what the parchment said, crumpled in Emiil’s clammy hands. He held it out to the man, his fingers shaking. They stood on the outskirts of the village, the sunlight low and golden. The guardian before him was a burly man, taller even than Emiil, all muscle and overt masculinity. He scratched the back of his shaved head, regarding Emiil.

“You found this just now?” he asked in a rumbling voice. Emiil nodded. “And you didn’t see who left the message?”

“It was in my copy of *Aii Staanastra*,” Emiil said. Every member of the village had their own personal hand written copy of the holy book. “It hasn’t left my house today.”

The head guardian, Blaake, grunted in response. He turned the note over in his worn hands. Despite spending most of his time as a guardian in training, the leader still made Emiil tense. He glanced around the surrounding trees. Blaake shook his head. “We don’t need to think very hard about who sent this note,” he said.

Emiil swallowed. “I don’t think Nadia-” he began.

Blaake raised a dark brow, silencing Emiil in one gesture. “You know your mission,” he said. “The elders have seen you fit to be more than just a guardian for your village – a guide to your generation.

The elders trust you to bring all the information you can to them.” Blaake glanced around, eyes darting towards the village. “Discretely.”

“I know but-” Emiil tried again.

“Protecting her serves no one,” Blaake said, his voice hard. Emiil bit his lip and nodded, his shoulders sagging. They were silent for long, aching seconds.

“Go to this meeting,” Blaake said finally. “See what the trickster wants.”

Emiil flinched. “You’re not going to stop her?” Emiil said. *If I can stop her doing anything more, there doesn’t have to be beatings. I can protect them, like I’m meant to.* Somehow, he wasn’t quite convinced of his own honourable intentions.

“The elders feel the...usual methods are not discouraging her,” Blaake said, folding his arms, crumpling the note in his fist. “Let her be her own destruction. Let her see how alone she truly is. Then we shall punish her.”

Emiil shook his head, taking a step forwards. “Please, sir,” he said. “Stop her now. She could be hurt or...or worse. Doesn’t Laastra teach forgiveness, understanding?”

“After a single sin,” Blaake said. “Not a thousand. You know she is rife with evil, Emiil.” He sighed and put a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “I understand it is hard, to constantly be judging your friends and choosing what is best for the village over yourself. But the elders and Laastra herself will reward such diligence.” He motioned back towards the village, through the darkening emerald forest. “Go Emiil. Watch what the trickster does. We shall come to your aid when the time is right.”

And just as he had done a hundred times before, Emiil turned to go and do as he was bid. To be the spy, the watcher, the guardian of all his people’s hopes and wishes – but this time his steps were heavier than before. For the first time, he thought that he might be the sinner himself.

The wind whistled through the rows and rows of trees marking the graveyard, each a reminder of someone long since passed on to Laastra's embrace. The stars stabbed through the sky above him, hundreds of tiny eyes watching him from the heavens. On any other night, it would have been a sight to behold- but tonight required no audience, no light. Emiil realised he was standing on someone's grave and stepped away to a respectful distance. A ghostly figure entered the grove, her freshly cut white hair brighter than starlight.

"Why are you here?" Nadia asked. Emiil swallowed. What was he supposed to say? That he was there to watch and report back to the elders? That this wasn't the first or probably the last time he would betray her? When he didn't answer, she continued. "Off to report to the elders with your tail between your legs the first sign of trouble, no doubt."

"You know I'm trying to help you, Nadia," he said. *Not denying it, are you?* He raised his hands as if to beg her understanding, then dropped them uselessly at his side.

"I'm sure," she said. She adjusted the straps of a large leather satchel at her side. *Does she already know?*

"The elders did not punish you, after all," he said. She snorted. She made her way across the long grass, pulling a lantern from her bag. With a glance over her shoulder, she found a match to light it with. The grove was filled with a small warm glow but it did nothing to ease the chill Emiil felt on his skin.

"Would you like me to say thank you? To run into your welcoming arms?" Her lip curled. In the amber light, she looked like Laastra aflame, ready to unleash her wrath.

"You know that isn't why I did it," he said, his voice rising. She was already walking away from him, watching the treeline.

As if she could sense him coming, Venne slipped out of the forest, hands in his pockets. A shadow who flitted between her world and his. Emiil had heard from another guardian that Venne had helped her back up after the fight. She had returned to her parents' home some time in the night and no one

had spoken of it since. Venne looked as if he had been dragged through the woods backwards. Had he been punished for his show of mercy? His gaze darted along the graves, scanning for something Emiil could not see.

“How many?” Nadia asked him with folded arms. Venne smiled but it seemed wrong. He was looking at the ground a lot, as if the earth would open up beneath his feet and swallow him whole.

“Everyone, of course,” Venne answered. His gaze finally fell on Emiil. “What’s the sycophant doing here?” *He knows, he knows, he knows.*

“I have no idea,” Nadia said. “Ask him.”

“Must I?” Venne said with a grimace.

“Do what you like. It’s nearly time,” Nadia replied. She headed back to the treeline, weaving in and out of the shadows.

“What is this about?” Emiil asked.

Venne stared after Nadia. She looked like a phantom, all white and faint in the moonlight. Venne tore his gaze away. “You’ll find out soon enough,” he said. Venne watched the forest, tilting his head in hopes he could understand the space between the branches. A moment later he spun back to Emiil with a sudden jerk. “If you even think about repeating any of this, or weave some fanciful lie about how this was all a mistake, I will make sure you don’t have enough body parts to wed Nadia,”

Despite the venomous words, all Emiil felt was confusion. He tried to school his features into impassivity. Where had Venne’s passion come from? Weeks ago, Venne looked at no one. Neither did Nadia. Now their eyes met and shared a thousand thoughts Emiil could only guess at. His world had shifted.

“Why would I do that?” Emiil said finally, squaring his shoulders.

Venne snorted. “Yes, why would you do that?” Venne said. “Why would you leave someone who is supposed to be your beloved bride alone in the dirt to rot?” Venne shook his head in disgust and

retreated to the edge of the grove, where Nadia was talking to newcomers. Emiil wanted to shout after Venne, to scream in frustration. *I'm doing this for you, to keep you all safe! To keep the peace.* He couldn't convince himself – he couldn't convince the others. He didn't fit with those his own age or with the elders who sought to punish those he spied on. He was the guardian of everyone and nothing.

In just a few minutes, Nadia had rounded up all the youths present for the midnight meeting and was guiding them over to her grand demonstration. She didn't need Venne's bravado or his wit – she was a leader herself. Her expression was grim as they hurried across the field by lamplight, casting wary glances at the trees and the stars and the earth. Nothing was a certainty any more. She still held herself stiffly, her right side taught where her ribs were still healing. Had she been using the salve he had given her? *Laastra's stars, what are you thinking?* Nadia had finally stopped in front of a small sapling planted on the edge of the graveyard. Nadia put her lantern on the floor.

"We don't have much time," she said, her voice clear and steady. Venne edged towards Nadia, eying the mess of leaves and twigs covering the grave before them. *Enough secrets.*

"What is this even about?" someone snapped from the back of the group. A girl with short red hair shoved her way through the crowd, going right up to Nadia and jabbing an accusing finger. "I didn't come all the way out here just to find a more scenic place to pray." Venne grimaced. Johanna was even more boisterous than usual. She glared at Venne, her lips pressed together in a pout. She had once asked Venne if he wanted a tumble in the hay. She said he was pretty. He said he would find more intellectual company in the cows she tended. She'd kicked him between the legs. They hadn't spoken since.

"This isn't a display of faith," Nadia said. "It's the opposite."

"So what? You're going to summon demons?" Johanna asked.

Venne rolled his eyes. "You came here because you were all curious," Venne said. "Not to argue the semantics of prayer." He took a step forward. "So let's get on with this before the more pious among

the village notice our absence, hm?” As he stepped back, he brushed against Nadia’s arm. She didn’t flinch. Her eyes found his. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

Johanna shook her head and looked expectantly at Nadia.

“You know I want to escape,” Nadia said. “I refuse to marry and be what the village thinks we should be. I’m not going to dance around it. And I don’t care if any of you come with me or not.” She paused, scanning the crowd. Her gaze rested on Venne as she continued. “But you need to know that they are keeping things from us.”

“This is Cal’s grave,” a small voice said from the gathered. Veta, Johanna’s long-haired twin, cowered at her sister’s side. Nadia nodded. Emiil, towering over most of the crowd, winced.

“It is. I’m sure you all remember burying her here.” The memory tugged at Venne’s senses, the cloying smell of lilies and incense thick in his nose.

“Venne,” Nadia said, her voice shaking ever so slightly, “showed me something.” She swallowed audibly. “A secret cavern. And what we saw there will make sense of what I’m about to show you now.” Nadia nodded to Venne.

He did not feel as mysterious or rebellious as he thought as they both bent down, grasping the edge of the foliage littering the floor beneath the sapling. With a swift tug, they pulled the cover to the side, moving branches and bushes from the spot to reveal a gaping hole in the earth. It had taken all day to dig the hole. Venne still had dirt stuck in his nails. The crowd rumbled with disapproval, gasps and shouts.

“Be quiet,” Emiil snapped from the centre. The group stared at him, a tense hush descending. “They have to have a reason for doing this.” Venne found himself smirking despite the scene. *Finally dawning on you, is it?* Emiil’s gaze did not leave the black hole before them.

“Look inside,” Nadia said. “And tell me where her body is.”

Emiil was the first to step forwards. Nadia handed him the lantern to shine into the gloom. He looked down into the earth. It took a few seconds for him to react. He hissed through gritted teeth.

“More than enough space to bury a body,” Venne said. The crowd murmured again, others stepping forwards to gape. They watched as the youths grew more outraged, unsure. It had only been a year since Cal and her Root had died. Her body would not have decomposed in that time.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Johanna said, rounding on the two as they watched the chaos swell. “Did you sick bastards move her body just to shake us up?”

Venne was taken aback. He had heard rumours Johanna had wanted to leave herself. She had been disciplined time and again for her less than chaste interactions with other members of the village, Root or no. Venne remembered seeing her steal bread the week she was forced to fast after a particular encounter with a man.

“There has to be a reason!” Veta wailed, clinging to her sister.

“There is,” Nadia said. She still hung close beside Venne. “There are no bodies in these grounds because no one is dead.” Nadia scanned the crowd and added, “Like your beloved Laastra, they are simply asleep.”

“Bullshit,” Johanna cursed, taking a step towards Nadia. “I don’t believe you!”

“I’ve seen her body,” Nadia said simply. Now was not the time to get angry, to rise to whatever challenge they threw her way. Venne was a stone beside her. She resisted the urge to reach out to him to steady herself. “She is a statue, with an engraving just like the one on this grave.”

“Here she sleeps,” Venne added in a wistful voice. Johanna shook her head, hands on her hips. Veta looked as if she would burst into tears. Emiil looked far too calm.

“But how do we know you’re telling the truth?” Johanna said. “Is this just some elaborate lie to get us all into trouble? We’ve all heard the stories about ghosts and demons and none of them are true.

You're always kicking the hornets' nest, Nadia." She spat the last word like it was a curse. Nadia raised her chin.

"What would I gain by lying?" she said, trying to hold back her temper.

Venne interjected, shielding Nadia as he stepped forwards. "I saw my mother," he said, somehow in a level tone. Nadia flinched. *You always were better than all of us put together.* "I saw her down there, frozen in the earth. It was her. She had a crystal in place of a heart...beating." He placed a fist on his chest, where his own heart was stuttering.

The nervous chatter grew louder. Venne's mother was known and loved by many. Her loss had been felt by every villager, their beloved healer ended in a simple fall. An accident.

"How can you know that?" Emiil said. He looked straight at Venne. "How can you know it was her? Or anything at all?" Nadia blinked. One moment Venne was beside her, the other part to her story. The next he was in the crowd, fists curled into the material of Emiil's white shirt, staring up into the other man's face.

"You think I would make this up? About my own damned mother?" he hissed in Emiil's face. He shook the other boy, despite his impressive stature. "You think I'd lie? You sick bastard!"

"Stop it!" Veta was crying. A few people tried tearing them away from one another.

"Hey!" Nadia shouted, lifting the lantern high so she could cast an angry glow across the crowd's faces. They glared at her, all their expectations now on her shoulders. In her hand was a knife that would split their world in two.

"Regardless of what you think this is," she said. "It is real. The graves are empty. There are strange statues beneath the ground." Her eyes went to Venne, who had finally let go of Emiil but showed no signs of growing calmer. "Ancient texts erased from memory, buried where no one can see them. And whether these things have sinister intentions or not, the fact of the matter is the elders are lying to us. They are hiding things." She looked to Johanna. "They tell us who we are supposed to love. Who to

worship blindly. They punish us for speaking out of turn. Yet I have never seen my faith rewarded. I have never experienced a miracle. And I don't care if you believe in Arthai and Laastra, but the fact is there are secrets. How many more things will they hide in our lifetimes? How long before it comes down to us to lie to our children? Younglings we will be forced to bear. All this we must do." She paused and lifted her hand to point at the empty grave. "And some of us will die for it."

The frenzy erupted. Everyone was shouting at once, moving and shifting. Emiil was swallowed by the crowd. Nadia let the chaos wash over her, heard the fear in their voices. All her secrets were laid bare. She saw her emotions reflected in their eyes, fear, confusion, anger, betrayal, despair. *This shouldn't feel good. To see others in pain. But it does. They finally feel it too.*

"This is blasphemy," someone was shouting. "We need to tell the elders at once." Venne marched up to the individual, pointing an accusing finger. Nadia was surprised to see it wasn't Emiil.

"You'll do no such thing," Venne said. "Or we'll all burn for this. You've all born witness to this. No one is innocent."

"They're going to find us! Hurt us, beat us!" someone cried.

"You dragged us into your mess!" another shouted. Johanna was at Nadia's side in a blink, grabbing her arm in an iron grip. *You wanted this. You wanted it.*

"What did you think this would accomplish, huh?" she snapped. "You show us an empty grave and what, you think we'll all just march blindly after you when you try run away again? It doesn't work like that."

"Would you rather they continue lying to all of you?" Nadia said, trying to raise her voice over the madness erupting around her. Someone was sobbing in the back of the crowd.

"You haven't given me any reason to believe you over them, that's for sure," Johanna said.

Nadia tore herself from the other girl's grip. "Keep believing then," she said. "You could go to the caverns yourselves and see the truth but why bother? You'd rather just lay down and have someone on

top of you, rubbing feeling into your cold, dead body.” *Too far. I’ve gone too far.* Venne ceased his argument with a group of boys who wanted to inspect the grave. He looked over at Nadia, wincing.

“You’re the cold-hearted bitch! Trying to drag everyone down with you!” someone else shouted at Nadia.

Johanna paused for a long moment, staring at Nadia in shock. Then she pounced, diving on top of Nadia. The girls toppled to the floor in a rush of screaming and fists. Johanna’s muscled arms gripped Nadia around the neck as they tumbled across the floor. Nadia realised she was bleeding only as the salty liquid met her lips, dripping from a gash in her cheek. She shifted her weight, trying to roll with the momentum of the tumble. The two fell into the grave with a thud, the breath flying out of them.

“You’re insane,” Johanna gasped.

Nadia took her chance and scrambled back up to standing, rubbing the mud off her face. “You’re the one who’s crazy, if you don’t see what’s really going on here.”

“Nadia!” someone was shouting. But all Nadia could see was her senses shutting down, the world growing smaller and colder. Johanna was sat in the dirt, gulping in big breaths. Her hair stuck up around her head like a fiery halo.

“Nadia!” the shout came again. The crowd was growing louder, a dull roar like the blood rushing through Nadia’s ears.

Venne’s hand closed around Nadia’s shoulder from above, yanking her towards the edge of the grave. “We need to get out of here,” he called down to her, his expression grim. She looked down at his hand. Some of the crowd were running. *If they tell the elders, this is over. This chaos will die before it even begins.* Nadia let Venne help pull her out of the grave. She resisted the urge to spit on Johanna as she clambered out of the dirt. Venne hauled her up with surprising ease and grabbed Nadia’s bag from the floor. “We’ve done all we can,” he said to her, his hand still on her shoulder.

“Why won’t they listen? They have to do *something*,” Nadia said, her voice small. She could see her plan unravelling before her. She found herself gripping Venne’s wrist with freezing hands.

He looked down at the contact. “They will,” he said, plucking up the lantern. “They already have. They just don’t know it yet.” He flashed her a grin, full of the mischief and cunning she had seen on his face since they were children.

She didn’t see the man she had always known she would marry. She saw someone with the same horrible spark of defiance that had been planted in her own mind. *Has he always felt like this?* A dozen lights pierced the night in the forest, along with cries and shouts of alarm. The grove was swarmed with the flames- hunters, elders, punishers. They had been discovered. The tension broke in a wave of cries and panic at the impending violence. Nadia squeezed Venne’s hand tight in her own and let him lead her away into the dark.

The long grass clawed at their legs like hands from the graves bursting through the soil, trying to stop their escape. Nadia’s large satchel caught on a fallen log as Venne passed it to her, the lights at their backs burning brighter and closer. The screams had already started, agonised yelps as one by one the adolescents were caught. If Venne closed his eyes, he could see the whips flying, the blood spraying already. Had someone alerted the elders long before the meeting had even begun? It had all happened too fast, too precisely timed. Perhaps they had been doomed all along. *We tried*. Venne hurled the lantern behind him, realising the light would only make tracking them easier. The sea of stars gave way to an ocean of leaves as they reached the forest again. Even in the gloom, the trees dampening all sound, the shouts and screams echoed in his ears. This wasn’t normal- no one had screamed like that before.

“Nadia,” Venne said. She was in front of him, running faster, always one step ahead.

“Keep running,” she called over her shoulder. She slid down a hill, vaulting over a ditch. Venne almost tripped in the darkness. The forest only grew thicker. He didn’t dare look behind him for the fire chasing them. They passed a stream, where Nadia took a sharp left and ran through the water, then back

out again. The wind began to howl through the canopy, a roar of a predator pursuing. *Everything about this is wrong.*

Nadia halted suddenly, spinning around to check her surroundings. “This is far enough,” she said. She fished through her large bag, retrieving a dark cloak and pulling it over her mud-stained white tunic.

“What are we doing?” he asked. They had done this together – burned all their beliefs and their faith when they found the dead girl’s grave empty.

“Venne,” Nadia said. She was facing him, all at once very still. The moonlight cut through a gap in the canopy, casting an eerie glow across her face. “Venne.” He didn’t like the way she looked at him.

“What do we do? Split up? They’ll find us eventually,” he said, threading his hands through his hair.

Nadia shook her head, walking right up to him. “I need you to do something,” she said. “Only you can do it.” Her cheeks were flushed. How many times had she run like this?

“What? What is it?” he insisted.

She took his hands in her own, her feverish gaze never leaving his. “I need you to trust me,” she said, icy fingers squeezing his own. “No matter what happens.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Nadia shook her head again. “Listen,” she urged. “Listen to me. Things might not make sense. It might all go wrong. No matter what I say, just trust me, alright?” She shook his hands in her own, jerking him. “It has to be you. Only you will believe me.”

“Nadia, what are you going to do?” he asked. There were shouts from the rest. They were running out of time.

Nadia released his hands. “Promise,” she said. Venne stared at her for a long moment. His future wife. The person he would be forced to bond with. A prospect which did not fill him with as much dread as it once had.

“We found the truth together,” he said, grasping her hands in his own now. “And together we’ll live with it.”

Nadia smiled at him. She looked like she may even laugh. Then she turned to look over his shoulder. “You were looking for us,” she said. “You weren’t a part of this. They’ll believe you, even if the other say differently. You’re part of the hunt.” She turned to go, pulling her hood over her head. She paused just as she turned on her heel.

“Don’t look for me,” she said. “Just remember.” Then she darted into the night, faster than she had ran before.

The forest filled with the angry light of lanterns as the older villagers broke around him like a wave. He watched after her, even when there was nothing left but starlight and shadows.

Chapter Six

Until Death

“Once the divine covenant is made, Roots will be blessed with the true power of Laastra and Arthai. In that blessing, lies a glimpse of eternity.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 2, Verse 4.

Blood trickled across Nadia’s pale lips. Even with a dagger protruding from her neck, blood spilling across her like a shroud, Venne thought she looked pretty. She would make a beautiful corpse.

“Venne, lift your arms,” came a sharp voice. Venne winced as the image faded from his imagination and his grandmother stabbed him with a needle. For every day Nadia had been gone, he had imagined some new gruesome fate for her. No matter what he dreamed of, he would always end up back there, on the day of his wedding. There was no escaping it, even off to grim fears that Nadia was dead somewhere in the woods, alone. Venne lifted his arms as he was instructed, despite the fact his tiny hut barely had enough room for himself, let alone his grandmother and a female elder standing in for his long-deceased mother. His grandmother tugged at the baggy white sleeves, making sure the batwing effect trailed down his back neatly. The tunic was huge, more like a shawl or a blanket than something to be wed in. He flapped his arms, sending the sleeves billowing.

“Why did you have to make it so big, Grandmother?” he asked, looking down at the plunging neckline that exposed his pale chest. If the garment were on a woman, it would have been scandalous. His fingers traced the black silk lining. *What a waste. All this finery and only to be worn once. Or not at all, if my bride doesn’t turn up soon.*

Nadia had been missing since the night of the meeting seven days before. When the chaos had erupted, all the youthful conspirators had been rounded up. The punishments had been varied and plentiful- public beatings much like the ones Nadia regularly endured, screaming arguments, days of endless prayer, starvation. And Venne had avoided it all, when the crowd had flooded over him and simply asked him to help search for Nadia. No one imagined he had been there. The youths dare not mention his involvement, fearing the wrath of the elder's pet. He didn't even need to lie. *And that makes it all the worse.* And so he had plunged into the woods, taking up a torch as his people hunted down his sole confidant and friend. He shook his head.

"You complain but it will be you everyone watches at the ceremony," his grandmother yammered on, placing a black belt around the tunic to tuck it in neatly at his hips. She threw back the swallow tail bottom, the hem resting just above his knees. "How handsome he looks, they'll say. His Root is so lucky!"

She'll have to be here first, before she can marvel at my beauty. For every day Nadia had been missing, a new story had emerged. She had crawled into the depths and hidden amongst the graves, but no one dared brave the ghouls to fetch her. Or she was really a ghost all along and now everyone had turned against her, she had ceased to exist. Or she had escaped and left them all behind. He wasn't sure which idea he hated more.

"That is not the purpose of the ceremony," the elder snapped, batting the grandmother's hands away. "His Root must return. Such childish games will not save her from marriage." A tense silence filled the hut. His grandmother would not meet his gaze.

"I can finish this myself," Venne said, trying to keep the bite out of his tone. "You both need to prepare yourselves as well." His grandmother began to protest but Venne cut her off with a good-natured smile. "I can't explain how thankful I am for the robes, Grandmother," he said. "They truly look wonderful. Now go and boast to the others. Go make yourself look just as beautiful."

He clasped her hands in his, still so young and vibrant. Her warmth against his cool skin made his chest ache. His grandmother was as pure and kind as his mother had been. She should have been there

too. His grandmother clucked and fussed but he soon ushered her out of the door. She went away, no doubt to glow with pride and excitement as the rest of the village prepared for the wedding ceremony. In every house, lights burned as the youths were put into home-made costume made specially by members of the family. Every home except Nadia's. Venne stared down at the long sleeve of the white tunic. How many times had this fabric been reworked, re-stitched and refashioned into some other garish fashion? How many others stood here and wished for freedom? Venne shook his head and poured himself a fresh cup of bitter tea. It stung his mouth and did nothing to warm his cold limbs or melt the lump in his throat. *Well, I did say I would never take a wife- and now she is not here.*

You would never be brave enough to do what she did. Emiil stared out across the tall grass and wildflowers. There was still a bloodstain on the bark by an opening in the forest, where an elder had punched a boy and broken his nose. A bloody handprint was all that was left of what Nadia had done. Emiil had no idea whether his entire generation plotted an escape today or they had all simply given up. No one had tried to escape - yet. *And what do you want? To run away from it all? To continue to feel nothing?* As usual, he did not have any answers.

Emiil made his way back through the trees towards the village, tugging at the sleeves of his white shirt against his dark tanned skin. The blackened leather tunic and pants were uncomfortable and made him sweat despite the chill fog in the air. He had to play the role of the warrior, the shining guardian, a protector who could not help even his betrothed.

"What were you doing out there?" a voice asked as Emiil stepped back into the village proper. A fellow guardian, Nicholas, was loitering by the fire in his ceremony leathers, looking thoroughly bored. He picked at his long pointed ears, regarding Emiil with a frown.

"Just paying my respects," Emiil said, trying to march past the fellow youth.

The sandy-haired boy used his tan gangly limbs to yank Emiil back, slinging an arm across his shoulder. Emiil tensed up besides the man.

“Of course,” Nicholas said. “It’s your wedding day and you thought the perfect spot to contemplate your new life would be next to a load of dead people. Good idea.” He snorted to himself, shaking his head.

But there aren’t any dead there, Emiil thought. You saw that empty grave. You saw it and pretended not to. “We should be getting to the ceremony,” he said.

“What’s the rush? Let’s enjoy a little pre-wedding drink, eh?” Nicholas said, holding firm. He pulled a leather flask from his pocket and took a swig.

“Oi!” someone shouted. Johanna was jogging towards Nicholas, white train dragging across the packed dirt floor. She was wearing a flower crown, as if her family had tried to make her more feminine for the ceremony. She did not look happy to be donned in lilies and pretty blossoms. She looked like she was ready to punch someone in the face. “You started without me!”

“You look ridiculous!” Nicholas laughed, pointing at the lace veil that ran down Johanna’s back. “What was your mother thinking when she made that? Is she blind?”

Johanna growled and rushed at Nicholas. She kicked him in the shin and then snatched away the bottle, taking a long swig. Nicholas was still laughing as she dropped to the floor, the half a dozen layers of white skirts flopping around her with a sigh.

“You’re an idiot,” she said between swigs. Only then did she seem to notice Emiil as she frowned up at him. “What? What do you want?” Emiil held up his hands in innocence.

“Nothing,” Emiil said. “You look uh...nice?”

“I look like a stuffed duck,” Johanna said. “There’s no way I’m going into this sober.” Nicholas collapsed besides his future wife, trying to take the bottle back. The two jostled each other. Even Johanna, promiscuous, flippant and cold, had some form of warmth towards her Root.

“I’m going on ahead,” he told them. Neither of them answered. He disappeared back into the fog.

It seemed appropriate that Venne's fate was sealed at an epic location – and the main hall was the most elaborate building in the village. It sat atop the tallest hill, surrounded by a glade of wildflowers and large willow trees. It was a stone structure, half built into the earth, with ivy and moss obscuring most of the walls, like the earth sought to reclaim the hill. Everything of note happened in that hallowed hall: weddings, funerals, prayers, meals. Venne's people lived and died in that dreary windowless tomb. *If we even die.*

Many of the youths were making their way in with their families, despite the actual ceremony being an hour away, when the sun set. Usually from atop that hallowed hill, the entire village could be seen and admired, before the trees swallowed up the lands around them. However, that was not true on Venne's wedding day, an endless fog obscuring everything. Venne near the top of the hill, pulling at the blossoms and tearing the petals into tiny pieces. *What am I even waiting for? A chance to run? A wife to wed?* He pushed those useless flowing sleeves up over his elbows despite the chill. The very air seemed to press down around him, pushing him towards the hall. Venne saw a looming shape at the bottom of the hill. Emiil emerged from the fog, his steps heavy.

"Perhaps we shall have to marry each other," Venne declared as the youth regarded him with a frown. "Now that would really rattle the elders."

Emiil shook his head. "You haven't seen her?" he asked.

"No," he said, not able to meet the other boy's eyes. "The elders have been sending out search parties daily, but nothing. They're in such a flap about it, it's rather hilarious."

Emiil looked towards the hall. Venne was sure he would leave, keeping his thoughts to himself. A moment later, Emiil sat on the grass beside Venne, staring into the fog as if it held all the answers. Venne regarded the tense set of his companion's shoulders, the dark circles on his tan skin, the bitten, chewed up mess of his fingernails.

Venne grabbed a handful of grass and pulled. He let the remnants scatter to the floor. "Would you have gone?" he asked.

“What?” Emiil said.

“Would you have run away? If things had worked out.”

Emiil pulled at another clump of grass, mimicking Venne’s own gesture. “I would,” he said. “I would have done it.”

Venne’s eyes widened. *He’s lying. He must be.* He laughed aloud. “I’m sure,” he scoffed.

Emiil shook his head, turning to Venne. “I would have gone with you,” he insisted. “Both of you.”

Venne raised a brow. “But why?”

A couple walked past, chattering happily. Emiil waited until they had gone. “You said you found caverns,” he said. “Secrets, right?”

Venne snorted. “So?”

“So, I already knew. That they existed. I didn’t know your mother was down there but...I knew.”

Venne paused, petals clutched between his fingers. *Liar. You don’t have the same look as her. Haunted. Desperate.*

He grasped the flowers tightly in his hand and then threw them in Emiil’s face. “At least try to make your lie convincing,” he said as he stood up.

Emiil shook flowers from his hair. “I’m not lying,” he said, temper rising.

“If you had seen what I had, you would be more than eager to leave,” Venne said. He folded his arms. “You’re a sheep. You follow. You don’t wander from the herd.”

“I didn’t...” Emiil said. Venne could see the physical struggle in the man, his shoulders hunched, limbs quivering. “I didn’t want to believe it.”

“So you ran,” Venne hissed. “Like you always do.”

Emiil had nothing to say to that. But no matter what Emiil thought, whether they had rebelled or not, there they stood, ready to meet their fate whether they wanted to or not.

Trust me. She had said that – but Venne didn't have any reason to do so, other than his heart beating a little too fast whenever he thought of her.

“Maybe he knew it always ends the same way,” came a voice from behind.

Venne and Emiil looked up to the top of the hill. She was a vision in purest white. Her capped sleeved gown was modest but feminine in a way Venne had never seen her before. Her thin skirt stirred in the cold breezes, layers of intricate white embroidery and fine fabric. Her feet were bare but there was not a speck of mud in sight. Her veil was off, clutched in her small hands. Her face had a new blooming bruise on her cheek and her nose was bleeding, as if someone had just stricken her across the face. She looked fragile. She looked broken.

“Nadia,” Venne breathed.

Chapter Seven

Silenced

“And Laastra said ‘I can never die because I am with you.’”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 7, Verse 10.

Nadia smiled – all broken angles, sad eyes and worn out limbs. It was wrong.

Emiil found himself at her side in a second, hands hovering above her shoulders but never touching her. She did not flinch as she usually would.

“You’re back,” he said. “They’ve been searching for you for days.”

“Well, they found me,” Nadia said. She sniffed and wiped her bloody nose on the back of her hand. Her gaze slid to Venne.

He stood rooted to the grass, gawking at her. He bit his lip and shook his head. “You gave us all a fright,” he said, his voice shaking.

Emiil looked between the two and watched the silence speak. They were exchanging tiny gestures, glances, thoughts he couldn’t begin to decipher.

Nadia shrugged, breaking the tension. “I’m here now,” she said. “May as well get this pageantry over with.”

“Where have you been?” Emiil insisted. “We were worried, the elders were-”

Nadia cut him off. “I find that hard to believe,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m here. You’re both here. It all falls into place.” She reached out and patted Emiil’s

shoulder, an awkward gesture. He felt her touch like frostbite, stinging his skin long after her hand had moved away.

Venne stood silently on the top of the hill as the fog pressed around them.

Nadia looked down at the veil in her hands. It was a flower crown of lilies, with white lace trailing from the headband. She placed it atop her head, slightly crooked. “Do I look the part?” she asked, hands poking and pulling at the various layers of her dress.

Emiil looked down at her, a wisp in the fog. He raised his hands up to adjust the crown on her head. *This is happening. It’s all finally over.* He couldn’t quite bring himself to smile.

“Pretty,” he murmured, feeling a blush burn his cheeks.

Nadia snorted and batted his hands away. “We may as well go in,” she said, motioning to the main hall. “No point delaying the inevitable.” She began making her way towards the entrance with the other youths, fading into the crowd.

Emiil turned to Venne. He still hadn’t moved from his spot, an observer of the entire affair. He didn’t even meet Emiil’s gaze. Instead, Venne glared at Nadia’s back as it disappeared. Emiil could feel his fury like an aura, angry lapping waves pouring out of him. Emiil followed his betrothed towards his future. *Let it go. It’s over.*

Not yet. This isn’t over. You don’t get to end this. Venne had no memory of moving into the crowd, or of grabbing her hand, or of dragging her back out onto the glade alone. Emiil had already entered the hall, blissfully happy now his dream of monotony and peace was finally coming true. Venne’s hand was like a shackle on Nadia’s skin. Her ice-cold touch burnt into the fever he felt building beneath him, fire on ice. She looked up at him with a bored expression, like she had expected the entire thing. She looked at his fingers around her and then up into his face.

“What the fuck is this?” he hissed.

She frowned. "What?"

Venne could have shaken her, tried to pry something from that hooded gaze, those scheming lips. The bruise on her cheek bloomed crimson. "You know exactly what I'm talking about," he said. "You show up here after being gone a week and what? To marry me? To resign yourself to this horrible charade? I don't think so."

She looked up at him for what felt like a long time. A passer-by glanced their way with a frown. They were running out of time. Nadia moved in to Venne, her body so close she was almost brushed up against him, filling all the empty spaces between them. She reached out, laying her cold palm against the exposed skin of his chest, just above his heart. He flinched, his breath catching.

"You look very handsome," she said, her voice barely a whisper. She looked up into his face. He could feel her breath on his neck.

He wanted her hands on his skin there, prying the ridiculous tunic loose. To tear that stupid crown of defeat off her head. The fever in him built from the pit of his stomach, every nerve in his body on fire. He wanted to kiss her. The air stirred ever so slightly, damp weighing on their tired limbs. She was all white and greys in the pale light. She smiled again and it was full of malice.

"What are you doing?" Venne murmured, inclining his head so he was looking down into her face. "Tell me."

"Why should I?" Nadia said, a smirk tugging on her lips. Pale lips he wanted on his, to pry answers from. Gods be damned, he couldn't think of a good enough answer. She continued. "Did you look for me?"

"Of course I did," he hissed. "You give me cryptic words and hopes of escape and you leave. I was furious. I still am."

Nadia peered away, as if weighing her next words. She shook her head, veil dancing around her pale starlight hair. For a long while she didn't say anything. And he was going to touch her, just to

get a reaction, to check they were still both alive in that terrible moment between one life and the next.

Finally, she spoke and she was grinning. “Don’t trip on all that fabric. You can’t run in that tunic very well.” She gave him a light shove and walked away, a bold, confident stride.

Her voice echoed in his head over and over. *Just remember.*

The meeting hall was one large structure, a long room that stretched deeper into the earth, like a slow descent into darkness. Ivy and moss had crawled in through the various cracks in the stone, nature infesting the space. Lilies dwelled in the corners, white and plentiful despite the lack of light. The floor was littered with their petals. Stone benches were lined up in even rows, crammed between pillars and any other open space to accommodate the entire village for the ceremony. Runes were carved across every surface, an endless swirl of mystery letters and symbols. Candles of dripping wax were lit by the dozen to provide dim light in the gloomy space. Somewhere incense burned. It was Nadia’s own personal hell. She wrinkled her nose as she entered with the crowds. Everyone in town had to attend to send off their youth into married life. After the ceremony, the entire town would escort the newlyweds to their new homes, old houses prepared for the couples or entirely new structures built for that very day. Hundreds of eyes would watch her resign herself to her fate.

“Nadia!” Emiil called from across the crowd as people fought for bench space.

Nadia shoved past someone’s parents without an apology, making her way towards Emiil. Those directly taking part in the ritual were required at the front, between the giant statues of Arthai and Laastra on each side. Emiil’s sheer size made it easier to squeeze through the bustle and soon they were by the long stone altar. Some of the ritual’s utensils were already laid out on a crisp white cloth –the wicked sharp silver knife that would cleave her flesh, the delicate rune-worked needle

that would cast ink into her blood and bind her to Emiil and Venne forever. She held her hands at her side in fists, fighting against every urge to run.

Emiil saw her staring. “Let’s wait over here,” he said, steering her towards a dimly lit corner beside a wall-mounted torch. His arm on her elbow, unwelcome.

She leaned against the wall, eyes scanning the crowd. Venne was nowhere to be seen.

“So you actually turned up,” came a voice. Emiil and Nadia looked to their left, where Johanna was barging her way past an elderly couple. Nadia felt Emiil stiffen beside her.

“I admit, I’m impressed,” Johanna said, folding her arms. Across the room, Johanna’s Root Nicholas was guffawing with a crowd of boys. “I thought you’d be dead in a cave somewhere, picked clean by wolves.”

“That’s uncalled for,” Emiil said through clenched teeth.

Nadia rolled her eyes. “When has anything so interesting ever happened here?” Nadia asked.

Johanna picked dirt out of her nails. “What a bust,” she said. “All that drama for nothing. I have two new scars on my ass and for what? Everyone chickens out in the end.”

“It always ends the same,” Nadia said. “What did you expect?”

Johanna looked back up at the couple. Her mouth was a hard white line, her jaw set. “I expected more from you,” she said. Then she flounced away to her Root, to share some final joke with the boys before she was bound to a mother’s life forever.

“Well wasn’t she as pleasant as ever?” said a voice in Nadia’s ear. She flinched as Venne brushed against her, taking up a place at the wall to watch the hall with boredom.

Emiil frowned at the other boy.

“A blushing bride, she most certainly isn’t.” Venne let out a little laugh. “And look at the costumes this year. How ridiculous. I don’t imagine Laastra ever wore so many petticoats.”

As he chattered, Venne's hand snaked down his side. His fingers found Nadia's, warm and dry. He clasped her hand in his, squeezing tight. To her surprise, she didn't pull away. Their tiny reassurance, their sanctuary in skin-ship, lay hidden behind her back and pressed against the stone walls where no one could see and assume anything of it. Across the room, Emiil's parents were calling him. He made his apologies and went to see his family, a nervous smile creeping across his face. Venne and Nadia were alone.

Venne leaned down towards her, his eyes never leaving the crowd. "Are you ready?" he whispered, his breath tickling her neck.

She held his hand tighter. *Don't let go Venne. Don't leave me for even a second.* "Never," she said, turning her face to stare up at him. Their lips were inches apart- she could have counted every long eyelash lining his green eyes. "But we've run out of time."

When all the Elders but one had taken their place at the long stone altar, the ceremony began. The youths flanked them on each side, standing with their future soulmates, hand in hand. Every gaze fell to the entrance at the back of the hall, the last of daylight flooding down the steps. The echoing steps of the High Elder sounded like a death knell in Emiil's ears, a requiem for his old life. He tried to appear solemn and reverent like all the others around him, but inside he felt bile rise in his throat and a bone deep trembling he could not shake off. *This isn't meant to feel like this. You should be happy.*

He stole a glance at Nadia to his right. She held his hand loosely, a dead weight against him – but he could see how tightly she held Venne's hand, both their knuckles white grips. Her expression was indifferent, a perfect mask of calm. Emiil resisted the urge to squeeze her hand, just so she could show some sign of reassurance.

The High Elder was making his way down the aisle now, the gathered families bowing their heads as he passed. The Elders were made up of the oldest members of the village, trained their

entire lives to lead and serve the Gods. Emiil did not remember a time the High Elder had looked any different. He had always had old eyes, snow white hair and a trimmed beard despite his face being reasonably unmarred by age. He seemed to exist in a time zone that did not move, above such things as mortal aging. *Maybe he's a statue, with a crystal for a heart. Maybe he's dead.*

The High Elder wore white robes for the ceremony- adults could wear whichever colours they chose but white was usually reserved for youths. The train trailed across the ancient stone floor and in his hands he held a silver goblet full of jet black ink. The ink was made from the sap of the nearby trees, said to have grown from drops of Arthai's own blood. Emiil watched the Elder approach the altar, laying the goblet down with a bow of his head.

The High Elder cast his gaze across the youths, a stern appraising glare, before turning to the congregation. "May Laastra watch us from above, and Arthai protect us down below," he said.

All gathered echoed the same reverent chant. Emiil noticed that Nadia and Venne said nothing. The High Elder, who doubled as the role of High Priest, nodded his head in satisfaction.

"It has finally come to the joyous day we celebrate the birth of our beloved youth and to join them to their Roots. For eighteen years, they have worked and prayed and nurtured their divine connections and on this night, they shall finally be together." He paused to smile at the youths at each side. Emiil felt as if something slippery and unpleasant had crawled across his skin.

Someone in the audience was already crying. There was a mixture of emotion in the crowds faces, joy, sadness, pride, loss – but there was nothing that matched the fear and anguish that fell across some of the youth's faces. Faces like Nadia's, who were glaring at the priest with all the wrath of a caged beast. Venne looked unamused.

The High Elder continued. "Just as Laastra and Arthai were joined, so too shall these blessed bodies be bound together in matrimony for the rest of time."

And as they did at every ceremony of birth, every winter and summer solstice, every harvest, the elders took turns to read the story of Arthai and Laastra from the *Aii Staanastra*. But it no longer rang as truth in Emiil's ears.

The story of Laastra and Arthai was one every member of the village knew by heart. Venne knew every plot-hole, every nonsense, every frivolous word of wonder and glory. It was filled with passages meant to inspire, meant to instil awe in all who listened. A sacred tale that was very simple. Laastra had been a shooting star, travelling across worlds through the night sky. Then she came to the land of Staahnesse, a world full of bountiful nature and wondrous sights. She stopped to gaze upon its beauty and there she met its creator and keeper, Arthai. He had the same affinity, the same divine gifts as Laastra. She could create stars in the sky, pluck a strand of hair from her head to make beautiful aurora and weep tears of bright crystals. He could build a kingdom of flowers, grow a thousand trees by laying his hands upon the soil. He was a ruler of earth and she a ruler of the skies. They had never met anyone like themselves and seeing the perfection of one another's gifts, they fell in love. They were bound together in their paradise, a perfect cycle of life. And their love only helped their world grow more and more lush, more beautiful – eternal.

What a pile of shit. Who came up with this? For the joining ceremony, this was where the story was cut off. Arthai and Laastra's story did not have a happy ending. But for today, when they were supposed to be happily joined, it was a good enough story – for most. Venne wrinkled his nose as the last lines of the passage were read. Nadia was looking towards the staircase at something he could not see. Her hand was warm in his now, the unbearable heat in his body having leached into her icy skin. She still clasped tight and he was glad of it. Venne looked up to the looming roof, where thousands of tiny stars had been carved. It felt just like the tombs stretching beneath their feet. The High Elder took a deep breath through his nose, satisfied with the telling.

“We are blessed with not one, but dozens of unions this day,” he said. “And though it can never compare to the love and sanctity of our god and goddesses’ divine covenant, it is a most joyous day indeed.” *Speak for your damn self.*

“Now let us begin,” the priest said.

The priests made a clean cut across their palms with the ceremonial knife. Even in the gloom the silver glinted. One by one they let their drops of blood spill into the goblet of ink. *I don't want your filth inside of me.* Nadia felt herself shiver. Venne squeezed her hand. The High Elder began reading out names from a list he pulled with his sleeve. The first couple stepped forward, a plain looking boy and girl, whose names Nadia could not recall. They went to the altar, placing one palm across the other person's and held the other hand out. The High Elder grabbed the delicate needle, tiny crystal stars worked into the metal that seemed to glow and dipped it into the goblet. With deft, practised hands he brought the needle out and pressed it against the boy's wrist. Slowly he began to carve a hollow diamond shape into his skin. Though he did not bleed, the boy trembled as if the knife were plunging right down into his bones, ripping him apart. All the while the priest would mutter in a foreign tongue, a language long since dead. *Something even Venne does not know.* The process was repeated for the girl, who to her credit did not even wince. Then they were married. That was all it took to be eternally bound to one another. Now the girl's emotions could be felt by the boy, their minds and hearts joined together into one being- or so the holy book said. A simple press of the needle and their lives were chained to one another. And all too soon it would be Nadia's turn.

The couples continued filing in one after another. Some cried. Others stayed stern and passive as sweat dripped down their skin. The same needle pierced them, the only pause in the ceremony to purify the metal in a flame for a moment before the next couple was initiated. The crowds of youths moved to the other side of the room when they were finished. Soon, it was only Venne, Nadia and Emiil. The High Elder crooked a finger, beckoning them to the altar. Nadia lifted her

chin, trying to stand tall but inside her mind was an endless scream, a deafening white noise fighting to escape her mouth. Venne's hand was crushing her fingers. Emiil's was a clammy dead weight. *This doesn't matter. It only matters if you let it. You came here for the trick, to make them think they won.* She stepped forward, pulling her two husbands with her. They approached the altar, offering up their wrists. *Just slit it instead, just kill me.* Their other hands lay on top of one another, a pledge of skin on skin. The High Elder dipped the needle into the ink that swallowed all light. It dripped on the white tablecloth as he lifted it towards Nadia's skin. *Not real, not real, not real, nothing, nothing, nothing.*

The blade pierced her flesh but Nadia felt it drive right down into her heart. Her blood ran cold as her being was cleaved, invaded, torn apart. The blade was sharper than anything she had ever felt before and she gasped as the ink flooded into her veins. It was not merely ink and blood, but molten fire and burning ice all at once. She drowned in the heavy black pestilence, the alien thing ripping her apart. She felt herself lean to the side, Venne trying to support her weight as the rune was carved into her flesh. She could have sworn she heard her entire world shatter. Then the blade was removed and she was entirely empty. Not herself, but not a victim of that demon any longer. She realised she had been squeezing her eyes shut, and opened them. Venne was grim-faced beside her, still trying to hold her up as best he could without letting go of their joined hands. Nadia dare not turn around to see what the crowd thought of her pitiful display. She swallowed back bile and disgust and shame as the needle hovered above Venne's wrist now. She watched helplessly as the man he had once been, free and unhindered, was stolen away. The moment the horrible needle left his skin, she heard a heart roaring in her ears. Venne's panicked breaths thundered like he was inside her. She felt the tremble, the fear of it, deep in her bones. She looked at him in disbelief. Though he had kept his composure through the ritual, he was ashen white, sweat matting his messy hair against his head. His eyes darted left and right and finally rested on hers. She saw what she felt reflected on his face- horror, despair. Emiil was next, already receiving the same treatment. He didn't even flinch. But she heard his voice, like a crack of thunder, *wrong, wrong, wrong.* And that was it. Two diamonds on each wrist and they were finished. They belonged to each other.

Chapter Eight

Come What May

“When the stars turn to blood, the end shall come.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 25, Verse 30.

Think about the house. Think about the gardens. The gardens Nadia will never tend because she hates you. You hate yourself, you hate this god-forsaken village and the violence-

There’s still my cache in the eastern den, the swords, the saw, ready to hack at the wall and break out. Maybe the tombs, no one looked far enough in the tombs. Stupid! How could I have forgotten the tombs? And now you’re married, well fucking done you imbecile.

One foot in front of the other, keep walking, head down. Don’t catch his eye. Why are you still holding his hand? No, keep holding it, pretend it’s for solidarity. Happy couple, happy men, happy wife, keep it up, don’t let them see what you’re about to do.

“Be quiet,” Venne hissed. Nadia and Emiil both winced, turning to Venne. They stopped dead in their tracks on the forest path, dropping each other’s hands. Venne could barely see their faces in the quiet night, the forest creeping in around them like dozens of shadowy claws.

The High Elder, hovering behind them, cleared his throat. “Is there a problem?” he said. The procession around them murmured, ready for a fight.

Venne shook his head. “Just a fallen branch,” Venne said, plastering on a dazzling smile. He grabbed Nadia’s hand and held it high, pushing her down the path and taking a step over a small

branch. “The last thing I want is my beautiful wife hurting herself before we even enter our new home.”

The High Elder nodded and they began walking again.

After the ceremony, a procession was made through the village. Every single member attended, guiding each of the newlyweds to their homes. Most families brought gifts with them to offer the couples- baskets of pastries and celebration food, decorated daggers and swords to mark the occasion for the warriors, silver jewellery, fine cloaks lined with fur and bouquets of wildflowers. As the night went on and happy and miserable couples alike were guided to their new life, the crowd dwindled to return to their own homes. Husband and wife were not to be disturbed after the ceremony for two weeks, to truly begin to bond and enjoy their lives together. Food and utensils were already prepared in their new homes. It was supposed to be a picture of bliss but Venne felt as if he were marching to his death. The phantom noose chafed at his neck, burning against his skin. He ground his teeth together as he fought to keep smiling.

Their house was on the edge of the village, nestled by a stream and the fringes of the vast forest around them. It was a lush patch, perfect for growing vegetables and even enough space for livestock, if they wished. *It's a god's damned joke.* Venne felt the whisper behind his thoughts, the constant hum and plucking of voices and nerves rising and falling. He tried to ignore it but he kept catching snatches of words, of white hot fury and despair. Finally, the tiny procession stopped in front of the cottage. It had a new roof in grey slate and someone had mended the fence. Moss crawled across the walls, devouring the little stone hovel. Ivy clung to the gates, an extra defence to keep them trapped inside. Venne could not remember what aged couple had lived and died there before them.

The High Elder placed his hands on both boys' shoulder, his spindly fingers digging into their bones. “At last,” he said. “You have arrived home.” He pushed them towards the threshold, the old wooden door barely visible through the fog.

Venne turned to the few villagers still gathered for the pageant. His father, a man of very few words and a stern face, said nothing. He wasn't even looking at Venne. Emiil's parents were smiling but every so often they glanced at Nadia like she was a viper ready to strike. Nadia's parents had made their excuses early and left. She had seemed relieved by their departure. Nadia headed towards the door, ignoring them all.

"We shall be close by," The High Elder said, his biting tone not matching the peaceful smile on his face. "Should you need anything." *In other words, he's watching your every move. Smug bastard.*

"You've provided more than enough already," Emiil said with a nervous laugh. "But thank you Elder."

"A note by the fence," the elder said, reaffirming the threat. "And someone will be with you instantly. There should be enough food for the fortnight, but nonetheless, we are at your service." He gave their shoulders a squeeze, bending forwards so only the two men could hear. "Do not hesitate to discipline the girl. The village expects much from the three of you." *Because you're the anomaly. Because you're a chaos in the quiet.*

Venne was ready to spit in the man's face. He took a deep breath but Emiil was pulling him away with a pat on the back.

"Sky and Earth be with you," Emiil said, in way of a farewell.

"Enjoy your nuptials, children," The Elder called. He made no move to go, hovering instead by the wooden gate with his golden lantern piercing the night. Venne turned to watch him as he walked down the path.

"Just get into the house," Emiil pleaded.

Nadia was waiting by the door, leaning against the frame with her arms folded. She rolled her eyes and made a sweeping gesture into the house. "Husbands first," she said. "Or else you might

‘discipline’ me.” He heard her laugh but her mouth didn’t move. It was as if she were inside his body, inhabiting all the empty spaces, plucking his nerves and joints like a lute for her own amusement. Venne frowned at her but reached to open the door.

“Nadia,” Emiil said softly. He glanced over his shoulder, where the Elder remained appraising them. “I know this isn’t what you wanted. I know this is going to be hard for you, but I’m determined to make things as comfortable for you as-”

“Get in the house,” Nadia ground out, her eyes ablaze.

Emiil stared at her for a few moments, his hands ready to reach out and comfort her. His shoulders slumped as he nodded and followed Venne.

The door creaked as they entered. Venne could make out the shadowy outline of a hearth, some seats and a table but not much else. Emiil was fumbling to light the lantern hanging by the door with some matches left on the mantel. Venne pushed past him as the lamp lit the main room. It was small and looked the same inside as every other house in the village. It felt very far from a home. Nadia slammed the door behind her. She went to the single glass window, looking out onto the garden. The High Elder had disappeared. Emiil was heading towards the hearth to light a fire, not sure what else to do with himself. Venne just stood there, desperately trying to understand what was happening. The chatter inside his head had gone silent. Emiil bent towards the hearth, a lit match between his fingers.

“Don’t light the fire,” Nadia said, hurrying to the fireplace.

Startled, Emiil dropped the match and stamped it out on the floor. Nadia shoved past him, stepping up into the pit itself. She bent to look up the chimney chute. Her hands reached past the soot stains to grab something. She pulled down a large satchel, the same one she had ran away with just a week before. Then she pulled down two more, throwing them on the threadbare rug at Venne’s feet. He raised a brow, his mind sluggish and as foggy as the forest outside.

“Light the rest of the lamps,” Nadia said, her face betraying nothing. “Make it look as if we’re here.” *Please Nadia. Say what I want you to say.*

“We *are* here,” Emiil said.

Venne felt a stab in his chest, like a flame flickering to life.

“*You are,*” Nadia said. She went through another door to the main bedroom, a tiny cabin barely able to fit a double bed. She returned with a plush cloak lined with fox fur around her shoulders, carrying a pair of heavy leather boots. It was still far too warm for such gear. She dropped her things on the floor and went back into the bedroom to retrieve another cloak and set of boots.

“I’m leaving,” Nadia said. She turned to Venne. “Are you coming or not?” She sounded impatient.

Something ancient and dormant clicked into place inside Venne. And he laughed.

Venne wouldn’t stop laughing. He leaned against the hearth, clutching his stomach whilst he guffawed. Emiil felt it reverberate through his chest. He caught Nadia smiling at Venne, a flash of teeth but it withered when she turned to Emiil.

“What?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” Emiil asked, his voice shaking. *Don’t say it. Don’t make this any worse.*

“Ask the eternal bond between us,” Nadia said, showing the two diamond runes on her wrist, representing Venne and Emiil. Like ripples in a pond, he felt it, a tug of annoyance as she glared daggers at him. She sighed through her nose and hurried into the kitchen. He heard her clattering around, as if to make as much noise as possible.

Venne was wiping tears from his eyes, his fit finally subsiding.

“You think this is funny?” Emiil said, coming up to the other man.

Venne was grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t you?” he asked, pushing past the other man. He went to the bag Nadia had thrown him and began rifling through, exclaiming happily at the contents.

“She thinks she can still escape from here!” Emiil said. “It’s over! It’s done. It’s too late.”

“Ignore him,” Nadia commanded, coming out with a sack filled to the brim. She turned to address him. “Unless you’re coming with us, we have nothing to discuss.” *Who’s the traitor? You or her?*

“Have you packed any weapons yet?” Venne asked, still the picture of glee.

“I have my bow,” Nadia said. “I’ve been making extra arrows for the past week.”

“That’s not nearly enough,” Venne scoffed. “You need an axe, a sword, tools, something else.” Nadia wrinkled her nose.

“You sort that out,” Nadia said.

“Oh, you were relying on me to get them? I’m honoured you’d trust me with such an important task.” Venne went to the chair by the table, bringing his boots with him. He hurled the ridiculous decorative footwear across the room, beginning to undress.

Nadia blushed and hurried back into the kitchen, muttering to herself. It was as if Emiil was not there, as if they had picked up some silent conversation they’d been having for weeks.

“Tell me what is going on!” Emiil roared. “Right now! Why did you leave and come back?”

Venne winced as if he had been hit across the face. Nadia yelped from the other room. Like they had a physical reaction to the emotions jolting down¹ their bonds.

¹ Word count reached.

“Who cares why she chose to come back? We’re finally leaving!” Venne said. *It was just another trick. Another mask to wear. She couldn’t possibly want to be your wife.* Venne pulled the elegant tunic off, dropping it onto the floor. He yanked the pants away and extracted a new woollen pair, grey and made for winter, from his satchel. He called to Nadia, neither bashful nor surprised. “You picked out clothes for me? What a good wife.”

“Shut up,” Nadia called. “That isn’t even remotely funny right now.”

Venne barked a laugh, wriggling into a fresh black shirt and leather jerkin. Nadia came back out at the same time. She wore a man’s clothing, the woollen top too big for her slight frame and almost reaching her knees over tight navy pants.

“You can’t leave,” Emiil said. “We’re connected now. They’ll never let us leave.”

“We don’t need their permission,” Nadia said. “For anything.” She adjusted the quiver of arrows hung over her shoulder, the bow string tight across her chest.

“Did you at least bring me a dagger?” Venne asked absently, as he laced up his boots.

“You’ve tried before,” Emiil said. “What makes you think you can do it this time? What could possibly be any different? Why now?” Venne regarded Emiil with a level stare. Despite his eagerness, was he thinking the same thing?

“Why would I tell you my plan?” Nadia asked, raising her chin. “You’re going to run to the elder the moment we go out the door.”

“You knew? All this time?” Emiil said, before he could think.

Venne’s eyes widened as he regarded Emiil. “What?” he said.

Emiil couldn’t stop it. He wanted to be free of the weight in his chest. *I can’t do this anymore.* “I was the one who told the elders about the meeting,” he said. “It was me.”

Nadia stared at him. He couldn’t read her expression, so he just continued.

“All this time, they’ve made me report to them. Any secret, any tiny infraction, I’ve had to report back. And I tried to protect you. Persuaded them to be lenient, to turn a blind eye.”

“You haven’t done a very good job,” Nadia murmured, a hand fluttering to her ribs.

An image flashed through Emiil’s mind—Nadia bloody, in the dirt once more. He chewed on his lip. “I didn’t want to,” he babbled. “I didn’t want to do it. I still don’t. But I thought I could protect us. Stop you from being hurt.”

Venne was silent, glaring at him. He finished lacing his boots, saying nothing.

“It’s not surprising,” Nadia said finally, with a small shrug. *That’s it? That’s all you think?*

“You’re a bastard,” Venne said, eyes on the floor now. “But I guess we always knew. That you weren’t on our side.”

“Is that what you think?” He said, feeling his heart straining against his ribcage. “That I’m just a sheep, who will follow whatever they say? That I don’t care about you at all?”

“Well,” Venne pondered. “Yes.”

Emiil ignored him. “I saw the grave, the same as you,” he continued. “I saw it. The elders told me I had to be silent or they’d make sure I was punished along with everyone else! Just for knowing something! I know what they’ve done. Do you think I enjoyed seeing my friends beaten and punished? That I want this horrible broken relationship?”

Nadia didn’t answer. She just held his gaze.

“I don’t want this! I don’t want to be what they want me to be anymore! I want to leave!” Emiil said finally. The weight in his chest, the ache of his heart pressing against his ribs, eased just a fraction.

Nadia cocked her head and looked to the window, eyes narrowing, deep in thought. Venne looked between them both, head supported by a hand as he leaned against the table. He looked far too calm, far too casual for a man who was about to denounce his faith and run away with his bride.

Nadia rummaged through her pocket, pulling out a piece of crumpled parchment. She held it out to Emiil. "Take this to Johanna," she said. "You'll know what to do soon enough."

He held the note but did not move. His lips parted but he could not find suitable words.

Nadia raised her brow. "Well? Get going."

"You've got to be joking, surely," Venne scoffed. "He'll just tell the elders, like he always does."

Nadia held up a hand to silence him. Emiil opened the note. *Time to go*, it read.

"I believe him," Nadia said. And with those words, Emiil was free.

"*Trust me*," Venne said, mimicking Nadia's voice. "'Trust me' she says. And then you invite the village's favourite spy to a battle to decide our freedom? Explain yourself Nadia, please, because I'm failing to see why you would spoil an otherwise excellent opportunity."

Nadia was double-checking her supplies, sat in a heap on the floor. Emiil had gone to meet with Johanna. Venne had just returned from retrieving one of his supply caches, usually kept for exploring and breaking into cabins to find tombs full of the undead. That night was for something different. He let the sack drop on the floor with a thud, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one had followed him. It was simply paranoia, he knew. All the other couples would be entwined in each other's arms, the families toasting the new adults in the comfort of their homes. *No, on your eighteenth name day you've chosen instead to risk everything for the tiny chance of a different life.* Nadia slung her leather satchels over her shoulder, hands wrapped tightly around the bags. They had distributed their rations between them. A blade hung at each of their hips. They had all the tools they could think of. They were as ready as they would ever be.

“We need to go,” Nadia said. She headed towards the door.

Venne grabbed her by the wrist without even thinking. She stared down at the contact. “You’re not even going to tell me your plan?” he asked. “What any of this involves?”

“I’ll explain on the way,” she said. “All you need to know is we’re going to the fence.” She snatched her hand away and peaked outside the window.

“Really? I’m surprised, I thought we were going to fly into the night sky for our escape,” Venne said with a roll of his eyes. He followed her gaze – there was only fog.

“We don’t have time to set it on fire,” Nadia said as she pulled the door open. She took another cautionary look outside, before stepping into the chill night. Venne followed her. She paused just beyond the threshold.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’d love to set this stupid house on fire,” Nadia explained with an exasperated wave of her hand. “Maybe they’d think we were dead inside. Or it would infuriate the Elder. Burn their image of happy marriage to the ground.”

I wish I had thought of that. What madness goes on inside her head? Venne felt a pang of longing. He swallowed it back and slammed the door shut.

“We’ll take the woods,” she said, setting a quick pace. “No light. Harder to track.”

“If this is all a ploy to get me into bed, it’s working,” Venne murmured as they hurried across the garden.

He heard her phantom laughter again but her body betrayed no amusement. She did not answer. They headed down a slope and into the forest. Venne could barely see his hand in front of him. Nadia was like a beacon, her white hair bright in the gloom. Venne had explored this forest a thousand times throughout his life but that night was different. Every tree was a foreboding shadow, every star an eye watching them, every crack of a branch under his feet a last chance wasted.

“Where were you for the past week?” Venne asked.

Nadia was setting a brisk pace, weaving over every fallen log and boulder like she knew the forest better than she knew herself.

She glanced over at him with a smug grin. “The tombs,” she said. “No one even tried looking.”

“In the caves?” *Next to all those dead. Next to my mother. Those crystals the only light. What good company she kept.*

“In the caves,” she confirmed. “Waiting.”

Venne felt the lump rise back in his throat

“You could have told me,” he murmured.

Nadia paused. “Too many plans,” she said. “There wasn’t enough time.”

That was not the answer he expected. He thought she would snap, say she wasn’t his wife really, that he had no control over her. Dare he believe she had missed him too?

“Why escape?” Venne asked.

Nadia flinched but kept a swift pace. “It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?” she mused. She cast her eyes to the clouded sky, reading the night.

“I want to know. Why now?” He had to know. There were enough questions in the village as it was. It was time for some answers. He was already leaving his mother behind. He wouldn’t let it all be for nothing.

“We ran out of time,” Nadia said after a pause.

“But why *after* the wedding?”

“They won’t expect it. They think we’ve submitted, that we’ve accepted the fates they laid out for us.” He could hear the grin in her voice.

“What about the rest of them? All the happy couples we leave to misery. Venne glanced around them. They were too far from the village now to see any houses, free of the sickly warm glow of happy families. Or the tears of couples who despised one another, bound together forevermore.

Nadia shrugged. “What makes me responsible for them? Why does my freedom have to have anything to do with theirs at all?” She slowed in front of him, pausing a mossy outcrop. She turned to him. “You think that's selfish, don't you?”

Venne tried to find her in the darkness, her outline burned into his memory.

“I won't presume anything,” he said. “We're no better than them if we stand here judging one another. Enforcing beliefs, laws- the way we wish things to be, over the way things are.” He resisted the urge to look back at the village. *It's too late for that. Even a glance and you're done.*

“Philosophical,” Nadia said. She started up again, clambering over the rocks.

Venne followed her a step and found his thoughts tumbling from his mouth. “I'm leaving because I want to know more. I want to be more than another grim-faced man who thinks he has a handle on destiny.”

“What about your mother?”

Venne gulped audibly. “She's dead,” he said. “I saw her head spilled open. There's no coming back from that. Whatever they did to her down there...I don't have the answers. I just need to go.”

Nadia nodded to herself. She did not reply for a long while. Not even the strange bond between them betrayed her emotions.

“I want to feel something else. Just...anything else,” she finally said. It was the barest whisper that betrayed a hundred emotions at once. Then he felt the bond, a fire through his veins, a flash of lightning.

“Nadia,” Venne said. He grabbed her hand again, pulling her back towards him. She staggered, closing the space between them. The air between them was thick with fog, like drowning

underwater, limbs heavy. His hands found her shoulders, cold fingers digging in to her cloak. She stared up at him.

“You don’t owe me anything,” Venne said. “And I don’t owe you anything either. No matter what anyone says, we’re not married. You are not my wife.” He let his fingers trail down her arms, skin slowly whispering against one another under their thick clothes. He imagined sparks flying off her pale skin, scraping against that iron exterior. “Whatever happens tonight, whatever you’re planning, you can walk away. We can go our separate ways.” He shook his head, losing the words that sounded so much better in his mind. All the questions, all the fears, died on his lips.

“I know,” Nadia murmured. Her eyes darted away.

“But if you want help, you can ask,” Venne said.

“You can ask,” she said. “You can ask too.” She swayed into him, leaning forwards on her toes. For a single second, her forehead lay in the crook of his collarbone, a solid comfort. Then she was moving back, out of his reach.

“We’ve wasted too much time already,” she said. “Let’s go.”

She set a jogging pace, weaving between the trees. And Venne would follow her to his doom.

Chapter Nine

A Sinner's Choice

"Sinners will not only burn, but cease to exist entirely."

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 24, Verse 13.

They were running through the trees. No one was chasing them yet but Emiil was sure it was only a matter of time. They headed straight for the fence.

Emiil had found Johanna waiting on her doorstep, Nicholas kissing her neck. She had stood up, already changed out of her dozen layers of lace and shouted to Emiil, "It's about time!" Somehow, Johanna had known. She showed him a note she had found in her home upon arrival. *The West Fence. Follow the light.*

Emiil could see no light, not even the moon, but still they headed west, setting a brutal pace. Johanna had been ready and knew exactly who to bring with them. She had a wicked sickle on the back of her pack. Nicholas, ever the troublemaker, brought his stash of liquor. Veta brought her dread and her husband, Markus. Nadia had trusted no one else to follow her into the abyss but Emiil was unsure why some of them had chosen to come. Johanna had always hated the village and Nicholas just wanted an excuse to cause trouble but Veta and Markus? None of it made sense.

It took them two hours to get to the edge of the forest, where the tall wooden fence stood, blocking out the world. By this time, they had fallen into a nervous, uneasy walk, constantly looking over their shoulders and tripping over every fallen branch and dip in the earth.

“Well,” Johanna said. “Where is she? She said go west, we went west.” She sat down on a rock, folding her arms.

Nicholas groaned and flopped down beside her, head resting on her shoulder. “Not the kind of action I thought I was getting tonight,” he muttered.

Johanna swatted at his head. Veta stayed by Markus’ side, an equally nervous and awkward youth.

They all looked to Emiil, as if he knew the answer to the burning question – what were they doing? “I-I don’t know,” he said. “She told me to find you. And then you had that note. She said...look for the light?”

“I want to leave already. I feel sick even thinking about all the motherly shit they want me to do. If this is some kind of sick joke, I swear to Arthai, I will kill her,” Johanna said.

“Johanna!” Veta squealed. The twins began a lively argument, Johanna trying to calm her startled sister and convince her to stay a few minutes longer. Emiil scanned the fence through the fog. It looked the same as ever, an imposing wooden shadow reinforced with great pillars of stone as thick as tree trunks. He went towards, it, laying his hand across the woven surface, as cold and solid as ever. *Why are you here?*

“This is boring!” Nicholas said. He had now spread out across the forest floor, hands propped behind his head as he looked up through the foliage. “How long do we have to wait for something to happen?”

“Why didn’t she just tell us what she was doing?” Johanna said, storming up to Emiil. “You were with her, you should have gotten details.”

“I didn’t even...I didn’t know she was going through with it,” Emiil said.

“Then you obviously don’t know her very well.” That quietened Emiil. *You don’t know her at all.* There he was, on the night of his wedding, waiting in the darkness with people he knew nothing

of, ready to risk everything he had ever known- and for what? An imaginary new world. Something, anything that was *new*. A chance to step outside the façade he'd created. He looked to the north, where the fence stretched on, trapping them.

"Johanna," Nicholas groaned. "Why are we here? Let's just go back and have a good time, we can do this later. Let Nadia get caught." His tone was casual, as if escaping their village was the same cheap thrill as stealing fruit from the kitchens.

"Stop complaining," Johanna said, kicking at Nicholas, who howled and rolled away. "You agreed to do this with me. If you want to go back and be a whining baby, go. But I'm getting out of here tonight, one way or another."

Nicholas opened his mouth to say something. Then he frowned. "What is that?" he asked, sitting up, leaves in his hair.

Emiil followed to where he was pointing. A strange orange glow coated the forest not far south from them. Amber clouds filled the sky. *No, not clouds. Smoke.*

Johanna sniffed. "Smells like...wood smoke," she said. "And something else." She studied the ominous glow as it grew brighter and brighter, stinging at their eyes.

Then a boom came from nearby, a sound that shook the forest to its core, rattled every root and branch and living thing. It was the sound of Emiil's life ending. The glow became a burning light, a beacon. Everyone around him was shouting, panicking- but he could only see that fire, the world burning. *Follow the light.*

If Venne awoke to find the last two weeks had all been a strange dream, he would have not been surprised. For his dreams of escape and a great beyond to come true was something he tried not to imagine very often. There had been the will and the want, but never the how. And yet there he was, holding Nadia's hand as they staggered down a ditch of jagged rocks towards the fence, to tear their

world apart. He still had no idea how they would do that, but despite everything he trusted her. No more prayers, no more beatings, no more elders watching his every move. *No more dead heartbeats beneath your feet.* For a moment, he thought of his mother, lying there. But fear swallowed the thought whole before it could fully form.

“Alright,” he said as they hit the flat forest floor once again, staring straight at the fence. “Explain yourself. How are we getting out?”

Nadia let go of his hand, dropping into a crouch by one of the stone pillars. She squinted. After rummaging through her pockets, she held a piece of flint out to him.

“Light a fire,” she said.

Venne took it from her. He looked around “Light what?” he said, feeling a fool.

Nadia groaned. “The lamp! In your pack!” she said.

Venne grimaced as he put his bags down and rummaged through to find the small lamp. A moment later, they were bathed in its warm light. Nadia was no longer a ghost haunting his side but a girl made real, full of colour and blood. She was walking the fence line now, stopping every so often to inspect the ground.

“Won’t they see this lamp and follow us?” Venne asked. Nadia returned to his side, dropping her bags beside his own. It was a paranoid question- the fog was so thick he could barely see Nadia, let alone anything else.

“We won’t be sticking around long enough for them to find us,” Nadia said. “How’s your shot?”

“Good enough,” he said with a shrug. All elders-in-training were required to excel in most things- hunting, guardian duties, religious learning, endless devotion. Venne found himself wishing he had paid more attention to the hunting part.

Nadia studied his puzzled expression and then shook her head. “We’ll shoot it together,” she said. “Take the bow from your pack.”

He did as he was told and soon Nadia was pushing an arrow into his hand. The head had been wrapped in a scrap of cloth, soaked in oil. The idea clicked into place. He opened his mouth but Nadia was already climbing back up the ditch, putting distance between herself and the fence. Venne went with her, carrying the lamp.

“That pile there,” Nadia said, pointing. “Can you make it out?” Venne squinted, focusing on the on the centre of the fence between two posts. A small shadow stood out at the base.

“I think so,” he said. “I really hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Have a little faith,” she said. Her voice cracked as she tried to stop herself laughing. It brought a grin to his lips. Nadia took the lantern from Venne and placed it at her feet. She dipped the tip of her arrow into the flame. The head was set alight, a small burning point that lit up her face. She was grinning too. Venne did the same, holding the flaming arrow ready to shoot.

“Ready?” she asked. She was still trying not to smile but she couldn’t help it. Her eyes danced in the firelight.

“I’ve been ready for a long time,” he said, quoting her.

That finally cracked the mask on her face. Her brow knit together, a sad smile breaking across her lips. “I’m glad it was you,” she said.

Then she let her arrow fly. It hit the pile and his vision exploded in light and flames and fury.

It worked. Just like the tome said. Suffer the ritual and gain the gifts of the gods. Nadia’s being cracked in two, her vision, her body cleaved. She fell back against the stone as the explosion blasted her back with a hot wind. Venne’s shot had missed but still the fence burned bright, a wall of flame and destruction. Some stolen wine, some well-placed kindling and she could destroy it all. But it was faster than she imagined, an all-consuming hellfire that swept across the fence too quick. She cast a glance at Venne, who was huddled against the stone, gawking at the chaos. He too, saw how

unearthly it was. Nadia was laughing. She didn't know she could make such a joyous sound. Venne looked at her as if she was mad – maybe she was. She could not stop.

“Nadia!” he said over the roar of the blaze. “We can't stay here.”

“You're right!” she said, tears in her eyes. “We have to burn it all.” She staggered back up, grabbing the bow from where it had flown from her hands. She hurried across the ditch, the fire already crawling across the rest of the fence.

Venne scrambled after her, casting wary glances as the flames ate away at the forest. “How are we going to get through?” he called. The heat was pressing at their backs, urging them forwards.

“There's a weak point,” Nadia shouted over her shoulder. “The fire should weaken it enough that it'll collapse and we can crawl through.” If not, she would risk the flames and death just to step beyond that damned fence.

For over a week, she had been crawling through the wilderness in the dead of night, setting up her little traps for chaos. So small and unimposing, the guardians would think they were just fallen leaves or an animal hovel. But beneath was wood soaked in wine, ready to burn bright and fast. All she had needed was time and the impending terror of the ceremony. And the false victory of the Elders, who thought they had ensnared her in their marriage pact and killed her hope once and for all. Their arrogance, their belief, would be their downfall. *It's all so perfect.*

“Right here,” Nadia said, pointing to a fresh stockpile. “Stand back.” Venne hesitated for a moment before nocking another flaming arrow. They shot at the kindling and again the world was set alight, the ground rumbling beneath them. *Brighter than anything Laastra could conjure*, Nadia thought as she marvelled at the sight.

Then Venne was laughing beside her, shaking his head. “You're insane,” he said, looking down at her with a glint in his eye. His hand brushed her arm, hotter than the flames. But she didn't have time to attend to the screaming in her head or the heat in her limbs.

She darted away from him, smiling. “We don’t have much time before they see,” she said to the fire. “Let’s light it up fast and get out of this hell.”

They came out of the smoke and fire like shooting stars, cutting through the flame. Emiil could not hear their voices in his head anymore- they had tuned him out. They turned their backs on him for a moment, watching the trail of fire they left eat away at the fence, larger and fiercer than anything he had ever seen.

“What have you done?” Emiil was shouting. “What have you done?” Nadia tugged Venne along with her, towards the group. Johanna was still gawking at the fire, an expression between awe and annoyance on her face. Nicholas was hollering, jumping up and down. Veta and Markus had their backs pressed against the trees, ready to run in a second.

“Finally,” Nadia said as she hurried towards them. “I told you to follow the light. Is that not a big enough sign for you?”

Emiil shook his head in disbelief. “How are we supposed to get past that?” he said. *As if I’m still going through with this madness.* He was shaking despite the heat.

Venne was entranced by the flames, standing beside Nadia. The grin never left his face.

“There’s a weak point, back there,” Nadia said, pointing over her shoulder. “We need to move now, before the whole forest goes up.”

Johanna jogged towards them. “You’re such a show off,” she said, jostling Nadia’s shoulder. It was probably meant to be friendly but Nadia flinched away, glaring at the other girl.

“Let’s move already,” Venne said. “The entire village will be able to see it by now.”

Nadia nodded. “Let’s go,” she shouted, motioning the group to follow.

Emiil could barely hear her over the roar of the flames as it crawled closer and closer. Were the trees already alight? Would the fire be so all consuming that it reached the village? *This isn't what you wanted.* But Emiil had made his choice and if it was the price for freedom, he would die in the flames himself.

The forest was glowing. If her life hadn't depended on it, Nadia would have stopped and watched the cinders dance. But every second spent in awe and wonder was a second wasted. So Nadia shouted for the group to move faster as Johanna dragged her sister across the dirt with Markus, the younger sister sobbing and hysterical. Venne shoved Nicholas forwards as he stopped to take a celebratory swig of wine from a flask at his belt. All the while, the wall of flame crawled closer across the forest floor, nipping at their toes. It was hard to distinguish the wall of light from anything else but finally Nadia came to a section where the wood had collapsed to the floor. On top of the already ashen remains was a felled stone pillar, free from the fire- and a perfect gateway to a new world.

"It's raining," Venne warned, holding his hand out in front of him. "The fire won't last long."

"It might make tracking us harder," Nadia said through gritted teeth.

She edged towards the pillar, dodging the flames around her. One trip and she would die in the blaze. How ironic it would be, to die in her own saving grace. The gods would laugh at her. She climbed on top of the pillar, the stone warm to the touch. A simple jump and her feet hit new ground - uncharted territories, never explored. A land unhindered by secrets in a single step. *You don't have time to celebrate.* Venne was already behind her, helping pull a frail Veta over the stone. The rest soon followed.

"Well, which way now?" Johanna asked, her hair covered in ash already.

Nadia took a deep breath of smoke and tension. Her reply was halted by the cries of another. Hunters, chasers, were shouting through the darkness, roaring their names. There was nothing

soothing or forgiving in their tones. Through the smoke, Nadia could make out the faint glimmer of lamp lights.

“Who told?” Johanna said. She grabbed Emiil by the collar of his shirt, snarling in his face. “It was you wasn’t it, you bastard-”

“They’re going to kill us,” Veta was whispering.

“Shit,” Venne said. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Split up!” Nadia said. She grabbed Venne, shoving him forwards. “Come on, move it.”

“Which way?” said Emiil, still being violently shaken by Johanna’s rage.

Nadia couldn’t find enough breath, enough seconds for this scene to right itself, for her plan to realign. *One step and it’s already slipping through your fingers.*

“Does it matter?” Nadia said. “If we never see each other again but we’re free, that’s more important. Just keep moving. We are *not* stopping here.” The group stared at her.

Venne grabbed Nadia’s arm, pulling her along with him. “Well?” He called over his shoulder. “Go! Run!”

The group broke apart, sparks from the fire that flitted through the forest. They went in every direction, scrambling away from the men turned monsters at their backs.

Chapter Ten

Freedom's Price

The rain was like a flurry of arrows, every tiny drop on Venne's skin like a sharp blade, pushing him further into the dirt. The forest beyond the boundary was wild and untamed. There were no paths trod by a hundred others, no open glades where wildflowers and herbs were picked. Everything was dense and ready to trip them in a second. Nadia ran beside him, her breath loud in his ears. Neither of them dared to look over their shoulders but they could hear the shouts, the calls, the screams of their pursuers. Their backpacks were heavy but if through some miracle they managed to make it out, they needed the food and tools to survive. A part of him believed they would make it.

"How far," Venne gasped, "will they chase us?"

"I don't know," she said breathlessly. "I don't know!" She tried to speed up, but tripped on a tree root and flew forwards.

A ditch opened before them, swallowing Nadia as she rolled down the rocks with a cry. He felt her impact like a crack of lightning through his body. Their bond screamed and he answered.

"Nadia!" he cried, trying to stop himself before he fell too.

He managed to skid down, almost losing his footing several times. He landed with a thud, his arms scraping against something sharp. Nadia was a mess of mud on the ground, scrambling to her feet and slipping again in a tangle of bushes and rocks. Venne pulled himself from the flora, grabbing Nadia and hauling her to her feet. Her arms and face were full of scrapes and her nose was bleeding. A snapping sound came from above them. A man stood at the top of the ditch, a stocky

farmer brandishing a scythe. He pointed it towards them. He didn't say anything, just glared down at them. The man began making his way across the rock-scape towards them.

"Venne," Nadia said, staggering through the tangle of thorns and bushes. "Venne, run."

"I'm not-" he began but Nadia silenced him with a shove.

"Watch out!" she said.

Venne fell to the ground just as an arrow whizzed past their heads. Nadia managed to duck just in time, feeling the air shift around her as the arrow hit a tree stump near her feet. Another hunter was hurrying towards them, already drawing a new arrow. Their enemies closed in around them.

Nadia was still pushing Venne to his feet. "Go!" she said. "Run!"

Venne didn't dare cast a glance over his shoulder. He shot up, running parallel to the bowman who sprinted after him. He dipped into the trees, his lungs roaring like fire inside him. He hadn't even made the decision to leave- his body had chosen to live above anything else. So he hurried further into the forest, the hunter on his heels and left Nadia to the thorns and the drowning rain.

Emiil had not seen any hunters yet. They haunted him instead, whooping cries through the darkness, shadows dancing in the rain, glimmers in the distance of all-consuming fire. Emiil's nightmares of this day, of escaping, were tamer than anything he was seeing that night. He could not differentiate the shadows that were his comrades racing for freedom and the hunters. *What will they do to us? This is beyond a beating.* The new air, the new sky was the same but somehow reborn. Every step was his own. Emiil sprinted fast, about to take a sharp turn to the west when he heard a cry. A girl's cry, unmistakable terror. Freedom be damned, he went to the sound. Lightning crackled overhead, illuminating the way. The ground had already grown slick and muddy, making the forest harder to navigate. He burst into a clearing to find four men surrounding Johanna, Nicholas, Veta and Markus.

“I’m sorry!” Veta was crying. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I’m so sorry.”

“Shut up,” Johanna hissed. “When I tell you to, run.”

Nicholas glanced between the men and his group, his jaw set. No one moved.

Markus stepped forwards. “We understand what we’ve done,” he said, arms lifted in surrender.

“We’ll come with you.”

A man Emiil recognised brandishing a large axe shifted it from one hand to another, staring at the boy. It was Blaake.

“You think you can repent?” Blaake asked. His eyes passed over Emiil and the rest of the group, no recognition there. “That you deserve to come back to Laastra’s home? Filthy sinner.” He hurled the axe across the glade. With a wet thud, it hit Markus square in the chest, sending the young man collapsing to the floor. In a second, Blaake, a guardian of the people, a protector Emiil had been on his way to becoming, had murdered his people.

They were given nothing else- no mercy, no chance at redemption. No second thoughts. Veta screamed. Emiil would remember it for the rest of his life, a constant white noise pressing at the corners of his mind. Veta collapsed beside Markus’ body as the world turned all grey and white. Blaake was coming forwards to retrieve his axe from the bloody mess of the young man’s body. Nicholas was grabbing onto Johanna, trying to pull her away from her sister. The other hunters advanced. Emiil was running but it wasn’t fast enough, a decision made too late. Blaake retrieved his axe from the man’s ribcage and with one quick swipe, cleaved Veta’s head from her body. Her horrified expression stayed frozen on her face as she collapsed into the filth. Johanna screeched and squirmed, clawing at Nicholas’ hands around her waist. She found her escape as another hunter ran Nicholas through a with curved blade, the handle soaked in Nicholas’ blood and plunging into his stomach. Emiil pulled a dagger from his belt, charging at another hunter but dodging at the last second, instead making for Johanna. He didn’t remember making the decision, only the fear, the

horror. The girl was launching herself at the murderer with nothing but bared teeth and empty hands. Emiil barrelled into her, pushing her back into the forest.

“Let me go!” Johanna was screaming. Emiil fought her for a few horrifying moments as the hunters gave chase and then scooped her off the floor, hauling her over his shoulder. She screamed and clawed at his back, cursing him over and over. Emiil darted through the trees as Johanna screamed over and over. She managed to claw her way off him a minute later. To his surprise, she just began sprinting faster, still fleeing from the hunters with tears streaming down her face that mingled with the storm lashing at them. The forest seemed to close in around them, cradling them in its shadows and hidden nooks. The hunter’s shouts grew fainter until there was only the sound of the rain. It did nothing to wash away the blood on both of their clothes and the death burned into their brains.

“How could you do this, Venne?” cried the man as he tackled Venne to the forest floor. *How could I not do this? How could you not have seen this coming?* Venne shoved his elbow into the hunter’s face, at the same time trying to roll from beneath him. The hunter grabbed his broken nose, crying out as Venne squirmed away, staggering up to his feet.

“You filthy sinner,” the hunter said, hauling himself up. “You think you can escape?”

“I’m a sinner?” Venne scoffed, circling his foe as he brandished a dull dagger. “You’re the one hunting us like animals.”

“You burnt down a sacred gate, grown from Arthai’s blood thousands of years ago!” the hunter roared.

“It was in the way,” he replied with a grin.

The hunter roared and charged at Venne. The younger man managed to duck behind a tree, darting between the pillars of soaking wood. But he could only dodge for so long. The hunter

followed, slashing out with his own dagger. Venne stepped backwards and fell into a stream, water soaking through his boots as he fought to keep his footing. The hunter advanced, catching Venne on his arm as he fought to duck away. They both tripped against the uneven rocks, falling into the icy waters with a splash. For a moment, all Venne could hear was bubbling water. Then he was wrenched by his hair back out of the water, the hunter clawing at him. He tried to lodge his knife under Venne's throat but his soaked hands fumbled to stay holding the weapon. Venne groaned as he fought against the man's weight on his back, using his hands to push the weapon away and slicing his palms. Grabbing a fist full of silt, he splashed water and mud into the man's face. The man slipped back, landing back into the stream and scrambling up again. Venne managed to get back on his feet, shivering from the rain and the stream and the fear. He had lost his knife in the scuffle.

No other choice. Venne rushed the man, taking the offensive. The hunter didn't expect the sudden savagery and slashed out uselessly with his knife. He was not a guardian or a trained fighter and though Venne knew only a little, it was more than enough to tackle the man to the ground. The knife flew from his grip into the water, lost in the dirt. Venne planted his knees on the man's chest, pushing all his weight onto him. The hunter scrambled but Venne's hands found his face, pushing it under the stream. Splashing limbs fought to tear Venne away but he held fast, white hot blood pounding through his icy limbs. He pressed his fingers into the man's eyes, digging deep as he pushed him further under. *Let Arthai save you.* Venne's wrist burned, the diamonds stark against his pale skin. They seemed to glow against the water, a grim reminder of the suffering he had endured. Venne held the hunter under until he moved no more. Then he pushed a little further. It was only the distant shouts of other hunters that made Venne raise his head and pull away from his bloodlust. He looked at his wrist. The runes were no longer glowing.

"Nadia," he breathed.

"We can't keep running!" Johanna cried. "We're getting nowhere! We have to fight!"

She slowed to a stop, bending over, sweat and rain and tears streaming over her cheeks. Her red hair was plastered to her head, as dark as blood. Somewhere, their fallen friend's bodies were soaking wet in their own blood.

Emiil spun around, looking at Johanna. "We can't stop!" he said, going to grab her. "There's four of them, you saw what they did!"

That sent a shock through Johanna. She shook her head, hands pressed against her face. Emiil reached out but flinched as an electric current like the thunder above tore through him. His left hand shook, the runes on his wrist white hot against the rain. He stared in shock as his heart beat like a drum through his arm, his body convulsing. *What is this?* The fireflies, lanterns carried by the hunters, drew closer through the foggy gloom.

"I'm not running, I refuse to fucking run!" Johanna cried. She raised her arms, calling to the hunters. "Come on you bastards! Come get me!" Emiil tried to drag Johanna away but she turned and punched him square in the face. "Get off me!"

Emiil winced back, his eye half shut and stinging. The lights turned into shadows of men. Johanna drew the sickle from her back. The hunters appeared from the gloom, shouting curses with weapons raised high. So fast, Emiil could not tell who to attack first, where to run, whether to leave Johanna. Someone else made the choice for him. An arrow cut through the night, cleaving the air near Emiil. It found its target in a hunter's chest and then another was shooting after it, into Blaake. One by one, with unholy precision, the hunters fell. Four bodies, two dead, in a matter of seconds. Johanna went to the bodies, sickle brandished to finish the job the bowman had started. Emiil turned to see his saviour, refusing to watch his former mentor die in front of his eyes.

Venne appeared, nocking another arrow, his fingers bloody but steady. "Nadia?" he asked.

Emiil just shook his head. Venne returned to the shadows in a breath, leaving Emiil to face the death he had wrought.

The man had Nadia by the throat. She could barely see anything through the fog and rain but she could see his eyes. They were devoid of any human emotion – a monster’s eyes. And Nadia knew with certainty she had made the right decision. It was why she was unashamed by what she did next. The man’s fingers tightened around her throat as lightning crackled, illuminating them for a moment.

Someone called her name across the forest but there was nothing but blood and endless abyss around her. Nadia tried to squirm in his grip and managed to fall to the ground, the man landing on top of her with a growl. Nadia choked as her freezing hands clawed across the forest floor, through leaves and twigs to find her salvation. She found something hard and that was all she needed. She grabbed a jagged rock and stabbed towards the man. The stone met his temple with a crunch and a spray of warm blood. He cried out and held his murderous hands to his face. Nadia kicked him in the stomach, shoving him off her. She didn’t know where her bow or arrows were. She held the rock and lunged at him again. Footsteps thundered behind her but she did not look away from the screaming man on the floor. She beat his face again with the boulder. He had helped her gather firewood once, when she was young. She recognised his face from countless meals. How many words had he spoken to her? When had he begun judging her? There was a crack and a squelch. She became aware she was screaming at him, cursing him to death. And her hands beat him and cracked into his skull until he stopped moving. She dropped the rock beside her with a wet thud.

“Nadia” someone was shouting. “Nadia, what have you done?” She turned towards the voice, towards the flame and the storm and the chaos.

“Free,” she said. “We’re free.”

Burning Paradise

They Who Welcome Chaos and Young Adult Fantasy

By Sophie Johnson

*“Nadia” someone was shouting. “Nadia, what have you done?” She turned towards the voice,
towards the flame and the storm and the chaos.*

“Free,” she said. “We’re free.” (p. 93)

Introduction

For my master’s portfolio, I chose to write a section of a novel. *They Who Welcome Chaos (TWWC)* is a young adult fantasy novel that tells the story of Nadia, Venne and Emiil, three adolescents seeking to escape an oppressive religious society and travel into the unknown world beyond their village’s confines. In trying to escape, the group stumbles across various secrets and hidden history, as well as learning about themselves and their own goals.

My aims for this piece were to create a strong young adult (YA) title that showcases the various strengths of the category. From dark, gritty themes, to strong feminist characters, I wanted to show how YA is a distinctive and versatile literature that has both commercial and literary merit. In this commentary, I will highlight the distinctiveness of YA and how I approached this in my own work. I will also highlight some of the fantasy aspects found within the piece.

The two major themes found throughout my piece are feminism and persecution. From strong female characters to highlighting gender roles within *TWWC*, I sought to create a strong cast of characters typical of YA literature. The overall theme of persecution helps add depth and a darker side to the story, a theme which is also popular in contemporary YA and fantasy literature. These themes continue to add to the overall idea that YA is a distinctive and versatile section of the literary world.

I read a large variety of contemporary texts from both the YA and fantasy genres to aid in writing my own piece. The core texts were the *Dragon Age* (2009) franchise, including the novels and video games, as well as the works of Sarah J Maas including *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series (2015-) and Leigh Bardugo, including *Six of Crows* (2016). Key academic texts that helped shape my work include *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) and *Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction: How to Create Out-Of-This-World Novels and Short Stories* (2013). Inspiration and research were an integral part of focusing on what I did and didn't want in my piece, from themes to worldbuilding. Not only is *TWWC* genre fiction, but a blend of both fantasy and YA, bringing different strengths and challenges. I had to understand what was in the market already, what was popular and what was no longer relevant. To facilitate these aims, I created my own reading list. This contained a variety of contemporary YA literature and fantasy literature. The full list is included within the bibliography.

YA is an ever-changing and advancing literature that allows a writer to explore a variety of dark themes and social issues. I wanted to highlight these issues whilst playing to the positive strengths of YA literature. It is a demographic full of creative, ground-breaking and empowering narratives. Through reading and researching YA literature, my own work has grown and advanced.

Young Adult

To write YA literature, I first had to understand it. As a prominent commercial success, YA has become a permanent fixture in most book stores and literary spaces. However, YA comes with a variety of problems, such as its much-contested target audience, how it is defined and whether it should even be considered a genre. This problem has only worsened over time by the identification of out-of-date tropes in criticism and the plethora of YA screen adaptations across the last decade. This creates massive problems when writing YA, trying to fight these misguided assumptions.

The history of young adult literature is a complicated one, part of a larger narrative of the rise of the “young adult” itself and adolescent culture. It depends on whether one defines young adult literature as

something aimed at young adults or written with young adult characters. The targeted audience of YA literature will be explored in more detail later in this essay.

In his journal article, *From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature*, (2001) Cart states that young adult: “—didn’t appear until 1967 with the publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender*,” (Cart, 2001: p. 96) but then goes on to contest this and states how the rise of young adult literature is part of a larger literary trend of each decade, dependent on what was popular. If one defines young adult as simply something with young adult characters and not read by only young adults, many classic literature titles could be considered young adult fiction, such as J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (2010). This makes categorising young adult literature a difficult task.

Concentrating purely on contemporary YA and how it was shaped today, blockbuster hits like *Twilight* (2007) and *The Hunger Games* (2009) are clearly when the YA trend gained mass-market appeal and acknowledgement. Having both a place in the literary and film industry seemed to cement YA as a lasting section within book stores today. Therefore, young adult can be defined as something that has appeal to more than one market, like literary and film or literary and television. The label is more of a marketing device used to loosely define the category than a concrete term to describe certain tropes, at least at a glance.

YA can contain characters who are young adults but it is not limited by this term. YA and science-fiction writer Chuck Wendig asserts that YA “should have a teen protagonist” (Wendig, 2013) but also identifies the ambivalent nature of YA and asserts that it is not a genre, but instead a category of literature with similar themes and characters with limitless possibilities.

“Young Adult can be whatever you want. It can be epic fantasy. It can be space opera. It can be (and often is) dystopia. ... it operates best when it karate-slaps all your genre conventions in the face, when genres run and swirl together like paint and make new colors and form new ideas and change the way you think about stories.” (2013)

Young Adult is not a genre but more a category of literature that contains a variety of different genres. They all share similar aspects such as young adult characters and themes, but can range from fantasy to

realism to romance. It is both a marketing term and a loose definition to describe teenage protagonist narratives. This highlights the distinctive and versatile nature of YA.

Who YA is aimed at exactly is a complex question and has many answers. A young adult will no doubt assume the books are aimed at themselves, hence the name. Look to the world of literary review and criticism however, and the answer becomes much more complex.

However, the audience (intended and actual) of YA literature is contested; there is not a defined age group that is specified within YA. (Thomas, 2013: p. 6)

Thomas writes of this shifting audience in his book, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature* (2013) as well as critiquing YA literature in general. This proves to be a somewhat negative portrayal, which will be discussed later in this section. The problem is, what readers define as YA was shaped vastly by its most prominent example, *Twilight*, an altogether dated and problematic example. *Twilight* introduced a public image of YA as a sexist, male-dependant narrative and stories primarily occupied with romance, as Taylor describes in their article *Romance, masochistic desire and postfeminism in the twilight novels*:

here I turn to the politically troubling aspects of the books themselves (especially in light of gender and sexual politics) as an initial yet crucial step in the process of coming to terms with the immense cultural reverberations of the *Twilight* series. (Taylor, 2012)

Although examples could be named from YA literature that would adhere to these tropes of sexism and oppression, contemporary YA of the last few years paints a vastly different portrait. Maas' series, *A Court of Thrones and Roses* is one such example of a YA novel that presents a more positive portrayal YA literature. The novel's protagonist, Feyre, is a far cry from *Twilight*'s own submissive heroine:

No one was my master— but I might be master of everything, if I wished. If I dared. (Maas, 2016: p. 319)

The second instalment in the series goes back on what it set out previously, to depict the main love interest as a sexist, abusive and controlling lover, a poignant critique of romantic heroes. The book

explores various dark themes, including but not limited to: rape, sexual abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar and depression, suicide, cultural disassociation, colonialism, sexism, racism and patriarchy versus matriarchy. Evidently, it is a far cry from the sanitised and rigid narrative of *Twilight*. Maas' works aren't the only literature to push the boundaries of YA. Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant* series (2007-) depicts acts of graphic violence and horror, Clare's *Lady Midnight* (2016) portrays various homosexual relationships and Bardugo's *Six of Crows* describes the criminal underworld and its victims in gruesome detail. Thematically, YA is far darker and less sanitised than *Twilight*.

Returning to the subject of who YA is aimed at shows further insight into its diversity. Publishers Weekly reported on research in 2012 that "55% of YA Books Bought by Adults" (Publishers Weekly, 2012), however this is now a somewhat dated study. More recent research, done by authors of the novels themselves, finds more specific information. In an interview with Cassandra Clare for *The New York Times*, "according to a survey conducted by Codex last week, Ms. Clare's peak audience is women ages 18 to 24". (Green, 2016). Despite these accounts, there are critics who condemn YA, such as Ruth Graham's infamous *Against YA* (2014) article for *The Slate Book Review*. These negative testimonies are usually met with outcry and backlash from both the writers and readers of YA themselves. Despite critique, YA remains a viable commercial and one with a varied audience.

In some instances, it can be hard to find critical reactions to YA or a definition and exploration of tropes. Many research books and articles focus on YA from an education/teaching perspective, immediately infantilizing YA narratives. Others, such as the aforementioned *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*, make poor assumptions of YA.

Unless you are white, traditionally beautiful and heterosexual, you're not going to be getting a lot of mileage as a female in YA books at the moment, (Thomas, 2013: p. 77)

There are many examples of YA literature that could instantly disprove this statement - *The Hate U Give* (2017) is an exploration of the Black Lives Matter movement and shootings, *Six of Crows* features three POC's in its main cast, one of which is bisexual. Even the *Star Wars* novel *Lost Stars* (2015), written by YA author Claudia Gray, features a non-white protagonist and mixed-race cast. Evidently,

race is something that is being explored in contemporary YA. Graham's *Against YA* also lacks useful critical merit, citing *The Fault in Our Stars* (2013), another famous YA novel and blockbuster hit, as a lacking novel simply because she didn't cry like many other fans of the story. Clearly, it is not a useful or particularly grounded critique of YA narratives. Disproving this negative critique only furthers the point that YA narratives are versatile and remain relevant amongst other contemporary literature.

So how does one go about writing a 'genre' that evades definition but remains versatile and commercially successful? A vague definition seems to be that YA novels are simply stories about young adult characters and situations – but not limited by that age group in their audience. One question I had when I began writing *TWWC* was what type of register YA novels use and the language involved, especially considering I was also writing a fantasy novel. Many famous examples of fantasy seem to write in a rich, descriptive style, such as *A Game of Thrones* (2014). However, YA fiction, no matter what sub-genre, is written in modern register, using the kinds of language and dialogue teenagers of today would be familiar with. This can be seen throughout the works of Bardugo:

"Fine. But if Pekka Rollins kills us all, I'm going to get Wyll's ghost to teach my ghost how to play the flute just so that I can annoy the hell out of your ghost."

Brekker's lips quirked. "I'll just hire Matthias' ghost to kick your ghost's ass."

"My ghost won't associate with your ghost," (Bardugo, 2016: p. 194)

So, I chose to stick with a YA-type register. This made writing my own piece infinitely easier – the dialogue flowed and could be written without concerns for the stories lore or time-period. It allowed the sarcastic nature of some of the characters to come through straight away, without having to learn the world first.

"Of course you would know," he said. "The forest is perfect, the harvest is abundant, the water is pure. My hair is perfect, my shit is abundant, my piss is pure." (p. 9)

This was something immediately picked up on by my tutors and so a concentrated effort was made to keep the language even throughout the novel. The register only ever changes when sections of the holy

book (*Aii Stanaastra*) are mentioned, to foreground the ancient nature of the fictional text within the novel.

Another point picked up on by my tutors was a scene considering description of appearances within the book. In YA, the character's appearances are typically described in detail, to highlight their beauty or fitness. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series features a harem of both male and female characters, often described by their beauty.

Standing before me was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Everything about the stranger radiated sensual grace and ease. (Maas, 2015: p. 188-189)

Many popular YA series' feature some form of beautiful creatures- vampires, angels, faeries. This attention to a characters' looks is not unusual and is even remarked upon in Clare's *Tales from Shadowhunter Academy* (2017).

Simon suspected the Angel did not choose the asthmatic or anyone who ever got hit in the face by a volleyball in gym. (Clare, 2017: p. 22)

I tried to emulate this in my own work, as it seemed to be a common example in YA fantasy specifically.

His shirt clung to his muscled body as he looked down at Venne. (p. 5)

She was a vision in purest white. Her capped sleeved gown was modest but feminine in a way Venne had never seen her before. Her thin skirt stirred in the cold breeze, layers of intricate white embroidery and fine fabric. (p. 54)

Many other YA series depict beauty often, notably Maas and others with heavy romantic themes in their works. Evidently, it is something which comes with the romance genre, regardless of the character's gender.

Overall, studying the literature and critical response to YA has helped me incorporate some tropes but also avoid others. By keeping a modern register, I saved my text from seeming stale and old-fashioned. By keeping myself uncensored I am following a long line of YA literature which pushes boundaries

and explore current social issues. YA is evidently a very versatile and very freeing genre to write for and continues to be a commercial success, thanks to its distinctive and contemporary nature.

Fantasy

Although *TWWC* contains many common elements of contemporary YA, it is first and foremost a fantasy novel. An established part of genre fiction, fantasy literature comes with its own set of rules and tropes just as YA does. As well as standing as a genre on its own, YA fantasy is a popular sub-genre within YA itself. As such, a firm grasp on the fantasy genre was required when writing my novel.

The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature charts the beginning of fantasy as far back as *Beowulf* (2003) in a timeline of the genre, however this is hardly relevant to contemporary fantasy. The genre has seen various transformations throughout literary history, from beginnings in gothic literature to a progression into Lovecraftian horror. However, the introduction of fantasy in its contemporary style, a sprawling world filled with magic and rich history, can be cited from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1995). The series established common tropes found within today's fantasy literature, such as the practise of magic, a fictional world woven with complex history and politics, as well as races other than humans. This is still not a concrete definition of the genre itself however. James notes this trouble of defining the genre but writes that "fantasy is about the construction of the impossible" (2012: p. 1).

A look at contemporary fantasy helps add to this definition. *A Game of Thrones* details a complex world filled with magic, the undead, dragons and various other common fantasy tropes. However, its strength and popularity lie in the intricacy of its characters and multiple viewpoints to detail drama and adventure. This emphasis on character will be detailed further on in the essay. Popular contemporary fantasy is a versatile and complex genre, a good choice to pair with the distinctive nature of YA.

Therefore, when writing *TWWC*, I played to the strengths of the fantasy genre. World-building is an integral part of fantasy writing. Without realism or science to ground the world, anything is possible and as such rules of the world must be set down from the first page. James explains this:

If done skilfully, the construction of an entire other world in which to set the narrative- often working out detailed maps, charts, languages, lineages and bestiaries- focuses the reader's attention (James, 2012: p. 107)

Without a pre-established world of rules and folklore, the society my character's escape from has no depth and loses all sense of jeopardy. The character's exploration of this folklore introduces the reader to the world.

"But look at this mural!" Venne said, scooping up his bag and hurrying back to the painting. "Why would they leave something so huge and beautiful down here?" (p. 28)

As the characters continue their exploration of these secrets, the world of the novel grows alongside the reader's knowledge. This will be a continuous exploration throughout the novel that helps strengthen the unique fantasy world I have created.

Part of world building means creating a believable history to my world. This means things like politics, religion or conflict within the world's history and current affairs. But when creating a religion, the writer must know whether it is true in their stories' world. I wanted to play with the idea of religion as folklore, mixing them together to create something that could be true or false. This was greatly inspired by the religions found in the *Dragon Age* universe. *World of Thedas Volume 1 & 2* (2013 & 2015) detail not only the religions found within the video games and literature, but also creates a holy book to go along with the narrative. Quotes, hymns and prayers have been written purely for the effect of deepening the worlds lore.

Threnodies 5

The Maker creates the Fade and spirits

(1) There was no word

For heaven or for earth, for sea or sky,

All that existed was silence,

Then the Voice of the Maker rang out,

The first Word,

And His Word became all that might be: (Bioware, 2015: p. 49).

Within the games and literature of the *Dragon Age* universe, there are several different religions within the world- most of which contain evidence to both prove and disprove their existence. Only in the latest game, *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), was the existence of the elven gods proven as powerful mages instead. This half-truth idea greatly inspired the stories of my own fiction's god and goddess, Arthai and Laastra. *Dragon Age's* fictional holy book also inspired the religious segments at the start of each chapter in *TWWC*, to create a more tangible religion and literature within the novel itself.

“And so Arthai began his slumber in the deepest depths of the earth- to dream of the day he would one day awaken to his goddess Laastra and the peace they wished for.”

Aii Staanastra, Chapter 20, Verse 33. (p. 20)

These sections make the fictional religion seem more realistic and create an example of what the characters of the novel are rebelling against. The village is an intricate society with its own religion, rules and regulation, not simply an evil cult.

As mentioned earlier, my novel is primarily a YA fantasy. I asserted earlier that YA was not a genre, but a category containing many sub-genres and crossover. YA fantasy is one of the more popular sub genres found within YA literature. I read many prominent examples of these narratives, including Maas' *Throne of Glass* (2012-) series', Bardugo's *Grisha* (2014) trilogy. Through this reading I established some tropes specifically for this sub-genre I could apply in my own work. Both series' have a varied cast with a balance of female and male characters, something I will explore more later in the essay. The main protagonist who the narrative ultimately hinges on is always a female though. I mimicked this popular feminist technique in the creation of Nadia. She will also be explored more later in the essay. By creating a female protagonist, I am following a prominent feminist trope found within YA fantasy, something that also makes it stand out in traditional fantasy. This further highlights the distinctive nature of YA and fantasy literature together.

Overall, it is evident that contemporary fantasy has greatly aided my work. I have adhered to some of the traditional tropes of world-building and magic present within the novel, combined with the strengths of YA outlined earlier. By adding elements such as fictional religion and conflicting beliefs, the work has gained more complexity and multiple viewpoints, enriching the narrative and the characters within. These strengths only help boost the overall aim of creating a unique and distinctive contemporary YA fantasy piece.

Themes

There are two major themes throughout my piece- feminism and persecution. By having central themes on top of the strong genre-work I outlined above, I could create a piece that was modern and relevant to contemporary literature of YA and fantasy, as well as add overall depth to my work.

Feminism seems to be particularly prominent in contemporary YA fiction. A running theme in these stories is their use of strong female heroines, something that has risen with contemporary feminism and YA fiction simultaneously. In an article for *Bustle.Com*, Kerri Jarema notes that fans expect to see elements of feminism in whatever they read, with the rise of a more socially aware readership.

With the We Need Diverse Books movement, as well as the call for more Own Voices books, feminism in young adult fiction has become more important than ever. Readers expect to see women (and men, for that matter) writing strong women, complicated women, kick ass women — probably most especially in fantasy worlds. (Jarema, 2017)

Lori M. Campbell also writes of this in her book, *A Quest of Her Own* (2014), commenting on female hero studies being a more recent phenomenon. She defines this as:

the issue of power, as it is claimed or used by the female hero, as well as in how it is represented by and around her... Whether she wields a bow, sword, superior magic, intelligence, or imagination as her weapon(s) (2014: P. 12)

The most recent Goodreads Young Adult Fantasy Award winner was *A Court of Mist and Fury* (2016) by Sarah J. Maas, which has a female protagonist. Other nominees had either a female protagonist or at least two female characters as part of a team. (Goodreads 2017). Following this new trend and wanting to have a novel with equal gender roles, I created characters such as Nadia and Johanna. Both have their own agency in different ways- Nadia openly defies her oppressive society and persists in resisting her fate. Johanna enjoys sexual freedom and is also outspoken in her rebellion. Together, they balance two male points of view throughout the story, providing the reader with multiple perspectives.

Writing a feminist character meant the focus was primarily on Nadia. I wanted to show her growth throughout the narrative. Although Nadia's character can come across cold, it only reinforces her sole determination to escape the village. Her drive to leave the village is ultimately what powers the narrative forward. She is the instigator of most plot points, like the meeting of the adolescents and the actual escape plan. By making Nadia incite most incidents, she remained an integral central character.

Another important element to writing characters is outlined by McKee- specifically characters as contradiction:

Dimension means contradiction: either within deep character (guilt-ridden ambition) or between characterization and deep character, (McKee, 1999: p. 378)

There are many instances of contradiction between Nadia and Venne's relationship. They are meant to be married to each other but both reject the idea, seeming very different on the surface. Nadia is an outcast, a troublemaker and surprises no one with her refusal to marry, whereas Venne is an elder-in-training, the village's 'golden boy' but still rejects marriage. Despite refusing to marry, both develop feelings for each other as the narrative progresses and even take the marriage ritual (albeit to fool the village into thinking they have given up their escape plan). Two characters who were curious but indifferent to one another end the first part of the novel hand-in-hand, entirely trusting one another.

And yet there he was, holding Nadia's hand as they staggered down a ditch of jagged rocks towards the fence, to tear their world apart. (p. 80)

These contradictions highlight the character's complexity- their beliefs and their emotions become contrasting ideas that create tension. It gives the narrative opportunity to unfold in unexpected ways, as well as create further conflict down the line with other characters such as Emiil, the jilted husband. Nadia's refusal to marry shows her own feminist agency and power. Her choosing to romance Venne is another instance of female desire and power in her situation. Despite being in an oppressive society, she remains a strong female character.

Building a feminist cast meant focusing on more than just the female protagonist. All characters served different narrative purposes. Nadia presents a strong female character with her own agency. Despite knowing the consequences, she openly defies her village's rules and publicly humiliates her father:

"Isn't this anger, all this hate you throw at me, really about your own inadequacy?" Mikhail's hand whipped out, striking Nadia across the face. She staggered backwards, holding her cheek. The grin did not leave her face. (p. 13)

This defiance ties in with the other theme of persecution. Nadia's open rebellion of the village powers the narrative forward and gives it a focal point.

Emiil is a spy who believes he is protecting his own people but is in fact only getting them punished for their misdeeds. Emiil does not fit into the father role he is being forced into.

"To be the spy, the watcher, the guardian of all his people's hopes and wishes – but this time his steps were heavier than before. For the first time, he thought that he might be the sinner himself."
(p. 36)

Emiil presents a contrast to Nadia's rebellion and shows how the other characters are facing the persecution and oppression in their society. He also provides another feminist element to the narrative, showing how the males of society are not the only one struggling with gender roles and seeking their own empowerment.

Venne is not only a love interest alongside Emiil, but a character who adds sarcasm and wit to dialogue:

“Path. Heaven. Seed. Eternal Hell,” Venne said. *“There, that makes perfect sense.”* (p. 28)

As well as adding valuable comic relief, Venne struggles against the binaries set down by the village. He is meant to be a leader, a future patriarchal figure but seeks to escape alongside Nadia, Emiil and Johanna.

Together, they create a varied and colourful cast that provide several different viewpoints to the central narrative of escape. Whilst Nadia remains the central character and strong from the start, other characters grow around her to present a strong cast beyond simply female protagonist and love interests. This helps break a negative YA trope of predictable romances and love triangles like those found in *Twilight*. My aim was to create a contemporary romance, filled with empowered characters with their own agency. This helps show the versatility and freedom allowed within YA literature and the feminist themes found within the literature.

The second major theme within my work was persecution. Themes of escape from some type of persecution or oppression seem to be prevalent recently in not just YA but contemporary fantasy throughout different mediums. *Attack on Titan* (2012) focuses on escape from man-eating giants and walled cities, *Six of Crows* focuses on a heist that will allow the characters to escape a life of crime and slavery, *The 100* (2014) focuses almost exclusively on the survival of its younger participants. I wanted to engage with this popular theme but also explore it from a different angle. The characters are essentially escaping perfection – they have little to worry about in their lives and everything is provided for them. This begs various questions to the reader: why the characters are leaving, what the world outside their walls is like and how they will escape.

“I will not marry you,” she vowed. Both boys flinched. *“I will not become a part of you. I will not pray, I will not break, I will not worship anything or anyone. I will escape this forsaken land of hellish perfection. And I will damn the god and goddess until I die.”* (p. 10)

Nadia is very clear from the start of the novel of her intentions but each character changes and develops their ideas as time passes. Emiil is the last person to decide he wants to leave and still seems unsure of his decision when he joins the others to flee. These constant contradictions help develop the characters.

I wrote earlier that contemporary YA literature deals with dark themes and social issues. This has allowed a vast amount of freedom when it comes to storytelling in the YA narratives. Inspired by the unforgiving acts of murder and representation of disease in *Six of Crows*, I knew from the start I wanted the piece to be particularly dark. Many of the garden of Eden-like traits of the village are juxtaposed by the acts of violence and punishment throughout the novel.

Someone sat dangerously close to the fire now, their limbs tied to a post. They were two days into their atonement prayers – they had eaten an extra apple for breakfast. (p. 12)

These instances are not expressed in too much detail to allow the acts to seem normal in the novels world. Bloodstains, domestic violence and harsh punishment are commonplace in the village. The oppressive state and the rules imposed on the characters allow immediate tension from the start.

One element of persecution in the novel created problems immediately. Feedback at the beginning of my project flagged up a problem- readers interpreted the elements of religion and its oppressive nature in the novel to be a direct criticism of religion itself. Thanks to works like *His Dark Materials* (HDM) series, writing anything about religion, fictional or not, seems imply the narrative is a criticism or negative portrayal of organised religion. *HDM* has long been attributed as an anti-religion novel, despite often being given the ‘children’s literature’ title.

Organized religion is represented á la Blake as a force to repress people’s true natures. (James, 2012: p. 231)

When creating the fictional religion for my project, I had thought only of world-building. The story of Laastra and Arthai was meant to be more of a folk tale than anything else, and not draw on any contemporary religion specifically. *TWWC* isn’t about deconstructing religion as Pullman’s work does.

The religion in my novel is simply a tool of oppression used by the village. It is one of many incentives to escape. Talking about this problem allowed characters to express early dissatisfaction with their lives.

Away from mindless study and free to explore to his heart's content, he found himself liking his prospective wife very much. (p. 4)

The religion is just one of many aspects of a vast world, seeking only to create a dense fantasy world. A prime example of this is the *Dragon Age* series, which has not only a variety of fictional religions, but fictional cultures, history, wars, nations, geography and more. It is only one side of a complex world.

Another central idea is the secrets of the community. The secret, the bodies underneath the village, presents a mystery and another reason to escape. Not only must the protagonists marry against their will, but do so with the knowledge their village is hiding things from them. For different characters this means different things. Venne's mother is one of those bodies, who Venne thought was dead. Nadia's resolve is only strengthened by the discovery of this secret. Emiil begins to question his loyalties. The characters realise their role as "sacrificial children", a theme discussed in *A Quest of Her Own*:

Writing on the trope of the sacrificial child in The Hunger Games series, Susan Tan identifies Katniss as part of a "system constructed to turn children into agents of their family's survival: adults cannot provide but children can" (56)." (Campbell, 2014: p. 153)

This conflicts with the whims of their oppressive society and ultimately leads to violence. I placed hints and references to unsavoury activity by the members of the village towards youths, but it is only in their escape that they realise the lengths their oppressors will go to stop them from leaving.

"You think you can repent?" Blaake asked. His eyes passed over Emiil and the rest of the group, no recognition there. "That you deserve to come back to Laastra's home? Filthy sinner." He hurled the axe across the glade. With a wet thud, it hit Markus square in the chest, sending the young man collapsing to the floor. (p. 86)

This switch to immediate violence helps solidify the central theme – the village is a controlling place and the characters are justified in wanting to leave.

Reinforcing the themes of oppression and escapism only helps add to dark subject matter of the novel. By creating a piece that plays to the strength of darker contemporary YA, it shows yet another distinctive and forward-thinking aspect of YA narratives, whilst still staying true to its fantasy roots.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have explored the literature and techniques that helped inspire and create my portfolio. At the start of the project, I was eager to research and read into YA literature. I feel having a reading list and reading what was popular helped impact my work massively. I gained a better understanding of YA fantasy specifically and how unrestrained it can be thanks to series like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Six of Crows*. Without this further reading, my writing could have stumbled across various problems, from type of language I used, to sanitising my own work for the audience. Learning about the audience itself and how large it can be in terms of scope and age group also allowed my work to be free of any constraints. It has only reaffirmed my own belief that YA is a distinctive and versatile section of literature, one that will continue to expand and explore new issues.

My research also helped me avoid certain themes. I did not anticipate the peer response to religion within my novel and how my themes could be misunderstood. Although my novel is by no means a criticism of religion, looking back I can see how it could be viewed that way. Moving forward the novel will have less of an emphasis on the religious elements to help move away from this misconception. The religious scriptures stop after the characters escape their village, already pulling away from religion as a theme. I will continue by adding more depth to the world over all rather than just the religious elements of the novels lore.

Works like *Six of Crows* and *A Court of Mist and Fury* show the importance of a strong cast of characters with empowered females. I feel my novel represents contemporary feminist characters and their relevance in a YA setting well. Nadia, Venne and Emiil show this through a variety of different actions of rebellion. Nadia is a character that moves the narrative forward the most, showing her own power

and agency through various acts of rebellion. I feel I played to the strengths of YA literature here and helped highlight it as a modern and empowering category that spans across several genres.

Starting this project my aim was to prove that YA was not only a viable option for genre writing, but something both popular and celebrated in the literary world. Far too often quick judgements are made because of tired tropes set down by long gone YA fiction, when in fact YA provides a playground for all kinds of themes and ideas. I could create a lush, dark world of the village, filled with folklore and mystery, powered forwards by strong characters. I feel confident moving forward that I will be able to continue writing the character's adventures beyond their village with strong themes in a cross-genre phenomenon that is constantly evolving and challenging its readers.

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