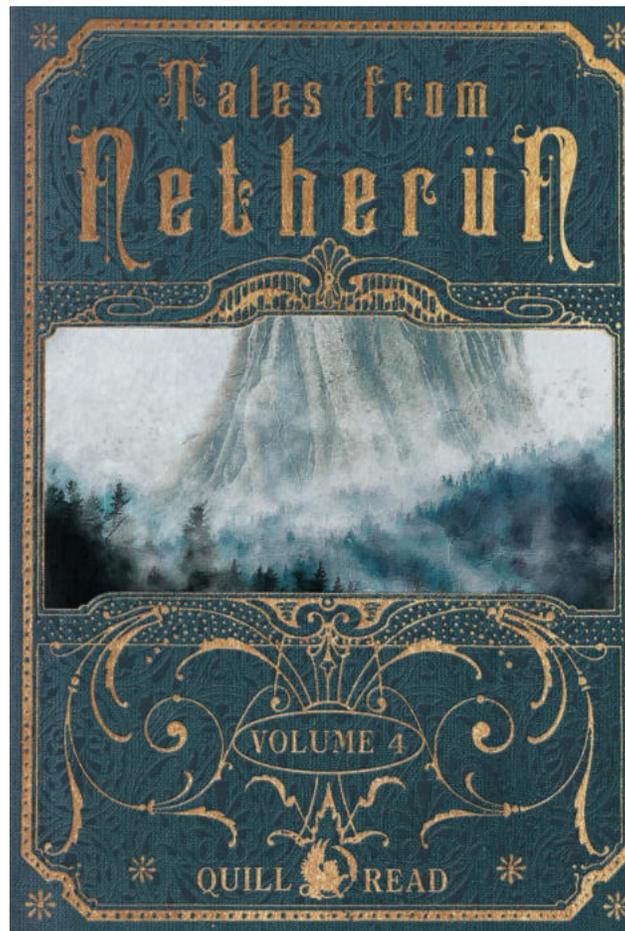


# Tales From Netherün: Volume Four

## Quill & Read



Cover Description: The cover looks like a grey, old-fashioned, vintage book with a rectangular window in the centre. In the window is an image of a giant tree trunk, surrounded by a normal-sized forest. In gilt gold across the cover are the words Tales From Netherün, Volume Four, Quill and Read.

[Table of Contents](#)

## Table of Contents

[Welcome to Netherün 3](#)

[\*Suns of the Division\* by Alexandria Burnham 5](#)

[\*Lock and Keystone\* by Tace Samoset 36](#)

[\*A Gathering, A Wandering\* by Ally Bodnaruk 61](#)

[Author Interview with Ally Bodnaruk 85](#)

[Pronunciation & World Guide 88](#)

[Content Warnings 89](#)

[Next in Netherün 90](#)

[Acknowledgements 91](#)

## Welcome to Netherün

In a world where maps are still being inked, animals are still being named and magic thrums just below its surface; life is for the bold and adventure awaits.

Welcome to Netherün, where the world is the same, but the thrill is in never knowing where you might end up...

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## [Table of Contents](#)



Image Description: A distressed fantasy map of the Thastor region of Netherun. There are three flags marking the locations that the next three stories will take place. One in Keystone, one in an enormous tree city north of Keystone, and one along a road to the south of Keystone.

## *Suns of the Division* by Alexandria Burnham

[Content Warnings](#) | [Pronunciation & World Guide](#)

Moji was fit to burst with happiness. To be still was to deny the shake and shiver of joy. The only time he was quiet was during prayer.

The Arvore thrummed with life this morning. Moji wished he'd met his home when she was still a sapling, but he was fourteen, and the tree was older than the lumbering giants of the deserts, or the sea-dwelling behemoths. Hers was a millennia-long persistent reach for the sun as her deepening embrace thickened in Netherün's soil. From simple tree to mountain's envy, the Arvore was taller than many cities were wide, her branches the colossal bark-paved roads that supported entire town districts. No, he did not regret missing her time as a sapling: only delight that his life now overlapped with hers.

Kneeling, forehead pressed to her bark, Moji was momentarily lost in the warmth seeded beneath his skin: a tingling sensation he'd always associated with happiness. It filled him until he couldn't keep the smile from his lips. He greeted the tree and it greeted him back.

A chime tolled, signalling the end of prayer. Moji sat, ending his conversation with his city, his home. He rocked back on his heels with an excitement that could not be contained. Rubbing furiously at his eyes, he brushed back his golden curls.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Rise, diviners,’ the journeyman called to his congregation. ‘It’s time we measure.’

Moji sprang up and his bright yellow robe belled around him. The other diviners rose. They were acolytes of the Division, all around his age, dressed in the same cone-shaped cloaks. Buttoned tight above the shoulders, the distinctive cloaks fanned out, forming a wide circle around their bare feet. With hoods up, they made a parade of triangle silhouettes who bobbed merrily through any crowd. To the city, they were known as diviners. Among themselves, they preferred to be called “Suns of the Division”. It was one of Moji’s favourite puns, which said a lot, because he knew a lot of puns.

The Suns followed their orange-clad journeyman up the winding steps to the sanctuary. He’d assign their daily tasks, just as his red-cloaked master had commanded him, and above them, the rarely seen white archmasters who were at the centre of the Division. Moji shivered to imagine himself one-day promoted to wear a different colour. It was an honour to serve the Arvore, for the Division’s sole existence was dedicated to keeping their tree happy.

Reaching a natural crevasse, the journeyman waved his congregation into the dim, earthly inlays. Moji was short for his age (he was sure he would grow when the Arvore chose him) but even he had to duck to scramble through the opening. Some moved to collect hand-held lanterns. Moji instead joined a tight circle of chatter.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘That’s so cool! When did you notice?’ a girl asked in an excited whisper.

‘Just last night,’ a taller boy replied. He showed his arm to the huddle, his cloak pushed back to expose skin. Or what should’ve been skin. At first, Moji thought he was looking at snake scales climbing up the boy’s forearm. But as more lanterns were lit he realised it was bark. The Arvore had bestowed this boy with the honour of sharing her form.

Moji rubbed his forearms beneath his sleeves and felt only the soft, bland skin he’d been born with. Before envy could arise, he squashed it with glee. In this city, and especially within the sanctuary, Moji would project only positive emotions for the Arvore to absorb.

‘That’s amazing,’ Moji said, teetering on his tiptoes for a better look.

The tall boy turned a careful eye on him, then a grin shone from beneath his hood.

‘Moji. You must be so excited for the day you get yours. You talk of nothing else.’

‘I know it will be soon.’ Moji nodded fervently. ‘Yesterday I divined a man who was contemplating his death. He wanted to throw himself from the ocean-point branch.’ His arms whirled to point and emphasize his story. ‘I sat with him and convinced him to live.’

‘That’s incredible, Moji!’ said a girl in the circle. ‘You are a trusted light who can always be shone on Arvore’s darkest citizens.’

## [Table of Contents](#)

Moji grinned. ‘Everyone thinks the sun is too heavy to carry,’ he said with a mock sigh, ‘but really it is very light.’ Moji glowed to hear the other acolytes giggle.

‘Diviners,’ the journeyman called. Acolytes lifted their lanterns to cast soft sunbeams around the inner hollow. They gathered in a large circle and produced their wands.

Moji retrieved his wand from his sleeve — a fine branch two-fingers thick and the length of his forearm. The Arvore had guided him through the carving of this wand, and its every knot and bump were unique and perfect. It sang in his hand, and the gentle thrum of prayer returned to him. His motions delicate and precise, he raised his wand above his head in unison with the other suns.

Channelling his senses into the wand, he blocked out all distractions, save for the concentrated bliss of absorption. Born naturally sympathetic to emotions, Moji had been recruited young for his destiny with the Division. So young, he had no true recollection of his parents. But all suns were the same. Who needed family when you could commune with the Arvore herself? Moji was complete and wanted for nothing else.

## [Table of Contents](#)



Image Description: A young boy, Moji, holds aloft a glowing wand. His expression is one of joy and awe and he is wearing voluminous robes.

Well, he did want to be a journeyman one day. Then a master, then an archmaster ... and he did want to gain his bark ...

The journeyman stood in the centre, poised with a chalk slate. He nodded for the measuring to begin. The tall boy — with his bark-blessed

## [Table of Contents](#)

skin visible for all to see — was the first to produce a pure light from the tip of his wand. The girl next to him sparked to match.

One by one, wands glowed to drink in the mood of the Arvore, and measure how much harmony she sang with this day. There was no more need for lanterns as the light they generated filled the hollow. They were receptacles, showcasing the Arvore's goodness level. If every sun shone, the Division could rest easy that this wellspring produced suitable quantities of good.

The light approached his place in the circle and Moji trembled with anticipation. He opened his senses and welcomed the Arvore to absorb his carefully cultivated emotions. Warmth rose from his feet and his skin prickled. An entire day between each measurement felt too long.

The girl beside him wavered. She strained and held her arm up high, but the light from her wand sputtered. They were only two-thirds of the way around the circle! Moji willed her wand to glow, hoping it was only a stutter in her ability to absorb, not in the tree's output. For the measurement to end here ... the Arvore was nowhere near the Division's base level.

The girl was sweating now. Then she gasped and her arm dropped. Like a burst bubble, the light in the chamber zipped back along the circle as each wand tip winked out.

They were plunged into darkness. An uneasy silence settled over the suns, and the lantern bearers sheepishly retrieved their alternate source of light. Moji felt sick. The light hadn't reached him. The light had never not

## [Table of Contents](#)

reached *him* before. In all his years as a sun the Arvore had never been this unhappy.

‘Diviners,’ the journeyman called, his tone a masterful suppression of his negative emotions. It was a reminder for all the suns to check themselves, and Moji dredged up his hope. He let it fill him until his smile was genuine. This was something they could fix. They were trained for this. Moji was good at his job and he loved it. He was the very best.

‘You know what to do,’ the journeyman said, nodding to each of the suns. ‘Divine out the negative emotions of Arvoreström. Make those people smile. Go out and do good.’

\* \* \*

Moji set out to do good.

“Do gooders” was another name they’d earned among the city folk. It wasn’t always muttered in the spirit of respect, but Moji didn’t mind. Happiness wasn’t always easy, not for everyone. That was precisely why the Division existed, and why Moji’s work was so important. A tree’s blossoms were only as fruitful as the nutrients of its soil.

He stood in the centre of a bustling track on Sunrise Branch, which reached for the eastern horizon and the far-off Coral Ocean. Wagons were pulled and pushed along the secure rails — but there was no fear of being bumped or bowled over. The people of Arvoreström always gave the little yellow diviners space, never rustling the edges of their cloak’s circumference.

## [Table of Contents](#)

One million souls lived amongst the Arvore's sun-washed leaves: leaves that were as large as a ship's sails. From her wood they crafted shops and homes, in awe of the materials she bestowed. Someone could live their entire life here and never cross every rope bridge, zip-line, nor climb every ladder or winding staircase. Just as someone could never touch every breath of wind. Arvoreström was their great city, grown among the world's most magnificent living entity.

Protruding halfway up the main trunk, the Sunrise Branch was one of the tree's thickest limbs. The thicker the limb, the denser the population. He'd have a good chance of finding someone less happy here, and his more intangible senses egged him on.

*Time to divine.* Moji drew his wand and laid it flat on his palm. He willed that there was no true end to his form; no gap between himself and the bark beneath his feet. Shoeless, a sun was never far from the Arvore. Entering the flow of his city, emotional ripples prodded his skin.

Love. He was filled with the care and tenderness the Arvore had for all its people. As he divined, he could pick out the feelings of every soul who called this tree home. Their happiness, their gratefulness. With regret, he steered himself out of the flood of love and began to seek its opposite current. The anomalies. The rocks in the stream that upset the flow.

His wand began to shift on his palm, as if disturbed by wind. Like the needle of a compass it turned in swirling directions. Behind Moji's closed eyes, he searched every burrow and building in Arvoreström, just as

## [Table of Contents](#)

every other sun would be doing now in their assigned districts to find a distressed person.

His wand found exactly that. A source of anguish. Perhaps thirty yards ahead. Stress. Anxiety. Someone was on the verge of tears. Perhaps a mother struggling to juggle young children. Perhaps a worker who'd made a mistake.

No, it wasn't enough.

He'd helped solve these types of sadnesses before. Sometimes offering a helping hand was all it took to have someone smiling again. Stress came and went. That was life. But that kind of help wouldn't solve the Arvore's low levels. It was the deeper miseries inside people's hearts that were poisoning their home — and these emotions were often difficult for a diviner to latch onto. Often it was easier to sweep the floor clean of loose dirt than it was to notice and scrub away the decades old grime caught between the tiles. This time, Moji needed to go deeper into the current and find someone with an aged and heavy pain.

Beside him a mother tugged her young daughter along. The girl had stopped to point at Moji's bright yellow cloak, giggling and smiling. Moji returned his brightest grin and the girl giggled harder. But when he met the mother's eyes, he saw a hardness to her smile. The expression was forced. She gave Moji a reverent bow and hurried her daughter along.

Prickly with the emotions of the city folk, Moji sensed her trailing unease to have made eye-contact with him. A strange reaction — the

## [Table of Contents](#)

people of the city usually loved their little suns. Perhaps she knew she was upset today and was too busy for a visit. Moji understood that people sometimes felt that way. But her distress was only minor. As long as she was smiling by tomorrow, no diviner would pursue her. Either way, he hoped she would have a good day.

He set his wand to divining once more, determined to find the most discordant heart. Someone the other suns would give up on detecting. Moji would solve this person's lingering pain and save his home. Nothing terrified him more than witnessing this wellspring sink towards malevolence. For the tree's pain was his, and her hatred would become his, if it went that far.

Faster and faster his wand spun. With a vibrating halt, it chose a new direction.

A lead weight grew in his chest until he was forced to lift his shoulders just for a sip of air. His mouth went dry and his lips twisted down at the edges. He radiated with resentment. His balance was unsteady and it was as equally precarious as his grip on his self-control. He wanted to yell. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to grab the nearest person and shake them!

Moji unstuck his feet from the Arvore and jumped out of the current of emotions. He shuddered, to wriggle free from what he'd just been feeling. Someone else's feelings.

## [Table of Contents](#)

He'd been close to crying, just now. Which was something he'd never done before. He'd never even faked cried, as they were taught to do to get their way with citizens outside of the Division (just like Elma, who'd been the best at that). No, Moji didn't like crying because it was selfish, and he wasn't selfish. Not like this person he could sense now, who'd developed such a vile state for themselves. Didn't they understand the consequence of their emotions? They were hurting their home.

Maybe they didn't know. Luckily, that's what Moji and the Division were for. He'd explain it all and together they'd fix it, because no one deserved to feel that way. Tomorrow, when they divined again, and the Arvore was stronger than ever, the journeyman and all the suns would be so impressed that Moji had cheered up the saddest person in Arvoreström. He'd be promoted — maybe he'd even wake up bestowed with bark on his skin.

Moji ran, a grin as wide as his face. He laughed and skipped across the rope bridge to the adjoining branch, his cone-shaped cloak billowing about him.

Someone needed his help and he couldn't wait.

\* \* \*

Feet shuffling on the doormat, Moji knocked again.

He stood before a little home, tucked high on an uneven stack of cabins. Whoever was inside: they were going to have the best day. Beneath his cloak, Moji wore his pack that was filled with all the things to

## [Table of Contents](#)

aid activities that always cheered people up. But where to start? Would they respond to introspection or distraction? Once he met them, he'd know what would be best.

He knocked again — and didn't stop. Tap tap tap tap ...

Movement on the other side. He heard a series of locks being keyed. Moji jumped back and smoothed out the creases in his cloak. It opened and Moji swept his most gracious bow.

'Greetings, citizen of Arvoreström,' he said. 'I am an acolyte of the Division, and on this day, you have been divined. I am here to assist.'

A pair of stark eyes peered from beneath a bird nest of grey curls. The woman, though much older than he, was only slightly taller. But seeing the way she carried her shoulders, her presence could have been mistaken for the size of the Arvore.

'Oh, a lemon,' she said, not smiling. 'Wondered when one of you would show.'

She slammed the door. Moji's mouth fell open.

A lemon?

He knocked again. Tap tap tap tap tap ...

The door opened. Moji bowed.

'Greetings, citizen of Arvoreström. I am an acolyte of the Division—'

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Oh, they do have you well trained, don’t they?’ She was smiling this time, but her teeth and parted lips projected no warmth. This smile would not help the Arvore.

Moji pushed on. ‘That’s right, I’m the best. That’s why I sought you. Only the very best can help you.’

She pressed a hand to her chest. ‘Hearing that makes me feel just awful!’

‘No!’ Moji cried. ‘Don’t feel awful! I’m here to make you feel better!’

‘You are?’ she said, eyes widening.

‘Anything you need. By the end of the day, I guarantee your joy!’

‘Anything?’ She leaned in and whispered, ‘There’s one thing I have always wanted.’

‘What is it?’

‘See the lip of the branch?’ She pointed to the ropeway and he nodded. ‘I’d love nothing more than to watch you toss yourself into the Nether-damned abyss.’

Moji paused. He couldn’t do that, he wouldn’t survive. Surely she ...

And the door slammed once more.

Oh! That was rude! She was being rude!

## [Table of Contents](#)

It was okay. Sometimes people were rude — a side effect of feeling awful. It wasn't their fault. He raised his hand to knock again, but the door swung open before he could.

'You're not going away, are you?'

'I can't go away. At the end of today, I must test you and declare your happiness levels welcome among the Arvore.'

'And what happens if I fail your test, young Lemon?'

'Oh, that won't happen. No need to worry about that.'

'No. It will please me to know. Tell.'

Moji bit his lip. 'In those cases, I inform my journeyman of the person I've been unable to help. But we don't want that! Because it's their duty to expel those people from Arvoreström.'

She studied him with her piercing grey eyes. 'At last, the Division has come to remove me from my home. Are you aware I've lived here longer than your little organization has existed, Lemon? And you flitter in with the authority to kick me to the dirt below.'

'It'll be okay!' Moji wanted to give her a hug. 'There's no way I'll let you be expelled.'

'You genuinely believe that, don't you?'

She shook her head and returned inside. But this time she didn't shut the door.

## [Table of Contents](#)

So, Moji skipped over the threshold. He eagerly glanced around, ready to absorb as much detail about her as possible. The more he knew, the better he could support.

She was in the kitchen, in the middle of cooking a meal. That was good! Cooking was one of the ways to help someone feel better. It smelled delicious. A stew? She retrieved a knife to resume chopping onions on the bench. He bounded up beside her with a swish of his robe ...

She whirled and held the blade to his neck. Moji squeaked and froze, not daring to move.

‘What would they do to me, you think, if I harmed one of their little leashed sympathies?’ she asked. ‘The Oranges would do more than just expel me, I believe.’ She put down the knife with a sigh.

Moji’s pulse raced. He felt dizzy, like he could fall over. That’d happened so quickly. But it didn’t seem like she actually wanted to hurt him. She was just the kind of person who said those things. He sensed that it’d been a joke ... just not a very funny one.

But it was good to know she liked jokes. Moji knew lots of jokes. Shakily he asked, ‘What do you give a sick lemon?’ — since it appeared to be her favourite fruit.

‘Does my answer need to be child-friendly?’ she asked, resuming her chopping. She was trying to get another rise out of him — Moji wasn’t ignorant of these things. He was simply too well trained to take her bait.

## Table of Contents

'Lemon-aid!' he said. She didn't laugh.

'I have others! What do you call a cat who eats lemons?' He answered before she could guess. 'A sourpuss! And what does the lemon say when it wants a hug? Give me a squeeze!' He was giggling before he could deliver the punchline.

She still wasn't laughing. Turning red, Moji cleared his throat and tried a new tact.

'What's your name?'

'I guess we're doing this. It's Carrie.'

'It's amazing to meet you, Carrie! My name is Moji—'

'I don't need your name, Lemon.'

'Why am I a lemon?'

She indicated to his bright yellow robes. 'Lemon. And your keepers are oranges.'

Oh. Now he got it. He liked this game. 'What are the masters in red?'

'Apples.'

'And the archmasters?'

Carrie turned to her benchtop and brought the knife down with a clean chop. The vegetable cleanly halved. 'Onions,' she mumbled, her expression darkening.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Moji giggled to ease the tension of her blasphemy. 'It's ironic! Because onions make people cry, and archmasters do the opposite!'

'Tell me, Lemon, who exactly will be responsible for the tears shed when I'm evicted from my home?'

'That's never happened to someone I've helped!'

It was time to halt this line of thinking. He glided around her bare home, judging Carrie not to be poor, but perhaps she didn't enjoy the keeping of things. All furniture was strictly functional, as were all objects: a clock, a dustpan, two empty wine bottles, a magnifier. No portraits displayed family or loved ones. The Arvore's vines crept in through window joins and the skylight. Their breath of greenery was the most joyful part of an otherwise transactional home.

'What troubles you, Carrie?'

'Aside from the lemon in my home? Why don't you tell me: divine it out.' She snuffed her stove fire and slumped in an armchair, watching Moji carefully beneath her wispy grey curls.

Very well. It shouldn't be too hard to sense any external causes to her troubles: people often left emotional residue on objects like sugary fingerprints after sweet cakes. Moji retrieved his wand, though he was hesitant to open himself back up to her. Carrie's emotions hadn't been a pleasant experience: all the more reason to fix her. He blurred the edges of his being only by a fraction and allowed his wand to twitch on his palm as he moved about the home.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘You don’t look upset,’ he said, hoping to get her talking.

‘What does upset look like?’

‘Most people show their pain. They cry, or their hands can’t keep still.’

Her folded palms were poised and calm. She sat on her armchair as if she were a judge in some high court. ‘Why are you so certain I’m miserable?’ she demanded. ‘I have my home. My health. I am satisfied in my work and my place in the world.’

‘I experienced your feelings. It was horrible. No one deserves to feel that way.’

Remembering it, he shivered.

Kneeling before a cabinet, he wiped off a dust layer and opened it.

‘The Division gives you the authority to snoop through my things, I suppose?’ Carrie muttered. Moji had been drilled to offer the same explanation to these sorts of queries.

‘As artificers of the Division, ours is empath magic. We can sense, locate and feel the emotions of others.’ He waited for his wand to turn. It guided him towards a leather-bound notebook inside the cabinet. He dug it out from the bottom of the stack.

‘Why not wave your stick, make me happy and be on your way?’ Carrie made a gesture Moji knew was lewd only because he’d seen tavern girls perform it to make each other giggle.

## [Table of Contents](#)

He flushed. 'I am only an acolyte. We seek and find. It is the masters and archmasters who are capable of manipulating the emotions of others.'

'Yet they'd still rather evict people from their tree.'

Moji ignored her comment, distracted by the book he'd opened. It appeared to be a diary. Beautiful handwriting scrawled every aged page, detailing daily activities, wishes, and regrets. It seemed right to handle it reverently. At the end of one entry, he read a name that was not Carrie's.

'Who is Aime?'

Carrie's answer was to stand, snatch the diary, and wallop him over the head with it.

'Ow!' he said. It didn't hurt, but he hadn't done anything wrong. As she said, the Division gave him every right to investigate. Especially if she wasn't forthcoming.

'Stop wasting time on diagnosis, Lemon. Get to prescription! No Apple or Onion will argue I wasn't cooperative with your efforts when they come to steal my home.'

Still open to her emotions, Moji caught her resignation and remorse. She didn't want to leave Arvoreström. It was obvious: Carrie loved the Arvore!

'You must be hopeful!' he said, standing. 'It's going to be okay. Together we'll make sure you don't go anywhere! Maybe I can't manipulate emotions with nether, but I am trained in every other way to soothe a

## [Table of Contents](#)

person's bad spirits.' He held her hands reassuringly. She stared at his touch like he'd forgotten to wash his hands after the lavatory.

'Alright, Lemon. Impress me. Make my troubles go away.' Her tone made it sound like a bet — one she was confident she'd win. Moji couldn't imagine she'd remain miserable just to prove a point. Of course she wanted to stay in her home, and all people wanted to be happy. She just seemed to genuinely doubt Moji could do it. So, he'd prove her wrong and they'd both win!

He bid her sit on the rug with him and asked her to describe what she touched; the coarse rug beneath them; the cool air blowing through the window. With her eyes shut, he asked her to describe the fluffy ball he retrieved from his pack. She called it, "soft and likely to amuse toddlers, like yourself."

They listened to the rustle of leaves and the cries of distant market spruiking. Clearly cheating and opening her eyes, she stopped Moji before he brought his flute to his lips to play.

But Moji wasn't deterred. When people didn't want to talk about their problems, they usually responded to distraction. He helped her clean and rearrange the furniture. This was accompanied by "packing" jokes in anticipation of her eviction. Not wanting her to dwell on that, he guided her through meditations and breathing exercises, before he realised she'd started to nap.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Carrie sang with him, “the leaves that sway at midnight” but ridiculed her own off-key notes. She mocked her own pink oval drawing that was supposed to be a pig. She complimented Moji’s fish, but told him a “canary would’ve been more appropriate. Or bumblebee.”

She was funny. Her jokes were harmless and they made Moji smile. But she didn’t seem to like that he’d grown to accept the nickname she’d given him. She wanted him to dislike it. The more he smiled, the more that appeared to annoy her. Which was the opposite of what he wanted.

Moji could tell she was trying. Yet, her emotions weren’t shifting. He was terrified of the pit that welled inside of her. He’d never met someone who joked so much, yet resonated so much pain. As the sun passed from the east to western branch, Carrie offered an apology of sorts.

‘No need to waste more energy, little lemon. Your overseers won’t punish you for doing your best. I’d have left the Arvore one day, either by eviction or lowered to the ground in a person-sized box. No point moaning that it’s come so soon.’

Moji’s heart galloped. ‘I won’t give up on you! I still have more things we can do. You’ll try them with me, won’t you?’

With a sigh, she nodded.

Pens and paper, then. Their affirmations list started on rocky ground.

‘I will strive to be as the world wants me to be,’ Carrie said.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘You can do better!’ he encouraged. ‘More positive, like, “I am worthy of happiness.”’

‘Worthy of happiness, but not a home,’ she said.

‘You are worthy of a home!’ Moji said, hands on hips. ‘That’s why I’m here!’

‘No, you’re here to protect your tree.’

‘It’s the same thing! Making you happy makes the Arvore happy! I just haven’t worked you out yet!’ He was pacing, certain he could do it. He just needed more time.

‘I never asked for your help. Just as I’m sure the Arvore never asked for the Division.’

‘She didn’t need to — she’s our home. We love her. It’s our duty to protect her, without prompting. We do it because we care.’

‘The Arvore was around for centuries before the Division,’ Carrie said. ‘And she’ll be around for centuries after we’re long gone.’

‘But she’s changing,’ Moji whispered. ‘We cannot let that happen. Don’t you love your home? When I’m sad, I count the things I am grateful for.’ Moji knelt at her feet. ‘You don’t have it so bad. It’ll be worse if you leave. People elsewhere have it so much worse than we do.’

Carrie stared at the blank affirmations page, features tight.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Let me test you again,’ he said. ‘Surely we’ve made progress. If I test you now, I can declare your happiness levels suitable to remain in Arvoreström. You’ll see.’

Resigned, Carrie held out her hand for Moji to grasp. He breathed in her emotions, and like poisonous insects they burrowed beneath his skin. Disdain. Weariness. Like a dog, beaten for far too long. Numb to what should have worked. Empty. No love to give.

Moji dragged himself away from Carrie, trembling — she hadn’t changed at all?

She met his eyes. ‘I felt this way before I met Aime. It never changed, even in her arms. She’s gone and it’s still the same. What you sense is simply how I am, Lemon.’

He shook his head. ‘Then it’s just in your mind! This means you can let it go, like I do! When I have a negative emotion, I breathe it away! Whatever you’re feeling will pass, you have to trust in that. Please, Carrie ... you just need to try harder ...’

‘I have tried. Believe me.’

And he did. But he refused to accept it. To give up would mean he’d failed. It’d mean Carrie would lose her home, all because he wasn’t good enough, all because the Arvore hadn’t given him bark and never would and that’d be so awful he couldn’t bear it—

His face was flush, his eyes hot ...

## [Table of Contents](#)

Moji pressed his palms to his chest. His breathing stilled. He felt the Arvore's gentle sway, measured in lifetimes.

'What are you doing?' Carrie asked.

'Exactly what I'm asking you to do,' he said. 'I let it go. Because I didn't want to cry.'

'Have you ever cried, Lemon?'

He lifted his chin with pride. 'No, never. And I never will. I'll never hurt the Arvore.'

Carrie's expression was as hard as stone.

'Then the Division has made a little monster of you,' she said. 'Diviners of emotion? No, they seek what all men seek. Power. They claim the Arvore's nether for themselves.'

'That's not true! We love the Arvore. It's people like you who are hurting her! Why can't everyone just be happy? We have to help, because your emotions are selfish!'

Carrie's gaze weighed him. She stood, and when she spoke, her voice was low.

'Your organisation would rather see sad people dead and shuffled out of sight than lose grip on their seat of power. You serve evil masters, little lemon. It's time you wake up to that.'

'No!'

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘No? Then why don’t you *try harder* to help me? You’ve failed and I will be the one punished. What is the point of you? You’re useless. Get out of my home, while it is still mine, and leave me to my misery.’

She was crying steady, rolling streaks, as she pointed at the door.

Before he could burst into tears, Moji fled her home.

\* \* \*

Moji wouldn’t cry. Moji wasn’t selfish. He loved the Arvore and offered her only the happiest of emotions. He was a good diviner; the best. So, he’d written down what needed to be recorded.

Feeling as threadbare as a wrung dishcloth, Moji climbed the steps which coiled the outskirts of the main trunk. He pulled his hood down tight against the wind. It was night, and the soft glow of lanterns swung from ornate hooks lovingly integrated into the bark. He passed the sanctuary and its hanging baskets where Division acolytes made their homes.

But Moji wanted to be alone.

He sought a small crevasse that only he knew of. He’d found it during a storm, when he’d stayed out in the winds too long and had missed the last elevator down. At risk of being blown from his city, Moji had closed his eyes and let the tree guide him to safety.

And she’d answered.

## [Table of Contents](#)

He slid through the gap into his tiny oasis. On hands and knees, he touched his forehead to the bark. Love and welcome pressed back — like a gentle hug that told him everything was okay. It was hard to believe that the Arvore was as emotionally malnourished as the Division said: but he'd witnessed himself their failure to measure her happiness to the correct levels.

The Arvore was changing, and someone like Carrie would only make it worse. As it was Moji's duty to prevent that, he'd written and submitted his report. His journeymen would read of his failure and enact next steps at first light. Carrie would lose her home. Sent to the ground, she'd never be allowed to return. That seemed a fate worse than ...

All because he wasn't as good as he thought. No wonder the Arvore hadn't blessed him with her bark. He didn't deserve it.

*What am I doing?* Moji tore himself away from his commune with the tree before any more of his negative emotions could seep through. All his humiliation and guilt — he was feeding it to her.

With his eyes squeezed shut and his fists shaking in his lap, Moji waited for his emotions to go away. But maybe they wouldn't. That's how Carrie had described hers. Always a part of her.

Distant bird song and encroaching warmth told of daybreak. Moji would be humiliated if the other suns sensed his emotions now. They wouldn't allow him anywhere near the sanctuary in this state. He'd be an embarrassment; little Moji, who always spoke of his bark but would never

## [Table of Contents](#)

be good enough to earn it. The right thing, he knew, would be to take his bad emotions far away. That's why the journeymen evicted citizens, after all. Moji wasn't better than them: if he couldn't control his emotions than he needed to leave as well. He'd do it if he truly loved the Arvore.

Moji would do it, because unlike others, he wasn't selfish.

Not wanting to wake the other sleeping diviners, he climbed from the crevasse and to his hanging basket. Quickly, he removed the happiness tools from his pack and shoved in his barest travel belongings instead. He should leave the wand behind. But couldn't bring himself to do it.

As sunrise crept above the horizon, and before the other little suns could rise, Moji scurried to the elevator platforms, his yellow hood pulled down low.

Moji asked the bellman operating the elevator pulley to take him all the way to the ground. The man gave him an odd look, but soon obeyed, and down and down they rattled. For one last time, Moji listened to the sounds of waking families inside their teetering cubby houses; smelled their early baking bread; and absorbed the sight of the crisp green leaves when dipped in morning dew.

Moji did not cry. It was the least he could do to thank the Arvore for the unconditional love she'd offered him his entire life.

With a *thud*, the platform settled on the scaffolding at the base of the tree. Moji settled his pack beneath his cone-shaped cloak, grasped the

## [Table of Contents](#)

wand in his sleeve, and slowly descended the scaffolding steps. Each footfall descended with a tap, tap, tap.

Holding his breath, he stepped onto soft soil. He stood for a second, wobbling on the uneasy sensation of solid, unmoving ground. If sailors from the floating cities spoke of sea legs, then those who lived in Arvoreström had tree legs. They could spend their entire lives unaware of the Arvore's sway, until confronted with the hollow sensation of standing on something that wasn't alive.

He hated it, but he had no choice. He cared too much to stay.

So why couldn't he make his legs take another step?

'Lemon?'

At her voice, Moji spun.

Carrie alighted from the elevator. She was saddled with her own packs for travel. An entire life, reduced to what could be carried on her back. Chin high, it was clear she was leaving of her own volition before any Oranges could evict her.

'Carrie—' and his voice broke. He broke. Shuddering gasps choked his attempt to say he was sorry. Sorry that he'd failed to end her sadness; that he'd sought her out; that he'd ever been found by the masters and been born a sympath and taken from his family ...

He pressed his hands to his mouth to muffle his cry. It sounded so strange to his ears. An irrational part of him was desperate for someone to

## [Table of Contents](#)

help him. Something was terribly wrong with him. Touching his cheeks, his fingers came away wet. His eyes were hot and they stung and his vision was blurry. On his lips he tasted salt.

Carrie's eyes were wide. She was alarmed by whatever she saw; he could sense it. Whatever disgrace he was making of himself, it had her stunned.

'Don't look at me,' he squeaked, whirling and tugging his yellow hood down so no one could see his face. No one at the base of Arvoreström could be allowed to spread the tale of a crying diviner. He'd undermine the reputation of the entire Division. Why couldn't he do anything right?

'Those tears don't shame you, Lemon,' Carrie said. She stepped onto the soil beside him. 'Shed them as autumn sheds its leaves.'

'No, they're bad! The Arvore—'

'Just as these tears won't drown you, they won't drown our tree.'  
Carrie knelt, tugged off his hood and brushed back his curls. 'Where are you going, little one?'

'Away! I can't go back. I'll turn her bad!'

'You want to know a secret?' Carrie asked. 'You don't have to be happy all the time. Life sees us through the good and the bad. There's no need to torture ourselves with how we should feel. Sometimes it's enough just to feel at all. That's something I'm grateful for. Life has given me a lot of emotions, and I experience all of them. Don't be ashamed or frightened by

## [Table of Contents](#)

what you feel. They are not the enemy, and experiencing them does not mean you have failed. It's not the Arvore who chases us from our home.' Carrie spared a look for the expanse of branches above.

What she was saying didn't make any sense.

'I just ...' he breathed, interrupted by his own hiccups. His cheeks burned with his inability to string a sentence together in front of her. 'I just wanted to be good.'

She hugged him. A fierce hug, like one his own mother might have given him, if he could remember her. He hugged back as hard as he could. He was sure he was getting snot on her clothes.

'You are good, Moji. All of you is good. Emotions do not deserve our value judgements. Nor will they form my judgement of you.'

It was too much. Opening to sensation, he was overwhelmed by kindness and love. It radiated not just from the roots of the Arvore, but from Carrie as well. The last person in all of Netherün who'd reason to be nice to him. Where was her bitterness now? He knew it was there, inside her, but it was not aimed at him.

Carrie stood and straightened her pack.

'Would you like someone to walk with, Lemon?' she asked and held out her hand.

## [Table of Contents](#)

The silent tears that welled next were not tainted by his shame or his guilt. These were warm tears. Grateful tears. He gave them freely to the Arvore's soil.

Moji wrapped his hands in hers and they turned their feet west, to follow the Arvore's leagues of shadow across hills and forest. Maybe somewhere among them was a tree just as lovely. Maybe they'd even find somewhere new to call home.

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

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## *Lock and Keystone* by Tace Samoset

[Content Warnings](#) | [Pronunciation & World Guide](#)

Asa ran his thumb along the edge of his bolt cutters. Smooth as glass, free of nicks, sharp enough to cut Rose's hair ... or slice through steel like butter. He hooked the bottom jaw blade under the lock shackle and sank his weight onto the handle. A squeeze and groan of metal on metal, the silky sound of it giving way, and the shank split open. The lock fell, wobbling through the air until it hit the swirl of water far below. Asa slid his bolt cutters back into his belt and leaned on the railing of the towering bridge at the heart of Keystone.

He tugged up a scarf, hidden beneath the collar of his street sweeper garb, and breathed in its redness. An old woman shuffled past, and he tucked it away before gripping his trolley of brooms and trundling off.

'Ye missed one!'

Asa turned. A shaggy-haired urchin crouched in the shadow of the Wellmind Temple. His thin, grimy finger pointed at the massive lock Asa had left behind.

'I was told to make room,' Asa said, nodding at the railing. Lovers spent good coin adorning the bridge with locks. Especially here in North Keystone. 'I did as I was told. I made room.'

'Aye, but you left that one.'

## [Table of Contents](#)



Image Description: A man dressed in workman's clothes uses a bolt cutter to cut a padlock off a bridge railing. There is one remaining padlock that he has left uncut.

Asa fisted the handle of his trolley. He took in a breath and let it out slowly, then looked the boy over. He was just a child. What would he know? Everything about him was in a sorry state. Matted hair. Ragged shirt. Scuffed britches. Even his eyes held a broken look. A South Keystone kid for certain. Asa patted his back pocket. It was late in the day and his bread was gone.

Bread. Don't forget bread.

'What's your name, boy?'

## [Table of Contents](#)

The child eyed him from under his mane of hair. ‘What does it matter?’ He wiped the back of his arm across his nose and sniffed. ‘Your cutters ain’t good enough to get through pure azinth, that’s why.’

Asa pulled out one of his last two shucks and held his palm open for the boy. The child crept forward like a beaten dog, snatched the coin and stowed it in his mouth before slinking away on all fours.

‘There’s not a strip of metal this side of the wilds my cutters can’t slice through,’ he said to no one in-particular before trundling past the window boxes and brightly coloured shops lining both sides of Keystone’s North Bridge.

Four bridges made up the town. They spanned like arms, pointing out the four directions of a compass over the massive wellspring the town sprawled around.

The folk at the end of the northern and southern ends of Keystone bridge weren’t known for their work. The North because they didn’t need to, the South because they couldn’t get any. East Keystone brimmed with fishing folk. Pulleys down to the water were fixed to the bridge, nets dried on the railings, and fish scales littered the streets. The West Bridge, where Asa trundled on his way home, smelled of burnt ore and dross. Soot stained the cobblestones, had baked into the bricks and buried itself in the foreheads and eye-creases of the grizzled folk he walked past. By the end of each day, they looked more like soot sculptures than men and women. But no one mocked a metalsmith. They wore that soot with the hard-won

## [Table of Contents](#)

pride of those who had made themselves and forged their town and its bridge as well.

Some even believed Keystone metal to be enchanted with greater shine and strength than that found anywhere, and those who worked at the forge took the craft in dead earnest. All dreamed of one day being admitted to the guild of metal makers. But the guild-master was rarely seen in Keystone, and admittance was hardly heard of nowadays. What the smithy folk did hear, and all too often, was that work which at one time would have gone to them, had been co-opted by Mr Locke and his nether factory.

Asa knew what it meant to dig up the earth and discover a seam of metal. He knew the satisfaction of watching the stones bleed gold or silver in the furnace, of scraping away the dross and watching the shining bands of malleable strength cool to the point he could bend them to his will. He pulled his cap low over his brow and nodded to the blackened men he wandered past.

He was a man hard done by, and they knew it. The eyes following him saw his shoulders hunch as he walked by the last smithy on the street. Old Sanders tapped at the point of an awl, but his rhythm fell out of time as Asa rattled past. Those watching knew why.

The white-haired man once had two apprentices. One pure ore; the other dross. Everyone else seemed to know what young Asa hadn't, as he bent from dawn until dusk over the old man's forge; when it came to full employment—Sanders never had a choice. Even if work turned sour, he would never turn his son out of the smithy in favour of keeping Asa.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Young Sanders slouched against the side of the forge, and as Asa passed, spat into the street. Asa ignored him, hooking a thumb around his bolt cutters. They gleamed like a dagger in his belt.

None of the forge folk knew just how long Asa had smithy'd them. Some said he had tempered and cooled them so slow he hadn't slept for a week. If it was true, Asa never told. Respect. That was what he saw in the whites of their eyes and their pushed back caps. But respect didn't put butter on his bread, nor jam on Rose's.

Bread. He sighed out a lungful of air. Rose had wound her scarf around his neck that morning to prompt him. Still, he'd almost forgotten. The scarf didn't remind him of bread, only of her.

All day long now, he swept streets; cleaned signs; replaced faulty balustrades; chiselled rust off bridge struts and cleared away dead vermin from gutters. Occasionally, he persuaded some poor soul, usually from South Keystone, from flinging themselves off the railings into the watery abyss below. But this was rare excitement. Most days, he gave his strength and skill over to the polishing of someone else's metal work. When evening came, the tolling of the bell would ring through him and wipe another day of life clean out of him.

He stopped by the bread shop that divided the West from the South. Bertha, who owned the shop, always struck Asa as a woman who belonged among the forge folk. She wrangled her fire and pulled bread out of it, just as they did metal. He trudged up the three steps to find her wiping crumbs off the worn shop bench. He nodded at the last baleful loaf.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Not good enough for his Rose.

He put down his last iron shuck, worn smooth, minted too long ago to remember its shiny days. Just like the town.

Bertha paused, looking at the loaf. 'Give me a moment, Asa.' She took it off the shelf and slotted it in the oven.

He knew Bertha; she'd make it worth his while. Asa ran his fingers over the door hinges, felt their quiet strength, and waited.

The smell of warm bread filled the dingy room and Bertha tapped the newly heated loaf out on the bench. 'For Rose.'

Asa wrapped the bread in Rose's scarf and, after tipping his cap, carried it out in the crook of his arm.

Everyone in West Keystone knew Rose. Knew her wink, knew her laugh, knew how a boy without family or name or a shuck to call his own, had won her out of the arms of Young Sanders with only the skill he had with metal and the full heart he poured into it so he could hand it over to her.

The spray of ferns he'd filigreed out of bronze scrap and left on her doorstep now sat on the shelf over their hearth, the silver blue jay he'd hammered into life and left on her window ledge now perched on the stool by their bed, and the gold he'd searched out of the river mud and forged into a ring, now lived on her finger.

## [Table of Contents](#)

He didn't speak of much; she would say, but what he made from metal—sang. He polished her words over in his head while he swept the streets past the smithies.

The sun dipped past the totter of houses that crowded out most of the bridge. He paused at his corner. This was where the window boxes of West Keystone ended, and the mean grey sprawl of South Keystone began. If only he could give Rose a window box. Of course, she deserved trees and birds and a brightly painted home and a view of the river like she'd once had in North Keystone. He plucked a single geranium out of the last flower box and twirled it between his fingers as he trundled down the dingy lane.

He was only half-way when she burst out their door and slapped up the cobblestones barefooted. Would he ever get used to her blushing, warm, nutmeg-rush? She'd kissed him, stolen his cap, slapped it on her own head, put the geranium behind his ear and was cradling the bread in her own arm, while gushing about the warm-bread smell, before he'd even mumbled a word of greeting.

His Rose. His lovely Rose.

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They ate the bread by the light of the fire with their chairs pulled up close. The flames danced over her face and glowed in her eyes.

'You should have jam on your bread,' he said when she dusted her crumbs into the fire.

## [Table of Contents](#)

She shrugged. 'I don't want jam.' She didn't say what once had slipped from her lips, that she 'had him, instead.'

He'd so collapsed into himself after hearing it, he'd hardly been able to kiss her back.

Choosing him shouldn't have meant choosing poverty. By rights, it should have meant a window box, fresh paint on a house in West Keystone and jam on her bread. Any metalsmith could have given that to his bride.

Her ring clinked against the tin cup she hugged in both hands. He'd only just polished the gold and put it still warm in his pocket when Old Sanders had given him the hard word. Work was short. The old man had space enough for one other in his smithy. A space just big enough for Young Sanders to loiter in and while-away useless hours brooding over how he'd lost Rose to Asa while his aged father cracked out ore and worked the forge alone.

So, Asa took the only opening he could find. Sweeping streets. He cleared away the town's dross and tried to make it shine. Pointless effort. The entire town should have been thrown into the fire and recast with a new die. Whatever had once made it; the ore, the iron, the silver, now had tarnished or turned to rust. But no one gave him a say, nor cared what he thought.

He set off every morning with a thick slice of bread in his back pocket and his cap pulled low over his eyes and the iron in his blood pricking his pride into full heat. Of an evening, as he turned for home, he would wipe a

## [Table of Contents](#)

hand across his brow and the cap would sit further back on his head waiting for the moment Rose would swipe it from him, steal the geranium from his hand, and a kiss from his lips.

The days shortened and turned cold. He begged Rose not to run onto the street. She never cared to put her boots on first. Now he walked up his dingy street alone, waiting for when she'd pull him in at the door and kiss him against their wall instead.

Winter came and Asa sliced through more cheap locks and watched them fall into the water. He knelt to look at the big lock hanging from the base of the railing. Someone had sliced a niche into its shackle. He ran his thumb over the metal and felt the cool, crisp wound.

'Yon smithy did that.'

Asa squinted into the shadows of the Wellmind Temple. It was the boy again. 'Hello, old friend.'

'Am neither old, nor a friend.'

Asa pushed back his cap. 'Who'd ye say did this?'

'Yon smithy, with fresh-fired cutters. Had a gaggle of fellows come watch 'im try, said 'e wanted to show 'em what 'e could do before the guild master comes. They left just before ye came.'

'The guild master is coming?'

'So they say.'

## [Table of Contents](#)

'Well,' Asa grimaced down at the lock, 'yon smithy failed, it seems.'

The child snorted. 'Cutters fell to pieces in 'is hands. Almost looked like 'e would fling himself off the bridge 'e was so 'umiliated.'

'Glad he didn't.'

'Kicked his broken cutters into the water though and stomped off instead, with them fellows sniggering at 'im as 'e did.'

Asa felt in his back pocket. It was empty of bread and coin. 'I'm sorry, I've nothing to give you.'

The child growled. 'What do you think I am? A beggar's dog? I'm not, I tell you. Leastways, not today.' With that, he scuttled along the shadowed side of the bridge and disappeared into the streets beyond it.

Asa frowned at the niche in the lock shackle until the evening bell tolled and broke him out of it.

Something was wrong when he got home. Rose didn't pull him through the door or kiss him. She was pale and trembling and asked Asa to hold her, then she whispered something in his ear that turned him pale as well.

He raked through the house and found all their hidden coins. Rose held out the copper spray of ferns and the little silver bird and, after begging him to take them, Asa snatched them up and ran across town to a cheap artificer.

## [Table of Contents](#)

The dusty man behind the counter peered through his lens at the bird and the fern spray for what felt like a quarter-of-an-hour and, after pocketing both along with all Asa's coins, he sniffed. 'I can give you a half-portion. You can't afford the full dose.'

And no amount of promises to work and pay it back, or wringing of his cap, would shift the old man to pity. In the end, Asa slid the small vial of white powder into his pocket and ran home to find Rose wide-eyed and shivering before an empty fireplace.

They mixed the powder with milk in her cup and she swallowed it down and waited.

In the end, it didn't matter. By the early hours of morning, they'd lost their baby just the same.

Asa and Rose lay on their bed all day, silent and staring at the paint curling off the ceiling. Rose chided herself for being too flighty; Asa, for not being able to afford the full dose.

That afternoon, as the bell tolled, Asa thundered downstairs and out the door. He took all his brooms to the edge of the bridge, where he snapped them to pieces and flung them off.

Rose sobbed when he told her what he'd done. And the next morning he paid for new brooms on trust, and they'd lived without milk for two weeks to pay them off.

## [Table of Contents](#)

That endure the geraniums stopped blooming in the window boxes and when dewgrass came, Asa, heavy with the tolling of the bell and the passing of another day, forgot to pick them. When he came in the door of an evening, Rose looked for one in his hand and when she found nothing, forgot to push him up against the wall and kiss him.

The empty space in his hand, the empty space between them; each noticed the other and didn't know why.

Time passed and Rose's eyes seemed more often red and raw when he came home. Her skin looked sallow and her arms thin. If only he could give her better bread, butter and jam like she'd once had in North Keystone.

She noticed he lived with his cap rammed down hard, only pulling it off as he came in the door to wring it in his hands while he watched her.

Then there were days when she didn't have the strength to get out of bed. Asa would knock at the front door at the end of his working day and she would tiptoe to the window and drop the key from it, before collapsing back into bed.

He would find the fireplace bare, and the floor ash blown. He swept his boards clean, like the streets outside, and set the fireplace in order, remembering the way the flames looked in her brown eyes with her tin cup clasped in her hands and her ring tapping against it when she moved.

He fisted his hands on his knees. Something had to be done.

## [Table of Contents](#)

The next day before work, he went early to the forges of West Bridge and just as they were stoking up the fires, cap twisted in his hands, he begged for work. He went to every single one of them, except Old Sanders. He couldn't stand the look of victory he'd find in Young Sander's eyes.

They all said the same thing. Work was light. If things turned, they'd send word. He was an anvil and their words hammer blows. He slunk back to his trolley.

'Wait. Asa, wait!'

He squinted back. Bruno was striding out onto the road. 'Like I said, I've no work for you, but there's word the guild master is coming and wants to see talent. He's an opening that needs filling.'

'Every single one of you will want it,' Asa said. 'What chance have I, without a forge of my own?'

Bruno clasped Asa's shoulder with a soot-stained hand. 'You're wrong, man. The opening will take you and yours away from Keystone. Few here with hearth and forge will want that. Think about it. You've skill, I'll speak for it.'

Asa blinked. The words he meant to say had stuck somewhere between the ache in his chest and the dryness in his throat. All he could manage was a bare-headed nod as he backed away. Asa swept the streets and waited. But tosamne came and went without any word of the guildmaster.

## [Table of Contents](#)

It was late harvest, and Asa stood at the door at the top of their stairs. Rose was lying in bed, her face turned to the window. The light lay across her in red tides that ebbed and flowed with the slight shifting of the curtains. Her hand lay on the bedsheet like it belonged to a bird. Curled. Dry. Thin.

Perhaps he'd sighed at the sight of it, for she turned at the sound.

He shuffled in and sat on the stool beside the bed, and she lay her cool hand on his.

'You caught me musing,' she murmured.

'Did I?'

'I used to watch how the light changed over the rooftops, but of late I've been staring at that tiny space on South Bridge.'

'Why that?'

'I hope to see you passing by it on your way home.'

'I come by West Bridge. You'll not see me pass there.'

'I know. But forgive my strange notions, I keep hoping you would, like it mattered.'

'Do you wish me to go there now? If you want to see me, I can linger there.'

She squeezed his hand with the tiny strength in hers. 'And be separated from you when you are right by me now? Never.' Her smile

## [Table of Contents](#)

faded and she turned back to the window. 'But that space on South Bridge haunts me all the same.'

'Why?'

'I never told you, but I had some odd sense akin to it, with my pretty view of North Bridge before I knew you. Every evening I'd peer through my curtains, stare at the railings and the swirl of water far below and wonder what would come of my strange obsession with the view, and then you walked by with some metal beauty to leave on my doorstep.'

Asa smiled. 'And your window-ledge.'

'And my finger.'

Asa paused and stared at her. 'And the lock.'

'Yes. I never breathed a word of my notions, I confess they embarrassed me, and yet where did you hang that lock, except on that exact North Bridge railing? See how my fancies come to pass?'

He stared out the window at the dilapidation of roofs and broken chimneys making up South Keystone and the lonely glimpse of the bridge where it met the dank side of the town. He shivered. 'I wish you had a better view. I can't see any pleasant notions coming from South Bridge.'

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It was the dead of endur and for weeks now, he'd watched how she grew more and more pale as she stared out their window. All that day, he'd

## [Table of Contents](#)

been thinking of what to say. But words were difficult things. They trickled in different directions from those he wished to cast for them. All the same, he'd heard nothing from Bruno, and something needed to be done.

'Rose?' he whispered as he sat beside her.

She lifted her bird-thin hand to put it on his thick, calloused one.

All he felt was the coolness of her fingers. He couldn't forge the words he needed with their chill in his head, so he pulled his hand away and wrapped his fingers around his sturdy knees for support. 'I've been thinking you should spend time back with your mother and father.'

Her lips turned grey. 'You don't wish me here ... with you?'

He frowned. Words were as dangerous as liquid metal. 'That's not what I'm saying.'

Her hand clutched at the space on the sheet where his hand had been. 'What are you saying?'

'I want you where you'll get the bread and the milk and jam you need to mend. And a different view of Keystone away from that—' he bit back the hot, foul words he had for the southern bridge.

'But they cast me off, Asa. You know that.'

He shook his head and clamped his hands around his knees. His veins ran like seams of ore up and down his arms. And then, as though the words inside him had begun heating the day he lost his place at the forge,

## [Table of Contents](#)

only to melt as he watched his bride eat dry bread on their wedding night, and finally turn molten when they buried their half-formed baby under a loose flagstone behind the slum-dump they called a home—out they all poured. ‘I can’t watch you wither in my hands. It hurts me, Rose.’

Her eyes grew wide, so wide he could have fallen into them. She blinked and her head sank back on her pillow.

‘Rose?’ He knelt on the bed and took hold of both her shoulders. His words were burning through and turning her to ash.

‘I’m hurting you,’ she murmured to the curls of paint hanging from the ceiling.

‘That is not what I meant,’ he moaned. She was so close to crumbling to dust and blowing out of his hands.

She didn’t move, and Asa leaned forward and gently kissed her half-closed eyelids.

Her cool fingers found his lips and she gazed out the window. ‘I know how to make your hurting stop.’

He snatched the curtains shut on the dusky red light and thundered downstairs to pace up and down the dingy street and glare at the glimpse of bridge between the houses.

Folk heading early to work the next morning found him already sweeping the streets like he’d been at it all night.

## [Table of Contents](#)

It was sometime past midday that Asa felt the change. Like a shift in the weather, the realisation came gradually. Folk didn't drag themselves along the street as they usually did. Small groups gathered and whispered and scattered again. There was a crackle in the air like that after lighting. He felt it and kept on sweeping.

It was at the fourth tolling of the bell that Bruno slapped his heavy hand on him and swung him round. 'He's here, Asa. The guild master.'

It took Asa longer than usual to pack up his brooms and trundle along behind the blacksmith, but as soon as they turned the corner Asa saw it was to the smith quarter that the crowds had blown like leaves in harvest. Bruno pulled him past the throng until they could both see the man.

The guild master stood draped in a purple cloak, looking down on the crowd from an upturned barrow. He didn't look like a metal man. His features were small, fine-boned and his beard manicured rather than singed. But something in his eyes told that he was not one to be countered. He raised his hand and quiet settled.

'All those who wish to be part of my guild need to show me their skill. Keystone boasts the best metal workers this side of the wilds, but anyone can boast. We all know how much dross needs scooping off before you find the true glow beneath. I don't test twice. If you pass what I set, I'll consider admitting you. You'll start next dewgrass in my metal works. Where are the willing?'

## [Table of Contents](#)

Two apprentices stepped forward. The guild master looked them over. Young Sanders stepped up and hooked his thumbs through his leather smith apron.

Bruno shoved Asa forward.

'I don't have a forge,' Asa hissed at him. 'How will I—?'

It was the guild master who answered. 'Who said you needed one, street-sweeper? I look for skill. Have any of that?' The man's gaze slid down Asa's face to the bolt cutters in his belt. 'They your work?'

Asa nodded.

The man sniffed and turned to the crowd. 'This, all Keystone has to offer me?'

No one shifted.

'Fine, you all,' he nodded at Young Sanders and the apprentices, 'bring your forged tools and follow.'

The crowd rumbled after the man in purple who strode past the smithies onto West Bridge. They carried Asa along like a twig in a stream past the Wellmind Temple and left onto North Bridge.

The guild master stopped at the clutter of locks littering the railing. He pointed at one apprentice. 'Clear them.'

The boy flushed and pulled out his cutters. The youth was little more than a boy. Asa dropped his eyes to stare at the cobblestones and, after a

## [Table of Contents](#)

moment of waiting, felt sniggers pass through the crowd. It was over then, poor boy.

‘Shame.’ Nothing in the guild master’s voice suggested he meant it. ‘Next.’

The second apprentice stepped up and the crowd leaned forward. Asa kept his face down. The scrutiny was cruel. The older boy managed three locks. The cutters seized on the fourth, and the boy had the grace to step back and bow out.

Young Sanders sniffed and sauntered past him. The crowd watched as he clamped through shackle after shackle until the railings hung smooth and clear, all except for one lock. Asa stared at it and then at Sanders as he hooked the bolt cutter’s jaw under the shackle and leaned into it. Asa felt the breath catch in his chest as he waited. The groan of metal and ... Sanders swore and leaned in again until the sweat gathered on his forehead and slid down his quivering cheek. Sanders tried six times after the crowd had given up on him and had begun to talk and size up Asa. It was the guild master who put a stop to it.

Asa stepped up to the railing. He frowned at the lock. A deep groove marred the shackle.

He remembered the days of gathering and heating, remembered the tart smell of the ore baking in the forge, and the moment the earth gave way and metal soaked out. He remembered every hour of making the cast, the moulding and dying and fitting the pieces together. He remembered

## [Table of Contents](#)

how it felt to have it heavy and cool in his hand, with the key in his pocket and the promise in his chest.

There were no more locks on the bridge, except for his. He fingered his cutters and tugged them out of his belt. The crowd waited. He stepped up to the bridge and hooked the jaw around the thick bar of railing and clamped through it. He clamped through another part of the railing, thicker than two of his fingers joined together. It snapped away from the bridge and fell into the swirl of water far below.

The crowd sighed, and he looked up at the guild master. The man in the purple robe stared at him, a peculiar expression, almost like hunger, on his face.

Someone jeered. Young Sanders.

‘He can’t do it!’ he said. ‘The street sweeper can cut our bridge apart, bit by bit, but he’ll never slice through that lock. That’s the truth of it.’

The crowd murmured, and the expression on the guild master’s face flickered. ‘Go on then. What’s stopping you?’

Asa looked at the lock. What was stopping him? Words. Pure gold words that he could only speak to Rose and were too precious to be scattered in the street among strangers who would stare and mock and jeer at them.

‘Don’t you want a place at my forge?’ the man in purple asked.

## [Table of Contents](#)

The crowd bled together in front of his eyes. The leaning in, the whispering, the pointing. The guild master's purple ran into the soot-stained leather of Sander's apron, which morphed with Bruno which swam through with a glimpse of his tiny dead baby and Rose's ashen face and her bird-claw hand on the bed sheets.

'Or perhaps your cutters ain't good enough?' Sanders said.

The bell tolled through him. Another day gone.

*There's not a strip of metal this side of the wilds my cutters can't slice through.* Asa hooked the jaw of his cutters under the shackle and leaned into the metal with all his weight, all his pride, and all his strength. The slip-grind of metal on metal and the shackle fell apart and dropped from the bridge.

It wasn't the crowd cheering that Asa heard. Instead, a wail burst inside his head and an appalling lightness came over him, like all the iron in his blood had slipped away and fallen with the shackle. For a hideous moment, Asa clung to the railing as though his life threatened to lift out of his body and float away.

It was Bruno, slapping him on the shoulder and pulling him into his strong-man's chest that cleared Asa's head.

The guild master smiled and flicked a coin through the air and into Asa's hand. Fresh minted shine. 'See you, come dewgrass.'

## [Table of Contents](#)

The crowd of strangers slapped his back and wandered away until he was left with his coin, his bolt cutters and the trolley of brooms. He stood and stared at them, not knowing what to do. In the end, he pulled the trolley along behind him. Something about the awful lightness that hovered in his chest made the handle something he needed to keep a grip on.

He'd passed the West Keystone forges when he first noticed it. Different clusters of people huddled together, whispering. Some of them pointed to him. He dipped his cap and kept walking. No doubt they'd been in the crowd.

But as he came to the edge of South Keystone, the whispering and pointing came with a shaking of heads and a turning away and the hideous lightness came over him again.

He was almost home when he remembered the bread and trudged up the three stairs into Bertha's shop.

He held the door open for two women carrying loaves, who brushed past without seeing him.

One murmured, 'And no one could stop her?'

'Seems not. She slipped away just as the bell tolled,' came the other.

'Poor soul.'

Bertha stood at the bread counter with the cloth in her hand, staring at the untouched crumbs on the bench. She stood unmoving, as though forgetful of what she was about.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Bertha?’ Asa asked.

She stepped back and covered her mouth at the sight of him.

Asa reached across the bench and steadied her arm. ‘You well?’

She dropped her hand. ‘Have you heard?’

‘Of the guild master?’ Asa pulled out the burnished coin and felt its newness between his fingers. ‘I have. He’s given me a place in the guild. Things are turning round for me, for me and Rose.’

‘Rose—’ Bertha blinked and turned away. After a long moment, she pulled her face into an expression of such fierce control that Asa gripped the bench to fight the lightness again.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked

She looked down at the crumbs. ‘There was a fall. From South Bridge. Nothing could be done—’ she grimaced and swept them away with her cloth.

‘I’m sorry,’ Asa murmured. ‘Did you know ‘em?’

‘What is it you want?’ Bertha said.

‘Bread... and jam, if ye have any. For Rose.’

Bertha pulled down a loaf, a small pat of butter, and a tin of jam. ‘For Rose,’ she whispered.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Asa slid the new coin towards her across the bench, but she stopped him and pushed it back. 'Not today,' she whispered.

Those who remember seeing him, said they watched Asa walk down the three steps where he stood still as ironstone, looking down at a coin in one hand and the jam in the other. Then, after a long moment, he dropped both and began running, running as though the world was slipping out from under his feet.

Others say they saw him at his door, knocking and calling her name as he stared up at the window, only for some passer-by to point out the key was in the door lock. Others say that he stumbled inside to find the floor freshly swept, the wood stacked in the fireplace and a tin cup on a chair with a gold ring resting by it.

The End.

## *A Gathering, A Wandering* by Ally Bodnaruk

[Content Warnings](#) | [Pronunciation & World Guide](#)

‘Hail, stranger!’

Bette startled, so focused was she on the grit of the road before her. She looked around and saw a young man — the peddler who had passed her earlier in the day in fact — in the scrub by the roadside.

He waved, smile large and easy. ‘Hail! You look weary, why don’t you join us? The sun is leaving us and the nights here are cool. Our fire is already burning and there’s space enough for one more.’

Behind the peddler in a small clearing sat a few other people, a fire already crackling between them and a bubbling pot suspended over it. At the clearing’s edge the peddler’s donkey stamped and snuffled at the grass. Bette’s stomach growled and she rubbed her hands together. She had no supplies for a fire — her coin had not stretched that far — and the nightly chill had crept in her joints and left her feeling frozen to the hard ground come morning these past few days.

Bette wavered. She had always had a good sense of people and his voice was genuine and his manner gentle, but the last few months had not been kind. Her sister, Tarrie, had cautioned her against trust the day Bette had left Keystone; but the way Bette saw it, trust had been what had given her back her life — sacrifices aside.

## [Table of Contents](#)

She eyed the others at the fire: a middle-aged woman in travel wearied clothes; an old man in a farmer's hat, stirring the pot; a woman in Keystone garb, huddled together with two children; and the peddler, dressed in a fancy coat and wielding his charm with practised ease. None of them flinched under her gaze, nor did they stare at her in horrified fascination at the evidence of her nethering — save for the children, but their regard felt non-judgemental.

'You'd be a fool to miss a gathering,' called the well-travelled woman, her face creased in amusement. 'We shan't bite, though I can't promise the same of Isidore's donkey.'

The peddler — Isidore — laughed. 'Bellwin is a perfect gentleman and you know it, Safiya.'

The gentleness of their joy made Bette smile. She cast her caution aside and moved through the scrub to settle down next to the fire on an empty log.

'Thank you for the invitation.' Bette inclined her head.

The root-cutter who had healed her had mentioned these gatherings with awe and a dash of respect. A commonplace thing for the people who travelled the roads. She'd said they were places of tradition and ritual. Bette hoped she didn't break them.

'Welcome.' Safiya bowed her head and the others around the fire followed suit.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Bette folded her hands in her lap and let her sleeves cover her fingers and the changes that had overtaken them. She knew they could already see her face — the way her nose protruded and the ungainly size and sharpness of her lower canines — and how it marked her as being changed by the nether. But somehow she felt more presentable if they couldn't see her hands. She and Tarrie had called it a miracle. Monstrosity, their neighbours had whispered.

'Do you have a contribution for the pot?' the old man asked. 'Tis only a stew, so need not be fancy.'

Bette fumbled for her bag, mouth watering at the savoury scent that drifted up from the pot. She'd had little but hard tack and dried meat for days. 'I found some berries earlier today?'

She gently pulled out her handkerchief and unfolded it, revealing a couple handfuls of pale white berries, sprinkled with small purple-black dots.

'Though I'm not sure what they are, or if they're edible. I haven't been game to try them.'

The man frowned and beckoned for her to hand them over.

'Don't mind Kieran,' Isidore playfully whispered. 'He's a protective snob when it comes to the pot.'

'Middim berries.' Kieran nodded and tipped them into the pot. 'Not very sweet, taste like herbs. Be good in the stew.'

## [Table of Contents](#)

Bette's shoulders relaxed and she smiled hesitantly. The woman with the children returned it.

'You're from Keystone, also?' the woman asked. 'My name is Oona, and these are Will and Mona.'

The children blinked at Bette, then looked away.

'I am.' Bette refused to let her smile falter. 'Bette.'

Oona nodded and they shared a look that conveyed a great understanding of Keystone and the myriad of reasons one might want to leave it.

'Isidore, you were about to tell your tale.' Safiya leant back, her face tipped up to the sky as if to catch the last rays of sun. Closer up it was hard to tell her age. She was sun-worn and wrinkled, but there was strength in her frame.

Isidore clapped. 'It's true, I was, I was. Now, how long has it been since last we met?'

'I've not seen you since last Leafwane,' Kieran mumbled. 'Nor Safiya since the year before that.'

'Aye,' Safiya agreed. 'I visited your farm and you cooked me a wonderful meal. I still have dreams about that pumpkin pie.'

'My door's always open.' Kieran ducked his head, but failed to hide his pleased smile.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Safiya grinned. 'And it has been at least since tosamne past that I passed this way. I think we met outside Guildholm, Isidore.'

Isidore nodded and turned to look at Bette and Oona. 'And we have only just met, and thus have not yet had the pleasure of hearing one another's tales.'

'I hope you'll consider sharing one,' Safiya added.

A warm feeling brewed in Bette's chest. 'I would love to.'

But Oona shook her head, her arms tightening around her stomach. Safiya nodded and reached out to pat Oona's hand.

'Then I shall have to hope we meet again one day when you are ready to speak.'

In the gentle quiet that followed, Isidore stood and struck a gallant pose. 'Well then, let me begin.'

None objected, so Isidore splayed his hands out wide, like an orator in a great hall.

'Mine is, as always, a tale of settlements and the roads that stretch between them. The arteries of trade! Bellwin and I are the lifeblood that runs from cities to towns to villages and back again. We carry spices, furs, grain; anything that might otherwise not have found its way to their front door.'

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘We have just come from upriver of that tumbling mass of industry we know as Keystone. Bette, Oona, you will forgive me this description, but if ever there was a place that could define the colour grey, it is Keystone. But before Keystone, the road becomes the river — the forests grow much too dense for donkeys or anyone who isn’t feeling particularly adventurous. The river road is a gentle one, taken mostly by passage through one of the many river barges.’

‘Which barge did you take?’ Safiya interrupted.

‘The Swift Leek, captained by my old friend Joshua Earlington,’ Isidore replied.

‘A good sort,’ Safiya murmured to Bette and Oona, ‘should you ever travel that way.’

With a wave of his hand, Isidore drew their attention back to himself. ‘But my story today begins before The Swift Leek and before the river road. It begins instead beneath the canopy of the Wolden marketplace. All good tales begin in a marketplace.’

Isidore winked theatrically to the group.

‘Now for those of us who have not travelled far; Wolden is a town that was founded upon the principles of lumber. Surrounded on most sides by densely packed, straight-backed aspen, and you had best believe that Wolden makes the most of this. But, I hear you all thinking, Isidore, you have not the pace for lumber upon dear old Bellwin, nor can I see the trappings of furniture or wooden knick-knacks. And this, I tell you, is

## [Table of Contents](#)

because you do not know your trees. Aspen wood is too soft by half for these things. Wolden, great town of the forest, is known for its paper.

‘Oh! For it is said that a king would grovel before he wrote on anything but Wolden paper. The finest word-smithing artificers swear the depth and precision it gives their netherwork. And even the loftiest scholars should look down their nose on a treatise printed on anything other than paper from the Wolden mills.’

Isidore clapped his hands and bounced on the balls of his feet as he grinned at them all. ‘But I am getting sidetracked as I am wont to do. Let us return to the market.’

‘The Wolden market is a spectacular sight, the straight trees and the dancing leaves. They even hang glittering oil lamps from ropes suspended in the canopy, which cast all manner of kaleidoscopic shadows. I must say, I did question the wisdom of putting flames so close to leaves when first I came to their marketplace, but they laughed at my worry. You see, nether runs deep in the sap of the Wolden forest. And we all know nether does merely what it wants and never anything else. And the nether of Wolden abhors the thought of catching on fire.’

‘On this trip, Bellwin and I were perusing the market, looking for any other finery or trinkets that might make a good price coast-ward. We were already loaded with our order of fine-milled paper, bound for Guildholm and the Guildmasters within, when I spied a most curious object.’

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Nestled within the bric-a-brac of river jetsam on a trader’s table was a sharp, glossy-grey stone. It looked like a chunk of glass, partially shattered. Clean, looping lines marking where the pieces had broken away. I had never seen the like before, which is quite impressive given how far and how long I have travelled.’



Image Description: A young man, Isidore, holds a shiny piece of rock up as he speaks. He is wearing rough travelling clothes and has many pouches and bags. Beside him is his satchel, filled to the brim with odds and ends.

‘You’re still wet behind the ears, boy,’ Kieran grumbled.

‘And yet!’ Isidore cried and launched back into his story.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Hail and well met, said I to the proprietor of the stall, could you by any chance tell me how you came by such a scintillating object?’

‘Hail and well met, said they, I bought it from a tale-teller who came by way of the south with stories of curved swords and black sand beaches.

‘Do you know what purpose it once served?’ Asked I.

‘Do I look like an academic?’ Asked they, and I agreed that with no offence meant, they did not look much like a member of the fine academe. ‘It’ll be five sheckles, said they, and I know no more.

‘A fair enough deal for an object of mysterious origin, thought I, so I paid for the little thing and went on my way.

‘But now, let me produce for you this strange thing. See, how the light seems to bend away from it, only catching on its sharpest edges? By my reckoning it could slice through even the thickest ropes with ease.’

‘Tis a wonder you’ve not sliced yourself,’ Safiya said. ‘From your mention of black sand, by my reckoning it is from the Isles near Asgar. I like not the sound of the swords.’

‘War perhaps?’ Kieran asked. ‘Do you think it would travel this far north?’

Isidore sat down with a huff as Safiya and Kieran muttered about war. Bette tucked her elbows in and tried to look stoic, but she sided with Oona’s children, though the girl looked old enough to object to the classification of “child”, who were listening with rapture. It was exciting to hear of these

## [Table of Contents](#)

places and these people. Wolden and Guildholm she'd heard of, but the road out of Keystone had felt so empty and directionless. When leaving the only place she'd ever had a home, it had been impossible to imagine the destinations at the end of the road. Even now, a querulous anxiety seized her. She did not know where she was going or what she wanted.

The leaving of Keystone, the decision, had been easy. The changes overtaking her and the neighbours' disgust, Tarrie's worry, had forced her hand and Bette had been happy to go with it. But now she did not know where she would be welcome, what fates awaited her.

'Here, take a look.'

Isidore interrupted her reverie and held out the stone.

'Thank you.' Bette took it gingerly.

In fact, it was not as sharp as it looked. Though certainly she thought Isidore was right and it might cut through anything if one used enough force. There was a faded sheen to it, similar to the strange vial the root-cutter had used, similar to everything nether. It hummed in a discordant frequency that resonated with something deep within Bette.

Hastily, she handed it back to Isidore, worried that being so close to something with even so little nether would hasten the changes being wrought upon her. She felt foolish the instant after when he narrowed his eyes.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Is there some measure of nether worked within this stone?’ he asked.

Bette’s breath caught in her throat. Even if she had been careless with her words when she had thought herself dying, now that she had a life ahead of her, her sympathy for the nether felt a dark secret. Then she chided herself. It was clear enough to all what she was now and why should she fear that which had granted her new life?

‘Oh, hush, Isidore,’ Safiya scolded him with a frown. ‘Leave the girl be.’

‘I was only — ’ Isidore broke off and shook his head. ‘My apologies, fair Bette, I needn’t have put you so in the thick of it.’

Bette gathered her resolve and remembered her carefree nature at death’s door. ‘It’s no matter. There’s no sense in hiding what cannot be hidden. I did sense some strangeness to it, an echo of nether.’

‘Curious,’ Isidore said, and before he could continue, Safiya clapped her hands.

‘Kieran, your tale, if you please.’

The old man sighed and shook his head. ‘I am not one for travel and so you all might find my tales dull. But, at the end of every endur, well before dewgrass breaks, I travel to Guildholm to see my daughter and her children. A couple of days to get there and a couple back, with a week in-between where my daughter fusses and the little ones caper about. Let

## [Table of Contents](#)

us not speak of that swindler of a husband of hers, a fox indeed, I am sure I have complained to Safiya and Isidore about him before.'

'I have met the man, and he is hardly as notorious as Kieran makes him out to be,' Isidore said in an aside to Bette.

'Too quick with his fingers for honest work,' Kieran grouched. 'Always mind a man with tricky fingers, Bette.'

'But, back to my grandchildren, for it is always good to see them and the little ones grow bigger each time. Wee Foss is learnin' his numbers at a right pace. That boy's going places with that brain of his. Only 6 years, and I'm sure he's smarter than I.'

'Shan't ye stay another week, Pa? My girl always asks. The farm is hard work, she'll add.'

'She's hoping to get me to sell up and move to the city to be closer to them.'

'Aye, I tell her, but it's honest work.'

'It is true, it's honest work — though hard don't even cover it — there's a rhythm to the farm and a rightness in that, working in time to nature. It's better for me than anything else I might try. Mine were not made to be idle hands. They were made to turn the earth, and there's much earth-turning to do this time of year.'

'I enjoy the days walking back to the farm almost as much as I enjoy my daughter and the wee ones in the city. The walk gives me time to plan

## [Table of Contents](#)

and by the time I get home the garden beds that were over-wintered will need waking and a fresh load of mulch. The garlic will be sprouting and the spinach will need picking. The spinach always needs picking.

‘Next, the greenhouse will need sowing. Peppers first, then the flowers. The herbs which lasted out the cold will need to have vacated the greenhouse by the end of Starbright to make room.

‘Give me dirt beneath my nails any day. I’d take a farm’s hard labour over the city, no question.’

Kieran sniffed then focused back on the fire. ‘Stew’s ready.’

Isidore caught Bette and Oona’s gazes and rolled his eyes. ‘Kieran’s always been more of a listener.’

‘Lad, you may be one for the road, but I prefer a simple life,’ Kieran said as he ladled out the stew and wooden bowls, worn smooth by many hands, were passed around as chunks of bread were produced from the fire coals.

‘Besides,’ the old man added. ‘Best not make fun. There’d be scarce left in the world if those of us who lived simple lives all sought out adventure.’

‘I’d never poke fun at someone who made stew as good as this from trail food,’ Isidore said around a mouthful. ‘For you are entirely correct. There would be little adventure left if we all followed the road.’

## [Table of Contents](#)

It was true about the stew, Bette thought, as she ate a spoonful. It was thick and rich, a hint of sweet from the berries, potatoes soft with flavour.

‘You’re hardly one to talk of adventure, Isidore,’ Safiya said with a smile. ‘We all know your heart lies in Woodvale with your sweetheart.’

Isidore threw back his head and laughed. ‘It’s true, I stand accused justly. Every time I set my feet upon the road I count down the days until I see my Aron again.’

It warmed Bette, to be amongst this good will, to hear these people speak of loved ones and futures. Tarrie, though her sister would love her always, lay behind her in Keystone, part of a life that Bette could no longer lead. What was ahead of her? She clutched her bowl in her lap.

Safiya nudged her elbow. ‘There’s no reason at all to look so glum, with such food before you. What troubles you?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Bette said, though she knew true enough herself. ‘Just thoughts of what’s ahead.’

The gentle sympathy of Safiya’s gaze was welcome, as was Oona’s murmur of agreement.

‘We have left Keystone as well. My husband ...’ she trailed off, eyes haunted, then shook her head. ‘I think we will go to Guildholm, no wellspring there. I am sick of it all.’

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Right enough,’ Kieran agreed. ‘I’ve never wanted a thing to do with them.’

A guilty glance was cast Bette’s way, but she inclined her head in agreement.

‘They are capricious,’ she said, and they all nodded and decided that was enough of that, then.

‘But now,’ Isidore proclaimed through the uncomfortable quiet. ‘Safiya, my brave traveller, what tale do you bring us?’

‘Well, Bette, what would you like to hear?’ Safiya winked. ‘I’ve more than enough tales of adventure to make up for these two.’

Bette fumbled her spoon and flushed. She didn’t want to pick wrong and ruin the atmosphere.

‘You cannot choose incorrectly,’ Safiya raised an eyebrow. ‘But may I suggest the tale of how I came to make my home on the road? Perhaps it could give you some clarity.’

Bette nodded. ‘Yes, that one. Please.’

‘My tale begins in the smallest village, in the largest forest, in the furthest corner of any map of Netherün. We called it Bowstring, for the way the river arched around us and the farm houses that stretched from one river bend to the other, but I do not think it was ever named on any official maps.’

## [Table of Contents](#)

Safiya's voice was warm as she began, with a lilting roll to it, as if she was spinning her tale out of fireside embers and knitted blankets. Bette leant back and let herself be swept away.

'It was so quiet that as a child I found it hard to believe that there were people and places beyond the confines of Bowstring. At night, the stars above lay like a blanket upon our forest and during the day, birds and clouds drifted close by overhead. I was always one to be looking at the sky. It was so big. And the world I knew was so small.

'When I was very young, still learning the basics of the world, the smallness of Bowstring didn't chafe. It was big enough for a child and the forest seemed ever expansive around us.

'But the year I turned eight Bowstring had a visitor. A tale-teller, a bard, a traveller; however you prefer to call us people who make the road our home. This particular wanderer was a young man with sturdy boots, practical clothes, and the most delicate and fanciful lyre I had ever seen.

'He stayed for only a week and played tunes for whoever wished and danced in the dust with us children as we capered along to his music. His songs were about places I'd never heard of — young lovers locking their passion to the bridges in Keystone, A city of golden marble rising out of the jungle, the bustle and prosperity of Guildholm. I was entranced.

'I followed him the entire week he stayed in Bowstring and when he left I followed him still.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Only as far as the road — I see your parental wince Oona, but my parents were much used to our disappearing into the woods — but the road was further than I had ever been from Bowstring before. I hid in a jumble of ferns and watched as he set one foot, and then the other, onto the hard-packed dirt of the road. He looked to the east, he looked to the west, then bounced on the balls of his feet and smiled the smile of one who has made it back home.

‘I think it was his smile that changed the course of my life. It was a smile for freedom and adventure, of someone who had no expectations. I couldn’t imagine it, but I knew I wanted to know what it felt like.

‘I dreamt of going back to my new favourite place and watching the people go by. Travellers and peddlers and adventurers — there would be no end to the exciting stories I could hear now that I had found the road.

‘Each week I journeyed to the road. I had to wait until chores were done and my parents were too busy to realise that I wasn’t playing with the other children. Then, I would hide in that same fern bush and watch.

‘Almost no one came by.

‘One time I watched as a peddler lumbered past, his cart pulled by an oxen, but I was too shy to leave my hidden spot to speak to him.

‘My time at the road was spent in a state of longing. I felt it as a sharp pain in my chest that slowly travelled outwards until my eyes burned and my fingers clutched at nothing.

## [Table of Contents](#)

'I grew older and my chores became farm work and housework and I had less and less time to visit the road. I didn't stop thinking about it though. Every spare moment of every spare day I was thinking about the places the road led to. Anywhere. Everywhere. But there was not enough courage in my heart to consider setting foot on it. Somehow I knew that once I set foot on it, the road would not let me go, that I'd never be satisfied in my small, cramped village.

'That was the most terrifying thing. For all that I dreamed of other places I was scared, too, of a life that didn't revolve around the curve in a river and the trees and the little fields with their blackberry borders. How could a person even begin to think about living in a place where blackberries didn't grow? Or a place that didn't mark the change from dewgrass to tosamne by the fish that struggled up river.

'Besides, I would tell myself, my family is here. My parents. My siblings. I am comfortable and happy, why would I seek change for anything other than certainty?

'Life continued in the relentless manner in which it is prone. Each year, after endur had melted away, Bowstring felt smaller and a little more rickety. Tiles that had fallen the previous year would still lie unfixed and the hedgerows would never quite reach a state of kempt-ness.

'My dreams filled with a yearning for something that I couldn't name. I would awake in the early morn, more often than not, with tears pricking my eyes and my jaw clenched tight. Some months I would push away all thoughts of the road and the world beyond Bowstring, sternly tell myself

## [Table of Contents](#)

that my world was big enough as it was. Grand enough. But with a strange inevitability, I would end up back on the outskirts of the road. Watching it. Staring down at the point where it disappeared.

‘I had not thought that my family would notice. They never mentioned it. We did not speak of the road, and whenever we spoke of futures I chose careful words about Bowstring and the farm. Almost as much as I wanted to know what lay beyond the road, I wanted to not be a disappointment. But on my seventeenth birthday my parents presented me with a pair of the sturdiest walking boots that had ever graced Bowstring.

‘Some folk aren’t meant for one place, my mother said. I can feel this town in my bones and it means I never want to leave, but I can see that yours are made of different firmaments. I should not ask you to stay any more than I could ask myself to go.

‘I love Bowstring, I said to her.

‘She shook her head. But do you want to go? she asked.

‘Aye, I told her. More than anything, I want to see where that road leads.

‘And from that moment my fate was sealed. My parents helped me stock up on supplies. Told me of a cousin, distant, who lived in the nearby town, and who I should stay with for a time before finding my own way. The week passed in a blur.

## [Table of Contents](#)

'I left the farmstead early. My siblings, still soft with sleep, wished me farewell between yawns as my mother dried her eyes on her apron. I didn't let them walk me out of the village. I wanted to be wholly myself, by myself, when I first set foot on the road.

'The second the sole of my shoe touched the dust of the road, I was changed. Like I had been holding myself back, keeping my wings tucked in close and tied down. The road set me free. And oh, how I've soared.'

Bette leant forward. 'But how did you survive? On the road by yourself?'

'That is a story for another time.' Safiya shook her head with a coy smile. 'Besides I believe it's time for you to tell us a tale.'

'Oh.' Bette bit her lip. 'I'm not sure—'

'—nonsense,' Kieran muttered around a mouthful of soup. 'Anyone can tell a tale, when there is no need for it to be a good tale.'

Isidore laughed. 'Kieran is right, in a round-a-bout way. There's no need for quality. We are not critics, ready to take a quill to your every word. We're just fellow travellers, looking to while away the time and share in something greater than ourselves.'

He spoke with no small degree of grandeur though, and Bette still felt intimidated.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘When you don’t know, it can be helpful to start with something simple.’ Safiya tapped her nose knowingly. ‘Where did you come from? Where are you going?’

‘I don’t know where I’m going,’ Bette said, looking at her hands.

Safiya made a noise of interest and leant forward. ‘Well then, tell us about that.’

Bette breathed in and shuddered through her memories of the last few months.

‘I was meant to die, this endur past,’ she said with a stuttering voice. ‘I had been sick for years, a creeping kind of illness that slowly swept away the foundations of my life. My sister would get angry, on the hard days, but it was the good days that I railed against. They gave me hope that I might get better, only to tear it away the minute I reached for wellness.

‘But then my sister and I met a root-cutter, or an artificer, I’m not entirely sure which. She’s only relevant in that she cured me, some way or some how, and she used nether to do it.

‘Having life, when you thought your future was an abrupt end ...

‘I’m not sure how to explain it.

‘Elation. Terror.

‘My sister grew worried. My ... my hands. They began to change. My heart. My face. Small changes. At first I wondered if they might just be my

## [Table of Contents](#)

health returning, like a wayward child, confused but well-meaning. But stairs that would have once toppled me became no obstacle and the cold wind of Rester was but a balm on my skin.

‘In the middle of the night I would stand atop the old bell tower and watch Keystone sleep around me while the ashes moved in their wobbling circles. The city chafed. Neighbours who once greeted us with soft generosity built of pity now side-stepped us in the street and whispered when they thought we could not hear.

‘It was as if the city itself could tell I had changed and it didn’t want me anymore.

‘It grew too much as the city awoke from Starbright’s slumber. In the cool light of Oxneap we could no longer hide the nethering. And so I left. Tarrie ... my sister ... we had not the money to send two. And she had a job besides, a small thing, but enough for herself now I am not there for her to worry over.’

Bette paused and her voice broke like a crashing wave over her next words. ‘I don’t know where to go. I don’t know what I am to do.’

The words, which had come in a rush, dried in abruptness. Bette pressed her hands to her mouth and desperately held herself together. Would these people chase her off, as sure as Keystone had? Was there any place left she could make a home? It was the not knowing that made the world seem a void capable of swallowing her whole.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘Well,’ Isidore said, his tone gentle. ‘Seems you’ve got a choice to make.’

‘Aye, you’d be welcome on my farm for a spell, if you’re willing to do the work,’ Kieran mumbled, without looking at her. ‘Could use some help come sowing time.’

‘Or, perhaps you’d be suited to the life of a peddler. Join Bellwin and I in Guildholm.’ Isidore’s hands danced through the air in time with his excited words. ‘Oh, that would be grand, I always love to have passengers.’

And, just like that, the darkness that had swirled around Bette’s future lifted. She did not wish to be a farmer or a peddler, but it felt strangely good to rule those options out. And it felt strangely better to be offered the kindness they had given.

‘You’re both very kind,’ Bette said, but she knew her hesitation was clear in her twisting hands.

‘What do you want?’ Safiya asked. ‘The comfort and hard work of a farm? The excitement and gossip of a peddler’s life? Or, perhaps, freedom of the road?’

Bette thought back to the last night she had stood atop the bell tower, the ashes surrounding her with their whispers. And how she had watched the sun rise, slow and determined, and how she had longed to run towards it. What lay to the East? What did it look like where the land touched the ocean? What was beyond that? The thoughts had overwhelmed her, until she was gasping.

## [Table of Contents](#)

‘The road,’ she whispered and she felt something within her unclench in relief. ‘I want freedom and the road.’

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

Ally Bodnaruk is on twitter

Twitter: [@allybodnaruk](#) or [click here](#)

## Author Interview: Ally Bodnaruk

### 1. Why are you a writer?

I've always enjoyed stories and storytelling of all kinds and writing kind of came as a natural step from that. I've been writing and telling stories since I was a kid, so it's always been a part of my life, but it wasn't until Uni that I started trying to hone my craft. There's something so magical about the ways we can explore concepts and issues in fiction and the power that writing has to effect change in the world.

### 2. What are your biggest writing goals?

I'd love to one day sell a book I wrote in a bricks and mortar bookstore. I work as a bookseller, so there's something about having it on a bookshelf that I think would make it feel real. I try not to get too caught up on goals though; I want to write because I enjoy it and sometimes focusing too much on goals takes the joy out of it for me. There's a fine balance to be found in striving for something and not letting it dictate every facet of your life.

### 3. What is your writing schedule/routine like?

Haphazard. I write on my weekends and sometimes during the week. Some months I'll write every morning before work, some months, only on weekends. It depends a lot on how much else I have on in a month.

### 4. Which author would you love to collaborate with?

## [Table of Contents](#)

I think the easy answer is Neil Gaiman, he really seems to understand the craft and I think I'd learn a lot. But I'd also love to collaborate with some of the more recent Science Fiction/ Fantasy authors like Arkady Martine or Becky Chambers.

### 5. Which book do you wish you'd written?

Currently, *A Memory Called Empire* by Arkady Martine. It's just so well put-together and the emphasis she places on the importance of language and literature in imperialism and colonisation is fascinating.

### 6. What is your current reading obsession?

Honestly, I've been reading a lot of politics, investigative journalism, and memoirs recently. A couple that really stand out are *In Order to Live* by Yeonmi Park and *Unfollow* by Megan Phelps-Roper.

### 7. What was the last book that made you cry?

*Unfollow* by Megan Phelps-Roper, the combination of grief and strength she felt when she left her family's fundamentalist church was incredibly moving.

### 8. Tell me about your story for the zine. What was the inspiration? Why this character? Why this story?

I wrote *A Gathering, A Wandering* after I ran a game of *Wanderhome* for some friends, which is a pastoral fantasy tabletop rpg game that focuses on travel, home, and the power of journey. I wanted to embody some of the nostalgia, exploration of trauma, and deeply felt sense of place that are

## [Table of Contents](#)

carefully woven into *Wanderhome*, within the realm of Netherün. I wanted the place to feel lived in and alive, and hopefully I've achieved that.

9. If you could have any magical power, what would it be?

Telekinesis always seemed pretty cool.

10. If you could be any magical creature, what would you be?

Obviously a dragon, it's the only correct answer.

11. Describe your perfect writing day.

The best writing days I've had have been in the company of writers, where we could bounce ideas around whenever one of us got stuck.

12. Any advice for your fellow writers?

Just keep trucking along at your own pace. Even small progress is still progress. Sometimes all I can manage in a session is 100 words, but I still feel better after those 100 words than I would if I hadn't written anything.

[Table of Contents](#)

## Pronunciation & World Guide

[\*Suns of the Division\* by Alexandra Burnham](#)

Arvore: Aah-vor

Arvorestrom: Aah-vor-strom

Moji: Moe-jee

[\*Lock and Keystone\* by Tace Samoset](#)

Asa: Ay-sa

[\*A Gathering, A Wandering\* by Ally Bodnaruk](#)

**Seasons and Months:**

Dewgrass (Spring)

*Oxneap* | *Strew* | *Burstlight*

Tosamne (Summer)

*Tendfield* | *Langour* | *Sunblaze*

Harvest (Autumn)

*Plenty* | *Dili* | *Leafwane*

Endur (Winter)

*Gloomtide* | *Rester* | *Starbright*

[Table of Contents](#)

## Content Warnings

[\*Suns of the Division\* by Alexandra Burnham](#)

Dark themes, implied physical child abuse, murder/death, corpses

[\*Lock and Keystone\* by Tace Samoset](#)

Depictions of homelessness, child abandonment, indenture

[\*A Gathering, A Wandering\* by Ally Bodnaruk](#)

## Next in Netherün

### *Come Inside* by Jaidyn Groth

A young girl awakes to find her brother stolen away in the night by a travelling circus. To save him from the dark and mysterious magic, she must brave the circus and the creatures who call it home.

### *Beyond the Farthest Horizon* by A. Gustafson

A young woman must choose between duty and dreams.

### *Save the Asterpox* by Bronwyn Eley

Believing it is her last chance to save her mother, a young woman joins the crew of a ship who hunt and harvest the magical blood of the asterpox.

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Quill & Read acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW and Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. Always was, always will be.

We also acknowledge the traditional and ancestral land of the Interior Salish peoples, in particular, the Sinixt, the Syilx, the Secwepemc and the Ktunaxa. We respectfully honour their traditions and culture.

## [Table of Contents](#)



Image Description: A solid black logo depicting a griffin from side on. The griffin is roaring and the tip of its tail turns into the nib of a quill pen. The feather of the quill pen curls up and over the griffin, mirroring its wings. Below the griffin are the Initials Q & R.