

Tales
from
The Hermit



Volume I

Quill & Read



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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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In this volume you will visit the city of Keystone in the Thastor region and sail down the mountainous coasts of the Ebony Isles



SOMETHING *in the* SHADOWS

By
Bronwyn Eley

Mild Content Warning

When Cilla was nine years old, her mother left her at the markets. Forgot her. Once she realised, she came back, of course, because what else can a parent do? But this was the first time Cilla realised her mother had other things on her mind than just her.

Cilla stared across the market square, her sweaty back pressed to the West Bridge wall, arms tucked behind her. The same spot she'd once clung to as a scared, forgotten child. But no one had left her this time; she was older now, almost an adult herself, and her parents didn't even bother asking her where she was going anymore.

Then there was Nardi, the young woman two market stalls up. Her face, half-covered in a scarf to protect from the late-afternoon breeze, making her careful selections of wilted vegetables. As the woman paid, she turned and walked towards Cilla.

Straight past her.

Cilla watched her go, shoulders sagging. For years growing up, all she had was Nardi. But the woman had married young and already birthed two children, or so she'd been told. Sometimes Cilla wondered if she'd invented her friendship with Nardi. The girl who would defend Cilla against her own sibling's taunts. It had been Nardi who taught Cilla how to transform their hurtful comments into a game instead. Who would insult her today? What would they focus on this time? Her weight? The flatness of her face? The way her teeth stuck out at odd angles?

Cilla became an expert at this game, winning every time.

The back of Nardi's head was swallowed up by the crowd. A once wild and riotous world, now unbearably quiet without her friend. But it had been long years since the woman had even looked in her direction.

And so Cilla fell back into old patterns. Hours spent daydreaming of a life she could have, if only she were brave enough to reach for it.

Cilla began moving among the market stalls, shaking her head. She made her way towards the one thing that kept her sane through the monotonous days: the paper. At the base of the temple steps, banished to the corner with uneven cobblestones, nestled a man in his late sixties with no front teeth. Cilla loved the way he spoke, in person and on the page.

Cilla had her shuck ready for Nolken, and he handed her the latest news with a wink.

'Bigger issue today,' she remarked. His paper was never more than a double-sided piece of parchment, a single copy which he kept on his person that you could pay to read. A clever little scam for the curious.

'Lots going on, it seems,' he replied. 'Heard from my friends on the East Bridge that a bunch of artificers have been poking round. What for? Not sure.'

But he'd know soon enough. Nolken had a way of making friends that Cilla wished could be taught. She smiled at Nolken, then pored over the words, drawn to stories from the other Bridges. She may as well have been reading fiction.

'So many missing?' she asked him, looking up. On the back, right at the bottom, was a short recount of a series of missing persons in Keystone. Missing! Surely such information deserved top billing.

Nolken nodded. 'One more last week, makes seven in the last month.'

'None have been found?'

'Most are southerners. Few westerners just like us. One northerner, though. The authorities took a right good look about for her, if you can believe that,' he chuckled, 'but nothing.'

'Did they check the towers? The rivers? What about down with the Outers? Maybe they have her?'

Nolken huffed, tucking his arms across his chest. 'What would a little girl with a dress that costs more than my yearly rate at the lodge be doing with those outcasts?'

'Maybe they took her,' Cilla said the words darkly.

'And risk their moth-eaten tents being burnt to the ground?' Nolken challenged.

‘They’ve got little to barter with. One misstep is all it would take,’ he clicked his fingers, ‘for the authorities to send them away from Keystone.’

Away from the precious wellspring they worshipped, much like everyone living in Keystone. She felt its draw, living beneath them, a swirling mass of benevolence. But her connection to it was one-sided. She had no Nether. No power.

And no friends, apart from Nolken. But what he liked most about her was the shuck she gave him.

Cilla slumped against the bridge’s stone wall. ‘I hate it here.’

Nolken chuckled as he fished something out of his teeth. ‘I’m impressed. Took me years to become this bitter old man. Take heart, girl, not everything’s bad.’

‘No?’ she shook the paper in his face. ‘Seven missing and the only one that is properly investigated is the girl from the North? Who’s surprised? What about the rest?’

‘You read that too seriously,’ he jerked a finger at the paper of his own creation, ‘who cares what’s happening to anyone else but you?’

‘You report these stories for a living!’

Nolken flashed the coin she’d just given him. ‘Survival.’

‘Doesn’t this upset you?’ She held the paper out. ‘That people go missing and nothing is done?’

He shrugged.

Exactly. Forget about them. It wasn’t their problem. Shrug and carry on as before.

She flashed the paper at Nolken. ‘Can I get a copy of this?’

‘Just got the one,’ came his trained reply.

‘Some spare paper, then?’ she pressed. ‘A quill?’

With a sigh, Nolken fished a piece of scrap parchment from somewhere in his bag. He unbundled the ball and flattened it, pushing his quill and ink in her direction.

‘You’re wasting your time with this,’ he said as she began scribbling down the names of the missing people. Why? She wasn’t sure right now.

Cilla scooped up the parchment and stuffed it in her pocket. ‘I’ll see you next time.’

She ducked and weaved through the markets, a bother to no one, heading for the one place she might find a moment of peace. The whole of Keystone was a riotous mess of four

bridges intersecting in the midst of a grand temple. Too many people for such close quarters.

The only place she felt even a hint of relief was the Lock Bridge. Each of the four main bridges had one, a small section made up of an iron gate with hundreds of locks grasping the metal, like lovers holding hands.

Cilla took a seat on an empty wooden bench, tossed off her slippers and flexed her toes in the grass. A quiet man moved along the locks, severing them with his cutters, sending them into the swirling wellspring below.

With a sigh, Cilla's eyes drifted back to the paper. Seven missing, none found, search minimal. Nolken at least had the decency to write the names of those who were missing. Perhaps the only acknowledgement this horrible city would give them.

Shrug. Carry on.

Something heavy plonked down into her lap. Someone.

'Hey!' Cilla squealed.

The man leapt up, hands flying to his behind. He looked around wildly, eyes taking a moment to find her. The girl he had assumed was a seat, not living flesh.

'Watch yourself,' Cilla growled, 'you sat right on me!'

The man dragged himself away. No apology, just a small shrug.

Shrug. Carry on.

Cilla ground her teeth, reading those names. Acknowledging them. One by one.

Lisla Anellkinde (North, Nestar)

Angie Myron (West, Winnor)

Byren Brick (West, Wallock)

Simon Blackmoor (South, Surpais)

Alia Magaster (South, Sandar)

Nyx Colter (South, Sandar)

Cyrus Taylor (South, Splanel)

Disappearances began during Burstlight. No sightings. Authorities limiting their search. Long may they rest.

Cilla frowned at the document. Long may they rest. But what if they weren't resting? And how could anyone else rest knowing they might still be out there? Missing didn't

mean dead, no matter what the authorities had decided.

Weren't their loved ones doing something about it? Maybe they were. If something like this didn't matter to a person, then what did? Cilla stared at the Lock Bridge, watching the locks tumble out of sight. Once severed, once gone, would those who put them there even remember?

If she disappeared, would her parents try to find her? Or would they let her go, a lock tumbling into dark waters, forever forgotten? Would she become a name on a list somewhere?

Cilla rubbed her lips together, staring at her feet. She loosed a breath as Nardi's face flashed in her mind. Walking straight past her.

If she went missing tomorrow, who would come looking for her?

No one.

Just like these people on this list.

Cilla raised her head and stared at the night sky, at the thousands of stars. Sometimes she forgot how many there were, just waiting up there, hoping to be seen.

Like her.

Cilla took in the list of missing once more, committing their names to memory. What happened to them had to matter.

They had to matter.

If no one else was going to figure out where they went or, at worst, what happened to them, then she would. If she found even just one of them, maybe the authorities would take their search more seriously. Listen to her. Find them all.

'I see you. I see you,' Cilla whispered at the names. 'I won't ignore you.'



When Cilla entered the room, no one looked up. Her mother and sisters were all otherwise occupied, her father asleep in his chair by the window. A weathered old thing more wrinkled than him.

'Excuse me.' Cilla cleared her throat. 'You won't see me most nights this week.' Her mother looked up with a sigh. 'I'll be doing some investigation, looking for those missing people.'

'What missing people?' one of her sisters snarled.

‘Seven of them,’ Cilla replied, but her sister was already staring at her cross-stitch again, ‘gone missing over the last month. I’m going to see if I can figure out what happened to them.’

‘Why?’ her mother was back scanning her book with bored eyes. ‘Have the authorities done nothing?’

‘Almost,’ Cilla replied. ‘They’ve found no trace of them anywhere. I think they missed something.’

‘It’s their job,’ her mother said. Cilla heard the hidden meaning. What can you do that they couldn’t?

But the authorities showed their hand, spending all their effort on the one missing girl that mattered, like spending all your money on one bet. She’d have known it without anyone telling her, that they didn’t really try for the others.

South and West were synonymous with shrugs and eye-rolls.

Cilla left her house at sunset. Starting with the two names from her own Bridge. She didn’t know them; how could a girl know all the names of the thousands of people crammed onto West Bridge? But Nolken had taken the time to write not just which bridge they lived on, but which suburb. Angie Myron, Winnor.

The sky was clear, moon beaming a blue light across the grey cobblestones. There was a spot on her Bridge, her favourite. If she found a high enough perch, Cilla could see North Bridge and the swirling wellspring below. Something about the way it spun always reminded her of Nardi’s laugh. Comforting. Just for her.

Once, as a child, she’d seen a little north boy looking over his edge in much the same way. She’d waved at him. Either he hadn’t seen her, or he chose not to.

Cilla hung her head, watching the dark water below. The way it spun and spun, a dance that she couldn’t look away from.

Something black slithered across the surface.

Cilla startled, pushing away from the wall. She looked up but saw nothing in the sky. No wayward cloud had made that shadow. No bird. Cilla leaned back through the gap and squinted at the



water's surface. It swirled and swirled. Nothing else. No shadow, no animal, no person.

Nothing lived in the wellspring, nothing but the magic itself.

Shaking herself out, Cilla carried on to the far end of the bridge, where Winnor was nestled. A patchwork of crammed houses sat on a field of brittle grass opposite the barracks. Cilla asked the few people who were about if they knew of a woman called Angie Myron.

Apparently, she hadn't existed even before her disappearance.

Just as she was about to give up, a voice called from her left. 'Who's asking?'

Cilla turned to see a tall man with twig-thin arms backlit in his doorway. She moved closer but stopped when he crossed his arms and glared. 'My name is Cilla. I'm looking for Angie Myron. Just wondering what happened to her. Do you know her?'

The man eyed her. 'She's my neighbour. Or was. Barely knew the woman.'

'Any idea what might have happened?'

'Gone missing,' he shrugged, 'how should I know? Probably dead. She was older than Netherün, that one. And odd. Didn't even leave her house. Got her food and supplies delivered.'

'When was the last time you saw her?'

The man laughed. 'I don't know girl! Dewgrass bless you. I only reported her missing coz the food was rotting, and I didn't want her place to go to waste.'

'What food?'

'What was left at her door,' he explained. 'Never any answer. She'd obviously been missing—dead—longer than we realised.' He shrugged again. 'Ah well. New family inside her place now. Probably just took herself off to die, like some dogs do, you know? Good riddance to that oddity.'

A woman who never left her house deciding to finally leave only moments before her death? Unlikely. And who would want to harm an elderly woman?

'Why was she odd?' Cilla called after the man, who was already halfway to his door.

'Seemed like a sympath to me,' was his reply.

'Oh,' Cilla took a step back. She scanned the dark windows around her, every shadowy spot, wondering if Angie Myron's ashe was watching her this very moment. But they were alone.

Cilla dragged her gaze back to the man, pondering his words. If Angie were a sympath,

and dead, perhaps Cilla could find her at one of the towers and ask her ashe what happened.

Cilla cleared her throat at the thought. Better to get what she could from the flesh and blood man before her. ‘What else can you tell me?’

The man shrugged. ‘Nothing.’

‘Did she have any family?’

‘Don’t think so,’ he replied, picking at his tooth. ‘If it weren’t for the food deliveries, I would have thought the place empty.’

‘Friends?’ Cilla pushed. The man shook his head. ‘Did you ever even speak to her?’

‘Uh,’ the man cast a sideways glance at the woman’s house. ‘Maybe? Once when I moved in? Can’t quite remember.’

Cilla sighed and shot a look to Angie’s house. The lights were on, a new family inside, taking up residence where this woman once lived. Though had she even lived? Was the house as empty then, as it had been in the weeks after she disappeared?

A silhouette appeared in the window. Cilla froze. It was not the silhouette of someone inside watching her, but... a shadow.

She blinked, hard, as it faded away, bleeding back into the light from inside the house. Cilla pointed. ‘Did you see that?’

But the man was gone, his door closed.

She stared across the courtyard at the window. Had she imagined it? The second shadow she’d seen tonight, though before she’d seen nothing but a ripple of darkness. This one was different, almost a person, but not quite.

A shiver ran up her spine. Cilla hurried from the courtyard and out onto the street, all the while feeling that dark face watching her. Was it just behind her? But she couldn’t bring herself to look back.

As she moved, Cilla stared up at the sky as she released a deep breath. The night was getting to her. Maybe she’d best try again, tomorrow when the sun was high, and shadows were scarce.



The next afternoon, when work was done, Cilla left the weaver’s shop with her list and a new name on her lips. Bryen Brick. It was easier to start with those that lived on the West Bridge with her. Cilla made her way to the suburb listed on the sheet, Wallock, and began

asking around for Bryen. Only one man recognised the surname.

Cilla made her way to the street where the Brick family supposedly lived and knocked on their door. A few moments passed before the door creaked open. The woman was middle-aged, eyes sagged so far into her face Cilla could hardly make them out.

A cacophony of shrieks and laughter came from within the house. Thunderous footsteps. Several children scurried past just behind them, gone just as quickly.

The woman hadn't taken her eyes off Cilla. 'Can I help you?'

'Hi,' Cilla began, gripping the paper in her hand, 'I hope it's alright that I'm here. My name is Cilla, I've come to ask you about someone called Byren Brick?'

The woman lifted her chin, eyes darkening. 'My son. What about him?'

'I-is he here?'

Mrs Brick pursed her lips, glancing back into the hallway. She called for someone called Theon and moments later a burly man joined her. She inclined her head at Cilla. 'Asking about Byren.'

Theon crossed his arms, looking down. 'Boy's missing. Has been for weeks now.'

'I know,' Cilla replied. They shot her a look. 'I just wanted to ask some questions about him. About the last time you saw -'

'Mikka, stop that now or I'll take it away!' Mrs Brick hollered over her shoulder. The three children at the end of the hallway froze, eyes wide, before tumbling away with laughter.

'How many children do you have?' Cilla asked.

Mrs Brick sighed. 'Twelve. Or... eleven now, I guess.'

'But there's still hope?' Cilla pressed. 'He might be found. Maybe he's on another bridge?'

'Byren was four years old,' Theon replied, voice wavering. 'Couldn't survive out there on his own.'

Cilla pressed a light hand to her mouth. She pictured the small boy, lost in a crowd of people, invisible at their feet. Huddled in a dark alley somewhere. Hair dripping into his eyes as a storm raged around him.

Then she saw another face. Her own, tears streaming down her cheeks. Lost in a crowd. Forgotten by her own mother.

'I'm sorry,' Cilla said finally.

The screaming inside continued and Mrs Brick disappeared into the house, screaming alongside them. Theon cringed, rubbing his face.

‘When did you last see Byren?’ Cilla asked. Theon’s gaze fell to the ground. ‘Mr Brick?’ But he shook his head. ‘Please, I know you don’t know me, but I’m hoping I might find something the authorities didn’t.’

‘Why?’ he hissed. ‘He’s gone. We didn’t realise. It’s too late.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked. ‘You didn’t realise?’

‘Look,’ Theon snapped, jerking forward. Cilla shot back several paces, stopping when the anger in Theon’s eyes faded to shame.

‘Dash!’ Mrs Brick’s cry came. ‘Sit down, now, and let go of your brother’s hair or I’ll—’

‘We’re not sure,’ Theon said. Cilla dragged her gaze away from the house and back to the man.

‘Not sure?’

‘When we last saw him,’ Theon explained. ‘He just... wasn’t there anymore. He could have been missing for a day.’ Theon’s eyes drifted, his mouth hanging open. He shook his head, eyes glazed over. ‘M-maybe more. I don’t know. We don’t know.’

Cilla frowned. ‘He was just gone?’

Theon closed his eyes and sighed, pressing fingers into his eyes. ‘Yes.’

Cilla blew out a breath and stared down at Byren’s name on her scribbled list. The chances of a four-year-old surviving on his own were next to impossible, unless someone took him in. But then why wouldn’t they take him to the authorities?

A door slammed. Cilla looked up to see Mrs Brick surging down the hallway with fists clenched by her side.

And Mrs Brick walked right through the shadow. Cilla blinked at the dark shape standing in the hallway, so small she nearly missed it.

‘Theon,’ Mrs Brick called, ‘will you come, please?’

Theon nodded at her over his shoulder. ‘Yes, yes, I’m coming. Look—hey, are you alright?’

Cilla jerked when he moved close. She focused on him, blinking away the outline of a small, dark shape. ‘Could I just...’ Cilla pushed past him into the hallway, stopping just short

of Mrs Brick, who stared at her with raised eyebrows.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, crossing her arms.

Cilla looked around but saw nothing. The shadow was gone. Cilla shook her head. ‘Sorry, nothing.’ She stumbled back outside. ‘I’m sorry for bothering you.’

‘We tried to find him.’ Theon hung out of his door to watch her go. Cilla stopped. ‘We did. But he’s gone.’



Cilla stared across the street at the three guards lingering at the base of the temple’s steps. Two of them were laughing, the other scanning the marketplace nearby. Cilla crossed over to them.

‘Excuse me?’ she began. The two who were talking didn’t stop. Had Cilla even spoken? She opened her mouth to say something further, but the third guard, the woman with the keen eyes, glanced down at her. She was about six-feet tall with short red hair, like there was a small and vicious fire sitting atop her head.

‘What is it?’ the woman asked. Cilla swallowed, fumbling with the parchment in her hand. She held it out. The guard cocked a brow down at it. ‘What’s this?’

‘A list of names,’ Cilla explained. ‘People who’ve gone missing in Keystone.’

The guard sighed and continued scanning the crowd. ‘Have you reported it?’

‘Oh,’ Cilla said, ‘yes, they’ve been missing for some weeks now. I only found out the other day.’

‘You don’t know any of these people?’

‘No.’

The guard cocked a brow at her. ‘Then why do you care?’

‘Because they’re people,’ Cilla replied, ‘who are missing. Do you know anything about this?’

‘No,’ the guard’s reply was curt. ‘And if it’s been reported, there’s nothing else to do. Just leave it.’

‘But I—’

‘Go home,’ the guard said sternly. Cilla clenched her jaw. The other two guards hadn’t even stopped talking. With a nod, Cilla began backing away. With a little shake of her head,

the guard cast her glance back into the crowd.

Go home.

Cilla marched straight past her home all the way to the end of West Bridge and down the wide stone steps until her feet touched grass.

Cilla froze, looking down at her shoes, at the soil below, trying to remember the last time she left the Bridge. She glanced behind her at the steps, imagining an enormous gate suddenly appearing, barring her from ever returning.

Cilla scanned her surroundings. A bright wash of green as opposed to dull stone. She fanned her arms out and not a single person bumped into her. She closed her eyes and listened to the rush of the wellspring and the breeze dancing by.

With a nod, she continued on under the grand archways that supported the bridges of Keystone, paper still clutched in her hand. Why did no one want to try? Really try? Did Byren's parents even have the time to look with so many other children to care for?

When the tents appeared, Cilla slowed. They were as ragged up close as they were from her view on the Bridge. She didn't envy the Outers on nights when storms raged, but maybe there was something about living away from the uncomfortable press of the Bridges that kept them here.

Cilla wove her way through the tattered tents, ducking underneath the clotheslines that hung between, around several campfires that were begging for fresh wood. She kept moving until she found someone with a face that didn't scare her away.

'Excuse me,' Cilla said. The woman was bent over a bucket of water, her arms deep in the browned liquid, rubbing a shirt against a wooden washboard. 'Excuse me?'

The woman's hair was coming loose over her face, but Cilla saw the impatience flash in her eyes. Strange how this woman looked at her. Probably the same way Cilla looked at northerners. Envy or anger, it didn't matter. Some poisonous mix that built up barriers between strangers.

'I was hoping you could help me,' Cilla said.

'How's that?' the woman continued scrubbing.

'I'm looking for someone,' she pulled out the paper, 'well, several someones, actually. Missing people.'

'If they're here, it's by choice.'

'If I could just read their names to you, perhaps—'

The woman sat back on her heels, wet hands dropping to her thighs. ‘Everyone who’s here came from the outside. No Keystoners here. Who’d come from that to this?’

Cilla eyed the tents as the woman went back to cleaning. Cilla stared down at her. ‘Lisla Anellkinde, Angie Myron, Byren Brick, Simon Blackmoor, Alia Magaster, Nyx Colter, Cyrus Taylor. Do any of those names sound familiar?’

But she did not stop. Said nothing more.

Cilla sighed and walked on. She spoke to several more people, each as unhelpful as the last, all echoing the truth of the first woman’s words. No one from Keystone chose to become an Outer. There were no strangers here, no missing folk.

Go home, girl.

Cilla found herself down on the sand, arms folded over the top of the stone wall that kept people from simply wandering into the wellspring. She rested her chin on her crossed arms and stared at the water. In the centre, right below the temple, the wellspring swirled and swirled, right into the middle, dipping ever-so-slightly. Where did the water go?

And why was the water so dark? The sky was clear, blue and yellow, glaring down at them from above. Completely cloudless. Yet it seemed darker than she remembered. The way it glistened and sparkled in the sunlight, the light dancing on the water. Where had its glow gone? It was dark as night. She could only just see the swirl of the vortex. And—

Something rippled over the surface.

Cilla eased her head up, hands pressing to the stone and pushing onto her toes to get a better view. The shadow had looked like a person, like all the others. But who were they? What were they? No one would believe her if she claimed there was a monster living in their sacred spring, or that there were strange shadows in their streets.

They’d think she’d gone mad. If they even listened at all.



Cilla lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, counting on her fingers. Working the problem. Of the seven names on her list, Cilla had investigated four.

Angie Myron, an elderly woman with no apparent friends or life.

Byren Brick, a four-year-old boy from a family of twelve children.

Nyx Colter, a middle-aged farmer whose wife and child had both drowned in a river boating accident several years prior. Cilla spoke with several people before tracking down

anyone who knew him well enough to give a recount of his sad and lonely life.

And Alia Magaster, a girl who had been about her age before she went missing.

Cilla still wasn't sure if these people were dead or not. It seemed each of them had a pretty good reason to wander off, and maybe that's exactly what they did. Angie was decrepit, Byren one of the many, Nyx's heart had been buried years before with his family, and Alia was a passionate scholar, but none of the temples or schools would hire her.

Had the girl simply left Keystone? Gone to find opportunity elsewhere?

But why would an elderly woman who never left home suddenly get up and go?

Why would a child who was only just learning to speak wander away from his parents?

Why would a man so heartbroken wait so many years before... what? Taking his own life? Running away?

One thing stood out above all. These people were sympath. Or suspected, at the very least. Cilla felt certain it had something to do with their disappearances. It was too big a coincidence to be ignored.

The next morning, Cilla passed through the market like a shadow herself, weaving around folk who were talking, laughing, shopping. She stopped behind the guard, the same from the other day. 'Excuse me.'

The woman turned and sighed. 'You again.'

'You remember me?' Cinna asked with a frown.

'I remember people who pester me with conspiracy theories, yeah.' She crossed her arms. 'What is it now? Think the ashes did it?'

'Have the riverbanks been checked?' Cilla asked. 'What if they drowned? Or the forest, or the mines—perhaps they—'

The guard raised both hands, leather vest creaking at the movement. 'I asked my superior about it. And, yes, the rivers have already been checked, same with the forest, the mines. Everywhere. The little girl's family demanded it after she went missing. They found no bodies. I think your missing people just left Keystone.'

Cilla blinked, giving herself a moment.

'Don't look so surprised,' the guard chuckled, 'people leave Keystone, you know.'

Of course, they did. That's not what surprised her. The woman had listened to her and

had actually done something about it after she'd left.

The guard cocked her head. 'Why do you care so much? Did you know one of them?'

'No,' Cilla replied, 'but someone has to care. Seemed no one else did.'

The guard frowned, but then a sharp whistle stole her attention. She glanced over at her comrades. 'Alinac, get over here.'

Alinac sighed and waved Cilla away. 'Go home, I've work to do.'

Why were people always telling her to go home? What was so great about home, anyway? She wasn't valued, only her shuck a week was.

Cilla stomped right past her house, not sure where she was going so late in the day. Eventually, she stopped, sitting with her back to a wall, staring at the derelict tower across the way. If these people were sympathis, it made sense to speak to the ashes. Perhaps Angie, Byren and all the rest had simply crossed over, the Nether transforming them into ashes.

Cilla eyed the building that rattled every few moments, wrapping her arms around herself. As night drew in around her, the cool air bit at her skin. Moonlight streamed down, a stillness in the air that settled around her, like the night was waiting.

She stared at the shadow beneath the building, the moon far behind. It made sense, that's what shadows did, but something seemed –

Darkness rushed at her.

Cilla jerked, hands flying up to protect her face. A powerful breeze slammed into her, a force pressing her against the wall, sweeping her hair back. When it stopped, she peeled her eyes open.

The shadow floated in the centre of the street. Two arms, two legs, a head, but frayed at the edges, the way heat shimmered off the ground on a hot day, as if the shadow were bleeding away into the night.

'W–what are you?' she asked. 'What do you want?'

It shot forward; arm extended.

Cilla screamed, slamming her eyes shut.

'Hey! Hey!' a voice yelled. Cilla drew open her eyes. The shadow was still there, unmoving, waiting, just inches away now. Cilla flicked her gaze up to the top window of a nearby housing settlement, where an elderly man was leaning out. 'Shut up with your screaming girl!'

‘Help me, please!’ Cilla begged. ‘Can’t you see it?’

‘All I see is a bad night’s sleep if you don’t shut up!’

The window slammed shut. The night stilled. The shadow hovered. Cilla found it in herself to stand. Legs trembling, she met the creature’s black stare. ‘What do you want?’

Blackness pulsed around her, and it disappeared.



The next day, she found her guard again. Alinac, was the name the other guard had called her. Seemed the woman was relegated to one particular part of West Bridge, and this worked fine for Cilla. Alinac groaned upon seeing her, but listened to what she had to say.

‘A shadow?’ A smile slipped onto her face. ‘You said you were near the ashe tower?’

‘It wasn’t an ashe!’ Cilla replied. ‘It was all shadow. No face, barely a shape. But it reached for me. And I’ve been seeing things in the wellspring.’

Alinac frowned. ‘What things?’

‘Shadows,’ Cilla explained, ‘ripping over the surface. What if this is some kind of new magic? A creature we’re unaware of?’

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ she replied, with a shake of her head, ‘the artificers are probably aware of it, even if you aren’t. If there was something to worry about, we’d know.’

‘There is something in the shadows, I know it.’ Cilla took a deep breath. ‘What if this is connected to the missing people?’

Alinac frowned. ‘Bit of a stretch.’

‘No,’ Cilla shook her head, ‘I started seeing them the moment I began my investigation. What if these things are taking people? Hurting them?’

‘And they’re upset with you for trying to ruin their evil shadow-y plans?’

‘Fine,’ Cilla picked up her bag, ‘no one cares. I get it. My parents don’t listen to me, why would you?’

‘Hey, come on, I didn’t mean—’

But Cilla was gone. If she was putting herself at risk by speaking to a guard that way, she wasn’t paying the consequences. Not yet. Besides, what was the point of getting these people to believe her?

The markets swallowed her up. The first place she'd been forgotten, so why was she drawn to it time and again? She spotted Nolken and made her way over. There was a new paper waiting, so she reached into her pocket for the shuck. Then she paused.

The thought of reading that there were more missing people was too exhausting to consider. More names meant more opportunities for her to fail. She had discovered nothing useful yet.

As Cilla approached Nolken's stall, she withdrew her hand from her pocket, leaving the shuck there. Nolken carried on reading a scrap of parchment in his hand, lounging back in his seat, one foot crossed over his knee.

'Nolken?' Cilla ventured.

Nolken turned the parchment over and continued reading. Cilla clapped her hands once and the old man startled. He blinked up at her. 'Sorry, love,' he mumbled, 'was caught up.'

He held out a paper.

'No,' she waved him off, 'not today.'

He dropped it. 'Uh-oh. What's wrong?'

Cilla stared at the people around her. 'I have a theory, but it's mad and no one will believe me.'

'Tell it to me,' he offered, sitting forward in his chair. 'I'm likely to believe anything at this point. Lost my mind years ago.'

'No,' she shook her head, 'I don't even know what it is and, even if I did, I wouldn't know where to begin. Who would listen to me?'

'Authorities will listen if there's something worth their time,' Nolken replied. 'Don't matter that you're a westerner.'

But they hadn't listened. Cilla crossed her arms and blew out a slow breath, chewing on her bottom lip. 'It's alright. I'll talk to you later.'

As Cilla walked away, she pulled her arms as close to her body as possible. She wanted to be alone, anywhere but stuck on this bridge. All this city cared about was one missing rich little girl. The rest? They were like drops of rain being consumed by the wellspring. A flash in the sky, a mere instant, then gone forever, no longer important.

Or perhaps they were never important.



Her family was halfway through dinner by the time Cilla returned home. The door thumped shut, and she stood just behind them, arms crossed, waiting for them to see her.

‘What do you know?’ her father said cheerfully. Cilla stepped into the room just as he lifted his head. ‘I found Anna’s missing marble, after all!’

Cilla’s heart deflated as her youngest sister reached across the table and snatched up the toy. Her family was laughing now. Cilla’s eyes drifted to the empty seat where she should have sat. They hadn’t set a plate for her.

‘What was it doing in your bowl?’ her mother asked.

‘Must have been dropped in,’ her father eyed Anna.

The little girl made a sound. ‘I swear I didn’t! Lillian hit hers against mine so hard that it—’

Cilla stepped back into the darkly lit hallway and stared back at her family; jaw clenched. Why did she think they would wait for her? Her whole life they’d been forgetting her. Ignoring her. As if she’d never been born.

They didn’t look up when she entered a room.

They didn’t care what she did with her time.

They hadn’t set her a plate.

They left her at the market.

Cilla stumbled down the hall to her room, pausing in the doorway. She reached into her pocket and withdrew the worn and folded paper. Careful not to tear it, she opened it up and stared down at the names of her missing friends. The guard had asked her why she cared, if she’d known one of them.

She didn’t know them. Not personally.

Yet she knew what it felt to be them.

Cilla collapsed into bed and pressed herself into the bedding to stop the shaking. She sobbed, then eventually, slept.

Since she’d forgotten to leave an oil lamp burning, Cilla woke to pitch black darkness. Yet somehow, she could still see the shadow hovering next to her bed.

This time, she did not scream.

‘Go away,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll stop investigating their disappearances. I’m going to leave Keystone tomorrow and never come back.’

The slender shadow arm detached itself again, reaching for her. Cilla froze, holding her breath. Now that she’d said it, she realised there was no other logical choice. Leave Keystone. Start again somewhere new.

‘Please,’ she begged in a whisper, ‘I want to leave this place.’

The shadow bled away.

Cilla launched from bed and grabbed her pack. Inside it, she shoved her favourite green dress, the only three books she owned, and the friendship bracelet Nardi had made her when they were children.

She would make new happy memories; in a home she chose.

She wouldn’t be a westerner.

She wouldn’t be invisible.

She would be Cilla.

But something changed. Cilla froze. She lifted her head. The shadow was back. Only this time it wasn’t alone. She stared at the shadows standing in her room, all unmoving, staring straight at her. They had no faces, but she could feel their gazes on her.

There were seven in total.

‘Wait,’ she said. Without taking her eyes off them, Cilla reached into her pocket and withdrew the list of names. She unfolded it gently and risked a glance down, recounting all the names, just to be sure.

The shadows pulsed before her, bleeding into the natural darkness in her room, joining with it, surrounding her, hugging her like a true mother’s embrace.



Three knocks on the door roused Cilla’s father from his chair. He hated leaving it for anything but work or bed, but the three knocks were soon after accompanied by a stern voice.

He would not end the day on the bad side of the authorities.

A young woman with wild red hair cut like a man’s was waiting at the door. Her leather was wearied, much like herself, and Cilla’s father wasn’t sure he had time for

whatever she had to say.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked, leaning one hand against the frame.

‘I’m looking for your daughter,’ the guard said.

‘Anna? Lillian? What do you want with them?’

‘I think her name is Cilla?’ the guard ventured. ‘The paperman told me this was where she lived. Is that correct?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ he nodded, ‘she in trouble?’

Whatever that girl had done she’d answer for. She was old enough to deal with it herself.

‘No,’ the guard hurried, ‘but I haven’t seen her in over a week now and neither has the paperman. It’s not like her.’ She chuckled. ‘At least, from what I can tell. I just wanted to check in on her.’

‘Check in?’ he cocked a brow. ‘Well, she’s not here. I don’t think.’

‘I already stopped by the weavers,’ the guard said, ‘they told me she hasn’t been at work for several days. So... she must be here?’

He shrugged. ‘She’s not. Haven’t seen her in a few days.’

‘A few days?’ the woman took a step into the house. ‘And you’re not worried?’

‘Should I be?’

‘May I see her room?’

He was reluctant to let this guard anywhere on his property, but he couldn’t very well tell her so. With a sigh, he waved for her to follow.

The door to the girl’s room fell open with a thump. He waved into the room. ‘See. Not here.’

The guard stepped inside. One slow, deliberate movement. ‘When did you see her last?’

Who knew where that girl went? ‘Few days. She keeps to herself.’

The tall woman eyed him, then cast her eyes across the room. She stepped inside, bending down to observe a pack strewn across the girl’s bedroom floor, contents spilling out of it like the innards of a dead man.

The guard picked up a single piece of parchment and frowned at it. ‘Is this all hers?’

He shrugged. ‘Guess so.’

‘Looks like she was going somewhere,’ the guard clutched the parchment in her hand, ‘and she never made it.’

The End

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Lost Things

Jaidyn Groth

Mild Content Warning

The key to surviving this life is to look after that which you hold dear...

Garry Hopps considered his uncle's words more and more often these days—on long walks along the West Bridge, as the sun turned the sky magenta and the water below glistened like a million diamonds; during the dragging hours of his workday at Locke & Key, where his closest confidantes were the keys that passed through his hands; and around the dilapidated dining table with his wife and two children. It was during those precious moments together, as Will and Mona fought for the last piece of pheasant, that Garry heard his uncle's words loud and clear; an ever-present reminder of everything he had and all he had to lose.

'Any word from your uncle's estate?' Oona, his wife—too beautiful for the likes of him, but too loyal to consider anyone else—asked him over dinner when the children had departed for bed.

Garry played with the food on his plate, the barley and oat scones looking grayer than usual. 'It should arrive tomorrow,' he said, trying not to sound too excited.

Oona smiled. 'Good. That's good. The collectors have been around twice this week and I don't think I can fend them off any longer.'

'Not even with a serve of your strawberry pie and a smile?' he teased.



‘Not even that,’ she said. She toyed with the ends of her ginger curls, the only sign of how nervous she was. ‘Do you know how much he’s left?’

He shook his head. ‘You know Fitz. He was bloody bonkers and as frugal as they come.’

‘Frugal people make for large inheritances,’ Oona mused as she stood up and began clearing the plates. ‘You have the key?’

‘Always.’

He didn’t know why she asked. He’d had the key for as long as he could remember. It was his earliest gift from his deceased uncle; the promise of something to come. Enchanted to open whatever endowment the old man had been left behind. Garry had never treasured something so much. Even from the dining table, he could feel the weight of the key from its home within his bedside table. Never before had he felt its pull; its potential.

So, while Oona set about cleaning, Garry thought about the key, his uncle and the mysterious package arriving the next day.



It was raining outside. A frightfully heavy kind of rain that set the hairs on Garry’s neck on edge and struck a chill deep into his bones. The walk to Locke & Key wasn’t far, but it would feel much further without a jacket. Pulling on his only jacket—a navy blue disaster of buttons and patches allocated to him as a uniform—Garry eyed his bedside table, once again, feeling that magnetic pull. Today was the day. Today...his life would change forever.

It seemed silly to leave the key in that drawer.

What if someone robbed them while he was at work?

What if there was a fire?

They were nonsense thoughts. The kind brought up by anticipation, longing and doubt. But he couldn’t stop himself. Reaching into the top drawer, he pulled out a small silk pouch the colour of sweet wine and tucked it into the inside breast pocket of his jacket.

There, he thought. Safe and sound.

He patted his chest once, then twice and with a smile and a nervous flutter in his stomach, he set off to work.



Garry had never particularly liked his job. One of a dozen key polishers at the city's only key factory, he supposed he had quite a special job. It was certainly one that gave him quite a bit of attention from his neighbours and friends. But it was perhaps the only upside of such a job. The long hours of standing and wiping down freshly cut keys was hardly his idea of a good time. Not to mention the accidents. Aside from the demonstrators, polishers had the second-most dangerous job. If one key slipped past without a proper polishing...well, the nether, in such an unstable form, would be disastrous. He'd seen it once before, when Korin had been too busy doing a rather insensitive impression of Mr Locke and had missed a key that was already smoking.

Garry had never seen someone lose their eyebrows and ears at once.

It was not a pretty sight.

So, as Garry stood at his station, wiping each key down with his polish, he couldn't help but think that this was perhaps the last time he'd be here. This might be the last set of keys he'd ever have to touch. This might be the last time he'd have to work under the prying eyes of Marvin Locke, the scariest man he'd ever known.

It was because of Mr Locke's reputation that Garry didn't mention his inheritance or the key in his pocket. He didn't need a reason for the King of Keys to come looking for him when he and his family started fresh somewhere outside of Keystone. Maybe even out of Thastor. It was best to simply get on with things.



The chest was waiting in the dining room when he came home.

His family hovered nearby, whispering amongst themselves. Mona, the eldest at sixteen, eyed the ivory chest as if it were encrusted with rubies and sapphires. Which it was not. In fact, aside from the shocking eggshell white, the chest was fairly non-descript. Nothing gave away its contents and Garry supposed that was part of its charm. His Uncle Fitz may have been slightly mad, but he was no fool.

'It's here,' Will whispered, jumping up and down excitedly. At nine, the boy was already the spitting image of Garry, with black curls, freckles and pale blue eyes. Unfortunately, he'd inherited the Hopps ears too. Despite their size, they didn't improve one's ability to hear.

'I can see that,' said Garry, setting down his rusted umbrella.

'Well'—Mona waved a hand at the chest—'open it!'

He ignored her tone. It was unfair to berate her on impatience when he, himself, had carried the weight of it all day. He'd been in such a daze that he'd almost left the factory without his jacket and the key. Halfway out the door, he'd realised his mistake and ran back inside, only to find it not on the hook where he thought he'd left it, but hanging over an empty barrel.

Oona watched him silently as he strode towards the dining room table where the ivory chest sat. He wondered if she was thinking the same thing as he. That this was the moment their lives changed for the better. No more escaping debt collectors or sneaking off to gambling houses in the middle of the night to turn an extra profit. No more letting Will act as a guinea pig for every training artificer who passed through the city gates. No more holding on for dear life, praying and hoping for a chance to begin again.

It was finally here.

Garry patted his breast pocket.

He froze.

'What's wrong?' Oona's face turned the same shade as the scones from the night before. 'Garry, what is it?'

It can't be.

Frantically, he reached inside his jacket, fumbling for the pocket, searching for the silk pouch that was meant to be there. But his fingers grasped at the empty space.

A coldness settled in his stomach that had nothing to do with the rain outside.

Will and Mona exchanged a confused look. Oona was ashen. Their collective disappointment hit him until he was sure it would smother him.

'It's gone,' he whispered, mostly to himself.

'What do you mean?' Oona asked in a similar voice.

'I've lost it.'



The key to surviving this life is to look after that which you hold dear...

All day and all night, Garry scoured every surface, every nook and cranny, every shadow and sliver of space that his house offered him. But every time, he was greeted by an emptiness that dug deep into his skin and seeped into the very essence of his house.

Oona wouldn't look at him. Couldn't. Instead, she dressed in her nicest clothes and left without another word. Mona departed shortly after, muttering something about the markets.

Only Will stayed, hovering around the edges, careful to keep his distance from his father who kept muttering to himself and sobbing.

‘I will fix this,’ Garry said, more to himself than to Will.

Will simply nodded.

‘I promise. I will find the key,’ he said more firmly.

The next morning, as he walked the West Bridge to work, Garry saw keys everywhere. As he passed the boundaries of the markets, he spotted several vendors toting ‘The Most Magical Keys’ and ‘Keys that Fit Every Lock’. Normally, Garry would laugh at the blatant treachery of such claims—especially in a city where locks and keys were the foundation of everything. But today, he flinched at every remark and felt a growing pressure in his chest whenever he spotted a key that looked similar to the one he’d lost. Iron-made, ivory-coated, twisted at the top into a triangle. One-of-a-kind. Today, though, every key seemed to look like his.

I will find it. I will find it. I will find it.

He said the words over and over again in his head. He said them until the words matched the sound of the hammers in the workshop. Until they mirrored the scratching and plonking of the smithery. Until they became an accompaniment to the soft hiss of his polish and cloth.

I will find it. I will find it.

I will find it.

Halfway through the day, his supervisor Norman berated him for knocking over a casket of polish. The warning had been stern, reminding him of the consequences of such accidents. Garry thought back to Korin and his lack of eyebrows and ears. Even though the man has already lost so much that day, he had also left without his job.

‘Hopps!’

Garry looked up from the key he was holding to find Joseph, the only polisher he actually liked, watching him with an aghast expression. Garry followed his horrified face to the barrel behind him.

His stomach dropped.

From the top of the barrel, several iron keys were hissing and smoking, the nether contained within their iron skin slowly leaking to the surface. Before Garry could apologise or stop them or do anything, there was a loud *bang!*

It was an odd thing, causing a dangerous explosion. Several times, Garry had been on the receiving end of such danger—it was the downside of his job, working with nethered keys. But every time, he'd had the slight joy of knowing he hadn't caused this problem. He wasn't responsible for the damages. He wasn't going to lose his job.

Except, this time, it *was* his fault.

This time, he hadn't been paying attention.

This time...

'I'm sorry, Garry,' his supervisor, Norman, said later that day. The noxious gas still coated the factory and everyone wandered nearby with cloths held to their faces as they narrowed their eyes at Garry. He bowed his head, his cheeks flushing red. 'We have to let you go.'

I will find it.

Shaking his head, Garry said, 'Please. You don't understand. I can't afford to lose this job and—'

Norman silenced him with a look. 'No one can afford to lose this job, Garry. But you know Mr Locke's policy. You put the whole factory in danger.'

He wanted to beg. He contemplated getting down on his knees and sobbing until Norman broke. But he'd already lost his job. He couldn't afford to lose his pride too.

'They need strong men in the mines,' said Norman, his gaze softening. 'It's unpleasant work, but it's work.'

Garry didn't say what he wanted to say. That he didn't need work. That he'd never wanted to work at Locke & Key to begin with. That he'd rather jump into the wellspring than work in the iron mines.

Instead he nodded, gathered his things and left, thinking about the one thing he *did* need.

I will find it.



Over the next few days, Garry left as the sun rose and came home just after it set. By all appearances, he was off to work as per usual. Oona hugged him goodbye and kissed him hello, none the wiser that he was spending his days pacing the West Bridge, wondering what to do next.

He couldn't tell his wife that her worst nightmare had come true. He couldn't tell her that what little money they had now had to stretch for the next month, instead of the next week. He couldn't tell her that something was growing inside of him—an urgency that led him in and out of the markets, contemplating positively stupid things.

Which is how, five days after he had lost his job at the key factory, Garry Hopps found himself standing in the markets, in front of an artificer with bright red hair and golden eyes. She had a crooked nose and a beauty mark below her left eye that looked drawn on. Her teeth were paper-white and so bright that it hurt to look at her.

But maybe that was just the nether.

Garry had heard enough about artificers to be wary. The rumours—or truths—blended together and he couldn't be sure what to believe. Was the nether part of her skin, part of the fabric of her being? Or was she merely a conman who had perfected the art of misdirection and performance?

It didn't matter, though.

Because Garry was running out of options.

'I know what you need,' said the artificer, flashing a pretty smile. She was younger than he expected.

'And what's that?' he asked, a little breathless.

She reached below the many blankets that made up her tent in the marketplace and pulled out a small box. Before he could question her further, she opened the box and revealed a hundred or so keys.

'These aren't what I'm looking for,' he said, crossing his arms. Maybe he was foolish to come here. Oona would understand when he told her what had happened at the factory. She would—

'Aren't they?' She tipped her head, grinning wider. She looked like a fox, ready to lure him in for the kill. He should've been scared. But he wasn't. 'These, my dear patron, are skeletons keys. They open anything and everything, regardless of the enchantment. The nether that runs through these keys is strong and malleable, unlike those piss-poor knock offs from Locke & Key.'

'They aren't knock offs,' he snapped, suddenly wishing he was anywhere else.

The artificer's eyes flashed. 'Well, they aren't like these.' She nudged the box closer to him. The keys seemed to glitter under the cold, mid-morning sun. In fact, if he listened

closely, Garry could swear they were whispering. ‘I promise, these are exactly what you need.’

He should’ve walked away then. He should’ve known better than to trust a girl with a predator’s smile and a box full of magic. He should’ve gone home.

But going home meant facing a chest that he couldn’t open. Going home meant facing the disappointment in his wife’s eyes as he told her that he’d lost his job. Going home meant that he was giving up.

‘How much?’ he asked.

‘Eleven sheckles.’

‘Eleven!?’

The girl shrugged. ‘Could be worse. There’s a merchant selling them for two talents. I’d consider this quite the bargain if I were you.’

Garry did the math. He knew how little they already had. He knew that the collectors would be knocking on the door any day now. But if he bought this key, it wouldn’t matter. He could open the chest and they’d have all the sheckles and talents they could ask for.

He handed over the money and took the key.

The bookshelf was missing. Not only that, but the half-dozen books that presided on said bookshelf. As well as the curtains. And the box of spare candles. And the rug Oona’s mother had gifted them on their wedding day.

‘Oona?’ Garry hollered through their small house. ‘What’s going on?’

A moment later, his wife appeared, an apron fastened around her waist and flour pasting her face.

‘Oh, Garry. Good. Your home.’ It didn’t sound good. In fact, it sounded rather the opposite.

‘Where is everything?’ he asked, gesturing to the front room, which now resembled something of an abandoned warehouse.

Oona dusted off her hands. ‘I sold them.’

‘Sold them?’ he repeated.

‘Yes. The collectors came back while you were at work.’ There was something in the way she said ‘work’ that gave him pause. ‘Apparently, Locke & Key notified them of your recent dismissal and they came by to arrest you.’

‘Arrest me?’ He stumbled back. ‘For losing my job? That hardly seems fair!’

She shook her head, her eyes flickering between angry and disappointed. Always disappointed. Always with him. ‘For the overdue debt, Garry. They’ve had enough. So I sold what I could to keep them quiet. I said that you were getting a job in the mines and that we’ll be able to pay the rest off soon.’

‘I will not work in the mines,’ said Garry, already reaching for the skeleton key in his pocket. ‘I know how to fix this.’

Under the ghostly candlelight of their house, the key didn’t look nearly as luminous and magical as it had earlier. It had lost the lustre and otherworldly atmosphere it had possessed in the marketplace. Or perhaps the nether lay dormant beneath its metallic shell. He edged towards the chest, which had since been moved to the corner of the dining room. Oona had moved it, thinking it was imposing on their daily lives; a reminder of Garry’s mistakes and disappointments. Though, she hadn’t thought to hide it. It was still in plain sight; still mocking him.

I will find it.

‘This is a skeleton key,’ he said, raising the key high for her to see.

Oona’s green eyes narrowed. ‘And what properties does this key possess that can possibly help us now?’

He paused. He didn’t like the way Oona spoke, as if she thought this whole thing was a fallacy and he was nothing more than a fool for hoping otherwise. ‘The artificer promised—’

An unkind laugh escaped her. ‘An *artificer*? Honestly, Garry. How much did you waste on a foolish gamble?’

‘Eleven sheckles.’

‘*Eleven sheckles?*’

It was the way she said, as if she were more upset about the price and less surprised that he’d been so stupid. It was the kind of tone that mirrored her later expression when he stuck the key into the chest and found that it neither fit nor worked. This expression paralleled the quiet sobs he heard from the kitchen in the middle of the night as he lay in his bed, the left side cold and empty.

The iciness made him wince, but the emptiness held him in its embrace until it became a comforting blanket.



The key to surviving this life is to look after that which you hold dear...

Garry wished his uncle had come back as an ashe. At least that way, he could demand answers. Although, he knew it was a silly thought. It was his own doing that had led him to this empty bed and empty house. Somewhere in the cracks and corners was the key he so desperately desired and without it, everything that was good to him was leaving. He knew that if he could just find it, Oona's smile would return and Will and Mona would stop spending so much time away from home. He could convince his old friends at Locke & Key that all the Hopps men weren't destined for madness.

If he could just find the key.

I will find it.

But days turned into weeks and the house became a graveyard of 'once-upon-a-times' and 'could-have-beens'. He couldn't quite tell when Oona stopped coming home altogether. He thought that perhaps he'd been feeling her drifting for quite a long time. Joseph stopped by the house once, to pass on his sympathies, but he hadn't been by since. Collectors came and went, taking what they could, startled by the man who mumbled to himself, clawing at the floorboards on his hands and knees—surely it had to be somewhere in the house! But soon, even they stopped coming.

It was a cold morning when he ambled from his house and stumbled into the markets, watched by an odd sort of fellow.

'Maybe I never had it to begin with,' Garry muttered to himself. 'Maybe this was all a trick of the old man. My uncle. Daft fool. He set this up. He told me lies. He—'

'That which you seek is deep below ground.' The odd fellow, attired in crimson trousers and a bright blue tunic stepped into his path. 'That which you seek is deep below ground.'

Garry blinked at the man. There was something off about him. Perhaps it was the way his hair stood on end as if he'd spent the night being struck by lightning. Or perhaps it was that the edges of his body seemed to blur and sway, almost disappearing entirely into the horizon beyond. Garry blinked again, but the man remained the same; hazy against the rest of the world.

‘That which you seek is deep below ground,’ the man said again, his words seeming to echo out of his face and surround Garry, as if his voice was the only thing in the world.

‘Deep below ground,’ Garry murmured. ‘The key? Is that what you mean?’

The man cocked his head to the left. Behind him, the marketplace awoke with the start of life—vendors unfurling their tents and blankets, eager patrons shuffling to-and-fro, and this man, too wide-eyed and excitable for the beginning of such a frigid morning. It was as though he had stepped through the fabric of the world from somewhere else. Though, Garry’s mind had hardly been present. There was every possibility this man had been here all this time and Garry was the one who had stumbled in from elsewhere.

I will find it.

‘That which you seek is deep below ground.’ The man was standing in a puddle, his scarlet trousers turning a murky kind of red—the colour of an infected wound.

‘What does that mean?’ Garry asked with more urgency. His hands clenched at his sides, frozen and furious. ‘The key? It’s underground? Tell me!’

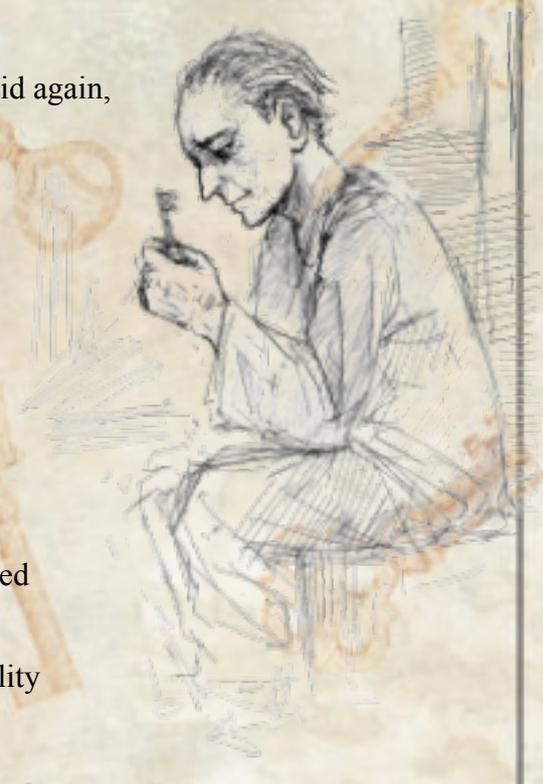
‘Underground, underground, underground,’ sang the man, starting to hop from one foot to the next. ‘Underground, underground, under—’

Garry was on top of the man. He hadn’t the faintest idea how he’d gotten here or what motivated him to do such a heinous thing, but he was here nonetheless, filled with an overwhelming rage that threatened to bubble over. Fists clenched at his sides, his heart hammered in his chest and he wondered, momentarily and for the first time in his life, if he was going to hit this poor stranger. The man had gone silent below him and Garry wondered if the force of his tackle had killed the odd fellow. But he merely glanced up at Garry with unfocused eyes.

‘That which you seek is deep below ground.’



There was nowhere else he could go. Not really. Not in a city surrounded by water, sitting on a wellspring. He supposed, the babbling man was probably crazy; a buffoon trying to



annoy him into beating him bloody. But Garry couldn't shake it. It was as if a seed had been planted and it now grew and grew and grew until it was a stalk, stretching high above his head.

And so, he found himself in the only place he thought made sense.

The iron mines were a ghastly affair. Filled with the groans of the overworked and desperate, Garry had avoided coming here whenever the occasion arose. In the end, whenever Locke & Key deemed it necessary that one of their own journeyed below, Joseph had always volunteered. Apparently, he found the dust and debris...comforting.

Marching over the West Bridge, Garry debated if he'd truly gone insane. Perhaps, he had caught it from that muttering stranger. Except, he didn't feel crazy. In fact, for the first time in weeks, when his path wound down and down to the guarded entrance to the mines, he felt like he had a purpose.

'Joseph!' cried Garry, recognising the greying tuft of hair under a flat-brimmed hat between him and the guards.

His old friend turned at once, a piece of parchment clutched between his hands. Seeing Garry, his dark eyes brightened. 'Garry, my good man. How are you? I've been meaning to drop by, but Locke & Key has been quite a mess since you left. Did you hear they've employed fourteen more cutters and boilers? What on earth for, I have no clue? No one tells me anything. I did see Oona recently! She looks well. Mentioned leaving Keystone. I thought I would've heard such news from you! So, how are you, my friend? Tell me everything.'

Garry frowned. Oona was leaving Keystone?

Ridiculous, he thought. He would fix this. He would right this wrong before she had a chance to pack away their life together and disappear with the children. But for now, this was a mess to be swept into the corner and dealt with later.

'I'm actually on the hunt for something,' said Garry, eyeing the guard behind Joseph. He was a stout man with an angry face. Garry didn't like his chances of sneaking passed, unobstructed. 'I've lost a key.'

Joseph smiled. 'Everyone in this city has lost a key at some point, Garry. You'll have to be more specific.'

Cheeks flushing, Garry bit his tongue to keep from snapping. Didn't Joseph understand how urgent this was?

'It's an ivory-coated key. Hatted with a triangle. One-of-a-kind.'

Joseph remained silent, a funny kind of expression coming over his face. Reaching inside his navy-blue jacket, his hand disappeared for a moment, returning seconds later with a key.

Garry stilled.

‘Is this what you’re after?’ asked Joseph with a kind smile. ‘I found it in here one day after work and completely forgot about it until now. You know me. I don’t like to throw anything away. Everything has its place. Everything has its purpose. Turns out I was right to hold on to this one and—’

‘Sorry, Joe!’ Garry said, already snatching the key from his fingers. ‘I must run. I’ll see you soon! Truly. We must do dinner!’

But Garry had no intention of following through on such social fantasies. He had a chest to unlock.



His house was a hollowed-out husk of a home. Despair clung to every wall, old memories slipping between the floorboards, disappointment slapping him across the face.

But not for long.

Garry gripped the key so hard that the triangle on top cut deep into the palm of his hand. He might have let it go, might have tended to the raw wound, but the pulsing from the key was so strong, so loud, that he dare not release his hold. Besides, one more careless slip up and he’d truly have nothing.

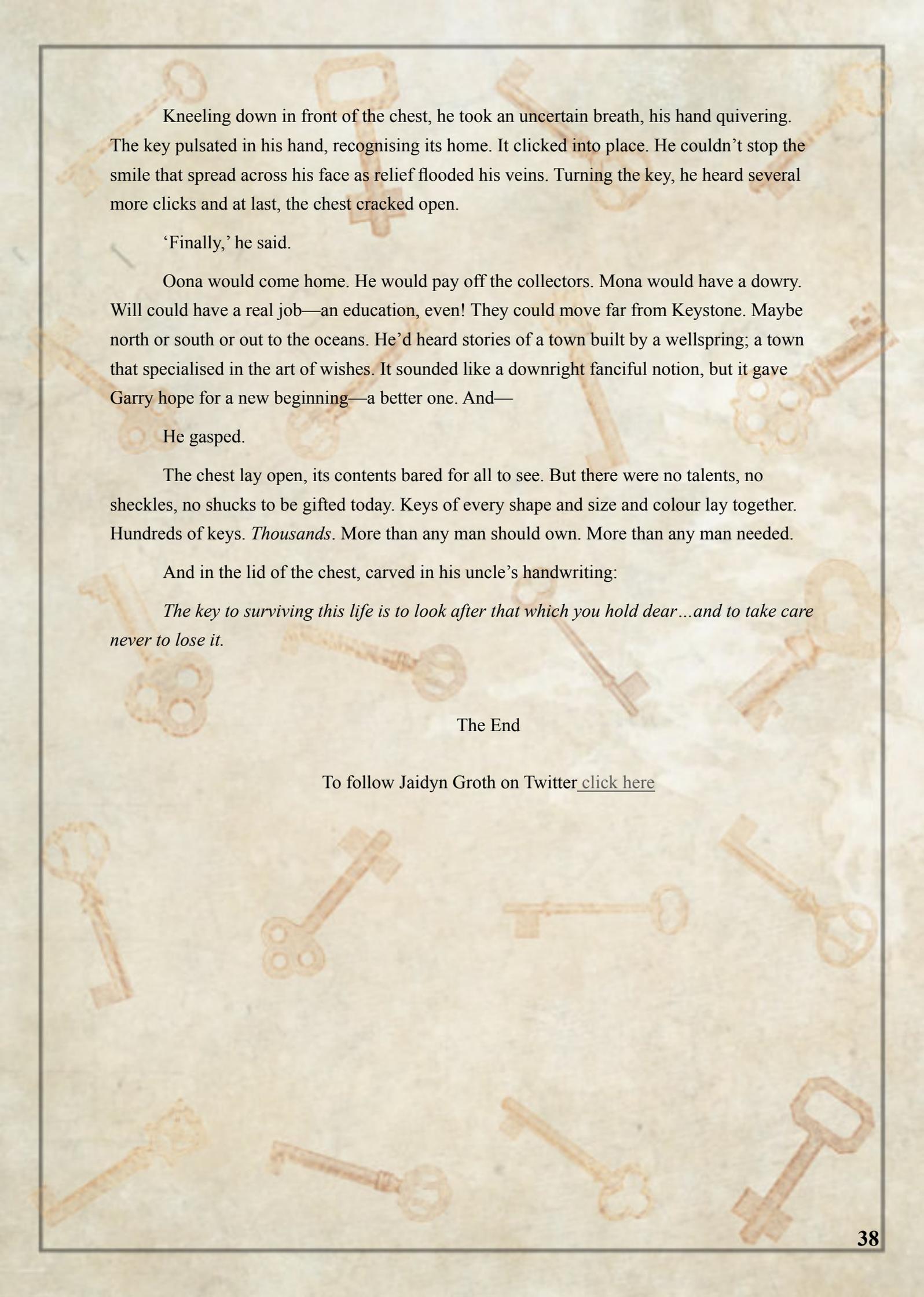
A draft escaped from somewhere, the chilled winds of Harvest creeping along beside him. His breath echoed around him.

Had the house always been this empty?

The kitchen was stripped bare, the dining room too. In fact, the only thing that remained in the front of his old house was the ivory chest, so stark against the rotting wood that encompassed his home.

‘I found it,’ he whispered aloud. Perhaps, if he whispered loud enough, Oona would hear his call from wherever she was. She’d come running home, Will and Mona clambering behind her and when they came through the door—

Garry opened his hand. Blood welled to the surface of his skin, staining the key an ominous ruby colour. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he had it now. It was here. It was fine. Everything would be fine.

The background of the page is a light beige or cream color, featuring a repeating pattern of various keys in a golden-brown hue. The keys are scattered across the page, some overlapping, and they come in different shapes and sizes, including simple skeleton keys and more ornate, decorative keys. The pattern is subtle and serves as a decorative backdrop for the text.

Kneeling down in front of the chest, he took an uncertain breath, his hand quivering. The key pulsed in his hand, recognising its home. It clicked into place. He couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face as relief flooded his veins. Turning the key, he heard several more clicks and at last, the chest cracked open.

'Finally,' he said.

Oona would come home. He would pay off the collectors. Mona would have a dowry. Will could have a real job—an education, even! They could move far from Keystone. Maybe north or south or out to the oceans. He'd heard stories of a town built by a wellspring; a town that specialised in the art of wishes. It sounded like a downright fanciful notion, but it gave Garry hope for a new beginning—a better one. And—

He gasped.

The chest lay open, its contents bared for all to see. But there were no talents, no sheckles, no shucks to be gifted today. Keys of every shape and size and colour lay together. Hundreds of keys. *Thousands*. More than any man should own. More than any man needed.

And in the lid of the chest, carved in his uncle's handwriting:

The key to surviving this life is to look after that which you hold dear...and to take care never to lose it.

The End

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Content Warning

Rowers hummed as they dipped their oars into the water. Their sound rose and fell with the waves that crashed against the hull and the steady beat of the drummer. The sails were taut with the wind, a gift from the skies, and a good omen for the battle to come.

The other ships in the war fleet sailed on every side of them, with their black dragon figureheads, and their prows cutting through the grey waters.

Despite the thick layer of clouds blotting out the sun, Jebran raised a hand to his forehead to shade his eyes. The other warriors were tense, conversation had died out hours ago, and those who should be sleeping paced and milled against the railings, staring out at the horizon. There was no sight of land in any direction, but they were getting close.

Jebran ran the whetstone down his curved blade, feeling the rumble of the stone in his fingers. The air was cold and wet from the sea, and it clung to his skin. Lifting the stone he set it against the edge, already sharp, and followed it down again. He kept his gaze on the blade, his mind on the vibrating of the whetstone. He did not want to leave this moment. In this moment, he was



alive, he was whole, and he was not a coward. By evening's fall, any one of them might not be.

A gull, in the distance, caught Jebran's eye. Fear roiled in his guts like a snake.

There it was, time, slipping forward, taking with it the last of Jebran as a boy. No matter how much he poured his mind and senses into collecting every piece of a moment, he couldn't hold onto it.

The gull grew closer, soaring on a draft.

Now was not the place to let his mind wander into the future, or the past. What had come and what was written, could not be changed. He must stay in the now, make the choices it demanded and prove himself a warrior. Jebran could not stay a boy forever, and his brother would need men he could trust if he was to bring them the great victory promised to them by the alders and their reading of the stars.

Jebran climbed down the ladder into the hull, past the rowing men to the lowest level that sat beneath the ocean's surface. The inside of the ship was filled with crates and barrels, a single area cleared near the middle for gatherings. Only the fiercest warriors of the Chieftain's circle could venture here.

It was not a place Jebran could feel at ease. It was not a place he had earned.

Armaghan. His brother and Chief, sat across from Shabaz, the white-haired aldar.

Armaghan was nineteen tosamnes, his face still not yet showing any signs of a beard. They looked alike, Jebran and Armaghan. The same silk black hair, dangling past their shoulders, their faces clinging to boyhood and their eyes the colour of slate. But Armaghan bore the scars of many battles and Jebran's skin; only the scratches of an adventurous boy.

'Brother,' Armaghan said, smiling. 'I have a gift for you.' He rose and dug through a small chest.

Gulab watched from the shadows. He was twice as big as any man had any right to be, with a thick beard that tumbled wiry and wild to his chest, and he dressed in the hide of the brown bear.

Gulab didn't like Jebran, but then, he didn't like any man, except for Armaghan.

Everybody loved Armaghan.

'Here.' Armaghan stepped around the old aldar. He held out his fist and opened it to reveal a smooth piece of petrified driftwood, the size of a thumb, at the end of a leather cord. 'From the beaches of home. It will bring luck to you.'

Jebran lifted the necklace from Armaghan's hand. 'Thank you, brother.' The gesture sunk a stone deep into the pit of his stomach. They all knew it was his first battle. He didn't need to wear evidence of it. But the years they had spent inseparable as brothers in the black rock mountains and shale beaches of home were gone, slipped into memory. Jebran could not reject his Chieftain, so he put it around his neck.

'What is it?' Armaghan asked him, his grey gaze piercing Jebran.

'A gull,' Jebran said, changing the topic. He could not voice his fears, that he would prove himself a coward, that he would die or become maimed and sent home. He would not say these things, not in front of others, and not in front of his Chieftain. Not ever.

His brother smiled. 'The wind has been at our backs, the seas calm, and now a gull has welcomed us into the home of our enemy.'

'It welcomes you, Armaghan,' Shabaz said, joining them. He was an old man with a twisted spine and a loop of rag hiding his missing eye. 'The spirits have foretold the glory of our people by your hands. You are the one we have been waiting for.'

Armaghan put a hand on the aldar's shoulder, and the other on Jebran's. 'The spirits are wise, and I am honoured by them. We must rouse the crew.'

Armaghan climbed the ladder, Shabaz followed. As Jebran reached for the wooden rungs, Gulab shouldered him out of the way, grunting.

The men were already gathering around Armaghan by the time Jebran reached them.

'Sound the horn,' Armaghan said.

The curved horn lived on Armaghan's ship. Too large for any man, it sat in a special mount against the port railing.

Wiry Ashkan, with his shaved head a canvas of faded tattoos, lifted the tip of the war horn and blew.

The sound filled Jebran and trembled the wood of the deck. The ships of the war fleet began to draw nearer to each other.

'Friends!' Armaghan shouted, standing at the prow of the ship. 'Warriors.'

'The Son of the Dragon speaks,' Shabaz called. 'Hear him.'

'Hear him,' rumbled the crowd in answer.

Jebran added his voice, trying to keep the quiver from it.

Behind Armaghan, the black line of land was taking shape.

‘Today we honour our ancestors and put an end to our enemies, once and for all,’ Armaghan yelled, and Jebran’s flesh prickled.

‘The Son of the Dragon will lead us to victory,’ Shabaz said. ‘Hear him.’

‘Hear him!’ the crowd roared and Jebran roared with them.

Armaghan drew his curved blade and held it above his head. ‘Glory for all!’

‘Glory for all!’ This time Jebran joined the crowd.

The beat of the drum, a slow and steady rhythm for rowing, turned to the triple beat of war. The oarsmen pulled harder, faster, as the land in the distance grew into jagged black mountains.

‘Bring me the shale,’ Armaghan demanded, taking off the key that hung from a chain around his neck.

At the stern of the ship was mounted a chest with three locks. The crowd parted as Shabaz shuffled through, bringing Armaghan’s key. Shabaz produced the second key from somewhere within the loose folds of his robe and Ashkan met him with the third.

From within the chest, Shabaz lifted a small box of polished redwood and a golden clasp. Lifting the lid revealed a bed of fox fur and three pieces of slate-grey shale, from the beaches of home.

Armaghan met Shabaz and took a single piece of shale from the box, the size of his palm.

‘Jebran,’ Armaghan called.

What was Armaghan doing? His mouth went dry.

Jebran shrunk as the battle-hardened men turned to stare.

A hand nudged him in the shoulder, pushing him towards his brother. Jebran swallowed but it caught in his throat. He couldn’t stand up in front of these men. He opened his mouth to speak but his brother reached out towards him and more hands shoved Jebran through.

Armaghan ushered him to the railing. Taking Jebran’s hand he set the shale in it. ‘Say a prayer to our ancestors and drop it in the sea.’

The aldar frowned at Armaghan’s words. ‘This is not the way, Armaghan.’

‘He must learn these things,’ Armaghan answered.

‘What will happen?’ Jebran asked.

‘Whatever the spirits grant us,’ Armaghan replied.

Jebran shook his head, heart thudding against his chest. ‘I can’t.’

‘You, too, are the Son of the Dragon, Jebran. The nether will work for you as well.’

Armaghan couldn’t know that. Their father spoke often of the malevolence of magic. ‘You use it too freely,’ Jebran hissed. ‘And what if it doesn’t work for me? We only have three pieces.’ He shoved the shale back at Armaghan.

Armaghan didn’t take it. ‘We only need one. Our victory against the Bedar is already written in the stars.’

Jebran was not an aldar or a warrior. He was just a boy. Armaghan pushed too far sometimes, always testing the boundaries of his power. What if the spirits cursed Jebran for Armaghan’s brashness and nothing happened? What if the men took whatever was summoned by Jebran as an ill omen? The battle would be lost before they even reached the shore.

‘You place too much faith in me,’ Jebran whispered, gaze darting towards the men who were drawing near and sharing looks of doubt. Jebran may be Armaghan’s brother, but the stars only spoke of one Son of the Dragon.

Jebran let go of the shale, forcing Armaghan to take it, and pushed away from the railing to join the men.

Armaghan took only a moment, head bowed, casting one furtive glance towards Jebran before he dropped the shale into the sea and took a dagger from Shabaz. He drew the edge along Shabaz’s arm, next to a dozen other scars.

The blood dripped, like rain from a forest canopy, into the sea, until Shabaz went pale and Ashkan had to grab him before he fell. He was taken below to rest and heal.

They all waited to see what protections Armaghan had summoned from the earth’s spirits. Armaghan’s gaze drifted to the mountains.

The clouds above the black peaks began to descend like a waterfall, obscuring the black rock, drifting down until it shrouded the beaches, hiding the arrival of their war fleet from their enemies.

‘Prepare,’ Armaghan said, pushing through the group of warriors.

Jebran stumbled into the line forming to take their shields from the railing. The circle of oak, painted black and grey, was heavy as he slid his arm through the leather straps. The war drums thrummed through his chest, discordant to the beat of his own heart, and it made

his stomach roil like he'd eaten fire. He could vomit, wanted to, but it would just be another sign of weakness.

Armaghan silenced the drums below decks as they reached the edge of the mist.

It swallowed the fleet whole, muffling the sounds of the oars and disappearing the other ships from view.

Jebran couldn't see beyond a few feet. His breath came fast and shallow and he loosened his sword in his scabbard. He shifted foot to foot.

Unaffected by the watery shroud draped over them, Armaghan appeared.

'Keep your shield high,' Armaghan said, grabbing Jebran's buckler and raising it to his chin. 'And keep a strong hand on your sword. And do not fear. The Bedar will fall, it is written. When you feel the boat run aground, it's time. Ashkan will fight beside you, stay close to him.'

Ashkan was there, appearing from the mist. His gaze met Jebran's and quickly looked away. He knew what he did, what Armaghan asked of him. Jebran's cheeks blazed with heat.

'You shame me,' Jebran hissed.

Armaghan put his hand on Jebran's cheek. 'I do not mean to. I love you.'

'Then remove Ashkan's protection,' Jebran said. The fire in his belly was burning up his throat.

His brother kissed him on the forehead. 'Forgive me, I cannot. When this world is ours, I want you at my side.' He turned away.

'Armaghan!' Jebran called into the mist as his brother disappeared.

There was no time to go after him. The oars rumbled as they were pulled into the vessel and the rowers climbed up on deck to grab their weapons. The boat slowed.

'Take a knee,' Ashkan whispered in Jebran's ear, making him jump.

Ashkan put a hand on Jebran's shoulder and pulled him down.

The boat scraped bottom, coming to a rough halt.

The mist vanished back into a cloudy day.

Armaghan was first over the railing, Gulab and all the rest rushing to catch up.

'Go,' Ashkan shoved Jebran.

Jebran stumbled. The air that had been so cold and wet turned thick and hot and his hide armour was tight around his chest.

This was it. This was where the boy Jebran would last exist. Here, on this beach, beneath grey skies, far from home.

Jebran gripped the railing, the wood cool beneath his hand. The drop was seven feet but it might as well be from a rooftop. Waves washed against the shore, dragging at the sand.

Ashkan jostled Jebran as he moved past him and over.

Jebran was the last on the boat.

Here he was again, clutching at a single moment while the world kept rushing past him.

Any longer and they would forever call him a coward.

Time to let the boy go.

Jebran leapt over the railing, landing in wet sand. A wave lapped against his leather boots.

With the mist gone, Jebran could see again. Ashkan was waiting for him, watching him with a narrowed gaze.

The town was made of stone and timber, just like Jebran's own. A thick forest stood between it and mountains of jagged, black rock, just like Jebran's own isle.

Horns sounded. Children ran for the forest, shepherded by grandparents who clutched babes in their arms. They were dressed in the same fur and hide as home.

It could have been his own people running.

Armaghan was half-way up the beach, Gulab at his side. Together they moved step by step towards the town, leaving a trail of dead. The beach was swarming with Bedar warriors. How was Jebran supposed to tell them all apart from his brethren?

All around Jebran, the other ships from Armaghan's war fleet were sliding onto the beach and halting. A few Bedar warriors slipped around the first attackers, sprinting full tilt towards Jebran.

Shield up, Armaghan's voice sounded in his mind.

Jebran raised it to his chin.

The enemy warriors screamed like wild animals, their faces painted, hair shaggy, eyes wild.

Keep a strong hand on your sword.

His sword.

It was still in its sheath.

Jebran grabbed the hilt and pulled too hard. His blade stuck. Ashkan shoved Jebran as the first axe whistled past his head. Jebran landed in the wet sand.

Ashkan killed two Bedar by the time Jebran drew his sabre.

A man bore down on Jebran, twin axes swinging. Jebran hid behind his shield; the strike battered his arm. The second axe came down, hooking the edge of his shield and yanking his arm away, leaving him exposed.

Jebran thrust his blade forward. It slid, too easily, through hide and wool and flesh and organ and the man's life leaked out into the sand. They stared at each other, Jebran and the man who was dying.

Was that all that stood between man and death? A few layers of hope? Was Jebran a warrior now?

The grey sky, the tan beach, the black mountains, they all stood flat like a canvas before Jebran, with splatters and blotches and trickles of vibrant red shining like fresh warpaint.

'Get out of your head,' Ashkan warned, felling another, a woman this time.

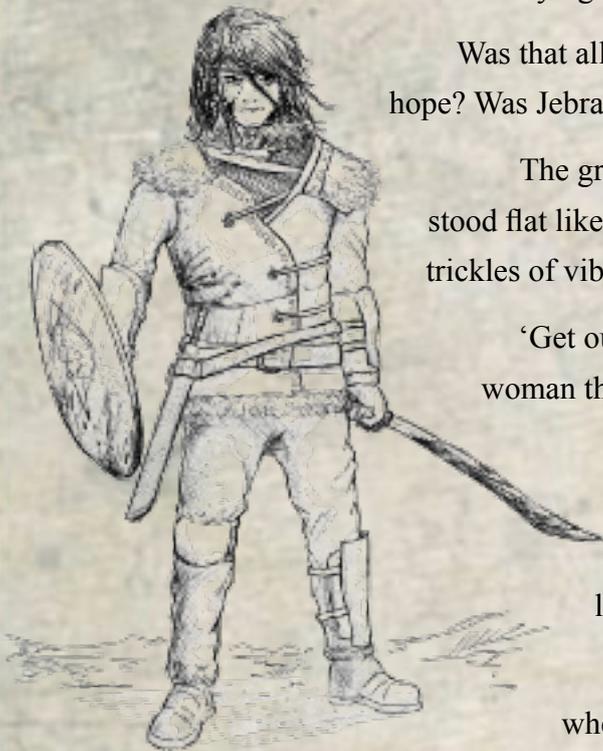
Their enemy had scrambled into a semblance of order, hiding behind a shield wall. Armaghan's forces met them, forming their own wall of interlocking shields.

'Jebran!' Ashkan's grip was tight and pinched where he grabbed Jebran by the scruff of his tunic, marching him up the beach towards the main fighting.

What more was Jebran expecting of his entry into manhood? He had killed a man who would have killed him.

He had survived. He was a warrior. And no coward.

Jebran jerked loose from Ashkan's hold. He adjusted the grip on his blade, picking up his stride until he was sprinting and screaming for them to come and kill him.



It was all luck and favour. The spirits chose one over another and that other gave their blood to the earth.

Jebran didn't want to be that other.

He kept his shield high, and his sword gripped tight. He used his buckler to press close to his enemy and his sabre to slip past their guard. He did not stay near Ashkan, but Ashkan stayed near him. They fought the stragglers and made it to the others.

Pressed into the wall, Jebran locked his shield among his brethren's and every time Gulab screamed to push, Jebran pushed, and in between he rammed his sword through any cracks in his opponent's wall. Sometimes it met air, and sometimes it met flesh.

Buckler pressed and rattled against buckler as, step by step, they forced their way up the beach towards the town, stepping over the bodies of their enemies. But the Bedar, still gathering themselves, soon outnumbered them and began to push back.

Jebran dug his feet into the sand but felt them slide as even more Bedar warriors appeared from the deep woods, adding their strength to the wall. Warriors pushed against Jebran and spear tips were thrust into any gap.

They were pressed back, despite the strength in their arms and the fire in their blood and the promise written in the stars; until cold liquid washed against Jebran's heels. Trapped between the Bedar and the sea, pinned in on either side by their own ships, they would die here; drowned or stabbed.

There would be no stories of Jebran told around the cook fires of his home. And no one to mourn him save his brother. This battle would slip to memory and Jebran would be forgotten.

He looked for his brother, to see how he would save them, but Armaghan was not with them.

'Where is my brother?' he asked Ashkan. The snake was back, twisting in his guts, sapping the strength from his legs.

'Do not fear,' Ashkan grunted. 'He has gone with Shabaz to use the shale. He will turn the tide of this battle.'

Armaghan had said they would need only one shale.

Jebran could smell the sharp tang of fear. The cold water and closeness of death was dousing their fire. They needed to believe Armaghan would save them.

'The Son of the Dragon will lead us to victory!' Jebran shouted.

Sea water lapped against his ankles.

Did the others ignore him because they were afraid, or because he was only Jebran?

The Bedar shoved and stabbed and water surged around Jebran's calves. Any deeper and they would lose all grip and strength to the sand and the waves. Armaghan was nowhere. Jebran could not give up.

'The Son of the Dragon will lead us to victory!' Jebran shouted again.

'Heave,' Gulab answered, catching Jebran's gaze and giving a single, curt nod. 'Heave I said!'

The hands pressed against Jebran's shoulders and back from the men behind shoved and Jebran shoved and together they all stepped forward.

That single step was sweet as victory and the snake inside Jebran coiled into slumber and the fire in his heart burned anew.

He was a warrior. Not a boy. He may not be Armaghan but they would hear him. They would listen.

'The Son of the Dragon will lead us to glory!' Jebran shouted.

'Heave,' the men answered.

And together they stepped forward.

'The Son of the Dragon will lay waste to our enemies!'

'Heave.'

And together they stepped forward.

'The Son of the Dragon will bring us the world!'

'Heave.'

And lightening split the sky.

The crack of thunder slammed against Jebran.

Armaghan appeared, standing at the railing of a ship, towering over all. The wind at his back ruffled the fur of his armour, whipping his long black hair. He looked like a dark spirit, his face shadowed and angry.

The Bedar hesitated, the force against Jebran's shield easing, the spears slamming through the gaps pausing.

A second bolt zagged across the sky above Armaghan, another crack of thunder. The wind grew into a roar, rushing off the sea.

Armaghan looked up to the clouds, lifted his arms, closed his eyes, and a moment later the rain came.

Heavy drops splattered down, soaking them in seconds, obscuring the world around them so that only this beach existed, only this moment.

Armaghan looked back down on the two shield walls and leapt from the railing onto the Bedar.

They scattered before the Son of the Dragon.

‘Break,’ Gulab yelled, taking advantage.

Jebran pulled his shield away and stabbed. The enemy wall broke and they surged forward. Their enemy were scattered, retreating up the beach, but re-gathering for a second attack.

Jebran tried to push through to his brother’s side, who fought alone, surrounded, but a Bedar stepped in his way. Jebran swung his sabre and it clattered off the man’s shield.

‘Leave me,’ Jebran shouted to Ashkan, using his body as a ram to barrel forward. ‘Get to my brother.’ The Bedar was knocked off balance and Jebran struck with his blade, but the man hooked it with his axe and twisted it away, tearing the sword from Jebran’s grip.

The man slammed his axe into Jebran’s shield, each blow rattling through Jebran’s arm and wrenching his shoulder.

Ashkan sunk a knife into the man’s shoulder and Jebran snapped the rim of his shield across his jaw. Jebran retrieved his sabre from the sand and continued to fight their way to Armaghan.

Not that his brother needed their help.

The Son of the Dragon was invincible. Armaghan’s blade was a blur in the rain, spraying blood as he moved through his enemies.

Jebran wiped his hair from his eyes and launched himself at another man while Ashkan faced two.

The rain was relentless. Draped over the beach, it hid the mountains from them and washed the blood from the sand.

The warrior before Jebran wielded a single axe on a long pole and the first blow struck through Jebran's shield, nearly cleaving it in two. When the warrior yanked, the axe stayed wedged in the shield and Jebran was thrust off his feet.

Jebran struggled to pull his arm from the shield straps as the man abandoned his axe and drew a dagger. His arm would not come free, the straps were too tight.

He couldn't run, or dodge; not with the axe wedged in the shield and stuck to his arm.

Jebran dropped his sword as the axe man stepped towards him. He fought to loosen the leather strap. The spirits favoured him. His arm came free. Jebran grabbed his blade and rolled away as the axe man stabbed the sand where he had been.

Jebran kicked the man in the face and found his feet.

Smiling at his own speed, Jebran looked for his brother. Armaghan was still alone inside a ring of Bedar, and wounded now. His right arm dangled at his side.

Jebran's throat clamped tight.

Armaghan!

Jebran kicked the axe man in the face a second time as he sprinted past.

He shoved his blade into the spine of a warrior at the edge of the circle that wretched Armaghan and stole the man's buckler.

Armaghan battered aside an axe blow with his shield, but the force dropped him to his knees.

Jebran burst into the middle of the circle. He stood before his brother, shield up, sword held strong.

'I've got you, brother,' Jebran said. He held his blade out, side stepping around his brother to keep the Bedar away.

Jebran would cut them all down

A Bedar warrior struck at Jebran with a two-handed sword. Even with a shield, the blow cracked against his body and threw Jebran off his feet.

As the man stepped over Jebran, sword raised, Jebran rolled to his feet. He struck three quick blows, each easily blocked and on the third, Jebran lost his sabre. It sailed away and stuck into the sand.

But while the man watched the sabre leave one hand, Jebran dropped the shield in his other and took the man's own dagger from his belt, slipping it up into the armpit and dropping him.

Jebran whipped around, dagger in hand, looking for his next fight.

But there was none.

The Bedar were fleeing into the woods.

And his brother lay still, ringed by dead warriors.

'Get up,' Jebran said.

The rain ceased. The thunder and lightning faded. Sunlight broke through the clouds.

'Get up,' Jebran said, stomping over to his brother.

Ashkan's hand slapped down on his shoulder, halting Jebran. Ashkan shook his head, gaze on Armaghan.

Jebran dropped beside his brother. With trembling hands, he lifted his brother's head. Armaghan's skin was cold and slick with rain. Jebran's breath was heavy and gasping, bruises already spreading up his shield arm.

The others gathered around.

Jebran bent over his brother, their foreheads touching. 'Please, Armaghan,' Jebran said. His throat was closed and tight, his nose prickled and tears slid down his cheeks. He gripped Armaghan's head, fingers tangled in his hair, pressing their foreheads so tight together it hurt. 'Please,' he begged. 'You can't leave me. You can't.'

But the spirits had already taken his brother away.

Jebran kissed Armaghan on the forehead, eyes squeezed shut. He couldn't open them. To open them would be to see an emptiness where his future used to be. To open them would be to allow time to keep slipping forward, further and further away from the last moment his brother breathed, laughed, cried, lived. Jebran's world shouldn't have to exist without Armaghan. That wasn't how it was supposed to be. That wasn't how it was written. To open his eyes meant to find a new path. Jebran didn't want a new path. He wanted to follow his brother.

Jebran dug one hand into the sand, a million little fragments ground between his fingers, the air in his lungs was damp and cold, the taste of blood burned the back of his throat. Jebran clung to the pieces of the moment.

A hand wrapped itself gently over Jebran's.

'We will grieve later,' Shabaz whispered.

There it was, time slipping forward, pulling at Jebran, telling him he couldn't stay here, no one could. That wasn't how time worked. First it was potential, then it was here, then it was a memory. It was always shifting and twisting and pulling you along like a stone tumbling along the bottom of a river.

'Find strength,' Shabaz said.

Jebran the boy was gone now, taken by battle and blood and death. He took a breath and opened his eyes.

With gnarled hands, Shabaz forced Jebran to let his brother go.

The warriors surrounded them, cradling injuries, soaked in the blood of their enemies, eager for guidance.

They looked to Shabaz.

No, not to Shabaz.

To Jebran.

'The Son of the Dragon,' Shabaz said, 'has brought us victory over our enemies.' He turned to look at Jebran. 'Now you will bring us the world.'

The End

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Author Interview

Bronwyn

Eley



1. Why are you a writer?

I've always been a writer, since I was a little girl. Apparently, one of my teachers told my parents that I was “too creative” (what does that even mean?) – basically, it's in my blood. I write because it honestly brings me joy, nothing makes me as happy. But there's another reason I write. When I read an amazing book, or watch a great film, and something about that story sends me reeling, gets me feeling, turns me into the insanely obsessed... it's the most amazing feeling in the world. I want to make other people feel that way with my writing.

2. What are your biggest writing goals?

Right now I want to become a full-time author. I am published (The Relic Trilogy by Bronwyn Eley) but currently out of contract. My biggest goal is to have one of my books made into a Netflix series like *Shadow and Bone*!

3. What is your writing schedule/routine like?

Very disciplined! I have a full-time job, so I write after work and on weekends. I find it very easy to do this, I treat it like a job, even telling my friends sometimes that I can't hang out because I'm “working”.

4. Which author would you love to collaborate with?

Leigh Bardugo or Jay Kristoff!

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

Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* duology. *And Peter Pan!*

6. What is your current reading obsession?

Nothing right now – I'm in a bit of a reading slump to be honest! I guess my reading obsession is my own work, I'm working on a new novel.

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

I don't often cry when reading! I think it was years ago – maybe *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green (because how could you NOT cry?!).

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

Something in the Shadows is about a young woman who is looking for a string of missing people in her city of Keystone. She is drawn to the investigation because the people, as it turns out, were all kind of... forgotten souls. Cilla feels a connection with them, as she has always gone unnoticed by the world, even by her family. Especially by her family. As she searches, she realises she is being stalked by strange humanoid shadow figures.

This story was inspired by a song called *In the Shadows* by Amy Stroup, a song I've loved for years but while I was trying to think of my first short story to write for the zine, it came on in the car and the line went 'there's something in the shadows'. Viola. Idea. I saw a young woman being stalked by shadows.

Why Cilla and why this story? Because there is nothing so painful as feeling unnoticed, unwanted, or unlovable. You know when you're speaking to someone, and they don't even hear you? That's her whole life. It is painful. I wanted to explore the people who 'slip through the cracks' of society. I think many young girls experience this at some point. Whether it's sitting in a room and going unheard, or not being listened to or trusted because of their gender. We feel like we may as well not even be there.

And while this story doesn't have a happy ending, I believe it's important to remind people to look a little harder at the people around them.

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

To fly! It would mean I could travel a lot more easily haha

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

Maybe a fairy, if I could fly!

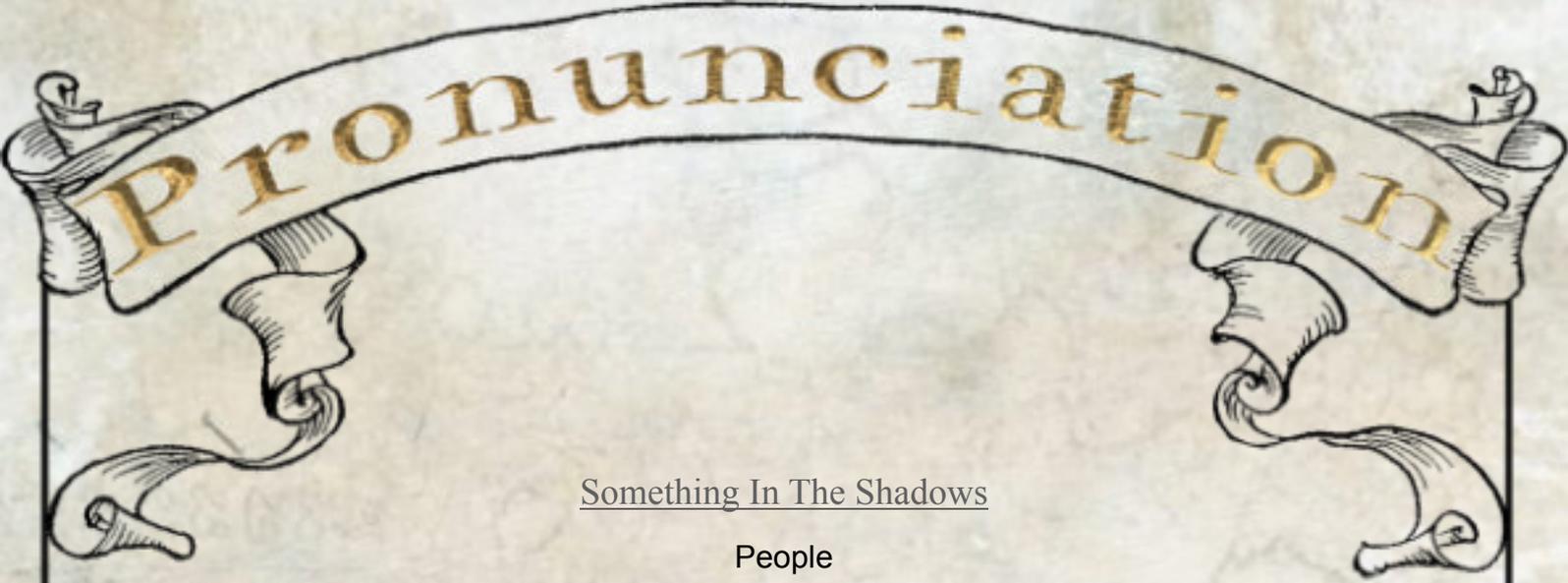
11. Describe your perfect writing day.

The whole day to myself, no interruptions. Some beautiful music playing, raining outside, my dog curled up on the couch behind me. Snacks galore and at least 5000 words done.

12. Any advice for your fellow writers?

Manifest the writing career you want. There are many ways to do this – reading constantly is one of them, writing as often as you can, even if it's just a few hundred words a day – but also by surrounding yourself by other writers and readers. You could do this in a few ways: start (or join) a writing group, do a writing course, join a book club, work in the book industry (publishing or a bookstore).

Basically, the more you immerse yourself in the world of books, the more motivated you'll likely be to chase your dream. At least, that's how it happened for me. I started working at Booktopia, was spending my days with readers, writers, and authors. Within three years I was published. It's not simple by any means – you'll have to work hard and want it more than anything else – but you can take steps that help move you along. The more chances you take, the more doors you knock on... eventually one will open.



Something In The Shadows

People

Cilla: Sill-la

Nardi: Nar-dee

Mathian: Math-eye-an

Nolken: Knoll-ken

Places

Surpais: Sur-pie-ass

Splanel: Splan-ell

The Son of the Dragon

Armaghan : Arm-A-Gan

Gulab : Goo-lab

Tosamne - Tow-Sam-Na (Summer)



Content

Warning

[Click here for more detailed content warnings - may contain spoilers](#)

Something in the Shadows

Mild Themes

Lost Things

Mild Themes

Son of the Dragon

Violence, Gore, Death



Content

Warning

Something in the Shadows

Abandonment

Children in danger/threatened children.

Lost Things

Mental Illness

Obsessive Behaviour

The Son of the Dragon

Violence, Blood, Gore

Next

in

Netherün

Feeder by A. L. Burnham

A young apprentice is tasked with feeding pain and suffering to her master's private wellspring.

Dismal and Miyah by Tace Samoset

A reclusive sympath hides from all except a blind girl who can't see his deformities. When she begs his help to find a wellspring which could cure her blindness; he is left with an awful choice.

Mercy of the Road by Ally Bodnaruk

A woman travels to Keystone hoping to finally pay off her debt to the nightmarish Mercy of the Road. All she longs for is freedom, but will she find it?

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