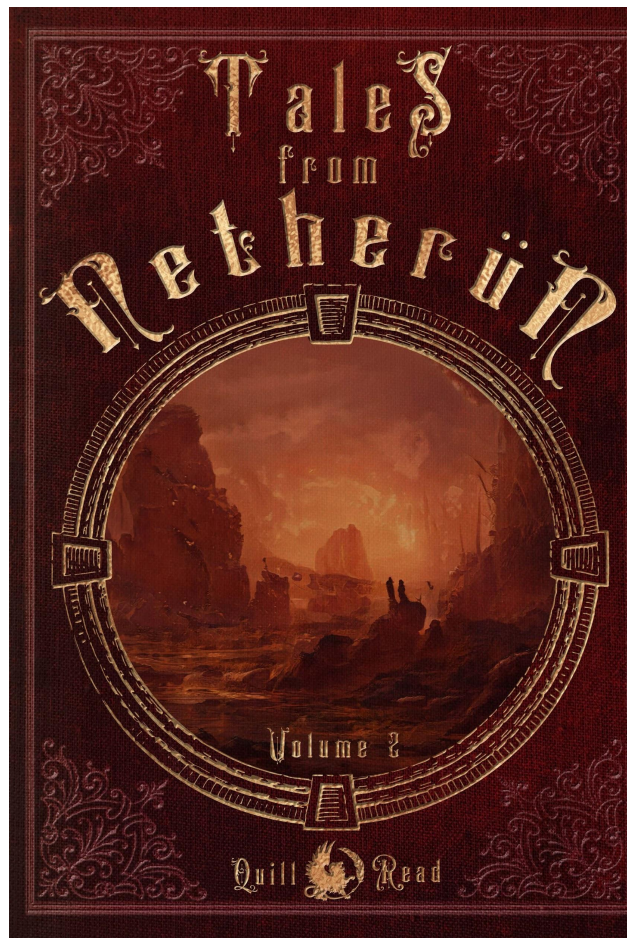


Tales From Netherün: Volume 2

Quill & Read



Cover Description:

A red cloth, vintage book with gilt-gold embossed words reading Tales From Netherün (pronounced nether roon) Volume Two Quill and Read. In the middle of the book cover is an image of a fiery mountainous landscape with two small figures standing on a rock.

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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.

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In this volume, you will visit the mountain-side town of Flint, wander the pine forests of Woodvale and return to the mining city of Keystone.

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Image Description:

A close-up map of the Thastor region of Netherün with three red flags pointing to the places the stories in this Volume take place. One is in Keystone, and the other two are in small villages in the foothills of the mountains to the north of Keystone; Flint and Woodvale.

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Feeder by A.L. Burnham

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Safety is warmth. Security is a flame. Therefore, it is only logical that complete insulation from the terrors of the world must consume the flesh with a scorching, blistering heat.

I find the boy I seek. He is in distress, hovering on the outskirts of Flint, a town no more than a pinprick on the edge of your Thastor maps. He is my age, or perhaps a year less. Sixteen, maybe. Then, it's not entirely correct to call him a boy. He likely has a trade, an income and his sights set on the future. It'd be unwise to learn too much of him.

It is not difficult to step from the shadows, to hover nearby, and allow him the choice to come to me.

'Miss, I need your help,' he says. Sirin, is the name he offers. His hair is a tight knot of thick, dark curls, likely to defeat any comb. He can't seem to keep them out of his eyes. 'My sister is sick.'

It usually is a sick sister. I owe a lot to sick sisters.

'What makes you think I can help?' is my reply.

I already know the answer, revealed by the way he studies my worn gloves and well-trod boots. Out of towners, like Sirin, only come this far if they are in search of something not provided within the comfort of their city walls. It is clear I am a traveller and know the land beyond Flint's borders.

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My clothes are thick and protect from the elements, with the scent of sulphur buried deep within their fibres. A scarf covers my head, shielding my tangled hair from any strangers who seek to remember my features. Sirin's gaze lingers on my bright, orange eyes.

'I'm looking for a wellspring,' Sirin says quietly, as if admitting a secret. 'There are rumours there is one in the mountain.'

This is unexpected, for there should be no 'rumours'. Fajron will be displeased to hear this, unless these rumours are silenced before his next return. I do not want Fajron displeased. His displeasure is unsafe.

Sirin's dark eyes dart to the stone huts behind us, as if he second-guesses approaching me, the strange girl who might know more than most. No one notices us talking, for all of Flint's attention is given to the bustling gravel road down to the quarry. If Sirin does feel apprehension, he pushes through it.

'I was hoping a sympath could help me find it.' His tone is earnest and raw. It is a good thing his sick sister is important to him.

'You think I'm a sympath?' I reply and don't correct him. Let him assume.

'What is your name?' he asks and adopts a more friendly posture. Sirin wants me to like him. He's smiling.

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'Inis.' It's been a long time since I've said my name aloud. It is more familiar to me as a bell tolled in Fajron's angry tones. 'Inis' spoken into the world is like a prayer or spell, often followed by pain. 'Inis' is unsafe.



Image Description: A rough ink sketch of a young man dressed in warm clothes with a head of thick, dark curls. In one hand he is holding a thin knife.

'That's a nice name,' Sirin says, and appears to genuinely believe it. 'Please, Inis, will you help me?' he says, and it seems there is a moment he intends to clasp my hands, before he reads my body language and

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abandons the prospect. 'I'm looking for a type of root, grown near a wellspring.'

I nod, seeing the full truth. Sirin has been promised a false cure by some healer, no doubt wanting to save face after failing to help his sister. But I need Sirin's hope and belief in this magical root, as a fire needs kindling. For I am weak, and weakness is unsafe. Sirin can help me recover my strength, and ebb Fajron's displeasure. Helping Sirin helps me. The cycle is neat.

I hold out my hand. 'I know where a wellspring is.'

* * *

Sirin has already packed his supplies. There is no delay for I only travel light.

Together we leave Flint and trek into the mountain. The view of the climb is monochrome, encompassing the dirt beneath our boots, the slate cliffside from which the track has been carved, and the heavy fog that dwells at eye level. The air tastes of foul eggs.

The walk is steep and cruel, and in good weather we could make it to the wellspring in under a day. But likely the weather will be poor, and if it's not that, something else will turn for the worse. It is the way of this mountain.

Sirin, though not a sympath, may start to perceive these dangers for himself soon enough. He may ignore his instincts at first, shaking off the

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cold drip down his spine and the feeling of eyes tracing his every step. He will tell himself he is foolish, and that he is safe in the presence of Inis, who clearly knows her way.

I do know my way. But I am weak. Sirin has offered to carry my pack several times now, and I continue to decline. His first and only attempt to whistle comes breathless and stillborn from his lips.

Instead, he asks, 'Can you sense the wellspring?' It does not seem he is prying for information, only company.

'Yes,' I lie, and point to the rocky ridges that stretch along the winding trail of this dead mountain. No trees, no animals. At what point will Sirin understand his magic root does not, cannot, grow in this terrain?

Fajron prizes these mountains precisely for their ability to keep people at bay, and allow him to maintain his own private wellspring. If there are other sources of power nearby, they are impossible to reach by foot. Indeed, most artificers would never let a difficult climb keep them from such a source; they are stray dogs, tugged by the scent of scraps. But Fajron thinks himself cleverer than most and has two reasons to trust this private wellspring will remain hidden.

The first is its nature. At this altar, Fajron does not offer prayers of kindness, blessing and goodwill. Fajron has poured his life into cultivating a wellspring of the other kind. He feeds it ill intent, distress and pain. Netherün provides only what it is given. It absorbs.

Power is power. Whether it is good or bad does not dilute its strength.

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The second reason is me. Fajron has tasked me, his student, to defend his wellspring during the times he is away. Where the pool fails to defend itself, I will do so, with the blade hidden in my pocket.

Sirin gives his first shiver. He clasps his arms around himself and observes with wide eyes the grey, lifeless rock in all directions. Involuntarily, my bones share an empathetic shake, rattled by the crisp wind tossed against the mountainside.

We will feel the heat soon enough.

‘Why do you live in these mountains?’ he asks.

‘Safety.’ My answer is honest, though it is not the entire truth. Duty binds me just as surely; Fajron made this brutally clear before his departure for Keystone. My teacher offers power. The world is cruel, and I know this more intimately than most.

* * *

Before Fajron leaves for Keystone, he tells me it is feeding day. It is time to refill our strength.

My teacher kneels by the boiling pool that burbles in the belly of this secluded cave. No souls know of this location save for Fajron and myself, and I am only here because he permits it.

It is uncomfortably warm, and it seems after all these years I am still not used to the presence of the wellspring. The water churns upwards as a furious mist, seeking to suffocate. My vision of the cave wobbles as the

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steam tampers with reality's perception. Snot and phlegm run freely, liquified by the heat. I wipe my face on my sleeves.

My teacher is rigid with concentration and reverence. Like me, he wears thick clothing, willing to endure the mucking sweat beneath, rather than expose unnecessary skin to this cave of liquid fire. His hair is dark and long, and his eyes burn a sunset orange.

Fajron plunges his hands into the wellspring and screams. I flinch from the sound but do not look away as he brings his shaking hands to his lips, cradling the hissing liquid as if it were a priceless gift. As quickly as his skin scolds and slooshes from his bare hands, new skin heals and forms. He uses the final drops of his magic to endure the refill.

Drinking deeply, he gulps it down between guttural gasps of pain. I know the raging heat for myself as it tears down the throat and into the stomach, and despite the horror of the exercise, I tremble in the anticipation of my share. For I am weak and my magic dwindles. I need my fire back.

Fajron sips his last taste and bellows as his scorched tongue reknits. His agony echoes in the sweltering space, feeding the energy of this wellspring. Pain and distress bleed into these walls, and the land devours it like a greedy, starved beast. I must gift it pain if it is to grant me strength, and in exchange for that strength, Fajron has me duty bound to keep it fed and vicious in his absences.

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This is the simplistic beauty of the nether cycle. We feed the wellspring, and it feeds us. I protect this place while Fajron is away, and Fajron protects me.

The completeness of safety. I am thirsting for it.

Fajron stumbles back, coughing and hacking. Now, it is my turn.

Bracing against the heat, I edge towards the water. My skin glows as I focus on my strength, and heal my body as quickly as it singes, just as I've been taught. The bubbling surface of the pool taunts and threatens me all at once. Bracing myself for the pain to come, I stretch out my naked fingers, teeth bared ...

'Inis!'

With the sound of my name, threat is summoned.

I am dragged from the pool and my head slammed onto hot stone. The sweat on my cheek sizzles as it is pressed down. Fajron's palm is on the other side of my face, holding my head still. I keen between rapid breaths. His hand will soon be the far more dangerous surface touching my skin.

'Fajron!' I cry.

'It is not enough,' he hisses into my ear as I squirm.

'Fajron, please ...'

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‘You have neglected your duties,’ he says. ‘When I refill, I expect the wellspring to be at its strongest. It must overflow with as much pain as we can give it. Otherwise, I go through this for nothing!’ His palm, pressed on my cheek, glows brighter and brighter. His handprint sags down into my softening flesh. I taste my own roasting gums. My eye burns ...

‘I can make this right ...’ I whimper.

‘See that you do.’ He releases me.

I lay on the rock and focus on my glow, seeking to repair the damage he has caused my skin. It almost uses the last of my magic to do so. My stomach knots and I accept that I will not have the strength to feed this day.

The agony my teacher inflicts on me in this place seeks to rectify my mistake. For every pain I endure here at Fajron’s hand, the wellspring’s strength will grow. In turn, it will make me stronger. I cling to this thought.

‘I want this done by the time I return,’ Fajron calls as he climbs out of the cave, ‘else I’ll feed you to it.’

I accept his instruction. It is on me to find someone else to feed to it instead.

* * *

There is an art to suffering. I know this from Fajron’s teachings. The art is an act of creation, for one must generate torment for the mountain to absorb. To this, there are three steps. First, the distressed person must be

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brought to the wellspring. Second, their hope must be taken from them. Only then should they be fed to Netherün.

But it's not easy to lure a person to where they do not want to go; a place that triggers their animal impulses to flee and self-preserve. Only the desperate fight this instinct.

I owe a lot to sick sisters.

'Her name is Ama,' Sirin says when we stop to camp. I summon the fire only once Sirin is distracted, so he will not see my palms glow.

'She's twelve. She's had the fever for a while, but we thought she was getting stronger.' He trails off, lifting his gaze from the path to study the township somewhere far below. It's too dark to see the sheer drop beside us, for the light abandoned us some hours ago. Despite this, sweat dampens the under layers of my clothes. My muscles tense, and I recognise this as the same sensation I feel when Fajron studies me. It is my instinct that we are not alone, so I keep my fire close beneath the surface of my skin.

Sirin too is uncomfortable, I see it in the way he thumbs his brow and takes shallow breaths of the sulphur scorched air. He is questioning his decision to come with me.

'You're a good brother,' I say, reaching for words to keep him by my side.

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Sirin answers with a wan smile. 'I'm trying. A good brother would know what to do. I'm only guessing. Leaping at anything and everything ...'

Sitting by my fire, he scuffs his boot along the stone where no roots grow.

'Someone who would try is a rare enough thing.' I don't know why I say this. It is not my place to comfort, for that is an act of goodwill and harmony. Such deeds will undermine the strength my teacher seeks to manifest in this mountain.

Yet, Sirin brightens at my words, and now it is a shy abashment that keeps him from meeting my gaze, not fear or uncertainty.

Doubt shudders through me. It takes all my resolve, and the memory of Fajron's forging hand pressed to my cheek, to tether me to my goal. I think of my safety. This world is full of dangers, and I know this, because I am a danger to Sirin.

Sirin is prey. Fajron is the hunter, and I am the spear. A spear can feel no guilt or sin for the choices of the hunter. A weapon is taken care of and preserved, so long as it remains useful.

Come morning, we climb on. As we do so, rocks shift and scatter beneath my boot tread. I must concentrate to stay on the shale-slicked narrow path, avoiding the jutting rock wall to one side, and the sheer drop on the other. But the increasing tremble of the ground is unnatural and I am slow to recognise the signs. The wellspring seeks to cause harm.

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My balance is ripped from me so quickly that I have no time to warn Sirin.

I sprawl to my knees as the stone trail shakes and rattles. Shards of stone dance on the vibrations and my teeth snap with the jolts. The rock splinters apart as an outward spiderweb in order to rearrange its shape and height. We are at the mercy of the mountain's will. The ground rolls and rumbles, inching me towards the trail's outer drop.

The mountain's attack on Sirin is far more direct. Shoots of rock, like small stalagmites, pierce upwards at the soles of his feet. He hops away in alarm and presses his back to the cliff wall.

'No!' I cry.

But it's too late. A spike, no thicker than a finger but as sharp as a dagger tip, stabs out from the wall. It punctures his back and ruptures through the front of his left shoulder. Sirin makes a startled croak, and his wild eyes stare at the rock spike jutting out of him.

My stomach clenches and I try to clamber to Sirin, fighting the backward motion of the ground beneath me. Sirin cannot die yet, not until we reach the cave, lest Fajron know of my failure. Running from my teacher is not an option, for he will scour all of Netherün to find me and preserve the secrets of his private wellspring. Nor am I willing to be without my fire and the protection it grants.

My safety is tethered to Sirin's correct death.

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Sensing my panic, the ground writhes with pleasure, lifts, and tips me over the side. Suspended in the moment before the fall, my insides hollow. I do not fight the drop, for surely this is what I deserve.

Sirin's hand clasps my forearm and instinctively I grip back. He cries with the pain it causes his injured shoulder to heave my body weight. I scramble as best I can as he drags me over the lip of the cliff. Together we huddle in the centre of the trail, equally afraid of the rock wall and the sheer fall, not sure where the danger will come from next.

The mountain's tremors ebb and ease, and the stillness in its wake is disquieting. The loudest sound is my quickened pulse in my ears. Its rhythm argues with the beat I can feel inside Sirin's chest. We remain clutched together for several moments more as the mountain returns to its slumber.

Sirin's blood, notably warm, is on my cheek and neck. I've unwittingly pressed against his shoulder wound. He is ghastly pale and his breathing labours.

'Sit back.' I assist Sirin down until he is comfortable then peel back his clothes to expose his shoulder.

'This wellspring,' he says through a cough, 'is not like the good ones, is it?'

He is astute, which is respectable. I take off my gloves.

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'No. It is the opposite.' I press my hands to his wound: one on his shoulder, the other to his back.

'Will it's magic still help Ama?' he asks.

Eyes closed, I concentrate on my glow. Heat ignites and expels at my palms. Sirin gasps as my handprints sear him, but I press firmer, not allowing him to wriggle free.

It is over in a breath. His shock will endure longer than the flash of pain. The skin of his shoulder is now pink and tender, resembling the shape of my hand. Sirin too is staring at his new burn mark.

'You cauterised it.' There is wonder in his voice. He looks at me, his breathing shallow. 'You're not a sympath. You're an artificer.'

You don't sense wellsprings, his tone accuses. You seek and harness them for your own gain.

I nod, and this honesty appears to pacify him.

'Thank you,' he whispers and sits. But he is looking at me differently now, his doubts stirring in the depths of his eyes. 'Are you okay?' he asks, despite this.

Reaching inside, I gauge my well of fire and am ashamed by my weakness. Most of my strength was expelled in order to heal Sirin. Even if I feed him to the cave there is no guarantee I'd survive drinking from the well. The process requires the fire inside us to hold our bodies together throughout the refilling of our strength.

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I'll be forced to wait until Fajron returns, so that he may aid me as I attempt it. The thought causes my mouth to dry. My trust for Fajron is a decaying thing.

'Inis?' Sirin prompts.

I become aware that I am kneeling, fists balled and shaking. He comes to my side, and with his sleeve, wipes his blood from my cheek. I cringe from the touch, for it reminds me of Fajron's scorching heat pushed against my face, holding me down.

'Sorry,' Sirin mumbles and pulls away. 'You have really nice skin. Is that a weird thing to say?' There is humour and warmth in his tone.

'It's new,' I offer by way of explanation, as I fight to bind the fraying ends of my nerves which are responsible for my quakes.

'Grew it yourself?'

I wonder at him, and it is enough to still me. His humour is a distraction, and it expels the sense of danger in my moment of weakness.

I tear my gaze away from him, unable to meet his eye. Bile rises in my throat.

'Do the roots grow here?' Sirin asks, sombrely. 'Inis, tell me it's going to be okay?'

He's scared of me, but is still willing to trust. Why? This instinct will see him killed.

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I tell him what he wants to hear. 'It's going to be okay.'

He doesn't quite believe me, I can tell. Yet, he smiles, his hope preserved.

And my conviction falters. Sirin offers no protection, but there is nonetheless safety in his words. Countless times I have fed this cycle; there are numerous faces I work to forget. Yet Sirin's safety, Sirin's kindness burrows beneath my skin. Somehow this time is worse.

There is an art to suffering. Only once the distressed person is brought to the wellspring must their hope be taken from them.

* * *

I shed my outer layers of clothes and offer them to Sirin. The heat of the boiling wellspring will harm him long before it hurts me. He struggles down the rocky climb into the cave. His eyes water and nose runs, yet he staggers on. Do thoughts of his sister drive his steps?

Heat engulfs us. It's a physical thing that clings to and slows our movements. Sirin takes in the cave and it seems he already appreciates this wellspring for what it is. Rather than religious awe, his expression is one of vast horror. This is not a place of goodness. The belly of this cave is antithesis itself.

The cave walls angle inwards, as jagged as natural saws. The ceiling is low and oppressive, which only incubates more heat. Save for the steam in my lungs, I am numb as I place myself between Sirin and the exit. He

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faces me, and understanding crumples his features. I witness the moment his hope dies. No magical roots grow here. He is a fool who has been tricked and his trust abused. There is no chance for him to save his sister, nor is there a force on Netherün that will save him.

As his hope vanishes, I relinquish my own. It is the hope that I will stray from the course Fajron has paved for me, and instead choose an outcome that will allow Sirin to live, and my soul to remain untainted by his death. I strangle and bury my hope with my own hands in order to accept what I am, and what I must become.

For this is not about hope. What I do is for safety, and hope is the price of safety.

'Inis,' Sirin says, for surely in this moment he is expected to say something. The sweltering heat has matted his curls over his eyes. Behind him the pool rages and boils, lapping up his misery. Hearing him say my name, as a plea and not as a curse, tugs at the place my heart should be. I feel it, but it is a distant thing, as if the remorse weighs inside someone else's chest.

Traversing the rock, I close the distance between us. I have followed the steps. There is no need to prolong this. I can offer Sirin that much.

Then I slip my knife between his ribs.

He jerks and sags. Beneath his curls, his eyes hold no fire, no resistance, only a devastating resignation to what is befalling him. And his acceptance awakens something inside of me. It is a fury that burns as I see

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myself in him, reflected back. Just as he accepts what I do to him, I have accepted what Fajron has done to me.

Then there is nothing in his eyes at all. My hand on his shoulder, over the handprint I've left on him, I push Sirin backwards into the pool. The water hisses, claiming and disintegrating him in the instant.

Only then do I allow the pressure of my anguish to rupture. On my knees, I offer my raw, choking torment to the wellspring along with Sirin. The heat of the fire evaporates my tears before they can spill.

Countless times I have fed this cycle. I have sated this mountain with the lost hope of many. But now, on my hands and knees, the creak and moan of its foundations alert me that on this occasion something is not the same. This time it consumes *my* hope — the shreds of someone who almost believed that things may have turned out differently. Sirin had caused me to waver, yet selfishly, I remained committed to my duty. And on that miserable choice, on that death of what might have been, the wellspring gorges on its largest meal yet. Its maleficence surges beyond anything it has ever been before.

Groans like distant thunder speak of stone splitting far below. The ceiling trembles and geysers bubble. This cave has never felt more horrific and powerful in all the years I have served it.

There is more power here than even Fajron has ever possessed.

It occurs to me that soon that power and strength will be mine.

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Reaching out, my hands blister above its surface. It is not certain if I have enough magic to survive my feeding, but I must try. Through it, I can learn to protect myself and no longer rely on my teacher. If I'm to ever be safe from Fajron, then I must be stronger than Fajron. Have I not earned the misery I have generated here today? Sirin's sacrifice, my sacrifice, will become my fire. My safety.

Fajron must not be permitted to reap Sirin's pain. He cannot have it, and with it, I refuse to offer him my own suffering any longer. I will take it all.

My hands plunge beneath the surface and I am consumed by agony. My glow surges as it fights to keep my skin, sinew and bone intact long enough to bring the fire to my mouth. Cracking lips part for the water, and my artificer's training rises to consume the nether and transform it from a threat, to the power by which I will protect myself.

From prey to hunter.

Heat surges through my veins, hotter than anything I've felt before. It dawns on me, with shuddering release, that Fajron will never cause me pain again for now I have more strength than him; the pain of what I've done to Sirin makes me stronger than him.

And now my safety is the scorching, blistering glow inside of me.

Sirin did not deserve to die, but I did not deserve to become what Fajron made me. There are inescapable terrors in this world, and all we can do is insulate from them.

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I am strong, I am my own safety, and I am duty bound no longer.

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

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Instagram: Alexendria.burnham or [click here](#)

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

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Dismal & Miyah by Tace Samoset

[Pronunciation](#)

Dismal crouched on a limb at the top of a towering pine overlooking Woodvale. It was night, no-one could see him. The town always looked like a nest of fireflies from that height, but he wasn't paying any attention to it. He was watching the light in the hut bordering the forest.

She was still awake.

'Mi-yah,' he whispered.

Such a pretty name. Not that he would ever say so. He could hardly say her name out loud, let alone tell *her* how he felt about it. But she was so different. She had told him from the first that his name made her sad.

Dismal.

It hadn't hurt to hear it. His name was sad. The hermit who had found him and given it, had said so. It was the sadness in the noise he'd made as he kicked around in his mother's birth-blood that had drawn the hermit to where he lay by the side of the road. He'd sounded like a dying lamb, hoarse and fading. Hoarse and fading and ... dismal.

He peered at the light. What was she doing inside it right now?

Dismal sighed. He never knew what anyone did inside their lights. Perhaps he would ask her in the morning once she'd felt her way into the glade.

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No ... she had called it something else.

Our glade.

‘Ours,’ he whispered the word and felt his face change with the warmth that soaked into his chest.

He lifted his hand to the shape his mouth made. A smile. Her words had made him smile. This was new.

His smile fell away. She only called it ‘our glade’ because she didn’t know the truth about him.

The light in the farm’s window winked out and the fields of heather went black.

There was no reason to stay in the tree. Dismal twitched his leather wings out of the pine branches and spread them open. He dropped from the tree and sailed through the air above Woodvale, across the fields above Miyah’s home and over the forest. He glimpsed himself reflected in the lake and told himself not to fly that way again. It was better not to remember the kind of different he was.

Dismal pulled up and beat the air as he dropped through the trees to land on his feet outside a shack. He stood with his hand on the doorframe and waited to hear the soft sounds of breathing inside. He waited with a hunger in his heart for it, but it had been years since he’d heard it.

Dismal had been a boy when, one morning, the hermit had gone, leaving his body behind. His old husk of a body. The body didn’t like being

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left and after five days of waiting; he'd had to find another home for it in a cave. Strange, he had been holding his breath to hear if the hermit had come back to the shack, when the hermit's body was far away. If the hermit was to come back, where would he go? To Dismal, or the body?

It was exactly the kind of question he would have asked the hermit ... had he stayed.

That night, Dismal tossed and turned on his cot. It was that glimpse of himself in the lake. He couldn't sleep with the memory of it leaking like marsh water into his head. In the end, he cocooned himself inside his wings and tried to blink what he'd seen away.

It was hideous.

The forgivable boy-ness that had once been in his body was gone. He was now manlike. He'd been too far above the lake to see if his face had changed, but for seasons now he'd had to blade-scrape grit off his chin like the hermit used to, so Dismal guessed it had become manlike too. Perhaps if that was all of him, he might not have minded, but the naked black wings were hard to miss.

Once, when he was young, he had found some children from the town. They'd been scouring the forest for berries. He'd heard their voices echo off the canyon walls and perched on a precipice to listen. When they couldn't find the best trees, he'd called to them and pointed out where they were.

A foolish thing to do.

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Most scattered, but two boys picked up stones and flung them at him.

They called him things that didn't make sense and it had taken a full afternoon for the hermit to make sense of them too. Dismal spent most of it wrapped up in his wings, sobbing until his voice was as hoarse and faded as a dying lamb's.

Dragon brat. Creeper. Beast boy ... sympath.

By the end of that day, Dismal understood why he had wings. Before he was born, his mother had strayed too close to a wellspring and stayed by it too long.

'Does a wellspring alter every baby?'

'No, only those who are sensitive to it. Those who are ...' the hermit pursed his lips, 'sympaths.'

It was a bad name. Dismal could tell.

'Promise me you will stay away from wellsprings, Dismal.'

'And she left me by the side of the road?'

'She did.'

'And you found me?'

'I did.'

'Are all babies left by the side of a road?'

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The hermit turned sad and took a long time to answer. It was in the wait for his words that Dismal realised it was because of the wings. The hermit didn't have any. The children looking for berries didn't have any.

'No, Dismal. Not all babies are left by the side of a road.'

It was because he was different. A bad kind of different. His mother had seen his wings and ... being seen was dangerous.

So, Dismal learned how to hide. He hid from the Woodvale children who haunted the woods in dewgrass; he hid from the poor folk gathering sticks by the road; and he hid from the rock breakers of Flint who cracked stones in the mountain passes.

But Miyah found him all the same.

With everyone else, Dismal tensed, turned silent and crept away. With her, he tensed, turned silent ... and watched.

Her hair was a soft brown and her skin looked too pale and thin to be out in the sun. He could see tiny blue veins through it. Her eyes were quiet, but her mouth suggested mischief and no one he had ever seen knew how to be still like her.

As soon as her parents left for town every morning, she would tap a supple length of cane along the path that led away from her gate up into the forest. Here she would stretch out one hand and count her steps until she touched the next tree, either with her hand or her stick. Once she reached the glade, she would sigh, kneel in the grass, and go still. She sat

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there all day. When the sun dipped behind the trees, she would pat the ground until she found her length of cane and tap her way back.

Dismal found it hard not to think about her at night.

On the third day of watching, he discovered her mystery. A pinecone dropped from a tree and sat on the ground at the edge of the glade. She turned at the sound, picked up the cane and tapped her way over to it, but after sweeping her hands over the ground time and time again, she didn't find it.

Dismal had never witnessed such a marvel.

The next day, she found the pinecone in the middle of the flattened grass where she liked to sit. She felt it over in her fingers and spoke. 'It is rude, you know, to stand by watching without giving a greeting.'

Dismal nearly lost his hold on the branch above her.

'I know you are there. I've always known.' She cradled the pinecone in one hand and patted the grass beside her, as though beckoning him to come. 'Time you stopped making me wait for it.'

Dismal dropped from the tree and stood on the edge of the glade, muscles tensed and wings poised.

She sighed. 'What is wrong with you? Why won't you come?'

'How did you know?' Dismal whispered.

'I can ... sense you.'

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'Are you a sympath?'

'Hardly. I just have a good sense ...' she pursed her lips and the mischief in them became clear, 'of smell.'

Dismal turned and crashed through the trees away from her.

'No, please!' she called and scrambled to follow.

When he found her that evening, she was lost in a canyon. Her face and hands were scratched, and she had no cane.

'Knew you would come,' she muttered. But the dusty streaks of tears down her face told him otherwise.

Dismal led her to the glade and found her stick.

She took it in her fingers and tapped her way through the trees, back to the path.

From then on, Dismal washed every morning before meeting her in the glade.

Over the next month, he looked for things that felt good to hold in his hands and were satisfying to drop into hers. Twisted vines, a nest and more pinecones than she could carry. She would sit in the glade and when the sun grew hotter, he would silently stretch one of his wings out over her to

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give shade from its full heat and she would sigh with relief and brush the feather he'd given across her cheek.

She was curious about everything. The colour of the feather, the bird it had come from, how it flew and where he had found it. She wanted to know all about the world, not just what could be found in the mountains and forests, but in the grassy plains and ice lands beyond.



Image Description: A rough ink sketch of two young people sitting on a rock. One of them has bat wings and he is curling them around his companion, a young girl with a contented expression on her face.

He told what he knew, but even then, he struggled with the few words he had. In the end, it was her words that helped fill the spaces between his.

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Later, when he was in the tall pine and she inside her light, he would say them over and over until they became his words too.

Sometimes Miyah would lie down in the glade, and he would edge down beside her and watch the sky drift across the gap in the trees. In the quiet rise and fall of his chest, he thought about the hermit and what Miyah would make of him. The waiting at the door every evening hurt. If he had Miyah with him, would he be so empty? Perhaps not. But there was no easy way to get her there, not without flying, and that must never happen.

He turned his head. She lay, half-asleep, with hair like cornsilk in the grass beside his cheek. No, she must never know about his wings. If she did, all that was good about these days would end. What he wanted was words to take her to the places he needed to go.

The next day, Dismal rolled a smooth white stone in his palm as he leaned against a tree. It had belonged to the hermit. The rock itself meant little. It was the questions Miyah would ask about it that mattered. With her words to help, she would learn that the hermit had once been and was now gone. Her knowing would fill the empty space in his chest.

She took the stone, rolled it over her palm and then across her lips.

‘So smooth. Where did you find this?’

It was just the right question to start with.

That afternoon when all was quiet, after she had helped him find the hard words he needed to say, she crawled her hand over to his and held it.

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It was difficult letting go when the sun sank out of the glade. There was a moment of not knowing what to do at the parting. She held out the stone to him.

‘For you,’ he mumbled, and pushed it back.

She ran her thumb across its surface. ‘Strange, something is carved in it.’

He waited to see if she would guess it.

She frowned. ‘A ... tree!’

Dismal felt himself smile.

‘Wait!’ A strange expression came over her face, half fear, half something else. ‘What colour is the stone?’

‘That of clouds on a good day.’ It was the exact phrase the hermit used to describe it when Dismal was a boy.

‘It can’t be!’ She ran her thumb over the carving again and blinked, then shook her head.

‘What is wrong?’ Dismal asked.

‘Wait for me here tomorrow.’ She got to her feet. ‘I need to check something.’ With that, she tapped her way through the trees and down the path to her gate.

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Dismal sat in his tree, watching the hut long after the light had blinked out, thinking about the way her hand felt. Everything about her was a good kind of different. The colour of her hair, the colour of her skin, the way she spoke, the sound of her voice ... the softness of her hand.

It was early the next day when she hastened up the path with a thick book under her arm.

‘Come Dismal.’ She flopped the book down on the grass. ‘I need you to help me.’

Dismal knelt by her. The hermit had three books he had fingered through as a boy. They were simple and brown and spoke of the healing properties of herbs. He had never seen one like this. Its pages were soft and worn. Rolling and flitting around the edge of each was a border of vines or flowers. Between the words were pictures of beautiful people doing extraordinary things. He stopped at a page where a man had run a long stick through a foul and bloodied creature. The words beneath it read; ‘*Anson slays the Dragon.*’ He lifted his eyes to stare at Miyah.

Her face shone with excitement. ‘Can you find the map for me?’

Dismal flicked through the pages until he found an image of mountains that ran from one page across to the next.

‘Have you found it?’ Miyah asked.

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He frowned at the pages. He knew those mountains. How many times had he flown above them? He saw the shape of the lake he always avoided. Indeed, if he looked closely, he could just make out the valley where the hermit's shack was hidden.

'Yes.'

'There is a story that goes with the map. Do you know it?'

Dismal turned the page and read the title. 'The Wellspring of Wishes.'

Her hand went into his and her eyes went wide. 'You can read!'

'The hermit taught me.'

'Do you know the story?'

His eyes slid down the page. It was about a wellspring, deep in a mountain ravine whose nether had seeped into a tree. Hundreds of years ago, an artificer had set within the trunk of the wellspring tree five carved stones, each as white as a cloud and empowered with the gift of a single wish.

Dismal paused. White as a cloud. The hermit must have known the story.

He read on. The artificer touched the first white stone and made a wish for wealth. The stone turned ash-grey, and the wish was fulfilled. Wealth came to the artificer in abundance, but so too came thieves. He

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came to the second stone and wished again, this time for long-life. It came, but with pain and weariness. He tried again, this time wishing for wisdom; profound loneliness followed. At last, he wished for love and was given a family. For a time, all was well, but as the seasons passed, his wife and children grew old and died. On the death of his youngest, the artificer prised the last white stone out of the tree and hid it. No one knew what happened to the artificer and the secret of the stone was lost forever.

When Dismal lifted his eyes to Miyah, something in her face had changed. A wrinkle creased her forehead.

She held the stone out to him. 'Did you mean to gift this? You didn't know what it meant. By all rights, it is still yours.'

'Are you sure it is the one?' he asked.

'How can I not be? Do you know how many hundreds of years people have searched for this? And you had it all along—a single wish.'

No, it was the hermit who'd had it all along. Would the old man have used it if he'd known what it was? For some reason, Dismal didn't think so.

All the same, a wish.

He blinked as the thought flashed through his mind of being like the young men who cut trees or cracked stone with smooth backs and no need to hide.

Promise me, you will stay away from wellsprings, Dismal.

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He dropped his face. If he strayed too close, the wellspring would have its way with him and he would likely end up a dragon with no man-ness left. Besides, he had given the stone away, so that was that.

He pushed her hand with the stone back towards her.

Miyah clutched it to her chest. 'Would you give me something more?'

'I don't understand.'

'Would you use the map and take me to the wellspring tree?'

Dismal sat back and stared at her. 'Why would you want that?'

'Don't you see what this could mean for me?'

Sickness filled his gut. 'The man hid the stone, Miyah.'

'What ill would come of my being able to see?'

'What if the world is ... not beautiful?' His voice cracked. 'What if it's *hideous*?'

'If you're with me, it won't be.'

'You don't know that,' he whispered.

She reached out and found his cheek. 'Thank you for the stone.' She stood and tapped her way out of the glade, but instead of finding her path home, she groped her way further into the forest.

'What are you doing?' Dismal called.

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She paused. 'My parents have left for the markets in Flint. They'll be away a full five days. They won't go again until harvest comes. This is my chance. I will have to find it ... on my own.' She tapped away.

Dismal watched her until she passed through the trees and out of sight. He held his breath, waiting to hear her turn and come back. No sound. His chest burned with the wait.

He growled, kicked away a pinecone and marched through the trees until he caught up to her.

She slid her arm through his. 'See?'

'See what?' he grumbled.

'The world is more beautiful already.'

He was too angry to answer.

She shivered in her sleep. Dismal stoked the fire closer to her and went back to fingering the pages of the map. They were close now. He peered through the dark at the ink drawing of the tree. It looked huge. Perhaps it was just a trick of the map, but it almost looked as big as a mountain. There were trees like that; there was the Arvore to the south. That's what the hermit called it. On a long flight, seasons ago, he'd seen it far off in the distance. Perhaps the wellspring tree was of the same seed?

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He held the map closer to the firelight. Between their camp and the tree lay a short stretch of trail. The forest had dwindled and disappeared days ago and it had been rocky paths and precipices since they skirted Flint. One more day of walking should do it—according to the map. But the map didn't show everything.

The trail passed what seemed like an ordinary mountain. It was nothing of the sort. A sickening power thrummed within its rocky heart; he could feel it.

Another wellspring.

This wasn't the first he'd ever found. When he flew over the wastelands, he could sense them beneath him. Of course, he was never tempted to draw closer. The hermit's warning was forever in his mind. Even so, he could feel the differences between each. Some had a heat, some made him shiver but not from cold, others made him heavy with fatigue, one filled him with the odd desire to cry.

They were all strange and all dangerous.

But with the one inside the walls of this mountain, he'd felt nothing so foul.

A cracking sound echoed through the dark. His head snapped up. He glanced at Miyah. She slept on. He stowed the book beside her and crept through the night towards the noise. On the other side of a rise, a small fire glowed. Two dark figures sat within its light. A young woman hunched in a cloak watched a young man with dark curls break twigs into its flames.

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What were they doing in such an evil, forsaken place?

Nothing good.

Dismal stole back to Miyah and snuffed out their fire. She shuddered in her sleep. The night was bitter now. He took her in his arms and wrapped his wings around them both to wait out the cold.

She sighed at some dream, and the warmth of her breath brushed his cheek. If only he had never met her in the glade. Tomorrow, she would make her wish and see him for what he was ... and the memory of this moment would torment him forever.

Dismal pressed himself against a boulder as the strangers trudged on their way up the trail into the mountains. Miyah stirred in his arms. He could feel the sleep draining out of her.

'What's wrong?' she whispered.

'Not alone.'

He waited until the two disappeared before shifting his wings silently out from around her.

'They are gone, then?'

He relaxed his hold. 'We aren't far now, but the way is all cliffs.'

Miyah nodded, clutching the stone in her hand.

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He stared at her fingers wrapped around it. All night she had held it just as tightly as he'd held her.

They edged around the mountain trail, a wall of stone on their right, a precipice on their left. Inside his head, the mountain bickered and whispered of pain.

Miyah was just about to take another step when Dismal pulled her back.

'Dismal?'

He stared at what was left of the path. Seasons, perhaps lifetimes ago, a landslide had ripped down the mountain and swept a swathe of it away. A stone's throw on, the track continued spiralling downward around the edge of a sinkhole until it petered out by a spring that bubbled out of the ground into a grassy pond, all of which was shadowed by an enormous tree. It was the wellspring. It had to be. There was nothing like it for miles. Even the grass looked strange in such a wasteland.

Dismal peered closer and just made out specks of grey lodged around its trunk.

The used wishing stones.

'Dismal.' Miyah was blinking in excitement. 'I can smell water and grass.'

He stared back at the missing span of path. She couldn't cross it.

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She needn't ever see you. She needn't ever know!

For a moment, Dismal pictured the glade again with her asleep in the grass. Then sickness filled the space where that thought had been. The missing span of path was nothing to him ... he could fly her across.

But then she will know how hideous you are.

The thought mocked him. He sensed a maddening glee at the pain he felt at the truth in it. It was the mountain talking.

The muttering grew, but now something else joined it. Feather light coolness was creeping over his skin. He shivered but couldn't shake it off.

The tree.

He had never come so close to a wellspring before, never felt its raw power, and now, he was snared between two. The mountain infected his mind, pulsing fetid and foul thoughts through him, like it wanted to dissolve from it everything that ever made him smile. The tree took hold of his body. Once its coolness settled on him, it clung hard. Through the maddening distraction of the whispering mountain, he could just feel the hair on his head growing, his eyelashes thickening and his fingernails hardening. The tree was altering him.

'Miyah,' he hissed, 'you don't want this!'

'I'm not scared.'

'I am,' he whispered to himself.

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She heard and turned to face him.

But before she could speak, the mountain answered. A rumble moved through it, pebbles jumped and trickled off the path and down the cliff. He was just about to pull Miyah into his arms when shards of shale stabbed out of the mountain walls. Two ripped through the leather of his wings and one sliced between his ribs. When he put his hand to his side, it came away slick with blood.

Then, as though the mountain had been plotting it from the beginning: the path cracked and fell away from Miyah's feet.

Dismal grabbed at her, but she slipped out of his bloodied fingers and down the cliff into the sinkhole. He screamed and flung himself after. His shredded wings beat against nothing. He dropped through the rising cloud of dust and slammed into the grass where he lay senseless to the pebbles pattering round him.

Coolness crept like a stream over him. First his head, then his hands, his feet, his wings. It turned cold, then to ice, and began to burn. He hardly noticed his side healing or the leather in his wings snapping back into shape, for the cold that flooded over him was condensing in two points of searing agony in his forehead. He reached up and gasped. Hard nobs of pointed bone were piercing his skin and growing out from under his hair.

No, no, no.

'Dismal,' the voice came weakly.

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His face flew up. He scrambled over to the slip of rubble. Miyah lay pale and crushed like a butterfly, her arms out at her sides as though trying to catch the world. He knelt by her, shivering and choking on the dust.

‘Take it,’ she whispered. There, in her unmoving hand, lay the stone.
‘I give it... back.’

‘No. Won’t.’

‘So tired, Dismal.’

‘Miyah?’

She didn’t respond.

‘No!’ he screamed at the mountain. In a blood rush, he snatched up the stone and flung himself through the ice-cold power of the wellspring towards the tree.

He never could remember exactly what happened next. Nor could he recall the wish he made. All he knew was that he gave the stone back. The tree shivered and filled with light. That was all.

When Dismal woke, it was a dull ache in his limbs that he noticed first. He smelled grass and water. He felt sunshine. Must be in the glade. But why the pain? The odd woody smell of smashed branches made him open his eyes and squint at the sky. Sheer walls of rock rose around him.

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Not the glade.

He grunted and pushed himself to sit. Dust and splinters trickled off him. He gazed about. The scatter of smashed wood and leaves lay like a blanket over everything. A monolithic stump rose out of it.

The wish.

'Miyah!' He scrambled to his feet and stumbled to the slip of rocks piled on one side of the sinkhole.

Miyah lay just as she had, arms out to catch the world.

Dismal clambered closer. Something about her was changing. The skin of her cheeks looked warm. He reached out his hand and held it over her lips.

She was breathing!

Then, like the shiver of a moth's wing, her lashes moved and her eyes opened. She stared at him.

Dismal's smile drained away.

Her gaze roamed over his face and halted at his hair. She frowned. Then, as though dragged on by some hideous magnetic pull, they shifted to something behind him. Her eyes widened.

He knew exactly what she was staring at. He could see their sinister shadow billowing like black sails across her.

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Her lips dropped open.

Dismal didn't wait to hear her words. He'd heard them all before. *Dragon brat. Creeper. Beast boy ... sympath.* He scrambled back on all fours, clumsy with clambering and tripping over his wings until he hit up against the stump.

She didn't stop staring.

The hollow space inside him was opening up all over again. His face twisted and he covered it with his hands, only to feel two blunt nubs of bone protruding out from under his hair.

Horns.

He coughed a sob and covered his head with his arms, his elbows, anything to stifle the dismal moaning sound he couldn't help making. His wings drew in and closed around him, shutting out the world and the pretty girl whose wide eyes never left him.

He should have known it would come to this. From the time his mother had abandoned him and the children in the forest had thrown rocks at him, and the hermit had left and never come back, this moment had been seeking him out from the beginning. No matter how well he hid: Miyah was always going to find him.

And so she did.

Dismal felt her prise his wings apart and slide in to kneel within the leathery cocoon. Her fingers tugged his hands away.

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He bowed his head. He was hideous and now she knew it. Dismal felt her eyes drift from his clenched hands to his heaving chest up to his face, where they lingered on his horns.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she whispered.

He couldn’t answer.

‘You used to take my hand and point out where the clouds were. You used to tell me all their colours.’

Why was she speaking of that? Because he didn’t deserve to touch her—that’s why.

‘You told me so many things. Why not *this*?’

He shook his head. Wordless.

She tilted up his chin. ‘Look at me, Dismal.’

When he finally did, she was staring straight at him. There was neither horror nor mirth. It was so fixed a gaze, Dismal felt it pierce him.

‘There were other things you could have wished for,’ she paused, ‘but you didn’t.’

The flush in her cheeks bloomed and spread. She looked away as though she had something to say but didn’t have the words.

This was new.

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Miyah bit her lip then let it go. 'You used to tell me about feathers, about the birds they came from and the shape they made in the sky when they flew.' She frowned. 'I was so used to living in the dark. The things you told me ...' she shook her head with the effort of speaking, 'it was like you opened a window and let the sky in.'

Dismal straightened.

'Perhaps you thought I wouldn't understand or wouldn't believe you about ... this,' she gestured helplessly at him. Miyah summoned a breath, 'Well, when you are ready, when you feel you can trust me,' she looked straight at him, 'I'd love to hear what it is like to fly.'

The End.

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Mercy of the Road by Ally Bodnaruk

[Content Warnings](#) | [Pronunciation](#)

She came with the night upon a swift horse; Mercy of the Road.

Asphodel awoke at the sound of muffled hoof beats. Her heart leapt in her chest. Harvest's wind drew cool fingers down her spine and she shivered as she wriggled out from under her blanket. She knew who was waiting now beyond the wagon and in her knowing her stomach twisted. She stumbled upright and out of the wagon, leaving the driver and other passengers to their gentle dreams. She wrapped her shawl tight around her thin shoulders and pushed her hair—thin and brown like dried grass stems—behind her ears. She looked older than her meager years, haggard in the way only open sun and blighted elements could bring. Her body quavered, wracked with the desire to return to sleep and escape the nightmare before her.

The sky was clear and the moon was full, so the ink-black horse that stomped and whinnied in the middle of the road was easily seen. It's rider was not.

Mercy of the Road was a shroud; ashe-like; insubstantial. Mercy was a gloom-filled monster, who lurked along the way preying on the downtrodden, the lost and looking, the wanderers who had a want in their heart. Mercy would make promises, and you believed them, if you didn't know better.

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Asphodel knew better. Her brother hadn't.

'Why do you call on me?' She clutched her shawl, hoping her fingers didn't visibly shake.

'Why do I ever call on you, Flower of Mourning?' Mercy rasped. 'There is a debt. It must be paid.'

The horse moved closer and the figure's cowl fell away. A viscous, black substance leaked from empty eye sockets and dripped down Mercy's face towards her cruelly-curved mouth where it stuck to her needle-thin teeth. Out of the robes sleeves crept snow-white hands, more bone than flesh, tipped in talons. It took every measure of Asphodel's resolve not to shrink like a frightened child, yet still she felt Mercy's amusement at her terror.

Mercy held out a glass ampoule to Asphodel. The vial was closed at both ends with a thin neck two-thirds of the way down, where it would have been broken to release the tincture inside if it were not empty.

Asphodel had first seen such vials in her apprenticeship—before her brother's debt; before his death. Her mentor at the Gardens had used them for concoctions that were too precious to leave unsealed. A tool for wealthy herbalists, not for a road-wearied root-cutter. But Mercy didn't care what Asphodel was. All Mercy of the Road cared for was the debt.

Mercy's ampoule was a store—Mercy had hundreds of them. They were a way of transporting nether beyond the influence of a wellspring—the only way as far as Asphodel could glean.

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‘It must be refilled at the Keystone wellspring.’ Mercy loomed through the ominous pause. ‘And then the debt will be done.’

Asphodel drew in a quick breath. An end to her servitude. Her heart trembled. Freedom; too late for her brother but soon enough for her. Nether-work was wily as a fox, but during her time paying her brother’s debt to Mercy, Asphodel had learnt to be wilier.

Unbidden, the atonal tune Mercy had taught her to summon nether flitted through her mind, and she hummed it without thinking.

Carry black tidings, over the heath.

But be careful to shroud your load.

Carry black tidings and brew them beneath,

If you look for the wraith of the road.

Mercy’s laugh, when it came, was caustic and cruel. With a flick of talons Mercy held the ampoule out to Asphodel again and shook it slightly.

‘Flower of Mourning. Deliver me this, refilled, and never again will you have to see me.’

Asphodel’s fingers twitched as she took the ampoule. It was cold, no lingering sense of what it had once contained, no matter how Asphodel stretched her senses. Any hint of the nether stayed coyly out of her reach, as always. She nodded and Mercy smiled; the corners of Mercy’s mouth turned upwards at an unnatural angle and displayed her teeth—predator’s

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teeth—threaded with gristle and black blood. Asphodel swallowed down bile.

The horse stamped once, twice, then spun with a whiny, disappearing back into the shadows.

It didn't matter where Asphodel went, Mercy of the Road would follow. Asphodel had tried every road and hidden grove, and every time, Mercy would come once more to demand payment. This was her chance to break that cycle and take back the freedom her brother's foolishness had stolen from her.

Asphodel had heard plenty about Keystone. More than enough to convince her not to visit. She'd heard that it was busy and bustling—full of young lovers and scampering children. On the surface, Keystone had sounded like it was alight with the glory of the world.

But Asphodel had seen the hollow eyes of people who had fled to the roads in search of something better. She had heard the shadows in the tales told round roadside gatherings. Something dark had a hold in Keystone and Asphodel hadn't wanted to find out more than that.

It was like her mentor at the Gardens, Fen, had always said: if you used a wellspring even once it could find its way to using you.

So walking into Keystone, Asphodel was surprised. In the clean-lit harvest sun it was a city of glittering temptations, food carts on street

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corners selling sticky-sweet candied berries and mulled wines, decadent architecture of wrought iron, and gull-cries signaling the nearby presence of water. The heady scent of anise wound its way around her and made her mouth water. A treat, she thought, as she parted with a handful of shucks in exchange for the spiced honey coated strawberries. They made her teeth ache and her fingers tremble from the sugar and Asphodel grinned as she wandered down the street.

The bridges were completely unlike what she'd imagined, so wide that she could barely see one side of the bridge from the other. Houses, alleyways, scraps of parks and shops crowded in against one another, nosing up into each other's business.

Asphodel marveled at it all. She was, at her heart, a wanderer and new places made her soul soar. The space and possibility of the road spoke to Asphodel. It was a language of muddy boots and wind-chilled fingers, scavenged hedgerow lunches and sun-worn eyes.

Keystone whispered of iron and mines and smithy heat. And water, Asphodel acknowledged, as she walked past a fish monger and wrinkled her nose against the smell—ripe and salted.

She followed the road towards the bridges' central point—the crossroads that loomed over the wellspring—and the temple that sat in the middle of it all. She'd heard the locals call it the Wellmind, which made her wary. Did it have a mind? She knew wellsprings could be strangely lifelike, but sentience? In the Garden, Fen had always taught caution when it came to nether and wellsprings, even for those sympathes who studied the herbal

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arts. Once, and only once, Asphodel had complained about her inability to sense the nether. Fen had snapped a switch of ash across Asphodel's knuckles.

'Never wish for a curse, Asphodel,' Fen had growled. 'Or it will surely find you.'

On the road, Asphodel had seen artificers do extraordinary things. Miracles in the form of worldly delights. But as surely as Fen had predicted, the curse had found her. Or rather, it had found her brother and slunk its way into her life after he'd died.

All she'd wanted was to work herbs and make people's lives better. Fen and the Gardens had taught her much, but she'd been forced to leave too early to call herself a herbalist. Root-cutter it was; she provided ingredients to herbalists and artificers in between Mercy's visits. She didn't mind it, even enjoyed hunting and foraging. But when Mercy called, she worked nether, skill be damned.

Sometimes she thought she could feel its curse working deep inside her bones. But perhaps it was only paranoia and all the nether really left behind was guilt.

But this would be the last time.

The temple was grandeur incarnate. It rose from the bridge's flagstones—a titan breaking free of its restraints. Spires rose from each of

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the temple's corners and the walls were covered in façades depicting the discovery of the wellspring and the building of Keystone. Keys and locks were central throughout the façades, the edging gilt depicting delicate silver ferns. The ferns looked to be moonwort, the herb of thieves and lock-pickers, which Asphodel thought was clever. The building spanned almost the width of the whole bridge and the steps, wide and deep, were surrounded by bustling markets.

Asphodel could smell food and incense; she could hear the tolling cry of gulls and the rhythmic shouts of the street hawkers. This place was ablaze. It was hard to remember caution when Asphodel could see a hawker selling roast vegetable hand pies with thick, flaking pastry that made her stomach rumble.

She bought two. A week or two in Keystone wouldn't be so bad. Surely there were herbalists here that could make use of her skills, or at the very least, be willing to pay for something from her wares.

Asphodel's steps were jaunty as she walked through the markets towards the temple's steps. At their base, market-goers sprawled in rest while scruffy children ran about between them, hands outstretched for either begging or thievery; they seemed to have no preference. Herb of thieves, indeed, Asphodel thought. Higher up, towards the temple doors, petitioners crowded in a half-formed line, their gazes desperately fixed towards the temple's interior.

Asphodel climbed the stairs and hovered at the back of the crowd.

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‘A blessing for my Thomas,’ a man called. ‘Please, sir.’

‘My Alia’s still missing, with no sign for a week yet,’ a woman keened.
‘Can you do nothing?’

Collectively, the crowd seemed to be addressing a young man standing in front of the doors. His pale blue robes hung loose about him and had the worn-thread look of hand-me-downs. Asphodel recognised the hounded look in his eyes—the same look on her brother’s face the last time she saw him.

‘Ah, you see—’ the man began, ‘—the Wellmind is entirely too busy to, uh, hear every case. You all know the new rules.’

The crowd howled and shuffled forward as one, a cacophony of pleases and entreaties. Asphodel cursed. How was she to fill Mercy’s ampoule if the Temple was closed? She needed access to the temple and the wellspring to fill the ampoule with nether.

‘You know we haven’t the coin,’ a woman growled.

Coin? Asphodel hadn’t heard that Keystone was such a mercantile city that it charged for its wellspring. She appraised the woman who had spoken; gritty blonde hair in a long braid that was tattered at the end; her clothes tidy, but patched, the seams beginning to give way around her shoulders.

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‘My sister needs healing. You artificers are supposed to help people. Help the city.’ The same woman pushed forward until she was right up in the young man’s face. ‘You’re a disgrace.’

The artificer looked at the woman as if she were a stain, his lips pulled down and his nose wrinkled.

‘You know the rules.’ Shoulders back, chest puffed out, he looked like a self-important turkey. ‘I’ll call the Temple guard if you don’t start behaving.’

The woman sneered and spat on the ground at the artificer’s feet then turned and pushed her way back through the crowd and down the temple steps. The crowd thinned as she left, the threat of guards changing their priorities.

All of this was another thing Asphodel didn’t like about the nether. Wellsprings like this, that were managed and barricaded, had been turned into a resource for the few, rather than something which was the domain of the many. She did not want to give this place her patronage. But Mercy and her debt didn’t give her the option.

With reluctance, Asphodel stepped forward and caught the artificer’s eye.

He squinted at her. ‘No entry.’

Asphodel pressed her tongue behind her teeth as she searched for the answer that would best get her what she needed.

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‘My name is Asphodel,’ she said, deciding mostly on the truth.
‘Root-cutter. I need to fill an order.’

‘At the temple?’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘We’ve no roots for you to cut here.’

‘Yours is not the only way to work the nether,’ Asphodel reminded him sharply. ‘My employer needs their store refilled with nether.’

He looked her up and down, gaze lingering on the root-cutter’s badge she’d been given when leaving the Gardens. ‘Come on, then.’

He led her through the temple doors to jeers from the crowd. Asphodel hunched her shoulders. When she was free she could use what she knew for good. Help people like the ones clamouring on the temple steps, rather than turn a blind eye to their plight. She could be a force for good. Not just a game piece, to be moved where Mercy of the Road saw fit.

The doors closed with a thud behind her.

A fountain grasped towards the Wellmind’s ceiling, depicting a man with a severe brow and a sharp grin holding aloft a key. Water thundered out of iron spokes that rose up around him, like a half-finished cage. A swirl of empty chairs filled the rest of the space and were framed by walls of iron; artfully curled and woven as if it were rope. Asphodel may not have had any smithing knowledge, but she recognised the skill it took to make one thing look like another. The walls were lit by oil lamps, hanging from ornate

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iron hooks; the centre was aglow from a sky light, built high in the ceiling that directed a beam of light down to alight upon the fountain. It was majestic and ornate and so fiercely over the top that Asphodel suppressed a wince.

The artificer turned to her with a sweeping gesture. 'Welcome to Keystone's crowning jewel.'

Asphodel widened her eyes and tried to look appropriately awed. He smirked, clearly thinking her a country bumpkin, some foolish, uncultured layabout who scraped and snivelled their way through the world.

'Where is everyone?' she asked, genuinely confused.

In a space designed for hundreds, she could only see fifteen, maybe twenty, people huddled in different corners of the hall.

'We don't allow any old riff-raff to set foot in this sacred place.'

Asphodel heard the implication that she was only the merest smear of ink above said riff-raff. But she was also beginning to see the whole painting, where before the details had been obscured. A changed city, a closed-off wellspring, twitchy artificers. This was a wellspring that was beginning to, or already had, turned. No wonder Mercy had sent her here, she thought bitterly. She nodded and reached into her satchel to produce the ampoule. She held it up, but it only glowed in dull tones in the oil-light.

'The store. I can fill it myself.'

He frowned. 'The fee is the same, whether you do it yourself or not.'

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Asphodel shrugged, though she was disappointed. ‘The fee?’

‘Ten talents.’

Asphodel hissed. That was more than she had expected. It was more than she had. Curse her brother and his debt.

‘Is that too much?’ the artificer sneered and Asphodel bristled.

‘How about I pay you five talents—’ all she had ‘—and a flask of fire tonic, brewed in the Gardens themselves. Easily worth all ten talents on its own.’

He raised his eyebrows and Asphodel prayed that while he seemed to have heard of the Garden, he wouldn’t know how to tell if the tonic had truly been brewed there. Because it hadn’t. She’d brewed it at a gathering by the side of the road out of ingredients scavenged from the other wanderers she had been camped with at the time. It was a good batch, one of her best, but it was a far cry from what Fen could’ve produced.

She pulled out the flask with a flourish, glad that she’d used the one Fen had given her, the one with the Garden of Coprianthus’ seal still visible on the outer.

He glanced around, nodded, then took the flask and hid it within his robes. More than the tonic, Asphodel mourned the loss of the flask. But that was how it was with Mercy. Each payment took more and paid back less than the last. It wore away at her—had worn, perhaps. She was nearly done. It was worth the sacrifice of her flask if it meant her freedom.

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She dropped the talents into the artificer's hand, and his fingers greedily closed around them.

'Go,' he gestured to the fountain, then added as an afterthought. 'And be at peace.'

There was only one way Asphodel knew to fill a source. Mercy had taught it to her the first time she'd come to collect on her brother's debt. Or, well, taught was a strong word. Mercy had told her to do it this way. Had told her it would work.

So Asphodel gently submerged the ampoule in the bubbling water of the fountain, and hummed gently under her breath.

The words danced through her thoughts as she hummed. Spiralling and spinning, like dandelion seeds in a gusting wind. She could feel neither the nether nor the wellspring; but she could see the faint tremble in the water as the current responded and became a little whirlpool with the ampoule at its centre. The song was a siren's call to the nether and the water responded with ease.

She settled herself in, carefully watching the inside of the ampoule for the first signs of water.

Asphodel left the temple with the ampoule refilled with a trickle of water. She tucked it safely away in her satchel and looked around. The night air menaced in a way that reminded her of Mercy. For a moment, she

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wondered if this was it. Had Mercy done the unthinkable and left the road? Had Mercy followed Asphodel to the city steps to collect her final payment? But she could not hear hooves. This was not the road.

‘Careful,’ she murmured to her fluttering heartbeat.

But there was something in this city that felt emergent under cover of night. The moon’s tremulous glow casting monstrous shadows across the streets. The market had packed up and the square below the temple seemed empty at first. But at the edges of the square shadowed figures stood beneath eaves and within the mouths of alleys. They weren’t doing anything other than congregating, but it made Asphodel clutch the ampoule tighter just the same.

Two worlds, one lurking within the other’s shadow.

Here was the second world of Keystone, revealed by cover of night. A drunken shout from further down the street set Asphodel’s heart leaping. She stepped sideways, feet hesitant, and clung to the shadows as she made her way down the temple steps.

By daylight, Asphodel had been eager to stay. Now, she couldn’t fathom a desire to linger. Had she been swayed by some mysterious power? The wellspring trying to make her want to stay here? Or had it simply been the collective desire of the people of the daylight to ignore what their city became at night that had tricked her?

All she had to do was leave. One step after the other, down to the square, then beyond that: the streets. Once she was clear of the city she

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could find a copse of trees, or a hedgerow, to shelter in until dawn or Mercy came. Whichever was first. And then she would be done.

Her stomach twisted and Asphodel pushed away her hope. Don't get ahead of the present. But, she couldn't quite extinguish the flame.

Sleek, silent movement was something Asphodel had practice at. But with each step she took she was reminded that her feet were more familiar with the tread of forests and dirt roads; she was used to the swaying shadows of trees and the mottled tones of leaves. Keystone was all cobblestone and sharp angles. There was no movement in the shadows to disguise her own. She felt observed as she slowly made her way across the square, avoiding the groups she could see, as if every part of the city was studying her for weakness.

The main street stretched before her and Asphodel's shoulders relaxed. There was less open space. The buildings reached up and over the street while the threads of alleys wove between them. Easier for Asphodel to hide as she snuck her way out of Keystone. Easier for someone to sneak up on her, perhaps, but she would have to hope she didn't look rich or interesting enough.

Asphodel brushed the thought away. She would be fine. She would be alert. Carefully, her ears straining for every noise, she crept and slunk her way through Keystone.

She had not gone far when a commotion sounded ahead of her.

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At first, the way the bellows and smacks echoed off the buildings made it seem as though the noise came from all around. Asphodel froze, half-crouched against the window of a bakery, and peered through the gloom. There was a group of people, men mostly, in the street before her, desperately brawling. Their grunts and snarls sounded to Asphodel's ears like wild boars tussling after sows in the month of Oxneap.

She was no quivering child to be scared of even a slightly scuffed crowd. But there was something in the people's faces—something wild and cruel—that made Asphodel grit her teeth and shrink back against the wall.

Once she was certain that they were too preoccupied to notice her, she carefully continued moving. Step after step, she sped forward, fuelled by a sharp want to be gone from this city and its second world before it noticed her.

But as she slipped from one shadow to the next a thunderous toll shook Keystone. It rolled through the street like an unhurried storm and Asphodel shrieked, for the briefest second she thought the bridge was collapsing beneath her.

The sound faded and in its absence came the realisation that she was across the street from a bell tower, sounding out the hour. She opened her mouth to laugh at herself—

—but a cry sounded from the group in front of her. They had noticed her, and with raucous shouts, they were coming towards her, their thoughts turning to what they could buy with the coin she might have. Asphodel

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glanced back the way she'd come, but there was movement from the square in front of the temple. Cornered, her breathing was shallow.

There, across the street, she could see the entrance to an alleyway. She took off, shirking her previous attempts at sneakery. Now it was time for speed, not subtlety.

She reached the alleyway with the men close behind her. Their voices still slurring, but with enough bite that they sounded like braying hounds caught on a fresh trail. The alley was darker than the main street, and Asphodel would have seen little enough going at a sedate pace. At full tilt, she was banging into barrels and shrubbery as her feet slammed to the ground.

She hoped she could gain enough ground that they would lose interest. Or lose her entirely. But despite their inebriation, they knew the streets better than she and it was a tight race. Her trouble, she realised—as she spun around a corner and found a dead end—was that she didn't know the streets at all.

Molten panic welled in her throat as the shouts grew closer.

'Quick, you fool,' a voice scraped out through the quiet and a hand snatched her wrist.

Little choice, Asphodel let the hand pull her through a doorway. She helped slip the door closed just as the first of her pursuers came round the corner. Outside, the men brayed. Inside—Asphodel met the wavering gaze and pursed lips of a woman, not much older than herself. Strangely, the

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woman—long, blonde braid tucked under a bonnet that had seen better days—looked familiar.

‘You were at the Wellmind, earlier today,’ the woman hissed, her gaze dipping to Asphodel’s root-cutter’s badge. ‘What are you doing out on the streets so late? Did your fellow artificers not give you shelter?’

She was the woman with the sickly sister, Asphodel realised, who the artificer had threatened with guards.

‘I’m no artificer,’ Asphodel said, though perhaps that was a lie now, after Mercy.

‘That doesn’t answer the rest of my questions.’

‘I wanted to be clear of Keystone.’

The woman’s gaze turned sympathetic. ‘Aye, that’s a sound idea.’

‘Perhaps sounder would have been by river, not the streets,’ Asphodel said with a glance to the door. ‘My name’s Asphodel.’

She held out her hand and the woman squinted at her, looked her up and down. Whatever she was, or wasn’t, looking for, she seemed satisfied. She nodded and pressed her palm to Asphodel’s and briskly shook her hand.

‘Tarielyn. I think you’d best be staying here. At least until they get bored.’

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Tarielyn's home was cramped and sparse, empty spaces along the mantle and shelves ringed with dust. Asphodel was led through the kitchen to the small sitting room, which held a simply-carved bench with pillows and two smaller arm chairs. Although Asphodel had presumed Tarielyn to be poor, this home held the echoes of money. Not wealth, as such, but more coin than Asphodel's family had managed.

'Thank you.' Asphodel sat on the bench and folded her hands in her lap. 'I'll be gone as soon as I can.'

Tarielyn nodded and sat in a high-backed chair opposite Asphodel, her eyes watchful. Asphodel was used to strangers. As a child, their home had been filled with a rotating array of her mother's old friends from the road. Trust well and judge quick, that was the wanderer way. She had cleaved to that teaching after Mercy had brought her brother's debt to her doorstep, and tore her clean away from everything else in her life.

'Tarrie?' Another voice called out from deeper in the home. 'Who was it?'

Asphodel froze.

A harsh cough followed the words and Tarielyn's eyes widened as she hurried towards a closed door. The door opened to reveal a young woman, sallow-cheeked and sunken-eyed, who trembled in the door frame.

'Careful, Bette,' Tarielyn steadied her. 'Slow breaths, gentle. That's it.'

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Asphodel watched, fingers twitching for her satchel and her herbs—mallow and hawthorn berries—as Tarielyn led her sister to a chair and settled her into it. She caught Asphodel’s focused gaze and glared at her.

‘It’s not contagious.’

Bette gave Asphodel a weak smile and spoke slowly with thin breaths every couple of words. ‘Oh, don’t mind Tarrie. She’s protective as anything; it’s only that my heart is failing. Along with the rest of me. Now that I see my insistence that my sister go and investigate the commotion was warranted, the more interesting question is: who are you?’

‘Asphodel. Root-cutter from the south.’

‘A pretty name.’

Asphodel shrugged, she’d never thought so. The flowers of her namesake were said to grow best on graves where the deceased’s spirit had lingered as an ashe. What her mother had been thinking, she would never know.

‘Your sister gave me shelter. I was, uh, being chased.’

‘The fool was running around outside.’ Tarielyn turned and bustled to the kitchen, returning swiftly with a glass of water, which she pressed into her sister’s hands. ‘Here, drink a little.’

‘Have you tried mallow?’ Asphodel blurted out.

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The two women looked at her with identical frowns.

‘For the congestion.’ Asphodel touched a hand to her breast bone.

Bette smiled sadly and Tarielyn rolled her eyes.

‘We’ve tried everything there is,’ Tarielyn said in a low voice.

‘Besides, I’m so sick of eating things that taste foul.’ As Bette spoke, coughs wracked her thin body.

Tarielyn reached for Bette, one arm wrapped around her back in support. When the coughs finished Bette collapsed against her sister, clearly exhausted. The gentle manner with which the two interacted made Asphodel long for her brother.

The days spent in rollicking fields. The night’s spent sneaking about as they looked for fox holes. They had been made to pull the other into mischief, their mother always said. She’d been correct to the end.

‘You should be back in bed,’ Tarielyn chided her sister. ‘It’s too late in harvest for you to be up late.’

‘Rest shall not lengthen my months. Let me speak to our new friend,’ Bette waved her hand in dismissal of her sister’s concern. ‘Tell me, Asphodel, where do you hail from? Why did you come to Keystone?’

‘Bette...’ Tarielyn sighed, but Asphodel waved her aside.

This was what she was used to, swapping stories at the end of the day. It helped calm the rapid beat of her heart.

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‘My mother was a wanderer, but we grew up in a small village to the west, far inland, and a little south. I’m a root-cutter, trained with some of the best herbalists in the land. I wander the roads now, and the one I was on brought me to Keystone.’

‘Few roads lead to Keystone these days,’ Bette said with a frown, ‘and none of that explains what you were doing skulking about town in the night hours, coated in nether.’

Asphodel narrowed her eyes. A sympath, but surely not an artificer, if Tarielyn was being turned away at the temple doors. And one so bold, as well, to reveal her skill in front of a stranger. The sisters seemed peaceable and kind enough to have helped a stranger, but Asphodel had learnt that some stories were better kept out of the firelight.

‘I have always had an ear for a story,’ Bette added. ‘I can tell that yours is one that will be better for the telling.’

Sifting through the moments of her life that lead her to Keystone, Asphodel realised Bette was right. She wanted to have someone listen and nod and acknowledge what she had gone through. But as she opened her mouth to speak Bette was taken by another coughing fit, harsh hacking noises that made her whole body shake. What had Asphodel gone through that could compare to staring down an early death?

Bette laughed, when she had regained her breath. ‘It feels some days as though my entire body is slowly betraying me. If I may give you some advice, Asphodel, it is to never take your health for granted.’

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Asphodel tried to hide both her wince and her curiosity. She bit her tongue against the desire to list herbs and ask what they had tried.

‘We’d not be so bad off,’ Bette continued, ‘but after mother died, father grew careless. Died at work, or so we were told.’

‘Bette,’ Tarielyn scolded. ‘Leave it be.’

Bette brushed her sister away. ‘Mr Locke is hardly going to care what I say in the privacy of our own home.’

Turning to Asphodel, Tarielyn leant back in her chair. ‘Our father worked at Locke & Key; the key factory.’

‘Is making keys a particularly dangerous job?’ Asphodel asked hesitantly.

‘It is when they’re made with nether,’ Tarielyn replied sharply.

‘Oh, hush, Tarrie. So, Asphodel, indulge me, tell me your story.’

Gently, Asphodel reached into her satchel and pulled out the ampoule. The candle light fractured against the glass and made the water inside glisten. Bette gasped.

‘I was visiting the Temple. It’s for... a job. You know how it is, a root-cutter provides the ingredients, an artificer works the herbs.’

‘In Keystone, the nether is only worked with iron and forges.’ Tarielyn’s expression grew wary.

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‘Nether and herbalism.’ Bette shook her head. ‘Does it work?’

There was something in her expression, some longing, that made Asphodel’s heart ache. Because it did. The right hands could bind the nether to the herbs and use them to cure almost any illness. The right hands and the right money. Fen treated any who turned up at the Garden’s gate, but most who were sick could hardly make the journey.

Asphodel could see Bette’s outline refracted in the ampoule. Hers could be the right hands, she had studied under Fen for just as long as most others. It had only been her brother’s death and his debt that had called her away. The debt that was now her own debt. This ampoule was her freedom.

She wrapped it in her fist, hiding it from view.

‘It can,’ she said. ‘With the right herbs, the right artificer.’

Bette nodded and Asphodel waited for her to ask, to beg for the kind of healing the ampoule could bring about, but she just smiled again.

‘There is so much to wonder at in the world. How much of it have you seen, Asphodel the Wanderer?’

Asphodel was silent for a moment, surprised that they seemed so un-inclined to take advantage. She berated herself for thinking the worst of people who had shown her only genuineness. She settled back on the bench and reached for the tone that she felt sounded most like a storyteller.

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‘Some, but not as much as I would like. I studied for a time at the Gardens of Coprianthus, far to the south. But wound my way back north to Thastor by the sea roads after I left. I passed the Serani Needles and witnessed the Ocean’s Bellow at Karantaur. The roads have taken me inland as well, through the Wolden Forests’ and beneath the arches at Mossildrury, and I spent a winter in the foothills of the Arkoss Peaks after I misjudged endur’s arrival.’

As she spoke, Asphodel watched as Bette and Tarielyn followed her words through the pictures she was creating. They smiled and hummed and nodded, Bette in particular seemingly taking great joy in her tales. She avoided Mercy, avoided her brother, but she spoke of her mother’s ease with the herbs and father’s skill in the garden.

‘He could always tell what the plants needed,’ she said.

Bette nodded, but there was something in her eyes that told Asphodel that Bette had noticed the holes in her stories—that she could see the shape of the spaces Asphodel had left blank. Let my ghosts haunt only myself, Asphodel silently prayed, these people had no need of them.

Bette yawned so wide that her jaw cracked as Asphodel was telling them about the fields of lavender beyond Crossing-by-Way.

‘That’s enough,’ Tarielyn said, voice now firm. ‘Bed for you, Bette, and I’m sure our guest has need of sleep as well.’

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This time, Bette acquiesced, and Asphodel was left by herself in their sparse living room with a thin blanket and her heart keening for the road and the ampoule burning a hole in her pocket.

When she fell asleep, curled up in the armchair, she dreamt of horses hooves and shadowed riders, and of always being watched.

She awoke to a roasted and bitter scent. It smelt warm and inviting and her mouth watered as she sat up. She could see through to the kitchen, where Tarielyn was stirring something on the stove. No sign of Bette.

Carefully, Asphodel made noise as she clambered to her feet, smiling as Tarielyn half-turned in greeting.

'Chicory?' Asphodel asked as she hobbled on sleep-stiff knees to the kitchen.

'Cinnamon, too.' She must have seen something in Asphodel's dubious expression. 'I save it for special occasions, like when we have guests. We weren't always as poor as we seem. Father was paid well for his work before he passed.'

As Tarielyn poured the mixture out into three cups, Asphodel's heart rose in her chest, moved by the small kindness of a teaspoon of cinnamon. What were we, if we did not share what good fortune we had left?

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Her hand slipped into her pocket where she toyed with the ampoule, freshly filled with water from the wellspring. It was her freedom and she had earned it. Slogging through forests and traveling in cramped carts as she bounced from wellspring to wellspring—merely a piece in whatever game Mercy was playing.

She had earned it. She wanted to keep it.

'I have some bread and a couple eggs from the neighbours' chooks. Are you hungry?' Tarielyn asked.

Asphodel hesitated. Wanderers did not turn down food, nor did they hoard their resources. They shared generously and openly. These people weren't wanderers, but here they were upholding those same values. What good was Asphodel, freedom or not, if she didn't embrace them all the same.

'I'm fine,' Asphodel muttered, then frowned and looked away towards the room where she was sure Bette still slept soundly. 'I think I hear Bette coughing?'

With predictable worry, Tarielyn turned and hustled towards her sister's room. She wouldn't be gone for long.

With trembling fingers Asphodel plucked the ampoule from her pocket and held it over one of the mugs. How to do this?

'Break it? Sing to it?' She asked the empty room. But singing was Mercy's way, and Asphodel wanted as little of Mercy's taint as possible.

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Besides, destroying the store would surely produce more power. She could hear Tarielyn returning.

Chicory, cinnamon, nether, good will. Would it even be enough?

'May you be hearty and hale,' Asphodel whispered and snapped the ampoule in half.

The water slid into the mug. There was no discernible change, she would just need to hope. She picked up a different mug and took a sip. Hope she could manage. Hope for herself, hope for kind Bette, hope for the souls who had shown her acres of generosity on the road. Asphodel would not falter when those of her acquaintance needed help. She swore it, no matter what consequences rode her way.

'She's still sleeping.'

Tarielyn slipped back into the kitchen and Asphodel held out a mug to her, so only the nethered mug remained on the bench, waiting for Bette to awake. How much further away was her freedom now?

In a distant echo, Asphodel heard the clatter of horses hooves and a sharp jangle of a laugh.

The End.

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Author Interview: Tace Samoset

1. Why are you a writer?

I write because I need to. It's as simple as that. Most often, I write something that needs to be written. This kind of writing is serious stuff. Those pieces usually end up as an article somewhere. I write them so I can sleep at night, so that my conscience settles, so I know I haven't passed by hurt and pain or some impending doom without trying to do something about it. But I am no keyboard warrior. I don't use words to maim or mangle and I loathe anything shrill, nor am I aggrieved by life or anyone-in-particular. I try instead to give a glimpse of a better way.

Then there are my stories. They are like children to me, children that need to be let out of a cooped-up space so that they can play. I write them down to get the noise of their chatter out of my head. I find it oddly satisfying to read over and find I've surprised, or horrified, myself by what comes out.

2. What are your biggest writing goals?

I am working on creating systems for writing, rather than goals. Everyone has goals and most people don't meet them. I'm trying to establish systems and habits of writing that will sustain me in the long term. Still working on this. Life is a wild ride.

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3. What is your writing schedule/routine like?

I'm someone who has, until recently, kept writing as the delicious cherry on top of my life. I try to get all of my other responsibilities done first and write once they are complete. Problem is, my responsibilities spawn other responsibilities. I'm trying something new by kick-starting my day with a power-writing session. Forty-five minutes may be all I get. I sit down and blast out words.

4. Which author would you love to collaborate with?

My favourites have quit this life, for something better, I believe. I don't think C. S. Lewis needed writing partners, but I would have loved to wear tweed, drink warm beer and critique his writing through cigar smoke at the Eagle and Child with the Inklings. Given I don't drink beer and never wear tweed and can't stand cigar smoke, that tells you just how much I love his writing.

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

The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elisabeth George Speare. It was the first novel I read as a child and its tone and plot still entrance me.

6. What is your current reading obsession?

I read the classics. Fantasy for me means Tolkien, Lewis or MacDonald. However, saying that, I just finished Magpie Murders by Anthony Horowitz. When I read, a semi-trailer could veer off the road and total half my house, I wouldn't notice. It's a problem.

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

The other night I curled up in bed with my two youngest children and read a short story by Patricia St John. At the end, my daughter sighed and looked over at me.

“Are you crying Mum?”

I sniffed and wiped my eyes. “Wasn’t that beautiful?”

She looked thoughtful. “It was moving.”

My son, who was snuggled up to me like a pet monkey, sat up, glanced at my face and groaned.

He hadn’t been listening.

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

Dismal and Miyah is a story that I’ve had in my head a while now. It started life as a bedtime story for my kids. I have a good cache of stories from my rather wicked childhood that they make requests for, but every-now-and-then I’ll throw in a story I make up on the spot. Dismal started life as one of these. If it has a fairytale quality, that’s likely why.

In terms of why Dismal came to life as one of these stories, I can’t quite say, except that one of my children may have needed to remember that the way they see themselves may not be the whole picture, that others might see something special they have missed.

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

More energy and a time-turner.

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

I am magical already. Deep within me is a dragon and from time to time, my children summon it up. Don't worry, it is never out of control, but no one messes with me in dragon mode. No-one.

11. Describe your perfect writing day.

I have my favourite cafes. They are perfect for writing. They are all perched on the edge of the ocean. I can muse over the blue of the horizon while I tap away. Sometimes I just type while I watch the waves, not even looking at my screen. It helps me turn off my inner critic. The wretched thing. For the price of a coffee, I have peace, creative time alone and a view to dine on.

12. Any advice for your fellow writers?

Love the writing journey. It is the destination. Love what you are doing. Love the people that it brings into your life. Love the worlds you get to explore and the words you get to explore it with. Life is more than a publishing deal. Don't stop living, don't stop giving. If life equals the keyboard, your writing will turn grey and pixilate, and who would want to read that?

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Pronunciation

[Feeder](#)

Sirin: 'Seer-rin'. Even emphasis on syllables.

Inis: Sounds like 'Guinness'

Fajron: 'Fah' like 'Farrah.' Soft 'j', sounds like 'zh', like the second 'g' in 'garage'. 'Fah-jron'

[Dismal & Miyah](#)

Miyah: My-ya (M-eye-ya)

[Mercy of the Road](#)

Asphodel: a-sfuh-del

Tarielyn: Tarry-lin

Coprianthus: Cop-ree-an-thus

Serani: Sir-ran-i

Karantaur: Ka-ran-tore, like guarantor

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Content Warnings

[Feeder](#)

fantasy violence, blood, abuse triggers, death

[Mercy of the Road](#)

addiction, abuse triggers, mild gore

Next in Netherün

The Missing of Moar by Bronwyn Eley

A young orphan and her friends find twelve skulls buried on the island they call home. When one of the skulls goes missing, Daewynn and her friends pay the price.

Not Nothing by A.Gustafson

A young boy explores the city of Keystone, observing its darker undercurrents and discovering a truth about himself.

The Importance of Being Good by Jaidyn Groth

A mysterious woman appears in Keystone with one motive: spread kindness and joy. But things are not always what they appear.

Acknowledgements

Tales from Netherün

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

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

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