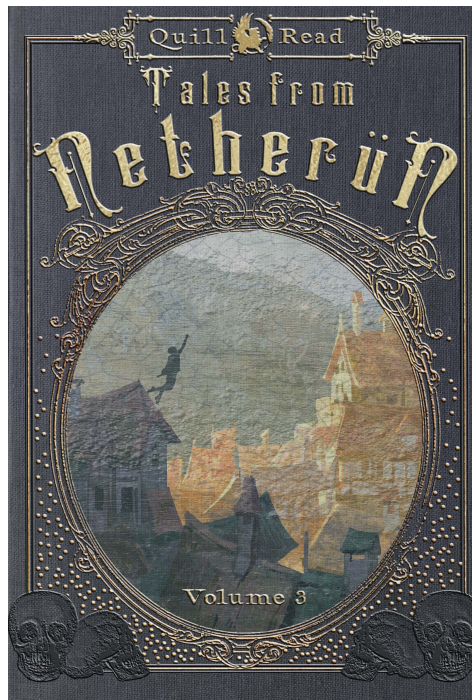


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Tales From Netherün: Volume Three

Quill & Read



Cover Description: The cover looks like a grey, old-fashioned, vintage book with a gold, gilt circle in the centre. In the bottom corners of the cover are embossed skulls. In the middle of the gold circle is an image of a boy reaching for the sky as he leaps off a city roof. In gilt gold across the cover are the words Tales From Netherün, Volume Three, Quill and Read.

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Welcome to Netherün

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

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

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Image Description: A map of a fantasy world with many different regions; forests, islands, deserts, fields, and mountains. Two flags mark out the locations this volume's stories take place in. Keystone is a city surrounded by forest close to both mountains and the coastline in the middle of the map, and Flately islands are to the south east, near a large desert.

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The Missing of Moar by Bronwyn Eley

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Daewynn looked down at her hands, side by side, to the long red welt running across each palm, and thought they almost looked like a smile. *Almost*. She cocked her head at the pleasing way they linked up. The only thing pleasing about them.

She curled her hands shut, tears prickling in her eyes.

Matron struck the children when she was unhappy. All the teachers did. “Displeased” was the word they used, but Daewynn wasn’t sure how to say it aloud. She hated big words.

‘Dis, *disss*,’ she sounded, ‘*dis-plee* ...’

‘Daewynn!’ Lukin shouted.

Lukin was new, only a year younger than her. His mother died in childbirth; father fell down the stairs. But Daewynn wasn’t sure how that killed a man. She fell down the stairs all the time. Her shoes were too big, cast-off from an older orphan who’d outgrown them and left when she turned of age.

She saw more children leave on their own, rather than with a new family. Even Daewynn was considered “too old”. She’d be nine years old in a matter of weeks. On Choosing Day, most families went straight to the cribs or the playroom.

‘Aren’t you coming?’ Lukin asked. ‘Everyone is down at the beach.’

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Daewynn nodded and jogged after him in silence, sounding out that horrible word again. *Dis ... plea ...*

Most of the children at the orphanage had been born on the mainland, bought across the water by rowboat.

Bought. No. Brought. *Brought*.

Bought for buying, brought for bringing. Tutor Kinnel preferred striking the behind, rather than the hands, when she got things wrong.

She'd been howling when they *brought* her across from the mainland. Five years old, or so she was told, with matted blonde hair and too-pink skin. Both parents killed when they "displeased" the wrong man.

That word again.

But she'd been spared and *brought* here, to the orphanage on Flatley Island, one of only a handful of buildings on the entire island. It was completely flat, covered in silvergrass, all greys and greens and yellows. Northside of the island was all big cliffs and angry waters. Southside was the beach. It wasn't a big island. She and her friends could run from one end to the other, straight across the middle, without stopping.

Commented [1]: OF buildings

Daewynn stared at the waves coming in. Where did they go? Children came here and ended up in the orphanage. The waves came, same as them, but they disappeared. What was their trick? And why couldn't they take her too? If only the ocean were a person that could adopt her ...

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‘Daewynn!’ Lukin cried again. He was crouched with Shelley and Mannu by a cluster of rocks and boulders where soil and grass met sand. ‘Quick! Come here!’

When she reached them, all gathered in a circle, Daewynn bent at the hips and frowned. ‘What are they?’

‘Skulls!’ Shelley explained with a big smile at Daewynn. The older girl was what Daewynn imagined a big sister might be like. ‘My father, before he died, helped make people better. He had a lot of drawings and charts in his office. These are *human* skulls.’

Daewynn frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Here,’ Shelley smiled, digging her fingers into the mix of soil and sand, pulling one of the strange white objects free. She held it up beside Lukin’s head. ‘That’s what’s inside us! See? Eyes go here. Mouth. Nose. Brain.’

Daewynn touched her nose, giving it a wiggle, then moved her fingers to feel what was beneath. ‘Huh,’ she said finally, because what else was there to say?

‘Come help us!’ Lukin waved her over. Mannu was already fingers-deep in the work alongside them.

Commented [2]: comma after 'finally'?

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Image Description: A young girl kneels in the sand, gently holding, and looking at, a fractured human skull. There are three other skulls in the sand around her.

Daewynn lifted one hand and stared at the growing welt. 'Maybe we should leave them?' She took a step back, looking at the sea. The sun was nearly gone and dark clouds were coming in. A cold wind was pushing into her. 'We don't want to miss evening meal.'

She didn't want any more welts.

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But they continued to dig. Daewynn looked back over the field of swaying silvergrass, imagined hiding in it. But no matter how small the orphans were, they were always found, or so she was told. The only way to leave the island was with a family. Daewynn pictured two people, tall and smiling, come to take her home.

But that would never happen.

‘This one’s funny,’ Lukin held his up, running a finger along the large split at the top.

‘They all are,’ Shelley replied, angling hers so they could see, ‘some are just smaller cracks. Probably how they died.’

Shelley was nearly fourteen and knew more than the rest of them.

‘How?’ Mannu asked, observing her skull.

‘Nothing good,’ Shelley murmured, placing hers down and digging out another. ‘Probably killed, every one of them. Look! How odd,’ she kept digging, counting as she went, ‘ten, eleven, twelve! I can’t see any more. And just their heads, that’s interesting.’

‘Why?’ Lukin asked.

‘Well,’ Shelley started lining up the skulls in order of the size of the crack in the bone, ‘when people die, they’re usually buried. All of them. Their whole bodies, in a coffin in a graveyard. But these people ...’ She lifted one of the skulls and pressed it to her cheek. Then she made a hard cutting motion against her neck, letting the skull fall to the ground, and

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waved to her body. 'What about the rest of them? Something probably hit them hard right here. BAM! Killed. Murdered.'

'M-murdered?' Daewynn tested the word.

'Yeah,' she nodded, 'just like what happened to your parents. They were murdered, right?'

Daewynn frowned as she remembered what she'd been told. 'I ... think so.'

Mannu shrieked, toppling sideways into Lukin. Everyone looked down at the long, slimy tentacle slithering across the sand. Brown and purple, blackened welts as large as eyes spotted along its skin, thick as a grown man's leg.

Shelley laughed, pulling them back. 'Careful! Give it space.'

'Wow,' Lukin breathed, 'I've never seen one up this far.'

Daewynn had never seen an asterpox in the full before, but they were easy to glimpse from the tops of the cliffs, floating just beneath the surface of the water. A dark mass moving almost too quick to see, except for when they shot one of their tentacles high out of the water.

Almost like they were waving at her.

The detached tentacle curled around one of the skulls and began dragging it down the beach. They all jumped up and followed it as it made its way back to its heart, that's what they called its large body, at least.

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Would the asterpox make a good family for her? She loved the water, and she was a strong swimmer for her age. She could live with them. Daewynn wished the asterpox would come out so she could ask it, but they were shy creatures. Just like her.

‘Huh,’ Shelley said, glancing back up the beach at the line of skulls.

‘What is it?’ Daewynn asked.

‘Well,’ Shelley began, turning to watch their discovery being pulled under, ‘Asterpoxes are drawn to the nether, which is why most of them live near that wellspring in the Sunken Sea, right?’ Daewynn, Lukin and Mannu all nodded. Daewynn wished Shelley was their teacher, not Tutor Kinnel. Besides, Shelley seemed to actually *like* teaching, unlike him. ‘Must mean these skulls have nether in them.’

‘So they were artificers before they died?’ Lukin asked.

‘Possibly,’ Shelley crossed her arms. The skull vanished beneath the water. ‘Or something was done *to* the skulls after death.’

Daewynn shivered. She didn’t want to think about murder. Not if that’s what happened to her parents. What if something just as horrible happened to their skulls?

‘Come on, let’s go,’ Daewynn said.

They ran back up the beach as the last of the sun left them, fighting their way through the silvergrass, the hardest stalks slapping against their faces, causing them to giggle and cry out in shock.

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All through evening meal, Daewynn thought about the skulls. Did they really have nether in them? Flatley Island was one of the least magical places in all of Netherün.

Any child suddenly orphaned on the mainland was brought here ... unless they were suspected artificers or sympathists. She didn't know what happened to those children.

Class seemed more boring than usual the next day. Daewynn wished they would teach her about skulls and nether and asterpoxes, things that were actually interesting. But all Tutor Kinnel wanted to talk about was *words*. What they meant, how they were spelt, when to use them.

He was horrible.

Kinnel would take them through the weekly news from the mainland, brought over by boat with their supplies, forcing each of them to read at least one pamphlet. While they read, Tutor Kinnel often sat on the windowsill, one leg over the other, cane stretched out across his lap.

The paper rattled in Daewynn's hands. '— three men were taken to Lorwin Dungeon last Cinneth, where they will be in ... incar ...'

'Incarcerated.'

'Incarcerated,' Daewynn repeated, 'for a minimum of five years. They —'

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The door creaked open, and Miss Jaenkyns poked her head in. She looked after the babies. 'Excuse me, Tutor Kinnel, but I need Lukin, Mannu and Daewynn please.'

Daewynn shot a look to Kinnel. For once she wanted nothing more than for him to tell her to stay where she was, to keep reading, but instead he said, 'Go.'

Daewynn placed the paper on his desk and moved towards the door, head hung. Lukin and Mannu got up as she passed. They followed Miss Jaenkyns in silence up the winding stairwell, all the way to the top where Matron worked. Daewynn knew this path well.

They were herded into the room, where a tall and silent Shelley was already standing before Matron. The old woman's skin was so crinkled, Daewynn thought it might crack and blow away in a stiff breeze.

But her striking arm was as strong as ever.

'Line up,' Matron instructed. They did so in silence, eyes cast low. 'Explain yourselves.'

'Please, Matron,' Shelley said, 'what have we done wrong?'

Matron heaved a breath out of her flaring nostrils. 'You were all seen returning from the beach rather late last night. And then this morning, Miss Alenzar found these.'

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Matron brought something into view, slamming it onto her desk. Hollow eyes stared across at them, sand dribbling out of the sockets and onto the fine harlow wood.

‘Do you have no respect for the dead?’ she hissed.

‘Please, Matron,’ Shelley begged, ‘they were not in the graveyard. We found them by accident! We were curious, is all.’

‘Curious?’ Matron lifted one invisible eyebrow. ‘You have been brought here by *my kindness*! This is not your home; this is *my* island. This house does not belong to you. That beach does not belong to you. The air you breathe does not belong to you. Nothing you can see or smell or taste or touch belongs to you. Do you understand?!’

‘Yes, Matron,’ they mumbled together.

She made a hacking sound and shook her head. Slowly, she lifted herself into standing. ‘You have no idea what you have done.’

‘Please, Matron,’ Daewynn begged, ‘they’re just skulls.’

‘One is missing,’ Matron seethed. ‘What did you do with it?’

Daewynn stared and her throat felt tight. If Matron thought they *stole* from her, they’d be caned. Again.

‘We don’t have it!’ Daewynn replied, tears in her eyes.

‘I don’t believe you. Tell me!’

‘The asterpox took it!’ Mannu cried.

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'It's true,' Shelley nodded, 'took it right off the beach.'

Matron inhaled slow and deep. 'Hands out. Now!'

Mannu whimpered, Lukin sobbed. Daewynn's heart shrivelled in her chest. Not again. *Not again!*

'It was my fault,' Shelley stepped forward. 'I found the skulls, I dug them up. They didn't even know what they were. I told them all about it.'

Matron lifted her chin, gaze fixed on Shelley. Daewynn stared at Matron's clenched fists. Was Matron shaking?

'I see,' Matron whispered. 'Very well. The rest of you may go.'

Mannu and Lukin shot for the door.

Daewynn stared. 'But —'

'Go,' Shelley hissed. 'Please, Daewynn, it's alright.'

Miss Jaenkyns gave Daewynn a hard shove on the shoulder. She stumbled out of the room, door slamming behind her. Daewynn cringed, then looked back. Silence. But for how long? Any minute now, the cane would come down on —

'Move,' Miss Jaenkyns spat.

The classroom stared as they returned to their seats. Daewynn could barely feel her legs or face or hands. Her gaze drifted to the ceiling, wondering why Shelley did what she did. Protected them when they were all to blame for ... what? Digging up skulls?

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You have no idea what you have done.

*

Henly's cart had one smaller wheel, but Daewynn loved the way it trundled up the path, as lopsided as the man who sat at the front. She lifted one arm high and waved. He waved back, his wonky smile as big as ever.

He was the nicest adult she knew. Large and round, with a kind face and soft cheeks, Henly was the best part of her week. Every few days he would deliver a fresh barrel of milk, most of which was consumed that evening. The rest was turned into cheeses and curds, which they fed to the orphans throughout the week.

Henly pulled his cart to a stop and tapped the seat. She scooted up and plonked down beside him, beaming when he held out the tin to her. She fished out a biscuit. Cream-filled, her favourite. Henly then reached behind, handing her his waterskin. Though this one was always filled with the milk he brought on his deliveries.

'Quality control,' he'd said once, taking a deep swig. She wasn't quite sure what he meant, but she'd laughed when milk dribbled out of his mouth and into his beard.

She took a sip now and nibbled on her biscuit.

'What's happened here?' Henly waved at her hand and frowned.

'I upset Matron,' Daewynn replied.

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‘Now,’ Henly grumbled, fishing into his pocket. He whipped out a small piece of cloth. It was the most beautiful handkerchief she’d ever seen, blue with purple patterns. He wrapped it around her hand and tied it off, giving her hand a pat. ‘All better, no?’

She smiled up at him. Henly would make the best father. He was kind and always had biscuits. But she was too afraid to ask him. What if he said no and felt too awkward to ever come back?

‘So,’ he groaned, hauling himself off the cart and into the mud below, ‘what story do you have for me this week? It’s your turn.’

Daewynn turned in the seat and watched him work, unloading the first tray of filled bottles. He waddled around the cart, keeping one eye on her as she considered. Henly’s family had lived on the island for generations, and his great-great-grandfather had built the library on the mainland. They were a family of storytellers; he knew just about everything that had happened in the region — or at least on Flatley Island.

‘I saw an asterpox on the beach!’

Henly lowered the tray. ‘Well, now, that’s something! A whole one?’

‘No, just one tentacle. It came up the beach, right next to me. I could have touched it, but I was too surprised.’

He made a face, wiping his hands as he moved around for another tray. ‘What was it doing, I suppose?’

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‘My friends and I found,’ she looked around, ‘skulls on the beach. The asterpox took one.’

‘Skulls?’ he leaned in with the word. ‘How strange.’

‘It is strange!’ she declared. ‘My friend Shelley said that they were probably murdered.’

Henly fumbled with the barrel. It struck the ground hard but didn’t break. He sighed with relief, cursed low under his breath, then chuckled. ‘Now why would your friend Shelley say such a thing?’

‘They all had big splits right here,’ she drew a finger along the top of her head, ‘and it was only their heads, buried in the sand. No bodies.’

‘You don’t say,’ Henly remarked, picking up the empty barrel that had been left for him and bringing it round. He adjusted his apron and climbed back into the seat. ‘Murder. Hasn’t been a murder on this island since ... I can’t remember when.’ He frowned. ‘How many skulls did you say?’

‘Twelve.’

Henly made a sound and leaned back. He fished out a biscuit and chucked the whole thing in his mouth. ‘Do you know,’ he sprayed some crumbs over his lap, ‘that reminds me of a story I was told growing up. About *The Missing of Moar*, do you know it?’

Daewynn shook her head. Henly always asked her for stories, but his were always far better. Another reason he’d make the best father. He could tuck her up every night with a new story.

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She picked up another cookie and settled in.

‘Moar,’ he said in a low voice, drawing out the vowels, ‘was what this place used to be called before some buffoon renamed it Flatley Island. So boring! People used to actually live here, you know? Hundreds and hundreds of them, my mother’s family among them. Now, this was a time when night was far darker than it is now and for some reason the nether on this island was like an angry drunkard coming home each night with his fists filled with rage.’

Daewynn’s stomach flipped. ‘But I thought there was no nether here.’

‘Well,’ Henly waggled his brows, ‘not anymore. Of course, that is why we celebrate *Lightgivers Eve* every year, to commemorate the dark times our forebearers suffered through because of the nether. To give thanks for all the light days since it left.’

Daewynn nodded. She didn’t know much about the nether, but from all the stories she’d been told in the past on *Lightgivers Eve*, she was glad it was gone.

Henly bit into another biscuit. ‘Word had spread to the mainland about Moar’s problems. People were scared, willing to pay anything for help. Three guesses who came to *help*?’

‘Artificers?’

‘That deserves another biscuit.’ He held them out and Daewynn fished one out with a smile. ‘Yes, Artificers came. A whole heap of them!’

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Well, they tried everything, didn't they? To stop the darkness, to soothe the nether. For weeks and weeks, but nothing worked.'

'Until something did!' Daewynn said.

He nodded. 'Until something did. One young Artificer knew what the nether needed.'

'What?' Daewynn breathed, her chest about to explode.

Henly shrugged. 'No one knows. To this day, it remains a mystery how the young man fixed Moar's problems in a single night. But,' his eyes darkened, but his lips quirked up, 'the next morning, people were missing.'

Daewynn frowned. 'How many people?'

'Forty-eight!'

'Where did they go?'

Henly lifted his arms. 'Yet another mystery! Forty-eight people went missing in a single night and, at first, the people of Moar were in a state. "Surely," they cried, "that meant the darkness was only getting worse. The nether took them, or perhaps it was the fault of the Artificers." But the nights grew lighter almost immediately, and the nether seemed soothed finally. In fact, the nether has not been heard from since.' He shrugged. 'Here, at least.'

'So, the missing people ...?'

'Yes,' Henly nodded, clasping his hands over his burgeoning stomach, 'it is suspected they had something to do with this young

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Artificer's miracle cure. That perhaps the nether required a sacrifice of some kind. But the people got what they wanted; they were happy. Soon the forty-eight that went *missing* were forgotten and time moved on, as it does. But no one ever knew for certain.'

He always sighed to signal the end of his story. Henly sat up and handed her one last biscuit before tucking the tin away and replacing the cork in the waterskin. Daewynn smiled and climbed down off his cart.

'Good story, isn't it?' He quirked his brows. Daewynn nodded as he prepared to leave. He picked up the reins and his horse snapped to attention. 'Who knows, perhaps your discovery has something to do with it. Maybe some of the Missing have found their way home.'

'Mr Henly,' she said, 'if the missing people did have something to do with the nether going away ... and with what we found on the beach ... what would happen if something happened to one of the skulls?'

'*Happened* to one?' Henly considered, then shrugged. 'From the stories my mother told me ... probably nothing good.' He smiled. 'See you next time, sweets!'

Daewynn's head was filled with it all. The skulls, Henly's story, Shelley's sacrifice. She hadn't seen her friend since yesterday. How was she meant to concentrate on anything else? Shelley studied with the older students and when Daewynn went to ask her teacher where the girl was, all she'd been told was that Shelley had been adopted.

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But by who? Why didn't she say goodbye? When did she leave?
What about Matron and the cane and the skulls?

The teacher lifted her cane in reply and Daewynn scurried away.
Children didn't just *disappear*. Shelley would have said goodbye, Daewynn was certain. Which meant Shelley never left.

But then what happened to her?

*

Three days later, something caused a stir among the children. A man arrived at the orphanage.

'An artificer!' Lukin whispered, watching the man saunter past, Lukin's wide little eyes as wide as she'd ever seen them.

She shot him a look. 'Are you sure?'

'Look at his wrist,' Lukin said. Daewynn spotted some kind of tattoo, long and curling, but she couldn't quite make it out. 'He's one of them.'

'But what is he doing here?' Mannu mumbled.

'Inside!' Tutor Kinnel snapped, sweeping one long arm in the direction of his classroom.

Lukin groaned. 'Nothing fun ever happens here. Now it finally does, and we have class.'

Daewynn stared after the darkly dressed man as he made his way up the flight of stairs. Had Matron invited him here?

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Was Henly's story true and now they were all at risk of being attacked by the nether?

Was this artificer here to help them or ...

The next morning, people were missing.

'Daewynn!' Tutor Kinnel nearly screeched. He slapped the doorframe. 'Inside. Now.'

Her heart pounded and she looked for his cane. No sign of it. Yet. 'But Tutor Kinnel, that man was –'

'Now!' A proper screech this time.

Daewynn scurried inside, fear of the cane far stronger than her burning curiosity. The class passed painfully slow; Kinnel's voice *forty-eight* times worse than it normally was. Daewynn fidgeted the entire time, leg bouncing and bouncing. She glanced at the window every few seconds, hoping to catch the sight of the Artificer's back as he left the orphanage.

When class was finished, Daewynn was the first from the room.

'Where are you going?' Lukin called after her as she surged up the stairs. 'Lunchroom is *that* way!'

'Be right back!' she whispered in return, stopping only briefly to make sure no one with a cane was watching. In the clear, she hurried up the winding flight until she reached Matron's door.

Closed, Daewynn leaned her ear against the wood as gently as possible, holding back her breath to listen.

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‘— to be sure,’ a deep voice rumbled. The Artificer.

‘How long do we have?’ Matron asked. Daewynn frowned. Matron almost sounded *afraid*.

The man scoffed. ‘You island folk have always been far too superstitious. There’s no evidence that the nether had anything to —’

‘Do you want to get paid or not, Balkin?’ Matron snapped, sounding more like herself. ‘Hurry it up before I change my mind and call for your competition. The Division’s reputation is growing —’

‘Fine,’ the Artificer snapped. ‘She’s a good start, but I’ll need eleven more.’

‘You’ll have them, by —’

But there were footsteps from inside the room, growing louder. Coming straight at her! Daewynn scrambled from the door and bolted down the steps as fast as she dared. She heard the door open, and their voices were fading, but Daewynn was sure they’d seen her.

She reached the bottom of the stairwell, out of breath, and stared up at the winding stairs. Nothing. They mustn’t have seen her then. She rubbed at her face, recalling their conversation.

She’s a good start, but I’ll need eleven more.

They couldn’t possibly ... but there *had* been twelve skulls in the sand. Daewynn slowed as she reached the dining hall. Did they need twelve new skulls for something?

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Daewynn staggered over to where Lukin and Mannu sat, plonking down beside them. Lukin looked up, asparagus sticking out of his mouth. ‘*Yunawanssem?*’ he asked.

‘Not hungry,’ Daewynn replied, staring at the table.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mannu asked, sipping at her milk. Daewynn eyed the white liquid, thinking about Henly, wishing he were here. If he knew about the story, maybe he knew more.

Years ago, an Artificer makes the bad nether energy leave this place but only after people go missing?

... ten, eleven, twelve! I can’t see any more. And just their heads, that’s interesting.

‘I don’t think Shelley was adopted,’ Daewynn said. Both Lukin and Mannu looked at their plates. None of them had seen her since Matron’s office. She protected them from the cane, but what if something worse had happened to her?

She’s a good start, but I’ll need eleven more.

Daewynn slammed her eyes shut. No, that wasn’t possible. They weren’t going to *replace* the skulls with twelve new ones. Bad things happened here, but nothing like *that*. Bad things only happened in *Lightgivers Eve* stories. This was real life.

Nothing like that really happened.

They were just stories.

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But by evening meal, Shelley wasn't the only one missing.

'Have you seen Mya?' one of the little girls from another sleeping hall asked. They all looked up, shaking their heads. 'Everyone thinks she's runaway but ...'

Daewynn refused to eat again, going to bed hungry, desperate to know more. If this man, this *Artificer*, was here to take people, she had to tell someone.

But who?

None of their teachers could be trusted. Besides, they wouldn't believe her. She had no evidence, just an old story told to her by —

Henly. He would listen! He would send for the mainland authorities and tell them that children were going missing at the orphanage!

But it was only Monneth and Henly wouldn't be back until Midneth. Did she even have two days to wait?

Daewynn closed her eyes and breathed through her nose. There was time. It was her only option and Henly would not laugh in her face. Wouldn't smack a cane across her flesh. Wouldn't call her a stupid child and shove her away.

Midneth morning, she'd make this mistake of theirs right.

But the next day, Lukin wasn't at breakfast. Daewynn dared not whisper her theory to Mannu and scare the poor girl. Daewynn was scared

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enough for both of them. She sat through lessons and worked through her chores hating each moment.

Midneth morning came slower than the night dragged. Daewynn didn't sleep a wink, staring at the ceiling and picturing the way those skulls had been split. Some so bad they were almost torn in two.

Daewynn flung herself out of bed and dressed for the day. Mannu called after her when she turned right instead of left out of their sleeping hall. What did food matter when Henly would be here any moment?

She ran for the door and heard it — the distinct sound of cartwheels turning in the mud. Daewynn skidded to a halt, wrenched open the door and hurried down the steps.

She froze, staring.

A middle-aged man and woman looked up from their seat, the man pulling the horse to a slow stop. 'Woah,' he called, reining the beast in. They both smiled at her, just like the couple she always pictured in her mind. Come to take her home.

Daewynn bit down on her lip. How could she forget? Today was Choosing Day, it happened only once a month and Daewynn grew used to ignoring it, since nobody ever chose her. People would be arriving all day and she'd be forced inside to linger with the other children on the *tiny* chance someone noticed her.

But Henly — he —

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‘Daewynn!’ Miss Jaenkyns squawked behind her. Daewynn jumped and spun to see the skinny woman pointing back towards the manor. ‘Get back inside this instant!’

‘But Henly will be —’

‘Inside,’ she spat, ‘now!’

Daewynn wanted to throw something at Miss Jaenkyns but that would only displease Matron. Daewynn made fists, feeling the pull of the healing flesh, and made her way inside.

The hallways were busy with children running back and forth to their sleeping halls to retrieve the things they’d forgotten. Change into a better shirt, not that they had such things. Check themselves in the mirror. It was always the same, a busy, panicked mess ...

Until the doors opened.

Daewynn made her way into the main dining hall, which had been cleared as usual. Tables and chairs pushed to the side, a small banquet at the back. She found Mannu and stood with her head cast low but her ears alert.

If Henly arrived, she *had* to find a way to see him.

There were six families today, most of them looking poor enough to belong to an orphanage themselves. Most of them headed straight for the nursery.

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Daewynn sighed and sunk against the wall, casting a look out the window. She leaned as far back as she could, nudged it open and leaned out, trying to see the main road in –

‘Daewynn!’

She sprung forward, scrambling upright. Matron stood close; her arms folded in front. ‘Come here,’ Matron said darkly.

Daewynn took three steps forward. Would she take her too? Split open her skull and bury it in the sand?

Then Matron did something she’d never seen before. She smiled. Or tried to, at the very least. ‘This is Mr and Mrs Mackersleigh,’ Matron stepped aside. The couple she’d just seen arrive were standing behind her, shoulders touching. ‘They’ve come all the way from the mainland just to meet you.’

‘Me?’ Daewynn gawked. ‘Why?’

‘Why,’ Matron chuckled, an unholy sound, ‘because they want to adopt you.’

Daewynn blinked, gaze drifting to the couple. The man smiled. ‘How old are you, dear?’

But she couldn’t remember. Not until Matron shot her a look. ‘I’m nearly nine.’

‘Do you like to garden?’ Mrs Mackersleigh asked. ‘Cook? Weave?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Daewynn replied, ‘but I’m sure I would.’

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‘Any injuries we should know about?’ Mr Mackersleigh asked.
‘Illnesses?’

Daewynn shook her head. But this couldn’t be real, surely? Maybe she was still dreaming. Any minute she would wake up and hear Henly outside. She’d go to him and —

Henly! But her friends! Matron was taking them and burying their skulls.

The couple smiled up at Matron. ‘She’s just as you described her,’ Mrs Mackersleigh remarked. ‘Could she come with us today?’

‘Of course,’ Matron cooed, ‘if you’ve brought the money?’

Mr Mackersleigh fished a purse out of his front vest pocket and handed it over. Matron poked around it in and closed it with a smile. ‘Wonderful.’ She spun on Daewynn. ‘Well, sweet girl, it looks like today is your happy day! Go pack your things, you’ll leave right away.’

‘But —’ Daewynn glanced out the window.

‘But, what?’ Matron said coldly. ‘Don’t be rude to your new family, Daewynn. You don’t want to displease them, do you?’

Daewynn stilled. There was that word again. “Displease”. Still, one word was louder. Family. *Her* new family. Four years in the orphanage and she’d never once been chosen. It was what every child here wanted. To escape. To belong to someone.

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But these people weren't just in her head, like all the other times. They were real, had to be, if Matron was talking to them. Which meant she wasn't dreaming. These people wanted her to be part of their family.

But ...

'Where is Lukin?' Daewynn whispered.

Matron's brows shot up. 'Your little friend was adopted earlier this week. Don't you remember?'

Daewynn gaped. A lie! No one had come to adopt.

'No,' she replied.

Matron chuckled and gazed up at the couple. 'It's been *such* a busy week here. The children are all in a bit of shock, I think! We've had eight adoptions this week already. A record for us.'

Daewynn frowned. Were there really eight children missing already?

'How wonderful,' the woman replied with a beaming smile. 'Soon to be nine, I hope?'

Daewynn eyed the couple. They wanted her. They *chose* her. This might be her only chance. If she stayed to speak with Henly, if she told him what was happening, and he went to get the authorities ... she'd have to speak with them. She'd be taken to the mainland and held for questioning. She knew that much.

The couple would not wait for her. They wouldn't want her. They would take one of the other children who wasn't involved, one who hadn't

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displeased them, or Matron, or the authorities. One who wasn't a troublemaker.

Would the orphanage even remain open once Henly told everyone what was going on here? What would happen to the children then?

Maybe it was already too late. Eight children were already missing. Perhaps the Artificer had already done what he came here to do.

Soon the forty-eight that went missing were forgotten and time moved on, as it does.

A whinny skittered in through the open window. The distinct sound of wheels on dirt. Daewynn glanced out into the yard, heart fluttering. Henly's cart wobbled into view; he was whistling. Here. Her chance. Run out and tell him what was happening, beg for his help to stop Matron and the Artificer from taking any more of her friends.

'Daewynn?' Mrs Mackersleigh leaned down to see her face. 'Our neighbours have three young children about your age, and several horses. I'm sure they'd be happy to teach you how to ride one.'

'Already set your bedroom up,' Mr Mackersleigh added, 'with a few new toys for you to play with, course. Would you like to come home with us?'

A family of her own. Her own bedroom. Toys and horses and friends

...

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Henly cut off his whistling. Daewynn gazed out the window again, staring at her friend as he lowered himself from the cart and looked around. Waiting for her? She should be perched on his seat with a cookie and a story right about now.

Only ...

Daewynn closed her mouth and looked up into the eyes of her new family. It was either stay or go. Stay and help her friends or go with her new family and start the life she deserved.

Daewynn took a deep breath and nodded. 'I would like that very much.'

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

Bronwyn Eley is on Instagram

Instagram: @letters_from_neverland or [click here](#)

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The Importance of Being Good by Jaidyn Groth

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

Money is such a trivial thing, Elma thought as she let the talent dance over her knuckles. It was a trick she'd perfected long ago—letting the small golden coin waltz over the back of her hand, as if by its own accord. *Such a trivial thing*, she mused again when she caught the eye of a small, unwashed boy with starvation etched into his face.

She offered him a smile, but he was already looking away, his hunger leading him to the nearby bread stall.

Elma continued to skip the talent along her fingers.

It had been a while since she'd found herself in Keystone, and she had to admit there were few places she disliked as much. Of course, the lower caverns of the Acorn Caves were claustrophobic at best and the winding labyrinth that connected Yester to Yere left her dizzy for days. But neither compared to the harrowing feeling that haunted her for months after a single visit to the city of locks and keys.

Wandering eyes watched her as she crossed North Bridge and she gave each and every person a solid smile, letting joy flood her face. Baffled, maybe by the sudden onslaught of kindness, the people gaped and hurried on with their days.

Elma knew this was bound to happen. Entering Keystone from the north was one thing—what kind of person wished to cross Malgor's Peaks?

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Most travellers from the north settled for the annoyingly long journey around the rugged, seemingly unclimbable mountains and entered from the west. But to arrive from the north, adorned in the brightest yellow fabric, with a smile plastered on one's face?

She was asking for trouble.

Except she wasn't.

In fact, Elma had a very important job. One that required her to fix the exact kind of trouble that led to these confused and sad stares.

Keystone was on the edge of something terrible, and no one knew.

She'd received word of this impending disaster nigh on a month ago. Travelling through the farmland of north Thastor, where the land meets the sea and the creatures that roam the dark are all teeth and nails, Elma had been enjoying herself when the letter arrived, begging her for help. Never one to turn down a challenge, she'd left the next day.

'You couldn't 'ave crossed Malgor's Peaks in that silly dress,' a toothless man with a flat hat said as she passed his market stall of grey scones and chicken feet.

'This silly dress proves rather useful against the chill in those mountains,' Elma replied, flashing him a grin. 'I assure you, it's quite practical.'

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The man snorted and his gaze dropped to the gold coin still skimming her fingers. 'You should be careful playing with that out in the open. We get some filthy types around 'ere.'

She almost sighed. That was the very reason she was in Keystone. Couldn't this man see that those "filthy types" were simply people unsupported and unprepared for the harshness of the real world? That with a bit of love and kindness, their entire lives may change?

'Have you sold much today?' Elma asked the man.

Frowning, the man looked over his stall. From what she could see, the woven baskets were full of scones that, with each passing second, looked more and more like rocks. Chicken feet dangled from fraying twine and two shelves of half-filled liquor bottles filled out the rest of the stall.

'It's been a slow day,' the man said, crossing his arms. 'Most folk are out on East Bridge. They forget about us up 'ere. We're not really supposed to be 'ere, you know?' He nodded his head to the small gang of vendors around him. There were maybe half a dozen; each occupying a small square space barely fit for a tent. It was true, there wasn't meant to be a market on North Bridge, but it seemed that the rich who occupied the majority of the bridge cared not for the odd stall or two. 'As long as we leave 'em alone, they leave us alone,' said the man, seeming to read the question in her eyes.

The gold coin stopped dancing. Peering down at the small gold talent in her unblemished brown hand, Elma smiled.

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Money is such a trivial thing, she thought for the third time.

‘How much for one of those scones?’ she asked.

‘I can do three for a shuck or one for a bit.’

She’d heard of a ‘bit’ before. She was fairly certain that Keystone was the only place where their lowest currency was simply a bronze shuck cut in half. Obviously, not real currency for the things that mattered, but here, out of the way of prying eyes and authority, half-shucks or bits were traded readily.

Elma weighed the talent in her hand. Twelve shucks to a sheckle, twelve sheckles to a talent.

‘I’ll take one,’ she said.

The man looked her up and down, no doubt taking in her strange, ballooning yellow tunic and her tightly woven hair that was piled atop her head. When he finished surveying her, she smiled her brightest smile.

‘Alright.’ He chose the grayest scone. ‘I ‘ave no bags.’

‘That’s quite alright,’ Elma said and handed over the talent. ‘Have a good day.’

As the gold coin fell into the man’s outstretched hand, she saw the confusion dawn on him.

‘Aye, that’s far too much,’ the man said, flabbergasted and eager all the same.

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Holding the rock-hard scone in one hand, Elma reached out with her other and grabbed the man's hand, forcing it to close around the talent.

'Do me a favour,' she said quietly. 'Should you see someone who needs that money more than you, pass it on. You'd be surprised by the magic that spreads from paying it forward. Otherwise, have a *good* day.'

And she left the man in his stall, chewing on the coin to see if it was real.

Barker was a rational man. A perfectly simple, rational man. He was sure in his beliefs about most things, in particular things revolving around the dismemberment of chickens, the art of baking and what people truly wanted. People did not gift things without a motive. Genuine kindness was not something he had experience with, especially in Keystone, which was why, for hours after the strange woman in the yellow tunic-dress left, he puzzled over the gold coin he'd been given.

It was the first talent he'd held that belonged to him. And for that reason, he wasn't entirely sure what to do with it.

Something told him that he wasn't allowed to be so close to such a thing.

As his day carried on, Barker passed through it like a ship in a sea of fog. He sold half a dozen scones in the end and a squark of chicken feet, but he barely noticed those he attended. His mind murmured to him the whole day, reminding him of the talent in his pocket.

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With a gold coin, he might afford such luxuries as a roast duck, garlic potatoes and a cheese wheel. For at least a week! Perhaps he could send for his brother and they might enjoy a week of splendour together. The thought warmed his belly as he packed up his stall at the end of the day. The sun dipped between the horizon of trees, casting a long shadow on North Bridge. Pausing in his chores, Barker peered to the north. Malgor's Peaks loomed; silhouettes against a violet sky.

Have a good day, she'd said—that strange woman in yellow. As if her gift was little more than a few scraps. And what was that promise? *Should you see someone who needs that money more than you, pass it on.* A strange request. One unlikely to be fulfilled, for if Barker was being honest, everyone on the bridge was as desperate as he. His stall neighbours, the Turners, and Ben the Bard, were surely just as in need of a good meal and all the comforts a talent could offer. But even as Barker let his eyes wander over his friends, he could not allow himself to part with the money.

Who needs this more than me? he thought to himself as he began to walk south towards the towers. *I work from sun up to sun down and I be needing a warm dinner, not some days-old scraps.*

He toyed with the talent in his pocket and hummed to himself as his tattered shoes clicked against the cobblestoned bridge. Maybe he'd invest in a visit to the cobbler and fix his old boots. His left shoe had such a large hole at the mouth that his big toe poked right out. He needed this coin for that.

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But as Barker crossed the tower and meandered through to South Bridge, he felt his resolve weaken. Less than seven steps onto the bridge and he came face to face with two young girls who were fishing through a pile of garbage. One girl, the older of the two, had her hands wrapped around a half-eaten apple as she eyed it carefully, as if she was looking for signs of worms or rot. The youngest girl fidgeted in a torn nightdress, her face marked with dirt and bruises.

I need this, Barker thought. It was given to me and I need it.

But his thoughts could not hide the twist in his gut as he watched the older girl raise the apple to her lips and take a bite.

‘Enough of that,’ he called, interrupting the feast. ‘You’ll get right sick if you carry on.’

The girls frowned at him.

‘Bugger off,’ said the youngest, but her tone lacked any bite.

Smiling in spite of himself, Barker played with the coin in his pocket. ‘You need to get some proper tea. ‘Aven’t you got a family to look after you?’

The older girl, no older than eleven, narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Aye, we got a family, but they ain’t lookin’ after us. Now, bugger off, old man.’

‘Aye, bugger off,’ said the youngest, earning a smile from the other.

They don’t need this, Barker thought. They’re bold girls. They’ll be alright.

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Ignoring the painful knots in his stomach, Barker turned towards the rest of South Bridge. Every crack and corner was enveloped in darkness, but not the kind most people were used to. No, down here, the darkness stuck like glue, collecting where light should. And even when the sun rose, the darkness left behind its fingerprints; a reminder that it was always there, waiting like an old friend.

Looking into the darkness now, Barker clenched his jaw and took a step forward. But there, where the cracks met the shadows, he caught a glimpse of something bright and yellow.

You'd be surprised by the magic that spreads from paying it forward.

The words came to him, loud and lyrical.

'Dammit,' he groaned and turned on his feet. 'Right, you two! Take this!'

The two girls were still busy rifling through the garbage when he stepped up to the oldest and stretched out his hand. She looked up at him with the same look as a feral cat who was ready to fight. But then her eyes dropped to his palm.

'This some sorta trick?' She scowled at him, still wary.

Barker shook his head. 'I wish. Just take it. You need it more than me.'

Carefully, as if she was waiting for him to close his hands and the coin would disappear, the girl plucked the talent from his hand. Barker

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expected a cold emptiness to replace the space where the coin had been, but instead, he found a strange warmth spread from his hand all the way through his body.

‘Uh, thank you... sir,’ the girl said as she showed the other what they had been given.

A smile tugged at his cheeks. ‘You are welcome.’ Turning before the regret could take him over, Barker started down the street when he had the sudden impulse to turn around and say, ‘Oy! Uh, if you meet anyone who needs that more than you, give it to them! There’s magic in paying it forward. I think. Good night!’.

Kinsey and Eve marvelled over the gold coin for the better part of two days. Under South Bridge, in a far-off corner surrounded by folk with sad eyes and even sadder smiles, the girls whispered back and forth over what to do with their newfound wealth.

‘We could buy a house,’ said Eve, her dark brown eyes glowing. ‘The biggest house ever!’

Kinsey snorted. ‘Eve, a house costs a lot more than one talent.’

‘Oh.’

‘We could take the first carriage out of Keystone,’ suggested Kinsey, turning the coin over in her hand.

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Nearby, the other residents of Under—the nickname they gave to this place of squallor and lost hope—shivered against the bleak winds of Leafwane. Endur was around the corner and soon Under would be icy and frigid and the girls would have to fight to survive another fierce and frozen three months.

It wasn't so bad, though. They had Charlie, a minstrel with a sack of discarded toys, who spent his days travelling around Keystone and picking up odd gossip and secrets. He kept the girls entertained with funny stories. And there was Magda, the woman in red. Even in the grime of Under, she was the best dressed by far. Kinsey was pretty sure she used to be a Lady, but she'd never say that aloud to anyone except Eve. And then there was Ji and his nanna. Nanna Bai was the happiest woman Kinsey knew. Older than Keystone and probably the whole world; her face was creased with knowledge and a life well-lived. But she was in a chair now and spent her days being rolled around by her grandson.

Kinsey knew Nanna Bai didn't have long.

'Where would we go?' Eve asked, shivering.

Kinsey shrugged. 'Somewhere far away. Somewhere warm.'

'Like the desert?'

Nodding, Kinsey tightened the blanket around herself, envisioning the warmth of sand and the heat of the sun. 'That would be nice. Like that painting we saw.'

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It was one of her favourite memories; a sweet embrace she leaned into when things became too much. She and Eve had been on West Bridge, staying out of sight, when they'd seen an artist set up her easel right on the edges of the bridge. At first, they thought she was going to paint the wellspring below, but as the day passed, the picture came together with golds and yellows. When she was done and the girls' knees hurt from hours of kneeling and crouching, Kinsey ran up to the artist and asked her what the painting was.

'That's the desert,' said the painter, in a voice like the summer sun. 'The Desert of Sam-Uin. It's very far away from here.'

Far away sounded good.

'Is it better than here?' Kinsey had asked.

The painter had only smiled.

'The desert sounds good,' Eve said, bringing Kinsey back to the present. 'And that will get us the whole way?'

Kinsey eyed the talent in her hand. She wasn't silly. She knew that, at best, this gold coin would get them out of Thastor. But with no food, shelter or protection, she wasn't sure how long they'd last. She was tall for eleven, and strong. But what good was she against hunters or artificers?

'Nanna Bai doesn't look very well.'

Kinsey looked up and followed Eve's gaze down the dirt path. Ji, who was a little older than she, was dutifully pushing Nanna Bai along, though

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with more difficulty than normal. Frowning at his flushed face, Kinsey quickly saw what the problem was. One of the wheels on Nanna Bai's chair was broken.

Putting the talent in the pocket of her too-big trousers, Kinsey made her way to Ji with Eve on her heels.

'What happened to your chair, Nanna?' Kinsey crouched low and eyed the broken wood. It was snapped clean through—almost like someone had gripped each end and forced it to break.

Nanna Bai's smile was tired, but kind. 'It's no problem, Kinsey. Do not worry. Ji says it will be okay.'

Ji's tight smile said otherwise. Leaving Eve to chat with Nanna Bai, Kinsey beckoned Ji close.

'You can't push her around in that,' she said. 'Look at all that mud! You need to get it fixed! It'll be endur soon and what will you do when it's icy?'

'I know, Kinsey, but I already asked around and we can't pay. It's too much.'

The talent grew heavy in her pocket.

Swallowing, Kinsey said, 'How much?'

The colour drained from Ji's face. 'Ten sheckles. Maybe more.'

We could go to the desert, Kinsey thought, looking over her shoulder at Eve. They weren't sisters, but they'd be on the street for as long as she

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could remember. They were all they had. *We could be warm and far away. We could be happy.*

But then Kinsey's eyes fell to the broken wheel.

'Ji,' she whispered, taking the gold coin out of her pocket. Ji was always kind... he deserved this. Nanna Bai deserved this. 'Take this.'

Ji's eyes grew wide. 'Where did you get this?'

She shook her head. 'It doesn't matter. Just take it.' Suddenly, that old man's words came back to her. 'You need it more than me.'

With tears in her eyes, she wandered back to Eve. Her would-be-sister was laughing with Nanna Bai, completely unaware of the beautiful woman in a flowing yellow tunic behind them. Kinsey frowned at her. She'd never seen her in Under before. But before she could question it, Eve was sweeping her into another one of Nanna Bai's stories. Kinsey rested her head on Eve's and let her mind nestle into the memory of warm sand and endless blue sky.

Ji was half-asleep against his nanna's chair when he heard the crying. In Under, it wasn't strange for the night to fill with sobs and screams. But this was different. These soft whimpers pierced his heart in a way he'd never felt.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he sat up straight and looked around the camp. Everyone appeared to be sleeping. Makeshift tents clung

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together like shipwrecked survivors at sea; though Ji knew one swift wind and they'd break apart. SnORES filtered through the camp and if he listened hard, faint whispers waltzed along the air. If anyone else heard the crying, they were promptly ignoring it.

Ji might have too, if it weren't for Nanna Bai.

'There is always room for kindness,' she had said on numerous occasions. 'Never forget that.'

So, Ji tiptoed from his sleeping nanna and along the camp until he reached the river. Since he didn't swim and had the same distaste for water as he did for anything sweet, Ji made sure to keep a few feet from the water's edge. As he walked, the crying grew louder, until he found a young woman resting on the banks of the river, her knees balled up to her chest. She didn't look like someone who belonged in Under. A bright yellow dress flowed out around her, making her look like the sun. Except, she was still crying and Ji didn't know what to do.

'Are—are you okay?' he asked softly, careful not to startle her.

'Everything's ruined,' the woman sobbed. 'I don't know what to do.'

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Ji watched the woman cry for a little while. He didn't have a lot of experience with this. Nanna Bai didn't cry all that much. In fact, he could count on one hand the amount of times he'd seen a stray tear roll down her weathered cheeks. And usually, it was out of happiness than sadness. He doubted that he would ever

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understand how his nanna could be so positive when the world continued to spit on them, but he supposed that was the best thing about his nanna.

What would Nanna do? He wondered to himself.

‘Can I tell you a joke?’ He knelt beside the woman.

She sniffled. ‘A joke?’

Ji nodded. ‘Why did no one like to visit the blacksmith?’

The woman shook her head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Because he *smelt* bad.’

There was a moment of silence where Ji began to flush red. But then the woman broke into half-laughs that were interrupted with hiccups.

‘That’s a wonderfully bad joke,’ said the woman. ‘But thank you. You’ve cheered me up a bit.’

‘What happened?’ Ji asked, despite knowing that prying into one’s private life was a dangerous thing to do and his nanna would have his tongue for being so rude.

The woman sighed, toying with the edges of her ballooning tunic. ‘I made a mistake. A terrible mistake and now I need to leave. But I can’t.’

He frowned. ‘Why do you have to leave?’

Nanna Bai would be very cross with him.

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‘Someone wants me dead,’ said the woman. ‘A very bad someone. But I can’t leave the city for I have no money.’

An ache settled in Ji’s throat. He and Nanna had often talked about leaving Keystone, but the cost of travel was great and with Nanna’s chair, most carriages wouldn’t take them further than the city gates.

‘How much do you need?’

The woman looked at him full in the face. She had round amber eyes and her black hair was coiled high on her head like a snake. Where Ji was pale, the woman was dark. Where he seemed weak and frail, she had a healthy glow and strength in her bones. She was as beautiful a woman as ever he saw.

‘You do not need to worry about me,’ she said. ‘I will be okay. Now, off you go, before true trouble starts.’

He should go. Ji wasn’t one to defy his elders, but something pulled tight in his chest and he hovered by the woman long enough for her to raise a bushy brow at him.

‘I have money,’ he whispered, half-surprising himself. Nanna Bai needed that talent Kinsey had given him. They needed to fix her wheel. But... someone was trying to hurt this woman and she needed the money, too.

There is always room for kindness, Ji.

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The woman watched him with kind eyes as he reached into a secret pocket stitched into his jacket. Running his fingers over the talent, he had the sudden urge to run very far away and never look back. But the woman was so sad and Nanna would understand. Nanna always did.

‘Take this,’ he murmured, handing the gold coin to the woman.

‘I can’t.’ She shook her head. ‘That’s too much. You take it. It’s yours.’

‘No.’ He thrust his hand out impatiently. ‘You need this more than me.’

It was an odd feeling that came over Ji as the talent left his hand and passed into the company of that strange woman in yellow. It could have been a snugness or something like the comfort of an embrace. But even as his heart swelled on the way back to camp, Ji couldn’t shake the uneasy cold that struck through that warmth.

Money is such a trivial thing, Elma thought as she let the talent dance over her knuckles. Money made their world spin and most assumed nothing could overrun its power, but they would be sorely mistaken. Elma had witnessed it time and time again—the power of a kind act; the strength of a selfless, good deed. And even though she’d seen the battle in the eyes of that young boy as he’d handed over the talent, she’d felt that flush of affirmation fill his bones.

He’d done a good thing.

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And Keystone would be better for it.

‘So, it’s done?’ Marvin Locke watched her the way men often did; all predatory eyes and coaxing smiles. He was a tall man with a mustachioed face and a thick head of salt and pepper hair. Adorned in navy trousers, a white tunic and a waistcoat, he was the picture of a businessman. But his eyes were hungry and Elma shivered in his presence.

‘It’s done,’ she said.

‘And the wellspring?’

Elma closed her eyes—mostly for her audience—and let her senses focus on the undercurrent beneath her feet. Here, in Locke & Key, she was a little further away from the wellspring than she would have liked, but she could still sense it; still feel the ripple and flow of nether as if she was running her hand through water. As always, the wellspring keened away from her, disliking the unfamiliar touch, but after a moment, it returned to its natural flow. Hovering in its element, Elma felt the shift she’d been searching for. Days earlier, when she’d first arrived in the city, she’d done this exact same exercise and reached into the wellspring. It had been a similar experience to getting struck by lightning. This time, though, there was an ease to the nether. A serenity.

‘The tides have turned,’ Elma said, opening her eyes. ‘You’ll have yourself a benevolent wellspring for a little while longer.’

Marvin Locke narrowed his eyes. ‘Perfect. I’ll be taking that coin now.’

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It pained her to part with the talent—after all, they'd been through so much together. But she was here to do a job.

Mr Locke turned the gold coin over in his hand, inspecting it with a quizzical brow. 'And this will work, yes? Because if I find out it doesn't—'

'It will work,' she interrupted. 'The Division does not lie.'

Marvin Locke hummed under his breath, as if he did not quite believe her. Raising the coin up to the light, he smiled. 'The power of a few good deeds. So strange. So... heart-warming.' He said it as if it were a bad thing. 'And now I have the power of a wellspring in my hand.'

'Not quite,' Elma said. 'The coin is merely a battery, infused with nether and solidified with benevolent acts. It will deplete. But it should work for what you need,' she added when he scowled at her. 'I must be taking my leave now.' She turned towards the door, everything inside of her urging her to leave as quickly as possible and never come back.

But as she reached for the knob, she heard a tutting noise behind her.

'Did you really think that would be all?,' said Mr Locke. 'Did you think I would need just one of these... batteries?' His laugh was cold. 'I've written to the Division. They've agreed that you shall be indentured to me. Indefinitely.'

The word felt like a punch and sounded like the locking of a cell.

Elma's mouth went dry. 'B-but I have other cities to attend.'

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Marvin Locke watched her with those hungry eyes. 'The Division understands how important you are to me. To my operation.'

They would. The Division always did. Especially when it came to Marvin Locke. But Elma would rather have drank hot wax than stay in this man's company a moment longer.

But she had to serve the Division.

She would always serve the Division.

'Now, come,' said Mr Locke. 'We have work to do.'

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

Jaidyn Groth is on twitter

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

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Not Nothing by A. Gustafson

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As the pale light seeped, like a creeping tide, across the horizon of thatch-roofed buildings, Hector woke. He put on the same shirt as he had yesterday, the one with the tear across the stomach. He put on the same pants; so torn beneath the knees he had ripped the shreds off with teeth and fingers. He had no socks and no shoes. His hair was too long and always in his eyes, but he had no knife to cut it and nothing to tie it back with. That was ok. He was a lion, and it was his mane.

Lions were strong. They liked the morning.

And no one messed with lions.

Not the alleyway kids, who made fun of Hector for having a home even though he'd rather be an alleyway kid himself. Nor the pack of stray dogs that roamed the neighbourhood and stole food from the younger children and had made a den in the graveyard. Nor the drunks who were just now thinking of beds and sleep and darker things.

No one messed with lions.

Hector prowled the streets of Keystone, padding along winding lanes and around sharp corners. He travelled to the far end of the city, built on a bridge that spanned the magical river, even though he'd never seen the magic himself and he'd lived there his whole life. He ventured far enough that no one would recognize him as the boy, Hector. Instead, they would see a slinking lion, looking for prey in all his usual places.

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The fat man with the peddler's cart, who always set up in the open square near the East Bridge, was busy talking to a rich man in a clean doublet.

Hector inched closer, flexing his claws, ready to pounce.

He sprang from the shadows, claws sinking deep into the flesh of a bread loaf. By the time the man yelled for help, Hector the lion had become Hector the squirrel, slipping into a dark alley and scaling the building, bread wedged in his mouth.



Image Description: A young boy with wide, concerned eyes is crouched down, one hand holding a piece of bread that he is eating.

He climbed to the roof and then he climbed the tower, the one with the open face and the cracked bell inside. Someone had lived there once. It had been their job to ring the bell, but for what, Hector didn't know. It had been a long time since he'd heard this bell ring, and he'd been too young.

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Across the city the other bells rang to mark the hours of the day, but this place had been special once, its bell marked something else, and now it sat silent and cracked and broken from its ropes to rest on the splintered wooden floor of the tower.

Perched on the railing, Hector kept one hand wrapped around one of the stone pillars holding up the thatched roof. He nibbled the bread until it was gone.

The wind never stopped this high up, it buffeted against him, making him shiver and trying to push him off the railing and into the tower, but Hector was a squirrel and squirrels didn't fall; no matter how high up they sat.

Besides, there were ashes inside the tower, remnants of people who had once lived. Sad things that struggled to hold themselves together, evaporating into mist or raining into puddles of water. They dampened the air inside so it tasted like mold, and dripped from the rotting beams.

Something brought them here. People said it was the magic of the river but the whole city spanned the river. It was this building, with its broken bell and crumbling walls, where most of them seemed to gather.

The sun kept climbing until he didn't think it could go any higher.

Hector became an osprey. He soared high above the city of Keystone, wings stretched wide. The rooftops were his streets, guiding him over ridgeline and chimney. His bare feet slapped the stone tiles, thighs burning as he leapt between roof edges and balconies. The wind ruffled his feathers.

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Hector sailed over the new places, where children played and the paint hadn't faded and windows were thrown open to catch the breeze and people still smiled. Where flowers bloomed from window sills and there was so much food they threw it away, and fathers always came home before darkness fell.

He flew over old neighbourhoods, with broken windows and leaning walls; where doors were dark mouths into empty spaces even though people lived inside and those people talked of leaving even though they never would because.

Because why?

There were too many answers, and none of them were real. The real was too large, too big for any one person to hold and say aloud because then they might have to do something about it or admit they're a coward.

Because then they might have to stop complaining about how their husband drank away each day's coin.

Because then they might have to stop defending a man who left bruises in place of love and terror where there should have been acceptance, all because he said sorry the next morning when he was sober.

Because then they'd have to admit that they're afraid, that it's fear that keeps them rooted to a place and to a person that's eating them alive as they stand and watch.

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Because then they might have to stop trying to convince their son that his own father didn't mean those awful things he said when he told the boy he was nothing, worth nothing, would become nothing.

Because then they might have to do something about it, or admit that they're a coward.

But Hector didn't have to worry about because ...

He was just an osprey.

When the afternoon sun was at its hottest, he tired of flying. Exchanging rooftops for alleyways, Hector became a cat. He dove and wove through the thin spaces between buildings, too small for anyone but him. He made feasts of leftovers stolen from bins and hissed at stray dogs to stay away. He napped in patches of sun, limbs hanging over the edges of a vine covered wall. He stretched and arched his back, smacking his lips and watched people wander by. He made his way to the very edge of the city, where the streets dropped away to the river far below and he sat, watching the fish sunbathe on the surface. The world around was busy and full and he was a lazed observer through sleepy eyes.

He watched as a young couple, leaning into each other, added a lock onto the bridge and threw a key into the river below.

People were always doing that. Adding padlocks to the bridge until there were so many, they covered the railing like the scales of a dragon.

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Hector followed the bridge towards the Eastern banks until it sloped downward. It was still a long drop to the river but it was hot and he'd done it before.

Everyone knew cats hated water, so he became a trout. The current dragged at him, tumbling and tossing him gently until he broke the surface. He dove as deep as he could until his human lungs demanded air, keeping well away from the whirlpool that swirled beneath the center of the city.

Upstream a man-made inlet of rocks housed a set of docks, and boats thudded and rocked against their moors. The men on the boats came from all over, to buy, to sell, to trade, to experience the magic of Keystone. They were rough men, usually, with no ties to the land and therefore not to be trusted, or so he'd heard others say. They were the kind of man his father wanted to be, before the tremors had taken away his trade and infection took his leg.

Children screamed and splashed into the water, the noise scaring the fish away, so Hector turned and fled downstream.

The city shrunk until he was washed onto the shore of a sandbar. He lay in the shallow waters, the sun glinting off his scales. The sand was warm and rough. He dug his fingers in deep and lifted a handful, watching it fall back down. No matter how he pressed his fingers against each other, the sand always found a way through.

It was like hope when you didn't want it.

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No matter how close you drew your shield, no matter how high you built your walls, no matter how hard you struck it away, it always found a way through.

The afternoon cooled and his stomach rumbled.

Hector the rabbit hopped along the riverbank, towards the far-off towers of Keystone.

Hector was very tall, for a rabbit, and yet the grass was taller still. He kept the sound of the river close until he heard the city.

Despite being a rabbit, the guards allowed Hector through the gates. Every sound was too loud, too harsh, for his ears. He hid in doorways, darting from place to place, but there was nowhere good to burrow down.

The light had turned golden. The streets were emptying, the shops closing up. The fish below the city had given up sunbathing, they broke the surface now, jumping and diving as they feasted on the bugs swarming across the river.

Mothers called to children, ushering them inside, protecting them from the darkness and what it awakened, what it allowed. His own doorway, visible now at the end of the street, stood empty and closed. The light of the fire flickered through the gaps in the shutters. His mother was home. She was always home. And always busy. Her hands always working, feet always shuffling, lips mumbling. As though she believed it was stillness that brought the rage and the darkness home each night.

Someone shouted Hector's name.

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Hector the rabbit froze.

Someone shouted his name, and footsteps slapped the cobblestone.

Alleyway kids. Emboldened by full bellies from the clerics at the nearby temple, coming to tease him and pinch him until they left dark bruises all over his arms.

Hector became a deer.

No one could catch him.

Not even the wolves.

He slid around corners and darted past horse driven carts. The shouts of an armoured guard only spurred him faster. He leapt fences and galloped through the empty streets of the old neighbourhoods.

No one could catch him.

Fingers caught the back of his shirt.

Hector slammed into the cobbled street. He flailed and yelled but it didn't matter.

The wolves had caught Hector the deer.

They tore at him, biting him, punching and pinching, all the while sneering his name as though his existence was an insult. His head rattled off the cobblestone.

Why couldn't they see he was worse off than them? Why didn't they notice the bruises that had formed before their punches landed? How could

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they miss the odd angle of one of his fingers? Why couldn't he just be one of them?

Because then you would just be a boy.

And you are not a boy.

You are a deer.

A rabbit.

A trout.

A cat.

An osprey.

A squirrel.

A lion.

Because then you might have to stop complaining about how your mother pours him drinks with a smile, even though she knows all nights end the same.

Because then you might have to stop defending why you stay in a house with a woman, who in the same breath says she is not a victim, chooses to walk on eggshells around a man who she knows will one day go too far, drink too much, hit too hard.

Sorry doesn't bring people back from the dead.

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Because to be an alleyway kid you would have to admit that you're afraid, that it's fear that keeps you rooted to a place and to a person that's eating you alive as you stand and watch.

Because then you might have to stop convincing yourself that those awful things your father said to you, that you are nothing, worth nothing, will become nothing, aren't the same words you've whispered to yourself at night a thousand times.

Because then you might have to do something about it, or admit that you're a coward.

Hector became a bear. He thrashed and clawed and fought his way free from the pack of wolves.

They shrunk away from his anger.

He was bigger than them. Tougher than them. Solitary.

He was a bear, and they were only wolves.

Hector roared.

The wolves ran.

He wandered back home, nursing an arm that wouldn't bend and limping on a paw that throbbed with each step and spitting out redness that tasted like copper.

Hector smiled.

He was a bear, and they were only wolves.

A bear was not nothing.

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A bear was something.

And he was a bear.

The last light of day leaked from the world, simmering against the horizon and then the veil of night slipped over the city.

The coolness hardened into cold.

Hector's bare feet ached. His flesh prickled. He dug his hands into his armpits as his muscles tightened and tremored.

He could not stay outside.

There was nothing he could become that would keep him safe from man-at-night.

Man-at-night were shadowed demons of dark cravings. The moonlight transformed them. The empty streets encouraged them. The growing nothingness that sat always in the corner of your eye, even as those who walked and talked with importance said nothing was wrong, consumed Keystone and twisted it into a darker version of itself.

No one else could see it.

But Hector did.

He saw it when he prowled as a lion and flew as an osprey.

It hid in the old neighbourhoods by day, and seeped into the people by night.

Hector heard the way men talked about the Keystone of their youth, even men like his father.

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A city of love and magic, enough for all.

But now an emptiness poured in. Into the buildings that lay abandoned. Into the people like his mother and father, warping them to shadows and hollow shells.

It started in the old neighbourhoods, finding easy targets where it could stay hidden behind the rumblings of violence and the blind eye to poverty. It worked its way, slow, into minds and hearts and deeds, like brush strokes across a canvas in a slightly somber shade.

But where it started did not mean that was where it would stay.

At the threshold of his home, Hector became a mouse. He listened at the shutters, for the thumps of rage, the slap of anger, the crack of hatred.

It was quiet.

Safe.

Hector opened the door.

His mother knelt on the floor, picking up broken glass, a fresh bruise blooming on her cheek.

She looked up and saw him; Hector the mouse. Her gaze darted to the corner.

His father was a hunched shadow near the fire, a furled mass of steadied, angered breathing.

Home early.

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From within the twisted darkness of his face, his father's gaze found him.

Black eyes, rimmed in red veins, sunk into swollen flesh.

Hector was only a mouse.

He flitted up the stairs and under his bed. Hugging his knees to his chest, clamping his hands over his ears, he waited.

Waited for the shouts.

Waited for the screams.

Waited for the creak of footsteps and the thump of his father's crutch coming up the stairs.

Waited for dawn.

His stomach rumbled and Hector stayed under the bed.

His mouth dried and Hector stayed under the bed.

The moon rose and fell, its pale light arcing across the room through the window, and Hector stayed under the bed.

Downstairs, a bed frame creaked in rhythm and the clink of a bottle rolled across the ground. And when the creaking finally stopped, the air in the house that had been thick and tumbling like it was before a storm rolled in, sighed into lightness.

Footsteps climbed the stairs, candle light appeared in the door, his mother's dress swayed as she walked and she sat down on the bed.

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Hector the mouse climbed out and stood before his mother.

Tears shimmered in her eyes but they didn't fall. His mother never cried. Not for a long time.

She patted the bed beside her but Hector didn't move.

He didn't want to be Hector the boy. He wanted to stay Hector the mouse.

Hector the boy was scared of things that boys shouldn't have to be scared of. Like fathers. And Alleyway kids. And mothers dying. And loneliness.

Hector the mouse was scared of all the things a mouse should be scared of. Like people and noises and cats.

She swept her fingers through his hair and took the tension that had made rigid branches of his arms and legs and he fell into her arms.

He breathed her in. Smoke and dough and dust.

She drew him up onto the bed and sang, all the while her fingers gliding across his scalp.

Hector closed his eyes, the candle light flickering red against the inside of his eyelids.

His mother told him all the things he might be one day and of all the great things he might do. She spoke on the wondrous things he might learn and create and see and share.

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But when he asked about all the things his mother wanted to be and learn and do, she fell silent.

To the sound of his mother's breathing and her steady heartbeat tapping against her chest, Hector the boy slept.

Dawn slipped through the window, pink and golden.

Hector the lion unfurled on his bed, arching his back and stretching each limb. He slid out from his mother's arms and padded down the stairs.

His father was a lump beneath the blankets. His crutch leaned against the corner. Empty bottles rested on the table. His face, poking out, was pallid and sagged as though fingers were dragging his skin towards the ground. He breathed heavy and smelled of sick.

Hector opened the door and stood in its frame, still watching his father.

Today, while his father slept, Hector would fly and climb and run. He would watch lovers unite and children play and ships sail. He would feel fear and joy and anger. He would do old things and try new things.

He would be a lion, a trout, an osprey, a rabbit because.

Because why?

'Because I am not nothing,' Hector whispered to his father.

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The End.

Want to know more about the author?

A. Gustafson is on twitter

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

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Author Interview: A. Gustafson

1. Why are you a writer?

I think at first it was just a desire to create and have fun, but studying the craft has also added to that list the desire to master something. My dad is a master carpenter with thousands of hours spent working with wood and his hands and his tools. I've always admired him, his work ethic, his dedication and this vast collection of knowledge he's gained. I want that.

2. What are your biggest writing goals?

I suppose I answered this above a bit but mastering the craft of writing, or at least the pursuit of it, is my goal. Comparing my writing to my writing even one year ago and seeing an improvement is what keeps me going.

3. What is your writing schedule/routine like?

Always different. My life has been in a state of constant flux since forever and so my writing schedule has to constantly adapt. I do find I'm most productive and hit higher word counts if I write in the morning than in the afternoon or evening, so if it's possible, I will write before I do anything else.

4. Which author would you love to collaborate with?

What a question! I mean, how do you choose? Leigh Bardugo. V.E Schwab. The great George R.R.Martin. Jenn Lyons.

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

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Game of Thrones. (Though *Name of the Wind* and *A Darker Shade of Magic* place close seconds) I've read the GoT series twice now and plan on tackling it a third time. I've read other stuff by G.R.R.M and while I enjoy them, it's the particular writing style of GoT that I love. I believe the term is 'romanticised'. I don't naturally write that way, but I wish I did. I think my favourite part of the book is when Cersei does the walk of shame and I paused for a moment because I realised I was feeling sorry for Cersei and rooting for her to have a comeback. To take a character that is so despised and twist your thoughts like that is masterful.

6. What is your current reading obsession?

I've just started the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J Maas.

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

Harry Potter. Book 7. Page 512. Fred's death.

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

Why this character? Why this story?

It started off just wanting to follow a lone boy around Keystone, to experience what a young but insightful person might notice and moved into how a person might survive a life where very few places and people make them feel safe, a terrible concept. But I love Hector's resilience to it, and the way in which he copes, which is non-destructive. Despite the sadness in the story, it ends on hope, on a young boy finding, if not himself, at least an important piece.

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

Control time. Pause, rewind, fast forward.

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

A phoenix, who can be constantly reborn and watch the world change, or a kraken who gets to explore the depths of the oceans and see places no human ever has.

11. Describe your perfect writing day.

Somewhere warm, near the sea with endless hours and coffee.

12. Any advice for your fellow writers?

Find or build a community of writers around you.

You will see the same advice repeated everywhere and that's because it's what works but first and most important of all that advice is to find other writers and build friendships.

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Pronunciation & World Guide

[*The Missing of Moar*](#) by Bronwyn Eley

Moar: more

Daewyn: day-o-win

Days of the week: Monneth | Toneth | Midneth | Forneth | Cinneth | Baneth | Sunneth

[*The Importance of Being Good*](#) by Jaidyn Groth

Squark (noun): a small amount; usually five to seven

[*Not Nothing*](#) by A. Gustafson

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Content Warnings

[*The Missing of Moar*](#) by Bronwyn Eley

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

[*The Importance of Being Good*](#) by Jaidyn Groth

Depictions of homelessness, child abandonment, indenture

[*Not Nothing*](#) by A. Gustafson

Implied domestic abuse, violence, implied sexual assault

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Next in Netherün

Suns of the Division by A.L. Burnham

A talented young artificer is tasked with preventing emotional damage to his home and wellspring, but meets his match in the city's most stubbornly miserable citizen. If he is unable to help her, the home he loves may be poisoned beyond repair.

Lock and Keystone by Tace Samoset

A young metalsmith pours his heart into his work so he can give it to his wife; but promises made in a forge can still be broken.

A Gathering, A Wandering by Ally Bodnaruk

Beside the road there was a campfire, and around the campfire there was a group of strangers, and in that group of strangers there grew a kinship as they told tales of the world and how they came to be there in that moment.

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