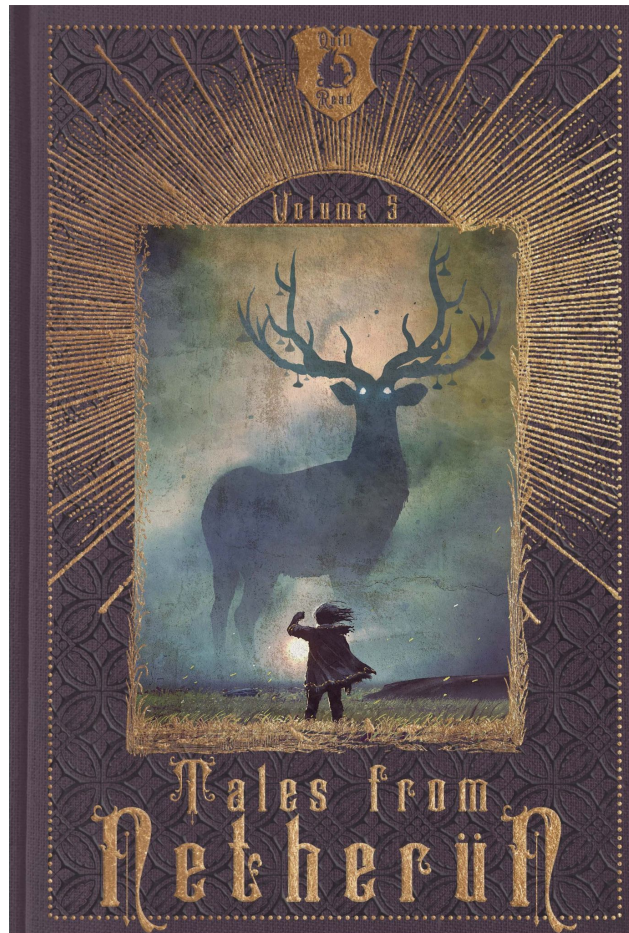


Tales From Netherün: Volume Five

Quill & Read



Cover Description: The cover looks like a brown vintage leather book, with a rectangular panel featuring an image of a young woman looking up at a giant ethereal stag. In gilt gold on the cover are the words Volume Five, Tales from Netherün.

[Table of Contents](#)

Table of Contents

[Welcome to Netherün 3](#)

[*Beyond the Farthest Horizon* by A. Gustafson 5](#)

[*Come Inside* by Jaidyn Groth 28](#)

[*Save the Asterpox* by Bronwyn Eley 46](#)

[Author Interview with Jaidyn Groth 71](#)

[Pronunciation & World Guide 74](#)

[Content Warnings 75](#)

[Next in Netherün 76](#)

[Acknowledgements 77](#)

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...

Interested in following us on social media? Just click the link below.

<https://linktr.ee/QuillAndRead>

<https://www.instagram.com/quillandread/>

<https://twitter.com/QuillandRead>

Table of Contents



Image Description: A distressed fantasy map of Netherün. There are three flags marking the locations that the next three stories will take place. One in the south of Midar, one in the plains between Gamneer and Thastor, and one in the frigid Sunken Sea in the north west.

Beyond the Farthest Horizon by A. Gustafson

SIX

The ground shakes. Saddo's eyes flutter open. It takes a moment for her to realise what has woken her.

The Feiht an Cenh.

Saddo swings from the top bunk, her bare feet landing on the cold floor. She is beaming, her breath coming swift and short as she jitters with excitement.

Her younger sister, Kelana, rubs her eyes, stirring from the bottom bunk. She is four and doesn't remember the Feiht an Cenh, only the stories told to them by their mother at night.

'Come on,' Saddo whispers, yanking her from the bed.

They run down the hall and Saddo raps on her parents' door as she passes.

The ground is still shaking beneath their feet, rhythmic tremors that rattle the dishes in the kitchen as Saddo puts on her grey jacket and fur lined boots. She has to help Kelana into hers.

[Table of Contents](#)

'Hurry,' Saddo urges. She shoves a twig into the black coals of the fireplace, disturbing their slumber. Flecks of orange burn as she stirs them, and white ash flitters up into the air. The whole room smells of smoke. Flame bursts to life and flickers from the end of the twig. Saddo takes the lantern off the hook by the door and lights it. Saddo holds the lantern high as she opens the door. Gripping Kelana's hand tight, they run out into the night.

On the front porch, Saddo grabs the rocking chair and drags it down the steps and through the dirt. Kelana helps her but she is not as strong or as fast as Saddo. The rockers drag through the rich soil, leaving a trail of two lines and their small boot prints. The chair bounces and snags on the stones that lie hidden. They reach the tall grass and stop, spin it to face north and stand beside it, waiting. Kelana slips her hand into Saddo's.

Steep mountains of stone hem in their little valley. Fields of yellow grass, hidden now by darkness, spreads from edge to edge. The stars above are not visible but it is not clouds that hide them.

'Dust,' Saddo whispers, pointing to the swirling in the air. It clings to every crease and Saddo can taste it on her tongue. She closes her mouth as they stand there, staring towards the end of the valley.

[Table of Contents](#)

Footsteps sound behind them, crunching dirt and gravel beneath hard soles. Saddo glances back and her father steps into the halo of the lantern, carrying their mother in his arms.

‘You left the door open,’ her father says, setting their mother on the chair.

Saddo’s father is a giant. He is muscled from mornings carrying their mother down the stairs and afternoons as a carpenter and evenings carrying her back up to bed.

He places one hand on Saddo’s shoulder and the other around his wife as he drops to a knee between them and turns his gaze northwards. Saddo leans into him. He smells of hard work and cedar and soft earth. Kelana nudges her way past Saddo to sit at their mother’s feet and cling to her mother’s night dress.

Saddo’s mother is gentle but fierce, like a mother bear. Kelana shares her smooth, black hair and hazel eyes but Saddo shares her temperament. Her mother sits with her twisted spine but the pain that usually pinches her face is gone, excitement replaces it as she runs her fingers through Kelana’s hair.

[Table of Contents](#)

The shuddering of the earth grows stronger. Pale moonlight cuts a beam through the whirls of dust in the air, shining down the valley, reflecting off the blades of grass.

The Feiht an Cenah steps from the coiling darkness at the end of the valley, a shadow itself against the moonlight. As its hoof hits the ground, the earth rumbles beneath Saddo's feet. The Feiht an Cenah towers against the landscape, the tips of its antlers high as the valley's stone walls, its eyes a glowing blue. It flicks its ears, bends its head down, down, down, and grazes.

Saddo can see the swathes of fabric and lengths of rope that loop between its antlers, a moving village of Errants.

Kelana gasps, her tiny hands clutching at their father who hugs her tight. She buries her head into his shoulder.

'It's all right, little one,' he soothes.

'Where does it come from?' Saddo asks.

'Far away,' her mother says.

The Feiht an Cenah continues grazing, ripping up sweeps of scrub, dirt raining down from their torn roots, and cracking the branches off the trees, leaving one side barren and chewed.

[Table of Contents](#)

‘Will we trade with the Errants?’ Saddo asks, a thousand more questions bubbling in her mind.

‘If the Feiht an Cenh doesn’t wander too far by morning,’ he says. ‘It is different every time.’

‘I hope it stays,’ Saddo says, unable to look away. How would its fur feel gripped in her hands? Would the wind blow differently from that high above the world?

‘Don’t stay up too long,’ her father whispers. He kisses Saddo’s mom and takes Kelana back to bed. ‘Come and get me when your mother’s ready.’

Saddo climbs onto her mother’s lap and curls into her.

They sit together, in the cold of night, watching the Feiht an Cenh until the tip of its tail disappears behind the valley walls and the rumbles grow fainter.

Her father’s friend told her once, that the Feiht an Cenh circles the world. That was why it only returned every four years. Though Saddo had only been two last time she’d seen it, she still remembers the glow of its eyes, the span of its antlers, the sight of the men and women in their swaying village.

[Table of Contents](#)

Saddo touches a hand to her heart, feels the fluttering in the chest.

Her mother places her hand over Saddo's.

'It's longing you feel, little one,' her mother says to her. 'I felt it when I was young as well; a desire to leave familiarity behind.'

'You don't feel it anymore?' Saddo wants to run down the valley, to catch the Feiht an Cenh and climb and hold on tight as it takes her beyond the farthest horizon.

'Wants change. Priorities. I met your father and fell in love, and we had you and your sister.'

'Did you want to leave?'

'I did. But just because I chose to stay, doesn't mean you shouldn't go, nor that I regret my choice. Follow your heart, Saddo, and you will have a good life wherever you are.'

No one left Barrow. Not for long. Saddo's uncle had gone all the way to Keystone once, for business. Saddo had begged him for stories for months, wanting to extract every moment of every day in the big city.

But father had stopped it. He said the city ate you alive, that it seeped into you like moisture into wood, creating twisting and warping that would weaken you over time.

[Table of Contents](#)

Her father wants Saddo to dream of a good life in Barrow, but Saddo's heart belongs to the Feiht an Cenh, just like her mother's had.

TEN

Saddo's mother sits, hunched, in the rocking chair on the stoop. She is thin and frail, wrapped in blankets despite the tosamne warmth. Saddo sets another blanket on her mother's lap and the basket of yarn at her feet.

Her mother smiles and tousles Saddo's wild hair. 'Thank you.'

Saddo smiles but it's only a half-smile. Her mother doesn't deserve a life bound to a chair. Her father and uncle told her once how her mother was when she was Saddo's age. Wild as wind, they said. Always running, always climbing, untameable; until shortly after Saddo was born and her spine began to twist.

Her mother had been a gardener and a baker once she married, and father still brags of her to the village. It has been a long time since her mother knelt in her garden and baked fresh bread in the oven. But Saddo can't change the past, so instead she grows up and takes her mother's

[Table of Contents](#)

place so her mother doesn't have to worry about all the things that need to be done.

Kelana is in town with Father, his helper for the day, freeing up Saddo from watching her so she can get her chores done.

'I'll be back in an hour,' Saddo says to her mother.

Behind the house, where it gets the most sun, is the garden; an acre of neat rows ploughed by her father in early Oxtide. Saddo brings a wooden bucket with her and kneels in the soft dirt. Her fingers dig to the roots of the growing weeds, pinches and twists them free. Every time she fills the bucket, she empties it onto the pile of compost and returns. The sun tips to noon, her sweat smears the dirt on her face to mud, and she feels the familiar rumble in the earth.

Saddo's heart leaps and falls. The Feiht an Cenh is a distant memory now, like a painting that's been smeared, the details smudged by careless hands. There are more important things to take Saddo's attention.

Her mother's faint voice is calling. Is something wrong? Saddo dumps the last bucket of weeds and sprints around the house.

'Sit with me,' her mother says, tapping the wooden bench her father made. 'We can watch it pass by together.'

[Table of Contents](#)

When the weeding is done the raspberries need picking, then tonight she must start jamming them to preserve for endur. But first her mother needs something to eat. With so much to do, there's no time to stop.

'Do you want lunch?' Saddo asks, wiping her hands on her apron.

'Can't you feel that?' her mother asks. 'It's the Feiht an Cenh. You used to talk about it all the time.'

'I know,' Saddo says.

Her mother's hands tremble, her face pinches with pain. Saddo takes the knitting needles and the half-completed endur mitt and sets them into the basket.

'You're cold,' Saddo says. 'I'll help you inside.' She holds her arm out to her mother.

'I want to watch the Feiht an Cenh.' Unspoken but hanging between them is the possibility that her mother may never see it again. The healer in the village had warned them what it means to live with a twisted spine.

Saddo turns to head for the kitchen and her mother's hand wraps over hers, stopping her. She brings it to Saddo's chest, placing Saddo's own hand over her heart.

'What do you feel?' her mother asks.

[Table of Contents](#)

'Duty,' Saddo whispers.

There are tears shining in her mother's eyes but Saddo doesn't want to talk of dreams. She slips inside to the kitchen, adding cedar kindling to get the flame going and birch to create a bed of embers. She cuts vegetables and fills the pot with water while she waits for the fire to burn down. When the fire is more pulsating coal than flame, she sets the pot on the iron hook above it.

Saddo stands at the kitchen windows as the Feiht an Cenh strides past. He does not graze but moves with purpose across the land. In the bright of day, she can see the Errants moving on its back, climbing the rope through its antlers into their fabric homes that hang like pinecones from a tree and sway with its movement.

Saddo doesn't like to cry, it only worries her mother and father. She blinks and a tear streams down her cheeks. She wipes it away and returns to the boiling pot to stir. Her mother has lost so much it doesn't feel fair to mourn for herself. It is only a dream after all. And life in Barrow is as fine as a life anywhere else.

FOURTEEN

The wind blows hard, howling down their narrow valley and rattling the shutters of their little cottage. It's late tosamne and the Feiht an Cenh should have passed weeks ago.

Kelana sleeps soundly in the top bunk and Saddo doesn't wake her. Kelana has no interest in the Feiht an Cenh, it doesn't call to her the way it once called to Saddo.

Saddo would rather let the Feiht an Cenh pass in the night, but she made a promise to her mother.

Saddo takes the lantern she keeps by the front door. She often wakes to chase coyotes away from the chicken coop her father installed last year. Saddo puts on her dark coat, the one that was her mother's. The fabric is heavy and sheds the rain, a wedding gift from Saddo's father to his bride their first dewgrass together.

The lantern is a glowing yellow ball in the night and she holds it high as she wades through the grass to her mother's grave.

[Table of Contents](#)

The mound in the earth is grown over with flowers Saddo planted there, and the headstone made by their father is painted with deer and seedlings and blossoms and reads *Takama*.

The footsteps, like small earthquakes, shake boulders loose from the valley walls. The crack as the rock breaks away echoes down the valley and Saddo can see the black boulders crash to the earth.

The wind whips at Saddo's hair, coming down from the eastern mountains, icy despite the fact it is tosamne. Saddo stands alone in the field of grass with her jacket billowing and the lantern creaking as it sways in her grip.

The Feiht an Cenh arises, striding from the darkness. It stands broadside to Saddo, a shadow in the moonlight with its glowing gaze and she swears it is looking right at her.

Saddo stands frozen, unblinking so her tears can't fall. The Feiht an Cenh flicks its ears, still watching her. Saddo's heart hammers against her rib cage and she holds a hand to her chest, feeling the thudding. For a moment it is as though her mother is here, urging her to go and the Feiht an Cenh is waiting for her, calling her to freedom.

[Table of Contents](#)

But she hears the front door clatter open in the wind and her father strides out, folding his arms against the cold and, though he's come to watch it with her, he's broken the moment.

He needs Saddo, and so does Kelana. She cares for the home while they work, she tends the garden and preserves their harvest and makes hot soup on cold nights. She is their anchor, like her mother was.

She leans against her father as he places an arm around her. She remembers when she thought he was a giant, but now that she is grown she realises he is smaller than most, but stronger too. He is the kind of man that others look up to. Slow to anger, quick to help, Barrow born and bred.

The Feiht an Cenh turns and continues on.

'You honour your mother,' her father says. 'Every day.' He holds her tighter and kisses the side of her head and releases her. 'Coming inside?'

Saddo shakes her head.

She stands alone until the cold turns her fingers and toes numb. She places a hand over her heart. She had not lied, all those years ago, when she told her mother she felt duty there. But she had not told the truth either. She felt the longing too. They are nestled side by side, neither one outweighing the other but holding an equal place so that she never feels

[Table of Contents](#)

peace, not for a single day in all the years since she had first seen the Feiht an Cenh and heard the stories of its people.

EIGHTEEN

Saddo stands at Isaura's stall in Barrow. She fills her basket with bread and hands over a shuck. The little jar of honey, already in the basket, is fresh from Saddo's hive at home. She finds her father at the blacksmith's house, working with Kelana to build a woodshed out back.

They stand with their boots on the narrow rafters, laying down wooden beams horizontal across them and nailing them down; working in perfect unison. Saddo watches them for a while. Kelana looks so like their mother. Her long hair is braided down her back and sweat glistens as she packs bundles of cedar shingles up the roof while her father nails down the last beam.

Her father's hair is peppered with gray and wrinkles have set deep into his face, but he is still as strong as he was twenty years ago.

Saddo shades her eyes against the sun as she walks beneath them.

Table of Contents

Her father smiles, wipes his brow and climbs down the ladder. Kelana follows.



Image description: Saddo, dressed in a simple tunic dress and carrying a basket of bread.

‘A feast,’ her father exaggerates.

But it is good. The honey is sweet and the bread is freshly baked and they sit together in the shade and eat.

[Table of Contents](#)

Down the alley, beside the woodshed, Demer walks past with a wheelbarrow of iron ore. He has dark, curly hair and his arms are thick with muscle. He wears a leather apron, the sleeves cut off his shirt to fight the heat of the forge. Demer is young, twenty, but they say he already rivals his father's skill with a hammer and red, glowing iron. He casts a side glance at Saddo and she can see his face, already red from the heat of the day and the pushing of the wheelbarrow, flush deeper.

'It's a good life,' her father says, 'the life of a blacksmith. Hard work but good coin. He would take good care of you.'

The words send spiders crawling across her flesh, but she doesn't voice her aversion, which by all counts is reasonless; there are many women her age in the village who have their eye on Demer. 'He's a good man,' she agrees. 'But life in our little valley is good too.'

'It is good,' her father agrees. 'But it is my life, and your mothers, and your childhood's. But you are not a child anymore. You must build a life of your own, Saddo, someday soon. Fill it with people you love and who love you.'

Saddo looks at her hands and picks at a nail. She's given everything to the cottage in their little valley. She's planted fruit trees, added a hive

[Table of Contents](#)

and built new rows of trellises to grow more beans and berries. Why can't she stay with her father forever? Why does he always press her to marry? She does not love Demer. She does not love anything. But even as she whispers it in her mind, she knows it is a lie; she loves the wind and the places she's never been.

She loves the Ocean's Bellow at Karantaur, as well as the Arvore, the great tree, even though she's never seen them. She dreams of the crossed bridges of Keystone that hold up an entire city above their swirling wellspring and of the Tears of Collidus in Gamneer that flow for hundreds of miles down a thousand waterfalls into the great lake of Tythus.

'I don't mean it unkindly,' her father says, calling her back to the moment.

Kelana finishes her bread and begins packing up their tools. Ever since mother's death she rarely speaks and will not look in mirrors.

'Shall we head home?' her father asks, slapping his knees and standing.

Saddo nods and picks up the basket. She prefers her days alone at the cottage, nestled between the black rock cliffs, wading through the sea of yellow grass. Her mother is there, seeped into every part. Her chair still

[Table of Contents](#)

sits on the deck and rocks in a strong breeze and the spoons in the drawer were carved by her hand. The bowls and plates of clay were made by the potter in town, but Saddo's mother painted them by hand to represent each of them; decorating Saddo's with deer and seedlings and blossoms.

They are at the start of the valley when she feels the tremor.

Her father and sister pick up their pace, the cliffs are dangerous when the Feiht an Cenh passes by, but something holds Saddo. She places a hand over her heart and feels it beating in time with the tremors.

Her breathing catches as the Feiht an Cenh appears, a great hoof flying above her. Her father yells her name, but Saddo cannot move, only watch as the hoof slams into the earth in front of her. The ground shakes and debris sprays her and the cliff rocks crack and Saddo grabs onto a boulder to stay standing.

Her father and sister are frozen now too, watching.

The Feiht an Cenh pauses and twists its head around to stare at Saddo with one glowing eye. The Feiht an Cenh huffs and as far below him as Saddo is, she can feel the breeze rustle her jacket.

[Table of Contents](#)

The world cools, standing in its shadow. Its foreleg is there, within arm's length. She just has to reach out, grab on and let it take her beyond the farthest horizon.

But her father and sister are only a few yards away and they are waiting, her father's face tightens in concern. They rely on her. They need her.

But her mother's words echo in her head.

Follow your heart, Saddo, and you will have a good life, wherever you are.

And her father's.

You are not a child anymore. You must build a life of your own, Saddo, someday soon.

Saddo looks to her father and is surprised to see tears there as he nods his head. Saddo takes a slow breath, gaze cast to the ground. How many times has she heard him tell her how good life in Barrow is? A thousand? More? Yet he nods?

'Go,' he says and his voice cracks. 'Go,' he whispers.

Saddo wants to run and hug him, she knows how much it breaks his heart to let her go. But she knows that she has only now, only this one

[Table of Contents](#)

moment to climb the Feiht an Cenh else it will move on, and she cannot hope to catch it no matter how fast she runs.

She will see her father and sister again, four years from now. And until then she will chase horizons.

Saddo pulls her hand away from her chest and stretches it out towards the Feiht an Cenh.

TWENTY

Kelana stands at the workbench she made herself, in the workshop she made herself, on the last street of Barrow. She works with her father for half the week, building, and for the other half she works for herself. The ground of her workshop is covered in the pale curls of birch and she works the spindle and chisel to create an intricate pattern into a pole of wood that will become a table leg.

The tremors start near midday and Kelana pauses. She sets down the table leg and the chisel and stands in the doorway. It is warm in the sun but a breeze flows through the houses. Kelana crosses her arms and waits,

[Table of Contents](#)

the whole town waits, and children climb to the rooftops for a better view.

They have been waiting all week.

The Feiht an Cenh appears in the distance, a growing, lumbering movement that begins to take shape as it crosses between her father's little valley and Barrow.

Kelana sees movement atop it, a few people weaving through the fur of the Feiht an Cenh's back and one lone figure standing at the base of one antler. Saddo. Kelana sees only the shape, but she knows it is her sister.

Kelana's father approaches from the back room of the workshop. Together they move beyond the last homes of Barrow, towards the Feiht an Cenh.

It stops and a long rope is thrown down from its antlers with a sack tied to the end that thuds against the ground. Saddo and a young man stand high, high, high up on its head, small silhouettes against a bright tosamne sky, but Kelana would recognize her sister anywhere. She sees them grab the other end of the rope, looped over an antler, and step into the air. The heavy sack on the ground rises upwards as a counterweight as Saddo and the man float down.

[Table of Contents](#)

The man is young, Saddo's age, and he keeps an arm on the small of her back. He is dark; dark hair, dark skin, dark gaze and there is a confident but gentle strength in his posture and movement.

Saddo hasn't aged at all in four years. Her hair is tousled, her skin burnished and she smiles to see them. She wears the clothes of the Errants now, fibre-weave with feathers in her hair. There is a thick wrap of fabric over her chest and a bundle inside that Saddo clutches in one hand. She is smiling and it is like the sun breaking through cloud.

Saddo hugs their father and then Kelana, and then she peels back part of the wrap to reveal the babe there, sleeping.

Father is crying and Kelana wipes her own tears away too. She reaches out a hand to touch the babe, to run a finger over her black hair.

'Takama,' Saddo says and their father looks up at Saddo with his shimmering gaze.

'It is a good life?' their father asks.

'It's a good life,' Saddo agrees.

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

[Table of Contents](#)

A. Gustafson is on twitter

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

Come Inside by Jaidyn Groth

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

The circus tent was alone on the field. Surrounding trees grew tall and wide; ancient warriors guarding this vacant clearing. The crops had been cleared away after the fires during the final month of tosamne, when the air was dry, the sun vicious and the grass vulnerable. Juna knew it was only a matter of time before the weather turned and this forest would be knee deep with sudden water and debris. Creatures from beneath the ground would make an unwelcome appearance, teeth bared and eyes hungry and no one would be allowed out after dark again.

But for now, she was safe under the stars. Except for the tent.

How could Tio be so stupid? She'd warned him. Told him not to listen to the boys under the bridge. But Tio had a curious mind and a desperate need to seek out answers. So, of course, when Juna had woken up and seen his bed empty, she'd known that he'd left in the middle of the night and journeyed through the whispering forest, ignoring the jibes and jests of the trees, all so he could see if the tent was real—if the magical circus had finally come to Hynne.

[Table of Contents](#)

An inquisitive breeze whipped around Juna, urging her forward. She heard the words from the forest on the tail of the wind and shook her head free of its lure. She wasn't here for that. She needed to find Tio.

Walking towards the tent felt like a dare. She silently cursed the boys under the bridge for spreading lies and stories about the circus. With each step through the charcoal and ash field, she thought of ways she would punish them for tricking Tio. Everyone knew the circus was more than lights and magic. Everyone knew that people who went to the circus never seemed to come home.

Ahead of Juna, the small tent glowed red. Through the single flap, an effervescent golden light wove towards her, seeking her out like the wind.

She was doing this for Tio, she reminded herself as the light caught her trousers. Goosebumps pebbled her bare arms and she swallowed. It was strange, the feeling that passed over as she reached for the tent flap. It was as if she was finding something she'd always searched for. Like a wish was being granted. A dream realised.

She pulled back the flap and stepped inside.

It was colour she saw first. Colour and chaos. Then her ears exploded with the sound of drums. And fiddles. And the whistle of a stray pipe.

[Table of Contents](#)

The circus was larger than she expected. Bigger than it should have been. Wilder than any rumour she'd ever heard. From the outside, the tent was barely big enough to fit a few people. Inside, it stretched and shivered as it shrouded hundreds and hundreds of visitors and performers. Above her head, nethered people swung from one platform to the next. Several had remarkable similarities to cats and reminded Juna of the family of strays that lived by the river. Others had horns or bluish skin. Juna was transfixed watching them swing and flip and somersault through the air, ignoring the hustle and bustle of the tent below.

To her left, a tunnel of brightly lit stalls wove in and out so that if she looked through the middle, she couldn't quite see where they ended. Vendors did parlour tricks; some turning paper to flame in an instant and others magicked a coin from behind someone's ear. If any were actual artificers, Juna couldn't tell. She'd only met one artificer and he'd been a cruel old man with one dark eye and one light. She shivered at the memory just as someone collided with her shoulder and sent her tumbling into the closest stall.

'Oy!' hissed the vendor.

[Table of Contents](#)

She turned to apologise, but when she did, the vendor's face blurred until it was nothing more than a mask of black where a face should've been. Swallowing, Juna stepped away from the stall and backed into another.

'Care to see your future?' a voice whispered like honeysuckle and mint.

Behind her, a hand of bone and gold crept towards her from beneath a cloak of black and she flinched away from the touch.

Everywhere, people pushed and shoved and laughed and cried and some reached for her and others shied away and music rang out and pockets of silence enveloped her and all the while, Tio was lost in here somewhere and the circus would never give him back and she couldn't breathe.

'Juna.'

From the back of the circus, behind fire-breathers, sword-swallowers, cats who spun and danced and tall men with long beards and tired eyes, Tio's voice echoed.

'Juna.'

Juna spun, searching for her brother's tuft of dark brown curls. 'Tio? Where are you?'

[Table of Contents](#)

'Come find me.'

Tio's juvenile voice was full of mischief and Juna knew she should stop playing. She never won at these games. Tio was too clever despite being five years younger than she. She'd spent the better part of her life chasing him through Hynne, trying to keep up with his riddles and stories, but he always bested her.

Her heart squeezed. If she didn't play this game, she might not have another chance. He could lose himself in the dark and she'd never see him again.

With the smell of citrus and pastry and something like vanilla filling her nose and drowning out rational thought, Juna decided she'd play Tio's game. And this time she'd win.

Pushing passed a man with a smile of sharpened teeth, Juna clenched her fists so tightly that her nails bit into her palms. *Good*. Pain would keep her focused. She had to stay focused. She had to find Tio. She had to find—

'Your future, dear?' whispered that honeysuckle and mint voice and even though she was a few stalls away, the voice brushed her ear... as if lips were caressing her skin.

[Table of Contents](#)

She dug her nails in deeper. 'No,' she said aloud to no one and continued to push through the crowd.

Cackles filled the air all around her, soft at first, until it was as if everyone was laughing. Visitors and performers alike leered at Juna as she fumbled through the crowds, searching for her younger brother's face. But it wasn't Tio she saw. It was hundreds of unfamiliar faces, each blurring as her eyes settled on them, making it hard to focus. Even if they were right in front of her, they seemed to wobble, like the lines around them couldn't commit to existence.

Was this what the circus did to people? The boys under the bridge spoke of spells and fun and magic, but the adults had whispered of lost souls and faceless creatures and children stolen from their beds. Juna swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed on.

Someone with a cold stare stepped into her path.

'Hello,' the man said and in an instant, his blurred face transformed. In place of his nose and mouth was a long hooked beak. The man's cool blue eyes darkened and darkened until they were so black that Juna thought she'd fall right into them and never come out. 'Do you want to come with me?'

[Table of Contents](#)

Something icy settled in Juna's bones and she shook her head furiously.

Look away, she told herself. Don't look at him.

But how could she stop looking at the man who looked like a bird? How could she continue on when she had so many questions and almost everything in her was begging her to stay put?

Stay.

Stay.

Stay.

'Come find me, Juna.'

'Excuse me,' Juna muttered and as the words left her mouth, she felt the hold on her break. Stepping around the bird man, she kept her eyes on the ground until she was sure she was safe from his intense stare. Until she was certain she wouldn't lose herself to whatever stalked behind the bird man's eyes. When she turned back around, the man was gone.

'Tio!' she called out, but where every other sound rang loud and deafening, her voice was small and weak. She tried again, but this time, the words lodged in her throat. Coughing, she clutched at her neck. The words were in there, half-formed and desperate to be free but they wouldn't come.

'Let me tell you your future, girl,' came that voice again.

[Table of Contents](#)

Around her, people swam and blurred and her eyes hurt from looking at them and her lungs screamed as breathing became as hard as lighting a fire with wet wood and there was that bird man again and she couldn't speak and what was this place and where was *TIO*?

'Breathe, sweetheart,' said no one and everyone all at once.

Juna took a gasping breath of air. She could taste vanilla on her tongue as she did, or she thought it was vanilla. Perhaps it was something else.

The crowd cheered as a nethered acrobat flipped in the air and landed on a tightrope high above their heads. Looking up, Juna thought for a moment that the circus tent took a deep breath.

She needed to get out of here.

Opening her mouth to call out for her brother, she thought better of it and continued on. Several times, as she shuffled down the endless tunnel of vendors, she thought she spotted the bird man, but she would blink and he would vanish.

Time passed and Juna's legs grew tired and her throat ached. She couldn't see or hear Tio and it seemed as if she'd only walked five feet. Every time she was sure she'd almost made it to the end of the stalls, she'd turn and find herself back at the start. Fury and impatience willed her to

[Table of Contents](#)

continue, but the longer she stayed, the more she found herself smiling and gaping in wonder at the dancers and sorcerers. The colours were spectacular and the performers were magnificent and perhaps that fire-breather would teach her that trick if she asked nicely enough.

'Juna.'

'Your future, dear?' someone asked and this time, Juna smiled and turned to face a small, aged woman.

'Yes, please,' Juna said.

This woman, like everyone else, shimmered around the edges. Moments ago, Juna would've tripped over trying to run away, but now, she enjoyed the way this woman glittered. Why had she been trying to get away? What was so scary about a shiny old woman?

With frail, clawed fingers, the woman in question held out five cards before Juna. Face down, the cards were decorated with intricate gold lining. The lines twisted together into a pattern she didn't recognise, but if she squinted, she was positive it was some kind of creature.

'Pick one.' The woman shook the cards to punctuate her point.

Nodding, Juna let her hand settle over the cards. Maybe she imagined it. Maybe it was the pulse of the chaos and frenzy inside the circus. It didn't

[Table of Contents](#)

matter. She was *sure* she felt a thrum from the middle card. She pulled it out with ease and raised it up to her face.

It was Tio.

'What is this?' Juna breathed. Her brother's face was distorted into a mask of terror and his eyes had been blackened by ash. 'I don't understand.'

The woman cocked her head. 'Your future, dear.'

Shaking her head, Juna handed back the card, feeling the pleasure and excitement leave her. The shimmering dulled and the woman's face became smoke and shadow. A cackle rose up from everywhere and nowhere, enveloping Juna, suffocating her.

Tio, Tio, Tio, she chanted to herself as laughter blurred her senses. *I'm so sorry. Maybe I'm too late.*

And maybe she was. She was only a child. What did she think she could do to save Tio against this place? Against this sinister vision that vanished as quickly as it appeared? Against this legend turned real that whispered of thrills, but left only pain in its wake? Maybe she was too late to save Tio from becoming another lost child.

No.

[Table of Contents](#)

'TIO!' Juna shouted and the laughter ceased. She took several steps away from the shadow woman, feeling a surge of strength in her body.

Behind her, the bird man materialised for a moment before disappearing into thin air—as if he'd crossed from one plain to the next. Juna didn't understand. This place, whatever it looked like, was far more sinister than she'd ever guessed. The boys under the bridge had spoken of lights and magic and beauty. They'd said the circus was full of fun and excitement. Tio had been tempted by those lies. Juna, too, if she was being honest. But now, surrounded by people who changed faces as easily as flipping a page in a book, she wanted nothing more than to leave and never come back.

But first, she had to find Tio.

'TIO!'

All through the tent, Juna ran and shouted and ran and shouted and pleaded and cried and maybe if she yelled louder he would hear her and what if it was too late and he was already in trouble and maybe he'd disappear into thin air like that bird man and she'd never find him again and what would she do?

He was all she had.

'Breathe,' nobody said.

[Table of Contents](#)

Juna took an unsteady breath. She was at the beginning of the tent tunnel again. Frustration boiled in her veins.

‘Breathe.’

Her next breath was clearer. Stronger. And just as she prepared herself to sprint through the tent and push past these creatures of mischief and madness, she saw a tuft of dark brown curls.

‘TIO!’ she called, but her brother didn’t stop. Instead, he darted in and out of the stalls, sprinting passed jugglers and people with painted faces. Juna raced after him, narrowly avoiding a cage of purple toads and one large black crow. The crow screamed as she ran past and the sound was so human and so afraid that Juna almost stopped.

‘Juna, come catch me.’

‘I’m coming, Tio,’ she whispered.

‘Over here. No, this way. You’re not listening to me. This way. Yes, come on, Juna.’

Something pulled at the back of her mind. Something told her that this was off. That Tio sounded strange. Different. *Wrong*. But as the tent took another breath, she willed herself to continue on.

[Table of Contents](#)

Between tight spaces and furry creatures, over crates of smoking glasses and under tables laden with potions and knick knacks, Juna followed her brother's voice until she finally emerged from the endless tunnel of stalls and into a huge amphitheatre. A huge field stretched out in front of her, surrounded by rows and rows of seats, each filled with faceless people who hummed quietly to themselves. From the roof, dancers spun and tumbled, tangled in multi-coloured fabric. They were beautiful; each movement so graceful that Juna couldn't look away. But she had the unsettling feeling that no one else was watching them. No, she had the eerie sensation that everyone's eyes were on her.

Behind her, the tunnel of vendors went silent.

'Come over here, Juna,' said Tio.

Juna walked across the field, keeping her eyes trained on the shadow at the far end of the amphitheatre. From so far away, she couldn't tell what it was, but everything in her told her to keep moving. Keep going. Get to Tio.

'Almost there.'

The humming from the audience grew louder.

'You've almost got me, Juna.'

The shadow twisted in front of her, slowly taking shape.

[Table of Contents](#)

This wasn't right. This wasn't right. Where was Tio? She needed to leave. They needed to leave right now. This was—

The humming grew.

The shadow twisted.

Leave. Leave. Leave.

The humming...

Leave.

Louder.

Louder.

Lou—

It stopped.

And in front of Juna, the shadow settled in the shape of a grey door.

'I'm inside, Juna,' said Tio from the other side of the door.

Fear bubbled in her chest and she looked from the ominous door in front of her to the crowd watching her every move. Even the dancers had frozen above her head, their blurred faces staring down at her.

Stepping around the door, Juna saw that there was nothing on the other side except the rest of the field and more and more seats filled with

[Table of Contents](#)

faceless people. Surely, if she opened the door, she'd be stepping right out on the other side.

'Come inside, Juna,' said Tio.

She couldn't go home without Tio. She couldn't leave without him. She had to be brave. She had to open the door and go inside. And when she finally found Tio, she would make sure he never did something like this again. They would go home and she would make him lettuce tea and tell him a happy bedtime story and in the morning she would yell at the boys under the bridge for being so stupid and everything would be okay. It would be okay.

'Come inside.'

She opened the door. Emptiness greeted her—a shroud of darkness and space. A hand reached for her, made of gold and bone. It stopped a breath away from her, waiting.

'Come on, Juna.'

Something murmured behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she found the circus almost empty. Every seat was vacant and instead of light and noise from the stalls, there was a silence that spread like a chill.

And alone on the field was the bird man.

[Table of Contents](#)

Juna swallowed.

'*Juna*,' Tio said and when she turned, she saw his face, hazy and shrouded in darkness.

'I'm coming,' she murmured and stepped inside.



Image description: Juna, scared and shrouded in light, reaches towards a bony hand that is breaching a wall of shadow, stretching out towards her.

[Table of Contents](#)

Tio awoke in his bed. He'd been dreaming of claws and teeth again. Sitting up, he looked over to the other bed on the far side of the room. It was a small room at the back of the house and he knew that Juna didn't like sharing, but he liked knowing she was there. It was especially good on night's like tonight when he could still feel teeth on his skin and the hot breath of a scary creature against his neck.

'Juna?' he whispered, squinting at her bed. 'Juna, I had a bad dream.'

She didn't reply.

He couldn't stay in his bed by himself. He had to get to Juna. She gave the best hugs anyway. She'd make him feel better.

Holding his breath as he swung his legs over the bed, he began creeping across the wooden floorboards until he reached Juna.

'Juna,' he whispered. 'I had the dream again. Juna?'

He pushed at the blanket on the bed, waiting for the groan from his older sister. But it never came. For, what he'd thought was Juna's body tangled in bedsheets, was merely empty air.

His sister was gone.

The End.

[Table of Contents](#)

Want to know more about the author?

Jaidyn Groth is on twitter

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

Save the Asterpox by Bronwyn Eley

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

'Mama?'

Atrea stepped lightly into the room, but she needn't bother. Her mother hadn't moved in weeks. Atrea covered her nose and mouth, taking a moment to let the smell of piss stop stinging her eyes. She could only leave her mother for so long. Without money to afford full-time care, she lay helpless in her bed until her daughter returned home.

But what choice did Atrea have?

That ship was her last chance to save her mother. Nothing else had worked. And when her mother died – *if* her mother died – she'd be all alone in the world. No healer could help her mother, so that left one thing.

Nether.

It had felt like fate, hearing whispers of the pirate captain and his vials of power. Most could never hope to afford one, but as she watched the tenth healer she'd consulted walk away from her, she knew what she had to do.

Pax hadn't seen her at first. Every morning for four weeks she went down to those docks, hoping to catch him for just a moment, but his crew was enormous and far too effective at keeping undesirables like her away. She was no child, just seventeen, but they saw her thin arms and slender body and saw only weakness.

[Table of Contents](#)

For a month, she watched three ships leave and three ships return. Day after day.

Then one day, only two returned.

She'd been at home with her mother when it happened, but folks who saw it claimed the asterpox that shot out of the water was bigger than the whole of Aðlesa. The *Shepherd Seafarer* didn't stand a chance as dozens of tree-thick tentacles came crashing down on it. Lucky for the rest of the fleet, they were nearly home, and the asterpox fled back into the ocean, taking its victims with it.

No one knew why. Not even Atrea knew back then. But now she understood. Was it coming to save its child or seeking revenge for one already lost?

'Mama, don't fret,' Atrea kissed her mother's forehead, 'I'm back now. Let's get you cleaned up.'

Her mother wheezed, the only sign that she was still in there. Listening. Praying she might be freed from her own prison. Only nether could do it. Then they could set out on the road out of town and find somewhere to live where the sun shone all year round.

Atrea cleaned her mother, lit several candles, and moved across to the hearth to warm some stew.

Her mother whined, a tiny squeak most would ignore. But to Atrea it was a scream. So she sang their favourite song, an Aðlesian lullaby that had soothed her baby brother to sleep for years before he died. It

[Table of Contents](#)

whispered throughout the cabin, almost too quiet to hear over the crackling fire and beating wind outside, but she knew her mother heard every word.

Atrea climbed in next to her mother, ignoring the dampness of the mattress. She had burned their second bedframe for kindling last endur, but she didn't mind sharing. Pressed up beside her mother was as close as she could be to her these days.

No words.

No laughter.

There was only this.

Atrea wrapped her arms around her mother and pressed her face into her neck. Her mother's heart beat slow and quiet, breathing shallow. Almost non-existent. Perhaps she was making it up and mother was already gone.

Atrea touched one hand to her mother's cheek. After a moment, her mother shuddered. The only sign she was still alive.

*

'Brat! What do you think you're doing?'

Atrea looked up from the deck, fabric in hand, half wrapped around her knees. Morten's wide shoulders blocked the sun behind him. 'I'm working, what are you doing?'

[Table of Contents](#)

Morten snatched at her hands, wrenching at the fabric now coiled around her knee. 'That's my shirt you've gone and ruined! What makes you think you can steal my stuff?'

'Oh, this?' Atrea tore it out of his greedy hands. 'I found it in the rag pile.'

'Like hell you did!' he growled. 'You're just begging for a beating, girl, and I'm tempted to give it to ye.'

'Go ahead.' Atrea resumed wrapping Morten's now-torn shirt around her knees. 'I'm sure the Captain will be pleased to see you wasting time.'

Extra padding helped little against the bruises but that's not why she did it. For days now Morten had relegated her to scrubbing the deck. Over and over. A simple and pathetic way to punish her for being a woman on a man's ship.

It had been clean and folded under his pillow when she'd taken it. Since he was the largest man on the ship, his shirt made the most sense. More padding for her burdened knees.

Morten scoffed, leaning out of his hunch with wildfire in his eyes. 'The Captain was out of his mind when he let you aboard this ship. Little thing like you, I'm surprised you haven't snapped yet.'

Atrea tied off the shirt, crushing her teeth together to hold back a retort.

[Table of Contents](#)

‘Heard you went begging again. Captain will never post you to capture.’ He leaned in, smirk widening. ‘You’re too weak.’

Atrea held his gaze. She reached into the bucket and whipped out the scrubbing brush with such energy, the dirty water flew out with her hand. Morten cried out and sprung back, staring down at his now wet shoes.

‘Maybe he *should* post you out there,’ Morten said quietly, lifting his gaze. ‘You’d get swallowed up on your first day. Drowned or crushed. Either way, you’d be out of my hair and off my ship.’

Atrea curled her fist around the brush, its hard needles stabbing into her palm. She managed a smile. ‘Don’t you mean the Captain’s ship?’

‘Morten!’

‘Speak of the devil,’ Atrea said. Pax was moving along the deck, waving to his second, surrounded by several men. ‘Who are they?’

‘If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you,’ Morten muttered, then sauntered off towards his better. Atrea kept her arms moving along the deck, but her eyes remained on the men.

Captain Pax was as storybook as they came. Lean and tall, with muscles that always looked angry. He was talking in a low voice, the men nodding seriously, their gazes all far off into the ocean. Atrea pushed to her feet and followed their eyeline.

Pax’s second ship, the *Anchored Beast*, was returning from its day. Riding high in the water, which meant no catch. A whistle sounded from

[Table of Contents](#)

above – the crew mate in the crows nest – warning everyone to be ready for another potential attack.

The destruction of his capture vessel – the death of so many of his men – had not deterred Pax from sending his men out the very next day. Overnight he'd secured stronger nets and upgraded the men from spears to five-pronged tridents.

Though how any man could best an asterpox...

Atrea would never forget the first time she saw one. Seaside towns like Aðlesa were rife with stories of them, perfect for bedtime, for little children who wanted both a thrill and a fright.

But stories were one thing.

She could never have imagined they'd be *that* big. A hundred tentacles bursting from their host body, twisting through the air like a humpback whale, only impossibly larger, with a thousand black suckers akin to giant eyes winking down at you from the sky above. Their bodies were so powerful they could launch fully out of the water and shadow any ship in the ocean. Come down on them, too, if they wished.

But they were not violent.

Or never used to be.

Morten was making his way across the deck. Atrea shot to her feet and hurried to meet him. 'Who are those men?'

[Table of Contents](#)

He slowed to a stop, then spread his legs wide and cocked his head. ‘New catchers.’ He smirked. ‘Men actually capable of the work.’

Then he sauntered off. Atrea looked back, the *Anchored Beast* was getting closer now, and the new Captain and his new catchers waited at the rear of the ship, watching its approach.

Atrea returned to her duties, keeping an eye on Pax the whole time. He and his men didn’t move, conversing quietly as several of the regular crew prepared the rowboat. They were going across now. Four new crew members, four new catchers. None of them her. One of the new catchers was barely bigger than her, arms just as thin.

Atrea glared at the back of Pax’s bald head. He’d never give her a chance. She was too skinny, too weak. Untrained and untested. But he’d made a deal with her and once she’d proven herself a worthwhile crew member, he’d give her a vial of the nether.

But her mother was fading. How long until Pax decided she was worthy? If her mother died before then, all these hours spent away from her – in her final days – would be for nothing.

‘Work hard. That’s all you can do. Prove to me that you belong out there, and perhaps I’ll make you a catcher.’

The crew busied themselves preparing for sail as the *Anchored Beast* pulled up alongside them. Atrea eyed the *Anchored Beast*. Then her own crew. Everyone was busy. Distracted. Supplies were being stacked around the Captain and his catchers, ready to go across to the other ship.

[Table of Contents](#)

Picking up her bucket, brush, and rags, Atrea crossed the deck keeping her head high. No one cared enough about her to really notice her. Atrea glanced over the edge. Several of the windows on the port side of *Anchored Beast* were open, likely to air out the crew quarters. Atrea reached for the rope, gave it a tug. She waited for a cry of alert.

Nothing.

She slipped over the edge of the ship, the rope's momentum pulling her towards the side of the other ship. She lifted her legs as the window came towards her. It was small but so was she.

It wasn't graceful. One leg went through, the other stuck on the outside. Atrea scrambled for purchase, dropped the rope and pulling herself through. The room beyond was dark, all the crew upstairs tending to the exchange.

Pax's voice boomed even from so far, over the cry of men and seagull and ocean alike. Calling orders, not calling for her detainment. He hadn't seen. No one had seen. But there would be no celebrating until they were underway.

Atrea found a dark corner and tucked herself away until the ship juddered into life. Once it had gathered speed, and she felt comforted by the up and down pull of the waves outside, Atrea slipped from her hideout and eyed her surrounds. Whipping a jacket and hat off a nearby bunk, she wrapped herself in the garments, hoping to hide her feminine features as best she could.

[Table of Contents](#)

Up on deck, the sun had now set and the men aboard all hurried about like there was an enemy ship on approach. Atrea crossed the deck and stared out at the darkening sea.

No. Not another ship.

The wellspring.

In the growing dark it glowed royal blue, pulsing light every few moments beneath the surface of the water.

And, around it, swirling dark masses.

The asterpox. Like ships swallowed by the ocean, being dragged closer and closer to the wellspring's inevitable destruction. But they were stronger than the ship, physically, if not mentally. Despite the new threat of Pax and his crew, they remained by the wellspring. Hundreds of them, spotted beneath the waves, beneath the ship. Any one of them could rear up and destroy this ship at any moment.

But just like when Pax yelled his orders, the asterpox were at the command of another. Whenever she looked upon Pax – his bone-y skull and too-pale skin – she felt a shudder come over her. But that was nothing compared to the nether.

The magic pulsed, a ripple streaking out from its heart, the asterpox and their many limbs shuddering at its touch. Long tentacles trembling beneath the water's surface.

[Table of Contents](#)

A sharp whistle from above. Several of the crew members looked up to the Crows Nest, Atrea among them. The man above pointed to the south-east and in an instant the crew was surging around her.

One man slammed into her. 'Get moving!' he spat but kept going. None of them had any time, it seemed, to consider her presence. Atrea leaned as far as she dared over the banister and saw what the crows man had pointed to.

A baby asterpox.

Too small and insignificant to fight off its older and larger counterparts, to push through the frenzy happening before them, to reach the nether. It was a wonder they survived at all, though from birth, asterpox were largely independent, hunting the seas for large fish, sharks, dolphins, whatever they could get their teeth into.

Though these asterpox were far from normal. Did they consume anything other than the nether? And what exactly was it they got from the magic?

'Line up!' someone called.

Atrea balked when she glanced over her shoulder. A line of men marched towards her, somehow graceful in the thrashing waves, tridents in hand. They were rigged into something, a handheld device almost like a crossbow, a bundle of rope tied to each weapon.

'Move!'

[Table of Contents](#)

Atrea scrambled out of the way just as the men anchored themselves along the ship's edge. Then something large, heavy, and cumbersome was in her grasp. Atrea glanced down at the weapon.

Loosing a breath, Atrea pressed it into her shoulder and lined up beside the crew. Grateful she could mimic their aim – for she had no clue where the baby was in the tumultuous mess below – Atrea placed her finger on the trigger. She knew what this weapon was. What it would do.

And that was why she was here.

'First attack, fire!'

Her finger pressed down. The jolt of the weapon releasing could have ripped her shoulder from its socket, but she held on. Even when the man beside her yelled. 'What are you doing!?'

Atrea shot him a look as her trident flew through the air. It went somewhere to the right of where she'd been aiming, disappearing into the water.

'Retract that, now!' the man beside her yelled. His beard was down past his neck, braided with red ribbon. 'Captain said *first attack!*' He cuffed her on the back of the head. The ship shuddered as it struck something and Atrea – and half the crew – went crashing into the banister.

'Retract! Retract!'

She did as was ordered, reeling in her line as fast as she could. Her arm burnt from the strain, the water doing everything it could to keep its

[Table of Contents](#)

new gift. The weapon glinted as it sprung free from the water and Atrea's heart plummeted. She'd been hoping the drag was from that of an asterpox being tethered to her line.

But no. She'd have to work harder than that.

'I'm new!' Atrea said to her assaulter. 'Which attack are we?'

'Outer left, idiot!' he yelled back. 'And we're up! Come on, get that line in!'

Atrea grabbed for the flailing trident and reset her weapon. The man beside her wasn't pointing at the baby asterpox anymore, but at a larger beast to its right. 'Got to clear their shot!'

A dozen tentacles shot out of the water, rising as high and large as oak trees. A shield. To protect the baby.

Table of Contents



Image description: An asterpox's tentacles, like a giant octopus or kraken, tries to tear apart an old fashioned sailing ship.

'Outer left!' someone called. 'Fire!'

The man beside her released his weapon, as did several others. Their golden spears flew through the air, skewering the asterpox's tentacles. There was a moment of dead silence, somehow, before a deep rumble shriek rippled out from beneath the ocean. The deck shuddered like thunder from below, not above, rattling her teeth.

'Release!'

[Table of Contents](#)

The lines tethered to the large asterpox severed, releasing the rope so it could be retrieved. Atrea stared as the ropes were coiled in. The man beside her reached into a long trunk beside him and heaved out another trident.

‘Reload!’

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ the bearded man shouted. Atrea blinked down to her weapon. The trident still in place. She hadn’t fired. ‘Bloody useless, you are!’ he barked. ‘Get ready. This time,’ he jostled her, ‘pull the damned trigger!’

But the scream of the asterpox was far louder than the bearded man’s orders. It pulsed around her like the magic of the nether. Again and again.

A mother protecting its child. Family defending family. Atrea knew that if her mother were strong enough to lift her own head, she’d fight until her last breath to protect her daughter from any harm. Just as she fought to save her mother’s life.

Which is why she was here. To prove herself useful to Pax. To get that vial of nether-infused asterpox blood. To give her mother one last chance.

‘Outer left!’

Atrea held her breath.

‘Fire!’

[Table of Contents](#)

She squeezed the trigger. Her bolt went flying. Pierced the flesh of the asterpox, still with a dozen tentacles in the air.

This time its scream was for her.

'Release!'

Atrea cringed as the sound as she reeled in her line, focusing on the action. Pumping her arm. Trying not to picture her mother being pierced by the same weapon.

A shrill whistle from above. Another line of men ran up, this time to the bow of the ship. They took aim and fired. The ship shuddered, bucking high in the water. Atrea crashed into the men around her, they into her, but they didn't seem to notice. They righted themselves and had fired again before Atrea had even found her feet.

'Get up!' the bearded man wrenched her into standing. 'And get ready!'

They fired again and again, their tridents hitting true each time. Atrea could barely lift her arms, but there was no turning back now. She had to prove herself or her mother would die.

A cheer went up around her. Atrea blinked, releasing her latest trident, and watched as the asterpox sunk lower beneath the surface, its dark form being swallowed up by an even darker ocean.

The main attack didn't require an order this time. Their tridents flew. One after the other. The bearded man wrenched her sideways and she

[Table of Contents](#)

knew what she had to do. She took aim at that small mass, still bigger than most houses in Aðlesa, and released.

The judder up her arm felt different this time. That feeling of knowing this wasn't merely a strike to injure, but a strike to capture.

To kill.

'That's it!' someone yelled. 'Reel in!'

The crew all heaved, pulling back as they made their way across the deck. Atrea scrambled to follow, her arms both threatening to leave their sockets, her back and legs protesting. Her mind too.

Something slammed into the side of the ship.

The baby asterpox.

'Heave!'

The crew, Atrea too, did as they were told. Heave after heave. After a moment, she saw it, the first tentacle. Flailing over the side of the ship, about as thick as a man's torso. Then another. And another.

Atrea's arms went limp when she saw its heart. Its face, for lack of a better word. But they called it the heart. Each of the limbs could detach from the heart, but only temporarily. They could only go so far, and be apart for so long, before they withered and died. Same went for the heart. Without its many limbs, it would perish. No one knew why.

[Table of Contents](#)

The heart shuddered like a human one in distress, only dark as ink and the size of a carriage. There were no discernible features. No eyes. No mouth. But it screamed somehow.

It flopped onto the deck, a thundering crash, its limbs spreading in all directions. The crew members with their tridents still locked into its body all pulled, then dropped to their knees, straining to keep the asterpox from thrashing.

Several men ran towards its to restrain it with a net, but Atrea followed the man with the syringe. Larger than one she'd ever seen, it looked to be made of metal and its needle was thick as a finger.

The man raised it above the asterpox –

But the beast struck out with a tentacle, and the man went flying. Crashing to the deck, the syringe skittered across the deck.

Landing at Atrea's feet.

She blinked down at it, touching the top of her boots. Something she'd seen a dozen times, each time a healer came to help her mother. And nothing had worked. None of their concoctions would save her.

But this one might.

This could be the asterpox to save her mother.

Atrea dropped her weapon. She reached for the syringe, nearly buckling under its weight, and ran for the asterpox. One of its tentacles came for her. She leapt high, tucking her legs in, feeling it pass underneath

[Table of Contents](#)

her. She skidded to a halt at its heart, dropped to her knees, and lifted the needle high –

The asterpox screamed again, but only for a second. A squeak, nothing more. So like the wheezing of her mother. Trapped in her bed, desperate to be saved.

Atrea's arm hung in the air, needle clutched in her trembling hand.

'Now!' someone yelled behind her. 'Do it now, boy!'

One of the restraining ropes snapped, whipping through the air around them. Several of the men ducked for cover as several tentacles broke free, flailing wildly with the hopes of making contact.

'Do it!'

The side of its heart met her leg.

'Now!'

It was warmer than expected. Pulsing hard, again and again, like the beating of a human heart.

'Hurry up!'

Atrea shuffled closer, bringing the plunger low, and placed a hand on its body.

'It's escaping!'

The asterpox shuddered. Atrea froze, grip loosening on her weapon, and stared down at the creature. Just as helpless as her mother.

[Table of Contents](#)

'More net! More net!'

But the men's cries turned to buzzing in her ears. All she could hear was her mother's wheezing. Her attempts at speech. She'd not heard her mother speak in months, but she knew what she'd say now, given the chance.

Save the asterpox.

Atrea jumped to her feet, launched over the asterpox's nearest tentacle, and launched the plunger over the side of the ship.

It sailed through the air for a moment, then disappeared into the sea.

Shouts sounded behind her as she turned on her heel and hefted the dagger from the nearest man's scabbard. He yelled but did not move, clung to his rope, laying on his side, straining against the asterpox.

Atrea reached for the nearest rope and severed it. Then another. And another. Tentacles emerged like hair set free from its ties. Atrea reached for another rope –

A body crashed into hers. They slammed onto the deck, only to be struck moments later by something enormous.

The asterpox was free, clawing its way over the side of the ship, taking no care with its limbs. They crashed into everything as they went – men, equipment, even cracking one of the masts.

[Table of Contents](#)

A hand clamped down on her throat. Atrea gasped, hands flying to the assault, but the man atop her was twice her size. Everything darkened, her body weakening, but before she closed her eyes, she saw it.

The asterpox disappearing over the side of the ship.

Heard the thunderous boom as its body struck water.

Free.

*

Pax crossed one leg over the other, his twisted mouth assaulted by his stiff fingers. He pinched his bottom lip, grimacing. With a sigh, he dropped his hand and stared across the room at her.

‘First, you disobey my explicit orders by joining the crew of the *Anchored Beast*. Then you –’ Pax spat out a breath. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done? The damage that beast caused when it escaped – no, when you *freed* it – the cost... I should have you arrested.’

Atrea frowned. ‘For what?’

Pax’s eyes widened. ‘Are you out of your mind?’

‘You cannot arrest me for something that never happened,’ Atrea said, placing her arms behind her back. Mostly to hide the shaking. ‘Not when no one is meant to know what it is you do out here.’

Pax shook his head, something close to admiration in his eyes. Pax could do anything to her, they both knew it. He could toss her body

[Table of Contents](#)

overboard like she did with that plunger. He could simply spread a rumour that she'd run off, driven away by her mother's impending death.

Yet...

'Obviously, this work isn't for me,' she said.

'Obviously,' Pax growled. 'You were lucky no one was killed and that my ship still sails. *That* is the only reason I am allowing you to leave intact.' He rose. 'But mark my words, girl, if you set a foot anywhere near the docks or my ships, I'll think of something to get you arrested. Or worse.'

Atrea nodded, because if she opened her mouth, her fear would pour out. She backed away towards the door and pulled it open behind her, keeping her gaze on Pax. Surely this was a trick, and he was going to come for her eventually.

But, in the end, what had she really done?

Pax's crew was fine. His ship afloat. They'd go out again and again, capturing many more asterpox. She'd done nothing, truth be told.

Nothing but save one asterpox.

And sentence her mother to death.

*

'Mama.'

[Table of Contents](#)

She'd never left her mother for so long. Her lips were cracked by the time Atrea fed her some water, but she could feel nothing more of the guilt, for her entire body already ached with it.

'Mama, I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I failed you.'

A groan escaped her mother's dry lips. Atrea grasped her hand and squeezed, all those times she'd pictured their new life drowning her mind. Her mother would never leave Aðlesa. They'd never find a new home, somewhere warm, somewhere far from the memories of this house. Mother and daughter reunited.

There was no beautiful future for them now. Atrea would be alone, her mother gone. She glanced to where her mother lay quietly in her bed as always, the room stinking of death.

This was the last place she deserved to be.

'Mama,' she murmured, placing soft hands on hers, 'come with me.'

It was not a simple thing to move her mother, which is why she'd not left her bed in months. Atrea tied her mother into the straps she saved for an emergency – today seemed far from that but also too close to it – and hauled her mama's body onto her back. She barely weighed a thing, especially after feeling the weight of the asterpox.

Atrea trudged down the muddy street, taking each step with care so she wouldn't slip. People stared as they passed but said nothing with their mouths. Some spoke kindness with their eyes. Kindness and pity.

[Table of Contents](#)

The beach was empty of people but crowded with seashells and seaweed. Atrea lowered her mama as close to the water as she dared, just enough so her feet might get wet each time a wave came in, not knowing if she could feel it, but hoping she might.

Atrea sat down behind her mama and tucked her against her chest. The water brushed the sand, the surface flat. Then, a ripple. 'Look, mama,' Atrea pointed, 'an asterpox, I'm sure of it. Maybe it will wave to you.'

She wasn't even sure her mother could open her eyes these days, but Atrea was grateful for the golden sunset none-the-less. She sat rocking her mother gently side to side, humming their favourite lullaby.

Time passed and the sea remained quiet. Atrea rubbed her mother's arms, listened to her rattled breath.

A wave reached for them, crawling up the sand, tickling her mother's bare feet. It retreated a moment before returning to do the same again. Atrea smiled and kissed her mother's head.

Her mother gasped, arching her body away from Atrea's.

'Mama!' Atrea cried out, grasping her mother's arms. 'What's wrong?'

Her mother tensed, curling forward, hands limp in the sand. Then she stilled. Atrea's lips quivered as she shifted around to see her mother's face.

Her mother blinked, shaking her head a little side to side.

Atrea stilled. 'Mama?'

[Table of Contents](#)

‘Atrea,’ her mother croaked. She sounded like death, still looked like it too, yet she –

‘How?’ Atrea gasped, gripping her mother’s arm. ‘How is this possible?’

Her mother merely shook her head, tears in her eyes. And that smile Atrea thought was lost found its way onto her face. Atrea laughed, disbelief coursing through her. She never thought she’d see such life in her mother’s face again, never thought she’d *look* at Atrea again.

‘I don’t understand,’ Atrea said. ‘I don’t –’

‘Look,’ her mother managed, turning her head slightly.

Atrea shot a look to the ocean but saw nothing. Just a clear surface, dark as ever, grey clouds in the distance. Their Aðlesa, nothing more.

A slight movement caught her eye.

Atrea gasped. ‘Mama! Don’t move.’

Around her mother’s ankle was a blackened tentacle. Thick and weeping, trembling against her mother’s skin. Something splashed in the water several feet away from them. Atrea lifted her gaze.

The asterpox bobbed in the water, dozens of tentacles fanned out around it like beams from the sun.

Atrea dropped her gaze back to the tentacle around her mother’s leg. ‘What is it doing, mama?’

[Table of Contents](#)

Her mother made a sound, as if sucking in her first breath of air in years. Perhaps it was. A smile trembled onto her face. ‘Thanking you, my darling.’ She peeled her eyes open and for the first time in months, Atrea’s mother looked back at her. ‘It is thanking you.’

The End.

Want to know more about the author?

Bronwyn Eley is on Instagram

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

Author Interview: Jaidyn Groth

1. Why are you a writer?

I feel like we've all said this, but the answer is pretty simple: what else am I gonna do? Writing is the one of those things that completely lights up my life and feels insanely easy and yet very difficult all at once.

2. What are your biggest writing goals?

Become a published author, obviously. But also... maybe write a screenplay adaptation for one of my novels?? Maybe...

3. What is your writing schedule/routine like?

Ha. What routine? I'm very much a manic writer—I'll write every day for a month and smash out an entire novel and then I won't write for two months. Or I'll write 5000 words one day and two the next. It's very all over the place.

4. Which author would you love to collaborate with?

Hmm... Megan Miranda? I feel like we could write a killer murder mystery (pun intended).

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

Where the Crawdads Sing or *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*.

6. What is your current reading obsession?

[Table of Contents](#)

I just reread the Vampire Academy series, which was such a throwback to my childhood. But I'd have to say my current obsession is Where the Crawdads Sing. Man, I swallowed the book down, regurgitated it and swallowed it again. You're welcome for the visual.

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

Reminders of Him by Colleen Hoover. Ouch that book broke me.

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

Uh, so Come Inside was meant to be a kind of atmospheric novel tied with the idea of the Pied Piper. As one of the elder siblings in a very large family, I was connected to Juna and her desperation to save her brother. It's such an intense feeling to look after your family, especially when they're younger than you. Truth be told, I ended up with very bad writer's block during this story and my older brother helped me figure out the details. There's a nice symmetry in that, I think.

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

Teleportation. I travel so much that it would just be so much easier to be appear at will. And I could leave awkward situations so fast.

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

Unicorn, obviously.

11. Describe your perfect writing day.

[Table of Contents](#)

Early morning, coffee, writing, more coffee, writing, lunch, watch a true crime documentary, writing, more coffee (???) and binge-read a novel. Rinse, repeat.

12. Any advice for your fellow writers?

Just keep going. This writing thing is hard and the publishing industry can be one of the biggest self-esteem killers, so just keep going. Find yourself a posse of badass babes (hi, Quill & Read gang) and build your support network. And keep on keeping on.

[Table of Contents](#)

Pronunciation & World Guide

[*Beyond the Farthest Horizon* by A. Gustafson](#)

Feiht an CenH : Fate an Ken

Tosamne : Tow-Sam-Na

[*Come Inside* by Jaidyn Groth](#)

[*Save the Asterpox* by Bronwyn Eley](#)

Atrea: Ah-trey-arr

Aðlesa: Uhss-less-ah

[Table of Contents](#)

Content Warnings

[*Beyond the Farthest Horizon* by A. Gustafson](#)

Death, loss

[*Come Inside* by Jaidyn Groth](#)

Child endangerment, mild peril

[*Save the Asterpox* by Bronwyn Eley](#)

Dark themes, animal death, animal abuse, human illness

Next in Netherün

A Fox in the Henhouse

In the mercantile city of Guildholm, an assassin creeps through a house. The deeper within he goes, the more he finds himself drawn inextricably back into his own past.

The Light on the Far Shore by Tace Samoset

When a young boy discovers a light signalling him from an enemy island he must choose between tribal loyalty or hope.

Clipped by A.L. Burnham

A young sympath with owl wings has joined a flock of sky-pirates who hunt and sell rare treasures – and now seek the scales of the great Magna-Scorpius. But each flyer must abide by a strict code: to disobey the rules of the group will see their wings clipped.

Acknowledgements

Tales from Netherün
Digital edition 5: September 2022

Published by Quill and Read
quillandread@gmail.com
www.quillandread.com

Names, places and incidents are either products of the authors' imaginations or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead (except for satirical purposes), is entirely coincidental.

Co-owners of Quill and Read (A. Gustafson, Bronwyn Eley, Jaidyn Groth, Ally Bodnaruk, A.L. Burnham and Tace Samoset) assert the moral right to be identified as the authors of their individual stories.

Copyright © 2022 Quill and Read

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Images contained within Quill and Read publications are purchased from Shutterstock. All character illustrations are the work of [Justin Fabregas](#).

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

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

[Table of Contents](#)



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