“ANATHEMA”

and

“THE POLITICS OF WORLDBUILDING IN POST-APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIA”

LAURA FRENCH MORAN

20148173
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DECLARATION

This thesis contains only sole-authored work, some of which has been published and/or prepared for publication under sole authorship. The bibliographical details of the work and where it appears in the thesis are outlined below:

Chapter Two of this exegesis ("Worldbuilding in the Hunger Games Trilogy") was adapted for presentation at a conference; the resulting paper will be published as "The Revolutionary Politics of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction" in a forthcoming eBook by Inter-Disciplinary.net.

Signed,

Laura French Moran

11th April 2016
This creative writing thesis explores the ideological function of worldbuilding in post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction; specifically, how authors have used worldbuilding as a form of activism in times of crisis. Angela Carter did so in her allegorical novel *Heroes and Villains*, responding to the trauma of the Cold War by envisioning a post-nuclear world in which key traits of 1960’s Britain re-emerge to be parodied and deconstructed. Suzanne Collins took a similar approach with the *Hunger Games* trilogy; her worldbuilding reflects the post-9/11 western world in a chillingly critical light, revealing the dystopian elements underlying a culture of entertainment media, consumerism and violence.

Finally, in my novel *Anathema* I have built a world concerned with dysfunction in nationalism, democracy and religion, reflecting on what it might mean when our greatest social frameworks become self-mythologising and impervious to criticism. With reference to all three novels, this work highlights the function of worldbuilding as a tool for the exploration and communication of socio-political ideas, particularly when applied to the realm of post-apocalyptic dystopia.
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PART ONE:

Anathema
At the peak of the orange hour, Valmora city was empty—more empty, that is, than usual. The city's ever-present haze of pollution seemed to be set on fire by the sinking sun, lending the grey streets a fleeting impression of colour. This time of day was notoriously treacherous. Usually Valmora left the murder and duplicity to her inhabitants, but near sunset the city grew restless. Empty streets could be transformed into billowing funnels of dust, and an unprepared traveller might find their lungs irreversibly lined with concrete and ash. All Valmorans knew how to protect themselves from the suffocating clouds, but those who could afford to tended to retreat to their hide-holes and strongholds, and wait for a more favourable hour.

But not the pale girl who had appeared on the street like an apparition and was now headed toward the city centre; a little dust was the least of her worries.

The orange light grew deeper, glinting dully off the shards of solar glass that still adorned most of the city's skyscrapers. The girl walked faster. Her attire blended in with the surroundings; the stark whiteness of her hair and limbs was dulled down with black grease, and a mask of gauze covered most of her face. To all but the most careful eye, the girl was nothing more than a shadow. She flickered in and out of sight, heading north, where the air thickened and the spires of the city grew tall.

Her pace quickened as she passed through the old business quarter, an area she usually liked to avoid. There was a different sense of feeling here than in the south, where she lived. Those dilapidated blocks reeked of abandonment, old and bitter, whereas this part of the city still whispered of lives cut short. Here among the skyscrapers stood the ruins of Valmora's most famous monuments—the stone cathedral, the war memorial, a pitted and greyed statue of the city's patron saint. Decades ago when bullets were plentiful, someone had hammered his face off with gunfire.

The girl pressed herself against the pockmarked wall of the old Barclays and inhaled deeply, probing for telltale smells like sweat and decay, gunpowder, metal, blood. Nothing announced itself. She peered around the corner and headed down the narrow alley, ignoring the hairs rising on the back of her neck; this place always felt eerie, as if someone was watching—partly because someone usually was.

She stopped at the base of a rusted fire escape, panting softly, and pulled herself up. On the fifth floor she stopped, scanned the street, then tapped on the blacked-out
window. Nothing moved.

Frowning, she tapped again, louder this time. Two quick raps, two slow. Unease stirred in her chest. Perhaps Max wasn’t there?

But someone was. The window flew open. A knife stung at her neck. For a moment, she thought, *That’s it; it’s happened.* But no—the scent in the air was familiar, the tang of rust scoured off metal, mixed with a faint trace of lemon soap.

“*Hey,*” she hissed through her teeth. Hesitantly, the knife withdrew. A pale hand pulled her through the window.

Scowling, she tumbled into the apartment with one hand clasped to her throat. A bright smear of red came away on her fingers. She wiped the blood disdainfully on one of Max’s black curtains, and looked around the room.

The apartment smelled overwhelmingly of mothballs and old sweat. It had been a nice place, once; a faded sign at the building’s front deemed it *the ultimate in midtown luxury.* Now, with the fixtures ripped out and most of the windows heavily boarded, the place looked a lot like her basement. Dark, defensible, desolate. Max, standing in front of her with his arms crossed, was the most desolate thing of all.

“What’s with the knife? I could have killed you,” she grumbled.

He laughed, teeth and eyes flashing in the gloom. “You could have tried, I think you mean, Ana.”

She tugged down her mask and narrowed her eyes, but her friend’s attention had already returned to the street. Max fastened the window and drew the blinds with a dramatic flourish. Despite their isolation, he still gripped the dagger tightly, as if readying himself for the next threat. He prowled from window to window, keeping a close eye on the street.

With a sigh, Ana dropped into her favourite armchair and waited for the pacing to finish.

Something *had* changed since their last meeting, she thought as she watched him dart around the room. Max reeked of paranoia. Veins stood out grotesquely in his gaunt face and arms, and his white hair seemed to be thinning. Worse still was the paleness of his eyes. That was how the wasting began, as a sheen of milk over the usual bright blue.

*You’re too young,* she thought violently. Her parents hadn’t shown signs of the wasting until Ana was eleven. That would have made them—twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? At least ten years older than Max.

He turned away from the window with a grunt, and collapsed into the opposite seat. Even his lazy movements were graceful; Max moved with a predatory elegance that no-one she knew of could match. At least the harsh Valmoran spring hadn’t taken that.
"There's hardly anyone left out there anyway," he muttered.

She sat up straighter in the chair, digging her nails into the fraying foam armrests. *This is your chance,* she thought. *Do it.*

"I think it's over," she said, too quietly. Max leaned forwards in his chair, staring with his eyebrows raised.

She cleared her throat and tried again. "We need to go. Find the wild."

Her words hung in the air. Max seemed to be toying with the idea of ignoring them, but she gripped the armrests even more tightly and stared him in the eye until he relented.

"You're giving up?" he said at last.

"There's nothing to give up," she retorted, "I—"

A cut-off cry came from the street. Max darted to the window, parting the drape carefully on one side. After staring out for a few moments, he yanked the curtain wider and beckoned for her to come and watch.

She went reluctantly. Scenes outside were never pleasant, and this one was no different. Barely visible on the main street corner, as the sunset faded into darkness, was a tall figure headlocking a smaller, struggling one. The attacker, a man, snapped the victim's neck in a savage movement. His howl of victory echoed through the alley. Answering howls came from the north—distant, at first, but then growing closer. The spell of the orange hour had faded.

Ana made a noise of protest, trying to pull back from the curtain, but Max's hand slapped over her mouth. He held her with a strength that belied his appearance, not letting her make a sound or turn aside.

"You need to see this," he said grimly. "Forget the wild. *This* is our world, *these* are our options."

She watched, wide-eyed, as the street filled with pale figures. One by one they materialised, at the mouth of the alley, on the roof of the buildings opposite, swinging down the rusted fire escapes near the corner. The gang converged on the corpse, stripping it, then butchering the emaciated limbs with brutal efficiency. Max released her with a grunt of disgust. She darted back to the chair and hugged her knees to her chest.

"That's why we need to go," she whispered, once the sounds outside had faded. "Please, Max. There's no food as it is—I'm hungry *all the time,* and so are you, don't pretend."

"Forget it," Max mouthed angrily. "Leave and you'll be dead within a week."

"*We both* will be if we stay here."
It was true. They wouldn’t last the summer in Valmora. The thought wasn’t frightening, she thought, it was liberating. Now that they had nothing to lose, they were free in a way that they had never been.

He shook his head again, dismissively, and pressed his lips together in a tight thin line. Ana realised, suddenly, that she could see the shape of Max’s skull under his skin. He was a walking skeleton. She sat upright, and gave him a determined glare.

"I’m going," she said. "I’m leaving this hole and never coming back. I don’t care if it’s stupid, I don’t care."

Max grabbed her arm. "What if there was another way?"

This is our world, he had said. These are our options.

Surely he couldn’t mean …

No. Never.

"There is no other way," she hissed, daring him to correct her. For a moment she thought she saw pain in his eyes. He stifled the emotion quickly and nodded.

"Bye, then."

Time seemed to slow for a moment and her heart thudded loudly in her ears. "Don’t you think—"

"No," he said coldly. "You don’t get it and you never will. So go ahead. Really. But don’t come back here. It’s not worth the risk."

She gaped at him. "Max. We’ve always had—"

"We’ve always had each other because of circumstance, Ana. Things are different now."

Feeling tears threaten, she studied the floor and bit her flaking lip hard enough to draw blood. "If you change your mind before this time tomorrow…"

... You know where to find me, she meant to say, but the words stuck in her throat. He was never going to come. It was stupid to pretend.

He gazed through the window with a hand on his knife, eyes scanning the horizon, reminding her of the desecrated saint that stood two blocks east of here. The city’s first man, and one of its last. Pitted marble and wasted skin. They were both remnants of a dying world and Max could never be restored to what he had been, any more than the statue could. The harshness of Valmoran life had changed him too much. In that moment she knew that it had changed her, too, because at one time she could never have imagined doing what she felt herself preparing to do now.

Ana hardened her heart, ducked through the window, and climbed down the fire escape without a second glance. Skirting the fresh stain that now darkened the mouth of the alley, she pulled up her gauze mask and disappeared into the night.
By the next afternoon, Ana had weaved her way through Valmora’s outer suburbs, then hiked over the range of barren hills that encircled the city, hauling the army-issue backpack that held her water, food sachets and knife. Dry summer winds stirred up dust and sand, stinging her bare legs and shifting the ground under her hiking boots. By the time she staggered out into the plains, her first water bottle was dry and the insides of her throat felt like sandpaper. The second bottle needed to last a lot longer—all the way to the Wild. Unfortunately, Ana had no idea where that was.

The land that now stretched out before her was incredibly vast, comprised of sunbaked clay sweeping out as far as the eye could see. She passed several car-sized lumps of earth and remembered her father’s stories of the sudden sickness, a death knell for Valmora after years of deprivation and unrest. When the sickness started most workers abandoned the city, trying to flee via the old highway. It looked like many of them had not made it far. The clusters grew sparser and eventually stopped.

The sun lowered, set, and rose again.

In the midday heat, Ana paused under the shade of an old bridge, and stretched out on the cool strip of clay. Rest—just for a little while. The problem was that when she stopped walking, memories flooded in. She picked at her guilt like a scab, ripping it open again and again until it bled, playing that last conversation with Max over in her head a hundred times. In some versions he was condescending and cruel, convincing her beyond a doubt that she’d made the right decision in leaving him behind. Those were the best versions. The worst were the ones in which he was simply fearful, or only in need of a few well-chosen words to be persuaded to join her. Or perhaps he had followed her and gotten captured. Or killed. Stripped and despoiled like that corpse in the alley—

No. She rolled over with a groan and pushed herself back onto her feet. It was too late to turn back now.

***

By the afternoon of the third day, the earth was transforming under her boots. Grey dust formed only a shallow layer over the ground, and below was something else, something darker and richer. The thin green horizon she’d been chasing since dawn wavered like a mirage. It must be the Wild, she decided, drinking it in with her eyes.

Pausing on a small island of granite, Ana shielded her face from the sun and
squinted. There was a house in the distance—one lonely structure perched on the side of a barren hill. Without particularly meaning to, she’d been working her way towards it since sunrise. Now she was closer, the house didn’t look terribly promising; it sagged heavily on one side and the vertical poles of its veranda looked like badly placed toothpicks. Cavernous windows glared accusingly toward the road.

When she finally neared the old house and confirmed that it was long since stripped of food and water, she sat gingerly on the steps of the rotting porch and began to beat the dust from her mask. Mid-shake, the cloth fluttered from her fingers. The air here—she paused, breathing deeply, waiting for the familiar burn in her lungs—but no, it was clear, and clean, and so rich in oxygen it made her head spin. She slumped against a column for support, only to lurch away when it groaned in protest. The roof released a small shower of dust and splinters but remained intact. Ana smiled faintly. The wind had picked up, and dark clouds were gathering in the east.

With torrents of silvery acid rain, the storm barrelled into the valley like an invading army. Ana picked through the gloom of the house and pulled out a few old steel pots. The contaminated water made her lungs and stomach hurt, but it eased the clawing in her throat, so she kept drinking and refilled her bottles. By the time she’d taken all the water she could hold, a stream raged through the valley where she’d walked just a few hours before. She settled in on the leaking porch to watch.

As soon as the skies cleared, the water drained away, disappearing down the vast crater that darkened the bottom of the valley. The sun shone even brighter and the mud dried into new contours, reshaping the land. She pressed a finger into the warm, baking earth, and it occurred to her that this place had not been particularly hostile. It had, in fact, saved her life. In a fit of giddy recklessness, she left her mask where it had fallen and started out on high ground. Although the water added weight, she felt lighter, renewed; the storm was a gift that would carry her where she needed to go.

*Perhaps it was meant for me,* she thought, *sent by Mama or her strange old god.*

***

Other than the days, the only way to mark time was the sound of her steps. After the fifth sunrise, those steps were getting weaker again, and shorter. Her boots caught on invisible snarls in the earth, threatening to send her sprawling. She almost missed the first tuft sprouting near the roadside. It was nothing much, two strands of anaemic grass, but Ana knelt to examine it anyway. With utmost care, she broke off a tiny piece and rolled it between her fingers; cloudy fluid oozed from the torn plant. It smelled and tasted horribly bitter.

*Inedible.* She could have cried if she had energy. The worst part was that she’d
crouched for nothing, and now she had to get up again.

_No tears_, she told herself fiercely. _No tears, no tears, no tears._ She hauled herself up. The words became a chant in her head, coinciding with her steps. _No. Tears. No. Tears. Don’t. Be. A. Baby. No. Tears._ Left right left right left. The simplicity was maddening, but it worked.

So, perhaps the Wild was not the wonderland her father had described. There was no ground water. The plants were elusive and toxic. Open hills and valleys left her exposed. If this was indeed the Wild, she’d seen and tasted it, and it was hardly more hospitable than Valmora.

With this realisation, something wilted in her; something precious, that had been a source of strength.

_So they were right_, she thought as she trudged forwards dejectedly. _All of them._ The Wild had been her father’s obsession, but since he’d disappeared it had become hers. Her dreams brimmed with crashing waterfalls and snow-capped mountains, greenery and red-blooded, furred beasts; pictures and words manifest in her mind. She believed in it because it was the only hope left. It had never occurred to her that the Wild could be reduced and corrupted like everything else.

She should have stayed with Max and faded into the shadows of Valmora.

As the sun lowered in the sky, that first blade of grass grew to dozens, but she ignored them, focusing on keeping one foot in front of the other.

***

Her body was failing. Time passed in lurches and pauses. Her brain could only seem to process one thing at a time; the erratic hammer of her heart, the swirl of colours as she walked. _Worst of all_, there came a sound, a sound out of nightmare—a looming, chirping echo. Ana blinked, trying to moisten her eyes, but the image danced just out of focus. She let out a whimper, wanting nothing more than to scream and curl up under her pack. But there was no attack, no fight, other than to keep stumbling forwards, no tears, _left right left right left._

Grass tugged insistently at her hands and legs. The noise reached a crescendo. It washed around her in waves, surging and pulling back. It _toyed_ with her. But then, abruptly, everything faded. Ana thudded into the grass. She tried to rise, but her pack held her down as surely as chains of lead. With great effort, she slid out of the bag’s restraints and rolled onto her back. Her lungs, for once, stopped wheezing. Her eyes were open, but the world grew dark around the edges.

_I guess I did it_, she thought, pleased with herself and no longer afraid. It wasn’t the dark, sad, lonely end she’d feared, cooped up in her basement in Valmora, to lie forever
alone, or, worse, be looted by the gangs. Instead she'd taken this gift for herself. To lie in the grass under the dusky blue sky, and savour the curious sweetness of victory in defeat.
“Crows!” Tavi yelled for the benefit of her brother, pacing on the forest floor below.

“Southeast.”

She swung herself down the beech tree, leaping from branch to branch with a practiced ease. When she reached the ground, as she had suspected, Chase was scowling.

“If the crows are interested it’s hardly worth our time,” he muttered.

“You know the rules, Chasey. Most Horrific Violation of the Third Circle, and all that? We need to stop them!”

He crossed his arms stubbornly.

“Come on, big brother. Should I face them alone?” She sang the challenge in her best Chase-irritating voice. _Deus_. For all that everyone said about her brother being such a fine guardian, she had yet to see it. If she wanted him to show her anything, he took as much prodding and poking as a hunterdog intent on snoozing off the gluttony of a kill.

He rolled his eyes and tossed his sister her bow. “Think you can manage to stick to the rules this time, Tav?”

“Stay back, observe, obey your _senior._” She rolled the _r_ and scrunched her nose to emphasise her disdain for the idea. “Whoever assigned me to you is an ass.”

“I’ll be sure to give the _Praefectors_ your feedback when we return,” Chase laughed. “Next time you’ll probably get Olen.”

“After we pull this off, I could get a new-bond of my own!” she said brightly.

Chase cursed under his breath. “No chance, sister. If I don’t like your postings I’ll ask to be assigned another Turn.”

Tavi glared at him. Chase had grown hard in his two years on the Guard, both physically and mentally. Only rarely did he act like the easy-going brother she used to know. Since he’d been named as her first senior at the bonding ceremony last full moon, she had been using every opportunity to goad him into behaviour that was ‘brother’ rather than ‘commanding senior’, but with limited success. Now she was nearly out of time.

Their posting together ended tomorrow, and after one more round he would be finished on the Guard forever. No version of Chase—no version of anybody, really, unless they were desperate for the elders’ favour—would choose to stay on once their compulsory Turns were up. The air was contaminated on the outer edge of the second
circle, without the thick canopy of ancient trees to filter it, and food was scarce. Every last one of them counted down the days until they could begin their real life in Tain. Her brother was no different.

“You would never,” she said, a little hesitantly.

“Try me.” He grinned. “Get yourself assigned to Brax or Ander and I might leave you be.”

“Fine,” she said, brandishing her bow to remind him of the task at hand. “I will try. Can we go and finish the Accursed already? I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” he said, but his focus had already shifted to their target.

***

They made their way down to the grasslands, weapons drawn. Chase gave Tavi the signal to follow ten paces behind. The trees on the border of the second circle were blackened and bare, as though they’d been blasted with fire; the only green came from the Crone’s Curse, a poisonous grass that shot up to waist height and shrivelled down within the turning of a few suns. The air was heavy with bitterness and decay. All Tain hated the third circle, and Chase was no exception. He did not want to lead his little sister out here, but—as he had been sternly reminded back at Tahon—it would happen, under his watch or somebody else’s.

They prowled through the thinning trees and into the grass. The crows saw them coming and shot upwards, continuing to spiral out of the range of Tavi’s arrows.

The enemy hid in the long grass—a loner, which was unusual for the anathema. Usually they raided in packs. Chase could see the path he had taken, weaving through the grass like a wounded animal. Nothing about it seemed to add up. Yet, if it was a trap, it was an unusual one. He’d never met an Accursed who could fool the crows.

“He hasn’t moved,” Tavi whispered. “Maybe sleeping?”

Most likely dead, he thought. Regardless, he drew his machete and gave her the signal to stay back.

As he crept closer, the crows screamed in agitation. Not a blade of grass moved around their target. Chase made the final few steps and parted the grass with his machete.

The Valmoran lay crumpled in the dirt, half covered by a large pack… rather, a small pack, which looked large in comparison to her. For it was a her, one of the very few Valmoran females he had ever seen, and definitely the youngest. She was drained of all colour, with cracked lips, burnt skin and the unmistakable look of death.

His sister burst from the undergrowth, gasping when she saw the body. “She’s just a pup!” She shot past him, heaving the pack aside and running her hands over the girl’s

Chase found himself reaching for his water-skin before sense kicked in. “Stop. If she’s alive we need to end her or take her in.”

Tavi jumped to her feet, and gave him a wide-eyed glare. “Are you joking?”

He resisted the urge to swear. “Moments ago,” he said—because this was a serious matter and a senior’s place was to lead by example—“you were ready for this. Now, what? The Crone has done our work for us and you want to nurse her back to health?”

His little sister glowered. She looked so much like their mother, then, bright with conviction, that it almost hurt to look at her.

“Our work?” she said shrilly. “Every day for the last six years, Chase, I’ve been training for our work. And I am ready. For the anathema. But what is she? Look at her! Look at her! You tell me what you see.”

Chase looked. Images flashed through his mind’s eye; wraithlike men, with pale eyes and rotting flesh, always armed to the teeth and inflicting savagery on his people for as long as he could remember. Those were the Valmorans he knew. But when the memories cleared, all that remained was a slight girl sprawled helplessly in the grass. The halo of white hair betrayed her heritage, but he slid one of her eyelids open anyway. Her cheek felt tight and angular; she was dangerously malnourished. His thoughts flashed to the bread and dried catmeat in his pack. No—to feed her would be insane. Her eyes were the pale blue of Valmora, the colour of the anathema. The Accursed. They were not human, not really. Yet ...

“I see a girl,” he muttered reluctantly.

“Exactly,” Tavi whispered, as though they might hear her all the way back in Tahon. “This is different, brother. What would they do with her?”

“What can they do? You know the law.”

They stared at each other in indecision.

“We can at least give her some water while we think,” Tavi said. “Her pulse is slowing.”

Chase thought it over. Her eyes were clear, not yet clouded over with the poison of oblak. He’d never seen a Valmoran without it. This was one of the first lessons Tain children learned in their training: Oblak marks one that has been lost to the Crone. These serve only violence and death; left unchecked, they would bleed the earth dry. They must be returned to the one who has claimed them.

But her eyes were clear, and Chase could not imagine putting his knife to her throat, so he shrugged. “As you wish. But if you don’t want to take her back, we need to get her out of here.”
Tavi looked at him, eyes shining. “You don’t want to take her either.”

Chase said nothing, just tossed his water-skin down and watched impassively as his sister coaxed small trickles of liquid down the girl’s throat.

“That should do,” she said at last. “Now what?”

“Now we dump her on the very edge of the Circle and make sure she knows not to come back,” Chase said grimly.

***

Ana dreamed through the night in vivid shades of colour. She sat on the brick-red porch of her grandparents’ old farmhouse, the one she’d seen only in pictures. Now it was familiar. The earth had not yet gone bad—or maybe it had recovered. A green sea of grass stretched from her dangling feet, all the way to the distant misty-purple horizon. Within it a multitude of creatures whistled, croaked, chirped and hissed. Crows circled overhead, wheeling lazily in the powder blue sky, and they talked to her in harsh voices. Ana knew she should understand them, but she couldn’t. She burst into the house, looking for someone to explain it, but whoever was in there had gone. Inside, the house was orderly and beautiful. The yellow sun-drenched kitchen was a safe place to sit and hide from the birds, so she took a long, cool drink from the faucet, and waited. Eventually the light streaming through the clean windows began to beat against her eyelids.

She woke at sunrise, wincing from the blinding pain that hammered against the insides of her skull. Small rocks dug into her back, and her limbs felt like dead things. After a few tries she managed to push herself up. The grass around her was only thin, patchy, and short—the kind of territory she had passed through a long while ago. How had she come here in her sleep? And why?

A cold feeling of dread prickled down her spine as she observed the way her gear was laid out around her. Every item—her knife, water bottles, the contents of her first aid kit, everything—had been arranged, in straight lines and makeshift arrows, to point east.

Someone was here! Someone ... who wanted her to go back where she came from? Ana huffed out an incredulous laugh and scrambled to stuff her belongings into the pack, except her knife, which she kept unsheathed in her belt.

Then she paused, unzipped the pack, and pulled out one of the plastic bottles. It was heavy with clear water. She unscrewed the cap and sniffed it suspiciously; it smelled sweet and fresh. She knew she should probably tip it out, but she slid it into the side-pocket of her pack instead, and headed west at a strong determined pace. Better to die of poison than thirst.
As the miles of scrub gave way to trees, and the trees thickened, she breathed easier and cautiously allowed herself to admire her surroundings, keeping an ear and eye out for the stranger who had moved her in her sleep. It was hard to maintain the proper level of caution. The trees were amazing, not at all like she'd imagined. They grew at closely random intervals, branches mingling together like interlocked hands. Their skins were imperfect, rough and multifaceted; iridescent grey, pale green, tan; innumerable shades melded through each layer of bark. In some places the trunk seemed to have broken open and oozed a little, forming gnarls that looked like badly healed wounds. Ana drew close to one, running her hand down the trunk slowly and wincing when a few small slivers embedded themselves in the soft skin of her fingertips. She drew them out one by one, then continued her examination; pressed her nose against the trunk, inhaling the clean scent deeply, and even used her knife to peel off a soft piece of the treflesh to taste.

*Definitely not for eating,* she decided, and spat it out.

The faint sound of flowing water called from somewhere further west. She pulled off her boots and glided downhill, enjoying the feeling of moistly decaying plant matter under her bruised and blistered feet. Her light steps made noise, but she was too high on oxygen and anticipation to care. There was so much to see, smell, taste... ... Until she saw, too late, two strangers and the glint of an arrow.

"No, no, no!" The girl wailed, a strange lilt to her voice. "Why? Why did you come here?"

Ana stared in shock. It seemed like they’d come out of nowhere. *Because you got lazy,* she screamed at herself mentally. *Because you got stupid.*

They were distractingly beautiful, these huge dark people. The girl with the bow stood at least a foot taller than she did, strong and lean, with honey-coloured skin and bright emerald eyes. She wore a confusion of dyed leather and silk. Her long brown hair was piled into an intricate hive at the back of her head; bright beads and dried flowers poked haphazardly from the mass of hair. Polished silver bands adorned her fingers and arms.

The effect was impressive to Ana. She didn’t want to fight this colourful girl—she wanted to be her.

The boy was taller still, much broader, altogether less adorned. He was dressed more sombrely than his brilliant companion, but he shared her colouring, her emerald eyes. He was very beautiful too in his own way, Ana thought. He looked angry, menacing even, but not desperate or cruel. Why did they want to harm her?

She cleared her throat. "There's nowhere else to go."
“Now we really will have to kill her,” the boy muttered. He didn’t look too enthusiastic about the idea.

Ana quickly assessed her situation. She could fight, despite being so tired and physically weakened. Duck the arrow, go for the boy while the girl reloaded; surprise them with her speed. They were too sure of their upper hand. It radiated from them. She might have a shot. The odds were acceptable.

But … that was city Ana, the one who didn’t have any choice. Before she could overthink it, she threw her knife on the ground and crossed her arms defiantly.

“If you want to kill me go ahead. I’m not going back.”
The pair looked agitated, and started whispering to each other with heavily accented words Ana could not quite understand. Suddenly the girl relaxed her bowstring, turning to face the boy and leaving herself unprotected. "We can say we found her in the grass, it is true enough. We've broken the circle anyway."

"She's not a lame pup, Tav, you can't take her as a pet," the boy said gruffly. "Second circle or third, it's all the same in the end."

"It's different!" The girl burst out, startling Ana with her ferocity. "You know that it is. Papa will see it. And Sera—"

"You don't have to take me anywhere," Ana interjected. "I'll just be on my way."

The boy sheathed his knife and shot her a dark look. "You wouldn't make it a day in this forest without someone finding and killing you on the spot."

"Maybe, maybe not," she thought, returning his glare.

"My name is Tavi, and this is my brother Chase," the girl said. "We'll have to take you home and ask the Praefectors to let you live."

Ana studied their faces—first Tavi, who smiled hopefully, and then Chase, who did not. Adrenaline was flooding through her veins, filling her with the overwhelming impulse to fight or run. But where could she go? Besides, she was curious about these strange people that seemed so... well, human, like she and Max when they were young.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked at last.

Tavi glanced at her brother and then shrugged apologetically. "Not so much. But don't fear, our father is a Praefector. One of three. People listen to him."

"Does he listen to us?" Chase muttered.

"What?"

"He—Crone's fire, forget it. We should go."

"Wait," Ana said quickly, "just for a minute? I've never seen a..."—she trailed off, gesturing towards the water.

"Stream?" Tavi asked, looking highly amused.

"Stream," Ana murmured, testing the word out on her tongue. Yes, stream was the word her father might have used. It looked glittering, inviting. If Chase and Tavi wanted to drag her away to their weird-sounding Praefectors without letting her see it up close, they could think again.

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“What is Valmora like, then, Ana?” Tavi asked as they sat on the edge of the water, letting it run over their bare feet. At first Ana was hardly aware that she’d spoken. The stream was no wider than she was tall, but it was cool and fresh, everything she’d dreamed of and more. The air around it was wetly rich and teeming with little flying bugs. Tavi and Chase slapped them away impatiently, but Ana was secretly fascinated. Keeping a watchful eye on her rescuer-captors, she lay back and sighed with pleasure. Cool rivulets of water dripped from her face and hair.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Chase—standing back from the stream with his boots on and arms crossed—shake his head.

“Tavi,” he warned.

His sister shrugged. “What? It’s just a place. A cursed place, yes, but I’ve always wanted to know what it’s like!”

Ana ignored Chase’s glowering and tried to relax. This was what she had come here for, wasn’t it? To find the Wild, and people who might be more to her than strangers and enemies?

“Nothing like here.”

Then, realising how hostile her answer sounded, she added hastily—“Do you have … buildings?”

Tavi laughed. The sound was natural and easy, which was jarring, but oddly reassuring. There was no malice in it. “We have Tahon, our—what is the word, Chase?—fortress, made of stone. It’s older than the forest itself, Papa says, the last refuge of mankind. And we have homes in the village.”

“Oh. Well, Valmora is kind of … just buildings, as far as you can see. Nothing grows there.”

“It is cursed, then,” she whispered, her rings chinking together as she clasped her hands in delight. “I wondered if it was just a story.”

Ana shrugged. “I don’t know about cursed. There’s hardly any food left and everyone’s scared of each other. Maybe that’s the same thing?”

Tavi looked uncomfortable. “Not everyone can be scared of each other …”

“Enough,” Chase snapped. “Get up, both of you.” He glared at his sister and wouldn’t let them talk more than three words together until they were within sight of Tahon village.

***

Rich smells of woodsmoke and gamey meat permeated the forest, along with the low, relaxed hum of a village at dinnertime. Tavi lit a bundle of dried leaves and waved it around with a flourish, dousing them all in sweet-scented smoke. Chase produced a
vial of white liquor and poured it carefully over their hands. The siblings muttered some kind of prayer. Ana followed along distractedly, hardly able to take her eyes off the village. It was a bustling hive of tents, huts and roaring fires, set under a canopy of tall pines; through the dusk and smoke, she could make out the dark shapes of a cliff face beyond the camp, and the towering edifice of an old fortress. Tahun. Tavi had called it a refuge, but the great black mouth of the entrance looked more like a trap.

As Tavi and Chase finished their ritual, Ana hitched her thumbs through the straps of the backpack that rested snugly on her shoulders. Nobody from the village had noticed them yet. I could just keep walking, she thought. The siblings flanked her; she eyed them furtively. The tension in their body language mirrored her own.

A lone figure sat by the nearest campfire, stirring a deep cast-iron pot, which was giving off an aroma that made her stomach seize painfully. Loose summer robes bared the village woman's tanned calves and shoulders, and her dark grey hair was tied back in a messy, plaited mass. The stranger seemed to catch Ana's gaze; she clanged a heavy lid over the meal and retreated abruptly, the back of her voluminous dress billowing behind her as she disappeared into the hut.

Before she could comment on any of this, the woman was back again, heralded by clattering strings of bones and beads that hung from her doorway.

"Malika," Tavi whispered. "Our seer and priestess. The last in all the world."

Back in her original position by the fire, Malika rested two polished wooden bowls on her lap, and pierced Ana with her sharp eyes. "Child of Valmora. Come. Sit."

Ana felt her body go tense, as it always did when she locked eyes with a stranger—someone she'd have to run from, fight, or both. Here, though, the stranger was wielding a food bowl and reaching towards the stewpot with her other hand. The gesture put an end to any thoughts of running. She hurried over and sat. After a pause, Tavi and Chase followed.

"I did not call for the two of you," Malika reprimanded them crisply. She gave Ana an appraising look. Since the woman was staring so openly, she returned the gaze without shame. The priestess looked old, although she couldn't tell how old. Her skin was creased, but it did not melt away from her bones the way Valmorans adults' did. Her dark grey hair was thick and shiny, and her brown eyes were clear.

"We stay with her," Chase said. "Not everyone is as open-minded as you, sacerdos." Ana got the impression that he didn't mean it as a compliment.

Malika ignored him, handing Ana a bowl of watery stew and a wooden spoon, leading her to lose all sense of the world outside of her hands. She gulped directly from the bowl, too fast, but she couldn't stop. The hot stew burned all the way down, but it
eased the horrible clawing in her stomach.

“You didn’t feed her,” Malika said reprovingly.

“She didn’t ask. And it is your goddess’s rules we follow,” Chase said, with more than a hint of disgust. “By law we should have killed her in the grasslands, and you complain of her not being fed?”

“You follow the letter of the law, boy, just like your father,” Malika sneered. “That is not the Crone’s way.”

“What is her way? Kill those you dislike the look of?”

“Maybe. You do not begin to understand,” the priestess said, pursing her lips sharply.

Tavi looked anxious. “Malika, we’ve been afraid for her. Neither of us has ever seen a Valmoran like Ana. We didn’t know what to do.”

“You did right,” the priestess said, after a long pause. “Just let me see her.”

Ana, now done with her stew and longing for more, glanced up in surprise. Did she want to conduct a physical exam? Briefly, she imagined herself being strapped down in the priestess’s dark hut, measured and prodded, jabbed, dissected.

But the woman made no move to approach her. Instead she stared in a very unsettling way—because she was looking near her, Ana realised, but not at her. Her dark eyes flicked around as though she was reading the air itself. Even in the poor light, Ana could tell that she was staring at nothing.

Perhaps the last priestess was a little insane. Ana glanced at the others to see if they’d noticed; apparently they had. Chase looked irritated and a little bored. Tavi seemed eager, leaning forward in anticipation, her eyes glowing. Seeing Ana’s questioning look, she grinned.

“You have interesting energy, girl,” Malika announced. Suddenly, Ana could feel dozens of eyes on her. Not just Tavi and Chase, but those of villagers outside their small ring of firelight. The bustle of dinnertime had gone quiet. She found herself looking to Chase for reassurance, earning herself a scornful hiss from the priestess.

“Do not look to him, little one. All your life you have pretended not to know things, but you do know. Perhaps you were punished for this in a previous life—for knowing too much, for speaking out of place, so now you are too timid. But you do feel the truth, and it guides you if you will let it.”

Chase made an impatient noise. “You tell Ana to follow her heart? Cliché, even for you.”

Malika dismissed him without so much as a bat of an eyelid. “Not her heart. It is deeper than that—rooted from the vaječník—ovaries. This knowing is as old as our
race and it does not lie.”

“But there is more than that,” she continued, before Chase could argue with her. Then she added, loudly, “—all you watchers, ostuda! Go about your business.”

A faint rustle registered in Ana’s ears over the crackling of campfires and the light wind stirring in the woods. Slowly, the noises of the village resumed.

“Death follows behind you, Ana,” Malika said, “and life springs before you. Here at Tahon the Praefectors will consider you as an anathema, the other, and in a sense they have never been more right. But that does not mean they are not also wrong. Keep hold of that pack of yours, little one, for you will need it.”

She lowered her head, looking tired, and stared into the flames.

Ana struggled with a tide of panic. Did Malika mean that she would be rejected by the Praefectors? Was she giving an opinion, or had she ‘seen’ that they would turn against her? Should she believe it, if the old woman had?

Chase rose to his feet, frowning. “Enough, priestess. What happened to all the things you tell the initiates? You will be a great warrior, Belun smiles on you, good luck follows you? Did you run out of comforting lies?”

“Malika knows what she’s talking about, Chase,” Tavi said, horrified. “She knew that I wanted to be a healer and that Mother would die young.”

Piece by piece, Max strapped every weapon he owned onto his body. A collection of kitchen knives, the kind that flew heavy and straight through the air, if you threw them true enough. Long combat knife. Spiked chain. Unloaded gun. The weight felt reassuring around his hips and chest, although it was harder to bear than it used to be.

The gun, of course, was useless, but he liked to keep his opponents guessing.

When there was nothing left to do but leave, he took a final drink from his water cache and swung himself out of the window. For the first time that he could remember, he didn’t seal it, didn’t arrange it to look unused and broken like all the others.

He grinned to himself, with a gleam that might have looked like madness glinting in his eyes. He hoped this was how Ana felt, throwing herself into the unknown with no real expectations or hope—just the electrifying knowledge that from this moment on, things were going to be different.

*She’s gone. Don’t think about her.* He’d meant what he said, that night in the orange hour that was so much like this one. She should have stayed. But he could understand why she didn’t. It was the same mad urge that was spurring him on now, the need to take control of the short remainder of one’s life, and the manner of one’s death.

Her plan, of course, was both dumber and better than his. Ana had refused to see the possibilities that still existed in Valmora. He loved her for it, hoped it would spare her from whatever hell he was destined for, but it had been just another reminder that she would despise him if she knew who he really was.

*Don’t think about her.* Ana was gone, a hole in his heart, a weight off his shoulders.

As the sunset deepened, Max settled into position above the gangway that connected two towers in the heart of the old city. The buildings were properly ancient, relics of a civilisation that had risen and fallen eons ago. But the gangway was a modern addition of concrete and brown tile. It looked like a deathtrap, crumbling from decades of acid rain, but the steel frame holding it up remained strong. He’d been observing the place for weeks; he was familiar with the routine of the gangs, allied for now, squatting in the lower levels of each building. Tonight all his watching and waiting would pay off.

Moments after the last rays of sunlight dried up, his target emerged from the far building and began to cross the gangway. Every night this happened. The tall male, carrying his AK-47, crossed over from the north block to confer with the south. Max didn’t know who it was, exactly, but he’d overheard enough gang gossip to know that
the bridge-crosser was his way in.

As the vibrations of the man’s footsteps grew louder, Max slid his favourite knife from its sheath and silently positioned himself over a hole in the walkway roof. It had been sealed, once, to protect its users from rain. *Mustn’t allow anyone to get wet,* he mused, as he slipped through the hole and made an elegant drop onto the target’s back. *Those poor bastards.*

He timed the cut perfectly. Just long enough for the target to let out a resounding bellow. Not long enough for him to aim his stupidly oversized gun. He gargled and slumped to his knees, then fell on his face. Max wiped the knife on his rags, so dirty they almost looked black. Then he waited.

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As they descended into the bustle of the village, Tavi took Ana’s hand in her own. It was a strange gesture, Ana thought. But it did make her feel less alone in this crowded place, where the carnival of life was on full display, in ways that were new and frightening. Nobody, so far as she could see, bore arms. Families sat together and ate around small cooking fires. Mothers held babies to their bare breasts. Children chased each other between the tents, their feet blackened with soot and earth. Animals—dogs and goats mostly, and some fat birds she didn’t recognise—roamed throughout the camp. Most of the undergrowth beyond the first line of dwellings had been cleared, although many of the huts themselves looked like new forms of organic growth, covered over with animal hides and the thin limbs of young trees. Everyone they passed stared curiously at Ana, although they made no attempts to approach or speak. She stared back hungrily. *So this is what it’s like,* she thought.

Chase, who was striding several paces in front, came to an abrupt halt by one of the huts. In the place of a fire pit, this site boasted a long, curved bench—lined with lit tapers, Ana noted with amazement. The Tain must be even more prosperous than she’d guessed, if they burned candles on a moonlit night like this.

A grinning, bearded young man appeared from the open doorway, greeting Chase with a slap on the back. He produced a tall cup of polished wood from underneath the bench, and filled it from the barrel that stood beside him. “Back a bit early, aren’t you?”

Chase took the cup, drank from it, smiled, and slid a bronze token across the bench in exchange. Tavi dumped her bow on the ground and sat next to Chase, so Ana took the final seat beside her and leaned over to inspect the token. It was a small, imperfect circle of iron, embossed with a woman’s face on each side: one young, one old, although both pairs of eyes glinted knowingly in the candlelight.

“…You’ve met Tavi?” Chase was saying. "What are the odds you would take her on
for the next Turn? I find myself doubting if I bring out the best new-bond qualities in her.” He glanced over at his sister and grinned fondly.

Tavi glared at him through narrowed eyes. “I don’t think you do either, brother, but it is no reflection on my abilities.”

Ander chuckled and stroked his beard. “Things are dull around here. I’ll do it, if the elders will make the assignment. And if you introduce me to your friend.” He turned to smile at Ana, and she felt her cheeks redden.

“Ana of Valmora,” Chase said, absentmindedly strumming the bench with his fingers. “Anathema. Don’t get attached. She’s here for interrogation and trial by the Praefectors.”

“It’s rude to talk about someone in words they can’t understand,” Ana snapped. “And if I’m to be interrogated, why are we here?”

A fleeting look of confusion crossed his face. He gave her a little nod, mocking or courteous, she couldn’t tell. “My apologies. They’ll know we’re here soon enough. I thought we might as well relax and have a drink.”

Tavi snorted. “Incredible. Out there—she swept an arm broadly in the direction from which they had come—”you talk like an elder. Back here we ‘might as well relax and have a drink?’”

Chase looked at her with an amused kind of patience. “Why not?”

“Emm ... because father is going to throw a fit?”

He shrugged and returned his attention to the cup. “Something you will eventually learn, sister, is that father throws fits whether you bend over backwards to please him or not.”

She pouted slightly. “You could try.”

“Besides,” Ana observed, “the only one getting anything is you.”

Chase turned to her, his eyes surprisingly benevolent, given how awful she was being. “You want something? Water? Juice?”

Ana frowned. Every moment with Chase and Tavi seemed to bring some new marvel that she’d never heard of before, and frankly, she was getting tired of seeming ignorant. Still, the answers were usually worth it. “What is that—juice?”

Chase’s eyes widened slightly, Tavi gasped, and Ander chuckled. They laugh so much, Ana thought. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed.

“Juice is something we make from fruit,” Ander said, smiling in a way that produced small crinkles around his eyes. “Here.” He banged an empty cup onto the bench in front of her and disappeared briefly into the dark hut. When he reappeared, he was holding two brightly coloured half-orbs, which he squeezed over the cup. Liquid streamed from
the fruit, and the sharp, sweet tang hung tantalisingly in the air.

She took a sip and sighed. The flavour was incredible—sweet, zesty, sharp—the best thing she had ever tasted.

Ander grinned, but then his smile faded abruptly. The tiny hairs on Ana’s neck prickled. She spun around on the stool, swiping uselessly at the place in her belt where her knife should have been, but Chase had confiscated it. Cursing him under her breath, she gazed around wildly.

Villagers teemed around them, carrying on with the business of living, although more than a few curious glances came their way. At first Ana couldn’t see what it was that had startled Ander. Then she spotted him—a tall man with closely cropped silver-brown hair, closing in on them with his jaw set like a tightly wired steel trap. Unlike most of the villagers, the man’s robes were black, and they covered him down to the elbows and feet. When he saw her, his green eyes narrowed into slits.

“I thought we would find you here,” he said, addressing Chase, “but it is disappointing to see that I was right.”

Ander stood to attention, as though the newcomer was someone very important, but Chase sighed and drained his cup before sliding off his seat and turning to face the man. “Incoming guardians have until midnight tomorrow to make their report, father.”

“A Valmoran within the first circle is a matter of the highest urgency, as you well know, son,” the Praefector replied. He didn’t raise his voice, but cold disapproval radiated from him strongly enough to make Ana flinch. If her father had ever talked to her like that, she might have cried. “What exactly are you trying to achieve?”

“Dinner, mostly,” Chase said, pleasantly enough, but his eyes were hard with an old anger.

“Secure the Valmoran and bring her to the crypt immediately,” the man snapped. Turning on his heel, he swept away in the direction he had come from.

Tavi clasped Ana’s shoulder apologetically and she had to resist the urge to knock it aside. Don’t touch me, stop touching me, I know you mean well but it freaks me out. Then Chase was gripping her other shoulder, not apologetically, but firmly. Ana yelled, and nearly fell off the chair in an attempt to yank herself away, but Tavi was gone and he had her by both arms and her hands clawed uselessly behind her. Secure the Valmoran? That bastard. If I had my knife I’d give them something to secure—

“I’m so sorry,” a girl was saying somewhere in the distance, again and again. A big hand covered Ana’s mouth and half her face, cutting off not only her scream but also most of her air. She bit one of the fingers and tasted salt and blood, but she already knew that the Praefector had won, and she felt more hatred in that moment than she’d
ever thought was possible.

6.

“We told you,” Chase said, barely able to conceal his irritation. “She has no knowledge of our conflict—she threw down her weapon when we apprehended her, what Valmoran has ever done that?”

“As the Accursed grow desperate and weak in these last days, they can be expected to become more devious,” Ammon said dryly from his seat at the centre of the podium. The other two Praefectors, their father and Sera, sat on either side of him. Ammon’s voice echoed through the justice tower, prompting murmurs from those who listened from the viewing gallery above.

“How can we know that she is not a spy, sent here to discern our weaknesses?” he added.

“When we found her she was nearly dead!” Tavi cried from the bench. “It was pure chance…”

Chase shot her a warning glare; his sister slumped back in her seat, nostrils flaring in frustration.

“How is it exactly, my children, that the Valmoran surrendered to you as she lay dying in the grass?” Jove demanded.

“Because,” Tavi said loudly, “I healed her in the grasslands and we let her go. She surrendered to us later.”

Chase groaned inwardly and rubbed his eyes.

“Why did you do that, Tavi?” Sera asked.

“Because she is a child,” Tavi said, as though it was the most ridiculous question she’d ever heard, although she was clearly trying to maintain a certain level of deference for their father’s sake. Poor Tav. She’ll never stop trying.

“Please,” his sister added, “we are taught that the Guard exists to protect Tahon from the Accursed threat, not vulnerable children.”

Her words were met with murmuring from the gallery parapets. Chase glanced up—reluctantly impressed, as always, by the soaring height of the tower. The room was magnificent, although he hated the feeling of being observed anonymously from above.

“You make a good point,” Sera said, smiling. “I think your mother would have done the same thing.”

“Their mother,” Jove said harshly, “died in Valmoran hands.”

“And yet she stood for all the finest values of Tain.”
“You have served for only a few short years, Sera,” Jove said curtly. The babble from above intensified, and Chase momentarily forgot the rest of his speech. A Praefector publicly dismissing a fellow Praefector—had that ever happened before? He didn’t think so. The council presented a respectful and united front, in harmony with the gods they served.

At least, they did until now.

“ENOUGH,” Ammon roared, drowning out the voices from the gallery. “We will retire for the morning and deliver our verdict at noon. Anyone with further evidence pertaining to the Valmoran may deliver it in private. Out! Everybody out!”

So much for their famous transparency and fairness, Chase thought. He had never believed that the Praefectors spoke directly from the gods, as the elders liked to imply. His father was too intemperate, altogether too human for that; Chase could always tell when Jove’s personal biases clouded his judgment. It did so especially when the memory of his mother was involved. It was doing so now.

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Ana paced her cell in a murderous rage. She’d known she would be held here overnight. Food, bedding, and a locked door, she’d thought. Isolation. Nothing too bad. Chase and Tavi had told her to expect it. What she wasn’t prepared for was the arrest, or how that locked door would make her feel.


Ignoring the bedding and change of clothes that Tavi had provided, Ana traced every reachable inch of the cell with her fingers, then scratched at the crumbling mortar that bound the iron hinges of the door to the wall. Whatever the substance was, it crumbled under her fingernails, but not enough. Her hands would be ruined long before the door was. With that, the last hope of escape evaporated. She kicked at the door’s bars and swore. How dare they, pretending to be so nice, then locking her up like this—like an animal—giving her no say, or even knowledge, about her fate? She loathed them; Chase for being indifferent, Tavi for being a fool. And their father for being a cold-hearted politician who thought that other people’s destinies were his to decide.

Whoever came to bring her before the so-called council, she decided, would have a fight on their hands.

The clang of her kick reverberated through the space beyond. It sounded large, perhaps a hallway or greater room. When she’d come here, blindfolded, she’d had only a vague impression of Tahon’s size, and that she’d been brought a few levels below the ground. Now, even without the blindfold, the darkness was absolute. Eventually Ana sat on the soft pile of Tavi’s sheets and rested her head on her knees.
After some time—hours?—heavy footsteps echoed, and soft golden light appeared from an arched doorway on the far wall, which was even further away than she’d thought. Moments later Chase appeared, illuminated by a blinding torch of fire.

Ana crossed her arms and squeezed herself, suppressing an involuntary shiver. She refused to be grateful that he had come.

She fumed silently as he slotted the torch into a link on the wall, fumbled with a set of keys and unlocked her door. The bars looked solid and formidable, welded into an iron frame—dreams of escape had been more laughable than she’d known. The cell was nothing more than a tiny room at the end of a long hall, lined by identically arched open doorways. The stone walls and floor were dank and gloomy, stained black in places, but they looked like they had stood for a thousand years and might stand for a thousand more.

Chase swung the door open, already turning to walk back the way he’d come. He gestured for her to follow. His eyes were trained several inches above her head, but Ana made a growl of irritation that made him glance down. It was enough. She lashed out, striking his face with her open hand. The impact echoed down the long corridor like a gunshot.

He looked gratifyingly shocked for a moment, then grinned, rubbing his jaw. "I spent a night down here once before, after my sixteenth birthday. I was mad as all cronefire when they let me out, too."

"I couldn't see," she hissed. "People could go nuts in there."

He raised an eyebrow. "Nuts?"

"Crazy," she snapped. "Mentally deranged."

"If it's any consolation, I can't imagine you'll be coming back," he said over his shoulder, continuing on down the hallway.

Ana glanced into one of the rooms and gasped. The walls were lined with very humanlike bones, stacked neatly on top of each other like building blocks. "You bury your dead in here?"

They came to the doorway at the end of the hall, which led to a small circular room lined with three more doors. She began to feel disorientated.

"The ashes of our dead are scattered outside," Chase said. "These are the ones who built this place. We thought about removing them, once, apparently, but Malika argued against it. She said it would be an insult to the Crone, ruler of death. The motion was put to the elders and lost." He led her through the door to the left, and into another identical corridor, which looked like it was being used for more conventional storage.

Ana shuddered. "Who were they—those bones?"
“We don’t really know. When our people first came here, Tahon was much as you see it, including the bones. But we think they lived very long ago, before the end times. The elders hold a few of their holy books.”

“Really? What do they say?”

“Much to do with the gods, laws, survival. You should ask one of the elders. The rest of us”—he paused at the end of the corridor—“rarely bother to learn many of the languages. We’re busy.”

Ana stumbled to a stop. This doorway, cut in the same pointed arch as the others, opened into the base of a winding flight of stairs. Each step was carved out of stone, with deep grooves worn into the middle by centuries of foot traffic. She moved to start up them, but Chase pulled her back. He looked her in the eye. For the first time, she thought, he looked … kind of uncertain.

“The Praefectors are in session with the elders, deciding what to do with you,” he said quietly. “So far the choices are to accept you, kill you, or send you back where you came from.”

She inhaled sharply. “What d’you think it will be?”

“I don’t know. That’s why you’re here. If you want to take your chances, we go to the chambers. I’ll present you to the council and you can give them your testimony. Otherwise…” he paused and ground his teeth together, then sighed. “You could make a run for it. Take your chances in the forest.”

“Why would you allow that?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. She’d trusted him too much yesterday, but she wouldn’t make that mistake again.

He crossed his arms defensively. “Plenty of reasons. For one thing, they might assume you escaped on your own. Some of our people believe that Valmorans are half demon.”

She almost laughed, although it wasn’t funny. She could see why they might think that; most Valmorans, in the last stages of the wasting disease, looked like the walking dead. Even her parents had, near the end. But that was irrelevant. There was only one thing that really mattered.

“Are they happy, your people?”

Chase looked mystified. “Do you have any idea what you’re—no. You don’t. You could be sacrificed to the Crone, Ana, burned to ash. They won’t even see it as a death sentence. If you’re anathema, you’re already dead, the fire is only a matter of restoring balance. The information you want is whether or not my people are happy?”

She nodded.

He gave it some thought. “Honestly? I believe so. Nothing is perfect, but in general,
yes."

Ana thought of Tahon village the night before. It had frightened her; the watchful eyes, the abundance of movement, the animals, all of it. Every moment she'd been expecting one of the villagers to rush at her and attack. But none of them had. Their bodies were strong and well nourished. Their families were unbroken and unafraid. Malika and Ander had fed her, asking nothing in return, smiled, and their kindness had kindled something in her that replaced the hope that she’d lost in the grasslands. She had a new dream now; acceptance. Not by the Praefectors, particularly, but among the people who lived so freely out there in their makeshift huts.

"The chambers," she said abruptly, pushing past him to start up the stairs.
The justice tower was small, but dizzyingly high. Ana had to strain her neck to see the top of it, beyond the soaring moss-stained walls and many levels of windows and galleries, through to the dark pentagon-shaped roof. If she squinted, she could see that it was carved with a geometric pattern. It was beautiful, all of it, both in design and the state of grandiose decay.

The room was deserted. As they crossed it and came to a connecting antechamber, which muffled the sound of angry male voices, her empty stomach churned nervously.

"They're not expecting us," Chase said. "But your testimony will most likely be permitted."

Just as the panic started to rise from her stomach, he swung the doors wide and hustled her in. The doors fell shut behind them, thudding heavily, and the voices instantly stopped. Ana blinked as her eyes struggled to readjust after the sun-soaked tower. This room had no windows, only flickering torches lined circular walls, which were covered at regular intervals with rich-coloured tapestries. A deep smell of burning spices permeated the air, overlaying duller scents of mould and stone.

On the far side of the room stood a large round table of polished timber. Three figures sat around it. As her eyes began to adapt, Ana recognised Jove, Chase and Tavi's father, sitting to the left; the other woman and man were strangers, although they were dressed in the same long dark robes. The second man was very old, near bald, and oddly thickset. The woman had a pinched sort of face and short black hair. Ana nodded in what she hoped was a respectful manner.

"Praefectors Ammon, Jove and Sera, I present Ana of Valmora, to give her testimony before you and our gods," Chase said formally.

Ana watched their faces. Jove's darkened in anger. Sera, leaning back in her seat, regarded them with interest. Her eyes were intelligent and kind. Ammon, though—she could not read his face. He seemed entirely impassive. Not for the first time, Ana wished she knew more of men other than Max and her father.

"She has that right," the old Praefector said at last, his voice as dry and thin as a new layer of dust. Immediately, Ana got the impression that Ammon led the council, in authority as well as age. It made sense, she supposed. Like Malika, he would remember the world before.

"Step forward," he commanded.
Chase motioned for Ana to go ahead. She shuffled forwards to stand in the centre of the room, where all the polished floor-stones converged in a decorative swirl.

“What is your full name, and age?”

“Anais,” she whispered, clearing her throat in order to speak louder. “Anais Thorne. I’m fifteen.”

Behind her, Chase made an almost imperceptible sound of surprise.

“Are you sure?” Ammon said mildly. “You are small for one who claims to be near adulthood.”

“Yes,” she said, glaring. “It was just after my fifteenth birthday that my parents disappeared. That was in the summer.”

“So you are an orphan? Any brothers or sisters?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Curious. Then how did you survive for a full year alone in Valmora city, and make the long journey to Tahon?”

“I was born in Valmora, and my mother and father equipped me as well as they could,” she replied, trying to sound calm. Everything the Praefector said seemed to cast doubt on her answers before they were even spoken. “Getting here—there was no secret to that. I just walked. I would have died if Tavi and Chase hadn’t found me.”

“You just walked,” Ammon said, his voice becoming even drier, if such a thing were possible.

“Others came from further afield in the past,” Sera reminded him.

“But not,” Ammon said, “in recent years, except to attack. And not alone.”

An uncomfortable silence reigned. Ana tried not to flinch or fidget.

“Her story is consistent with the circumstances under which we found her,” Chase said at last. “As Tavi and I have both testified, we believe that she came alone.”

“Your testimony, my son, is called into question by your pride—as Tavi’s is by her tender-heartedness,” Jove said. “This is one of many factors we must consider.”

“And your pride, father?” Chase said quietly. There was something wrong about the way they spoke to each other, Ana thought—some fundamental mistrust, as though they’d both looked to each other at some point and found strangers masquerading as family. It was painful to watch.

“Enough,” Ammon said. “Speak again out of turn and it will not go well for you, Chase. We have seen the anathema and heard her testimony. Now we shall make our decision in private.”

“You have cursed her already, then,” Chase said, darkly. “It is true what Malika says. You cling to the words of Xavier like frightened bats.”
Everyone in the room bristled, and Ana longed to slink away and hide. Her presence might not even be missed. There was something going on in this room, something awful, but she was increasingly sure it had little to do with her.

"Have you ever wondered, Chase, why Malika is not a member of this council, although she serves the Goddess?" Ammon remarked in a detached, scholarly tone. "It is because she cannot see past her own perceptions. Xavier's laws cut through our own biases and egos; they have helped us to stand and grow even as every other civilisation on the face of this earth has fallen. They are all we have that is worth having."

"Life is worth having," Chase said abruptly. His words echoed in the relative emptiness of the room. "Justice. If we condemn the innocent because we cannot bend our own rules then the law is—"

"Son," Jove said, in a voice so simultaneously ordinary and strained that Ana stared at him in amazement. "You will leave us. Now. Have your sister tend to the girl."

Ana glanced sideward at Chase. She saw fury in his eyes that went even deeper than the poisoned feelings she held for all of them herself. But he swallowed, hard, and nodded, then turned towards the door. She followed, feeling all three pairs of eyes pointed like crosshairs at her back.

***

News of the impending verdict spread fast. The tower teemed with people, young and old, crowding the main chamber and filling the viewing galleries above. Ana sat on her seat in front of the podium, carefully ignoring them all. Right now, she couldn’t deal with the censure she thought she might see in their faces. Did they really think she was cursed, coming from a place like Valmora? Would they be wrong if they did? Nope, she told herself, don’t go there.

Tavi had spent the morning teasing her hair up in the Tain fashion, complete with dried flowers and beads of malachite that glowed like emeralds. Together, as if by silent agreement, they’d ignored the silent guardians that had accompanied Ana everywhere since the Praefectors meeting. They’d staved off the fear that had put down roots in the pit of her stomach.

Ana had been bemused then, but she was grateful now. The flamboyant hairstyle made her slightly less of an alien. Some among the crowd had hissed when she’d made her way in, head down, flanked by guardians. Others, though, had smiled and shouted words of encouragement. A few hands had patted her arms and hair, and she’d smiled to herself, just a little bit. They were good people, here. They would not want her to burn.

But now, in the centre of all that noise and scrutiny, her conviction was wavering.
She wanted to storm into the other room and rage at the Praefectors—or throw herself down and beg for mercy. She wanted to belong in Tain—or go back to that moment in the stairwell with Chase, slap herself, and flee.

*Enough thoughts of running,* she thought savagely. *You made your choice, over and over again!*

When the heavy interior door linking the chamber to the Praefector meeting room creaked open, an absolute hush fell over the crowd. Sera, Jove and Ammon shuffled onto the podium, taking their seats. Ammon, Ana noted, sat in the more prominent chair in the middle. Tavi had said that the elders represented the views of the people, and the Praefectors, the wisest of the elders, were all equal in authority.

So why did Ammon take his place with all the self-assured stateliness of a king?

***

From her viewpoint on the second floor, Tavi watched her father rise to make the verdict. His short dark hair was shot with silver and thinning slightly around the temples. When had that happened? She tried to remember what he’d looked like a Turn ago, or two, but nothing came to mind. When she looked at him anywhere but the justice tower, she saw the father of her childhood—maybe a little older, more stern-faced, but essentially the same. Here, though, he was a father to all of Tain.

Hope and pride flared within Tavi. She gripped the cool stone ledge tightly. He would have made the right decision; she knew he would have. For all his sternness and pontificating about the importance of the law, the wisdom of Xavier, and the guidance of the gods, Jove was a good man. The same man who had worshipped their mother, even though she’d laughed at some of the laws and sometimes even at the Praefectors; the same man who used to let her ride on his shoulders, even when she beat his head and face with her little hands, urging him forwards, faster, like a pony. He’d roared with amusement and obeyed. Actually, she couldn’t imagine the man that stood before her now doing that. He was different, in that sense. But he’d certainly always tried to do the right thing, not only by the gods, but also by their people. That would never change.

*Yes,* she thought, as her father opened his mouth to speak. *He will not have failed her.*

“The wisdom of our founders leads us on the narrow path between prosperity and destruction,” he said, his rich voice filling the soaring chamber effortlessly. Tavi smiled; for all that his position had cost them as a family, Jove was a natural leader.

“Like Xavier,” he continued, “we follow the eternal laws of the holy books, and the source of that law, our gods. Belun, the almighty Father; and Baba Yaga, the Maiden and Crone. Through the very end of the world, they have guided and protected the people of Tain. They have been our light, when all others have fallen into darkness.”
He paused, as if to let the impact of his words sink in. Tavi sighed. They’d heard it all a thousand times before.

"Part of this law dictates that our enemies, the anathema of Valmora, may never set foot in our lands. The penalty for doing so is death, and the offering of their bodies to the Crone’s fire. In this way our peace is protected, and a balance to their corruption is restored."

But ...

"The Valmoran who stands before us is unlike all the others. She does not yet bear the mark of the Crone. She is young, and by all accounts, innocent of the crimes of her people. She has testified that she comes to us, not in violence, but to seek refuge from the violence of our enemy."

Thank the gods, Tavi thought. He’s really doing it!

All around, her people were nodding and murmuring sympathetically. Tavi clasped her hands together with joy. Ana would be saved; she’d have such a good life, here in Tain, and things could go back to normal. Not great-normal, the normal of ten years ago, but average-normal, where they’d all get back to their work and maybe she, Tavi, would have a new friend—one who might see past her position as daughter of a Praefector.

"The written legacy of Xavier is silent on such cases," her father was saying. "This alone is testimony to how singular our predicament really is. Do we follow the law, to an end that was never intended? Or do we follow the spirit of the law, and take a potentially grievous risk?"

Another pause. Tavi jiggled her foot nervously.

"In the absence of any clear indication from the holy texts, brothers and sisters, your elders have consulted among you and heard your voices. They conclude that this dilemma is one which can only be settled by the gods. Therefore our decree is that the Valmoran will join tonight’s initiation cohort. If she succeeds, it is because she is protected by the Father, and she will be a woman of Tain. If not, she belongs to the Crone’s fire. Malika will escort her to the domus aisling at sunset to begin."

Tavi stared at the podium, openmouthed, and slumped against the ledge. All her earlier happiness and pride drained away, leaving behind an odd sense of betrayal. Her father turned and exited through their private antechamber, followed by Sera and Ammon. The crowd parted respectfully as they walked, but their murmuring exploded into an uproar the moment the Ammon disappeared through the heavy double doors.
With the better part of a day left before sundown, Chase led Ana through the Praefectors wing and into the main hall of Tahon. She stared at the huge space wordlessly. Huge pillars of grey marble, polished to a dull shine, held up the arched ceiling that soared to the height of twenty men. High-set windows let in slender crossbeams of golden light. In the space between each column stood a white statue on a pedestal, male and female figures in robes not unlike the ones the Tain wore—some were fully clothed, clutching scrolls or swords, while others bared much of their stone bodies. She could only make out details on the closest few, but there would have to be at least thirty altogether, each as imposing as the last.

“You could drive a tank through here,” she whispered. The expression was her father’s. Ana had only seen one tank in her life, and it had been broken down and rusted, partly cemented to the road by years of grit and rain. You couldn’t have driven it anywhere.

Chase glanced at her sideways, smiling at her reaction. “We sleep in here in the winter.”

“All of you?” The room was big enough, no doubt, but Ana could hardly imagine it.

“Why not? It’s dry and warm. Protected. We like our privacy well enough, and it’s easy to get in summer, but we choose comfort over dignity when the cold comes.”

She made a face. “Married couples—”

“Marriage has no place in our world.”

Ana glanced up at him in surprise. “Really?”

“Pleteni,” he allowed. “The voluntary union of two souls, pledged to serve and protect each other until they mutually decide to part. Couples often do it if they wish to share children. But there’s no marriage in the traditional sense. People will either be faithful to each other or they won’t.”

“Is that from one of your books?”

Chase shook his head. “You really should ask the elders about the books. But no, I think it’s more that we derived it from their example.”

That’s weird. “But how do you know what to derive from and what’s meant as law?”

He sighed. “It started with Xavier. I think they’re still working on a definitive compilation. The books themselves are too varied—poetry and manual instruction, stories and divine knowledge. It’s hard to piece it all together. They do the best they
can. In truth, it's pretty boring."

"Boring. Right. For you, maybe, not being a candidate for the sacrifice pyre."

"I have a hard time believing they'd go that far," he said, frowning. "Not now. They just need to create the appropriate ... gravitas, I think, to propel a change in the rules that needs to be made. They can't just change things without proper justification. The laws seemed to become more important after Xavier died. They're what kept us from falling apart."

Ana nodded, although she wasn't too sure about that, and something told her that Chase might not be either. They carried on, footsteps echoing softly, as if the statues were whispering behind their backs. Who were the people behind those stone faces? What were they like? Had they been faithful to their gods, loved their children, been content with the riches of their land or reached for more? Why had they built this place? The statues looked down at them benignly, some smiling, some pleading, or struck with a terrible passion. She wondered about those in particular. Maybe she would ask the elders about the books, once she got through initiation.

Her feet faltered to a stop in front of a female statue near the end of the hall; a lovely young woman standing with her hands gathered modestly in front of her dress, wearing a serene expression. A lovingly arranged mass of real flowers lay on the pedestal at her feet.

"Why the flowers?" Ana asked, eying them curiously. Some looked fresh and perfect, others decidedly wilted, almost decaying. There were stains on the statue's feet from older offerings that had since been removed.

"This is the maiden," Chase said. "She rules over love and childbirth. Some like to make petitions to her, or give thanks."

Her gaze swept the hall, past the dozens of other figures, all flowerless. "I thought you only had two or three gods."

With an amused twitch of his mouth, Chase turned and looked back as well. "When the founders of our people came to this place, they found it much as you see now, although some restoration work has been done. The statues are theirs. Anyway, the maiden's not a goddess, just a facet of Baba Yaga, the Crone. That's what Malika will tell you, anyway."

"Not the Praefectors?"

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You ask the difficult questions, Valmora. Technically the Praefectors serve both the Father and Crone—or represent them. But in practice they tend to favour the Father."

She had a feeling she shouldn't, but she had to ask. "Like the three Praefectors are
technically equal, but in practice ... Ammon leads?"

Their eyes met, and she watched as some silent struggle took place behind Chase’s eyes. "Yes. Like that."

"You don’t trust them," she observed.

"I do," he objected. "Everyone does, and with good reason—for the most part they lead our people well. It’s not a role that many of us could fill."

Ana squinted an eye at him dubiously. "But?"

He crossed his arms and tilted his head back, casting a sideways glance at the far end of the hall, as though he longed to be anywhere else.

"I’m still working on an answer to that," he said at last. "Perhaps it’s the history. The first Tain came here from every corner of the world, bringing with them their various beliefs. The settlement worked so well from the start that they knew it was with divine help—but from whose god? It started to tear them apart from within. Xavier, the first Praefector, used the holy books to decipher the truth and unite our people. They say the mother and father spoke through him. But they say that about the current ones, too."

"And you don’t believe that?"

"No," he muttered. "But try to grasp any one untruth and it slips through your fingers like water. A thousand rationalisations behind everything, and once you start digging”—he cut himself off abruptly. "I don’t bother anymore. The system works, and there’s truth enough in it. My advice to you is, when someone talks about the gods, make up your own mind and keep quiet."

She longed to ask more, but the look on his face said that the subject was closed. Wordlessly, she spun on her heel and followed him out of the great hall. Beyond the far door was a series of smaller rooms, linked together by open doorways. The first held a variety of weapons on long trestle tables.

"Guns, rusted steel, things that no-one wants," Chase said, sounding relieved to be back on neutral ground. He pulled out a black rifle and clicked the trigger experimentally.

"No-one wants a gun?" Ana asked, eying one of the piles. Most of it was rubbish, sure, but she could see plenty in there that seemed better than nothing. Guns were a great prize in Valmora—the only thing more precious than water or food.

"No ammunition. Besides, we don’t think much of them. A gun separates you from your enemy. A little too convenient, don’t you think?"

Ana huffed incredulously. "That’s very nice for someone who’s apparently spent the last two years killing Valmorans—"
She'd spoken too freely. Chase's posture stiffened, and his green eyes flashed. He pulled something from under his jacket—a blade—Ana skittered backwards and sank into a defensive stance.

Then she recognised it.

“That's my knife,” she hissed, outraged.

Chase threw his head back and laughed. “You can have it back. I was just trying to make a point.” He put the knife on the edge of the table and slid it towards her, handle first, and held his hands up in mock surrender.

Ana snatched it up. “Oh yeah? What was that?”

The amusement in his expression fell away. “In the grasslands, every bit of training we had told us to kill you. If it had been a matter of pointing a gun, one of us might have done it. A blade is personal. I had to be willing to look you in the face, and hold you as I cut you. I couldn’t do it.”

She nodded reluctantly. “I couldn’t by the river, either.”

Chase smirked in response, and she found herself giving him a glare that could have withered grass. You find that amusing, do you, the thought of me sparing your life?

Seeing this, he arched an eyebrow mildly. “You do realise you were outnumbered and unprepared?”

“I could have stopped you,” Ana said.

“Really?” His voice was mild, almost serious, but he laughed at her with his eyes.

“Really,” she snapped. “Try me.”

The knife felt good and solid and familiar in her hands, filling Ana with confidence and a restless energy. Armed with her knife, she could take on anybody, maybe teach Chase a thing or two about laughing at people.

He hesitated; she could see the protests already forming in his mind. “If you don’t,” Ana said, “you lose the right to act superior ever again.”

He pulled a blade from inside his jacket, not the machete he wore outside of Tahon, but a smaller hunting knife roughly the same size as hers. The jacket he removed and threw on the table. “Fine. Combat rules?”

Ana smiled. “No deep cuts. First blood wins.”

“You'll regret this,” Chase warned. “After I win I plan on acting superior constantly.”

Ana laughed, and then did it again because she’d thought that all the laughter in her had dried up years ago. She felt herself filling up with adrenaline, as fighting with Max had once done, back when she’d learned that she could match his cunning and elegance with her own agility and speed. Chase would fight differently to Max. His strength was, literally, his strength. Health, muscle, stature, and good training. But she could see the
weaknesses in him too, the overconfidence, the heavy feet, a tendency to betray his next move with his face. She could win. She would.

Chase opened his mouth, to issue more rules, probably, so she cut him off by vaulting onto the table. The shock on his face was priceless—it made her want to laugh again, but she bit it back and kicked his heavy jacket toward his head, followed by a quick swipe of the knife. With a yell, he swung his arm up to catch the jacket and block her blow, a little too slowly. When he straightened and the jacket fell to the floor, a bright bead of blood glistened on his tanned cheek.

"Ow," he said, surprised, and Ana suppressed a snort.

"Ow? Is this how you scare off your enemies? That was too easy. Try again." She jumped from the table and lashed out again, wanting to nick the shirt over his heart, but he parried with a swiftness that surprised her. She ducked the answering blow, spun, and launched herself onto Chase's back. As he teetered and yelled with surprise, Ana whipped her knife into place against his neck and smiled to herself.

He held up his hands slowly. "I... huh. I surrender."

Flush with triumph, she released him and dropped to the floor. Chase turned around, breathing heavily, and rewarded her with an incredulous look. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

She preened. "When half the men in your city are armed with convenient weapons, you learn to end fights quickly or not at all."

"Huh," Chase said again, his eyes burning with something—Approval? Wounded pride? It was hard to tell—"and here I thought initiation would be unfair on you. Let's go, Valmora. Training time."
"You selfish sons of bitches," Max said, staring at the rows of haphazardly stacked crates.

The basement reeked of garbage and piss, but it was an undeniable treasure trove. Food. Water. Clothing. Supplies enough for a hundred short lifetimes. Max squinted up at the skylight that had been smashed through the floor above, and grinned at Theo. "Seriously, man, I’m impressed. I had no idea this much gear existed."

Theo smiled back. Max wished he wouldn’t. His gums were dark with rot, pitted and stained, not unlike the damp floor of the basement. He also seemed to be missing half his teeth.

"Pays to be the biggest and baddest, Blue," he said. "Not that it does much at the end of the day."

"Oh yeah? Why’s that?"

"Take a look upstairs, yeah? Our boys aren’t near thriving on this diet."

He had a point there. Max had been feeling pretty sorry for himself, health-wise, until he cut his way into the Jackals and saw the future up close. It was cloudy eyes and scabby skin, potbellied skeletons with half-baked brains. Then and there, he’d decided that he’d do the gang act until it got old, then let some kid with initiative slit his throat, like he’d done for the guy before him. The wasting was a bad way out.

The only hitch in the original plan was that he’d aimed too high. He’d wanted clout in the gang, good rations, a bit of respect. Instead he’d ended up a leader—and some sort of messiah figure.

"V-Cal?" Max offered lamely. He recalled his mother finding a bottle of them when he’d been small, and doling them out as though they were powdered magic.

Theo scowled and spat. "Worse than useless. Can’t tell for sure, but doc thinks the boys that used to take them bit it sooner."

"There’s glass," he added, "for a quick boost. But that kills ‘em faster, too."

"Everything does," Max muttered, leaning back against one of the stacked boxes. Theo snickered softly. "That’s the shape of it, Blue."

Blue, Max thought. Terrible nickname. He’d thought they were hazing him at first, undermining his cheaply bought authority, until he realised that they were actually marking him out in a good way. A powerful way. The thought never occurred to him until it fell into his lap.
He was the guy with the good blue eyes and a full set of teeth, and he was here to rule.

***

By midday a small crowd had gathered at the guardian tree—an old oak in the centre of a shallow valley to the east of Tahon. The tree dominated all others around it, with great moss-covered boughs shooting out in every direction, like thick forks of lightning. Seniors lounged around the base of the massive trunk, while new-bonds and prospective initiates gathered around them.

Only two would undertake the trial tonight along with Ana: a compact, muscular girl named Henn, who was silent and pale-faced under her tan, and Pyrois, a tall, loudmouthed boy who swaggered into the meeting late and put up a great show of not paying attention. For them, the meeting was just a summary of things they already knew, but Ana hung on every word as though her life depended on it. Which, in a very real way, it did.

Ander was speaking.

"Once you enter the domus aisling—that means something like ‘house of dreams’ to you, Ana—you must stay, no matter what. Those who leave before sunrise are an instant fail."

"What if your tent catches fire?" A boy’s voice rang out from the back of the group.

Ander grinned. "Burn with it."

The boy—who could be no more than fourteen, Ana thought—released a disbelieving torrent of curse words, most of which she couldn’t understand, although they made Ander chuckle.

"Fine,” he said. “Somebody would rescue you and I’d wager you’d sit your trials again on another evening, Faro. The elders would not let you fail over something outside of your control."

"What happens if you fail?" Ana asked.

Every eye swung towards her, and she bit her lip. "I know what would happen to me. But in general, if someone fails the bond trials, what happens?"

Finally, it was Chase who spoke. “You become the sombre."

"Which is …?"

"A shadow-life. Half-life. Those that fail cannot pass into adulthood, join in pleteni with a partner, serve on the Guard, or receive a vocation. They live among us, but not as citizens. They rely on the charity of their family."

"That's harsh," she said, before thinking. "Just because you fail some test at sixteen?"

Her words prompted some uncomfortable sniggering among the kids.
“Yes,” Ander said, simply. “And if you fail in your role as an adult, too, there are consequences. Cleansing—iso lation—or, if you really mess up, purging. That is the way things must be. As adults our people work mostly in pairs. We cannot rely on one who is weak in the body or mind, not as a partner in the Guard, not in the hunt, nowhere. It is harsh, but ours is a harsh world.”

“Besides,” Chase added, “it’s rare that someone fails. In effect, our children are trained for their bond trials from birth. You have not been—and in your case the stakes are much higher. Let’s focus on what it takes to pass, rather than fail, yes?”

***

By mid-afternoon the lesson was going around in circles. The seniors disagreed often over what and how much could be shared; there were those who thought Ana should get the official briefing, and no more, while others pointed out that most initiates were unofficially trained by their parents and older siblings.

“Your old man loves the rules, Chase. I’ll bet you weren’t trained,” Pyrois pointed out sullenly.

“But I was,” Tavi chimed in, winking at Chase. “And we all know you were, Pyrois. You bragged of it enough.”

Her tone was light, teasing, but the young man flushed and looked away sullenly. Ana noticed Tavi trying to catch his eye after that, but he ignored her.

The arguing went on, as the sun reached its apex and the shadows cast by the oak tree started to lengthen. Eventually Tavi yawned and stretched, nearly elbowing the head of the girl sitting next to her. “I’m hungry,” she complained, giving voice to what Ana suspected everyone was feeling. “Are we done?”

Chase glanced at her with an air of thinly veiled irritation. “Nobody is making you stay. We can’t pack seven years of training into a few hours, Tav.”

“Exactly,” she said, casting another surreptitious glance at Pyrois. “You can’t. So why try to? We should take a break, go down to the river.”

Yes, Ana thought eagerly, let’s.

Chase looked sceptical. Ana wondered if there was ever a time when he didn’t; she tried to imagine him as a scrawny little green-eyed kid, scowling and taking exception to everything. She couldn’t see it.

“Let her see the land,” Tavi wheedled. “That will be the best thing.”

The mood among the group brightened. Many who had been slumped or outright dozing straightened themselves and started looking around. A couple of the younger boys jumped to their feet. When Ander did the same, shooting an apologetic grin at his friend, the battle was won. Tavi smiled victoriously. Ana had the feeling it wasn’t often
that she gained the upper hand over her brother.

Before Ana knew it, the class was herding out of camp and through the forest, stopping at the top of a deep gorge of white, chalky rock. The river from the south wound through it, shining a brilliant turquoise that she had never seen in real life. Pyrois and his small posse of friends dashed past her, yowling, and seemed to run over the cliff edge—but their footsteps continued, followed by splashes as they catapulted themselves into the water.

Tavi disappeared down the ledge and Ana followed dubiously, tiptoeing over the others’ discarded overclothes, down the narrow path that had been cut into the rock. The steps ended on a flat, sun-drenched stone that jutted out a few feet above the water. Thankfully, the other younglings ignored her. Tavi splashed over from the middle of the river and rested her chin on the warm ledge.

"The fish traps might interest you," she said, grinning. "Chase is going there now. It doesn’t matter if you aren't the strongest swimmer."

Ana leaned down gingerly to touch the water’s surface. The tiny ripples she made were quickly obscured by the gentle pull of the current.

"I don’t know what sort of swimmer I am," she admitted.

“Oh,” Tavi said in surprise. “Well, it’s not deep. And you float naturally, so you just have to wriggle your arms and legs a bit. It’s fun!”

Keeping her tattered shorts and t-shirt on, since they badly needed a wash anyway, Ana lowered herself into the water. It felt good, gently searing away the dust and dirt smothering her skin. She found that her toes could reach the bottom, so she bobbed out further, ignoring the Tain younglings diving and fighting around her. Some of her tension seemed to evaporate. I love rivers, she thought, triumphantly. Perhaps she did belong here after all.

With a surge of confidence, she rolled onto her back and floated, letting her head fall back to gaze at the broad ribbon of blue sky revealed by the glowing cliffs—and felt alive, soaringly, blissfully alive, in a way that she never had before. The sensation came and went in a heartbeat. A ripple washed over her face, and she convulsed with surprise; river water flooded up her nose, and she thrashed her way upwards, choking.

A familiar laugh came from downstream. Chase flashed a vaguely mocking grin through a fence of wooden slats that cut across the river, allowing water and creatures of a certain size to flow through, she guessed, but it would hold back anything bigger than a fist. The fish traps, Tavi had said. She let herself drift awkwardly downstream, half paddling, half hopping in the chest-high water.

From the other side, Chase pulled fat, wildly convulsing fish from a large wicker
barrel lodged midway through the fence. The barrel had a large opening on Ana’s side, which narrowed like a funnel, leading into the trap.

“It’s genius,” she breathed, seeing the quicksilver flash of another fish still darting around in the barrel. Every one Chase pulled out was impaled unceremoniously through the head, stacking one after the other on his two-pronged spear. They wriggled, desperate and sinuous, in his hands, until the very last moment when the spike drove through their brains with a horrible squick.

“Wait until you try the meat,” he said, seeing the stunned look on her face. “Just wait.”

Back on the ledge, Tavi and some of the others were busy coaxing flames to life under a small stack of branches. White smoke gushed from the pile at first, then the flames took hold and it seemed to burn cleaner. Breathing it in along with the mineral smells of the river, Ana thought she could feel the heartbeat of the world under her feet, as if it were opening up to her, revealing itself at last.
As the sun started to dip in the sky, Tavi stood among the crowd of Tain women, tuning out their excited chatter and nervously twisting the silver bangle around her upper arm. She had worn it since her own bonding ceremony exactly one Turn ago. It was inscribed with symbolic etchings of the sun and moon, representing the Father and Crone, and signified their acceptance of her as an adult of their people. Of course, she was not fully an adult—not yet. She couldn’t speak at meetings or participate in ritual until she was eighteen, after two years’ service on the Guard.

She was almost glad of that. Despite the armband, in many ways, she still felt like a girl.

A hush fell among the women as Malika emerged from her hut, followed by Ana and Henn. Ana’s hair was still woven in the style she herself had created earlier, but the horrible grey clothes had been changed for a lovely robe of black silk that left one pale shoulder bare. She looked so strange, like an otherworldly child, who might almost have been entrusted to them by the gods themselves. That was what some of the women were saying, anyway.

As Malika began to usher them forwards, Tavi seized her final chance and grabbed Ana’s arm. “None of it is real,” she whispered urgently. “Remember that, whatever you do, no matter how frightening it gets…”

Ana grinned, her big eyes gleaming. The younger girl looked very small and very white in the dimness, like a ghost. “Relax! I’ve got this. I’ve had odds that were way worse.”

She’s excited, Tavi thought incredulously. She’d known girls like that, who viewed the trials as a game, a challenge; most of them were humbled by the domus, or even reduced to madness. The tent stripped them bare on the inside. But it was too late to warn her of any of this; Ana was gone, ushered forward by Malika, and the women formed a procession behind them.

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Ana followed the priestess up a long and winding path that curved past Tahon, high into the mountains, where the trees were ancient and still. Near the edge of a dizzying precipice stood a few structures of animal hide not unlike the smaller dwellings in the village. The outsides of these tents were colourfully painted, with intricate patterns that seemed to tell stories. She wanted to ask somebody about it, but this was no time
for curiosity. After some brief words of encouragement and an exceptionally tight hug from Tavi, she was ushered into a tent.

She kneeled by the small fire and waited obediently, clutching the hem of her robe to keep it from trailing in the dirt. The ceremonial garment was by far the nicest she’d ever worn. If she survived the next day, it would be hers to keep, the first piece of her life as a Tain woman.

Malika ducked through the door-flap shortly after, wearing long robes cut much like those that the Praefectors wore. Hers, though, were much more beautiful—made of inky blue silk, threaded with traces of silver. "For ritual we wear the colours of night, and speak the languages of the gods," she had said, back in the village. "So you will hear many words that you cannot understand. It does not matter. Focus on your task."

Now, in the tent, the priestess had shed her concerned expression and donned a new face. Behind her layers of paint, she looked preternatural and ageless. She withdrew a leather purse from her robes and shook the contents over the fire, then fanned the flames with her long sleeve. Musky smoke swirled through the small space, enveloping them both and stinging Ana’s eyes, before seeping out gradually through the small opening at the apex of the tent. No starlight crept through; the fire was their only illumination.

"Drink this." The priestess produced a small vial of dirty-looking liquid and handed it to Ana. This, she guessed, was the substance that would produce her waking dreams. She drank it down in one swallow. It tasted horrible, bitter, wrong, like the grass she’d eaten on the edges of the third circle.

She didn’t feel any different after the vial; no sudden sleepiness, and no fireworks in her vision. Malika folded it back into her robes, and pulled out a few small coloured pots, and a small brush. She started to paint Ana’s bare arms; the soft bristles tickled pleasantly. Ana concentrated on holding still, not squirming. Finally Malika began to speak.

"On your left I am drawing the Maiden, Ana. She is the lesser face of our goddess; she is beautiful and young, innocent, like you. She is Belun’s child-bride, or in some stories, his daughter. She blesses her people with good fortune and fair harvests; she heals the sick, bestows her blessing on young lovers, and is present with mothers in childbirth."

"On your right"—she moved to Ana’s other side, and began to dab quickly—"the Crone. This is our goddess in her full power. No force can sway her, not even the sun. She can be cruel or merciful. She can strike men down in the height of their power, but she is also a friend to the old and dying. When she chooses, she protects those who are
right-hearted. She is the wisdom that can be found in your own darkness, if you are brave enough to look.”

The priestess’s voice had taken on a hypnotic, rhythmic quality. The tickling sensation eventually stopped, and when she opened her eyes—she hadn’t even realised that she’d closed them—the priestess stood by the doorway of the tent.

“Is it really true, all that stuff about the goddess?” Ana asked sleepily. Malika seemed to believe it, and her words sounded authoritative and wise, but ...

Then she bit her lip, remembering that Chase had warned her to stay silent, but the priestess only laughed. “It is rare that someone asks me that. The stories have truth in them, little one, that helps us comprehend the unknowable divine. All you need know is that Crone is with you tonight, to consume the child in you and give her blessing to the woman.”

With that she turned, and ducked out of the tent, careful not to allow Ana a glimpse of the world beyond.

How long had she been here? The fire was burning low, now, and most of the smoke had cleared. She felt so tired. Maybe she could just nap the night away, and wake up rested for the sun-trial tomorrow.

She dozed, just a little, but woke up with a start when someone slipped through the tent opening unannounced. This woman was younger than Malika but older than most of the Tain women. Her bony arms and legs were bared by the ceremonial robes that they all wore. What struck Ana, though, before she even straightened from ducking through the doorway, was the paleness of her hair—stark white, matching her own. Another Valmoran, she thought, hope flaring brightly in her chest. She was not alone.

The woman straightened, and looked directly at Ana, her blue eyes piercing, but kind. Familiar eyes, a familiar face. Ana jerked away from her with a wounded cry. “Mama?”

She looked so different. Madeline Thorne was a lovely woman, or had been, until the wasting ravaged her eyes, skin, hair, and limbs. Wherever she had been for the past year, the environment had been kind. She looked better than she had before her disappearance … a lot better. Her face transported Ana to an earlier time, when no problem was so great that her mother could not fix it.

Madeline rushed to her, past the fire, gathering her up in her arms and squeezing tightly. “Anais,” she whispered, her lips pressed against Ana’s hair. “I thought I’d never find you. Thank god you’re okay—how did you come here? What happened to you?”

Ana wriggled free of her mother’s arms, not ready just yet to let go, but reeling with disbelief. “What happened to you? I was at home—I waited for you. I waited for a year.
Where’s Dad?”

Her mother’s bright blue eyes filled with tears. “He died, baby. We both did.”

Ana was gripping her hands; they were real. As real as her own. “What?”

Madeline didn’t seem to hear the question. She was reading Ana’s face, dismayed, crying, as though she could see right through to the deepest and most shameful parts of her soul.

“What happened to you—what you’ve done—oh, god, Ana. What are you? What have you become?”

“I’m sorry,” Ana whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Madeline pushed her away, hard, and Ana crumpled at her feet. Slowly, almost against her own will, she looked up to meet her mother’s gaze.

The tears solidified in Madeline’s eyes, clouding them, as they were as she last remembered. Her face fell—the skin slumped with her expression, sagging too far, melting off her bones like candle wax. Ana screamed in horror as her mother’s skin came away under her hands; the body slumped inward, until all she was reaching for was a puddle of robes. She threw them into the fire, sobbing, and collapsed, wishing she could disappear into nothing as well.

Eventually, spent, she pressed her face against the coolness of the earth, drawing strange comfort from its timeless indifference. Then she groaned loudly and sat up. The dirt—the dirt was real. Her mother had not been. She wiped the tears that were streaming down her cheeks, muddying her face. Trials. Must not leave. All of this is a dream.

She couldn’t forget a second time.

“Got a bit complacent, did you?” Max said, to her right. Ana jumped and stared at him. He looked exactly as he had that last night in his apartment in Valmora. Even his clothes were the same.

“You’re not really here,” she said softly—feeling stupid, even as she said it, for talking to a figment of her imagination.

“If you say so,” Max said, shrugging. His knife was in his belt; he drew it out, and started toying with it, flipping it restlessly. He looked pale and haggard. Why can’t he look better, like Mama did? The thought immediately made her shudder.

“Are you having fun out here?” Not-Max asked, his eyes wide. “Running around with all your new friends?”

Although she knew he wasn’t really accusing her—he wasn’t here—Ana felt herself quiver. She’d been angry and scared a lot, but she had been enjoying herself more than she cared to admit. Having the time of her life, practically, while Max was alone and
dying. Who was she to think she deserved a place in the world? If he was a shadow, she should be a shadow too.

"The shadow girl who thought she could become a woman," Max sneered. "You selfish bitch."

Like a snake coiled and ready to lash out, he threw the knife hard and fast, and it sunk deep into Ana's chest. Blood immediately darkened her robes, gushing from the wound, streaming onto the dirt floor. *A DREAM*, she thought, swaying on her feet, but the pain was overtaking her certainty.

Perhaps Max had followed her after all; perhaps he'd been watching, and picked this moment for his revenge. He had a right to be angry. The blood streaming down her front felt hot, corporeal. The dagger pierced her more with every tiny movement she made.

Ana collapsed, seeing the triumph in Max's eyes, and knowing that any help would be too late. He began to laugh. Slowly, agonisingly, she pulled herself up onto all fours. Blood streamed from the wound, and muddied the dirt under her knees as she inched away from him. Her fingers brushed the hide flap of the tent.

Then she fainted. At least, she thought she did, because the world cracked wide open and gushed with the essential stuff of life, sweeping her away in its torrent. Ana was both inside and out; the tent contained multitudes, but it did not contain her. She was free. She resisted the call of the sky and drifted down into the earth where the bones of the long dead hummed with traces of memory. Their lifetimes bled into hers and she understood what Malika had said; to her usual self, crouched in the dirt, this world was inconceivable. But even as the knowledge consumed her, she felt it slipping away.

Jolted back into her body, Ana looked over her shoulder for Max and found him gone. She crouched by the door-flap of the tent, uninjured, but caked in mud and soot, with her arm reached out towards the fastening. Warily, she crawled back to her place by the fire.

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The night was long, but after the nightmares faded, Ana was happy enough to huddle next to the glowing coals and doze. Dreams came in her sleep, ordinarily enough—dreams of Tahon and home. She saw Max, alone in his apartment, arming himself to the teeth. When he left, she tried to follow him, but found that she could not. The small window would not let her pass. She watched as he disappeared down the alleyway and around the corner.

Then she was back in Tahon village, the bonding armband gleaming proudly above her elbow, as she wove a bright-coloured cloth. Malika hovered over her, guiding her
hands where the pattern became complex. They were outside, and a few of the youths from the river were there too. Tavi was nowhere to be seen; she had been granted her vocation already, healing, and was off studying wound care and herb lore. The weaving circle was for those who had not yet been assigned. Ana didn’t think much of weaving as a way to spend a lifetime, but she was happy sitting under the shade of the trees on that sunny afternoon, working the thread, listening to the girls giggle and chatter.

“Did you remember your pack?” Malika asked.

Ana dropped her thread, suddenly choking with fear. “No, but I can get it—”

“Too late,” Malika said sadly, gesturing towards the mountainside beyond Tahon. Pale-headed men were streaming down into the village, carrying lit torches and setting fire to everything as they passed. They had come for her at last, to drag her back, tear her apart …

But they never reached her. Dawn came as the warmth of the coals receded, and she woke, shaken from the fitful dreams by the approach of many footsteps. Female voices called out to her in new and old languages. Words of congratulations, welcome, and summoning. Ana buried her fingers deep into the dirt—just to be sure.

The earth felt reassuringly cool and solid. The voices outside still called.

Ana crawled towards the tent flap and ducked through it, blushing. She was filthy, and her beautiful robes were torn and singed. The woods were dim, but from this altitude she could see the pink haze of sunrise forming to the west. Malika slipped a clean tunic over her head and thin leather slippers onto her feet. The tunic felt oddly weighted. Ana brushed her fingers over the fabric, feeling the faint outline of her knife in an internal pocket. She glanced at the priestess in alarm—but the older woman shook her head slightly and disappeared into the throng. High voices sang in the background. It still felt like a dream, a strange limbo midway between the real and unreal.

For a moment she locked eyes with Henn, who was receiving treatment for what looked like nasty burns to her hands. She thought she saw her own relief and horror mirrored back in the other girl’s face, but Henn dropped her gaze abruptly.

Tavi, brimming with relief, darted forwards and clasped Ana’s shoulders in an awkward hug. “Malika says that you did well. I’m so happy for you, Ana. Now you have to get through the hunt!”

“I just catch an asp before sunset?” she asked, feeling stiff and sluggish. The training session seemed like weeks ago.

Tavi drew her closer, on the pretence of wiping soot from her face. “Remember, no weapons,” she whispered. “Be very quiet and very quick, or it will bite you. Are you
sure of the markings?"

Ana nodded slightly. Yes, it was all coming back. Chase and Ander had made the distinctions between the asp and other reptilian wildlife very clear, even though they’d never had to undergo this particular test themselves. Male initiates had to kill a brown bear, boar or lynx, to prove their courage and strength; the females got the asp, to prove their agility, and triumph over corruption. If they succeeded, there would be a blessing and celebration afterwards, with food and gifts. If they failed, they could not show their face there. Assuming they lived, the initiate would slink back into the village unaccompanied, and begin their lonely life as a sombre.

Nobody seemed to think that she would be able to do it. Ana felt a welcome surge of adrenaline pounding through her veins, burning away the night’s lingering weariness. They doubted her, but she could surprise them. She was quiet and fast—made for this challenge. The asp had nothing on her after the dream tent.

Ana stretched, grinned. “I’m ready.”
The problem, it turned out, was not killing the asp viper so much as finding one.

Around her, the woods rustled and whispered restlessly, like a huddled crowd of nervous spectators. The search had led Ana into a new valley far to the north of Tahon, where the air was cooler and the trees grew low and thick. Rather than leaves, they wore soft green spines that looked dangerous but smelled heavenly. There were no hunting trails here, just the smaller, faint passages of wildcats and their prey. The sun hung low in the sky. Not only did she have to find an asp and kill it before dark—she had to get it back to Tahon, as well. A cold, nervous sweat was creeping down her neck, and her head felt like it was stuffed with the woolly material of her tunic.

In the distance, she could hear her tracker stumble over a branch and curse. Ana scowled. Whoever they were, they were being very loud and unhelpful.

She circled back, intending to give the Tain man a piece of her mind, when she finally saw it. A thin brown snake, marked in a tell-tale dark zigzag pattern, was coiled up in a patch of sun, under a large cluster of toadstools. It seemed to be sleeping. Ana crept towards the asp, each footfall as light and quiet as a ghost. She smiled to herself. It was hers. Initiation was hers. She just ... had to ... grab it.

As if hearing her thoughts, the snake uncoiled in a flicking motion that seemed impossibly fast. It hissed, loudly, all mouth and fangs, and made as if to rear up at her—but in a split second, the creature changed its mind and made for the nearest patch of scrub. Ana lunged. Her fingers closed on the tail. She whipped it up through the air, with enough speed to keep it from rearing against her. Whirling, she ran to the nearest tree trunk and cracked the asp’s skull against it—once, twice, three times. When it went slack in her hands, she hit it a few more times and then flung it onto the ground, panting. The creature lay still.

Cautiously, eyes trained on the snake’s body, Ana picked up the nearest decent-sized rock and shook off most of the dirt, then ran over and smashed it over the head. Let it run away after that, she thought triumphantly.

But when she removed the rock and looked at the still body with its smashed-in skull, she remembered the look of horror on her mother’s face in the dream tent.

What are you?

"Sorry," she whispered to the snake, but the apology struck her as unforgivably silly. Worse—hypocritical. She had done it and she would do it again.
Shaking her head, she scooped up the long, slackened body, cast a final glance at the fast-sinking sun, and forced herself into a sprint.

Ana reached the crest of the mountain overlooking Tahon just as the setting sun touched the edge of the horizon. Soon, very soon, it would be gone; there was barely enough time to run down and declare victory. Her lungs ached. She stumbled to a halt, allowing herself just a moment to catch her breath. She squinted at the village. It looked curiously still. No fires were burning. Something about the sight stirred up the fear lurking in her gut.

The soft crackle of plant matter under graceless feet reminded her of the tracker. He had trailed behind her all the way back. She hadn’t wanted him to pass—he’d been annoying and loud, after all, and she was tempted to say something imprudent—but now her limbs were shaking insistently and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath. She needed water, food, and sleep. Badly.

Just downhill, she told herself. Just down one little slope and then you can rest.

She clutched her asp and started walking again, just as the tracker appeared through the trees. He wore a painted ceremonial mask, woven from dried grasses, which flared over the crown of his head like the crest of a bird. Otherwise, he wore the standard guardian uniform of brown leather, neutral hemp, and a long knife suited to his height.

Ana paused, frowning over her shoulder at the sight of him. She opened her mouth to call out a greeting. He pulled out his knife. She shot back several paces, keeping him out of reach.

“What do you want,” she yelled. The words sounded harsh, like a growl, in her parched throat. Remembering the blade in her pocket, she slung the asp over her shoulder and yanked it out. He kept coming.

She ran backwards and stumbled. The precious asp slid off her shoulder, just as the tracker’s hand shot out and grabbed her arm. Things had gone too well, been too easy—she should have known. Ana squirmed, ducked under the tracker’s arm. He swiped at her with his blade. She dodged.

Keep him off balance. Keep him away from the asp.

Ana danced around the tracker, bobbing and jabbing, ignoring the fire in her lungs. If he destroyed her asp, or even cut it with his blade, the trial would be void, and that, she promised herself, would not happen. She darted backwards, daring him to come at her. He swung again and she ducked, kicking out at his knees. He snarled. Pain seared through her scalp as he yanked her up by her hair. Somehow she managed to land a cut on his side—deep enough that he yelped and dropped her.

“Rules?” she yelped. He only laughed. So, she thought. A final test. I’ll have to figure
this one out for myself.

They circled each other cautiously. She could hear herself panting like a weak, sick animal. Darkness swirled around the edge of her vision.

Ana cursed herself. It all made sense now. The worry on Tavi’s face, Chase’s mysterious comments, Malika’s knife. She should have expected this.

The tracker circled, feinting blows toward her head or chest, but not overreaching himself. He was sizing her up—she had to end this now. The sun was sinking fast, barely a sliver over the horizon.

He swung wide. Ana pounced, smashing the butt of her knife against his skull. The tracker gasped; a soft, pained sound that made her worry she’d hit too hard. Surely she was meant to disarm, not kill. He staggered and fell. She jumped back and took off at a run, snatching up the asp and keeping her blade at the ready, heart bursting in her chest as she shot towards the village.

Ana screamed as she broke through the line of trees, an inhuman sound that echoed through the empty camp. The adrenaline that fuelled her seemed to evaporate. She sunk to her knees. The sun disappeared; dusk settled over Tahon, and her time had run out. There were footsteps, she thought, rushing towards her, and voices shouting. But the world was tilting, spinning, and the ground rushed up, smacking her shoulder and head in a way that would have stunned her if she wasn’t already gone.
Max braced himself on the steel mezzanine rail, trying not to wince as Eli smashed steel-plated knuckles into his female opponent’s jaw. Howls erupted around the ring. The girl didn’t seem to feel the pain, or the hostility of the crowd; she bounced back, spat blood and grinned.

Who was this girl? Nobody, until now. The Jackals stomped their feet, baying for more. She kicked, landing a solid blow on Eli’s gut; he roared, and charged at her like a bull. The girl dodged. The fight went on for a few long minutes, until Eli landed another solid hit to the girl’s skull, splitting the skin from temple to ear. A knockout. Max held his breath. She swayed on her feet, eyes rolling back in her head. Eli raised his arm to land one final, unnecessary blow—

Her blue eyes fluttered open, and ... he must be losing his mind, but Max swore she caught his gaze. Winked.

Bellowing his triumph, Eli swung with a shattering force aimed at the wound on her temple. The girl struck; dodging the fist, grabbing his shoulder, swinging her knee up. Her kick collided with Eli’s spine. His scream pierced through the roaring of the crowd. He crumpled. The girl looked on impassively, watching Eli with knowing eyes as he tried, and failed, to pull himself up. He strained, and screamed, and twisted, but his legs would not move.

He was good as dead, then. Max pitied him.

Theo rang the bell, signalling the end of the fight, and awarded the girl Eli’s gun. A classic pistol. She sauntered over to retrieve his steel knuckledusters as well. Pale, shivering, and covered in sweat, he let her do it. Two skinny, shirtless kids dragged him out of the ring. Theo raised his arms; the crowd fell silent.

"Kenna," he screamed. The girl raised her new weapon, punching the air. The Jackals howled their approval. Yesterday she was nameless, scorned, subject to the lowliest of sons; now she was a Jackal, the first daughter of the new alliance. Smiling, she swaggered into the crowd without a backward glance.

Max shook his head and weaved his way out of the crowd, tired of the night’s theatrics. A few more kids would get their faces beaten to a pulp, and maybe one or two more fighters would inevitably die of their wounds. Status would change hands with every bout. It was a standard night for the children of Valmora.

He headed for his room, a studio apartment on the twenty-second floor. After the
darkness of his old home in the western quarter, these new rooms were airy and light, with huge windows that could be opened to reveal the Valmoran waste. Why not? He was tired, so tired of hiding.

Max took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the ache in his lungs. Now was no time to be weak. Maybe later, he’d head back down to the ring and remind them of why he was the second son, but for now he was looking forward to a few hours of solitude.

His heart sank when he emerged from the stairwell and saw a figure slumped against his apartment door. A girl. She raised her face, and he recognised the hastily patched wound before he recognised her. Kenna.

"What?" Max grunted. *Get lost,* he wanted to add. Nothing about her appearance seemed to indicate a challenge, but frankly, after tonight’s display in the ring he wouldn’t put anything past this girl.

Her sharp eyes pinned him to the spot. "I wanna talk."

"I don’t," he snapped, yanking a thumb toward the stairs.

She backed away from the door, but didn’t disappear like most would have. He unlocked the door—another reason he’d chosen these rooms, the solid locks—and strode past her, planning to slam the door in her face, before she reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Aren’t you gonna ask me in?"

Max raised an eyebrow, looked her over. She was pretty enough under the blood and stitches, small and strong, with large blue eyes. No wasting yet.

"Why would I?" he said at last. "This isn’t how it goes. You win a fight, you get your own space."

"Yeah," Kenna said softly. "But I watch you, Max. Yer different. The others, when they get in Theo’s stinkin’ club, they swagger and boss, and we don’t like bosses round here. They get slugger real quick. But you …"

She cocked her head and eyed him shrewdly.

"Yeah. Yer changin’ all right, but different. Smart. Ya know when to keep yer trap shut, but when you speak, they listen. With the right second”—she meant herself, no doubt—“you cud do better’n Theo."

Max stiffened. "Theo’s fine. And I don’t need you."

She grinned like a caricature shark, all teeth. "But you might."

He examined her more carefully, thinking it over. He liked his space, his solitude. Craved it. But after what he’d seen of her abilities in the ring … maybe Kenna would be a good ally for him. And ...

Well, she was pretty.
Against his better judgement, he swung the door open, and she scuttled inside. Max headed into the bathroom, where a bucket of fresh water waited. After locking the door against Kenna, he stripped off his weapons and clothes, and took his time washing up. When he came out, she was curled up in his bed, looking for all the world like an innocent at rest. She looked—

He swallowed, hard. His throat ached.

She looked like Ana.

“Get out,” he said.

She stirred, squinting, and looked up at him warily.

“Hu—”

“Get out,” Max snarled, yanking her up by the shoulder and pushing her, stumbling, towards the door. This was a mistake. Stupid. Needy. Weak.

Kenna howled curses as he threw her into the hallway and slammed the heavy door in her face. Max clicked the locks shut, all four of them, and dragged a heavy table over to lean against the door for good measure. When her ranting stopped and her footsteps disappeared down the stairwell, he flung himself onto the bed and groaned. Instead of an ally, he’d just made himself another ruthless enemy.
Everything was uncharacteristically comfortable; the world, in fact, was a black hole of comfort. Ana never wanted to move another muscle. Why would she? All she had to do was keep her eyes shut, ignore the faint gravitational pull of the life outside her hole, and go back to sleep.

She stretched slightly, ready to roll over and do just that, but a voice, louder and nearer than the others, buzzed in her ear like one of those little flying bugs that came out at sundown. She opened one eye, very reluctantly, and squinted.

Tavi hovered overhead, holding a branch of fiery stars that gave the room its eerie light. She was dressed strangely—but beautifully—in a short green sheath that matched her eyes. Her hair was gleaming and decorated with a delicate headpiece of silver chain and beads. Strings of gold and multicoloured glass adorned her neck. She looked, Ana thought woozily, a bit like one of the ancient Egyptian princesses from her old picture book.

"Get up," the princess said shrilly. "You are going to miss your bonding."

"My ... huh?" Ana said. It came out as an unintelligible groan.

"THE BONDING," Tavi yelled, thumping the candles down on a side table. Where were they? The walls were stone, Tahon’s stone; the room was large and very comfortably furnished. It smelled like Tavi’s spice scent.

"Quick, throw something on, anything, it doesn’t matter!" she insisted. "They’re waiting down at the river."

Ana sat up suddenly. "For the blessing? I passed?"

Tavi grinned. "You passed. Just. It’s all anyone’s talking of." Then she threw a cream-coloured sheet at Ana’s head. "Wrap that around yourself, we need to go immediately."

She was already disappearing through the open doorway.

Clutching the sheet to cover herself and almost falling over in the dark, Ana chased Tavi through the long corridors of Tahon and out into the forest. Music thrummed through the trees, making the dark woods seem doubly alive. She could smell—oh, so many things—meat and spices, sweetness and savoury, all permeating thickly through the still night. Her stomach growled. Panting, she stumbled faster.

All of Tain was waiting by the river where it carved through the valley upstream of their swimming spot. A large swathe of cleared land hugged the western bank, easily accommodating the crowd. They had, indeed, been preparing for a celebration; the
riverbank blazed with dozens of torches, lighting up the dark water, and several large piles of wood stood at measured intervals, ready to be kindled into flame. Nearer the trees were large trestle tables laden with earthenware dishes. Turning away from the food reluctantly, Ana faced the crowd and bit the inside of her cheek.

“Henn and Pyrois are done,” Tavi said, nudging her forwards. “It’s your turn.”

The crowd parted slowly, revealing Malika standing waist-deep out in the river with Ammon. Their black robes swirled like spilled ink in the murky water. Tonight they were representatives of the moon and sun, Crone and Father, and only they could bless her into the Tain fold. Once it was over, she’d be one of them forever. No matter what occupation she was given, she’d be equal in status to everyone else. And after she died, Tavi had said, her ashes would be scattered outside Tahon, anchoring her soul to this forest. Between rebirths, she’d rule and protect the living along with Xavier and the founding brothers and sisters.

Ana didn’t care what happened to her after she died. Not yet, anyway. What mattered was that tomorrow—in moments from now!—and every day after, she’d have a place in the world. Nobody would send her away.

She left Tavi, tightly clutching the sheet around her, and walked through the crowd, hoping that no-one could hear the dreadful pounding of her heart. Somebody had undone and brushed her hair; it fell forwards and shielded her from all the faces. On the riverbank, where the murky river-water nipped at her toes, she hesitated and glanced back. A hundred pairs of eyes urged her on.

Ana stepped into the river and waded out, trying to ignore the unnerving feeling of mud and weeds squelching invisibly under her feet. The sheet became waterlogged and dragged her back, but she yanked it along. When she stood at last before Malika and Ammon, she nervously unwound the sheet and hunched in the water to cover her nakedness. The priest and the priestess joined hands. They began to sing.

The wordless sound of their voices was old and haunting, echoing down the river and reaching back in time, before the droughts and the sickness, before the skyscrapers and machines of war, before the farms and mines and countless monuments of humankind. It was a story of creation in reverse. Malika sang the feminine and Ammon sang the male. Yet it was not entirely a human sound; it was a resonance with this place, the river, the mountains behind the castle of Tahon.

Then Malika pushed her underwater, holding her firmly by the shoulders. Ana almost inhaled water. The sheet billowed and tangled with the current, and she struggled to relax under the priestess’s vice grip. Malika’s voice chanted above the surface, but the words were muffled and foreign. Ana opened her eyes. A million points
of light swirled in and out of view; a green-tinted micro-galaxy with the power to remake her.

The blessing lasted for what seemed like ages. Then the swirling lights flared and she was up, out, choking and gasping air like it was the first time. For a moment she was back at the ruined farmhouse. Had it been only a few days ago? Was that possible?

Cheers came from the riverbank. As her senses returned, she clutched the sheet back to her chest and felt for Malika. The priestess was already there, holding her up.

"It is done, little one, for better or worse," she murmured. At her words, Ana felt a twinge of sadness. Had she done something wrong in coming here, forsaking her city and leaving it behind forever, even for—if the Tain were to be believed—her soul? Would she never see her parents or Max again, even in death?

But surely it was life that mattered most, not that uncertain realm that may or may not exist. Like Malika said, the divine was unknowable. Something that their stories could reflect but never capture, like the flicker of a shadow thrown by fire. She wasn’t in the habit of fearing such things, and she wasn’t about to start.

Ana gathered the sheet around herself. It dragged and threatened to unbalance her, but with every step she took into the shallows, water streamed off and she felt lighter. By the time she stood on the shore, coughing water and smelling like algae, it felt like she was made of air.

The drumming started up again and Ana was dragged off by a small army of chattering mothers, bathed, brushed, prodded, pulled at, dressed, and declared presentable as a new woman of Tain.

Tavi was in her element. "Your dress is even nicer than mine," she said enviously, in a pleased sort of way. Ana gazed down at it, a short robe the colour of the river at midday, a dusky topaz blue. It twisted off one shoulder and ended just above her knees. It was a simple thing, but far nicer than her own clothes, which she was told had been burned.

"There will be jewellery among the gifts," Tavi added before being hustled away by the woman putting the last touches on Ana’s hair and face paint. "Make sure you put some on!"

Now that the throng had dissipated, the woman introduced herself in the impeccable and lilting way that Ana had come to associate with the Tain. Her name was Briar, she said. She’d been an aesticia before she’d joined and had six children, a number that cemented her esteemed status as a full-time mother. These days she plied her old trade at bonding ceremonies only, as her gift to the new woman.

Briar loved to talk and didn’t seem to mind much whether Ana said anything in
return. She slumped back in her chair and let the stories wash over her. In doing so she learned a great deal more about the Tain; things she never would have thought to ask.

According to Briar, they all looked forward to the day that Belun would come and lead them beyond the second circle to renew the earth. That day was not yet, not while the anathema remained, but it was soon. Given today’s outcome, Ana was decidedly not Accursed anymore; in fact, she never had been, and Briar was brimming with enthusiasm over her deliverance from that terrible fate. It was all a little confusing, but very nice. Once the dabbing and chatting stopped, Ana wandered out from the aestician’s tent feeling vaguely elated.

Outside, the clearing was transformed. Three huge bonfires raged along the banks of the river, adding their heat to the warm air of early summer. Animal carcasses sizzled over smaller cooking fires. Tain adults flitted around, eating, drinking and talking. The music obscured their voices into a dull roar. Drummers and musicians danced freely through the crowd, disguised with paint, masks and jewels, and many of the revellers were dressed the same way. Ana looked for a face she could recognise, but found none.

Her growling stomach led her to one of the feast tables. Uncovered clay dishes held an abundance of foods, thick soups and stews, skewers of meat, whole roasted birds, vegetables and fruit. Dizzily, she reached out a hand—only to be admonished by a tall woman gnawing on a juicy-looking skewer. This far from the light, Ana had to squint to make out her face. She had a small nose and sharply pointed chin, with large almond eyes.

“No, no,” the woman said shrilly, almost shouting to be heard over the music. “This one.” She jerked her head towards the bonfire behind them.

Ana stared at her in wide-eyed despair. Clucking reproachfully, the woman hustled Ana over to the fire bearing a roasting pig. She tried not to look at its charred, glassy-eyed head. Close up, it smelled of singed hair. It was hard to hide her disappointment. Some of the dishes on the table had looked so delicious …

All the talking and singing quietened a bit as recognition rippled through the crowd. Someone set another prong over the fire—bearing a slim, rippling shape—the viper, Ana realised. Her viper. It had been skinned and gutted, but she could still see the sad, limp mess where its head should have been. The snake-meat crackled in the intense heat of the flames, seeming to writhe, and she found herself looking to the woman and shaking her head.

“No, please,” Ana said. “I’d rather not.”

The woman narrowed her eyes sternly. “You must.”

“You must!” One of the men roared, gulping down wine messily, and his cry was
taken up by a few of his friends. Ana, willing herself not to cry, squared her shoulders and stared at his flushed, bearded face. Was he being cruel, trying to humiliate her? Or was it just the wine?

Looking around in desperation, Ana spotted Ander glancing over his shoulder at the noise. Like most of his male companions, he wore dull leather trousers and a simple shirt, nothing special. He turned away from her and rapped one of the others on the shoulder—and then Chase was looking at her, too. She widened her eyes pleadingly. “Help,” she mouthed.

He gave her a sharp look that strongly suggested she was overreacting. With a grimace Ana turned back to face the snake. It was charring now, with tiny bubbles of fat glistening on the surface of the meat. The same man who had placed the skewer over the fire now removed it, and handed it over with a cloth carefully wrapped around the handle to protect her from the heat of the flames.

“Thank you,” she said, but the words were entirely swallowed up by a sudden upswing of drumming and other, stranger instruments that formed a sort of compliment to the rhythm. Her mother had owned a musical instrument, she remembered—one with strings—but they'd never dared play it.

Ana stared down at the long skewer of snake. It had been so defiant and quick, hissing even as she smashed the life out of it with her hands. Now it was just a piece of meat.

*What are you?*

The almond-eyed woman narrowed her eyes again. She grabbed Ana’s free arm and put her lips to her ear. “It is a matter of respect,” she said loudly.

Suddenly, Ana thought she understood. Killing animals for food was the way of their world. She had taken everything the snake had, because she needed to, and because she could. It was a simple fact. Regretting it didn’t make it better. Wasting it would make it worse.

She brought the pointy end of the skewer to her lips, broke off a piece of stringy meat with her teeth, chewed, and swallowed. Then she did the same a second time. It didn’t taste too bad.

A final, raucous cheer went up as she offered the meat to the man standing next to her, which he accepted with gusto. Ana backed away from the heat of the bonfire and tried to disappear into the crowd.

Tavi spotted her and darted over, jewels glittering, face flushed. “It’s nearly time for gifts!”

Ana sighed anxiously. “People are going to give me things? What do I give back?”
“Nothing,” Tavi said, a little impatiently. “You give your gifts in the future, at the bondings of others.”

*I hope I’ll have something to offer,* Ana thought. She’d be assigned to her posting on the Guard tomorrow, entitling her to a share in what Chase called ‘her living.’ Apparently that meant free access to essentials like food, clothing and healers’ services. Anything else, she would have to trade for, or learn to make with her own hands.

As Tavi had warned, the partygoers eventually started coming forward with gifts and congratulations. The music, feasting and drinking never stopped, but they took turns in coming past Ana whenever the crowd around her thinned. She tried to remember their names and titles—Cassidy hunter, Elena weaver, Janus metalsmith. Some of the gifts were extravagant, given by a whole family or even several at once; a small chest made of polished teak, a set of combat knives, and all-weather leather garments. The smaller gifts were no less lovely. Bright wool dresses, embroidered slippers, soft hunting shoes. Belts of woven twine. Rings, beads, bracelets. A bag to carry food and water. Dozens of faded silver coins with holes punched in the middle so they could be woven into hair or jewellery, and some bronze tokens stamped with the two faces of the goddess. Ana’s heart swelled. They’d accepted her—really accepted her—some of them smiled with a warmth that bordered on affection. If a few seemed to nod stiffly, or avoid the crowd around her altogether, she decided not to care.

"Don’t mind her," Tavi pouted as one woman, who had been dragged over by Briar, turned her back with a narrowed glare. She crossed through the clearing to join her partner who waited by the path leading back up to Tahon, and the two of them disappeared into the darkness. “That’s Rowan. She’s always dark on something.”

Ana nodded nervously. The three Praefectors were headed towards them. Most gift-givers had trickled off towards the broadest part of the clearing, where the musicians assembled; they thumped out a lively melody that reverberated through the trees.

“You are bonded already, so this gift is merely a symbol,” Ammon said as they approached. Ana stared at the old man, a priest rather than Praefector tonight, who had allowed her initiation and blessed her. Had she been wrong about him? Maybe.

Sera was smiling; even Jove looked almost relaxed. Despite herself and her earlier anger, Ana felt a rush of gratitude towards them. She accepted the small wooden box Sera offered. Inside was her armband, the same one that Tavi and most of the Tain women wore, smooth silver etched with the phases of the moon and sun. She slipped it on, above her elbow as most of the younger ones wore it. With a nod, the Praefectors turned and walked away, not towards the dancing, but up the trail back to Tahon. Ana glanced around, noting the many dirty plates and now mostly-empty tables.
“Now it’s done,” Tavi said. “You can stop looking like somebody might cast you out at any moment.” Ana flinched, and the other girl laughed. “That is exactly what I’m talking about. That face. It’s over; it will be easy from here on out, with the gods’ blessing. Forget about it all and celebrate. Which means dancing!” She jumped up. “Come.”
Ana trailed dubiously behind Tavi towards the throng of people. A few kids, who’d escaped being herded off to bed by their parents, darted past them and splashed through the shallow water. The dancers stomped and twirled, a writhing mass of colour and limbs gleaming in the firelight, stirring up the smoke from the nearest bonfire. It all felt rather eerie—like a dream, or worse, a hallucination. Tavi disappeared into the crowd.

Ana hesitated. *At the next bonding I’ll feel better,* she thought, *be better at this.* She backed away, disappearing behind the tree line, and slumped against one of the broad, smooth trunks like an exhausted marionette whose strings had finally been cut. Out there, dressed in beads and standing under the torchlight, she was a performer. Here she was herself; here she was invisible, safe.

Even so, a pair of footsteps approached. *No more presents,* she thought wretchedly, trying to meld with her surroundings, but the bright robe made that impossible.

Chase sauntered over and leaned casually against a nearby tree, drinking a cup of wine. There was not much risk of death by presents from him, at least.

“Dancing scares you, Valmora?” He smirked. “Of all the things.”

*Of course it does,* she wanted to hiss, but she had no strength left for aggression. Instead she looked away, through the trees, towards the torchlight and noise. It all seemed, from this distance, like an absurd spectacle; she could feel herself, worlds away, observing like some envoy from an alien species.

“I’ve known five people,” she said instead. “Five people in my whole life.”

Chase came closer, so near that he could almost reach out and touch her, although he didn’t. He drained his cup and tossed it carelessly to the ground. Ana’s heart hammered uncomfortably. She was one of his people now—everyone said so—why couldn’t she believe it? Why did she want to run away and hide?

“I underestimated you,” he said thoughtfully. He seemed different. Perhaps it was the darkness; it made him look younger, less intimidating.

She snorted and waved a hand dismissively. “Pretty sure nobody thought I was going to make it, you least of all.”

He shrugged. “Not after we fought. But still, some fail, even children that have trained their whole lives. How could I expect you to walk in from a different world and breeze through it?”
“I didn’t breeze.” In the dream tent she’d wanted to die. The memories flooded back, horribly near and vivid: her mother tearing apart under her hands like cobwebs; her own blood muddying the ground under her knees. Ana shuddered.

Chase reached out and took her hand. His fingertips were warm and rough, like the sunbaked clay in the valley after the rainstorm, or the earth near the fire in the tent of dreams. His hand felt the same, somehow, and it anchored her to reality.

“What did you see?” he said, after a long pause.

Ana searched for the words and found none. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, then closed it again. It felt too personal to share.

Luckily, he seemed to understand. “They’re dead?”

“My mother is. I don’t know about the other—maybe not yet.”

Chase exhaled sharply. “Most people have little to fear from the dream tent. They see ancestors and distant relations, things that stir their darkest fears. But nobody has it worse than one who has lost their close family.”

“Your mother is gone, too?” Ana asked, then immediately felt terrible and stupid. She was killed by Valmorans, she remembered. How he must hate her, underneath his stilted kindness.

He released her hand and leaned back against his tree. “It was a long time ago. She was a healer, she used a lot of plants that grow outside of Tahon. One day she went too far. The Guard patrols the second circle, but others have no business there. Mother ... walked too far. Some of the Accursed got through deeper than they should have, and she ... was just in the wrong place on the wrong day, I guess. The Praefectors changed the law, afterwards. Once we finish on the Guard we never leave the first circle again.”

Ana recalled what Malika had said to Tavi at her campfire—“It didn’t take a seer to know any of that, girl.” This must have been what she meant. Was the second circle so dangerous? Had Chase’s mother been warned, and chosen to ignore the warnings?

“I’m sorry,” Ana said. “She must have been brave, to take that risk for the people she helped.”

Chase bristled a little and she wondered for a moment if she’d offended him. Then he nodded, with a strange expression crossing his face that looked almost pleased. “She was never afraid of anything. More fearless than my father in many ways.”

“About your father,” she asked, burning with curiosity. “Why do you hate him so much?”

A shadow of surprise crossed his face, and he shook his head. “I don’t hate him.”

“You anger him at every opportunity, though.”

“He’s too easily angered,” Chase said shortly. “Who is your first senior?”
Ana found herself glaring, but since his relationship with Jove wasn’t really her business she decided to let it go. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

He raised an eyebrow. “Really? You’ll be leaving tomorrow at first light—your senior is important.”

Ana exhaled sharply. Couldn’t she be done with worrying, just for a few hours?

“I hadn’t thought about it. Tavi said that the hard part is over.”

Chase shrugged. “You did well in initiation, but getting through two years on the Guard will take a lot more than that. Wait here.”

With that he walked away, leaving Ana in her cocoon of darkness, which suddenly felt—well, if she didn’t know herself better, she might have said it felt almost lonely.

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“Olen?” Chase repeated. His voice drowned in the noise of the party. It was still raging, in fact picking up steam now that the children and elders had drifted back to the village. Chase had scanned the crowd for his sister, and spotted her dancing with Pyrois. That was bad enough. But Olen as senior for Ana, the only new-bond with no relevant training? Olen, who had scraped through his own trials through the skin of his teeth, notorious as a backstabber and coward?

“Apparently he was the only one available,” Ander said flatly. Even he did not fully believe that, Chase knew.

No—someone wanted the girl from Valmora to go out on patrol and disappear quietly, as a few among their ranks did every year. Part of him hoped his father was not that person, but he could well have been. How had this happened, even as the men and women of Tain celebrated their new sister? How had he not seen it coming?

The trial, the prayers, the ceremony, the bonding. All for show. A display for the men and women of Tain who lacked the stomach for killing kids. He’d been so foolish to believe otherwise. His grip tightened around the cup Ander had just given him; it cracked, and dark wine drenched his fingers.

“Throw that away before it’s taken from your wage,” Ander advised quietly. He was serving tonight, even though he joined tomorrow’s Guard as Tavi’s senior. In fact, his friend was always working, but he never admitted the slightest interest in elderhood, nor did he trade his hard earned surplus away. Chase often wondered if this hoarding of tokens and favours was meant to be some kind of insurance for Ander’s younger brother, who was simple in the head. He never talked about it, never uttered a hint that he feared for Leith’s ability to pass initiation or keep up with the output expected of Tain adults. Ander never complained. He just worked with a cheerful laugh and an energy that never flagged.
Chase merely stared at the broken cup in his hands. He was remembering what he’d said to Ana in the stairwell of Tahon’s crypt, as she’d looked up at him, cautiously trusting—"It’s not perfect."

Gods, how very far from perfect it was.
Ana woke up alone, in a small hut that smelled pleasantly of sandalwood. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and looked around. The place was a treasure trove of bizarre artefacts: bundles of aromatic herbs hanging from the ceiling; daggers, candles, feathers, a bronze pot; makeshift shelves crammed with glass jars holding liquids, salves, granules and paints; crystals, sticks, pottery, playing cards, and several clay models of human hands. Something about the set of their fingers looked vaguely ominous, lifelike, as though they were curled in real ecstasy or pain.

Her eyes fell on the doorway, which was obscured by long strands of twine knotted with bones and quartz stones. She’d seen the other side of it on her first night in Tahon. The hut was Malika’s.

Sitting up, she eased open the familiar wooden box that sat by the sleeping pallet. It held all the gifts from the bonding, including a few sets of clothes. The sight of them made her smile. Quickly, she swapped her wrinkled blue dress for dull leather pants, and a light hemp tunic that left her arms free. Over this went her new weapons belt, complete with the twin daggers that felt like they were made for her hands. Then hunting shoes. Finally, remembering Malika’s words, she retrieved her dirty old backpack and dug out the steel water bottle, replacing it with her new water-skin and a change of clothes. She might carry her old pack, but she was part of the Guard now and she would use their tools.

The camp seemed quiet, but the sun told her that she was already late for the meeting at the guardian tree. She let the chest fall shut, hoping that Malika wouldn’t mind her leaving it behind. The older woman had insisted that she sleep here after the bonding, muttering something about reading the signs; Ana, belatedly realising that she had nowhere to stay, had accepted. Now she wondered if that had been a bad idea. Her dreams had been strange, and she felt heavy and slow, as though sleep was reluctant to release her.

The small cut on her right index finger didn’t escape her notice, either.

Frowning, she shouldered her backpack and ducked out of the hut, squinting through the early morning fog. A small, silver-headed figure sat, cross-legged, at Malika’s campfire. It took Ana a few moments to recognise the priestess, who sat as still as the dead, with dew dampening her robes and ash from the burnt-out fire dusting her shoulders and hair.
What on earth could she make of this woman? Ana had a few good reasons to trust her, and just as many not to. Eventually, she placed a tentative hand on Malika’s shoulder. Her eyes snapped open.

“You,” the priestess said roughly. “What are you? So many futures, so much potential, so much death. The mother knows. The mother knows.”

With that, her gaze went blank, and her slight figure slumped forwards. Ana caught her and yelled for help. A few early risers came running and she stood back, watching, as they tried and failed to rouse Malika. One woman, who was round with a pregnant belly, turned away from the priestess with a cry of horror. Her accusing stare fell on Ana.

“Accursed,” she spat.

Dread seeped through Ana’s chest, icy cold, at odds with the pleasantness of the mild summer morning. She took a step back. As one of the men lifted the priestess into his arms and started towards Tahon, she turned and ran. She didn’t stop running until she reached the guardian meeting tree—where she found Chase waiting alone, with his arms crossed.

“You’re late,” he said irritably.

“You’re my senior?” Ana panted, sliding down the last few steps of the gravelly slope and stumbling to a halt in a cloud of ochre clay-dust. “Why didn’t you say?”

He turned without answering and walked away, clearly expecting her to follow, and he reminded her of his father so much in that moment that she scowled at his retreating back and stayed put under the boughs of the great oak. He disappeared into the forest without any sign of pause. Grumbling to herself, she started after him at a jog. The path was one she hadn’t seen before, little more than a game trail; she had to duck and weave through tangles of foliage, trying not to crush ferns underfoot.

“Where are we going?” she panted when she’d caught up. Her lungs ached. Each of his long, quick strides covered twice the distance of hers.

“East,” he said.

Ana bit the inside of her lip to hide her irritation. She wouldn’t be the annoying, clueless new-bond clamouring for information and help at every turn. She’d watch and learn and stay silent, proving her competence in any way she could.

In the end, Chase did show her many things that day, with the stone-faced air of an adult speaking to a particularly ignorant child: how to check and rewire a snare, find clean water, build a fire, make shelter; all useful things, knowledge she drank up greedily, memorising each tiny detail so that she could do it all on her own if needed.

The land was an endless source of fascination. She found herself appreciating it in
new ways. Rivers and streams were common and seemed to fork through the undulating terrain like a giant web of geometric lace. As they moved away from Tahon, the mountains eased out into gentle hills. When they took care to walk quietly, she saw lizards, rabbits, birds, even the bushy tail of an occasional wildcat. They climbed down the side of a steep mud bank to rest on a sun-drenched island in the river, and Chase showed her where to find mussels and spiny crayfish, and which of the long reeds by the water could be dug up for eating.

Finally he decreed that they'd come far enough for the day, so they made camp in a shallow cave under the roots of an old tree. When the floor was insulated and the doorway obscured, they wandered back down to the river. Here, the water ran gently over a smooth rock face, gradually sloping downwards to a wide sandy pool below. From further downstream came the gentle roar of water lashing against jagged rocks.

Putting a finger and thumb to his lips, Chase blew a short, sharp series of notes. Ana tried to do the same, but succeeded only in making a faint hissing sound.

He whistled the signal again, with slow and exaggerated movements. It sounded like a loud birdcall, to her ears, but Chase assured her that this was exactly the point. It would fool Valmorans and be instantly recognisable to the Tain.

"Forget it," she said in disgust, plunking herself down on the rock. "I'll never learn."

"You will. An early warning can mean the difference between life and death. Keep practising."

"Would have come in useful yesterday, by the way," she remarked.

"What?"

"I dunno, a warning?" Ana sighed, rolled her eyes, and waved a hand dismissively. She shouldn't grumble. Chase had stuck out his neck more than enough where she was concerned.

"A warning," he said slowly, "about what?"

She raised her eyebrows. Surely the need for pretence had passed. "The masked tracker?"

He looked at her as though she had gone mad.

"Oh, come on," she snapped. "The third trial. Super-mysterious surprise duel just outside of Tahon?"

Chase hesitated for a long moment. She watched as the look in his eyes went from fierce, to knowing, to resigned.

"There is no third trial," he said at last.

"What do you mean?" Her voice squeaked on the last word and she hated it.

"I mean if there was someone trying to stop you getting back, that had nothing to do
with initiation.”

Ana bristled. “Of course it did. You said yourself! You said you thought it would be unfair, until after we fought. Then you changed your mind.”

“Because I realised you weren’t as weak as you looked,” he said indignantly. “Not because the bond trials require you to fight.”

“But if it’s not a part of the trials …”

Chase nodded slowly. “I think somebody wants you dead.”
The blade flew, for the third time, out of her left hand and thudded against the forest floor.

“Come on,” Chase growled. “Grip better.”

“I’m trying, okay?” Ana complained, ducking to retrieve the knife. Sweat pricked her scalp and ran down her back. She needed to bathe.

It was near sunset on the second day of her guard, and they’d made camp a few miles north of the place that Tavi and Chase had first apprehended her. The trees were becoming thinner and paler, almost anaemic, although they’d seemed so lush when she first saw them. Chase had scanned the area and announced that they should be clear until sunset. Then he’d insisted on a combat lesson, in which Ana would learn to fight with both of the knives she’d been gifted—one in each hand.

“You must compensate for your weakness,” he’d explained.

“Weakness?” she’d scoffed. But it turned out that Chase had a point. He’d learned from their first encounter, and was proving a formidable opponent. Now that she’d lost the element of surprise, she couldn’t beat him. The knowledge irked her deeply.

Returning to their starting position, he waited for her to regain the correct grip, angled diagonally along the palm, blade up. Ana crouched and watched for his move. He feinted overhead, then arced his blade at the last moment, swerving around toward her neck. She blocked as he’d taught her, using the extra blade to derail the swing of his arm, then twisting around, stopping just short of the move that would cut open his wrist and send the machete flying. Then she jabbed her left dagger into the air near his stomach. The point kissed the rough fibre of his shirt, and Chase froze, laughing.

“And my guts are all over the floor,” he said approvingly. “Better.”

“Gross,” Ana said.

He bared his teeth in a brief grin, then set to work lighting the fire, striking a piece of flint over a fistful of carefully shredded bark. When the kindling caught, he transferred it over to the base of the woodpile and blew gently on the flames until they caught.

Ana watched the flames dance and thought about what she would do when it came to fighting by his side against Valmorans. Could she live with whatever might happen?

They cooked in silence, ate, and threw dirt over the coals. Once the sun had properly set, their makeshift cave was almost invisible, disguised as it was by the tangled roots and undergrowth. Ana wriggled in and tried to make a nest among the dead leaves.
Chase slid into the small space next to her, so close that she could hear him breathe. She stared, wide-eyed, into the blackness and thought about saying something, but the sounds of his breath changed and slowly her eyes were blinking shut too.

In her dreams she wandered through the forest alone. All the noises of the birds and insects and animals stopped; even the rivers stopped running. Her footfalls were the only sound, and she knew that everything hung in the balance. The Tain god watched from the sky, wearing a sunburst crown of daggers, waiting for her to take a false step.

She stopped moving. The sound of her footfalls continued, which was wrong, very wrong. Somewhere between the realm of sleep and waking she realised what it was; approaching feet in pre-war boots, the kind with heavy soles that the Tain people scorned. Her eyes snapped open and she elbowed Chase in the side. He made no noise, but his body turned alert and rigid.

Carefully, silently, he slid out of the cave. Ana followed, rose to her feet silently, and drew out her knives. Blinding white light pierced the darkness, and a male voice let out a yell.

It all happened so fast. She scrambled to cover Chase’s back.

The figure holding the torch raised a handgun; Ana threw one of her knives, and the shot went wide as he stumbled. Pale men flooded the woods, one coming from behind, two rushing forwards to help the first. Chase barrelled towards them with a yell. Ana turned, barely avoiding another shot, and leaped forward to trip a Valmoran as he ran. He grabbed her hair. She ripped herself away and darted back. A hot spurt of blood dribbled down the side of her neck.

Sounds of steel striking steel filled the forest—no more shots. Good.

Something moved behind her back; she whirled, almost colliding with the first man. He had pulled out her knife and recovered.

_No, she thought, that shouldn’t be possible._

They fell against each other in a clumsy embrace. Time shuddered to a stop. The woods were dark, but she could see the whites of his eyes, the paleness of his arm, still holding that gun, which clicked hopelessly. She still gripped her second knife. It was buried to its hilt in the region of his stomach.

He made a sick gasping sound and sagged against her, as if seeking support. His gun clicked again. Useless.

Ana made a strangled noise of her own and yanked the blade out, just as she was seized from behind.

She wriggled out of the grip. His blade flashed. She rolled.

Ana made herself ignore the screams coming loudly and horribly from underfoot.
There was only herself and the Valmoran. They blocked and jabbed with mechanical precision. She got a clear opening and twisted the knife away like Chase had shown her.

He pulled out something else—a dagger. They circled each other. He rushed forwards again. She deflected, following through with a kick to the groin. The Valmoran grunted in pain as the blow landed, and he stumbled.

She rushed forwards to end it, but he knocked her back with a hard blow to the head. He was skilled—better than her, probably. But weak. No stamina.

*Make it a killing blow,* she told herself. *Clean, make it clean.*

Panting, Ana tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear and tried to focus. It was crazy, but something in her was starting to wonder ... *No! Don't be stupid ...* and yet. This fighting style, the sounds of his laboured breath ... the rust-and-lemon scent.

It was all familiar.

She risked a glance at his shadowy face.

“*Max?*” she whispered furtively.

Behind them, Chase still fought, but the sounds were of one opponent, not two.

*Stop wasting time,* she thought. The Valmoran had gone still. Behind her, she heard a knife finding flesh, a sharp groan. Not Chase. Good.

“Ana,” the Valmoran said, between gasps.

The sound of Max's voice changed everything. She found herself darting forwards, blade down, pressing the hilt into his hand. “Go,” she hissed, pushing him away. He stumbled backwards, gripping her knife, but he did not run.

Behind her, Chase started towards them.

“Go!” she screamed. Chase barrelled past her, intent on pursuing Max. She flung herself at his middle. They crashed to the ground.

He spat curses, wrestling her off, and leapt to his feet; Ana flung her arms around his knees and latched on.

Chase was shouting. Slowly, the fight drained out of him as Max's footsteps faded away into the distance. He shook her off angrily, and she let him.

Wincing, Ana raised a hand to the bloody patch of scalp where she’d left a chunk of hair in Max's hand. It was wet but no longer spurtling.

Suddenly, Chase seized the Valmorans’ discarded flashlight and grabbed her by the throat, shining the beam straight into her face.

“What in—” he growled a string of profanities that she could barely understand—“was that?”

Ana cringed away from the light searing her eyes. She'd let him down, betrayed their people. But there was no loyalty, no sense of belonging, that could make her kill Max.
“That was my friend,” she choked. “The one from the dream tent.”

A harsh, rattling moan reminded her that they were not alone. Half-human, half-animal, and pure pain, it cut Ana as deeply as any knife. The sound was not one of Chase’s kills, she knew. It was hers.

Chase heard it too, and scrutinised her for a few short moments before releasing her neck and snapping the spotlight off.

“Finish it,” he said coldly.

Ana opened her mouth to protest, but stopped short. Self-loathing like she’d never known flooded every molecule of her being. She’d killed a man—and, what? Had she expected Chase to make it easy?

The light of early morning was starting to seep through the trees. Several feet away were two bodies, unmistakably dead. The third was nearer, writhing weakly near the mouth of their tent.

Ana took a deep breath and walked over to check him for weapons. His gun lay discarded a few strides away, where they’d fought, and a dark river of blood stained the ground where he’d dragged himself, agonisingly, no doubt, toward the relative shelter of the undergrowth. It was so fruitless, so pathetic, that it made the emotion welling in her throat turn into a hard, choking lump.

He’d wanted to feel safe. To get away. From her.

*What are you?* Madeline had asked.

*I don’t know.* The thought hit Ana like a physical blow. *I don’t know what the hell I am or what I’m capable of.*

Two knife wounds darkened the Valmoran’s filthy shirt. Sucking in a breath, Ana forced herself to look up at his face. She stared into his pale eyes for a moment before he emitted a final rattle and went limp. His eyes, clouded by the wasting, stayed open and accusing. She closed them with shaking fingers.

Chase, meanwhile, had dissembled and packed up their belongings with furious efficiency, and headed off the way that Max had gone. Ana took a final look at the Valmoran, ensuring that she would never forget his scrawny features; she knew that a forgotten, blank face would haunt her worse than a real one. Then she heaved herself up, grabbed her pack, and ran after Chase.

He crashed through the undergrowth like a freight train, made loud and heavy-footed by his anger. She caught up, but he ignored her.

“Hang on,” she begged. “Stop.”

Chase didn’t stop. If anything, his strides became longer, faster, until they were running. Branches scratched at Ana’s bare face and arms as she battled to stay at his
side; when she couldn’t keep up anymore, she reached out and seized his backpack, and he whirled around, green eyes widened dangerously.

“What?” he spat.

“Just stop,” she yelled, digging her fingers into his pack so that he’d have to dump it, or drag them both. “One … minute. Let me explain.”

He glared, but stayed put, for a few moments at least. “You’ve explained enough.”

“Clearly not. What would you do? How many men have you killed? How many friends? How could you expect that?”

“The Accursed are not men,” he said harshly. “This is my duty. I protect my people.”

Ana exploded. He thought he was angry? She was angrier. “Oh, that’s bullshit, Chase. It’s a line. You know it is! You may be at war, but don’t ever tell yourself that they’re not men just like you and your family.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he snapped. “Your friend has to die, now, there’s no other way.”

Frustrated tears burned in her eyes and she closed them so they wouldn’t fall.

“No,” she said at last. “Another lie.”

They stared each other down silently. She tried to read his face, but he turned away so she couldn’t. Then he made a strange, angry growling sound, and committed an act of violence against the nearest tree.

“You don’t understand. The Praefectors, the elders ...”

“If we could track him, I could talk to him,” she said quickly. “Tell him to go back.”

Chase huffed. “Yeah? Because that worked out so great with you?”

“But why couldn’t he stay? You don’t know him, you don’t know what it’s like to have never had a chance,” Ana said, surprising herself. She did see his point. It had been a stretch, getting her accepted by the Tain, and Max—if he was even interested in joining them—would not engender the same sympathy. Perhaps even asking would snap the strained cord that held her in place with the Tain. But what was Max supposed to do? Go home and die?

“He had choices,” Chase snapped, as if he could tell what she was thinking. “He chose to come here with a gun in his hand.”

“I don’t believe, if you had his life, that you’d do any different.”

“So that’s it then? We should let your people”—he spat the word as if it had a foul taste—“overrun us, destroy our home, our way of life? Because that’s what they’d do. If you don’t know that, you’re a fool.”

“They could be different here,” Ana said.

Chase didn’t reply. He turned and started walking again, albeit at a slower pace, one that she could follow without panting.
“We track him,” he said at last. “Take him prisoner. But if he’s killed someone before we find him, there really is no choice. He dies. And you must be the one to do it.”

Then he paused. “You gave him your knife, didn’t you?”

Ana nodded miserably.

Chase threw up his hands and stalked off again, following the faint signals of Max’s trail. It meandered through the forest, first back out to the grasslands, then carving in an arc towards the southwest. They gained on him slowly, arguing in whispers about what should be done when they caught up.

“Let me talk to him first,” Ana insisted for what felt like the hundredth time. “You know he’s dying already,” she finally snapped.

Chase shrugged noncommittally. “Is that supposed to change anything?”

Ana stopped and ditched her pack on the ground. Digging out her water-skin, she gulped a cool mouthful of water and used a few precious drops to clean off her face.

“Um, it should,” she hissed. “Every generation is wasting younger. My parents were in their thirties when they died. Max is eighteen. Your age. That’s the Valmoran lifespan now. Have you ever tried eating tinned food for a week? A year? Breathing air that burns? Feeling yourself going hard and bad inside? And what, then you find a place that’s better, and you’re supposed to go away and die because of their rules? Would you?”

Chase breathed out sharply and stared at her. “I don’t know.”

Ana stared back. She could see the same strained look on his face that he’d worn in the great hall of Tahon, talking about their gods and leaders.

“My mother agreed with you,” he said, so quietly that Ana almost didn’t hear him.

She inched closer. Chase was staring at the ground as though it held all the answers he needed. “She wanted to give the Valmorans who came here a chance, and she wasn’t the only one. There were less of you back then and they weren’t always armed. Mother thought she could heal them of the … wasting, you called it. The Praefectors were considering it. Then she died.”

Ana nodded numbly. So things could have been different—for her parents, for everyone.

“All that could still change,” she said. “Your people were open to it before, maybe they could be again. Starting with me and Max. And I bet the wasting can be healed. Your mother could have been right. We can make her dream happen.”

Chase snapped out of whatever daze he was in, and jabbed a finger towards Max’s trail. “Find your friend. We go from there.”

She nodded, re-shouldered her pack, and followed his lead. Then, suddenly, he
jerked to a halt.

“There’s never been this many,” he said, with an air of wounded surprise. “Never.”

Ana, who’d been lost in thought, followed Chase’s line of sight and gasped in horror. The subtle marks of Max’s passage—broken twigs, crushed ferns, a slight indent in mud—were joined by what looked like the exodus of a horde. Dozens of feet had trampled this area, churning the ground up violently. These were not Tain feet, that trod so lightly over the earth, but a mass of Valmoran boots.

Max ... somehow, against everything she knew to be possible ... had found himself an army.
After that, Ana and Chase ran full pelt, all day and into the night, cutting a path straight to Tahon. Midmorning, they smelled smoke on the wind. Ana had a terrible feeling that she knew what it was that burned. From the look on Chase’s face, she thought he suspected the same. They kept running. The smoke became choking, filling the forest with a haze that reminded Ana of home. It was her nightmare brought to life.

Chase led them up the mountain behind Tahon, then down a steep path that wound through the towering crags of rock. They didn’t stop for the cleansing ritual. Muffled shouts and the sounds of running feet echoed through the valley; Valmoran or Tain, she couldn’t tell. Eventually the trail spat them out at a small sandy opening; a dead end, encircled with sweeping cliffs, except for the smooth face of stone that revealed a small and deep-set door. Chase ran to it and yanked at the iron handle. It wouldn’t budge.

“They’ve burned the village and retreated into the fortress,” he said breathlessly. “That is what they would do. The books demand it.”

“But what if—”

Chase was already pounding a fist against the door. The aged copper chimed dully. Ana drew out her old hunting knife and held it behind her back.

A small section of the door slid open slightly, then slammed shut. The door groaned, and a terrified-looking Tain woman ushered Chase inside. He grabbed Ana’s arm and yanked her in after him. The woman slammed the door shut, and turned a handle that activated a series of locks; Chase helped her wrestle a heavy beam of timber into place across the doorway. When it thudded, Ana didn’t know whether to feel relieved or trapped.

Chaos reigned inside the fortress. People scurried everywhere, some armed, others hauling crates and barrels. Discordant voices rang out from the justice tower. Ana glanced back just in time to see the woman who’d opened the door for them suppress a sob by pressing a hand to her mouth. Her eyes were dark and terribly wide. Ana barely had time to register the violence in them before the woman lunged, knocking her to the ground. Hands tightened around her neck. She had her knife, but she couldn’t use it, not as the woman screamed with fear and grief, not even as her windpipe started to give way—Ana struggled, but the woman was too heavy. Her vision went dark around the edges. She raised her knife arm slowly, aiming the point at the woman’s back.

Then the weight was gone. Ana flailed and coughed. Chase stood between them. He
was shouting something, but all she could hear was the hysterical words streaming out of the her assailant's mouth.

“She is the end of us. Accursed, accursed.”

Ana stood, shakily, and slid the knife back into her belt. The small crowd that had gathered in the doorway dispersed, carrying on with their duties as if nothing had happened. Chase turned his back on the woman, and they walked on into the justice tower.

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High up on the mountain across the river, Max watched the smoke envelop the old fortress, and grinned. The place was everything they’d hoped. Their runners reported evidence of plenty of livestock and food, and—most telling of all—aged citizens in good health. This was something that none of the scouts had been able to confirm until now.

He cracked his knuckles, pinkie finger to thumb, both sides. It didn’t ease the ache that was growing in his bones, but it did give a momentary illusion of relief. It was a dumb habit. Funnily enough, since he’d joined the unit as second-in-command, he’d noticed a few of the kids starting to imitate it. As though it were tough or something.

Now, with Theo dead, the Jackals were his to lead. The responsibility rested heavier on his shoulders than he’d thought it would. They were a lousy bunch—some of them were given to habits he couldn’t abide, which was saying something. But they were his. They served him. They’d never had a chance. He was going to give them one.

Their bonfires leapt higher, burning unnatural shades of red and black. When the smoke—of the village and, presumably, wealth of resources that the forest freaks had hurried to burn—cleared around the valley, they would see it. His second message to them.

*Welcome to your nightmare,* he thought. *Expect the unexpected.*

But Ana. *That* was an interesting turn of events. When he’d convinced Theo to treaty the gangs together and make a last-ditch attack on the forest, he’d had zero expectation that she would have made it so far. Even when he’d found her mask at the ruined farmhouse, he hadn’t allowed himself to hope. She never could have survived out here.

Except that she did.

The thought intrigued him. His Ana, the girl with a reasonable amount of smarts but a soft and idealistic heart—he knew her. The girl he’d faced in the forest was different. Adaptable. Tough. She’d wormed her way in with the forest dwellers and killed Theo with a remorseless thrust. She had a hidden side to her, a side that *survived.* He was beginning to think that maybe she would be able to understand him after all.

Root out the villagers in their place of strength; destroy them, take the spoils. That
was the plan he and Theo had based the treaty on. But Ana might just be the wildcard upon which this whole thing turned.

He tore his gaze away from the turrets of the fortress, barely peeking out of the haze, and called for the captive keeper.
The Praefectors’ emergency council meeting could not have been more different than the last. The chamber floor teemed with elders and guardians—among whom many were yet to return, including Tavi and Ander. Chase knew that it could mean nothing, that she was probably still on her way, that Ander would know how best to keep her safe, even if it meant taking a longer route home. Still, her absence felt glaring, and if it hadn’t been expressly forbidden in the strongest possible terms, he’d be out there looking for her.

He would go anyway, he decided. Sneak out and lie to whoever had replaced Rowan on the door. *Special orders from my father,* he could say. As if their father had ever cared more about his children than his rules.

He lingered near Ana in the shadows, leaning against the wall, near the exit. She had long since slumped into a sitting position, resting her head on her knees. Her white hair was matted with dried blood. Part of him wished he could put his arms around her, comfort her … although whether she wanted comforting was anyone’s guess.

Briefly, he toyed with the idea that he knew would be raised soon, once the Praefectors were done grilling the guardians for information. *Did she lead them here?* He glanced down at Ana’s small form. It wasn’t the first time he’d wondered what was going on in her head. But now the question was crucial. Did she have information they needed? Would they hurt her to get it?

Outrage washed him at this thought, and he knew that there was no part of him that doubted her. He wasn’t sure if that certainty should be a relief or a matter of deeper concern.

*Faith.* The word popped into his head out of nowhere. What could he believe in? The Praefectors used faith like a shield against too many questions, along with disapproving phrases like *spirit of independence.* But, in his heart, he still had faith in the gods themselves. And he might as well admit it—he had faith in Ana.

The Praefectors had forsaken their council seats, preferring instead to stand, reflecting the state of high agitation in the room. Exhausted guardians spoke with demanding elders, and the Praefectors themselves seemed to be pouring over a recently delivered note. They shared whispers and nods, and then Ammon stepped onto the podium. The noise in the room died down.

“Brothers and sisters of Tain,” he said gravely. “We have been in contact with the
Accursed."

Total silence followed his statement, except for the noise of a few quiet feet rushing in from the outer rooms.

"They threaten us with war," he said, raising his voice. "They threaten us with annihilation."

Murmurs of fear sparked throughout the room, threatening to inflame.

"But what do we know?" Ammon shouted. His face was turning a mottled shade of red. Chase noticed Ana hugging her knees tighter, as if shielding herself from his fury.

"We know that Belun will bring us victory over our enemy on His Day, giving us righteous dominion over the world. We know that his promises cannot fail. And if the Accursed come to His heartland, bringing their corruption, bringing death, then we say, let them come. Let them come, because Belun's day is here. It is now. This is not a night of fear, brothers, but the culmination of our prayers. They bring us war; we will give them war, and holy fire. We will cleanse the sacred circle of their corruption. In the morning the Crone will feast on their dead, and we will embark on a new chapter, the renewal, the everlasting golden age of this world."

The old man was a skilled orator, perhaps even better than Jove. Amongst the crowd, unease had turned to passion; Chase himself could feel it, the excitement. No more hiding, no more fear. Cheers erupted from the floor and spread the viewing galleries above.

"Prepare for war, brothers," Ammon screamed over the noise, fanning their fervour. "Prepare for war."

***

Chase pulled Ana to her feet, through the jostling crowd, and toward the double doors of the Praefectors' private chamber. He would have barged straight through, she thought, except that she was hanging under his grip like a rag doll, coughing violently. Dark stars exploded in her eyes. When her airway opened again and her vision cleared, she looked up, just in time to see the crease of worry running between his eyebrows.

"Smoke inhalation," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "Sorry."

Ammon's declaration was a disaster, of course, but Ana couldn't stop thinking about the woman in the passageway, and the way she herself had raised her knife, almost automatically, poised to stab her in the back. Would she have done it, if Chase hadn't acted? She didn't know.

Chase frowned, opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it again. "We need to stop this," he said finally.

Ana nodded. He pushed through the doors of the antechamber; once they slammed
shut, the chaos of the justice tower faded instantly. The second set of doors was locked. Ana put a finger to her lips and crouched down, pressing an ear to the crack. Above her, Chase sighed and did the same.

"What are their numbers, their weapons?" Sera was asking.

"The watchers report that smoke obscures their camp," Jove said. "Guardian reports so far suggest anything from one to three hundred. Some guns and limited ammunition."

Ammon was quick to make the leap that Ana was dreading. "The girl. She’s your answer. Lock her up, put on the pressure. We need to know what we’re dealing with."

"I disagree," Sera said sharply. "She does not fit their profile. And you saw her at the bonding, Ammon, as I did. The girl wants to be here."

"I’m not suggesting she’s one of their soldiers," he retorted. "But they sent her, mark my words. She knows what’s out there."

Ana looked up at Chase. "I’ll tell them what I know, but they’re not going to like it."
Ana was back in her cell at the far end of the crypt wing even sooner than she’d expected. But this time, Chase wouldn’t be letting her out, because he was with her.

The iron door fell shut in his face, fastened hurriedly by one of the ashen-faced guardians. Jove nodded as the lock clicked shut and thanked the young men for their service. He waited silently, with his hands clasped behind his back, until their footsteps had faded in the far stairwell.

"If we had another cell I would separate you," he said to Chase. "But not once in my lifetime has this door been needed to house more than one individualist soul. The fact that it does now is my shame as well as yours."

Ana could only see the outline of Chase’s arms as he gripped the bars tightly. Was it a gesture of anger, she wondered, or pleading?

Jove lowered his voice. “Use this time to think on what it means to turn your back on your people, and your family.”

He turned to leave.

“Wait,” Chase said roughly. “Tell me you’ll send someone for Tav. If you won’t let me look for her—”

“Your sister is in the Father’s hands, as are the four others who are still missing,” Jove said as he walked away. “I will do what I can.”

“You’re her father,” Chase shouted after him. His voice cracked slightly, and the pain of it echoed through the long corridor, again and again. By the time it faded, the Praefector was gone.

They sat shoulder to shoulder after that, and Ana sat in stunned silence, feeling the despair in his ragged breathing.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last.

He groaned. “Don’t be. You gave them more help than they deserved. It was me who messed that up.”

“You didn’t! You only lost your temper once it was obvious they weren’t going to listen.”

“We’ll all die,” Chase said. His voice sounded curiously flat and hollow. “They choose their laws over survival or fairness. The Accursed have breached the first circle and that’s it, it has to be war.”

“The laws are survival, to them,” Ana observed glumly.
“They’ll find out the difference when it’s too late.”

***

Dusk settled over Tahon like a trance. A glance out of the fortress windows revealed a world lost in smoke; he village still smouldered, and across the river, the fires of their enemy burned blood-red and tar-black. It was nothing more than a magician’s trick to scare fools and children; but nonetheless, Malika saw shapes of death behind the plumes.

Deep within her mind’s eye, the old priestess wandered through the wreckage, trailing her hands and feet through the hot coals, reaching inwards for the Goddess. She saw her tent, burned with all the others, but there had been no one to salvage her possessions before the fires took hold. A lifetime of treasures, gone. She’d heard the voices of the ones who had carried her from her fireside, and cloistered her in the old place; but their hands seemed not to have touched her. Her meditation had carried her too far within. Still she could not find the answers she sought.

The pale woman-child; she’d seen such promise in her. The vitality of youth living in the shadow of death. A clear inner eye, a perfect and potent instrument for the Great Mother to play. She’d brought them the potentiality of rebirth. A chance to cast aside the old ways, embrace the new. And, with the exception of Ammon and his meddling, they had embraced her.

So why did she feel a terrible judgment closing in?

“Prosím, Matka,” she called out to that dreary wasteland. “Explain it to me.”

The Mother hungered, burned, and was silent.
“They’ll release us before then,” Chase said, his voice thick with sleep, or lack of it. Ana felt the hum of his voice through the top of her head. She’d never sat like this before, in the arms of another person who wasn’t her mother or father, but the total darkness of the crypt drove them together like a person might cling to a life raft at sea.

“If they don’t,” she whispered, feeling just tired and pathetic enough to voice what she was most dreading, “they’ll come for us last.”

“Ana, you look like one of them. Would that not save you?”

How could she explain Valmora to him—the way humanity had fallen apart outside of Tain? That even those who somehow maintained their hearts had to ignore them to survive? That life had been made cheap?

“I kind of hope not,” she said at last.

He traced her face with his left hand, as though he was trying to see her.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she added. “If they let you out—”

“I won’t let them leave you here,” he said quickly.

“No. If they let you out, maybe you can stop this. Forget the Praefectors. If you sway the majority ... even just the Guard ...”

Chase was nodding. “They fear guns. If we can convince them that it’s not Belun’s day, not some part of a bigger plan—”

“—They could negotiate,” Ana said quickly, sitting up straight. “Whatever Valmorans are, if they’ve lived this long, they’re selfish. None of them want to risk dying so that someone else can prosper. If we could convince them that your army could even put a dent in theirs, which with the home advantage they probably could—”

“... They’d be open to it?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s a chance.”

“Good enough,” was all he said.

She felt him draw her closer still, and his lips brushed against hers. Ana stiffened, shocked, but then the warmth and softness of it seemed to reach down to her bones. She kissed him back, sliding her hands up around his neck because it seemed like she’d stop breathing if the moment slipped away. As a child she’d read a few novels that had kissing in them, and she’d wondered what it would feel like. Physical affection was rare in Valmora; the fight for survival trumped everything else. So she’d never guessed that it would feel almost like coming close to death; that her body would blaze up almost
the way it did under an enemy’s knife, filling her with adrenaline, and that the rest of the world would fade into nothing. But it did. And she learned, too, that there had been a void in her new wealth of experiences. She glimpsed a part of herself that she had never known.

Footsteps clattered at the base of the spiral staircase. They leapt apart and jumped to their feet, staring out of the barred doorway.

Jove swept down the hall with his arm wrapped around a bedraggled and weeping Tavi. Sera and Ammon, along with a cluster of guardians, followed behind them. Seeing his sister, Chase let out a shout of relief. Ana, too, found herself clutching the bars and grinning—she hadn’t admitted to herself just how worried she was that Tavi had been captured and killed. But why were they bringing her to prison?

“Chase, stay back, your time is not up,” Jove warned as he unlocked the door. “Anais is free.”

Chase surged forward, asking something, but Ana couldn’t make it out. His words were drowned out by Ammon shouting, and the flurry of movement, and the spear that jabbed through the bars to hold him back as she was pulled out through the door.

It swung shut, locked. Ana blinked. Why would she be released and not Chase? She looked around, searching for answers in their faces, and was chilled by what she saw. Tavi sobbed and writhed weakly under her father’s grip, refusing to look at anyone. Everyone else stared at her with condemnation in their eyes.

“Tavi and the remaining guardian prisoners were released to us conditionally,” Ammon announced. “Chase. Can you guess at the terms?”

“I don’t know,” Chase snapped. “This is a bad time for games. You need to tell our people the true—”


Ana gasped as though she’d been winded. She braced herself against the hands of the guardian restraining her.

“She’s not theirs to demand,” Chase said.

“They seem to think otherwise,” his father retorted. “They asked for her by name. It makes no matter. She goes, or they will attack immediately, leaving us no time for preparations. She will be purged and delivered to them.”

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On the far end of the great hall, Ana found herself barelegged and barefoot, testing the strength of the thin cords binding her wrists. Her guardian tunic was stained red with a sash of animal blood mixed with scarlet dye. It was meant to mark her as void, a failed guardian, a non-person in the eyes of all Tain. She looked out across the hall,
taking in the crowd of men and women—those who could be spared from their duties—plus the Praefectors, elders, and every child. They filled the room, leaving a narrow path for her to pass through so that they could witness her unmaking. This was the punishment of apostates and betrayers.

The statues of the ancients stared blankly. Overhead torches gave off light, and thin wisps of oily black smoke. A child in the crowd started to grizzle and was quickly shushed.

Ana took a step forwards. It was so much like the moment of her blessing, but this time no one smiled; no one urged her forward with encouraging nods. She swallowed, trying to quiet the roaring in her ears. She couldn’t falter now. Starting through the parted sea of people, she tried not to see the blankness on their faces.

Oh, but it was no good. The rejection was palpable. Each person stared through her, as if she didn’t exist, because she had been declared lost from Belun’s sight. There would be no redemption.

Eventually she gave up and openly scanned the crowd for Malika, clinging to the strange hope that the old woman at least would not condemn her. Instead she saw Ander. His face was swollen and bruised, and his lip was split open in two places. She couldn’t help it; she looked him in the eyes as she passed him. Recognition met her there, and sadness. He saw her. He was sorry. He didn’t move.

Next, her gaze fell on a small child, who flinched away and gave a small whimper of fear.

This is stupid, she thought, suddenly filled with rage. What reason did they have to be afraid of her? She started to walk faster. Where before her footsteps had been timid and silent, she let them slap defiantly against the polished stone floor.

At the end of the hall stood the elders, vaguely familiar faces who looked through her dutifully, and finally the Praefectors. Jove had the strange task of escorting her to the river without formally acknowledging her existence. She followed him out of the hall and into the forest, down the path she’d taken with Tavi towards the river.

As they neared the blessing spot, Ana’s anger and curiosity got the better of her.

“Was it you? Who sent the masked tracker?” she asked. The Praefector kept walking, as though she hadn’t said anything. As though she didn’t exist.

“Or Ammon?” she tried again. “I know one of you sent him. Why? Why deceive everyone like that? Why play games? Don’t you think it was all a bit pointless?”

Jove abruptly stopped walking and she almost stumbled into his back. Then he turned on her with a frown.

“Malika called you an instrument of the Crone, and perhaps you are. You sow
discord wherever you go. You are poison. Corrupting the young ones. Destroying my family."

Ana laughed bitterly. "That's insane."

"No. The insanity came in not condemning you the moment you set foot in Tahon."

"I bet you would have if you could. But your people are better than that. You try to control them—"

He struck her face with an open hand. Ana stumbled back, tasting blood.

"But you can’t control them," she yelled. "Not completely. I bet you hate that."

Jove seized her by the arm and started dragging her towards the water’s edge, screaming a chant that drowned out her words. "Abesto anathema unum, a reptili usque ad fratres tuos. Abesto anathema unum. A reptili usque ad fratres tuos." With that, he pitched her forward into the river; the binding on her arms made her clumsy, and she fell face first into the water. She thrashed around for a few moments before the Praefector pulled her up.

She shook her head, trying to clear her eyes and ears. There was light, and movement, on the far side of the river. Valmoran men waited on the opposite bank, with their blinding flashlights. Someone swung a beam in their direction and it landed directly on Ana. She felt the blood drain from her face as reality started to set in.

"Wait," she said to Jove. "I can’t go over there."

He made as if to shove her back into the water, so she splashed out a few steps to avoid his reach. He drew his knife and stepped back. With great effort, the rage and indignation in his eyes turned to blankness. He looked through her and turned his face aside.

_I really need to do this_, she realised. Otherwise the Valmorans would attack without delay. Tentatively, she took a few steps deeper into the river.

But what if they went back on their bargain? Ana was hardly versed in gang customs and morals, if they had any at all, but there was no reason the Valmoran army would not attack immediately. Could they have really postponed their attack for her sake? _No_. She knew it immediately. Valmorans did not share the same bonds that united the Tain; if the gangs were loyal within themselves, that was one thing, but they wouldn't care about her. It must be something else.

She waded out slowly, clumsily, pretending that the current was keeping her off balance. With her hands bound, it wasn’t too much of an exaggeration. The water was cold, and fast turning her feet numb.

_Think._

Information. They must want insider knowledge of Tahon. Perhaps they’d already
tried with Ander and Tavi; perhaps they’d decided, knowing from Max that there was a Valmoran among the Tain, that she might be more amenable to their cause.

Max. Was he trying to protect her, or had he sold her out? She quickly decided that it didn’t matter. She wouldn’t help them. Not with Chase and Tavi’s lives at stake. But she could buy them time.

She bobbed further out, faster now, beginning to struggle for real where the current picked up in the middle of the river. A command was yelled out on the other side, and two Valmoran soldiers splashed obediently into the water. She was already winning against the current when they reached her—made it forward to the point where the water started receding again—but they hauled her all the rest of the way out anyway. They dumped her, shivering, on the muddy riverbank. It was the furthest west she had ever been.
The Valmorans dragged her into their camp, a vast array of ramshackle shelters sprawled out among the trees that swept up the rocky mountainside. The camp gleamed with strange smoke and solar light. Everywhere she looked, Ana saw men and women armed with guns. Some still wore their unnecessary masks. All were young, feral and skeleton thin; truly it seemed like an army of the dead, and she could see why the Tain regarded them with such horror. A few men were attempting to cook rabbits that they’d evidently managed to shoot. They hadn’t skinned or butchered the meat, and the smell coming off the fire was foul. She looked for Max, but the responding leers soon taught her to keep her glances to herself. Her escort kept a ready grip on his semi-automatic rifle. Most of the men carried pistols or shotguns; they deferred to the greater firepower of her captor.

They stopped front of a dark tent, indistinguishable from the others. Her escort, a man not much taller than she was, muttered some kind of order. The rest of the men carried on and dispersed through the camp.

Ana felt a tug at the cords binding her wrist and looked down to see her escort cutting her free. She tried to catch his eye. He was perhaps in his twenties, although it was hard to tell under the grime and years of hard living. His long white hair was thin, pulled into a careless ponytail that bared streaks of his flaking scalp. Without meeting her gaze, he gestured towards the tent with his gun and handed her a small bundle of cloth. She rifled through the items quickly: a thin microfibre towel of neon orange, a small pair of jeans, a black t-shirt. New, but stiff with age.

The man waited patiently, without saying a word. She shot him an incredulous glance and ducked into the tent.

Inside, the air was stifling and reeked of synthetics. She stripped off her soaked cotton tunic and towelled herself dry, then eased on the jeans, and rolled up the cuffs until they bunched around her ankles. The shirt fit better and she tucked into the waistband of the pants. The clothes felt odd, unnatural, but they were clean and she was grateful for them.

It was strange, in fact—this basic respect, this courtesy. Perhaps they didn’t know what she had done. They might hope to win her over, the better to use her against the Tain. Never in any of her nightmares did she think she’d be taken prisoner by a gang of her former people and be given dry clothes. She eased out of the tent and re-zippered
the nylon opening.

"Leave it," the man grunted, with a glance at the wet tunic balled in her hands. A small feeling of outrage welled inside her—she wanted to keep it, very badly, her last piece of Tain—but making a fuss would be too silly for words, so she draped it over one of the tent lines. There. A small act of normality, to hang one’s clothes out to dry, as if she’d be back to wear it again when the new ones got dirty.

"Come," he said, and swept her off toward the far reaches of the camp. There was one tent that was different to all the others, a comparatively palatial structure that blazed with light. Two guards stood by the doorway wearing semiautomatic guns. One of them bared his teeth at Ana; she was tempted to bare hers back, but instead, she stared blankly ahead as though he bored her.

Inside, the tent was large and airy. Three young men stood around a large folding table. They turned as Ana and her escort entered. She felt very small all of a sudden, barefoot and dressed in too-big clothes. Her escort nodded abruptly and left.

"Have a seat," one of them said, nicely enough, indicating the small folding chair nearest to her, made of the same high-tech nylon as their table and tents. "He’ll be with you soon."

Ana stared at him. "Who?"

A flurry of movement came from the doorway, the guards muttered a greeting, and a pair of feet in heavy boots sweeping into the tent. They all turned. All of a sudden, she was staring at—

"Max," she whispered, reeling.

Max, a leader of Valmorans? Since when? Hadn’t he been her friend not so long ago, the recluse, the one who didn’t want to take any risks, the one who hid along with her from men like these? Was it her imagination or did he look healthier? Why was he doing this? Who was he?

"Leave," Max said curtly. The men around the table nodded respectfully and filed out.

Ana collapsed into the chair she’d been offered, bracing herself against the flimsy aluminium frame. Sitting like this brought her back to their last conversation, when she’d sat on his faded grey armchair and asked him to leave Valmora. It seemed like a very long time ago. She glanced at him and realised that he was thinking the same thing. No longer remotely frantic, or paranoid, Max had gained an air of confident authority—as if he’d been born to lead the Valmorans to war.

He was eying her thoughtfully, deciding on a strategy. She shot him a sharp look. *Don’t lie to me. I’ll know if you do.*
Max nodded almost imperceptibly. “Did they mistreat you?”

“No,” Ana said, taking a deep breath. Was this how they would be? Old friends, as if she wasn’t at his mercy? Perhaps he just wanted her to think so. She breathed out and tried to relax.

Don’t blow this. He’s seen you fighting with the Tain; he knows you’ve allied with them. He knows how you feel about the gangs. You’ve got to seem ... open, but not too open.

“No,” she repeated, more calmly. “They were actually kind of okay.”

“They like me,” he confided. “Because I offer them more than any leader ever has. But of course, we need to deliver. Come.”

He pulled her to her feet, and they walked out of the tent into the woods. Max took a trail leading further up the mountain, which came out to a small ridge overlooking Tahon’s valley. They gazed down at it together. Under the light of the moon she could just make out the fortress, and the glowing remains of the village that had burned at its feet. If what she’d seen of Max’s army was any indication, tomorrow, every person in the halls of Tahon would be dead.

“Why do you want to destroy them?” she said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“Why do you care?” Max said. “They cast you out quick enough, didn't they?”

She wanted to scream at him. Instead, she sighed. “They did,” she admitted softly. “But some of them were kind. Like our parents were. Truly, Max, if you care at all about what’s right, if you care about me—”

“Don’t do this?” he said mildly. “How predictable, Ana. I thought you’d grown beyond black-and-white morality. That kind of weakness will get you killed in this army. Certainly it would get me killed.”

“You lead them,” she said, stating the obvious.

“For now,” he replied. “Because I’ve promised them everything and you killed my superior—thanks for that, by the way.”

She’d been making great efforts not to dwell on the man she’d left behind in the woods. She didn’t appreciate being reminded, and certainly not thanked.

“Screw you,” she hissed. “What do you want?”

“I want what you want, and so does everyone else here,” he said coolly.

“I hardly think—”

“A chance, Ana,” Max said, raising his hoarse voice. “To be better. To be human again. Did you know that our people have been coming out here for years—decades, and dying in the attempt? You might just be the first of ours to ever survive walking into this forest. To see all of this potential, and they’re hoarding it—"
“Defending themselves.”

“Not at first. The first were regular people, Ana. They never came back. Did you meet any of them, by any chance, in your beloved tribe?”

Ana winced. “The wasting. They think it’s some kind of curse. They would have... killed them, but not ‘cause they want to, exactly, it’s more like some kind of quarantine thing...”

“I know about how they started,” Max cut in. “Do you? Did they tell you? Did they explain that their founders happened to see the end coming just a little bit sooner than everyone else, and knowingly holed up here and let everyone else go to hell? They sealed up their ark and let everyone else drown. That’s what you’re defending, Ana, so think twice about your sympathies. There’s nowhere else to go and we will never get another chance.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Ana said, wincing inside at the desperation in her voice. “If you let them, they could compromise. You have shelters. You could stay. Negotiate a peace. Some of them are deluded—”

“You're deluded,” Max snapped. Then he saw the look on her face and sighed.

“It’s possible that I could sell the boys something,” he said after a long pause. “It would have to be good. At least an equal split, fifty-fifty resources, full access to lands. Merger of leadership, a change in their system. No need to storm that castle of theirs, no blood spilled. We've lost enough just getting here.”

“The guardians?” Ana asked.

He shook his head grimly. “Just the walk.”

An army of dying men, Ana thought, with guns, and nothing to lose.

Max was toying with one of the knives in his belt, which she didn’t recognise until he drew out and pressed into her hand. It was the one she had given him, although she could no longer think of it as really hers. The other one had been taken back, along with her armband and all the bonding gifts.

“Thank you for that. I mean it.”

“That's okay,” she said. She knew that Max was testing her, trying to bridge the distance between them, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the residents of Tahon.

“It was a gift,” she added suddenly, “from a family at this ... ceremony they had to welcome me. They weren't wealthy but the father was a metal smith, and—”

“I get it,” he said. “They're just people.”

Ana nodded. There were a thousand things she wanted to add, but all of them seemed inadequate. Max sighed and gazed back down over the valley, weighing his options. Finally he nodded, too. “I'll talk to the men and see what happens. The three
you met, in my tent, they head the gangs that formed the Jackals. They’d all have to be on board for this to have any chance."

“So talk to them.”

“I will. But if this doesn’t work, Ana, you’re going to have to choose a side.”
The only person Chase could bear to look at, when they finally let him out of the cell, was Tavi. He found her in her room, still dressed in her filthy patrol gear, huddled under the covers of her bed. She cried and shook in his arms, raving about how they'd beaten Ander in front of her eyes, how she'd been sure they'd kill them then and there, how their camp was heavily armed and she didn't know why they'd let her go but they were all going to die at sunrise anyway.

Chase stroked her hair awkwardly. He wasn't used to Tavi leaning on him like this. She'd survived the Valmoran army, but it seemed like a different girl had come back. Had they done something to her? He couldn't bring himself to ask. Words were spilling from her mouth between sobs, so he just held her and listened.

Eventually she stopped crying. Chase let her go, and she stared at him with red-rimmed, watery eyes.

"Something's changed with you," she said, her voice wavering. "What is it?"
"There's a lot that's happened, Tav."
"Tell me," she demanded with more of her usual fire.
"You didn't hear them in the tower," he said. "They've brought the gods into it. Like this is a good thing for us. Belun's day. They're making people think we can win—"
"We can't," she said, starting to tremble again.
"I know. On numbers alone, we'd have a chance. But not with our weaponry against theirs. We have to make it known."

Tavi hunched down and pulled at the covers. She looked even more panicked by the idea of speaking out against the Praefectors than she did of fighting at dawn against impossible odds.

"Father?"
"Sides with Ammon, as he always has."

She shook her head, staring blankly. "We should speak with him."

_Waste of time_, Chase thought, but he didn't have the heart to refuse. "Now, then, before this thing goes any further."

That, at least, got her to her feet. They made their way out of the family chambers, down to the storage wing adjoining the great hall.

"Did you hear?" Pyrois called out as they passed through the weapons room. Every torch was lit, and every last piece of serviceable metal was being dug out, sharpened
and polished. The Guard was preparing to arm their people for war.

“Hear what?” Chase snapped. They had no time to waste.

“The Accursed want to parley,” he said, snickering. “Guess they’ve realised what they’re up against.”

Ana. She must have reached them already, found a way to carry out her part of the plan. Chase glanced at his sister, who had that sick, faraway look on her face again. Suddenly Pyrois was standing between them, eyebrows raised—clearly expecting some kind of response.

“Which is?” Chase obliged.

“The might of the Father,” Pyrois said with an air of superiority that implied that Chase, Praefector's son and all, should not have had to ask the question. Chase glared at him in disgust.

“They're up against this,” he said, seizing one of the junky knives and throwing it back onto the pile with a clang. The busy room fell silent. He could feel all eyes on him; perhaps they were a little horrified, but they were also curious.

“And they have bullets,” he added loudly. “Yes, we all worship the Father. Maybe some of you have felt his hand in your life, in the outcome of your battles against the Valmorans. But what of our brothers and sisters who have died? There are many. Did they not worship the Father too?”

He spotted a familiar face lingering in the shadow beyond the doorway. “Your sister, Rowan. Who was better or more faithful than her? Or Matt? But they died fighting, because the gods do not bother themselves much with the course of our lives. Or else why do we train? Why bother arming ourselves at all?”

“You heard Ammon. We’ve been waiting for this all our lives,” Pyrois insisted. “If you doubt that Belun is on our side tonight, you doubt it all, Chase. We are not blessed. We have no hope. We’re no better than the Accursed.”

“Perhaps we’re not,” Chase said hotly. He knew immediately that he’d gone too far. Was that even what he thought? Had knowing Ana twisted his mind? He could see that very accusation in the eyes of his peers, but nobody seemed to want to challenge him.

Nobody except his sister. Pyrois stepped aside, and she looked at him with wide, watery eyes.

“Perhaps I was wrong to fear,” she said slowly.

“No. You know the reality of this more than anyone else here—”

“But if the Father brings us victory against impossible odds, how much greater the glory to him? Some of us have doubted. I’ve doubted. Malika has spoken against the Praefectors, and we gave an ear to her ... her blasphemy. And now she lies under some
kind of trance. She's abandoned us.”

Tears were pouring down Tavi’s cheeks now, and Chase longed to get her away, comfort her, stop this. But he found it impossible to do anything, as words that were not her own, not her, spilled from his sister’s mouth.

“I agree with Pyrois,” she was saying. “We have to trust in the Father now. Put our faith in him. Or we lose more than this battle—we lose ourselves.”

She avoided his eyes as Pyrois folded her into an embrace. The guardians were hooting, shouting, eager to add their agreement. Chase felt lost among the noise, cut loose from his purpose—if he couldn’t save Tavi, what was the point?—and the bonds of total loyalty that had always bound them to each other. She was an adult now, forming her own ideas and attachments. He’d done the same thing to their father. Perhaps that was what growing up was.

"Please, Tav," he said quietly, wanting the words to be just for her, wanting her to know with how much love they were spoken. “Live for faith if you want, but don’t die for it.”

She closed her eyes as he spoke and recoiled slightly into Pyrois, as if seeking shelter from his words. Was there anything he could say that wouldn’t hurt her? He wanted to stay and fight for his sister, but it seemed as though the push and pull might tear her apart. And there was no time.

He turned away, walking at first among the bustling workers, then forcing his way through at a run. Tavi was right about one thing. The last person on earth that he wanted to see also happened to be the only one who might actually be able to save their people. The beloved leader, the great orator. Their father.
"Chase," Jove said by way of greeting. He sat alone in his small chambers adjoining the second level of the justice tower. They were cold rooms, sparsely furnished. In pride of place was a heavy oak table holding a few of the holy books. His father was not one for luxury, but he did believe in the power of the written word. It came as no surprise to Chase that, in this hour of crisis, it was the books his father had turned to. He sat before them, as if deep in contemplation, turning a small jade pendant over in his hands. Chase tried to remember where he’d seen it before; it was buried somewhere, deep in his memory, but all he could recall was a deep feeling of unease.

"Tav is distraught," he announced by way of greeting. Sometimes Tavi was the one place they could find common ground.

"I’m sure she is," Jove said, still fixated on his books. "She has been through the fire. It will pass."

*Have you even talked to her?* Chase wanted to ask, but there was no good to come from that.

"Father," he said instead. "Tell me that you’ve considered that this might not be Belun’s day. That it could be something we haven’t anticipated. Are you truly willing to gamble every life here on this interpretation? *Tavi’s* life? She believes in you, but she doesn’t really understand why. I don’t know of anyone who understands why. They just trust in what Ammon said. With all that on your shoulders—"

*That* got his attention. Jove stood abruptly. "I have considered it."

Chase tried not to show his surprise. "And?"

His father looked him square in the eye. "And what do you think? I stand behind him and our Father. Were this not the final war, we would have to fight every last man of them anyway, to cleanse the circle. The books give that clear directive."

"There are other verses," Chase argued. "Ones that speak of hospitality and compassion. Why you’ve chosen this interpretation and not another—"

"Is not something you care to understand, clearly, but you were always more interested in arguing than learning, Chase. Your ego is, as ever, beyond my influence—"

"Like you tried to influence Mother? I remember. Don’t bother telling me that her problem was ego as well—"

"No," Jove said heavily. "Her problem was her heart."

Chase blinked. His father had never before said a word about their mother after her
death. Not a word.

"Compassion is a virtue, son, and I know this is something you share with her. But if not tempered by faith ..."

"You think Mother lacked faith?"

"I was talking about you. But yes, she did. Your mother was a special woman, Chase. You know how I worshipped her—too much, in truth. After we were blessed with you, our life seemed perfect. But in the year that I joined the elders, she started to grow in pride. I didn’t see it at first. She started to question our Praefectors publicly, and was not receptive to the answers; she wanted to create change, tear down some of the very walls that our nation was built on. I tried to temper her questioning nature, protect her, but in time her boldness grew too ... destructive. She was creating a rift among our people, and it was that much more damaging because she was special. Because she was respected. Because she was loved. I fear that if you continue down this path ..."

Jove’s voice was tight with the effort of holding back his emotions, but they were written all over the sharp lines of his face. Fear for his son. Grief for his wife. And something else—something Chase struggled to identify at first, but as he waited for his father to finish the sentence, it came to him.

Guilt.

He found himself stepping forward, seizing the front of his father’s robes. “You fear I’ll be conveniently killed? Like she was?”

At last, he saw tears glinting in Jove’s eyes, and he wished he hadn’t.

"Not killed,” his father said heavily. “Purged.”

Chase remembered the time of his mother’s disappearance and death. Remembered it too well, he’d thought until now. It had been a time of great upset. He’d thought that all of the grief was for her loss, just like his. But it had been more than that; of course it had.

"You purged mother?” Chase whispered. Jove was staring at him, but Chase got the strange feeling that his father was seeing mostly traces of her—the wife he’d abandoned to the Praefectors’ justice.

“There is a special provision,” Jove said, “for cases like hers. She was cast out privately by the elders, including myself, and the people were notified of her death.”

"A lie,” Chase snarled.

"Not a lie. She was gone from Belun’s sight. Moreover, the physical death that followed—at the hands of our enemy—was very real. I grieved, son, grieved terribly. You must know that.”

"I know nothing about you except that you’re a liar,” Chase spat. "You go on and on
about honesty when it is expedient and deceive about the things that matter—"

"The worst thing," Jove said, ignoring him, "the worst thing of all is that I fear that history will repeat itself if I cannot prevent you from following her course. If you don’t relent in your mindless campaign—"

A small gasp came from behind them and the door swung open, revealing Tavi, her face swollen and shiny and red.

"You lied, Papa," she choked. "Don’t make it worse by pretending it was right."

She turned away, clutching the place between her ribs as though she’d been stabbed there, and ran for the stairs. Without a word, Chase followed. He chased her all the way to the top of the justice tower, where she lunged for the edge of the parapet, sobbing.

He caught her arm and yanked her back.

"DON’T TOUCH ME," she screamed, swinging at his face with her free arm.

He caught the fist and held it; her hands felt small and fragile under his, the way they always had. His little sister writhed under his grip and unleashed a torrent of words that would have made any guardian raise an eyebrow. But when she crumpled, he caught her, and held her up, and the fact that she let him was a benediction a thousand times stronger than the one Ammon had bestowed on the day of his bonding.
Ana had seen enough forest mornings by now to know they had run out of time. The sun would appear over the mountains before long—already the world around them was lit well enough to see far into the valley, shrouded as it was in early morning fog. If the Tain were planning on accepting the terms that Max and his gang had agreed on, they were leaving it dangerously late.

Had Chase failed? Had he even tried?

"I want to go down to the river," she told Max.

"Could be dangerous," he warned. "They may be planning to answer our message in blood."

Ana shrugged, stood, and brushed the leaves off her jeans. It was time to move forward, one way or another.

Back at camp, the Jackals milled around impatiently, having packed up their tents and consumed the last of their food at his orders.

"We'll have new supplies by nightfall," Max gloated.

Ana ignored him. She was looking at the faces of the men as they passed through. In them, she saw the stuff of her nightmares, but also simpler things, human things, like exhaustion and despair and hope.

Without a belt, the jeans kept slipping down, so she asked Max to wait while she changed back into her guardian tunic. He inclined his head and waited nearby while she located the correct tent and changed. There was no reverence for him among the gangs—she heard some ribbing about his patience with 'the girl'—but there was respect, and a kind of kinship. It was no longer so hard to imagine that Valmorans might fight and die together.

Ana re-emerged quickly, wearing her tunic and belt. The fabric was still stained with blood, although most of it had been washed away. In these clothes and a dagger back in her belt, she felt like herself again.

"Ready?" Max asked. He held out his hand and they made their way back down to the west bank of the river. Ana wove her fingers around his tightly, wishing that things could be different; that they could be brother and sister like Chase and Tavi, that nothing could drive them apart. But the sun rose, and with no sign of a Tain messenger, Max grew restless.

"I have to get back to the men," he said at last. "They know the terms."
“You could still turn back from this,” she said to Max, but he didn’t even bother shaking his head.

She tried again. "What if there was another place for us? Somewhere away from here. We could find it together."

"There’s nowhere else," Max said firmly, taking a step back towards the path leading up to his army. "I have to go. Choose a side, Ana."

"Bye, then," she whispered.

She recalled him saying those same words to her, back in his apartment in Valmora, and how much it had hurt. But Max was smiling.

"We’ll win, you know," he said, almost gently.

"Yeah." They probably would. The thought held no comfort. She only saw death when she looked at him. His, and many others.

He turned, walked away, and was soon lost to sight.

Ana sank to her knees. Never had she felt so alone, so lost. Had she somehow set this chain of events into motion? Could she have done something differently to stop it? Was there something, anything, that she was missing—that might still be done?

A faint yell came from the woods on the other side of the river, and she looked up, startled. Chase appeared on the far riverbank, with a small group trailing behind him. Ana squinted. They carried gear, but wore no armbands. She waved to them to let them know it was safe. After a pause, Chase hoisted his pack over his head and waded into the river, and the others followed slowly behind. The sun was rising, bringing with it a sense of dread.

Chase emerged first, shook off a little of the water, and re-shouldered his pack. Ana tried to catch his eye, but he seemed reluctant to let her.

"It’s strange," he said at last. "To be dead in the eyes of your people and gods, but to still feel the same."

For the first time, she noticed the faded sash of blood on his clothes. His companions were emerging from the river, bearing the same mark. First came a battered and red-faced Tavi, gripping a loaded bow and staring at Ana as though she were a total stranger. Then Ander, holding the hand of a skinny kid who shared his wayward reddish-brown hair. Henn, the stocky girl that had shared her initiation, and another boy that she didn’t recognise. Finally, her eyes drifted back to Chase.

"What happened?"

"War," Chase said, looking at Ana at last. "They declare war, and we are purged from the nation of Tain."

"No. All of you?"
“Any who spoke out, or sided with those who did,” he confirmed.

Ana shook her head disbelievingly. There were many among the Tain who would not want this fight. She knew it. But they had made their choice, and there was no way of getting to them now, with the fortress sealed.

“Then Max is our only chance,” she said quickly. “We need to cut him a deal. Something that could sway his army. What can we offer them that we haven’t already?”

Chase glanced at his sister and back to Ana. “I have an idea. But if we're going to try …”

She jumped to her feet. “We need to run.”
They raced up the mountain, Ana leading the way until Chase's long strides overtook her, then Tavi's, then Henn, Ander and the boy. They burst out into the clearing just as an almighty explosion rocked the valley.

"What in His name—" Henn exclaimed. All seven of them looked around wildly, but the thick green forest revealed only dissembled campsites, hastily abandoned.

Ana paled. She was gasping for breath, trying to ease the vice that gripped her lungs. To reverse the strain of exertion, she had to breathe slowly, but breathing slowly seemed impossible when her body screamed for air. The world blurred. Battle cries and the sound of pounding feet echoed through the mountains, but it seemed distant, like something happening far away.

"The ridge," she gasped, jerking a hand in what she hoped was the right direction. "So we can see."

The others took off at a run and she staggered behind them, grabbing at mossy trunks and rocks for balance. Ana was the last to make it to the ridge, and she pressed her eyes closed for a moment, not ready just yet to see what was unfolding below. But she couldn’t block out Tavi's scream, or the wails of Ander's brother. She opened her eyes.

A giant hole had been blown in the stone wall near Tahon's main entrance, blooming from the edifice that had housed the towering sculpture of Belun. One of the great bronze doors had fallen. A wave of pale soldiers surged forward, rushing through the gap, and gunfire blared in a racket that sounded like it could tear open the fabric of the world. Somehow, Ana thought she could hear screaming.

But the Tain rallied. Rocks and arrows pelted down from the towers and parapets. Dozens of Valmorans fell, and their peers trampled over them without hesitation, pressing on to make it through the doorway. Their path inside seemed to be blocked. They surged and were pushed back, a second and third time, while the archers thinned their ranks.

Then the dam inside the corridor seemed to break, and Valmorans streamed inside Tahon with their guns blazing. The outcome of the fight no longer seemed so certain. In fact, Ana wondered if either side could claim victory. It looked as though they might just rip each other apart.

She reached out and touched Chase’s arm. He turned to look down at her, and if she
had expected to see blame and hate in his eyes, she was partly relieved to see neither. What was really there was worse; a chasm of loss. It stretched out through the short distance between them like a hundred miles of scorched earth. She dropped her hand abruptly.

He was turning something over in his fingers—a small, circular pendant of jade that she had never seen before.

“What were you going to do?” Ana asked.

He opened his hand to reveal the pendant. It was a circle comprised of two complimentary halves, together but separate.

“This belonged to my mother,” he said slowly. “She got it off a travelling woman that she treated in secret a few Turns before her death. A woman that came from the west.”

Next to him, Tavi huffed in pained disbelief. She looked at Chase, then back at the fortress, then at the pendant in her brother’s hands. “That’s crazy, Chase. Nobody comes from the west. There’s nothing there.”

“You were three, Tav,” he said gently. “You don’t remember. I barely do myself. But it’s true.”

Ander, who had been crouched down, shielding his brother’s face, stood and cleared his throat.

“Regardless of who wins this war, I think we’d be best to be far away from here when it’s over,” he said.

Ana nodded slowly. Some part of her had known it would come to this; that Malika had been right, that she could never have found a place in Tahon, and her future lay far away from here. She no longer had the backpack the priestess had told her to keep, but she felt within herself the beginnings of some kind of intuition, as clear as if the priestess was whispering in her ear.

The future, whatever it was, lay to the west. She would keep pushing forward, until she was strong enough to be a true force to be reckoned with in this world. She would not belong to anything or anyone.

A deep groan came from Tahon and they watched as the justice tower shuddered and started to crumble.

“Let’s go, then,” Henn said in a strangled voice. “I can’t see any more of this.”

They turned away from the Tain valley, and made their way up near the crest of the mountain where the air was noticeably cooler. From there they could see the ranges stretching out for miles, with puffs of white cloud floating above the jagged peaks. Further out, on the horizon, shimmered some sort of sandy haze.
Ana shuddered. It looked like a journey that demanded too much hope, when the world around them seemed hopeless; but they descended into that overgrown valley all the same, forward, forward, left right left right left.
PART TWO:
The Politics of Worldbuilding in Post-Apocalyptic Dystopia
INTRODUCTION

Through discussion of Angela Carter’s Heroes and Villains (1969), Suzanne Collins’ Hunger Games trilogy (2008-2011) and my own novel Anathema, this exegesis explores the use of speculative worldbuilding in post-apocalyptic dystopia as a vehicle for socio-political commentary. I suggest that worldbuilding, particularly in the context of the dystopian genre, facilitates the transmission of controversial ideas by allowing them to be encoded in setting and thus presented to the reader in a highly accessible way. Carter and Collins both provide strong examples of this; the heavily politicised worldbuilding of both Heroes and Villains and the Hunger Games trilogy succeeds in lampooning key aspects of Cold War Britain and the Bush era United States respectively, with significant critical effect. Applying New Historicist principles, I consider these texts as both a product of and commentary on the time and place in which they were written, highlighting the functionality of worldbuilding in the dystopian genre as an effective and compelling tool for the expression of revolutionary political ideas.

What is “Worldbuilding”?

Worldbuilding is a general term for the authorial techniques employed in the crafting of a fictional setting. Its scope is generally seen to include the presentation of culture, geography, technology, natural laws, history, language, and so on.¹ That said, there is some variance between the traditional demarcation of worldbuilding as described above—an anchored to physical and factual aspects of setting—and broader notions which also emphasise the conjunction of place with character, and by extension the personalities, beliefs, motivations, attitudes and assumptions expressed within the text. In the latter sense, characters and their actions, insofar as they are a reflection of their cultural milieu, may be considered an essential aspect of worldbuilding.

In addressing the scope of worldbuilding, even the most conventional authorities acknowledge a strong link between character and setting. Jerry Pournelle

does so in “The Construction of Believable Societies”; through his directive that authors must use worldbuilding to give their characters plausible and consistent motives:

> We can state as a rule of thumb that no story can be believable unless there is behind it a social background that makes the characters act in believable ways... characters may have to do bizarre things to make the story work; and the more bizarre the actions, the more careful must be their explanation. That explanation requires some examination and presentation of the society that produced the character. Even madness cannot escape some limits: the ways men [sic] go mad are in large part determined by their backgrounds and upbringing.³

Pournelle stops short of explicitly relegating such actions to the domain of “worldbuilding” but he does establish the necessary link; if characters are underpinned and made plausible by worldbuilding, then it follows that worldbuilding is expressed through characters and their actions. At the very least, Pournelle’s observations acknowledge a highly permeable boundary between character and setting.

Such a view has been promoted by science fiction pioneer Ursula K. Le Guin, whose essays on the craft of science fiction express her conviction that all ‘true novels’ are primarily about character, with classic worldbuilding techniques such as “the invention of miraculous objects, the relation of alternate histories, and so on... used subjectively, as a metaphor, as a means for exploring and explaining what goes on inside [characters].”⁴ Although this exegesis does not go so far as Le Guin’s statement in insisting on the absolute primacy of character, it does acknowledge that characters and setting are linked in a symbiotic relationship that would lose all meaning if divided, and that worlds cannot be meaningfully explored apart from the persons that inhabit them. I will therefore consider the use of worldbuilding in any relevant form, including that which is often most complex and interesting—the ways a world is made manifest in human characters.⁵

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⁵ Due to limitations of space this exegesis does focus more on the broader social aspects of worldbuilding rather than the personal. A few key aspects that would have been interesting to address more fully include Marianne’s metamorphosis from passive object to anarchist-feminist leader, and her ambivalence toward patriarchal relics; Katniss’ moral sensitivity, developing sociopolitical awareness, and emotional response to the emergence of post-revolutionary
Worldbuilding in Dystopia

As originally proposed by Darko Suvin in 1972, science fiction can be defined by its departure from empirical reality, toward the novum, or elements of scientifically plausible cognitive estrangement.\(^6\) For the science fiction writer, this space between ‘what is’ and ‘what could be’ provides scope for creative innovation and constructive thought experiments, while for the reader, the ‘strange newness’ of the novum offers a means of viewing reality through new eyes. Used in this capacity, worldbuilding is foregrounded as a key aspect of writing and reading science fiction; a world in this genre is expected to be at least somewhat different to our own, and the text’s relevance relies, at least partly, in these differences.\(^7\)

The cognitive estrangement element of worldbuilding becomes even more central to dystopian works, since any moral or political ‘message’ is often directly articulated through authorial choices such as, for example, social mores and government (as in The Hunger Games) or culture and environment (as in Heroes and Villains). With the author’s philosophies embedded in the setting itself, the novel’s protagonist may uncover complex and provocative ideas simply by interacting with their environment. In many cases, this mode of transmission allows the author to raise, naturalise and communicate truly radical points without reverting to blatant didacticism, or causing undue offence; any relation to the real world is a connection usually made by the reader themselves, as part of the collaboration between author and audience.

Throughout the history of science fiction, we find a rich tradition of thought experiments facilitated by speculative worldbuilding. Dystopia in particular has been used as a vehicle for sociopolitical extrapolation and forewarning, especially in response to major world crises of fear. As established by Tom Moylan, although it was utopia that traditionally thrived in tumultuous times, the unprecedented world events of the 20\(^{th}\) century prompted a turn toward more radical, dark and pessimistic literary forms, popularizing the critical utopia, anti-utopia and dystopia.\(^8\) The dystopian
government; and the personally and socially disruptive effect of Ana’s introduction to Tain
culture.


\(^7\) Although the same might be said of related genres such as fantasy or horror, Suvin makes the distinction that the novum of science fiction is scientifically plausible and therefore not an escape from reality, but a means of exploring reality through the imagination. (Ibid., p. 375)

\(^8\) Demand The Impossible: Science Fiction and The Utopian Imagination, Oxford, Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2014.
imagination became, as Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini call it, a “canary in the cage” for the modern world. This was evident in the surge of post-nuclear dystopias published throughout the Cold War period, reflecting concerns relating to the threat of nuclear annihilation; today, it is evident again in the way popular young adult incarnations of dystopia reflect collective traumas such as 9/11, the War on Terror, and the Global Financial Crisis. Through the novum of dystopian worldbuilding, authors engage with the anxiety generated by such paradigm-shifting world events by extrapolating on emerging social, economic, political or environmental trends, and exploring their effects through the experience of human characters.

Exegesis Overview

In keeping with the dystopian tradition, Angela Carter and Suzanne Collins both engaged with significant political moments in Heroes and Villains and The Hunger Games. Although there is considerable overlap with other genres—both are adventure stories, and Heroes and Villains is pure gothic fantasy—both are clear post-apocalyptic dystopias which make effective use of Suvin’s novum to reflect on the upheaval of their times. Yet both novels also went further in transforming the apocalyptic discourse they were a part of. The publication of Heroes and Villains in 1969 came on the tail end of the dystopian response to the Cold War, following classic postnuclear visions such as Fahrenheit 451 (1953), The Chrysalids (1955), Alas, Babylon (1959) and A Canticle for Leibowitz (1960). Yet—as we will discuss in chapter one of this exegesis—while Carter showed a referential awareness of such novels, she deliberately subverted their tropes and instead opened up an anti-patriarchal path toward the second-wave feminist science fiction of the 1970s and 80s. Collins, on the other hand, was an early contributor to the dystopian resurgence of the 21st century (alongside Scott Westerfeld’s Uglies and James Dashner’s The Maze Runner), and has arguably brought on a renaissance of the genre, which is characterised by young adult themes and a distinct anti-neoliberal sentiment. Both novels, then, are not only outstanding


10 Prominent examples include The Female Man (1975), Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), and The Handmaid’s Tale (1985).

11 Two of the many young adult dystopian adventure stories that seem to have been inspired by Collins include Marie Lu’s Legend (2011) and Veronica Roth’s Divergent (2011) trilogies, which both targeted teen audiences and dealt similarly with issues of identity, political agency, economic disparity, media manipulation, and violence.
examples of effective cognitive estrangement, but also forerunners of significant ideological shifts in literature and politics.

As discussed in Chapter One, *Heroes and Villains* presents an anarchistic post-nuclear world that signifies Carter's rejection of the patriarchal and authoritarian ideologies that led humanity into the Cold War. Through her fable of Marianne, the Professors, and the Barbarians, Carter presents the wild terrain of post-apocalyptic England—scattered with stark reminders of the failure of civilization—and two unique societies that are doomed, in their own ways, to repeat the mistakes of the past. As her protagonist, Marianne, comes to understand and reject the Professors' and Barbarians' reliance on obsolete social, political and philosophical relics, Carter suggests that radically new pathways must be forged in order to avert disaster.

Chapter Two explores the similar function of Suzanne Collins' worldbuilding in the influential *Hunger Games* trilogy. Through Panem—a grim, economically imbalanced, politically disengaged post-apocalyptic world that mimics the worst of post-9/11 politics—Collins gives a powerful voice to rising fears of what it means to be a citizen of the West in the age of terrorism and reality TV. In this speculative vision, entertainment media dominate the cultural narrative, essentially dictating the ethics and preoccupations of wealthy citizens while diverting attention from their lack of political agency under the dictatorship of President Snow. By juxtaposing the existence of privileged 'Capitol' citizens and poor 'District' workers, Collins demonstrates the insidious potential of biased entertainment media and the associated consumer culture to perpetuate alienation, injustice and violence.

As discussed in Chapter Three, *Anathema* draws from Carter and Collins' example by applying a similar mode of worldbuilding to current world issues. Struggling for survival in the post-apocalyptic wasteland that follows a mismanaged environmental crisis, the 'Valmoran' and 'Tain' societies are pitted against each other on a cultural and ideological level, with the challenge of transcending their differences in order to survive. Primarily through the forest-dwelling Tain, whose society might be seen as an ambiguous utopia if not for their dysfunctional response to outsiders and dissent, *Anathema* explores the destructive potential of nationalism, religion and democracy gone awry, particularly in the context of immigration and war.

Viewing all three works as a deliberate reflection of their social and political contexts, this exegesis considers Carter's, Collins' and my own use of dystopian worldbuilding as a medium for thought experiments and socio-political commentary. I submit that speculative worldbuilding lends itself to the expression of complex or controversial ideas, firstly by offering authors an arena in which to explore their
concerns unencumbered by the limitations of reality, and secondly by distilling the outcome of this exploration into a uniquely approachable, naturalised form. With reference to Carter and Collins, I highlight some of the ways that this function has been utilised at peak times in the history of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction. Finally, having used these findings as a model for *Anathema*, I explain my own use of worldbuilding techniques and their place in the ongoing dystopian tradition.
WORLDBUILDING IN HEROES AND VILLAINS

The idea first gripped me when I was a little kid and read The Day of the Triffids in the newspaper, that the literal truth might not be the whole truth, turned into a conviction that one way of asking questions—because I think one of the functions of fiction is to ask questions that can’t be asked any other way—is through constructing imaginary worlds in which ideas can be discussed.

- Angela Carter, 1982

Published in 1969, at the tail end of the surge of post-nuclear fictions issuing from the Cold War 1950s and 60s, Angela Carter’s Heroes and Villains depicts a unique post-apocalyptic world that is constructed so as to articulate and emphasise its author’s political ideas. Through the construction of two fictional societies, the ‘Professors’ and the ‘Barbarians,’ as well as their post-apocalyptic setting, Carter deliberately subverts the dominant genre trends of her time and initiates concerns relating to environment, gender, society and species, as well as cultural factors like religion, art and language. In doing so, she leverages the authorial tool of worldbuilding to present an unconventional critique of 1960s Britain, and forges a ground-breaking path forward for feminist and politically minded authors.12

In Heroes and Villains, the “reset” of apocalypse offers Carter the scope to explore pressing sociopolitical issues through original worldbuilding.13 Foregrounded among these issues was the spectre of nuclear war. In her Guest of Honour speech at Channel-con in 1982, Carter acknowledged the immense ideological impact of the nuclear bomb on her work and society at large, calling the Cuban Missile Crisis “one of the great watersheds, certainly of my life.”14 This ‘watershed’ was likewise evident in

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12 Deconstructing the perceived-as-unassailable was a key goal of Carter’s fiction; in Notes From the Front Line, she famously wrote that she considered herself in the “demythologizing business”, concerned with investigating “the social fictions that regulate our lives.” (Carter in Micheline Wandor (ed.), On Gender and Writing, Pandora Press, London, 1983, pp. 70-71). In a later interview with Anna Katsavos, Carter explained further that she was “basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, and what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them.” (Carter 1988, qtd. in Aidan Day, Angela Carter: The Rational Glass, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998, p. 3-4).

13 As Aidan Day observes, “Carter’s future settings usually provide … an arena in which she can freely consider the problems of a present which is still distorted by the attitudes and outlooks of an old world.” (Day, p. 40)

science fiction; Roz Kaveney points out that Heroes and Villains is “a version of the post-apocalyptic novels of the fifties, in which an older sort of decline-of-civilization novel... is blended with the specific fears that it is our own civilization that will be handed down among the radioactive ruins.”15 Within this trend of post-apocalyptic visions, Kaveney notes that English examples “tended to be about return to a safer pastoral experience”, while American examples “tended to be far more about a continuation of legitimacy.”16 Carter makes a deliberate departure from both viewpoints. Her world is one where pre-apocalyptic relics, both physical and ideological, are revealed in the harsh light of satire as ineffectual at best or fraudulent at worst. Through the decline of the Professor and Barbarian cultures, tied to their failure to eschew such relics, she demonstrates her view that a rejection of tired authoritarian, patriarchal power structures and modes of thought is imperative to survival.17

The novel’s plot follows Marianne, a young woman raised in a literal white tower among the ‘Professors’—an orderly agrarian-academic community that aims to preserve the knowledge and conventions of the former world. After her father’s death, Marianne flees the community and throws her lot in with their nemesis, the unruly ‘Barbarian’ tribe. This transition is fraught with trauma and ideological difficulties, but when Marianne finds herself pregnant by the barbarian leader Jewel, she allies herself with him against Donally, the tribe’s manipulative shaman. After Donally’s exile and Jewel’s death, she resolves to forge a new path forward as the Barbarian leader. Ultimately, the plot sees Marianne mature in her understanding of both societies, as well as their abuses of knowledge and reason; in this she takes a step toward reconciling the aspects of western civilization that Carter has problematized, opening up a new discourse about power, human nature and gender, and presenting ideas that are in many ways as relevant to the 21st century as they were to 1969.

The Professors

The Professors are the society most directly associated with Carter’s Britain, and it is primarily through them that she rejects the mainstream ideologies highlighted by Kaveney. Pastoral nostalgia is dismissed as early as the opening paragraph of the novel, when Marianne perceives that “time was frozen around her in this secluded place

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16 Ibid.
17 According to her later writings, it seemed to Carter in 1969 that such changes might be imminent; “Truly,” she wrote of that time, “it felt like year one, when all that was holy was in the process of being profaned.” (Carter 1983, p. 70).
where a pastoral quiet possessed everything and the busy clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice.”\(^{18}\) The Professors—who can be read as a parody of educated circles in Carter’s world\(^ {19}\)—have formed a rational and well-intentioned society that strips human life of vitality and meaning. In many ways, the clock is representative of this society and everything Carter perceives as wrong with it. Measures of time, as Marianne observes of the contents of her father’s books, have “ceased to describe facts and now stood only for ideas or memories,”\(^ {20}\) yet the clock ticks persistently on—orderly, archaic, meaningless. Before embarking on her journey of self-discovery, Marianne drowns it in the swamp.\(^ {21}\)

The ‘continuation of legitimacy’ ideology is likewise rejected early in the novel, embodied in Marianne’s father, as representative of the Professor culture at large. He relates a version of apocalyptic history with University professors as heroes, being “the only ones left who could resurrect the gone world in a gentler shape,”\(^ {22}\) a goal which has apparently been met in their orderly caste system of Professors, Workers and Soldiers. However, their achievement is rendered sterile by the quietly dystopian outcome, in which human nature is repressed and the knowledge that they value above all else is presented as painfully anachronistic. “[Marianne’s father] was writing a book on the archaeology of social theory,” Carter narrates, “but maybe nobody in the community would want to read it, except Marianne, and she might not understand it.”\(^ {23}\) Accordingly, after fleeing her home in search of a more colourful existence, Marianne warns Jewel against his notion of escaping the tribe by handing himself over to the Professors:

They’d walk around you carefully in case you bit them and clip off your hair and take photographs of the picture on your back, a relic of the survival of Judaeo-Christian iconography, they’d find that very interesting. They’d take away your fur coat and dress you in a dark suit and set you intelligence tests where you had to match squares with circles and circles with squares. And give you aptitude tests ... and many other tests. And everything you did or said would be

\(^{18}\) *Heroes and Villains (HV)*, p. 1.

\(^{19}\) In interviews and non-fictional writing, Angela Carter maintained a critical view of university education, despite having completed a B.A. in English literature at the University of Bristol. In *Truly, It Felt Like Year One*, she spoke favourably of the “intellectual apprenticeship” she received from the culture of the sixties, which she said “suited my own instincts far more than the Leavisite version I was being given at university.” (Carter 1988, p. 211).

\(^{20}\) *HV*, p. 7

\(^{21}\) *HV*, p. 15

\(^{22}\) *HV*, p. 8

\(^{23}\) *HV*, p. 8
observed and judged, sleeping and waking, everything, to see how you revealed your differences, every word and gesture studied and annotated until you were nothing but a mass of footnotes with a tiny trickle of text at the top of a page. You would be pressed inside a book.\textsuperscript{24}

This excerpt epitomizes a point that recurs throughout \textit{Heroes and Villains}: the Professors' language and ideas, like their spiritual lives, are barren. "The Professor community is a world where words have lost their power of communication and, thus, to effect any change,"\textsuperscript{25} notes Gemma Lopez. As the Professorial elites occupy themselves with study for the sake of study, soldiers "delegated to police and protect" them are meanwhile "developing an autonomous power of their own"\textsuperscript{26}—something Marianne's father notes wistfully in so many passive words, reminding the reader of the seeming powerlessness of the British public to direct the actions of their government and military.\textsuperscript{27}

The Barbarians

While it is clear from the start of the novel that the Professor's sterile brand of rationalism doesn't amount to any real way forward, Marianne's experience of Barbarian culture reveals that the other end of the spectrum doesn't fare much better. As her father forewarned, chaos is the opposite pole of boredom,\textsuperscript{28} and the Barbarians' uninhibited, unexamined, naturalistic existence leaves them "sick, sad and worn"\textsuperscript{29} as well as entirely vulnerable to intellectual abuse by their Professor-raised leader, Dr Donally. Culture, religion and language are weapons in Donally's hands, repurposed to

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{HV}, pp. 123-124
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{HV}, p. 9
\textsuperscript{27} Of course, this has been a widespread problem for most societies throughout history, but it seems—for Carter, at least—that events in the 1960s, as well as the counterculture of that period, brought the issue to the forefront of public consciousness (see Carter 1988). In her monograph on British cultural history of the 1960's, Patricia Waugh notes: "The Profumo scandal of 1963 revealed the government to be seriously unaware ... of the attitudes of the general public, and the satirical magazine \textit{Private Eye} parodied its insouciant decadence in a fall-of-Rome cartoon in the June issue. A prominent spokesperson for the British New Left, Perry Anderson, castigated the nation as 'sclerotic' ..." (\textit{Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990}, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 3-4). Unfortunately, as chapter two of this thesis will argue, the 21st century resurgence of dystopian fiction suggests that little has changed in this regard; authors such as Suzanne Collins are engaged in reflecting the failures of western democracy and suggesting radical pathways to renewed public agency.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{HV}, p. 11
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{HV}, p. 14
\end{footnotes}
shore up his power. He exploits the Barbarians’ lack of education to control them with superstition and fear, through use of religious-themed magical imagery, violent showmanship, and empty rhetoric. 30 Borrowing heavily from cultural props and Biblical myth, he paints Jewel as a messianic icon, Marianne as a post-apocalyptic Eve, and himself—the creator of both personas—as a proxy for God. “The Doctor is a practical man and believes religion is a social necessity,” says Jewel. “So he keeps Viperus berus in a box out of social necessity and now and then he persuades them all to worship it.” 31 Through this nonsensical culture cunningly crafted by Donally, Carter implies a scathing view of religious institutions in general, framing the church as a tool of mental and emotional enslavement. 32

Tellingly, Mrs Green and Jewel—the most educated of the Barbarians—knowingly refer to Donally’s tricks; yet they, like Marianne, are inclined to be swayed by them nevertheless. Donally achieves this in large part through reliance on intellectualism and sloganeering. He makes a concerted effort to bring Marianne under his influence by emblazoning the wall outside his chapel with faux-intellectual rhetoric: “BOREDOM IS THE HANDSOME SON OF PRIDE,” 33 “ONENESS WITH DESTINY GIVES STYLE AND DISTINCTION,” 34 “MISTRUST APPEARANCES, THEY NEVER CONCEAL ANYTHING,” 35 “MEMORY IS DEATH,” 36 “OUR NEEDS BEAR NO RELATION TO OUR DESIRES,” 37 and, finally, “I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST; BUT IF I TAKE TIME OFF FROM THINKING, WHAT THEN?” 38 Here, as with the language of the Professors, words lose their value for communicating ideas—but Donally’s words are sinister rather than merely impotent, since he knowingly crafts them to obfuscate and manipulate. If, as noted by Linden Peach, the void language of the Professors is a parody of ‘increasingly diffuse’ military language in the 20th century West, 39 then perhaps Donally’s cunning

30 “It’d be hell with your Dr Donally running everything, real hell, no respect for the old or nothing. Only tortures, mutilations and displays of magic,” says Mrs Green, a Professor woman who ran off with a Barbarian man in her youth. (HV, p. 39)
31 HV, p. 29
32 That she manages to do so without being offensive is testament to the effectiveness of worldbuilding as a uniquely non-confrontational way of communicating ideas. Carter, an atheist, was far more direct on the subject of religion in her nonfictional writing: “Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives... emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. That is why they were invented in the first place.” (The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History, Virago, London, 1978, p. 6).
33 HV, p. 46
34 HV, p. 59
35 HV, p. 60
36 HV, p. 87
37 HV, p. 89
38 HV, p. 98
words are a darker form of satire; religious, political and academic leaders alike are skewered insofar as their language resembles Donally’s. Further, when the shaman’s leadership is under attack, he defends it by misleadingly equating himself with concepts of fundamental merit—all “Take me away ... Throw me out. Throw out art, throw out culture, throw out wit and humour”\(^{40}\)—much as a priest or religion may equate themselves with God, or a politician might commonly appeal to peace, prosperity, or nationalism. By building a world that displays language as empty or disingenuous in the hands of the powerful, and culture as shrewdly employed to create authority by association, Carter builds her case against the social structures that perpetuate the myth of their own unimpeachable status.

A Politicized Landscape

Outside the orderly and artificial compound of the Professors, Carter paints a flamboyantly Gothic dreamland of verdant life juxtaposed with entropy and decay. Life and death is at war in her land, cultures, and people. Wildness bubbles up in the repressed Professor community in the form of madness, familicide and suicide, while the vibrant and unruly Barbarians are visibly marked by hunger, illness, and rot. The human genome now extends to *Homo praedatrix, Homo silvestris* and “various others”\(^ {41}\); the strangest and most appalling of these are the Out People, a humanoid species characterized by festering sores, oozing bodily fluids, and animalistic features such as fangs, scales, furled ears or webbed fingers.\(^ {42}\)

The Out People are loaded with ideological significance, not least as a stark reminder of what humanity has done to itself, and a way to demonstrate that the collective moral imagination of humans still falls woefully short of what might be philosophically or even practically desirable. Eva Karpinski observes that the Out People represent “what Kristeva calls the abject, embodying the horror of ultimate transgression of socially established boundaries ... associated with excrement, sores, leprosy and pox, [they] suggest leaking boundaries of the body. Their fantastic deformations ... also confound the binaries between human and nonhuman as well as those between the sexes.”\(^ {43}\) The common horror of this species is one of the few points on which the Professors and Barbarians are united; Marianne kills one of them not just

\(^{40}\) HV, p. 131
\(^{41}\) HV, p. 9
\(^{42}\) HV, p. 109-110
in defence of Jewel, but "out of a blind repugnance only to obliterate what seemed to her a cruel parody of life."\textsuperscript{44} By considering the Out People not as an evolutionary relative, but as less-than-animals to be locked out or put down, the Professors and Barbarians reject the abject, the transgression of ‘socially established boundaries’, and their complicity in the changed world. In doing so they guarantee that the mistakes of the past will be repeated. In this way, Carter uses the Out People to make a point that is as painfully relevant to the age of terror as it was at the time of writing; that the demonization of other cultures inevitably results in unnecessary conflict as well as social and spiritual impoverishment.

The Professors, of course, take this a step further by trying to ‘lock out’ and demonize the (undeniably human) Barbarians. Aidan Day observes that the Professors, “failing to recognise their own repressions, have sought to hound that which is not gentle and ordered outside themselves.”\textsuperscript{45} This is why their high rate of madness and suicide cannot be acknowledged and examined as a social problem; individuals who succumb are quickly silenced, while authorities insist on referring to such instances as individual “maladjustment”.\textsuperscript{46} Here, again, Carter highlights the steep cost of ‘us vs. them’ mentalities, seeming to deliberately reflect western governments and media.\textsuperscript{47}

Violence, Costume and Myth

In accordance with the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting, violence is a constant presence in \textit{Heroes and Villains}, primarily between Carter’s culturally and geographically disparate societies as well as members of the opposite sex. Dehumanising costumes play a significant role in both kinds of conflict. The Barbarians deliberately dress themselves up as painted “hobgoblins of nightmare”\textsuperscript{48} for their raids on the Professors, while the Professor soldiers don fascist uniforms of black leather, plastic helmets, and reflective glass visors. Accordingly, each opponent takes on a nightmarish mythology in relation to the other. From the safety of his white tower, Marianne’s ever-rational father can see through the false opposition perpetuated by these myths:

If the Barbarians inherit the earth ... if they finally destroy us ... they

will destroy their own means of living so I do not think they will

\textsuperscript{44} HV, p. 110
\textsuperscript{45} Day, p. 45
\textsuperscript{46} HV, p. 15, 17
\textsuperscript{47} In her use of the catchphrase ‘maladjustment,’ Carter “may well be parodying the way in which military language in the late twentieth century, employing evasive terms such as ‘conflict management’, has become increasingly diffuse”, suggests Linden Peach (p. 88).
\textsuperscript{48} HV, p. 5
destroy us. I think an equilibrium will be maintained. But the Soldiers
would like to destroy them, for soldiers need to be victorious, and if
the Barbarians are destroyed, who will be then be able to blame for
the bad things?^49

True to form, this understanding is purely theoretical; he makes no attempt to
see it shape Professor society. Inversely, Jewel, who has real power among the
Barbarians and typically leads them in war, refuses to deconstruct the myth of
appearances—even when prompted by Marianne to do so, and even when persisting in
the myth will likely bring his own death. “When the soldiers see you coming, they will
think you are the devil incarnate, riding a black horse,” she tells Jewel towards the end
of the novel, when he plans to carry out a particularly risky attack on the Professors.
Jewel dismisses her almost reflexively: “They are the devils, with their glass faces.”^50
When Marianne asserts that these costumes of war are not true reflections of either
side, Jewel rejects her point again, albeit more thoughtfully: “It’s true,” he claims, “as
long as one or the other of us wants to believe it.” In this answer, we start to see a
myriad of historical enmities reflected, most directly the historical conflict between the
Western Allies and Soviet Union, but also the more fragmented power struggles of the
21st century. In the end, Carter implies, it is myth that enables such wars, and conflict
will persist until both societies are rational and self-aware enough to pull back the
curtain.

In Heroes and Villains, as in much of Carter’s writing, a second war rages in the
estrangement of men and women. Here, too, myth and costume comes into play; Professor
girls are taught that Barbarian men cut their rape victims open and sew cats
up inside them,^52 while Barbarian males whisper that Professor women possess
cannibalistic toothed vaginas. As a child, Marianne quarrels with the son of the
Professor of Mathematics, who wants to cast her in the role of Barbarian in their
customary game of Heroes and Villains. She refuses, and wins a small victory by
symbolically disrupting the patriarchal structure,^54 but she proves less able to subvert
her role among the Barbarians, where humans live more in sync with the Freudian id.55

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^49 HV, p. 11
^50 HV, p. 145
^51 HV, p. 145
^52 HV, p. 10
^53 HV, p. 49
^54 Peach, p. 87
^55 “Marianne, brought up in the abstract Professors’ world, is a stranger to all the basic drives
which Jewel the Barbarian epitomizes: ‘he’s id,’ Carter commented [Sage 1977], using the
Freudian term for the primordial instincts which root human behaviour.” (Day, p. 43) Roz
This struggle, along with the potency of costume and myth, returns at full force at the wedding of Marianne and Jewel. The bride is forced to wear a crumbling Victorian wedding gown, while the groom is both painted for war and dressed as a king of antiquity,\textsuperscript{56} poised to take dominion over and ‘secularize’ Marianne, thereby neutralizing the threat she apparently poses the tribe.\textsuperscript{57} The symbolism of their wedding succeeds in imposing a shaky sense of patriarchal order until Jewel—having removed his talismans of protection—dies, and Marianne reclaims her pre-marital role as an icon of fear and power. Throughout this conflict, Carter invokes traditional gender symbolism seemingly in order to disrupt, problematize, and parody it; her world is one where patriarchal power structures are reaching their natural end, having led to the nuclear apocalypse and failed to respond appropriately to that crisis, preferring to cling to old, disproven ideas and modes of life.

**Nature vs Civilization**

The natural world of *Heroes and Villains* is in the process of reclaiming the land marked by civilization, and in so doing it takes on a capricious character. Marianne’s first ventures into the forest see her wander, fairytale-like, among the stags, rays of sunlight, and wildflowers, and resting poetically in a bed of ferns, but this is no benevolent pastoral landscape. Instead, as Chiharu Yoshioka points out, the “natural” world of the Barbarians is in fact “a Necropolis ‘built’ upon the ruins of a city: it is a made-up, Frankensteinian Creature.”\textsuperscript{58} This is nature caught in the act of devouring the former England, not from the outside in, but from the inside out. Lions and tigers, the descendants of circus animals, have run wild, as have domestic plants like the garden rose. Marianne picks her way through ruins reclaimed by a noxious swamp, forming a “dangerous network of caves,”\textsuperscript{59} and resides uneasily in the Barbarians’ decaying English manor house, a “gigantic memory of rotten stone,”\textsuperscript{60} within which “the forest [was] well already camped inside, there gathering strength for a green eruption which would one day burst the walls sky high back to nature.”\textsuperscript{61} As in the Professor community, where they attempt to ‘hem in’ human nature only to find that it bursts

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Kaveny suggests that this base characterization is a recurring theme for Carter: “Jewel, like so many other male characters in Carter’s work, is clearly a creature from the Id.” (Kaveny, p. 179)

\textsuperscript{56} HV, p. 67-68, 71,

\textsuperscript{57} HV, p. 87


\textsuperscript{59} HV, p.8

\textsuperscript{60} HV, p.31

\textsuperscript{61} HV, p.32
forth in the most unseemly of ways, here the former England’s neat demarcations of nature (zoos, gardens, houses) are shown to have burst at the seams. In this aspect of her worldbuilding—which might equally be viewed as a creative ‘un-building’ of reality—Carter communicates her anarchistic political leanings; the disruption of order by natural disorder is not only inevitable, but poetically beautiful, and an antidote of sorts to human mismanagement.

*Heroes and Villains*’ final major setting, the seaside town partly reclaimed by water, provides scope for Marianne to observe the relationship between their loss of knowledge, and this failed dominion over nature. On the shore, she observes:

> Before them and around them were all the wonders of the sea-shore, to which Marianne could scarcely put a single name, though everything had once been scrupulously named. The fans, fronds, ribbons, wreaths, garlands and lashes of weed had once been divided into their separate families … Losing their names, these things underwent a process of un-creation and reverted to chaos, existing only to themselves in an unstructured world where they were not formally acknowledged, becoming an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter surrounding the outposts of man, who no longer made himself familiar with these things or rendered them authentic in his experience by the gift of naming.62

Here Marianne is exposed to an alternative to the relentless study of the Professors—seeing that, while over-examination may strip what it studied of meaning, ignorance or indifference can amount to the same. She then turns her attention to the flooded resort town, where civilization is in the process of being deconstructed:

> ... the sea swam through inglorious thoroughfares nibbling, gobbling, gulping and digesting … incurious fish swam in bedrooms where submerged mirrors reflected faces no more, only the mazy dance of wrack and wreckage; fish swam through ocean-gone ovens and out again, uncooked …63

As indicated by Carter’s tongue-in-cheek tone (fish swam through ovens and out again, uncooked!), the resort is a farce of civilization, complete with a decaying “luxuriously endowed … scantily clad” female clock-statue in the town centre, whose “whole figure was splashed with white droppings.”64 In this process of unmaking, much is revealed

62 *HV*, p. 136-137
63 *HV*, p. 138
64 *HV*, p. 138
about the previous culture, which is retrospectively seen as frivolous and ignorant, having pursued entertainment and pleasure while racing toward their own destruction.

The cliffs towering over the resort are treated with more respect, although Carter narrates that they, too, will be subject to the ravages of time. Most poignant of all is the lighthouse upon the cliffs, “a white tower [glistening] like a luminous finger pointing to heaven”, which is obsolete, yet ‘intransigent’. This structure is the twin of the white tower of Marianne’s childhood among the Professors; it is apt, then, that while reflecting upon it, she begins to reconcile her past and present. “[Abhor] shipwreck,” says the lighthouse, “go in fear of unreason.”

Embracing reason, however, does not mean that Marianne embraces the old concepts of civilization, which would bring her full circle back to the bookish rationality of the Professors. Rather, she relishes the deconstruction of civilization, particularly at pivotal moments such as the burning of the old manor house, and, shortly after her reflections on the lighthouse, when a lion stalks Jewel on the beach:

She cleared the ridge of sand and saw the lion’s blunt, noble profile bent over the man … The world ceased to whirl and the sea to move; the shore was now the lion’s home and she and the man were intruders … The ancestors of the lion came over the sea in cages to delight and instruct the children of domestic times; she watched it and was instructed. Its eyes glowed more steadily than candle flames and Jewel would feel its warm presence close and amorous; it was a most seductive death.

The lion, like the manor house, is a vestige of the old England but the fire that burns within it is life, not annihilation. Unlike the female clock-statue and the lighthouse, the light in its eyes is ‘on’—still relevant in this remade world. The lion, in its silence and power, is the antithesis of empty words and repressive social constructs; it is nature, and art. Watching it, Marianne, who has been struggling to reconcile the ideological missteps of her new and former societies, finds herself ‘instructed.’ As noted by Dominika Oramus, she begins to recognize Professorial and Barbarian values as a “set
of false binary oppositions ... inherited from pre-holocaust Western patriarchal society,” and is ready at last to form the new ideology that amounts to the novel’s conclusion.

Accordingly, when Jewel arrays himself in his costume of war for an attempt to rescue Donally from the Professors, Marianne notes that the effect of his disguise is “quite dissolved” under the light of her matured perspective. Suddenly, in a morally ambiguous twist, she can not only see through the fripperies of culture, religion, and symbolism, but also use them toward her own ends. Upon the sudden deaths of both Jewel and Donally, she resolves to repurpose one of the Doctor’s most cherished myths, and fashion herself as “the tiger lady,” who will “rule [the Barbarians] with a rod of iron.” As noted by Aidan Day, she refuses the extremes of the Professors and Barbarians alike, favouring a new social paradigm where “reason may order, like an iron rod, the inchoate energies of the id, while the energies of the id—the energies of the ‘tiger lady’—may enrich reason.”

Conclusion

Through her production of the Professors and the Barbarians, as well as a post-apocalyptic environment caught in a powerful moment between the unmaking of the old world and the formation of the new, Angela Carter employs a broad range of worldbuilding techniques to fulfil the mandate she described as a key purpose of science fiction—that of "constructing imaginary worlds in which ideas can be discussed." The ideas raised in Heroes and Villains are complex and controversial, attacking the very foundations of western civilization, yet Carter succeeds in communicating her views in an accessible way, through an evocative presentation of environment, culture, and characterisation that explores and illuminates, rather than expounds, her views. This, I suggest, is a strong example of worldbuilding in its unique capacity for raising provocative ideas in a potent but readily assimilated manner, which adds greatly to the revolutionary potential of literary dystopia. In the next chapter of this thesis, I turn to a contemporary example; the breakout novel of an author who

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71 HV, p. 147
73 HV, p. 150
74 Day, p. 53
75 Carter 1997, p. 35
addressed the upheaval of a new era through speculative worldbuilding, satire, and sharp sociopolitical commentary, prompting the second wave of dystopian fiction, and doing for the age of terrorism what *Heroes and Villains* did for the Cold War.
WORLDBUILDING IN THE HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY

Telling a story in a futuristic world gives you this freedom to explore things that bother you in contemporary times. So, in the case of the Hunger Games, issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth, the power of television and how it's used to influence our lives, the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon, and then first and foremost to me, the issue of war.

- Suzanne Collins

It would be difficult to overstate the cultural impact of The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins, first published in 2008—a year when the events of 9/11 were still fresh in the collective memory, but the ensuing search for ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and associated War on Terror were the subject of increasing cynicism; when a backlash against the Bush regime was growing in the United States and abroad; and when the Global Financial Crisis hit world markets with a force not seen since the Great Depression. Unsurprisingly, after an all-time low throughout the 1990s, dystopian fiction was making a quiet resurgence. It was into this environment that Collins launched her controversial young adult novel, featuring a post-apocalyptic world controlled by a fascist-style dictatorship bearing pointed correlations to western democracy—a world where privilege and poverty exist in sickening contrast, rampant consumer capitalism strips individuals of agency, and, famously, teenagers are forced to fight to the death in a celebrated media event mimicking both war and reality television. Collins’ worldbuilding raises concerns targeted to the post-9/11 age, particularly in regard to social and political structures, the manipulative and desensitizing powers of media, and the steep cost of consumer culture. Today, the series—including sequels Catching Fire (2009) and Mockingjay (2010)—has emerged as the bestselling trilogy of all time, popularizing a relatively new discourse about the failings of western neo-liberalism, as well as promoting young adult political activism.

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79 Although concern about state control has been a well-established feature of dystopian fiction throughout the genre’s history (among many others, Brave New World, 1984, Fahrenheit 451 and A Clockwork Orange all focused on various aspects of this theme), Collins was among the
and awareness. In doing so, the *Hunger Games* trilogy presents a strong example of speculative worldbuilding as an effective tool for sociopolitical commentary and change.

The *Hunger Games* trilogy follows Katniss Everdeen, a teenage citizen of District 12, which is one of twelve working-class districts that provide material support to the nation’s affluent ‘Capitol’ city. The three-novel story arc begins when Katniss replaces her younger sister in the Hunger Games—a televised Battle-Royale style competition designed to entertain Capitol citizens and reinforce the oppression of the districts. The plot of *The Hunger Games* focuses primarily on Katniss’s struggle to survive the Games, as well as her relationship with the male competitor from her home district, Peeta Mellark. *Catching Fire* develops the trilogy’s themes along with Katniss’s increasing social consciousness; as she struggles with the unexpected injustice of being sent back to the arena, she begins to engage with the plight of the districts and reject the status quo of Panem. Finally, in *Mockingjay*, Katniss participates as a figurehead of the revolution and experiences the traumas of war. Underpinned by complex worldbuilding throughout, the trilogy ultimately prompts young readers to critically examine modern developments in their own world and consider the moral issues presented by social inequality, reality television and state-sanctioned violence.

**The Districts**

The trilogy opens in District 12, a coal-mining region through which Collins explores working-class poverty and some key mechanisms of social and economic oppression. Katniss describes the town as “grey and squat”[80], its people as physically and mentally downtrodden; “Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many of whom have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails and the lines of their sunken faces.”[81] The district is subject to pervasive if relatively lax methods of overt control, most notably a chain-link fence electrified only two or three hours a day, a peacekeeping force long since slackened into minor corruption and personal familiarity, and the intimidation of the Hunger Games.[82] These factors

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[81] *HG*, p. 4-5.
[82] “Taking the kids from our districts,” Katniss narrates, “forcing them to kill each other while we watch—this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy ... [the]
combine to present a place caught in a precarious balance between harshness and tolerability—Katniss wryly notes that, in District Twelve, one can “starve to death in safety”83—so that the majority of citizens may live in passable contentment unless struck by particular misfortune, such as the death of a family’s main provider or losing a child to the Hunger Games ‘reaping’. Accordingly, District Twelve citizens are presented as too poor and tired to challenge the Capitol’s dominance, or concern themselves with much beyond surviving within the parameters set for them. This state of affairs is foregrounded in Catching Fire, when Katniss hopes that her people will join the growing revolution, but finds them unwilling to gamble the little sustenance and security that they have—a stalemate broken only when the Capitol bombs Twelve at the end of Catching Fire, killing the majority of the population and forcing the survivors into exile.

Collins’ construction of District Twelve, and the subsequent behaviour of its citizens, begs a question very pertinent to modern-day movements such as Occupy Wall Street; where lies the tipping point at which rebellious sentiment reaches critical mass, and what strategies might governments or ruling classes employ to make sure that such a tipping point is not reached? As discussed by Chad William Timm, Twelve’s notable lack of revolutionary drive can be attributed less to Panem’s ‘overt’ methods of oppression and more to ‘invisible’ methods subtly woven into the fabric of district life. “The trick”, says Timm, “is to get people to control themselves, to fall into certain habits that perpetuate the existing social order.”84 The district education system is one such tool, geared to indoctrinate young men and women with a favourable view of the Capitol’s authority while teaching them the skills requisite to Twelve—that is, the skills that will keep them productive and poor. Katniss learns basic literacy and math, but somehow, “it all comes back to coal.”85 Tim argues that this kind of schooling mirrors a fundamental weakness of the modern public education system in that it functions as “one of the most powerful hidden forces of social control, an invisible force field that locks in social inequality”86—one which reinforces the prevailing distribution of economic, social and cultural capital.87 Accordingly, Katniss and most of her fellow competitors are ill equipped to survive the games, negotiate the subtleties of affluent

message is clear. ‘Look at how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you.” HG, p. 22.
83 HG, p. 7.
85 HG, p. 50.
Capitol life, or provide for themselves outside of the system of production their district is geared toward.

Another subtly manipulative feature of district life is the existence of a false middle class, the storekeepers, who appear privileged in comparison to the coal-mining families of the seam. Many among the working and merchant classes actively perpetuate this divide: Katniss recalls the baker’s wife screaming “how sick she was of having those brats from the Seam pawing through her rubbish”[88], when Katniss, as a starving child, was searching for food; inversely, Katniss repeatedly worries about her mining-class friend Gale’s rudeness to merchant-class peers like Madge or Peeta. “Gale knows his anger at Madge is misdirected,” she narrates. “On other days, deep in the woods, I’ve listened to him rant about how the [inequalities] are just another tool to cause misery in our district ... a way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on their supper ... it’s to the Capitol’s advantage.”[89] Anxious as she is to avoid conflict, it’s only after the Hunger Games that Katniss truly appreciates the falseness of the worker/merchant class division. “Huh,” she muses after Peeta mentions his upbringing on a diet of old bread. “I always assumed the shopkeepers live a soft life. And it’s true, Peeta has always had enough to eat ... but there’s something kind of depressing about living your life on stale bread, the hard, dry loaves that no one else wanted.”[90] Through the unprecedented circumstances of her teamwork with Peeta, she gains insight that her entire society is geared toward preventing, and it is this perspective—of transcending false notions of otherness, and coming to realise “who the enemy is”[91]—that puts Katniss, and Panem, on the path to meaningful reform.

On a larger scale, the division of the districts into twelve carefully separated fragments fulfils a similar purpose in keeping the working population alienated and disempowered. Like the merchant class, District Two enjoys a slightly elevated position due to its function as weapons manufacturers and the supplier of Peacekeeping troops; through this district, Collins explores the collective mindset of an enslaved people given just enough privilege to think they are free. Whereas most districts regard the Hunger Games with appropriate fear and abhorrence, the wealthier districts are shown to adopt the ‘spirit of the games’ dictated by the Capitol. They train their children to be fierce competitors, even professional tributes who volunteer for the ‘honour’ of participation. Accordingly, they are disliked and mistrusted by the other districts, and

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[88] HG, p. 35.
[89] HG, p. 16.
they are reluctant to join the rebellion. While their sense of misguided loyalty is eventually overcome, the strength of this pro-Capitol sentiment—based on marginally better living conditions and a false sense of superiority—has been read as a critical reflection of what it means to be a part of the dwindling ‘middle class’ in the modern age.\footnote{Although Collins is careful not to talk about politics in her interviews and personal appearances, it seems evident that in her depiction of class division she is responding at least in part to the erosion of the middle class first noticed during the Reagan administration and which has continued into the twenty-first century.” (Tom Henthorne, \textit{Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis}, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2012, p. 117).}

\section*{The Capitol}

Contrary to first impressions, Collins’ study of oppression does not end at the district borders. The Capitol and its populace are a parody of first-world consumer capitalism, replete with glistening candy-coloured buildings, extravagant meals, and surgically modified people who give Katniss the initial impression of “oddly colored birds.”\footnote{HG, p. 76.} Her description is fitting; steeped as they are in luxury and artificiality, Capitol citizens appear removed from their humanity, with the key signifiers of language, appearance and moral sense all distorted almost beyond recognition. In contrast to her prep team—Venia of the aqua hair and gold tattoos, Flavius of the orange corkscrew locks and purple lipstick, and Octavia of the pea green skin, all speaking in the affected Capitol accent—Katniss is set apart as from another cultural, economic, political and moral world. Despite mutual attempts at goodwill, the two sides cannot relate to each other; Katniss looks beyond their bubbly friendliness for a deeper sense of human empathy, while her Capitol handler and prep team look at performative social signifiers like table manners, physical appearance, and her ability to walk in heels. By these measures, of course, both parties find each other wanting. Katniss thinks of them as “unlike people” and they refer to her, condescendingly, as looking “almost … like a human being” as a result of their extensive primping.\footnote{HG, p. 76.}

As a parodic extrapolation of the modern-day United States’ cultural and economic trajectory, the Capitol is crafted to highlight Collins’ admitted concerns about consumer and reality TV culture, and the ways in which these developments might lead to widespread apathy and violence. Capitol citizens are characterized by a jarring lack of sociopolitical awareness, blithely ignoring the profound disparity of wealth between themselves and the districts that support them, as well as their own lack of power.
“Despite the city’s relative affluence, physical beauty, and technological advancement ... the people there are nearly as oppressed as those in the districts, the primary difference being those in the Capitol are either disinterested in or unaware of their condition,” says Tom Henthorne, noting that both groups are under the control of President Snow’s dictatorship. Even Panem’s name, taken from the cynical Roman tenet of ‘panem et circenses’, or bread and games, reminds us that the privileged in Collins’ world have given over their political power in exchange for comfort and entertainment—a state of affairs which could, as observed by Henthorne and Sarah Darer Littman, be read as directly mimicking the way that many “post-9/11 Americans ... preferred to lose themselves in ‘reality TV’ than pay attention to the erosion of civil liberties during the War on Terror.”

Throughout the series, the Capitol’s unbridled consumption habits are revealed as a major factor in the disempowerment of its citizens. As discussed by Adrienne Kress in “The Inevitable Decline of Decadence”, the Capitol—like so many advanced societies before it, including our own—rests on a precarious power structure based on a privileged few relying on the deprivation and hard work of many. In this kind of system, notes Kress, the ‘few’ inevitably become out of touch with the realities of life and the ability to provide for themselves. In the Capitol, citizens rely absolutely on their government and the prevailing economic system, so they cannot afford to question or challenge it; this apathy not only results in widespread suffering outside of the Capitol, but it also proves to be a costly mistake when the workers join together in rebellion, cutting off the city’s food supply and turning its residents into a flock of startled, starving refugees.

Digging deeper into the politics of consumption, Christina Van Dyke has explored the various ways that the Capitol’s obsession with fashion and body modification has transformed citizens into ‘docile’ bodies, drawing their focus away from the moral and political, toward a constant practice of superficial self-surveillance and self-correction. Rather than making themselves productive, informed or politically engaged, Capitol citizens such as Effie, Flavius, Octavia and Venia excel at navigating the nuanced and ever-shifting waters of cosmetic and social trends—such

95 Henthorne, pp. 117-118.
96 Sarah Darer Littman, qtd. in Henthorne, p. 118.
as, for example, which appetizers to serve as a party, or the significance of Octavia's change from "pea green" to "light evergreen" skin.\textsuperscript{99} This surreal skill set not only disempowers the consumer in the Capitol,\textsuperscript{100} but it also leaves them pathetically helpless outside of their artificial world, as illustrated by the traumatic experience of Katniss's prep team in the austere military compound of District 13.\textsuperscript{101} On the whole, the Capitol lifestyle has not only left its people completely at the mercy of their government, but it was also doomed to fail—an uncomfortable takeaway message for young adult readers who may never have considered the morality and sustainability of their own affluence.

\textbf{District 13}

In \textit{Mockingjay}, set apart from the working-class poverty of the other districts and the extravagance of the Capitol, Collins presents a third alternative—a society built on the suppressive concessions of wartime. Set in an underground bunker, District 13 operates with military efficiency in all areas of life, including clothing (grey uniforms), food (strict rations based on a set caloric allowance), activities (full schedules being printed on each resident's arm at the beginning of the day, including set times for 'reflection', meals and bathing) and governance (apparent democratic ideals, but governed by a 'President' with temporary totalitarian authority). "What makes District 13 so chilling," comments Tom Henthorne, "is the fact that it seems to be modeled on what has been happening in the United States following the September 11th attacks ... [the district] first seems to be more of a utopia than a dystopia in the sense that people have a shared sense of purpose and have their basic needs taken care of during a time of crisis ... [yet] Katniss remains sceptical about the possibility of District 13 ever becoming a free society."\textsuperscript{102} The question Collins seems to pose through the world of 13, then, is an evaluation of evils: is it better for a society to be competent, militaristic, and duplicitous, like District 13, or extravagant, ignorant, and cruel, like the Capitol? The question has implications for two major facets of the western world, since—as noted by Henthorne—District 13 appears to reflect troublesome elements of post-9/11 politics, while the Capitol mimics consumer capitalism in boom times. Which society is definitively worse is not a question that \textit{Mockingjay} seeks to answer, but from Katniss's

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{CF}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{100} In addition to Van Dyke's points, we also learn in \textit{Mockingjay} that the Capitol's obsession with keeping abreast of fashions has lead many citizens into unsustainable consumer debt.
\textsuperscript{102} Henthorne, p. 120.
perspective, it is 13’s *pretensions* of freedom and democratic superiority that presents a threat even more troubling than their established enemies in the Capitol. At the climax of the trilogy, she chooses to shoot Thirteen’s President Coin instead of President Snow, since Coin represents a new kind of oppression replacing the old.

**Media, Propaganda and Violence**

Within these social and political structures, another ideologically significant aspect of Collins’ worldbuilding is her use of media and reality entertainment, which plays a key role in maintaining the status quo of Panem. In the place of folk wisdom and cultural stories, such as what *really* happened in the ‘dark days’ when the districts rose up in rebellion, Panem elects to disperse heavily biased narratives through the Capitol’s media channels while restricting other forms of communication. Foremost on the program is all things related to the Hunger Games. As previously noted, the games serve a multitude of purposes: primarily to further intimidate the districts, keep the Capitol populace politically and emotionally disengaged, and reinforce divisions between the districts, who must watch their ‘tributes’ kill each other with the understanding that there can only be one winner. They also offer the victor a chance for a life of affluence, creating the aspirational fantasy that Panem’s oppressive social and economic barriers can be overcome—but only on the Capitol’s terms.

Ultimately, the Hunger Games serve as a critical reflection of our own apparently insatiable appetite for reality entertainment. A key commonality between the Games and real-world shows like *Big Brother* or *Survivor* is the dehumanisation of both viewer and subject; be it violent murder or the lesser trials of humiliation, deprivation, and mind games regularly found in our own programming, Capitol audiences are positioned to derive satisfaction and amusement from the suffering of others. In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, this moral blind spot is brought to our attention by the relationship between Katniss and her Capitol stylist team. The trio act kindly, even affectionately, towards Katniss and are visibly distraught when she is called back into the area in *Catching Fire*; yet they, like all Capitol citizens, take delight in the spectacle of the competition and show callous disregard for the young competitors in general. As suggested by Christina Van Dyke, the Capitol’s consumer mindset seems to play a role in this, nurturing the toxic misconception that the elaborate trappings of their lives are somehow integral to ‘proper’ humanity—contributing to “a sense of superiority that leads the citizens to view people from poorer districts as ‘abnormal’, even sub-human,
and in need of fixing.” However, the cause also lies in the nature of reality TV itself. Suzanne Collins has asserted as much in interviews, blaming reality TV for changing the way consumers respond to more essential forms of media:

When [habitual viewers of reality TV] see real tragedy playing out on the news, it doesn’t have the impact it should. It all just blurs into one program. And I think it’s very important not just for young people, but for adults to make sure they’re making the distinction. Because the young soldier’s dying in the war in Iraq, it’s not going to end at the commercial break. It’s not something fabricated, it’s not a game.

Tom Henthorne provides further insight in his discussion of the subtle ways that shows like the Hunger Games and Survivor function as socializing agents that reinforce a particular set of beliefs and values. Henthorne notes that reality programs are “constructed, edited, and in some cases digitally altered so as to provide compelling narratives that both affirm prevailing beliefs and naturalize them by embedding them in contexts that represent themselves as real.” In the case of the Hunger Games, one of the key values being ‘naturalised’ is the disconnect between viewer and subject, creating a lack of recognition of the tributes’ humanity, or empathy for their suffering. This disconnect is cultivated through all aspects of the program, from the premise and setup of the event, to editing, commentary, and post-game analysis. Prior to the games, tributes are encouraged to attract sponsors by choosing a definite—easily recognised and contained—persona, such as ‘the clown’, ‘the violent brute’, or ‘the sexy one’. During the games, particularly brave or gory deaths are celebrated, while sad or emotional deaths are greedily enjoyed as a form of dramatic narrative; the only unacceptable deaths, in fact, are the boring (such as “that year half of them died of cold ... It was considered very anticlimactic”) or the unavoidably humanising (such as when Katniss, grieving her young ally Rue, sings her a lullaby and covers the corpse in flowers).

Accordingly, any reflection on the games on the part of Capitol citizens is automatically framed in the morally void sphere of entertainment, and in relation to the viewer him or herself, not the subject. “It’s funny,” Katniss notes of her prep team, “even though they’re rattling on about the Games, it’s all about where they were or how they felt when a specific event occurred. ‘I was still in bed!’ ‘I had just had my eyebrows dyed!’ ‘I swear I nearly fainted!’ Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls.

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103 Van Dyke, p. 259.
104 Trierweiler Hudson.
105 Henthorne, pp. 96-97.
Conclusion

In her construction of Panem, Suzanne Collins presents three distinct dystopias which reflect, parody and extrapolate upon key aspects of 21st century civilization: the Capitol as a critique on consumer capitalism, Districts 1-12 on working-class oppression, and District 13 on faux-democratic wartime leadership. As a whole, these societies—while deeply provocative in many of their implications—communicate Collins’ ideas in a non-proselytising way that is not only palatable to her young adult readership, but in fact has seemed to feed a tremendous appetite for political criticism and self-examination in the aftermath of world events such as 9/11, the War On Terror, and the Global Financial Crisis. As Angela Carter managed to do in Heroes and Villains, Collins’ worldbuilding makes her work both revolutionary and approachable. Katniss succeeds in making a relevant and timely ideological contribution to modern society, not because she tells young readers what they should think, but because she lives and interacts with a carefully constructed world that speaks for her.

107 HG, p. 429-430.
108 "Trump is the presidential candidate that reality TV made," says reality TV producer Seth Grossman in a recent NY Times opinion piece. "An electorate trained in voting contestants on and off shows like ‘American Idol’ wants to keep him around because he makes things interesting. Instead of any plausible policy stance, Mr. Trump has built his campaign around an entertaining TV persona … Mr. Trump rates. Love him or hate him, he makes us feel as if the future of our country is teetering on the precipice. It might be entertaining to watch our country implode under his leadership, but one of the great pleasures of reality television is being able to turn it off when you’ve had enough." ("Donald Trump, Our Reality TV Candidate", The New York Times, 27 September 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/opinion/donald-trump-our-reality-tv-candidate.html?_r=2, accessed 22 October 2015.)
Viewing *Heroes and Villains* and the *Hunger Games* trilogy as part of an ongoing dialogue in the field of dystopian fiction, I sought in *Anathema* to add to the conversation by applying the politicised world-building style of these novels to a new range of issues. Whereas Angela Carter depicts the conjunction of patriarchy and nuclear war, and Suzanne Collins connects reality TV culture with inequality and violence, *Anathema* centres on the issue of immigration and otherness, particularly in an atmosphere of heightened nationalism and fear. In the wake of the rise of ISIS and the associated refugee crisis in Europe, I wanted to explore the scenario of two alienated societies, both with utopian and dystopian aspects, faced with the challenge of accepting the cultural ‘other’ in order to move forward. What might that conflict look like from the inside of each group? How might a society’s self-image become so inflexibly mythologised as to lead toward destruction instead of change? These are the questions I sought to explore in *Anathema*, by building two oppositional groups within a high-stakes post-apocalyptic world, and setting a proverbial cat among the pigeons in the form of my protagonist.

The narrative follows a fifteen-year old girl, Ana, as she flees her post-apocalyptic home city in search of a more sustainable way of life. As a character, she is intended to be paradoxically vulnerable and headstrong, caught in a fleeting window of mutability; young, plucky, desperate for emotional and physical sustenance, and therefore open to new ways of living. Accordingly, she stumbles across the Tain survivalists and seeks acceptance into their fold. However, her status as a refugee of their enemy makes the transition difficult, and a long-standing struggle between the two groups threatens her place in her newfound home. As is the case in *Heroes and Villains*, the ‘wasteland’ setting of *Anathema* serves to underscore the failures of the prior civilization, while conflict between two post-apocalyptic societies functions dually as a reflection and continuation of those failures. Through their conflict, Ana and her companions experience the dark side of social cohesion, and some of the ways that sincerely held beliefs may lead moral individuals toward destructive actions and outcomes.
Valmora and the Jackals

In contrast to the lush vitality of the Tain forest, Valmora city and surrounds are portrayed as a monument to a dead civilization that failed to adapt appropriately to environmental crisis. As represented by the wrecked commercial buildings and machinery that appear frozen in time—abandoned, as it were, in full swing—this is a civilization that continued on an unsustainable economic trajectory despite dire signs of warning. The heights of wealth and technology on display beg a question—how could a technologically advanced first world such as Valmora fail to save itself? One answer, as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the Hunger Games’ Capitol, is that first-world consumer decadence is fuelled by untenable exploitation of the working classes—and, I would add, of the environment. However, Anathema’s world history has been constructed so that it also points toward deeply flawed governance and an ingrained aversion to the economic and cultural ‘other.’ When faced with the challenge of responding to an environmental crisis, world leaders failed to make the collective action that could have prevented disaster, preferring instead to preserve the form and function of their accustomed way of life. Ultimately, the lead-up to this apocalypse will I hope be seen to echo the same failure that looms over the Tain in Anathema; a default of continuity and self-preservation over necessary action and transformation.

In building the Tain and Valmoran societies, I sought to achieve a rough balance between utopian and dystopian aspects, so that neither side could be thought of as definitively ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ and the implications of their conflict are not obscured. Driven by harsher environmental conditions, the Valmoran ‘Jackals’ are portrayed as being, on the surface, the vastly inferior society—the average gang member is more violent, physically abhorrent, and generally villain-like than the average citizens of Tain, who appear in contrast to be kind and wholesomely attractive. Yet, as I have sought to show through the eyes of Max, Valmoran politics are in some ways less problematic. Each gang member has an equal right to express and assert themselves, without any top-heavy power structure or notions of divine authority to stifle free expression. Max is granted power to lead the gangs—but only because he “offer[s]

them more than any leader ever has”¹¹⁰, and bows to the will of the majority. Although their pecking order is established through violence, the system can be viewed as a meritocracy necessitated by their circumstances; moreover, although a system based on physical dominance might be condemned as unfairly disadvantageous to women, the rise in status of Kenna—who wins a place in the upper echelons of the gang by outsmarting her rival in the fighting ring—is intended to demonstrate that the Jackals lack the ideological mechanisms of patriarchy that are increasingly dominant among the Tain. Ultimately, these virtues imply a threat to Tain society that is ideological as well as physical; the Valmorans truly are an anathema to the zealously guarded belief system on which Tain society is based.

The Tain

*Anathema’s* primary society is a survivalist tribal group who have made their home in the wilderness. Founding members came from across the continent prior to their world’s apocalypse; accordingly, the second-generation Tain are encouraged to view themselves as a chosen people protected by divine will. The particulars of their faith, which is mostly derived from survivalist textbooks and beliefs of the founding members, are shown to inform much of their everyday life. Survivalist principles are evident in their fanatical adherence to isolation, quarantine and cleanliness, as well as the ritualised enforcement of communal productivity. Judeo-Christian teachings are reflected in the structure of their government, which is essentially a selected body of ‘elders’ and ‘Praefectors’ appointed to rule over the ‘congregation’ of Tain, and the conditions for legitimised citizenship, through which adults are made and unmade by a process akin to baptism and excommunication. A third main element—pagan influences derived from art and their natural setting—is primarily associated with the priestess Malika and the tools, rituals and cultural practises of everyday Tain life. However, it is made to become apparent that this branch of practice is increasingly relegated to the margins as the Tain drift toward authoritarianism and patriarchy. Their beliefs provide the benefit of unifying rituals, social cohesion, and solid leadership; factors that would have contributed to the original success of Tain society, but which have outlived their original purpose. Practices that were vital in the years immediately following a pandemic, such as strict quarantine and isolation, are now detrimental to the moral and practical development of Tain.

¹¹⁰ *Anathema*, p. 95.
The ill effects of these underlying ideologies are barely notable in everyday Tain life, which appears prosperous, well ordered, and cheerful. However, the fault-lines become apparent in the face of outsiders or dissent. The mother of Chase is revealed to have died as a direct result of her transgressions against Tain values: straying freely beyond the sacred ‘first circle’ of territory and into the second, questioning the authority of leaders, and pushing for greater inclusion of apocalyptic refugees. Ana, too, proves divisive to the community and is ultimately rejected. Although her youth and physical smallness is sufficient to win the initial sympathies of most Tain citizens, Ana’s origins and characteristics make her a clear target under less favourable circumstances, when the Valmorans lay siege to the Tain fortress. However, the issue is perhaps most directly articulated through the experience of Chase; despite legitimate and pressing concerns, which are not without support within the Tain community, the Praefector’s son has no avenue through which to have his views aired and properly considered. The quasi-democratic structure of their government—in which elders are appointed by popular consensus, and Praefectors are selected from the body of elders—fails under the ultimate test, much as the pre-apocalyptic democracy did under the test of climate change.

Ultimately, part of the failure of the Tain democracy—much like western democracies, if recent studies are any indication—is that it is not much of a democracy at all. In the United States, ex-President Jimmy Carter recently commented that power primarily lies in the hands of the wealthy, technically making the leaders of the western world an oligarchy; in Tain, where money is less relevant, power lies with those bold and charismatic enough to seize it via authority from their gods. Both are top-heavy power structures geared against the airing of dissent from those at the bottom. Both exert heavy influence on public opinion through the views of prominent figures—be it an entertainment journalist on Fox News or a grandstanding speech from the justice tower of Tahon. The voices of moderate and rational leaders,

111 "Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence", concludes a study published in September 2014 by the American Political Science Association. Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," Perspectives on Politics, Volume 12, Issue 3, September 2014, pp. 564-581.

112 "Now [the United States is] just an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or being elected president. And the same thing applies to governors, and U.S. Senators and congress members," Jimmy Carter on the Thom Hartmann show, quoted in Eric Zuesse, "Jimmy Carter is Correct That the U.S. Is No Longer a Democracy," The Huffington Post, 4 August 2015 (accessed 14 January 2016). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-zuesse/jimmy-carter-is-correct-t_b_7922788.html?ir=Australia
exemplified by the Praefector Sera, are frequently drowned out by louder and more insistent voices appealing to baser primordial instincts. The subsequent demise of Tain culture invites a young adult target audience to reject self-mythologising social paradigms as a basis for violent conflict.

**Immigration, War and Fear of the Other**

Ultimately, the opposition of the Jackals and the Tain represents the issue around which this novel is centred—immigration and fear of the ‘other’ in the post-9/11 social and political climate. Like us, the people in the world of *Anathema* are portrayed as having experienced a paradigm-shifting collective trauma that has had the effect of skewing group mentality toward self-preservation and fear. Nowhere should this be more apparent than in the Tain people’s attitude toward Valmorans, but the negative effects of this shift are also evident in the internal politics and social dynamics of both groups. The Jackals and Tain are shown to have each cultivated an ‘us versus them’ mentality toward outsiders—which, once established, takes extraordinary leadership to overcome. Fresh to his leadership role, motivated by his relationship with Ana and the needs of his people, Max manages to steer the Jackals toward compromise and peace; however, the top-heavy, delusional and deeply authoritarian leadership of the Tain proves unable to make the same concession. They favour their own sovereignty and self-image at the cost of survival.

Even before their annihilation of each other, however, the mutual impoverishment of cultural alienation is in full effect. The Jackals grow ever more desperate and depraved in the city, obliterating any chance of shared subsistence with the Tain through their violent and confrontational advances. On the other side of the coin, fear of the ‘big, bad Valmorans’ is fuel for the most oppressive and delusional aspects of Tain politics, resulting in the curtailment of basic personal freedoms. It is a deadlock deliberately reminiscent of the War on Terror, declared in 2001 and since evolved into a many-headed hydra with no end in sight; doubtless, *Anathema* will be one of countless dystopian visions reflecting this conflict that is so far defining the 21st century.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the writing of *Anathema* and this exegesis, I have aimed to engage with an ongoing discourse within the dystopian genre, in which authors such as Angela Carter and Suzanne Collins have leveraged the power of cognitive estrangement to explore difficult questions, provoke thought, and challenge the status quo of their time. Reading in this vein has lead me to understand dystopian worldbuilding as a uniquely powerful tool—one that grants authors free reign to critically explore the terrain of their darkest social and political concerns, ultimately producing an arena of the imagination in which readers may do likewise. Through this treatment, political dialogue is revitalised; no longer the dry, esoteric domain of analysts and public servants, but rather an issue that concerns us all by necessity and birth-right, which demands emotional as well as intellectual attention, and which offers readers of all ages the sense that things might be changed for the better.

In their landmark dystopian works, Carter and Collins have each painted a compelling speculative vision that cuts to the heart of potentially ruinous social and political developments characterising Cold War Britain and the Bush Era United States, respectively. *Heroes and Villains*’ world of post-nuclear aggression, false dichotomies, and outmoded patriarchal authoritarianism presents the real-world social qualities on which they are based as a kind of collective disease, of which the bomb is an ultimate symptom. Like many of her contemporaries, Carter leverages the spectre of the bomb to make her point; uncommonly, however, she focuses not on the nuclear event itself but the social and political trends perceived as leading toward it. By working these qualities into her world and presenting them as flawed, archaic, and ridiculous, Carter implies a choice between intelligent anarchy and mindless destruction. It is testament to her cutting-edge speculative vision that *Heroes and Villains* maintains much of its relevance in the 21st century, long after the decline of the original nuclear crisis.

Collins’ *Hunger Games* world, on the other hand, takes an unflinching view of the disconnected and tenuously justified violence, rampant consumerism, and inequality of the modern neo-liberal west. Through the eyes of Katniss, she exposes her young adult target audience to complex social experiences such as fascist-style dictatorship, jarring economic injustice, abuses of authority, manic consumer capitalism, and media functioning in its basest capacity to obfuscate and mislead.
Several years after the publication of the first *Hunger Games* novel, the darkness of the ‘Bush years’ mirrored by Collins has faded somewhat—yet the conflict in the Middle East persists on various fronts, entertainment media and consumer capitalism dominates largely unchecked, and a new groundswell of unrest seems to be looming on the U.S. political horizon. As the United States stand on the precipice of potentially radical change after eight years under the Obama administration, the world is presently caught up in speculation as to whether the future of the west will hold more of the leadership style commonly described in terms such as “careful, patient” and ‘thoughtful’ or a kamikaze plunge into radical change driven by the clear majority of polled voters who feel that the political establishment has failed them.

As dystopian social commentary, *Anathema* is a product of this uncertain environment. I have had the opportunity to use worldbuilding to explore and express concerns relating to modern democracy, religious belief and cultural alienation, reflecting my personal interpretation of world developments in and around the year 2015—with particular emphasis on the obsolescence of rigid social and political barriers in an increasingly connected world. As technology drives us toward exponential change, I believe, as Angela Carter apparently did, that the future will demand open and radical examination of which ideologies and social frameworks still serve us, and which are best reformed or left in the past. The alternative, as it seems to be at present, could be that voters grow so frustrated and disillusioned with western democracy that they seize upon a different sort of radicalism—like Donald Trump, or whatever brash and noisy substitute rises up to take his place.

Ultimately, what ties *Anathema, Heroes and Villains*, and the *Hunger Games* novels together—aside from a broad adherence to the conventions of genre—is a clear intent to critically reflect on contextual social and political developments through a

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115 A recent *Sunday Times* piece noted this collective mood ahead of the US’ presidential nominees Super Tuesday milestone: “Entrance polls had 60 percent of caucus goers saying they wanted someone outside of the political establishment. Of those, 70 percent picked Trump. The same polls had 60 percent of people saying they were ‘angry’ about Washington. Dartmouth University Professor of Government Dean Lacy said voters across the board felt forgotten by Washington, and so were compelled to vote for anti-establishment alternatives. ‘Voters in both parties feel like Washington is failing them,’ Prof Lacy said.” Anna Caldwell, “D-Day For the Usual Suspects,” *The Sunday Times*, 28 February 2016, p. 34.
targeted application of dystopian worldbuilding. This intent, as scholars of genre have emphasised, is part of the driving force behind both utopian and dystopian literature\textsuperscript{116}—to enact revolution within the sphere of the imagination, which is surely the birthplace of all intentional change. It is fitting, then, that authors and readers alike have repeatedly turned to dystopia in times of crisis, revelling in the potentiality of worlds where disaster reigns, but anything is possible.

\textsuperscript{116} See, for example, Baccolini and Moylan 2003, as well as Moylan 2014.


