

Amateur Outlaws

Chapter 1

I. Intro

Two people sat silently in a dimly lit prison cell. They sat opposite each other, their eyes never meeting. The cell was small and cramped, the size of a walk-in closet. A barred window sat high upon the wall—too high to look through. Rays of light spilled through, illuminating the ashy dirt in the middle of the cell. The two prisoners sat on wooden benches against the walls, obscured in the shadows, and were careful not to let their feet touch the sunlight. It is day on the Earth, but in the cell it is night.

The two prisoners did not know what fate awaited them, but they knew it would not be pleasant. Possibly slavery, likely execution. One thing was for certain—those who see the dusty floor of the prison would see the sky never again.

It was the young woman that first broke the silence after several hours. She pulled her brass goggles down from her head and went to clean them with her shirt, then let out a huff of frustration and shoved them back into her copper hair. “Do you have a tissue or something?” she asked her fellow inmate.

At her words he roused in his seat and blinked at her with tired eyes. He must have been sleeping, she thought. It was clear that he was in a miserable state. Under his eyes were heavy purple bags, and his cheeks were gruff with blonde stubble. The prison had been his home for far longer than her. “Huh?” he answered.

“It’s just that my clothes are all the wrong material and every time I want to wear my goggles I remember they’re smudged, so I try to—”

“Argh, just—stop. Here.” Quickly shutting her up, he untied the red bandana from around his neck and tossed it to her. It fell short, so she had to reach into the patch of sunlight to retrieve it.

The bandana was rough and frayed at the edges, but when she wiped it over her lenses they became spotless. Her fellow inmate appeared to be dozing off once again, so she took the liberty of examining the cloth more closely. She noticed the smooth weaving, stretched from use over time. As she was admiring the faded dyeing, something slipped out of a hidden pocket stitched into the fabric and hit the floor with a dull clank. The noise was enough to snap the young man out of his stupor, so the woman swiftly swiped the object and obscured it in her palm.

“You say something?” he asked dumbly. She shook her head. Abandoning his prior aloofness, he scratched his chin and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Innis,” she replied. “You?”

“Sterling.”

They nodded respectfully. Remembering his miserable condition, Innis asked, “How long have you been here?”

“A couple weeks, maybe. A month or two. I dunno, I stopped counting.”

“Oh.” A stretch of silence. “What did you do?” He didn’t answer quickly. “I mean like, to get here.”

He took a long breath before murmuring, “Nothing that should have landed me here.”

Innis cringed. The Capital prison is notorious for being ruthless to their occupants, who were barely more than lambs to the slaughter. And here they

were, lambs trapped in the barn, though there was no wool pulled over their eyes. The blade was clearly seen.

She thought to herself that no action should warrant Capital prison.

Sterling continued, "It's not like it was magic or anything."

Innis tossed Sterling's bandana back to him. "I'm sure you're not being accused of that," she reassured.

"What did you do?" Sterling returned the question. "Like, to get in prison," he said, mocking her earlier phrasing.

Innis gave an indulgent smile. "I stole some parts for a repair."

"That doesn't seem like a big deal," Sterling said.

"I know."

All had been said for the time being, and they fell back into their own thoughts, keeping their feet in the shadows.

Possibly an hour later, both prisoners looked up when a jangling of keys at the door broke the still atmosphere. A tall, solid prison guard pushed a long key into the intricate and complicated gold locking mechanism. With a couple clicks and pops of the metal, the door creaked open.

"You," the guard barked, pointing at Sterling. "Come."

Sterling tightened his lips and slowly rose to his feet. Too slowly. "Move!" the guard snapped, laying a hand on the fat gun tucked into his belt. Innis blinked and stuttered protests as her new prison mate was ushered from the room.

"Now—now wait, here!" she said, scrambling to her feet. "What are you doing with him?"

The response was a door slammed in her face. She stared through the bars at Sterling, who, ever-stoic, did not glance back. "Bring him back!"

She yanked down her goggles, flicking to the smallest lens, zooming in on the gears and levers of the lock. Her inventor's mind whirred, analyzing the

structure, but her hands faltered. Her fingers were shaking and her palms were clammy at the thought of what the guard could be doing to Sterling. She sank to the ground, powerless to stop it.

Innis's trembling had ceased by the time the jangle of keys reapproached. A burst of confidence surged through the tinkerer, like autumn leaves on the wind, then suddenly falling with the sight of the sandy-haired man walking down the corridor, leaving her with a similar loss of air. She sat back down in her chair as Sterling somberly entered the chamber.

He said nothing. He kept his eyes down. Giving him a scan, Innis noticed the mussed clothing, the unique slump of his shoulders, and a dark stain near the cuff of his sleeve.

"I—oh my God, I thought they were gonna kill you!" she exhaled.

"I wish they would," said Sterling, hoarsely.

Innis stood and sat, moving her hands all about. "Can I—? What did—? Are you okay, Sterling?"

With the shift of his bandana, a dark blue mark could be seen blossoming on his neck. Innis knew by the circles around his eyes, heavier than usual, that her blabbering was unwanted, and shut her mouth.

Eventually, the silence was broken by the clang of a tray of food being pushed through a hatch in the door. "Tray," a voice said. Automatically, Sterling found an identical tray laying in the shadows and slid it through to the outside. He then placed the new tray in the center of the room.

On the tray were two small loaves of bread, a cup of soup and a mushy pear. It looked like a royal feast to the prisoners' eyes. Innis suddenly remembered that she hadn't eaten anything all day, and her stomach growled. Despite this, she waited for Sterling to take the first piece.

Hunger won against his stoic facade and he promptly grabbed a piece of bread, shoving it into his mouth with the vigor of a child.

Innis took his enthusiasm as an invitation and swiped a piece of bread for herself. The two continued eating until only crumbs remained on the tray. Innis moved it onto the bench beside her and was surprised by its weight. It was like lead.

Sterling burped. Innis laughed.

“Satisfied?” she asked.

“Hell no. It was as stale as a troll’s toenail.” This prompted more giggling from Innis, which spread to Sterling until the cell was filled with laughter and the warmth of each other’s company.

As the mood faded and their smiles dropped, the two looked at each other in the darkness. “They wanted information,” Sterling confessed. “I know something they don’t and they’ll do anything to change that.”

“At least that means they can’t kill you! Otherwise they’ll never know,” Innis added, hopefully.

“Maybe not, but they’ll never let me out of here.”

The square of sunlight had completely dissipated now, and the prison was cool and quiet in the twilight. Sterling was right. Life was over for the prisoners. One way or the other they both would die. There was nothing left but the four walls and the little square of sunlight. But that, too, had gone for the night. Moonlight gave a ghostly glow to the cell as the inmates drifted to sleep on their wooden benches.

II. Homes

The morning’s light was blinding. On her second day in prison, Innis was awoken by the pain in her back from sleeping on a wooden bench. She was suddenly struck with a profound longing for her childhood home.

The little trade and repair shop she grew up in was humble and rusting. In her youth, she often complained that it imprisoned her. The shop itself was pleasantly quaint, but rather restricting for an adventurous growing girl. Innis's old room was not much larger than the cell she sat in presently. Its shelves, however, held the contents of the universe, and Innis was free to explore. Tools, parts, and mechanisms of all sorts adorned the walls, and young Innis was captured by the bits and pieces of it all. The surplus of whatchamacallits and doodads turned their tiny abode into a hub of invention that brought many customers from the big, brass and steel city surrounding it.

Considering her current living conditions, Innis wondered how she could ever have resented the shop of infinite wonders. In that moment, Innis appreciated her little home immensely—more than she had ever before—and now she would never see it again.

Innis was drawn out of her memories when she heard the clang of the food tray hatch being opened. "Tray," a voice said.

"What?" Innis asked.

"Tray," it said again.

"The tray," Sterling said.

She looked over at the tray from last night. Hesitantly, she slid it through the door where the new one had come through. The hand snatched it instantly.

"Alright, then," she concluded, and turned her starving eyes to the green banana, granola bar, and more bread that lay before them.

"Wow, this looks... *scrumptious*," Innis said.

"Oh yeah, five star service," quipped Sterling. He snatched the banana and took a bite.

Innis grabbed the granola bar. "You know, this morning I really started to miss home. I know it's only been a day but I just wish I could see it one last time."

Sterling leaned his head back against his wall and looked wistfully out the window. Innis thought he might say something, but when he didn't, she continued. "It was such a great little shop. We do trade and repair. It's called Steam and Steel. My dad came up with it."

Sterling kept eyes fixed on the window. "I wish I had a home like that."

"You don't?"

Sterling shook his head once. "Not that I remember," he said, voice laced with emotion. "The only home I had was the sky. The clouds, the breeze, the sun." Innis became entranced by the vision he created. "The shore in the distance, the ocean below us, the salty air."

"You were a pilot?"

"*Pirate*, actually. I should make you call me Captain." He laughed. "Well, my dad's the real captain, but the ship is—*was*—mine to inherit. It was dangerous work, but the moments when I got to feel the mist of the ocean on my skin and the wind in my hair. That made it all worth it."

"Is that what got you caught?" Innis asked. "Sword-fights and pillaging and all?"

"Kinda." Like before, Sterling was reluctant to talk about his crime. "I just wish I could see it one more time."

"The airship?"

"The ocean." Sterling put his head back against the wall, but his eyes stayed in the cell.

Innis hummed in agreement. "I wish I could go to my shop one last time. The place itself is wonderful, but what I liked most was helping people. When I handed them back their radio, all ready to play again, or their boots shined and mended, I loved how their eyes lit up. I guess I'll never see that again."

"Is it just you in the shop?"

“Most of the time. I’ve got some people who swing by and help sometimes, but it’s not too much to handle.”

Sterling kept his head against the wall, but turned it in Innis’s direction. “Better make a lot of money, then.” She chuckled politely. “Your parents retire, then?”

“What?”

“You said your dad named it. Sorry, I just figured.”

“Oh. Um, yeah, something like that.” Innis looked away, at the empty tray sitting in the square of sunlight. She picked it up and put it on the bench. It was as heavy as last night’s tray, like a bag of bricks. Guess they didn’t want anyone stealing them.

Sterling looked away as well, and the cell lapsed back into silence.

III. Enter Acacia

As the square of sunlight was dimming, a clambering in the distance of the prison caught Innis’s ear. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Sterling replied.

The noises got clearer and louder. They could distinguish several different sets of footsteps, and people arguing. Suddenly, the commotion rounded the corner, and the culprits were in plain sight. Two stoic guards were carrying a young woman by the arms. She was thrashing against them, trying to hit them but failing.

“Let me the *hell* go! Put me down!” she was shouting at the guards. “Jerry, you know I didn’t do *anything*! I didn’t *do* anything!” They were heading straight for their cell, which was about to get crowded. The left guard unlocked the door while the other firmly held onto the woman.

“No, no, please,” she pleaded. “Why the Capital? You know it wasn’t me, Jerry. It wasn’t me! You have the wrong girl!” The guard never responded. He simply swung open the door and pushed her in. The door slammed and the woman sprang up from her knees and banged on the bars until she finally sunk down again, defeated.

She had a rich, dark complexion, and spots of white face paint that shone like stars, though smudged. Her hair spiraled towards the ground in thick ringlets, but in her struggle their perfection had been disturbed. There were twigs and hay stuck on her clothes and threaded through her curls. Regardless, she was beautiful. Sitting in the square of sunlight in the middle, with the others surrounding her in darkness, she looked like a distraught angel. Innis and Sterling could almost believe her pleas—it was hard to believe that she could be a criminal like them.

She looked up from the ground, and everyone looked back at her. Aware of the vulnerable position, she quickly stood with her back to the door.

“Uh, hi,” she said. “I first just wanna say—I shouldn’t be here. They got the wrong girl.”

“I’m sure,” said Sterling, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, you don’t believe me?” she said with, surprisingly, equal sass. “Don’t get on my bad side, hobo.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

Innis put her head in her hands. She almost wished the guards would take her to the gallows now.

“I’m Innis,” she told the new girl. “The grumpy hobo is Sterling.”

“Acacia,” the new prisoner said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I believe you,” Innis said. “That you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Acacia blinked. “Thanks. That means a lot. I’m sure you don’t deserve to be here, either.” Sterling snorted. “You, on the other hand,” Acacia said to him, “are exactly where you belong.”

“*Thanks*. Means a *lot* coming from a witch.” At this point, the cell would usually go quiet again, but Acacia hadn’t gotten the memo.

“So what’s the plan?” Acacia asked her two new prison buddies.

Innis and Sterling exchanged a glance.

“Plan?” Sterling asked.

“Yeah, I mean I’ve got places to go, people to see. Can’t let this dusty old prison get me down.” She stood up on the bench near the back wall, trying to peer out of the window. “This little place isn’t as locked up as you’d think. And it’s run by some real dumbasses, too.”

Sterling snapped, “I’ve been trapped in here for weeks, that window *doesn’t* open.”

“Well maybe you can’t escape because you’re just too grumpy. Anyway, I’ve been in and out of here like, four times. I’m basically friends with all the guards at this point!”

“Right,” Innis said, swept away by the charisma of this new girl.

“*Right*, I’m sure you go to brunch with Jerry and the others,” Sterling quipped.

Acacia spun around, smirking. “We’ve discussed it.”

“So, Acacia,” Innis said, changing the subject. “What do they *think* you did?”

“The typical bullshit,” Acacia said. Dead-set on her goal, she continued, “It doesn’t matter, I’ve gotta bust outta here. You with?”

Innis shifted in her seat. “Well, I mean. If you’re such an expert.”

“That I am!” Acacia boasted. “What about you, grumpy pants?” she asked Sterling. “All set to rot in here forever?”

He had a mischievous glint in his eye that made him seem all the more like a pirate. “I’d rather not, actually.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“So how are we doing this?” Innis asked.

“I may or may not have a little hocus pocus up my sleeve, if you know what I mean,” she smirked and put a hand on her hip. Innis gasped. “You’re a magician?” she sputtered.

“You bet.”

Sterling scoffed. “Come on, don’t pretend you couldn’t tell.”

Innis ignored him. “Natural-born or taught?”

“Born and bred.”

“Is it—”

“Okay, fangirl, let’s do this *after* we’ve broken out of jail,” Sterling interjected.

Acacia composed herself. “Right, okay. Stand back.” She slowed her breathing and reached her hands in front of her. The expression on her face was so intense it seemed as if she could melt the wall with her eyes. Her fingers clenched into fists and she dug her heels into the dirt. Several silent moments passed, Acacia’s gaze getting weaker and more unsure. Innis and Sterling exchanged glances.

“Does spell-casting usually take this long?” Innis asked.

At that moment, a platter of food slid through the door. “Tray,” the voice asked.

“Could we speed it up a little bit?” Sterling urged.

“Let her concentrate!” Innis said.

“Tray,” the voice repeated.

“Oh my God, we’re dead!”

“Shut up and get the tray, Sterling!”

“*Tray*,” the voice said, growing impatient.

Acacia squinted harder, her hands starting to smoke. She channeled her anger but there was too much fear and anxiety creeping in for her spell to take.

The voice did not say “tray”, but instead, the jingle of keys were heard right outside the door. At the *click* of the lock opening, Innis and Sterling both looked to the heavy iron tray on the bench, and the same thought appeared in their minds.

Innis scrambled to the bench and with tremendous effort, swung the metal to meet the face of the unsuspecting guard the second it appeared from behind the door. The guard fell to the dirt.

At the same instant, Acacia’s burning eyes snapped shut, and the wall burst out in an array of dust and brick. A grassy courtyard was displayed before them, brick walls on all sides, and no clear way out.

Acacia gaped at the fallen guard as Innis and Sterling gaped at the hole.

Sterling stood beside Innis, who was shaking. “That was one hell of a swing.”

“Guards!” the voice outside the door shouted.

“Let’s go,” Innis said in a breath. She looked through the open door to see dozens of gun-wielding guards running down the hallway. “Now!”

The three criminals jumped through the hole and darted through the courtyard. They were aware that the gate they were running towards was likely locked and likely held more guards behind it. Nevertheless, Acacia ran with her hands out from her body, ready to blast the door in. With a push, the metal did not shatter or burst into flames, but swing open like it’s meant to.

“It was open!” Sterling said. “Who runs this place?”

“I told you -- dumbasses!”

Chapter 2

I. Steam and Steel

The gate gave way to a long, wide alley. Gray billows of smoke poured down from the tops of the buildings, obscuring the light from the end of the cobblestone corridor. The fugitives ran towards the city as shouts of their pursuers grew nearer. Like a cloud parting, they burst through the fog and stumbled upon the tall, bright, bustling city. Women in corseted dresses conversed along the pathway as large metal carriages puffed down the streets, carrying merchants and royalty to their destinations. Across the way, peddlers were pitching their motorized toy boats and stylish utility watches to all passersby.

Sterling expertly led them through the traffic with the ease and discretion of a local. Around buildings and through courtyards, as far away from the prison as possible.

“The cover of the city will slow down the guards,” Sterling said, “but we’re not gonna lose them just running around like mice.”

“I think I know somewhere safe we can go,” said Innis.

In a couple more turns they were standing in front of Innis’s shop, *Steam and Steel*. Innis fumbled for the key, clumsily fitting it into the lock and swinging open the door.

“Welcome home, I guess,” she said with a grand smile on her face.

The space was filled with knick-knacks for sale; baubles on shelves and wrenches in buckets, varieties of woods and all colors of metals. Behind Innis's main counter lay her clients' broken machinery in need of repair.

Innis pushed past the counter and made her way towards another door. "Here, come on. Back here."

Innis held the door open for Sterling and Acacia to enter wide-eyed and open-mouthed. The tinkerer took no note of her companions' amazement and took to rapidly tidying up her workspace.

Inventions and contraptions of all manners were in various states of completion throughout her workspace. A full-sized butler robot stood next to Innis's bed, a pot of tea poised on his hand, though his face was swung open on its hinges, revealing the gears and springs behind. A steam-engine bicycle rested against the brick wall. Innis was brushing the remnant crumbs of a jelly donut from her desk into her hand when Sterling touched a solid-looking backpack-shaped item and asked, "What's this thing?"

Innis abandoned the crumbs and pulled her goggles onto her face. "That is my Rocket Sack!"

"Your *what now?*"

"My, uh -- Turbo Pouch? Or maybe, uh -- Zoom Parcel? Well, I don't know for sure what it's called yet, but it *shoots* you into the air! With -- with steam-power. And, um... Well, let me just show you!"

Innis hoisted the straps over her shoulders, almost capsizing from the sudden weight. "Now observe. With a simple flick of this switch, I am propelled into the air!"

Acacia and Sterling looked at each other, and then at Innis's feet, still firmly intact with the ground.

“Well, you see, sometimes it takes a while to, uh...” Innis flicked the switch on and off a couple more times, eliciting little more than a whine from the steel tanks at the back of the pack.

“Amateur tinkerer, then,” Sterling smirked, earning a smack from Acacia. “What? I mean it *looks* cool --”

The pack suddenly emitted a hot gust of air and the harsh sound of gears churning, and sent Innis rocketing off the floor and into the ceiling, prompting a cry from Acacia.

“Oh my God, Innis!”

“See! I told you it works!” With a yank on one pull string Innis brought herself to a gentle hover, and with a sideways yank on another, spun herself around. In her prideful presentation, she managed to knock over a coat rack and send her Robo-Butler’s pot of tea careening to the ground. With that accomplished, she flicked off the switch and pushed up her goggles.

“Oops.”

The tea now seeping between the floorboards, Acacia waved her hand and brought the cracked pot into one piece again and the tea safely held within. A twitch of her finger allowed her to pour a cup and levitate it into her hand. With a grin, she passed it to Innis. “That was amazing.”

Innis blushed and took a sip. She grimaced. “Blegh, what -- ” Looking down into the cup, her black tea was suddenly clear and stung like fire in her throat. “Is this vodka? I swear I had tea in there before.”

“Oh!” Acacia laughed. “That was probably my fault. I’ve been thinking that I need a drink after today.” She took back the teacup filled with vodka and threw it back, downing it in one gulp. Innis marveled at her. “I’ll teach you someday,” Acacia promised. “Simple trick. Now, what’s the plan?”

“We can’t stay here long,” Sterling said. “There are definitely guards coming after us, and it’s only so long before they catch up to us.”

“You’re right,” Innis said. “We’re too close to the city.”

“I know where we can go next,” said Acacia. “First, let’s gather anything we might need from here.”

The group agreed and started rummaging through cabinets and drawers for useful materials. Suddenly, a bell sounded, like a crack of lightning.

“Someone’s here,” Innis said gravely.

She crept over to the door, peering through the window, aware that a single creak of the floorboards might send them all back to jail. Sterling and Acacia’s hushed breathing whispered over her shoulder, deafeningly loud. She caught sight of a little old lady wrapped in a shawl standing at her counter. Innis let her lungs breathe again.

“It’s a customer,” she said, turning back to her cohorts. They sighed breaths of relief, and resumed their search for supplies.

Innis left the room to help her customer.

“Hello, Sahira!” Innis greeted her. “How may I help you on this fine day?”

Sahira chuckled weakly. She was a grey-haired woman with golden eyes like amber and deep laugh lines. Her shawl was adorned with beads of every color, as vibrant as her old smile. “Yes, I’m here to pick up my watch, dear.”

“Right, of course, I’ll go fetch it.”

Innis returned to her workspace, where Sterling and Acacia had filled a couple bags with supplies. She moved to her deskside cabinet and put a key in the bottom drawer. Unlike the rest of her workshop, this cabinet was meticulously organized, and Innis was able to pull out a small black bag labeled “Sahira.”

“Woah! Hold up!” Acacia burst out, holding out her hands. “I sense magic in here.”

Innis cursed, closing the drawer again.

“Is it the guards, maybe?” Sterling asked.

“No, couldn’t be, they don’t use magic. That’s, like. Their whole thing.”

Innis almost snuck out of the room before Acacia asked, “Wait, Innis, what’s in that bag?”

She turned around and poured the contents of the bag into her hand. “It’s, uh, this necklace.” The pendant was a beautiful amethyst on a bright silver chain. It looked fairly normal. “It’s for the client.”

Acacia came closer, leading with her nose almost as if she was smelling for magic like a bloodhound. “That’s it. Is that magical?” she asked, then suddenly concerned, “Innis, I think your client might be a magician.”

“I -- uh. Yeah, okay. Yeah, it’s magic.” Innis put the necklace back into the bag.

“You mean --”

“I’ll explain in a minute. I need to get this to Sahira, she’s very frail, and this helps.”

Innis went back to Sahira and handed over the bag. “Here’s your watch.”

“Thank you, Innis. You’re a dear. Treating me so well, just like your mother before you.”

Innis smiled and bid her customer farewell, then prepared herself for the barrage of questions before returning to Sterling and Acacia.

“Are you a magician, too?” Acacia asked. “Were you born with it?”

“No, it’s not like tha--”

“I thought this was a repair shop,” Sterling piped up.

“Well, actually--”

“Which element do you feel most connected to? I’d say I’m closest to--”

“Okay!” Innis shouted loud enough for her assailants to close their mouths. “Can I talk please?” She sat down on her bed before beginning. “I told you this was a repair shop, and that’s not a lie. But it’s also kind of a magic shop, too. Magicians come in and secretly ask for magical things they need. And I give it to them. Secretly. It was my parents’ idea. They wanted to provide a safe place for magic to exist within the city without fear of persecution. Everything is tightly secure, I promise you.”

“But do *you* have magic?” Acacia asked.

“No, unfortunately. Both my parents did, but I don’t. I just supply the magic for others.”

“Well, I think it’s really cool, what you’re doing,” Acacia said. “I wish my family had a place like this to feel safe within the city.”

“Thanks.” Innis smiled.

“I still think it’s dangerous,” Sterling said. “And not just because it’s illegal. But I’ve done my fair share of dangerous and illegal crap so I guess I can’t argue with it.”

“We *are* all fugitives, now,” Innis pointed out. “A little danger isn’t out of the question.”

“Running from the law,” Acacia remarked.

The door suddenly slammed open. The sounds of boots and weapons barged through the door, and the fugitives didn’t have to look to know it was the guards.

“Looks like the law has finally caught up,” Sterling said, throwing a bag over his shoulders.

“Not yet, they haven’t,” said Acacia, quickly taking the other one.

Innis grabbed her Rocket Sack off the floor and slung it over her own shoulders.

Sterling looked around at the lack of back doors or low windows. “Um, Innis? Are we trapped in here?”

“Follow me,” she said, moving to a bookcase filled with trinkets and inventions on every shelf. With a surprising amount of strength, she pulled it away from the wall, revealing a door behind it. She smoothly slid a key into the lock, swinging it open. “After you.”

Sterling and Acacia ran into the tunnel followed by Innis, who pulled the bookcase back against the wall and locked the door from the inside. The tunnel was dark, narrow, and dusty.

“Great work!” Acacia shouted from up ahead.

“It’ll take them a while to figure out where we went,” Innis said proudly.

“Where *are* we going?” Sterling asked.

Acacia answered, “We’re going to *my* home.”

Up ahead, the dust and dirt floating through the air was illuminated by sunlight shining in through the door at the end of the tunnel. The trio ran faster in hopes of finally getting a breath of fresh air. As they burst through, gasping, their lungs were instead filled with foul smoke which left them coughing. They found themselves in a far away corner of the city--what looked like the junkyard for any and all waste of factories or facilities. Trash, wood, and metal was strewn about in forgotten piles. Smoke poured down from above. The sunlight that had filtered through the door was merely an illusion, as the sky was shrouded by dark grey clouds of pollution.

“What is this place?” Acacia asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had to use that tunnel before. My parents built it as a precaution.”

“Well, good news is we’re not getting caught anytime soon, since no one wants to come to this dump,” Sterling quipped.

“Bad news is,” Acacia said, “I don’t *quite* know how to get home from here.”

“Wonderful.”

“Don’t worry,” Innis perked up. “We already have a head start on the guards. Let’s just keep going.”

Sterling rolled his eyes but started through the fog to find a way out of the junkyard.

II. A Spectacle

Dashing in and out of streets, passing shops and vendors, and admiring new parts of the city, the fugitives had almost forgotten they were on the run. They had been lost for close to an hour, weaving through the blocks of the city. Through one wide street, an airship passed overhead.

“Oh, Sterling! Is that what your ship looks like?” Innis asked.

“That shrimpy thing? No way, my ship is much bigger.”

Acacia quirked an eyebrow. “A ship, huh? I’ll believe it when I see it, pirate.”

“Maybe someday,” Sterling said, eyes downcast. “Once all this blows over for good.”

Innis frowned. “Don’t you think we’ve lost them by now?”

“Maybe. But they haven’t forgotten about us. Which reminds me, we should probably get out of the city soon before someone recognizes us and alerts the guards.”

The fugitives turned the corner into a wide, open plaza. Acacia smiled. “Well, we’re in luck. This looks like the City Square. I know the way from here.”

As they began to cross the square, they noticed a crowd of people gathering near the far right side.

“What’s going on?” Innis wondered aloud.

“Let’s find out,” Sterling blurted, and diverted from their path to investigate. Innis allowed her curiosity to pull her closer as well.

“Sterling, what? No--” Acacia began to protest before Sterling retreated from earshot and begrudgingly, the two others followed.

Indistinct shouts came from the crowd, and a physical struggle was visible. In the middle of the mob of aggressive people, two bound men were being shoved and beaten.

“Scum!” “Get him! “Sorcerer!” Hateful cries were flung at the men as they were pushed closer to a platform. Realization dawned on the trio when they noticed the gallows looming over the crowd. A neatly dressed man in a silk cravat and gold-buttoned suit jacket walked up onto the platform. He swung his velvet cane at the men as they were shoved past him, their necks fastened into their nooses. The three fugitives hid behind a temporarily abandoned food cart and watched.

“Welcome, all!” The man said. “What a lovely day for a hanging, don’t you say?” The crowd roared savagely in response. “These two prisoners have been convicted of *sorcery!* Let their fate be a reminder that devilry is not tolerated in this city! Now, let’s hang the vermin!”

As the crowd cheered in response, the prisoners’ faces were drenched in fear and sorrow. Dark purple bags sagged beneath their eyes and dark blue bruises colored their cheeks. Not a hint of evil or malice resided in their expressions; merely fatigue and surrender. The stools were kicked away from the prisoners’ feet, their expressions blank and empty, and Innis closed her eyes as the *snap* echoed through the silent square. Then all at once, the crowd burst into uproarious cheering. The trio took the distraction as an opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

Once the shouts of the barbarians and the lights of the city had faded into the distance, Acacia took liberty to speak her mind. “That was the most unbelievable display of inhumanity I have ever had the misfortune of witnessing!”

“And it’s what would have happened to us had we stayed in prison any longer,” Sterling said.

“Those were *human beings*. It’s repugnant.” Acacia clenched her fists.

“*Someone’s* read a thesaurus,” Sterling quipped.

“Did you know them?” Innis asked Acacia.

“*Do I--?* No! Do you think all magicians know each other or something?”

Sterling rolled his eyes. “Acacia, it’s just life. People die.”

“No, Sterling. This isn’t just life. It’s oppression! I’ve known that the city was prejudiced against my people my whole life, but to actually see something like that right in front of you?” She gestured wildly.

“Wait, was that the first execution you’ve ever seen?”

“Yes!” Acacia cried. “And I hope it’s my last.”

Innis remarked, “I recognized that man, before, the blonde fancy-man. He’s the sheriff, I think. Salem or something.” Innis paled.

“Yes,” Acacia replied. “Newest model of the Chapmin family. Makes their fortune in locking up my people. He’s actually the guy responsible for our imprisonment, since his family owns the prison and, like, most of the government. I’ve—We’ve been trying to take those guys down.”

“God, these people hate those people -- it’s not such a big deal.”

Acacia stormed right up to Sterling. “You’re a Kizzy. And a pirate. You benefit from the same system that kills people like me. I’m a Magician. And Innis trades with Magicians. Anyone that touches magic knows that it’s more than just a big deal. It’s life-threatening. I wouldn’t expect you to understand, but if we’re going to be travelling together, I expect you to be a bit more sensitive.”

Sterling was quiet for a minute, but still clearly fuming. Innis, who had been silently watching the fight, inched forward. "I know that whole thing is difficult to process, but maybe we should just keep moving?" Acacia glared at Sterling for one more burning second, then huffed and stomped forward on the trail.

"All that *magic* must be going to her--"

"Don't be an asshole, Sterling," Innis warned.

Chapter 3

I. Two Bridge Creek

After they had left the boundary of the city, the trio walked on a stone path in the wild for about an hour. The trees they passed were as tall as buildings but far older. Birds twittered in their branches and swooped down near the path, inviting the travellers for a game of tag. Above the treetops, the clouds billowed like pale blue mountains in the distance. The beautiful sights kept Innis and Sterling content and uncomplaining, even as their feet ached--until Acacia stepped off the path and headed into the dense woods. Innis glanced at the low evening sun then back at the shaded forest.

"Uh, Acacia? What sort of place are we headed to, exactly?" Innis asked.

"Just beyond these trees is my home. It's sort of like a haven for all sorts of magical folk."

Innis beamed. "Everyone there is magical?"

"Oh, yeah." Acacia suddenly halted her step. "Just one *teensy* little thing you should know. The villagers aren't really used to Kizzies being in their town, so they might seem a bit prickly. Don't sweat it, they'll warm up to you in no time."

“This’ll be perfect,” Sterling started in his usual whiny tone. “Kizzies in a *magic town*--”

“Oh, this is it!” Acacia shouted as they came upon a little creek. The water was bubbling gently over the rocks, and flowed under a worn, red bridge. Time had worn the bridge weak and weary. Though the wood was splintering and the paint was chipping, it kept standing. Bushes, flowers, and weeds grew all over and around the bridge, as nature attempted to reclaim its land.

Innis and Sterling stood looking under the bridge, into the thick expanse of forest that lay beyond.

“Welcome to Two Bridge Creek,” said Acacia.

“I don’t know how to break it to you,” quipped Sterling, “but there’s only one bridge here.”

There came no answer. Acacia simply ducked under the bridge and made her way into the trees.

Innis and Sterling shared a look, shrugged, and followed. As Innis followed under the bridge, she felt a chill run down her spine, and took a breath to find the air purer and cleaner. She took another deep breath in and exhaled the grimy city air from her lungs.

Sterling blinked several times to be sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. The landscape from this side of the bridge was suddenly transformed. The creek emerged from under the bridge as a clear, rushing river. Several large, thick, luscious trees grew up from the ground, reaching toward the sky, with dozens of smaller trees filling in the spaces. Twinkling stars seemed to be glowing from within the branches, but upon moving closer, Sterling realized the lights came from houses built in the trees. Hundreds of small, wooden homes with thatched roofs were sprinkled throughout the forest. Each tree connected to the others with long rope bridges, forming an interwoven, almost spider-webbed path.

Acacia signalled for everyone to turn around, for behind them was the strangest sight of all. The battered bridge which they had walked under was transformed into a shiny bridge of steel; tall and sturdy.

“Two bridges,” she said. “One creek.”

“It’s beautiful,” Innis marvelled.

“Let me show you where I live!” Acacia exclaimed. She led them toward a verdant, flowery archway where an armed man stood on either side. The sentry on the right caught sight of Acacia and laughed mockingly.

“Uh oh, look out! Trouble this way comes,” he teased.

“Shut up, Timon,” Acacia grumbled and showed him her special finger. “Hey, Njord!” she called out to the left sentry, ignoring the other. Before she passed him, he blocked her path with his sword. “What?”

“Who the hell are *these* people?” Njord asked, nodding to Innis and Sterling, cautiously analyzing their appearance. Their brown leather jackets upon gold buckles and straps made no effort to hide their heritage.

“They’re with me, it’s cool,” Acacia dismissed.

“No, they smell like the city.” Njord sniffed them and sneered. “They’re Kizzies. They’re not coming in.”

Acacia shifted her stance. “They broke out of jail with me today. I wouldn’t still be here if not for them. And the guards are after all three of us. Either you let us all in or we all die.”

“If I let them in, the whole village might die. Acacia, they could be working for the city, trying to destroy us from the inside.”

Acacia glanced back at her guests. Sterling’s knuckles were as white as bone, desperately trying not to explode. Innis was pulling on her hair. “I trust them,” Acacia said.

“That’s nice,” Njord said. “But I don’t. And frankly, I don’t really trust you.”

“You don’t -- Excuse me?” Acacia blabbered.

Njord lifted his sword back onto his shoulder. “Acacia, you’re not the most responsible member of this community. You said they broke out of jail with you? How many times have you been there? Just barely escaping and putting the whole town in danger? How many times have I or others had to come rescue you? You’re reckless, Acacia, and I don’t trust your judgement.”

Acacia nodded, listening attentively. “Okay. Alright, fine. You’ve got a point. He’s got a point, doesn’t he, Timon?” The sentry opened his mouth but Acacia continued. “So, I guess, you wouldn’t mind if I go tell all your friends, and coworkers, and everyone in the Council who you were making out with by the campfire last week. After all, I can’t be trusted, can I?”

Timon leaned on his sword, grinning impishly. Njord faltered. “You wouldn’t.”

Acacia shrugged. “Oh, I just can’t help myself. I’m so *very* untrustworthy. I’ll tell your parents, and your sister. I’ll even tell your girlfriend all about what I saw.”

“No,” Njord pleaded.

“Maybe we could strike up a compromise.” Acacia rubbed her chin. “How about this--if you let me and my pals in, maybe I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Njord was silent for a couple seconds, digging his sword into the ground before he finally answered. “Fine. They can go in. But if I hear *any* trouble or you tell *anyone*--”

“I promise,” Acacia said, leading the Kizzington natives into the town, turning around to tell Njord, “but I doubt you trust I won’t break it.”

II. Cottages, Councils, and Consequences

The village was even more spectacular up close than it was from down by the bridge. Acacia led the newcomers discreetly through the small grounded portion of the village before proceeding up along the winding suspended bridges and along paths carved out of branches. Peeking into windows, Innis could see masters and apprentices practicing their magic, and magicians brewing their potions. With a gust of wind from inside a hut, the shutters flew open and the windchimes rattled.

“The Garcias specialize in powerful elixirs,” Acacia explained. “They also like to experiment.”

The group continued climbing up through the trees, closer and closer to the treetops. Rays of sunlight shone down in fantastic patterns from between the leaves, casting the village in an ethereal glow. The pathways near the bottom of the forest, where the light was blocked by other structures and trees, relied on lanterns to light up the village; the streets near the top were naturally lit by the daylight.

Acacia stopped in front of a thick branch near the very top of the tree. Nestled into the branch was a cozy little cottage. “So this is where I live,” she said. “My grandma also lives here, but she’s old and crazy, so don’t mind her.” Acacia pushed open the rustic front door to a homey space. There were antique knick-knacks on every surface, confirming that an old woman did indeed live here. There was an enchanted coo-coo clock on the wall with a feathered tail that swung back and forth with the ticking seconds. Vases and trinkets adorned shelves and tables, colorful glass and dark wood and pristine porcelain. Delicate lace curtains were tied away from the window, allowing the pure forest light to illuminate the room. Potted ivy sprawled down from atop a packed bookcase and windchimes tinkled in the breeze through the open door. Acacia walked silently

past the dining table through the living room and out of sight. Sterling and Innis stood confused at the front door.

“Acacia Lucia Dupont!” a strongly accented voice howled from the other room. “How dare you sneak off and get yourself into trouble like dat without tellin’ me?” Acacia’s mumbled apology was unintelligible. “Girl, ya gettin’ yourself into things you don’t understand!” Another hushed response from Acacia. “Bringin’ guests outta nowhere? Not givin’ me a chance to clean up da place?” Acacia’s grandmother cried out in despair and marched into the front room. Trailing behind was Acacia. The woman looked far more frail and wrinkled than her thunderous scolding voice would suggest.

“What in God’s name?” she uttered as her eyes laid upon Sterling and Innis.

“Bibi, don’t—” Acacia interjected her grandmother. “They’re nice people.”

The woman sprung into motion again, shaken from her stupor. “Why of—of course they are! What else did you expect me to think?” She brushed some dust off of Innis’s shoulder and straightened Sterling’s jacket. “I was just surprised, is all!” she explained, unconvincingly. “Bringin’ in company without tellin’ me. You must be very, very tired after the *adventure* I heard you had today.”

“*Bibi*,” Acacia whined.

“Oh, and take those muddy boots off, please!” she added. “I don’t want your city *shenanigans* dirtying up my carpets.”

“Bibi!”

“I am sorry for wanting to keep a tidy home, Acacia. A more old-fashioned woman would not let in two Kiz—two *city folk* -- so easily.”

“How gracious,” Sterling rolled his eyes. “Sacrificing the *purity* of your home for the sake of two fugitives.”

Bibi laughed sarcastically. "This one's got a tongue! I'd suggest you bite it in my presence." Then she smiled widely, testing him. Sterling wrinkled his nose and turned his eyes downward. Acacia gave up on reprimanding her grandmother.

"Now," Bibi clapped her hands. "Let's go see if we can find you some blankets."

"Thank you," Innis said, wringing her hands together. Bibi nodded and started from the room.

As Acacia followed her Bibi to find some blankets, she leaned in to the Kizzies and whispered, "She's crazy."

As Acacia and Bibi were helping their guests smooth out blankets, the setting sun cast golden light in through the trees and through the curtains.

Bibi fluffed a pillow and said, "I am very sorry we only have this one couch. But, see -- it pulls out!"

"It's alright," Innis reassured her. "Thank you, again, for being so welcoming."

"Of course, I wouldn't dare to turn away Acacia's partners in crime."

Before Acacia could even roll her eyes, a frantic pounding on the door startled the room. Bibi and Acacia exchanged confused glances. "I'll get it," Acacia said, heading for the door. She opened it to reveal a short man breathing heavily. He was dressed in rich forest green robes adorned with golden metal leaves around the collar.

"Acacia. The Council summons you to their meeting to address an urgent matter."

Acacia turned to the crowd watching her in silence, then back to the messenger. "Um, now?"

“Yes, now!” said the messenger, exasperated. “Please hurry, the meeting is already in session and it is imperative that you arrive quickly.”

“Well, fine, then,” Acacia muttered. “I’ll be back,” she said to Bibi. “*Be nice* while I’m gone.” Bibi chuckled and shrugged, closing the door as Acacia was whisked away out onto the streets of town. She followed the messenger under branches and over bridges to the top of the forest, in front of a large white building nestled into the tallest branches of the most central tree of the forest. The leaves parted above the roof, revealing the sunset above. Acacia and the messenger bounced up the front steps and swung through several doors until they burst into the meeting room. Every eye in the room snapped towards them.

A council of magicians sat around an oval table. Their hair neatly combed, their forest green robes clean and vibrant, and their hands folded in front of them. At the head of the table stood a man in deep golden robes. His hands were pressed against the table as he leaned over, glaring at the new arrivals. His dark grey hair was short and so was his patience.

“Acacia, please take a seat,” he said tersely, then, “Thank you, Abiru Jobu.”

Acacia made her way to the empty chair at the opposite end of the table. She felt the eyes of the Council boring into her head, but kept her gaze steady and fixed on the man in gold. He stood up straight and folded his hands.

“It has come to the Council’s attention that you went *rogue* on your last mission,” he said to Acacia.

“If I may --”

“You may not,” he cut Acacia off. “Your insolence not only sent you to prison, but also forced the rest of the team to abort the mission, leaving it unfinished.” He paced at his end of the table, keeping his eyes trained on Acacia, who returned the stare. “I can only imagine what chaos you caused when you

managed to escape, but I have no doubt it will mean consequences for the rest of us.”

Acacia struggled to maintain eye-contact with him as her heart pounded rapidly. He fell silent, letting the echoes fill the room, waiting to see if she would speak out of line again. She held her tongue.

“What have you to say in your defense?” he finally asked.

She took a deep breath and said, “I would first like to apologize for my actions, Sikhulu Djembe. I was inconsiderate to my teammates, and I understand the trouble I caused them. I promise it will not happen again.” The Sikhulu did not bat an eye from across the room.

A magician from the middle of the table raised her hand and said, “If I may, as we all know, this is hardly the first time Acacia has jeopardized an operation with her irresponsibility. With all due respect, Djembe, we cannot continue merely slapping her on the wrist. Hard consequences must be dealt, for the sake of the village’s safety.” There were scattered murmurs of agreement. Acacia picked at her thumbnail.

Djembe paced back to his chair and sat. “You have reason, Vivian. But rash decisions from a leader also end in disaster. We will take a vote. All in favor of punishing Acacia Dupont for her infraction, raise your hand.”

After a couple heavy seconds of deliberation, hands started shooting into the air. With each arm, Acacia felt her heartbeat quicken. With the final hand, a little over half of the Council were against her. Djembe frowned. “Too split. Very well. I rule that Acacia is removed from the task force, but suffers no further ramifications for now.” Hushed groans sounded from the Council. Acacia let out a rush of air. “However,” Djembe locked his narrowed eyes with Acacia’s, “if this sort of behavior continues, expect serious consequences coming your way.” He

straightened his robes and sat down, gesturing with lithe fingers, “Be on your way now. You are dismissed. Thank you for coming.”

Acacia stood clumsily from her chair, mind lagging behind her limbs already pushing her out of the door. “Now, the next order of business,” echoed from the room behind the closing door as Acacia stepped out into the misty darkness.

She raised her eyes to the bright moon beyond the leaves and the clouds looming among the treetops, and a cooling breeze washed over her. Her mind was snapped back into her head. With her haze dissipated, her eyes suddenly threatened to pour tears hot like melted steel. Acacia raked her fingers over her scalp, tugging at the curls in her hair. A deep breath. A slow exhale. Her breath in the cool air rose like steam up to the stars.

By the time she arrived back at her cottage, the cold air was no longer soothing, but numbing. She peered into the window and saw Bibi laughing with Innis and Sterling at the dinner table. Acacia smiled and walked in.

“And *dis* was Acacia’s first bath!” Laughter ricocheted off the ceiling, slapping Acacia in the face. Sterling and Innis were craning their necks over Bibi’s shoulder. A stack of photos lay on the table in front of them. Acacia’s temporary sense of serenity shattered.

“Bibi!” she shrieked. “What is going on?” She snatched the photo from her grandmother’s hand and gaped at it. Her tiny baby cheeks were chubby in the photo as she splashed in a tub of bubbles, barely concealing her body from the eyes of her fellow fugitives. She tossed it onto the table and chuckled defeatedly.

Innis picked up the photo again, amusement in her eyes. “Acacia, you were so cute!” she giggled.

Sterling took the photo from Innis and smirked at it. “Yeah, what happened?”

Acacia sighed all the frustration out of her lungs with a long exhale and sunk into the extra chair. “Whatever.”

“What was all dat commotion about, before?” Bibi asked, her reading glasses low on her nose.

Acacia shrugged and grabbed a photo from the stack. “Nothing. They just needed an opinion on a future operation.” Bibi nodded.

“Operation?” Innis asked.

Acacia pulled another photo. “Yeah, part of a larger attack on the city they’re planning. We don’t really know what it is but they’re pretty determined. Oh, look at this one!” Acacia held up a picture of Bibi as a younger woman with curls and a smile that looked a lot like Acacia’s.

“Dear Lord,” Bibi marveled. “Those were the days,” she reminisced with a chuckle.

“Who are these people, Acacia?” Innis showed Acacia a picture of a man and a woman smiling and embracing against a tree.

Acacia smiled somberly. “Mama and Papa.”

Bibi looked over with a frown. “Oh my,” she said, looking closer at the picture. The yellowish filter over the picture made it look antique and aged, but the people it portrayed looked young and invincible. Sterling glanced at the picture and felt a twinge in his chest.

“Are you alright, Acacia?” Innis asked, watching a single tear escape over her eyelashes. Acacia wiped it away immediately, standing up and pushing her hair back.

“Yeah,” she said heavily, the lump in her throat blocking the lies. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just tired. How about we all get to bed?” Bibi agreed and started cleaning up the photos. With an exchange of goodnights, Acacia headed into her bedroom

and Bibi her own, leaving Innis and Sterling in the living room to settle into their futon bed.

Innis kicked off her boots and sat on the far side of the bed. With a flop from the other side, she knew that Sterling had done the same. She took a moment before she layed down, biting her thumbnail, allowing Sterling to get comfortable. She took her goggles off and laid them at the side of the bed, and finally laid back against the pillow. She opened her mouth to say something to Sterling, but closed it as she saw his shut eyes and slowly rising chest. She tried to relax, but images of prison and magic and trees and hangings flashed through her mind like frames of a moving picture.

As the sun rose in Two Bridge Creek that morning, Sterling cracked his eyes open. The sunlight shone upon his sandy hair, illuminating it like golden strings upon a harp. With a grumble and a hand across his chin, he smiled into the light. The cushiony springs of the bed on his back felt like heaven all throughout the night, compared to the wooden benches he endured for the past several months. The pillow in the crook of his neck, no matter how stiff and odd-smelling, was sweet love for his aches and pains. For the first time in months, Sterling felt good.

Chapter 4

I. Aunt Tessa's

The outlaws made their way through the town in the early morning light. Acacia led them past cottages big and small, peeping into the windows of every restaurant, searching for a place for breakfast. Though Bibi insisted she make

pancakes for the guests, Acacia insisted she show her companions around town. (They also had some very important things to talk about—in private.) Her pace quickened as she saw a small diner up ahead.

A bird chirped as they opened the door. Sterling looked above the door frame to see a parrot there instead of a bell. It let out a squawk and dove off its perch, gliding around the room. The dark wooden chairs surrounded empty tables, and the green booths were all empty. *Aunt Tessa's Diner*, read a sign on the wall, overgrown with foliage—whether it was real or fake, Innis wasn't sure. Aunt Tessa's was a hole in the wall. Or rather, a hole in the trunk. That's probably why so many people passed it by. But something about the warm, rich aroma that wafted from the kitchen made the trio feel at home.

"This place makes the best omelets," Acacia raved.

They chose a booth made of soft checkered fabric. The tables wobbled a little bit, but Innis adjusted the legs before they sat so it wouldn't bother them. Just then, a dark-haired woman materialized in front of the bar with the parrot on her shoulder, almost as if she had floated in on the smell of garlic wafting from the back. A single messy pleat was draped down her back and she beamed a warm, crooked smile at her patrons. She wore big cat-eyed glasses over her soft, gently wrinkled eyes, and a dirtied red apron over a pair of tall, laced boots.

Acacia looked up from her menu at the woman and burst into a smile.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Acacia," the woman said, nearing the table.

Acacia shrugged and responded, "I've been out of town a lot," omitting the part about prison. "These are my, uh, companions, Innis and Sterling."

The woman bowed her head and greeted them. "My name's Tessa and welcome to my Diner. What can I get for you today?"

They gave their orders and Tessa fell back into the kitchen. Finally together and alone for the first time since they arrived at Two Bridge Creek, they all, conspiratorially, leaned in closer.

“I’m glad we’re out of the house. I need to tell you something,” Acacia started. “I was called to the Council’s meeting last night. I don’t want to worry Bibi, or you guys, but they said that if I get into any more trouble, bad things are gonna start happening.”

Sterling retorted, “Maybe try to stop causing trouble then.”

“I’m *serious*,” Acacia snapped. “They could evict me, or exile me, or take my magic away.”

Innis glanced down at her clothes. “I have a feeling that Sterling and I being here means trouble.”

Sterling sharply nodded. “So does the fact that guards probably haven’t stopped looking for us after we *literally broke out of jail*.”

“Would you rather have rotted away behind those bars?” Acacia snarled, “Or been dragged into the sun only to be hanged or shot?”

Innis spread her palms in the air. “Okay, we can either argue about this forever, or we can figure it out *together*.” She folded her hands together. “What’s it gonna be?”

Sterling fell back against the cushion of the booth and Acacia flopped her head into her hands. Innis took a deep breath. “How long are we planning on staying here?” she asked.

Acacia tilted her head to look at Innis. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

“What are the odds of the sentries keeping the city guards at bay if they pick up our scent?” Sterling asked.

“Pretty slim,” Acacia said. “Their combined magic forces could hold them off for a while, but the city has guns. And it’s pretty hard for a magician to fight

back against bullets. The main protection of this place is that it's hard to find. But if they manage somehow..." She pushed her fingers through her curls.

Innis and Sterling looked at each other. "Then it's probably best if we don't stay here too long," Innis gingerly suggested.

Acacia shut her eyes tightly until she saw red spots dotting her vision, then looked into the reflective metal of the napkin dispenser, gazing back at her own face pressed against the table. Thoughts of her grandmother passed through her head. Her sweet voice and her rough hands. Every hug they've shared since it's been just the two of them, every argument turned to laughter, every home cooked meal, and every "welcome home" when Acacia returned from causing trouble.

She lifted her head from the table, meeting Innis's gaze. "We'll stay another week. By then, the guards won't be searching as hard, and we'll be able to get far away from trouble."

"A week," Innis agreed.

Sterling propped his elbows on the table. "Let's hope we don't get in too much trouble before then."

Tessa emerged from the kitchen again, walking instead of simply appearing this time. She served each fugitive their meal, though she may not have served them if she had known they were, indeed, fugitives.

"One stack of blueberry pancakes, one bacon and cheddar omelet, and four eggs, scrambled," Tessa said as Sterling dug into his eggs, the first good meal he'd had in awhile.

He wiped his lip, took a breath and told Tessa: "These are delicious."

She smiled and thanked him. "I'm glad you like them." Innis and Acacia tried their food and expressed the same gratitude. With a squawk from her

parrot, Tessa bowed her head and magically whooshed back into the kitchen, leaving the trio to enjoy their meals.

Through a mouthful of eggs, Sterling pointed his fork at Innis and said, “You know, I’ve been thinking, and I have a strange feeling that your crime was a little bit worse than petty theft.”

Innis sunk back into her shoulders as the same conclusion dawned on Acacia. “That’s right! The magic from your shop! I’ll bet that’s what got you caught.”

Their eyes bored into Innis for a long moment until she finally shrugged. “Yeah, okay. You’re right.”

“So you lied about stealing, then?” Sterling accused her.

“Well, no,” Innis said, fiddling with her goggles. “But yes, technically, my charge was ‘magic possession,’ not theft.”

Acacia raised her eyebrows. “But you did steal?”

“What?” Innis cried. “What’s the big deal? You’re acting like we all weren’t thrown in the same cell! Which we all also broke out of, by the way! A little shoplifting isn’t exactly the worst thing any of us have done!”

Sterling rolled his eyes at her outburst. “Yeah, yeah. I just didn’t expect anything like that from *you* is all.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Innis said.

“Nothing,” Sterling answered, leaning back into his seat with a smug grin.

“No, really, Sterling,” Acacia piped up, a sharp curiosity in her eyes. “Spit it out.”

“All I’m saying is that theft requires a certain,” he chose his words carefully, “delicacy, and precision. And I’m not so sure you possess those, Innis.”

Innis stopped her fidgeting at once, promptly forgetting her breakfast. “Are you saying I’m a bad thief?”

“Well, you did get caught, didn’t you?” he quipped.

Acacia butt in once more, “So you think you’re better, hot shot?”

Sterling didn’t even meet Acacia’s eyes as he said, “Don’t get involved, Miss Troublemaker.”

“You have *no right--!*”

Innis put her hands out across the table, stopping the bickering. “Then we’ll settle this. A steal-off.”

“Steal-off?” Sterling rolled his eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”

Innis replied, “Well, if you’re so good it’ll be no problem for you. Here’s how it works. Whoever steals the most before getting caught wins. The bigger the thing, the more points you get. Same goes for how expensive it is. If you’re caught, that’s minus 10 points.”

Acacia was nodding slowly. “How do we know who wins?”

Innis shrugged. “I guess whenever we get bored. Or when we all end up in jail again.”

Sterling was rubbing his chin. “This is really stupid. And dangerous.” He flashed a mischievous smile. “I’m in.”

“Me too,” said Acacia, and immediately swiped the salt shaker from their table, shoving it into her pocket.

“Seriously?” Sterling said.

“Just getting a head start.”

The parrot at the front door suddenly squawked again and a group of four teenagers waltzed in. The shortest of the four, wearing a dark purple satin sash stood in the front and nodded to the trio sitting in the booth. Apparently the de facto leader, everyone followed their instruction and sauntered over. At the booth, Acacia rolled her eyes and turned to greet the gang with a fake smile.

“Delrew, cohorts,” Acacia addressed them. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Not talking to you, witch,” Delrew barked. “I could smell Kizzies from the base of the tree. Figures they’re with you.” Their voice was nasally and taunting. Another punk with mousy brown curls that was looming at the back of the group leaned forward and plucked the goggles off of Innis’s head with a snicker.

“You got a problem?” Sterling warned, crossing his arms. With a splat, Innis’s goggles fell straight down into his eggs.

Delrew put their arms on the table, leaning right into Sterling’s face. “Yeah, actually.” The rest of the group chuckled amongst each other. “We don’t want people like you in our town.”

Acacia kicked Delrew’s legs from under the table. They buckled and hit their forehead on the wood, which Innis and Sterling took the liberty to laugh at. Quickly recovering and brushing their neatly coiffed dark black hair back against their head, Delrew scrunched their nose at Acacia. “Careful, sweetheart. We don’t want *you* here, either.”

Delrew spit in Acacia’s coffee, and with a flick of their head, signaled for the group to head out, only one of their extras missed the cue. “If I were you,” he said, “I’d get out of town quick. Before something bad happens.” The fourth croney sniggered and clapped him on the back, but Delrew quickly tugged them away by their jackets.

“I said, *out*, you--” they muttered, their insult muffled by the closing of the door.

Acacia pushed her coffee to the side and sunk down into her seat. “I’m sorry about them,” she said with a sigh. “I can manage Delrew getting on my case, but you guys didn’t deserve that.”

Innis extracted her goggles from Sterling's plate and began wiping them off with a napkin. "I'm starting to think we really aren't welcome here."

Acacia didn't respond, merely cast her eyes downward.

A creaking of the floorboards brought the trio's attention forwards with a collective flinch. But no leather-jacketed teens were to be seen, only Aunt Tessa meekly creeping forward. After a long pause, she said, "There's a clothing shop down the road from here. I can't promise those punks won't pick on you again, but hopefully it'll help you two blend in and attract less *unwanted* attention." With a gentle smile, Tessa placed the bill on the table and walked back into the kitchen.

Sterling eyed his clothing. "Do we really stand out that much?" he asked.

Acacia scoffed. "She's got the right idea. We won't be able to mask the city smell, but hopefully a makeover will help, to a degree." The magician rummaged around through her pockets, pulling out several silver coins and dropping them on the table. "No time to lose," she muttered, and hopped out of her seat, headed for the door.

Innis and Sterling shared a look and followed her out.

II. Shopping Episode

Just as Tessa had promised, there was indeed a small clothing shop tucked into the branches nearby. The building resembled an acorn in its round walls and curved roof, so much so that Innis thought it might actually be a magically enlarged acorn with windows and doors carved out. Acacia took no time swinging the front door open, clearly still fuming from their earlier encounter. Innis and Sterling hesitantly followed. The interior of the shop looked exactly like the retail stores they had in Kizzington. Metal racks lined the walls, stuffed with hangers and hangers of the latest fashions. Cloaks and shawls of all patterns

and colors hung from hooks on the walls, hats and shoes resting on shelves, and beautiful, shimmering jewelry (which attracted Sterling's attention) sat in a glass display case near the shopkeep. The middle-aged shopkeep took a glance at the group that had just walked in, scoffed, and ducked behind a set of curtains into a back room.

Acacia held up a long black dress against Innis's frame. "I like something like this on you." Innis gathered the cotton material in her hands. The bottom tapered in with many tattered layers of fabric—silk and lace. "The neckline might seem like a bit much but layering is very stylish right now, so I wouldn't worry too much."

"O-okay," Innis said, glancing up at the plunging neckline in question. "So corsets aren't in style here?"

"God, no," Acacia replied. "Most magicians prefer having uninhibited movement. I mean, it all works differently, but it helps to be able to breathe." She plucked some cloth wraps from a basket nearby. "Some girls use this stuff for support. It kinda twists around and fastens at the back." She took a sniff of the material. "I'll let you borrow some of mine."

Sterling, at the front of the store, was examining the gold and silver jewelry behind the glass. He was pretty sure that real diamonds would shine brighter than fake ones. So he quickly reached behind the counter and grabbed a golden necklace with the shiniest white gems he could spot. As he pocketed it, Acacia signaled him over, holding a short sleeved royal blue robe.

"I think you're a blue guy. Am I right?"

"Hell no," Sterling said. "I am not wearing that."

"Oh, come on! Don't be like that, it would look so nice on you!" Acacia insisted. She held it up beside him. "Hm, maybe a bit bigger though."

Sterling snatched it from her hands. "Fine. It'll fit. Where do I try it on?"

Acacia clapped her hands with glee. “Back wall with the curtains! Innis is back there, too.”

As Sterling stalked back to the dressing rooms, Innis was struggling with the buttons and laces on the many pieces of the layered outfit picked by Acacia. In her struggle, her old clothes went flying about the room, and out from a pocket in her pants fell a small metal object. It mutely clanked against the wooden floor, drawing Innis’s attention away from fashion. She quickly glanced at it, back at her laces, then quickly back again. It looked like a key. She crouched before it, grabbed her goggles from the bench, and inspected the item. It was indeed a small metal key, with dozens of tiny delicate shells embedded along the bow. Feeling it in her hand, she remembered where it was from.

Sterling’s bandana. She had pocketed it in the prison cell. Briefly, she thought about returning it.

But then she remembered the stealing game. And she imagined Sterling’s reaction when she would finally reveal the key. She resolved to keep it, and smugly smiled as she continued dressing.

As Sterling and Innis both emerged from their dressing rooms in their new outfits, Acacia grabbed her face in glee. “You two look positively adorable,” Acacia raved.

“No way,” Sterling grumbled, and started back behind the curtain. Much to his annoyance, Acacia had already grabbed his wrist, and proceeded to march the two disguised Kizzies to the checkout counter, Sterling protesting even once they were out the front door.

As Acacia and Sterling stood arguing in the streets, Innis began fumbling with her goggles.

“Oh, Innis, nope,” Acacia said, noticing the habit and plucking the item from Innis’s hands. “No way you can walk around in these. They’re completely city.”

Innis wrung her hands about. “Oh, okay. I can’t, um, do any tinkering without them, though.”

“Don’t worry,” Acacia reassured, shoving the goggles in her bag. “You’ll get them back once we’re out of the Creek. And here I can teach you something even better than tinkering”

Sterling huffed, “Great, two witches in our bunch. That’s just what I need.”

“I’ll get you casting, too, grandpa,” Acacia retorted, and pulled Innis ahead.

“Absolutely not,” Sterling proclaimed, jogging after them.

Chapter 5

I. Campfire

It was later that night when the gang of punks approached the outlaws around a campfire. At the base of the giant tree, far from any flammable leaves or branches, a 50-foot campfire was dug into the soil. Rocks big enough for a human-sized lizard to sunbathe on stretched the whole circle, framing the burning logs.

“You should really see the fire in the fall,” Acacia said. “The orange leaves drift into the fire and make little sparks spring up.” She gazed into the flames as the trio sat on a carved log together.

Innis thought the fire was beautiful now, anyway. Orange and yellow against the forest-green background. It was nothing like anything in the city.

They were only granted these few peaceful moments of reprieve before the onslaught began.

“Look what the spirits dragged in,” a voice came from behind. Acacia, in immediate recognition, whipped her head around.

“Delrew,” she sneered. A lackey pushed Innis off of the log, another spitting on Sterling’s shoes.

Delrew hitched their pants and sidled up beside Acacia on the log. “Y’all are looking pretty magic this evening,” they crooned. “You look nice, really.” Delrew stroked the velvet of Sterling’s cloak—then yanked it over his head. “We all know it’s just a disguise though. You’re not fooling anybody.”

“Can’t cover up the city smell with weak perfume,” one of the delinquents teased.

Acacia smiled sweetly, a flavor that didn’t make it to her eyes. “Can’t put out a fire with oil,” she jeered.

The bully cocked his head. “What does that even—” and then caught a glimpse of his ankle, engulfed in flames, and began yelping. As the rest of the gang joined in on freaking out, Delrew sneered at Acacia. “You won this round, witch,” they warned, “but we’re not going anywhere.”

Sterling adjusted his cape and helped Innis back onto the log bench. “That was some quick magic, Acacia,” Innis said.

Acacia shrugged. “It usually only happens when I feel a strong emotion. I was pissed.”

“Not that time in prison,” Sterling added.

“That was an exception,” Acacia retorted. “Most magicians have an element they can summon. Mine seems to be fire. And the angrier I am, the bigger the fire.”

Innis fumbled with the top of her head before remembering her goggles were gone. “There’s no way you can harness it? At any time?”

Acacia shrugged again, doodling flames with her shoe in the dusty dirt. “Not that I’ve discovered. I had to focus really, *really* hard back at the prison. And I think it only happened because we were desperate.”

“That was luck?” Sterling challenged.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to do anything like that again. Whether because I’m incapable, or because the Council takes my magic away.”

The team slouched into the log for a minute, defeated. “Wait, didn’t you say magic could be taught?” Innis remembered.

Acacia sighed deeply. “Yes, but not elemental magic like this. Something like that needs to be inherited.” Innis nodded solemnly. “Not that learned magic can’t also be powerful!” Acacia quickly amended. “Those types of magicians are called scholars. I think you’d make a great scholar, Innis.”

Sterling rolled his eyes. “Great, just what I need.”

“Yeah,” Acacia replied. “It *is* just what you need. Two powerful women magicians to save your rear-end when you get into trouble you can’t get yourself out of.” He raised his palms in innocence.

Innis pointed her toes and traced a gear into the dust beside Acacia’s flame. “Could you teach me a trick?” she muttered. Acacia lit up.

“Oh my god, yes,” she shrieked. “Let me think for a minute,” she added and then nearly immediately returned with, “I know!” and scrambled through her bag, producing Innis’s goggles. “This will be a perfect trick for you.”

Acacia dropped the goggles into the dirt and kicked them around; Innis witnessed it with horror. “You’re going to use magic to make them clean again,” Acacia instructed.

For several minutes, Acacia attempted to guide Innis in imagining her goggles were clean; she imagined feeling the spotless lenses under her fingers, looking through crystal clear glass, and the particles of dust disappearing. When a dozen attempts passed with no avail, Sterling, clutching bundles of hair in his hands, finally stopped them.

“Enough, god,” he exclaimed. “How come you never tried to learn this crap before, anyway, Innis?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Innis inquired.

He tugged at his scalp. “The magic shop,” he sputtered hopelessly. “Didn’t you spend years building rapport with magicians? Why didn’t one of them teach you?”

Innis laughed. “That would have been *way* too dangerous,” she explained. “There’s a difference between acquiring and selling magic goods and,” she fumbled for the right word, “*partaking* in it yourself. It’s a line my parents wouldn’t cross.”

Acacia handed Innis the goggles again. “Time to cross it, girl.”

Innis furrowed her brow, clasped the goggles in her grasp, and whispered to herself images of all the sudsy windows she’s ever seen doused in water. He opened her eyes but was disappointed to see the same dirty lenses.

“Try to think about how it makes you feel to see your glasses cleaned,” Acacia offered. “Why do you like them clean? What does it look like when they’re dirty?” Innis closed her eyes again, gentler this time, and thought, no, felt, she was looking through dirty goggles. She remembered every time she struggled to wipe them clean with a towel or a greasy rag. Then she imagined why it’s so important to have clean goggles. She thought about her tinkering, and eyesight, and vision. Innis felt the frustration when they were dirty, and the relief when they were clean. She wasn’t sure how long her eyes had been closed, but when she finally opened them, the goggles were clean.

Acacia cheered and grappled Innis in a hug. “I knew you had it in you!” she shrieked, and the baffled Sterling, hair matted in fist-clumps, nodded wordlessly.

II. Mushroom Hunting

Days pass as peacefully as they can for the outcasts: with Innis learning magic from Acacia, Sterling opposing, everyone stealing small treasures, and far too much money being spent at Aunt Tessa's. Oftentimes in the evenings, when there was no one else around, Aunt Tessa would pull a chair up at the end of the outcasts' usual booth and chat until closing time. But the outcasts were there for most breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. (Much to the dismay of Bibi.) Eventually, Delrew and their gang learned that Aunt Tessa's was outcast territory, and stayed away.

"Y'all going to the ceremony tonight?" Tessa asked one morning as she was cleaning a table.

"What ceremony?" Innis asked.

Tessa scoffed. "Acacia didn't even mention it?" she replied. "Some guide she is."

"Hey!" Acacia defended. "It was going to be a surprise!" Under her breath, to the others, she whispered, "I didn't think we'd still be here by now."

"Sorry," Tessa said and laughed. "But I'll see you three there?"

"More magic stuff?" Sterling said. "Couldn't keep these two away."

Tessa proclaimed her excitement, and headed back into the kitchen—so the trio made their way back into the village. "I hate to ruin the mood," Acacia said, "but we should probably pay my Bibi a visit."

"Ruin the mood?" Innis exclaimed. "Your grandma is great."

"Yeah, pretty hot, too," Sterling added.

"What the hell, dude?" Acacia rebutted.

“Kidding.”

The instant Innis, Sterling, and Acacia walked through Bibi’s door, she threw herself with open arms at her guests. “Children, what a fine day it must be for you to grace me with your presence!” she exclaimed, half in jest.

“Bibi,” Acacia whined, “I’m sorry, there’s just so much in town for me to show them.”

Bibi patted her granddaughter on the head, drawing her close. “I know, baby, I’m just jokin’. And might I say,” she redirected her gaze to Innis and Sterling, “you two clean up very well.” The woman moved to straighten Sterling’s cape and smooth Innis’s sleeves.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dupont,” Sterling charmed, wiggling his eyebrows when she looked away.

Bibi regarded the whole room. “I’m so glad you three are here,” she started, “so that I can send you all back out again on an errand!”

Acacia groaned. “Really, Bibi?”

“Yes, yes, but I’m sure it won’t take too long. I only need one or two caps of werewere-kokako.”

“Where-what?” Innis asked, confused.

Acacia pondered. “Are those the blue ones, Bibi?” She nodded. “Bibi, those are so rare!”

“Are they?” Bibi asked innocently. “Well, I know they only grow on the forest ground, so start by the base of the tree.”

“What, exactly,” Sterling spoke up, “are we talking about, by the way?”

Acacia explained, “We need to get a specific type of mushroom for Bibi. It’s small but *bright* blue, and *very* rare.”

Innis asked, “But why does she need a mushroom, though?”

“It’s for druid magic, child,” Bibi answered. “That mushroom’s the last ingredient I need for my poultice that will cleanse the creek for the ceremony.”

Acacia chimed in, “Bibi’s and her magic have been an important part of the ceremony for over 50 years, right, Bibi?”

Bibi shook her head. “All that doesn’t matter, baby. What matters is the mushroom, eh?”

Acacia sighed. “You couldn’t have mentioned this any sooner, Bibi? There’s, like, six hours until the ceremony.”

“That’s plenty of time!” Bibi retorted.

“Fine,” Acacia groaned. “But you owe me, Bibi,” she said, and waltzed out of the cottage, Sterling and Innis close in tow, leaving Bibi chuckling in the cottage.

The trio made their trek through the branches and bridges down to the bottom of the tree, where they could hear the creek babbling. The forest floor was serene and surprisingly dark—not much light was able to filter through the dense leaves, Bibi had explained before, so a lot of mushrooms thrived in the dark, cold environment. They could immediately see this was true. They spotted tall mushrooms and short mushrooms, wide, thin, skinny, fat mushrooms, and speckled, striped, and spotted mushrooms, but no small and royal blue werewere-kokako mushrooms. After about an hour of foraging; checking in hollowed trunks, brushing away fallen leaves, and overturning logs, the outlaws were almost ready to give up.

“I knew they were rare,” Acacia mused, “but they never used to be *this* rare.”

Innis asked, “Are there any sorts of tracking spells you could use?”

“No,” Acacia answered, “I’d need a sample of what we’re looking for to do that.”

Sterling crouched by the creek and dipped his hand into the water. “Let’s try walking along the river,” he said. “We’ll follow the direction it flows.” Without waiting for an answer, he began walking. Innis and Acacia shared a look, and followed.

After a while of walking along the creek with no new observations, Acacia suddenly stopped. “I recognize this area,” she said aloud. She continued walking with renewed purpose until she came upon a large cottage built up against the creek. The cottage wasn’t quite as humble and modest as many of the other buildings within the village, but not quite ostentatious. Most of its glamor was in its beautiful landscaping; rows of multicolored flowers stretched from the front door to the creekbed, and a grandiose, well-tended fruits and vegetable garden was fenced off near the rear of the property. And in that distant garden, Sterling saw a cluster of royal blue mushrooms. He pointed to them.

“That’s them!” Innis near-shrieked. Sterling shrugged and smirked. The pair immediately took a step onto the property to gather the ingredients. Acacia stepped in their way.

“Really, Acacia?” Sterling questioned. “You’re not afraid of a little thievery, are you?”

Acacia shook her head, color draining from her face. “This is Djembe’s house,” she uttered.

Innis stumbled back from the lawn.

“Oh,” Sterling said.

“This is *trouble*,” Acacia said. “And Djembe said I *can’t* make trouble. Otherwise—”

Innis cut her off. "I'm sure there are mushrooms somewhere else," she said. "It's a big forest and we've only explored a bit."

"No," Sterling interjected. "Bibi sent us for a reason. She could have gathered her own mushrooms if they were just in the forest." He looked to Acacia.

"He's right," she said, nodding. "She knows the kind of stuff we get up to. This must be the only place they grow. She wants us to steal them."

Innis and Sterling considered this. "Then you stay out of it," Innis decided. "We'll get them and get back, no problem."

Acacia shook her head. "Djembe knows we're associated. If either of you got caught, it would point back to me," she said. "No, if we're doing this, we're doing it together."

Sterling nodded his head sharply. "Alright. *Mushrooms* on three?" he asked, extending his arm. Acacia and Innis looked on and kept their arms to themselves. "That was a joke," he clarified.

Acacia hesitantly pulled open the gate. No magically activated Rube Goldberg machines were set off; no guard dogs were alerted, no alarms were blaring—none except the ones in Acacia's own head. She stepped foot onto a stepping stone path, treading carefully, and keeping an eye on the back door. As she slowly progressed, the others slowly followed. They crept their way past magnolias, daffodils, tulips, and strange varieties of flowers that Sterling didn't recognize. After a million agonizing steps, they arrived at Djembe's garden, the blue mushrooms illuminating the night. They were nestled under the wide leaves of the squash plants—protected from the sun during the day, and the cool water from the natural irrigation winding around the land provided moisture.

Wordlessly, Acacia approached the plant, crouching to slice the mushrooms with her pocket knife. Sterling and Innis crouched with her, ducking

behind the squash leaves. The cool metal cut clean through the soft stem, and Acacia pocketed two mushrooms. With a glance to Innis and Sterling, all three stood up.

Sterling caught sight of a candle suddenly lit in the porch window. He grabbed the elbows of Acacia and Innis, pulling them back down behind the plant.

Acacia opened her mouth, about to shout at him, but noticed the light, and the door swinging open.

Two figures emerged from the house and stood on the back porch, the candlelight providing mere silhouettes.

One man perched on the stairs and said, "Thank you for meeting on such short notice."

The other man responded in a deep voice, "I appreciate your concern. And I appreciate that you came to me directly."

"But you won't do anything about it," he said.

The man standing still in the doorway responded, "I know what's best for my people."

The thieves squatting in the garden looked at one another.

"I can promise you, this isn't best for your people!" The first voice grew louder. "Imagine the retaliation."

"Imagine the bodies of our people already in the ground."

"Imagine hundreds more!"

Both voices were silent for a while.

"It's not only about revenge," the deeper voice said gently. "We must show power. We can be passive no longer."

"I know this, Djembe," he responded, "but *you* know what comes of violent cycles. Don't you?"

A faint splash from the river behind the intruders alerted them, and everyone else nearby.

Two pairs of eyes from the porch snapped to the garden, searching beyond the cabbages and squashes for signs of life. Acacia, Sterling, and Innis went stiff—eyes wide and frozen like corpses. Acacia peered into the eyes of Djembe, and the faint outlines seemed to peer back.

Several silent moments passed, and the eyes turned back to one another. The outlaws shared a sigh of relief.

Djembe regarded his visitor again. “Thank you for coming,” he said. “But don’t come again.”

The other man started down the steps. “You’ll regret this,” he called back. Djembe did not respond. He watched the critic retreat into the trees until he disappeared. Then he stood on the porch, gazing into his dark garden, but didn’t rush into the plants to shoo away the hidden thieves, then returned into his house.

Chapter 6

I. Ceremony of the Creek

Just hours later, the silver moon shone on the dark wet treetops, glinting almost like metal—though the breeze gave away the illusion. Bibi finished preparing the werewere-kokako and mixed them with the rest of her ingredients in a demonstration of magic that Innis was entranced by. Once she was done, the solution was placed in a blue glass bottle and placed in the pocket of Bibi’s beautiful robe. Bibi, Innis, Acacia, and Sterling were all dressed in their best clothes and they made their way down from the very top of the village to attend the Ceremony of the Creek held just outside of town. Acacia wore a form-fitting

dark purple gown that flowed past her hips in elegant ruffles down to her feet. Golden embroidered details traced her torso and fluttered along the skirt like shooting stars. Over her shoulders she wore a sleeveless, deep magenta robe, casually left open.

Innis fidgeted in unusually loose garments. She donned a white dress which featured frilly accents at the knees where it tapered away. Acacia had convinced her to try the multi-colored jeweled necklaces which she wore today, and which sparkled like rainbows in the moonlight. For warmth, she kept a red knitted shawl, finished with tasseled at either end.

Finally, Sterling sported various shades of green, fashionable robes, which were very similar to his other set, since Acacia could not convince him to branch out any further. He was, however, more than thrilled to try on a host of golden rings, which he wore tonight.

The pathways were flooded with families and friends, all headed to the same place. Innis would have worried about the sturdiness of the ropes if Acacia hadn't assured her they were magically secured.

"What is this ceremony about, again?" Sterling grumbled.

Acacia, too excited to bemoan his disinterested tone, responded, "Basically, the best magicians from every realm of magic are asked to bless the creek."

Innis gleamed. "Does that mean the best scholar in the village will be casting tonight?"

"Why else do you think we're bringing you, Innis?" Sterling quipped with false elation.

“Shut up, Sterling,” Acacia countered. “Yes, Innis. And I’m sure you’d be able to introduce yourself if you were interested. You’ve been making good progress this past week.”

Innis blushed. “I’m alright.” She glanced back at Bibi, following close behind, in admiration. “But your grandmother is so talented. Do you think she could teach me druid magic?”

Acacia shrugged. Innis pressed on, “Do I need inherent magic to practice?”

Bibi glanced up and smiled softly. “All you need is a steady hand and a lot of patience.” Sterling rolled his head towards Innis. She furrowed her brows.

“I’m very determined,” she resolved.

Bibi laughed. “That’s even better, child.” Innis hung back to ramble with her as they walked, leaving Sterling and Acacia side by side.

They shared a companionable silence for a while until Acacia nudged him playfully.

“What do you want?” Sterling grumbled.

“So,” Acacia whispered, undeterred, “what have you stolen so far?”

Sterling rolled his eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Acacia whined. “C’mon! I need to know if I should be on the lookout for valuables tonight.” Sterling scoffed. “Just a little hint?”

“Fine,” he began. “I’d guess I’m at about 250 points by now.”

“Shit,” she exclaimed. “You’re probably overestimating but I’m nowhere close.” He shrugged. “Unless we’re counting the mushrooms that I technically stole. Which would put me at, say, 500.”

Sterling snapped his head towards her. “Those mushrooms were *not* worth that much.”

She replied, “I stole them from *Djembe’s garden*,” with hushed insistence.

Sterling gestured wildly. “Well, *technically*, we all stole them together.”

Acacia threw back, “No, *technically*, it was me.”

“*Technically*, you’re wrong.”

“*Technically*, you’re an asshole.”

Many rebuttals later, they reached the forest floor for the second time today, and looked upon the beautiful, incandescent celebration that was already in full swing before them. Children darted through the trees, waving sparklers and leaving trails of light behind them. All sorts of magicians were practicing their crafts in preparation for their part of the ceremony. Hundreds of candles lined both sides of the creek, stretching in one direction as far as the eye could see, and the other direction, leading straight to the tall silver bridge that marked the village’s secret entrance. Bibi peeled off from the group to chat with other druids, and the outlaws made their way to the bridge. Where the candles ended, an arch almost as tall as the bridge curved over the creek. The arch seemed to be made of twisting branches, as many colors as the multitude of trees that scattered throughout the forest—birch, oak, maple, fir, all winding around one another in perfect unity.

A familiar voice called from behind.

“What’s a bunch of Kizzies like you doing here?”

The trio turned around towards the voice. Delrew stood there, dressed in white flowing robes. Sterling jolted to approach them, but Acacia grabbed his arm. “Don’t,” she said.

Delrew held their hands up and shrunk into their already short stature.

“Woah,” they yelped, “Hey, I’m sorry!”

Acacia glanced around, then looked them up and down. “*Don’t* use that word at the ceremony.”

“Yeah, I got it.” Their hands found pockets within the folds of fabric. “I’m sorry. I should have just said hi—I meant to just say hi.”

Innis furrowed her brow. “What? Why would you—? Where’s your posse?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Delrew snapped. “Whatever, just forget it,” they said and kicked the dirt as they stormed off.

“That was weird,” Sterling remarked to the rest of the group. He watched as Delrew approached their gang and was playfully shoved and tousled by all the other much taller teens. One pointed towards the three outlaws and Delrew punched him in return, vigorously shaking their head.

Acacia’s attention was turned to the creek when she noticed a glowing light and a hush fall upon the forest. A woman stepped into the creek, her bare feet making ripples in the water. The three wordlessly moved towards the crowd gathered around her.

The magician paced in a small circle, trailing her toes along the surface, and her heels padding on the smoothed stones. As her movements grew grander and her arms swayed faster from side to side, the water became more agitated. The droplets sprung higher into the air with each step of the magician. Splashes and spraying of water flung from the creek into the audience, until finally, she dropped, heaving and folded over her knees. The crowd breathed out a sigh of air they hadn’t noticed they were holding, and realized the thousands of water droplets suspended in air. As she sat in silence, breathing with the village, the forest, and the creek, the muddy, greenish water surrounding her began to glow. It began as one small ripple extending from the magician. Slowly, the glowing circle grew larger. Then another ripple, then another. Each ripple adding more light to the creek until the entire creek as far as the crowd could see was glowing with heavenly white light, and the magician at the center with her eyes closed, breathing serenity into the world.

She stood, and the glow faded as fast as it had occurred. And the water appeared the slightest bit cleaner as she waded back into the crowd.

“That was a water witch,” Acacia said, as the village applauded. Innis caught a sly smile on the magician’s face as she passed by, dripping. “Incredible.”

With the water witch’s spectacle still making waves through the crowd, a stout cloaked figure meekly made its way to the edge of the creek. The magician pulled his hood down to reveal a face covered by a long brown beard, and piercing blue eyes.

Acacia gasped. “Innis!” she whispered. “That’s the scholar!” Innis gazed on in wonder as the scholar tip-toed carefully to avoid wetting his embroidered leather boots in the creek, and rustled through a large bag to find a thick arcane tome. He opened the book and spent several long seconds flipping through and trailing his finger along the pages—searching for *something*. The crowd started to murmur in suspense and a small measure of agitation. Innis remained transfixed to the yellowed pages and the subtle puffs of dust that exploded with each chunk of text slamming against the other side. As the scholar’s eyes squinted so tightly they might have been closed, the flipping and skimming suddenly stopped. He spoke aloud in a raspy and bellowing voice, the words falling out from his mouth as smoothly as if by second-nature “[insert cool ancient-sounding magicky words here].” At his utterance, the crowd was silenced. But as the village looked in unison to the river, there was little, if any change visible.

The scholar nodded sharply and returned the tome to his leather pack by heaving it over his head and dropping it. He then turned to the crowd with a meek smile. “I-I know it doesn’t look much different,” he wrung his hands discreetly amidst his long sleeves, “but the nutrients in the soil have been replenished,” he

said through his beard. "I mostly deal with maintaining local ecosystems. The fish will be returning in a few days." With this announcement, the crowd erupted into applause, and the scholar quickly bowed several times and shuffled away.

Innis turned to Acacia with a sparkle in her eyes. "That was incredible," she marveled. "Where does he get those books from?"

Acacia shrugged. "You should go ask him," she said, and pointed to the hooded figure a dozen feet away. Innis's jaw dropped and she jogged in his direction. Sterling took Innis's place next to Acacia and leaned slightly down to whisper, "I bet it's bullshit." Acacia jabbed his side with her elbow.

"It's magic," Acacia said.

"I need to see it to believe it," Sterling replied.

On the other side of the crowd, Innis was introduced to the scholar named Angel and beamed with childlike glee.

With the second display complete, the third and final magician of Two Bridge Creek approached the water. Bibi, or more accurately, [Bibi's real name here], the druid, paused by the riverbed and began scouring the stony ground. She announced to the curiously watching crowd, "I'm searching for a large, round and flat stone." Innis returned to her friends as Bibi bent to the floor to pluck a stone of her liking from the earth. She then retrieved the poultice from her pocket and carefully unbound it, gathering the dark, wet mixture on her fingers. She smeared it on the river stone in circles—tracing and retracing the shape on its smooth surface.

Acacia felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see a messenger in a forest green robe standing with his hands behind his back. "Ms. Dupont," the messenger said. "Will you and your friends please follow me?" Sterling and Innis exchanged glances and followed Acacia as she walked behind the messenger.

As they all left the first floor, Bibi dropped the stone into the creek and the water glistened.

They followed the man up the winding bridges of the town to the Council meeting hall, where only Djembe was sitting and waiting at the head of the table. Acacia's face slouched in realization. Something was wrong. She felt a sense of doom fill her from her feet to her shoulders.

II. Disaster Strikes

"Please, take a seat," Djembe said. He waved away the nervous-looking messenger. Acacia, Sterling, and Innis approached hesitantly, sitting near the middle of the table. "There have been some complaints from small businesses about property loss," he began. Innis squirmed in her chair and looked at her lap, but felt Djembe's eyes on her. Sterling stared squarely ahead with a fixed jaw. Acacia felt fire in her veins. Djembe continued, "Do you three know anything about that?"

Acacia began to sweat, remembering the very real threat posed to her at the last Council meeting. "I have no clue what you're talking about," she uttered. Innis and Sterling remained quiet. Djembe nodded.

"That is quite strange," he remarked. "As witnesses have identified some individuals suspiciously similar to you three." Innis blushed. "If you are trying to be sneaky, it helps to actually sneak," Djembe commented.

Sterling flashed a forced smile. "You're mistaken, sir," he said, his knuckles white. "We haven't done anything wrong."

Djembe laughed; a deep belly chuckle. “Kids, I thought you’d know better than to lie to me.” His face fell expressionless. “Or at least tried harder.”

Acacia flew from her seat. “Please don’t make me leave, Sikhulu. I have nowhere else to go. My home, my grandmother, my team.” As she pleaded, she felt lava bubbling in her brain, and boiling in her stomach. “Please, Djembe. Give me one more chance.”

Djembe shook his head slowly. “You’ve had enough chances already, Acacia.” The girl began to protest but Djembe cut her off. “Countless opportunities, but nothing changes. And after all your previous offenses, you bring these two here? Two Kizzies into our community? Acacia, surely you knew the risks, yet still you proceeded.”

“But—” Acacia began.

“But *nothing*,” Djembe countered. “You bring in two foreigners and then they steal from our businesses. There is no excuse for that, Acacia. I thought you knew better.” Acacia let her head fall, and Innis fought the urge to run to her. “No matter,” Djembe resumed. “You and your friends are to leave this place and never return.”

Sterling rose from his seat, knocking it to the ground. “You can’t do that!” he shouted. “It’s not Acacia’s fault, it’s mine! Just banish me!”

“It is your fault,” Djembe agreed. “But your punishment is to live with the knowledge that you corrupted this woman with your sick, city ways.”

As Djembe finished his sentence, a steady whistle droned in the distance. All four people in the room looked through the window, but saw nothing. Acacia glanced back at Djembe’s emotionless face in the split second before the earth shook and the room threw everyone to the floor.

A piercing, explosive boom followed immediately after. Innis's ears were ringing as she crawled across the floor towards Acacia, who was flung towards the wall.

"What happened?" Acacia croaked and wheezed.

"I don't know," Innis responded.

As Sterling stumbled onto his feet, two sentries rushed into the council room and helped Djembe up onto his.

Another long drone sounded from outside, and the room shook once more.

"What the fuck?" Sterling yelled.

"What's happening?" Innis echoed. Acacia pulled herself up by the windowsill and peered out the window. She saw nothing; no treetops, no bridges, no sky. There was only thick gray smoke moving through the air in billowing waves.

"We're being attacked." Djembe was smoothing his golden robes as the room shook and disturbed dust floated about. He didn't have to say by whom.

"No," Acacia whimpered. Innis's hands flew to cover her mouth.

Djembe limped closer to the three. "Listen carefully," he said. Another sudden explosion threw him against the meeting table, and unbalanced the outlaws. "Nothing from before matters, now," Djembe spat. "Nothing will ever be the same." He delved into the pocket of his robes and retrieved a small wooden box secured with a latch. "This is an artifact from my ancestors." He paused to cough violently. "What is contained in here will help lead you to another one." He handed the box to Acacia, and she accepted it in her hands like she was holding a baby bird. "Do not open it now. Wait until you're safe. Do not show anyone else." Acacia handed the box off to Innis, who nodded and secured it in her backpack. Djembe continued, "I am sorry I cannot explain more, but I—" he briefly choked up—"I don't know who is left alive, and there is no time. Pardon

my bluntness, but I cannot entrust this to my strongest warriors, so you three will have to do.”

Acacia slowly approached Djembe. He straightened his back to tower above her and stared down at her. She matched his posture and stared back. “I won’t let you down,” she said.

“Good,” Djembe responded. “All our lives depend on you. All three of you.” Innis, Sterling, and Acacia looked among one another. As bombs continued to fall on the town, they felt a surging in their own spirits. “You asked for another chance, Acacia?” the Sikhulu said. “Well, here it is.”

“Thank you,” Acacia whispered.

Djembe gazed absently out the window. “Thank *you*.” He waved his hand at one of the sentries still standing at the front of the room. “Timon, please accompany these three out of the village. It is of maximum importance that they are protected.” The sentry approached and bowed with his hand over his heart. “Go. Now. Killian,” he glanced to the other sentry, “Bring as many survivors as possible to safety.” He nodded and rushed out the door.

Innis, Sterling, and Acacia followed Timon to the back end of the room as he jogged, sparing glances over their shoulder at Djembe, sitting back down at the head of the table.

The sentry placed his hand on the wall. After a few seconds, a panel slid out of the way and a corridor was revealed. Acacia peered on in shock. How many times had she met in this room and never known its secret exit? The group quickly descended down the spiraling wooden stairs and occasional smaller explosions shook them. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Timon opened another door into the cloud of smoke that the town had become. They jogged through the dirt pathways on the forest floor, fire and floating embers shining through the thick smoke. Rubble blocked their path near the edge of the

village, and they climbed over the walls of someone's cottage to proceed. Sterling caught a glimpse of a struggle from the corner of his eye and sidestepped closer to investigate. He opened his mouth to shout to his party for help, but stopped the sound from escaping when he noticed the familiar purple sash on the body. It was Delrew, Sterling realized.

Their eyes locked together. Sterling glanced back at the retreating forms of his friends, then back at Delrew. Their bloodied hand reached towards Sterling, and with pleading eyes, croaked unintelligibly.

Chapter 7

I. A Puzzle Emerges

"I need to find my grandma," Acacia barked at Timon.

"You need to get out of here," Timon replied. "You have more important things to do."

"Please," Acacia begged, becoming hysterical. "I need to find her."

Innis tugged on Acacia's sleeve. She was planted at the entrance to the ceremony grounds. There were fallen trees everywhere, and a lot of unseen commotion. The explosions had passed, but fires were running rampant, and magicians had come out of the woodworks to start extinguishing them.

Timon shouted to another sentry running past. "You! Are there people handling the ceremony area?"

The hurried sentry shouted back, "I just came from there! I'm headed for a medicinal druid."

Acacia cried, "Oh, god, Bibi might be hurt." The other sentry took off running again, and Timon crouched beside Acacia's crumpling form.

"We have to keep moving," he pleaded. "I promise she will be fine."

Sterling came jogging up behind the scene. “What’s happening?” he asked.

Innis responded, “He’s not letting us check on Bibi.”

Sterling sauntered over to Timon and towered over him. Timon raised himself back to full height to counter Sterling. “Let the girl find her grandma, man,” Sterling growled.

Timon touched a hand to his sword. “The Sikhulu commanded me to deliver you three to safety. It’s not safe in there.”

Sterling placed his hands on Timon’s chest and shoved. “It’s about to not be safe out here, buddy.” While he was off-balanced, the group ducked under a fallen tree and climbed their way into the ceremony grounds.

Innis giggled maniacally at the absurdity. “I think we lost him,” she panted. Acacia, in tears, slowed and said, “Thank you. Where is she?”

Sterling led the trio through the battlegrounds. Dozens of magicians were lying on the ground. As they passed, searching for Bibi, the three helped several people pinned under fallen trees. They followed the creek—almost so pristine, now stained with debris and ashes—until they came across the bridge. A bomb had just nearly missed the bridge, resulting in a burning crater and a shockwave of downed trees. Nearby, an elderly woman was lying on the ground.

“Bibi!” Acacia cried out, and fell to her side. She gently put a hand to her face and rolled her head to meet her eyes. Bibi smiled.

“Acacia, darling,” she moaned. “What are you doing here?”

Acacia could barely form sentences. “It’s alright, Bibi. You’re gonna be okay. I love you.”

“I love you, too, dear,” Bibi crooned, and tried to lift her hand to Acacia’s face in return, but cried out and drew it back to her chest. Innis crouched beside the pair and noticed a pool of blood seeping through Bibi’s sleeve.

Timon, the sentry, ran up to the group crowded around Bibi. "Oh good," he muttered, and quickly diverted to the side to round up some able-bodied young people to assist Bibi to safety. "There should be a medical druid set up near the entrance soon. Take her there and be careful!" The tired-looking group nodded, and proceeded to lift Bibi gently, away from Acacia's still sobbing form.

"Be careful of her shoulder!" Innis warned, and Acacia continued shouting "I love you's" as Bibi was whisked away.

Timon helped Acacia to her feet. "Good job, you found her." Acacia nodded furiously, wiping tears from her face and dripping white face paint. "She'll be alright," Timon promised. "Now, let's keep moving, okay?" She nodded again.

The four started making their way back to the bridge; standing tall and golden from this side of the creek. As they approached the structure, Innis felt a rattling from her backpack. With each step it seemed to intensify.

"Wait," she called out, and began to dig through its contents.

"I forgot you've been lugging that Rocket Sack thing around, Innis," Sterling commented. "Must be heavy."

"No, it's not that," Innis replied. "There's something loose in here, I think." She felt around in the pockets for the source of the rumbling, rustling around her several trinkets and stolen goods, then her finger brushed upon a small wooden box and she pulled it out.

Acacia and Sterling stared in wonder at the violently shaking wooden box that Djembe had just gifted to them. Innis's eyes were wide. "Did I break it somehow?"

"Should we open it?" Sterling asked.

Acacia quickly protested, "He said not to open it until we're safe and alone."

Sterling spun around, assessing the empty and eerily still forest around them. He raised an eyebrow.

“No!” Acacia repeated. She marched to Innis kneeling on the ground and snatched the box from her hands, continuing up the path to the bridge. As she progressed, the shaking from the box became even more violent and she dropped it from her hands with a yelp. It jumped and bounced on the ground where it landed, slowly inching towards the metal reinforcers of the bridge. Acacia hesitantly approached on her knees to the object. Carefully, she flicked open the small golden latch, and lifted the lid.

In the box’s velvet interior was a round and silver ball. It continued to shake and wobble within the box until Acacia took it gently into her hands. The second she enclosed her grasp around it, it began tugging her closer to the bridge, as if a powerful magnetic force was pulling it. She stumbled in the direction, and Innis shouted, “Be careful!” as Acacia neared the metal at a concerning velocity.

The ball slipped out of Acacia’s hands. She felt her world ending in that instant, and imagined all the thousands of people supposedly relying on this small piece of metal. And the instant was over, and the ball slotted perfectly into a small hole in the bridge’s metal entryway.

Acacia didn’t react immediately, but then began scratching her fingernails at the spot, but the fit was too tight, and the metal ball too smooth to budge. As she struggled, the ball began to glow red and orange in irregular markings across the surface. She jolted away at the heat it suddenly emanated. Finally, the heat and the glow subsided and the ball released from the socket, and tumbled inert on the forest floor. Acacia hesitantly returned it to her grasp and examined it, returning to the gaping bystanders.

No one said anything; they simply stared at Acacia turning the silver ball in her hands, tracing the markings that had appeared. “There are words,” she said.

“Trek across the salty edge,
to the wreck at jungle’s ledge.”

Acacia felt her head reeling. She must have walked over this bridge a million times, and that small socket looked like nothing more than a decoration to her. But it had been part of this strange contraption this whole time, hiding in plain sight. She placed the ball back in the box and the box back in Innis’s backpack.

“What is that even supposed to mean?” Innis remarked. “It’s complete Nonsense. Salty edge?”

Acacia replied, “It’s telling us where to go next, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“Dirk’s Sea,” Sterling said. “It’s named after an explorer but it’s also a kind of sword.” Acacia and Innis gawked at him. “What? I’m a pirate, I know geography. Anyway, it’s also the most direct path from here to the Nilmu Jungle, which famously grows up against a canyon. I don’t know anything about a wreckage, but I’d know where to look.”

Timon, who had been standing guard, piped up, “You guys didn’t ask me, but I think he’s right.”

Acacia nodded. “Alright, then. But then that means we need to cross an ocean. Do we have any ideas about how we’ll manage that in a timely fashion?”

“If you recall,” Sterling said, grinning and cocking a brow, “I am an airship pirate.” Acacia and Innis beamed. “And while traveling by air is a lot faster than by sea, it *will* be a trek. So we’re going to need supplies first.”

“We’ll stop back at my shop first,” Innis agreed. “I have some money stashed away there, and maybe some more useful stuff.”

Timon stuck a hand out. “It will be way too dangerous to just walk into Kizzington.”

“Don’t worry,” Innis reassured, “my shop is on the outskirts of the city, and mostly frequented by magicians, anyway. We’ll be fine.”

“Fine,” Timon acquiesced. “But don’t let your guard down.”

“I’d never do anything to disappoint you, Timon,” Sterling crooned. Timon groaned and marched ahead, and the rest quickly followed.

Night had fallen on the outlaws and Timon by the time Innis’s shop entered their sight. Innis rushed to the entrance, and halted in her tracks. The front door was slightly open. Timon kept his hand on his sword and Innis nervously pushed the door. The shop was obliterated. Innis walked through the shop proper, ailes of gadgets and supplies toppled over. Shelves were broken and dangling off the walls. Most of the goods in the front room had been completely ransacked—save for useless trinkets and decorations, there was nothing useful. Acacia and Sterling wandered in behind her and stepped over the rubble cautiously.

“Everything is gone,” Innis lamented. “Decades of work,” Innis cried, “destroyed.”

Acacia warned, “It’s not safe here. We need to move fast.” Innis wordlessly continued into the back room, and stood dejected at the doorway. The room was even more devastated than Innis. Every drawer was thrown on the ground, every shelf cleared. Innis’s robotic Butler was crushed and torn apart on the ground. The most neatly ransacked item in the shop was a short filing cabinet, which was completely empty. Not a paper remained. Innis fell to her knees before it. “All these people. They’ll be thrown in prison because of me.”

“What do you mean, Innis?” Acacia asked gently, with a hand on Innis’s shoulder.

“This cabinet contained the records of every magician that came here,” Innis sobbed. “Every person that was helped for *decades*. I’m fine with the shop being destroyed. I knew it was a possibility after the prison escape. But now the

guards know every name, and it's all my fault." Innis crumpled to the ground. Acacia kneeled beside her.

"No, Innis. It's not your fault, it's mine," she admitted. "If I hadn't broken us all out of jail, it wouldn't have escalated this far."

Sterling chuckled. "But then we all would have died, Acacia." He sat on the empty filing cabinet. "We did what we had to do, and that's what we're going to keep doing. I'm guessing they took the money, too, Innis?" Innis helplessly crawled to the counter and reached underneath. She pulled out a few bills. "That's good, but not enough for rations and weapons." Acacia raised her eyebrows. "I just want to be prepared," he explained.

Acacia replied, "Great, so we have a plan but not enough money to achieve it."

Sterling shook his head, reaching into his pocket. "You must have forgotten what got us kicked out of the Creek." He pulled out a glimmering diamond necklace. "If we can find somewhere to sell this, that will probably be enough money."

Timon adjusted his sword from across the room. "I can take care of that. You three shouldn't be seen outside." Sterling nodded. "And in the meantime, if everything of value is secured from this location, maybe we should find somewhere else to go. Whoever did this likely won't be returning, but they might have guards watching. It's best to get moving." Acacia and Sterling agreed, but decided that some disguises would be in order before another move, and got to work finding any sufficient clothes lying around for everyone to change into.

Innis was sitting on the ground still in front of the filing cabinet. Her tears had dried sticky against her cheeks. Her gaze was fixed on the ground, and she let the conversation wash over her. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a

small purple piece of paper sticking out from under the cabinet. She didn't recognize anything that looked like that, and reached her hand out to grab it.

Salem Chapmin
Chapmin Confinement
Assistant Manager
497 Main Street, Kizzington

"Guys," Innis announced. "That Salem guy was here."

Acacia turned back to Innis to examine the outstretched business card.

"Not this guy again," she said exasperatedly.

"Who?" Sterling asked.

"That radical anti-magic hotshot."

"This says he works for *Chapmin Confinement*," Innis read. "I think they run the prison."

"Oh yeah, big time," Acacia responded. "They built that prison and also manage most of the city guards."

"Okay," Sterling chimed in, "but why is this bigshot guy personally handling our case? Was he tailing us from the start? Since the prison break? Why?"

Innis shook her head. "No, it couldn't be. We saw him on the other side of the city right after we left."

"Then he must have returned here at some point," Sterling continued.

Acacia's face sunk. "Oh my god. The file of names. The attack. It all ties back to us."

"Slow down, Acacia," Innis interrupted. "That's a lot of assumptions."

"No," Acacia continued. "It makes sense. We led them here, and the files of magicians led them to the Creek. It's all my fault"

Timon approached her. "It's alright, Acacia. But we need to start moving so that more violence can be avoided." She nodded firmly.

II. The Airship

In the end, Innis, Sterling, and Acacia combined racked up enough stolen goods to pay for a week's worth of rations and weapons for everyone. When they turned the odds and ends over to Timon, he laughed out loud. "I knew you three stole all of that stuff! I knew it! Why did you even do that?"

Sterling shrugged and answered, "For the points."

They discreetly set up camp in a local library both near enough and far enough, and waited for Timon to return with the supplies in a bag. "Everything's in here, there's a gun for each of you, rations for two weeks just in case anything goes wrong, and some cash left over."

"Thank you, Timon," Acacia said.

"But we should probably part ways, now," Sterling asserted.

Innis pitched in, "It's probably best if you inform the Council about the missing files."

"And help rebuild the City," Acacia continued.

Timon solemnly nodded. "I understand. But before I go, I think I have some important information about where you're headed."

He began to recount the tale of the ancient magicians of the jungle, and the unique power they had. "I don't know the specifics," he said, "but I know that Djembe retains some of that power, since he descends from those magicians. Hundreds of years ago, the people of the Nilmu Jungle were the most powerful magicians in all the world. But when the Mundane discovered the jungle, the Nilmu all disappeared or left. Djembe was only a baby when his family fled, and now he's the only known survivor."

The outlaws thanked their guardian and exchanged goodbyes as he left for the Creek, and the three left for the dock.

As they exited the library, hoods covering their faces, Sterling noticed a sign posted on the front of the building: “Wanted Acacia Dupont, Innis Argall, Sterling Ohama. Early 20’s.” Accurate portraits of each outlaw were drawn below their names. “Wanted alive. Reward: £500 each.”

Sterling quickly snatched the poster and crumpled it. “We need to get out of here quickly and quietly,” he told Innis and Acacia. “Look around.” As they scanned their surroundings, they noticed several other wanted posters hung on nearby buildings. “Follow me,” Sterling said, and darted down an alley. Prostitutes and charlatans hawking snake oils whispered at them as they sped between the buildings. Cigar smoke burned their nostrils. When they emerged at the other end, the clear blue sky unblocked by trees or buildings breathed fresh air into their lungs.

A long brick walkway hung over a calmly lapping ocean. In the waters, several fishing boats sailed nearby. A few small market stalls stood quietly against the wharf’s railing. Sterling, Innis, and Acacia walked less cautiously down the road, now, at ease in the lazy marina atmosphere.

“So we’re finally going to board Sterling’s famous airship,” Acacia teased.

Sterling adjusted his bandana. “Yep. The Xacta, she’s called.”

Innis spotted an airship dock in the distance. “Is it over there?” she marveled.

Sterling squinted. “Yep, it’s the biggest one there.” They stared at the magnificent rich wooden ship towering over the others. There was no mistaking which ship was Sterling’s. The tall masts flew massive sails painted with the image of a mermaid.

“Will we be able to man the whole ship with just the three of us?” Innis asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Sterling reassured. “There’s really not much to airship travel. Did you know that the wood is imbued with magic and that’s pretty much how it flies?”

Acacia scoffed. “No way,” she said. “No way the City lets that fly. No pun intended.”

“It’s a little known fact,” he commented, smirking. “We will have to shovel coal into the fires every once in a while, but it’s really quite easy.”

“I’m surprised you’d fly in a magical ship, Captain Sterling,” Innis doubted.

“I have layers,” Sterling quipped.

As they slowly approached, he noticed the ship starting to shift and shake in the harbor. Then, slowly, it began to rise. “Shit,” he muttered, and broke out into a sprint. Acacia and Innis quickly noticed him picking up speed, and the airship slowly taking off.

“Where is it going?” Acacia yelled. Sterling didn’t answer her and continued running.

By the time they reached the base of the ship, it was a good twenty feet in the air above them. “Shit,” Sterling swore again.

“Why is it leaving?” Acacia repeated. “There’s no way we’ll reach it, now,” she relented.

“Is there another way to get across the ocean?” Innis asked.

“No,” Sterling barked. “We *need* to get on that ship.”

“*How?*” Acacia begged. “It’s not like we can fly!”

Innis’s eyes grew wide in realization. The ship was about thirty feet above them, now. She pulled her backpack off of her shoulders, remembering what she’s really been lugging around this whole time.

“My Rocket Sack!” she blurted. She flicked a switch on the side of the bag and steam began to pour from the pipes at the bottom. “Grab onto me!”

“Innis, that thing is a prototype!” Acacia exclaimed. “It could barely handle the weight of one person!”

Sterling wrapped his arm around Innis’s left side. “It’s our best chance,” he said. Acacia held her hands to her head in a second of debate, then followed suit and latched onto Innis’s other side.

“This thing better not kill us all,” Acacia grumbled.

“No promises,” Innis replied, and yanked a ripcord on the Rocket Sack.

The three, huddled together in a tight hug, suddenly blasted into the air. Acacia squeezed shut her eyes as they were being thrown about, but held fast to the other two. When she dared to open her eyes, the horizon between the sky and the ocean was vertical. Innis struggled to gain control of her invention, but the power it needed to transport such weight seemed almost too much for her to bear. After several screaming revolutions in the air, Innis spotted the sun located in the correct position in her vision, and just barely was able to reach a switch on the backpack’s straps. With a jolt, the Rocket Sack kept them in an upright position, and kicked into high gear. Another yelp from everyone delivered them straight into the air, and the sputtering invention slowed to a halt as they catapulted onto the stern of the ship.

Innis, Sterling, and Acacia slowly released their grasp on one another, and spent a second to breathe before untangling themselves from the dogpile. Innis shook the Rocket Sack and determined it was out of fuel. If they had taken a second longer, they would have fallen forty feet back onto the solid ground. Acacia peered over the ledge of the ship. The earth and ocean below were retreating quickly now, and sparse, low hanging clouds enclosed around the ship. Acacia felt her legs wobbling as she realized how high up they were.

Innis spoke first. “I can’t believe we made it.”

“Me neither,” Acacia trembled.

As Sterling stood upon the poop deck, at the very stern of the ship, his face hardened. The sails of the mizzen mast obscured them from the view of the rest of the ship. He held out his hand to Innis. "Distribute the guns, Innis," he said.

"What? Why?" she asked, puzzled, but still reaching into the bag.

"We need to be prepared," he answered gravely.

Acacia, her face green, turned skeptical to Sterling. "What is going on?"

He didn't respond, but as soon as the pistol was in his hand, he stepped around the corner of the deck, in full view of the sprawling ship below him. Innis and Acacia reluctantly did the same.

Sterling's hardened, steel gray eyes shot down at the crew of pirates busy at work on the deck, and locked onto the feather-capped figure standing ominously near the bow of the ship—and staring directly back at Sterling. He grinned and Sterling could nearly make out a glint from his golden teeth. Acacia and Innis stumbled upon the same sight, far less level-headed than Sterling.

The figure across the ship raised his sword with a *shink* as it unsheathed and announced in a gravelly, bellowing voice: "Welcome back, Sterling!"

The remainder of the pirates abroad ground to a halt and clattered to spot Sterling and his friends there, at the stern. Sterling cocked his gun and smiled. "Ahoy, Captain," he said, and the crew lurched towards the outlaws.

Rider University

Gem of a Genre

An Analysis of YA Lit and a Case for its Importance

Elayna Badger

Senior Thesis

April 16, 2023

Introduction

I have been writing my novel *Amateur Outlaws* for six years now. The story has taken many different forms over the years—I was a sophomore in high school when I first conceived of the idea: three young adults, each of them struggling with their self-worth in a world of magic and science, are forced into companionship after breaking out of jail together. In its early hours, I gave no thought to decisions such as marketing, target audience, or even genre. I was sixteen and simply excited to have a good idea. Now, after making significant progress in my manuscript for the creative portion of this project, I am much closer to a final draft. In my education and maturation, I have dipped my toes into the publishing industry to discover that in order to have a successful novel, it may be important to determine what will be the genre(s) of my book. For that reason, I have decided to devote this paper to the research of genre, specifically Young Adult literature, but also fantasy/speculative fiction. This paper will also explore genre from a literary analysis perspective as well as a publishing perspective.

What is Genre?

Literature intended for young adults, Young Adult (YA) Literature is sometimes referenced as a genre, and sometimes not. Which is it? Categorical labels like YA function on the basis of “its relationship to and constitution in literature produced on behalf of audiences that are constructed and understood in demographic terms” (Pattee 219). Traditionally understood genres like romance, science fiction, or fantasy are not constructed for any specific age group; rather, these genres are founded on recognizable rhetorical elements. Anis Bawarshi writes in his essay “The Genre Function” that “genres have come to be defined as typified rhetorical ways communicants come to recognize and act in all kinds of situations, literary and nonliterary”

(335). Thus, not only are "fantasy" and "mystery" genres, but so are "shopping lists," "job performance interviews," "meetings," "recipe[s]," "podcast[s]," "tv-show[s]," and, yes, "novel[s]" (Auken 163). As seen with these examples, genre can be defined by form in addition to content. A fantasy novel, then, includes two genres: the formal genre, "novel," and the "sub-genre," or what Auken would call "embedded genre," fantasy. While many critics consider YA to be nothing more than a label, I would argue that it is appropriate to term YA as a genre on the basis that Young Adult literature "helps us define and organize kinds of texts" (Bawarshi 335) and also contains "building blocks" (Auken 168) that are "recurring and standardized" (170) just like any other genre.

There are several concrete, recognizable elements of YA lit. YA literature is overwhelmingly characterized by a "sense of 'immediacy' in voice." On the other hand, Adult literature has a "'scope', a stronger sense of past, present, and future" (McAlister 6).

Additionally, YA's focalization is primarily first-person, often with alternating perspectives (McAlister 10, 14). Many of these characteristics can be seen in the styles of front-running YA authors, Rowling (*Harry Potter*), Meyer (*Twilight*), and Collins (*The Hunger Games*), whose contributions helped grow the genre (Cart 146). Many YA novels are also characterized by the developmental journey of the protagonists, and what they achieve in growth by the end of the novel. At the start of the narrative, the protagonists are usually situated in childhood, and while the coming-of-age narrative develops the protagonists, they rarely reach true adulthood by the end. Of course, not every YA novel is a *Bildungsroman*, but in featuring adolescents as protagonists, the trope is quite common. Indeed, YA literature almost always features young

protagonists, usually between the ages 12-18, which is also the target audience of the genre. These are elements that construct and indicate a modern YA novel.

In comparison, the elements of the fantasy genre are more concerned with subject matter than style. The fantasy genre traditionally “incorporates timeless folklore and fairy tales” (Cart 98); elements like dragons, other fantastical creatures, and magic. However, the genre “has evolved over more than three centuries...and has often been a response to the social and cultural concerns related to the role and importance of imagination at any given time in history” (Rossbridge 24). Modern fantasy, thus, has evolved with the changes in history. The development in technology, culminating in the advent of the digital age, has brought changes to the genre, and contemporary examples more often include realistic developments of technology and science along with more fantastical, magical elements. Indeed, the line between science fiction and fantasy is becoming blurred, and “many observers regard science fiction as having now merged with fantasy to form something called ‘speculative fiction’” (Cart 97). While science fiction is often focused more on futures of Earth that could realistically come to pass, fantasy has always been less grounded in reality. The blending of these genres can be seen in Leigh Bardugo’s *Six of Crows*, which I read for this project, and will be discussing in greater detail in the coming paragraphs. Part of Bardugo’s fantastical and magical “Grishaverse,” *Six of Crows* has plenty of distance from our world’s reality—characters are endowed with abilities to heal others, manipulate metals with telekinesis, and control the elements (with no explanation other than “magic.”) However, *Six of Crows* is also concerned with science. The plot revolves around a recent performance-enhancing drug called *jurda porem*, which was developed by a scientist, and is being used by malicious forces to greatly modify the powers of magic users

(“Grisha”), but leave them lethally addicted and ill. This plot is a small jump from reality, and evokes the moral dilemma of performance-enhancing drugs being regularly used in athletics. Bardugo’s novel beautifully exemplifies the speculative fiction genre.

Marketing Genre

Book categorization is extremely important for the discoverability of a novel. The “industry standard in categorization” as the Book Industry Study Group (BISG) boasts on their webpage, is to use a Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) subject heading that applies to your book. Publishers and retailers alike utilize these alpha-numeric codes to “facilitate consistent shelving and merchandising of similar material...and allow customers to more easily locate titles of interest” (BISG.org), and to make communication between publishers and retailers more simple (because communication and consultation is often and important.) Book retailers like Barnes & Noble are “increasingly active” in the publishing industry, and are often “able to create and develop trends” (Cart 107). In fact, the decision on how to market a book or whether to publish a book at all is an incredibly economic decision. Cart emphasizes that a retailer might push to acquire a book based on the popularity of the author or the amount of revenue the book could generate (Cart 108), or vice versa. As a result, it is then the author’s concern to consider public reception of their manuscript if they are looking for a successful publication.

Whether or not to market a book as YA is an important and complex decision. While YA is immensely and increasingly popular—over the course of 17 years, 27 new imprints specializing in YA were created—it has reached the point of “over-publication.” In 2016, nearly 7,000 YA books were published (Cart 110). The danger of this, as Cart puts it, “is that it’s

difficult to give books the editorial attention they require and, accordingly, it's not hard to find examples of sloppy publishing; also, because the business is currently trend-driven, the literature runs the risk of becoming homogenized, lacking innovation and originality" (110). This volume of literature might be explained economically as well; due to teens' large population, their purchasing power (unlike children, who are unable to make their own financial decisions), and free time (unlike adults, who are too busy to be reading often), teens are a powerful and unique demographic (Cart 109). However, YA literature is not exclusively consumed by young adults, or teens.

Given the success and popularity of the YA genre, it makes sense that many adults read and enjoy these novels. In 2012, publishing company R. R. Bowker released that "55 percent of buyers of...YA books...are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44. Accounting for 28 percent of sales...they report that 78 percent of the time they are purchasing the books for their own reading" (Cart 146). But the diverse demographic range of consumers in the genre was not hard for publishers to capitalize on. "Crossover" is the term used for YA literature that also appeals to adults (or even the reverse, as well), and in response to this phenomenon, publishers and retailers began the practice of publishing a book as one demographic genre and then "reissu[ing]" it as the opposite (Cart 134). All that needs to be changed is the cover art, the reviews, the BISAC codes, and reshelving. Instead of publishing two editions at the same time, like might be done outside of the United States (Cart 135), publishers prefer to manufacture two waves of popularity.

However popular with the older generations YA might be, there are still concerned parties that voice their dissent against crossover reading. In 2014, Ruth Graham wrote an essay bashing

adult readers of YA. “You should feel embarrassed when what you’re reading was written for children,” she writes. Pattee and Cart (as well as many other scholars and members of the public) take offense at her stance for many reasons, but the stigma around YA still stands. Perhaps it is due to YA’s over-publication, or simply because content for the youth is constantly underestimated (as well as the youth itself), but publishers and authors alike sometimes strive to avoid the label YA (Cart 136). During this time of crossover and criticism (beginning in the late 2000’s) was the precise moment when a new genre began to pop up (Pattee 223).

New Adult

Somewhere amidst the early stages of my novel-in-progress, I started to think seriously about genre; things like focalization and violence or sexual content would be harder to change after I finished my novel, so it was in my best interest that I decided on a target audience. For some reason, labeling my novel “Young Adult” felt like it would be cheapening my work. Clearly, not even the young adults are immune to the stigma of YA. When I heard whispers of a genre called “New Adult,” I was intrigued. Although “new” and “young” have some pretty similar definitions, escaping the connotation of YA seemed preferable. In my mind, this phrase conjured the forms of books sophisticated enough for adults to enjoy but fast-paced and understandable enough for teens. In fact, this was the exact concept that St Martin’s Press was seeking when they opened a competition for new stories in 2009. They sought ““great, new, cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience. Since twenty-somethings are devouring YA, [we are] seeking fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult”” (McAlister 4-5). They called it “New Adult” (NA). Of course, the motivation to cultivate a new genre was specifically inspired by the crossover trend

and was an economic one. Ultimately, the contest was a failure and in the hands of the public, the NA genre quickly morphed into a very specific offshoot of YA, primarily embedding the contemporary romance genre. Today, NA is characterized by books like *Beautiful Disaster* by Jamie McGuire, the “self-published NA breakout bestseller” (McAlister 8). Since the target demographic of NA is aged 18-24, the genre typically includes more “erotic content” while YA rarely or never does (Pattee 222). As a result, the protagonists of YA are older, and the setting is often a college or university (McAlister 11). While the intention of the NA genre was to capture the crossover phenomenon to garner a wider audience of readers, the result was an extremely specific genre that appeals to an even smaller demographic.

Scholars and authors write about the “emerging adult” demographic that consumes NA books. “Emerging” adults are differentiated from “young” adults or adolescents because they “have reached their majority and enjoy the rights and privileges associated with this milestone.” Additionally, “members of this group consider and describe themselves as neither adolescent nor adult” (Pattee 220). However the phrases “young adult,” “emerging adult,” and “new adult” are nearly if not completely synonymous. While debate about the readership of NA continues, I would argue that the genre is simply publishing code for erotic literature. Needless to say, when NA caught my eye, I was not savvy to the connotations it carried. The book that I am writing does not, after all, fit the category of New Adult. But why is this segmentation of demographic necessary at all? And why was I so determined to avoid the YA label in the first place?

The fact is that the way that we perceive age and maturity is changing: “because of economic hard times, more and more twenty-something Americans [are] returning home to live with their parents, delaying commitments—to professions and partners alike—until their early

thirties” (Cart 139). Further, while scientists once believed that “the human brain is fully wired by the age of twelve,” we now know that “the brain continues to grow until the early or mid-twenties” (Cart 139). Why would we still consider YA readership to span from ages 12-18 when the real psychological life-stage of “young adult” has clearly shifted? NA may not be a very age-inclusive genre, but it is notable for bringing these demographic shifts to the forefront of publishing and literary spheres.

Should YA span from 12-25, then? Surely that seems too broad a category for such an already diverse genre. Cart recommends that YA novels marketing towards a demographic on the lower end of that range (around middle school range) should be marketed as “Teen (a descriptor that more and more public libraries are using anyway for what had formerly been called young adult services); and books for eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds could be categorized as young adult” (Cart 140). These adjustments aside, no one falls into “rigidly defined demographics,” Cart continues. All people “grow and mature at different rates and, accordingly, have different individual needs, interests and appetites. And they should be encouraged to...[read] up or down as their needs and interests dictate” (140). Whatever way you slice it, there will always be some overlap in age, someone will always be upset or offended, and crossover reading will happen anyway. Maybe it’s best to leave the demographics to the marketers.

Bardugo and I

With this new understanding of demographic and age-range, I feel more comfortable accepting the label “YA,” since my book would be clearly differentiated from middle school fiction. Upon rereadings of Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series or Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, though the books were incredibly formative in my younger years, their style

is not what I'm looking for in my book. However, the odd yet widely accepted age-range of YA is not the only thing driving me away from the label. My book is not narrated in first-person. The protagonists are aged 18-21, not 12-18. More than anything else, the *style* of the book was what I wanted to be clear about. To get a closer look at the boundaries for YA style and content, I chose a book to read. *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo was published in 2015, about two years before I began writing my novel. At the time, the book was very popular and widely discussed. Bardugo's plot features a group of young criminals that journey away from home to perform a risky heist for the good of humanity—almost word-for-word mimicking the skeleton of my own book. Coincidentally, I had not read the book until now. Besides the potential for inspiration in the plot similarities, I chose *Six of Crows* because it has multiple protagonists, is written in third-person, and has dark and serious themes.

Throughout my reading I marked the use of three curse words: one f-bomb as well as the tamer “ass” and “sons of bitches.” More surprising were the scenes of intense, graphic, and disturbing violence throughout. (Matthias rips a wolf's jaws apart on page 92, Kaz yanks out the eyeball of a rival gang member on 158 before pushing him into the sea. Magic-users exsanguinate living people to death on page 387. There are many descriptions of torture and murder.) This book, marketed as YA, is far more violent than my manuscript so far, and far more violent than I previously believed YA could be. As Pattee quotes from Deahl, “the rule in entertainment has long been that it's more acceptable to feature violence than sex in content geared at kids” (222). Though *Six of Crows* had no explicit sex scenes, the book also did not shy away from sexual references. Inej, one of the protagonists, was forced to work as a prostitute.

Nina, another protagonist, makes several overtly suggestive comments throughout the work. But more than any of these elements, I was ecstatic that the book was not just good, it was *incredible*.

Much YA criticism questions the quality of the genre's novels. Some critics hold that creative and literary YA books are too complex for teens to follow or be interested in. (Cart 86). Others prioritize works in the literary canon—as Ruth Graham does in her essay “Against YA”—a problematic notion I could write an entirely separate essay about. Of course, there are differences between YA literature and Adult literature. For this project, I attempted to read *A Master of Djinn* by P. Djèlí Clark, a fantasy/steampunk novel *not* marketed as YA. After the brilliance of *Six of Crows*, I could not get past the book's complex language and the historical and political background knowledge that it demanded of me. Pattee evokes Emma Patterson's argument from 1956 that adult literature ““assumes on the part of the reader a sophistication, a maturity, and a background of experience that the average adolescent does not have”” (223). Indeed, some adults might not have the required level of experience or knowledge that a book demands—or even simply not want to read literature that requires it! In this manner, YA might be less complex or “literary” than some other Adult books, but a breadth of creative and stimulating YA literature does exist. Look at any of the Printz Award winners (list in Cart 84-5), YA books chosen for exemplifying these qualities. Any underestimation of YA on behalf of critics or even readers (myself included) stems not from the generally understood quality of the genre, but from society's underestimation of genre's intended readership: youth.

Conclusion

After extensive research and rigorous consideration, I have come to decide that my novel will one day be marketed as Young Adult literature. The genre has its complexities (as all genres

do), but the marketing benefit of the label is more beneficial than harmful. Through questioning my own biases towards YA, I uncovered the harsh truth behind the stigma, and besides the over-publication and the muddy demographic ranges, YA is a space where children and adults alike can enjoy a good story without needing extensive background knowledge. Auken and Bawarshi both analyze the rhetorical and social implications of genre, but never explicitly mention YA literature in their writings. The core element of YA can be summarized briefly: when a reader picks up a YA title, they expect a story that is accessible. Any genre can be embedded, and any range of subject matter can be included; it doesn't matter as long as the reader's needs and interests are met. This is the beauty within the chaos of YA. When *Amateur Outlaws*, my novel, is published as YA, ambitious middle-schoolers and comfort-seeking adults alike will pick up a copy from the shelves of their local bookstore or library and sink into the story, knowing that their needs and desires are in good hands.

Works Cited

- Auken, Sune. "Genres Inside Genres. A Short Theory of Embedded Genre." *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, vol. 31, no. 1, Dec. 2021, pp. 163–78. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.31468/dwr.883>.
- Bardugo, Leigh. *Six of Crows*. Henry Holt and Co., 2015.
- Bawarshi, Anis. "The Genre Function." *College English*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2000, pp. 335–60. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/378935>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2023.
- "BISAC Subject Codes." BISC, Book Industry Study Groups, <https://www.bisg.org/BISAC-Subject-Codes-main>.
- Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. Chicago, ALA Neal-Schuman, 2016. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1616289&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Graham, Ruth. "Against YA." *Slate Magazine*, The Slate Group, 5 June 2014, <https://slate.com/culture/2014/06/against-ya-adults-should-be-embarrassed-to-read-childrens-books.html>.
- McAlister, Jodi. "Defining and Redefining Popular Genres: The Evolution of 'New Adult' Fiction." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2018. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.0fd566d109>.
- Pattee, Amy. "Between Youth and Adulthood: Young Adult and New Adult Literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2017, pp. 218–30. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2017872421&site=eds-live
&scope=site.

Rossbridge, Joanne. "Peering through the Fantasy Portal: The Fantasy Genre for Understanding and Composing Texts." Scan: The Journal for Educators, vol. 39, no. 4, Jan. 2020, pp. 23–34. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.213627034101715>.