



Incorporation of Bulgarian Folklore Traditions and Culture into the Urban Fantasy Genre

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Incorporation of Bulgarian Folklore Traditions and Culture into the Urban Fantasy Genre

By Kiril Dimitrov

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for the degree of Master of Arts in the Research Institute for Media, Art and Performance.

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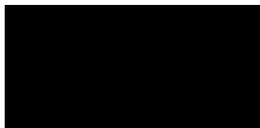
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Abstract

In *The Soul Beneath* I explore the elevated importance of setting in the urban fantasy (UF) genre. My work is based on creative research of the UF genre carried out by reading works of authors such as Cassandra Clare, Ben Aaronovitch and Ilona Andrews. Upon examination of the novels I've read, it has become clear that many published UF texts are set in a surprisingly limited number of large cities such as New York in *City of Bones* or London in *Rivers of London*. This begs the following question, which forms the basis for the thesis accompanying the creative element: what if an urban fantasy work was set in a non-typical for the genre city? This project aims to present how Bulgarian setting and culture can be incorporated into UF and the effect that can have on the story. Rituals such as fire-walking and spirit scaring were crucial inspirations for the magical element in the creative piece. Throughout the thesis, I discuss what Anastenaria is and how I've moulded this folklore tradition into a magic practice. The overarching results of my work reaffirm the great importance of setting, particularly cultural when it comes to an urban fantasy text.

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The Soul Beneath

Prologue

Elena walked slowly, circling the remains of the large bonfire. The cool Balkan wind was strong tonight, flaring the burning embers with every gust and sending ash swirling in the air. Three women danced on the embers, bare feet poking from underneath the white hems of their flowing dresses. Their long braids swayed in rhythm with the haunting bagpipe melody layered over the pounding rhythm of the tapans.

Elena shivered, yearning to join the younger Nestinars in the warmth of their emberdance as she would have a year ago; her own homespun white dress was rather thick but it still proved insufficient in the March cold. Tempted, she took a step towards one of the ember circles before stoically turning away, sighing. Unfortunately, the title of Matriarch came with a lot of mundane tasks attached to it, like making sure tradition was adhered to.

I already led the first emberdance for the evening; it will have to be enough.

As far as Elena was concerned, it was crucial for the few young girls of the Nestinar families present tonight not only to get a chance to participate in the emberdances but also to benefit from their matriarch's guiding hand. Not many people cared about being Nestinars nowadays but the Nestinars' strength had never been in their numbers. Rather, it had always been about tradition.

Strolling between the different ember circles, Elena checked if the dancing women all had their hair straightened and braided as was proper. A tiny smile played on her lips as she

remembered her own daughter, Lina, trying to emulate the emberdance for the first time, her curly hair flying around as she spun and giggled. That had been well over a decade ago now, back when they'd all still lived in Tryavna. Shaking her head to clear the memories, Elena paused to chide an unmasked Kuker who was lingering too close to the embers. Her smile slipped away as she traced his gaze. The man's eyes were glued to the shape of the young Nestinar dancing on the embers.

“Observe propriety,” Elena hissed at him, showing her displeasure.

The Kuker started, turning to give Elena a measuring look. She gestured at his mask and he reluctantly obeyed, putting it back on and stepped away from the ember circle. Satisfied, Elena passed him on. She looked out beyond the clearing as she walked between the ember circles, her eyes struggling to adapt to the darkness while surrounded by fires. Snow still covered the branches of the trees and blanketed the ground, the shy petals of snowdrops poking here and there. As she watched, two figures emerged from the treeline, close enough for Elena to discern some details. A young woman clothed in bright colours walked in front of an older man, her pink backpack an odd contrast to his fraying sack. Elena heard snow crunching under heavy boots and turned around to find the Ivailov brothers standing behind her, both of them dressed in Kuker furs, adorned with chimes and bells and their horned wooden masks in place over their faces.

“Probably tourists from Kula who got lost,” Elena said with a frown, turning back to watch the two strangers slowly approach. “See to it that they don't interrupt the rituals, Zahariy.”

“As you wish, Matriarch.” There was deep respect in the elder's brother voice as he addressed Elena. She'd been well into her teens by the time Zahariy was born and the boy had been raised to look up to her. Elena observed him walk off and intercept the two

strangers, their voices inaudible over the intertwining melodies the bagpipe and tapan musicians weaved through the clearing.

Elena glanced at the younger Ivailov brother as he stepped up next to her. Without saying anything, he shrugged off his thick fur coat and held it out for her to take. His T-shirt underneath proclaimed the services of an automobile repair shop where he probably worked during the week.

“You look cold.” His voice was muffled by his mask.

Elena furrowed her brow, trying hard to recall his name, thinking back to when she’d first met him. He’d only started coming to the gatherings recently when he’d turned of age.

Ognyan, that’s it! I remember thinking the female version of it would make for a great name for a girl of a Nestinar family. Ognyan isn’t that much older than Lina, come to think of it.

Suddenly, Elena felt old, her mind struggling to sort through two decades worth of memories. Ognyan had already been born when she’d become pregnant so he was twenty, perhaps twenty-one years old. Indeed, just a couple of years older than Lina.

With a sigh, she took the coat from Ognyan, gratitude mixing with a vague sense of guilt inside her. With her mother gone, she was the Matriarch now and as such she was expected to follow traditions strictly and stay appropriately dressed during the rituals.

But she was also human, and quite cold at that.

Huddled in the warm coat, Elena turned her eyes back to the two strangers and Zahariy. The brightly-dressed woman laughed at something Zahariy said. He started gesturing vaguely behind him as if trying to explain something.

“I think you are right about them being tourists,” Ognyan commented from beside Elena. “But it doesn’t look like they are looking for their way back to Kula.”

Elena said nothing, watching silently as Zahariy led the two strangers around the multiple ember circles and away from the outer ring of masked Kukers standing vigil. The trio crossed the clearing and eventually disappeared among the trees on the other side.

“Yep, definitely heading for the cave monastery, although I’m surprised my brother agreed to take them there – he’s not the adventurous type,” Ognyan said. “Shouldn’t we stop them? It’s not safe to go up to the monastery in the dark.”

Elena lifted her eyes to the limestone rocks beyond, their outline only vaguely revealed by the starlight. Although she couldn’t see it, she knew the Albotin Cave Monastery rose for some twenty-five metres in the darkness, empty rooms dug straight into the rock. What sights the two strangers would get to see in the abandoned place during the middle of the night, she couldn’t fathom.

“No, your brother chose wisely,” Elena said at last. “We don’t want them intruding upon our rituals.”

“So Zahariy gets to spend a few hours playing tour guide to a beautiful woman *and* being out of the wind,” Ognyan said, “while I get to sit here and freeze in the cold, where you slap the hand of any Kuker who attempts to ogle the odd firewalker.”

Elena turned to Ognyan, prepared to give him her best glare but found his eyes sparkling with mischief behind his mask. She shrugged off his coat and handed it back to him with a smile.

“Here, you can stop complaining now.”

Ognyan accepted his coat back with a smile and turned to join a group of Kukers standing vigil. Elena glanced at the closest ember circle, her fingers absently toying with the ends of her braid as the cold wind bit into her freshly re-exposed skin. The bagpipes’ melody rose into the air, enticing her, pulling her in and her heartbeat thumped in rhythm with the tapans.

She took a step, then another one, and suddenly there was only the blissful warmth of embers underneath her, the music around her and the heat of the dance.

Elena didn't know how it was for others, but when she emberdanced, time lost its meaning. It was only when the embers under her feet finally died and started growing cold hours later that she opened her eyes, realising that the musicians had long stopped playing and the sun was peeking from above the hills. She blinked, her eyes struggling to focus back on the physical world after having stared into the spirit one for most of the night. Elena's movements slowed as lethargy settled in her muscles, bringing with it a wave of tired content. Finally, she stepped out of the ember circle and looked around, the grass wet in the chilly morning under her feet.

People lay asleep around small campfires that still burned weakly, their bodies buried under thick fur coats and wool blankets. Here and there young Nestinars continued to dance ecstatically in the morning silence on a patch of dying embers, their braids and dresses swinging back and forth.

Ah, the vigour of youth...

Elena walked between the sleepers, her slow pace eventually leading her to the big pile of luggage at the side of the clearing. She extracted her bag and pulled out a jacket and a pair of warm shoes. She fished into the inside pocket until she found her cigarettes and lit one. Elena inhaled deeply, letting the nicotine fill her lungs and with it, grateful for the calmness it provided. She exhaled, taking the cigarette away from her lips and her eyes rested on its tip; the tiny ember there mesmerized her, a living splash of red amongst the greyness of the ash...

Faint plucked notes from an acoustic guitar drifted over to Elena from somewhere behind. She could only feel mildly curious in her exhausted state but she still made her slow way through the mass of sleeping bodies in the clearing. Eventually, she spotted the source of the music. Ognyan sat on his bunched up guitar gig bag, the instrument resting in his lap as he plucked the strings. Another Kuker, his mask discarded, and two Nestinar women in not-so-white-anymore dresses sat on the ground next to him, a small fire burning between them to keep them warm while they listened.

As Elena approached them, Ognyan glanced at her, nodding in a polite greeting.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No,” Elena said, her voice hoarse as if she’d been shouting all night. She sat down on the ground next to Ognyan and squinted as she looked up to the sky, the early sunlight reflected from the rocks of the cave monastery momentarily blinding her. She looked back to Ognyan as he strummed a diminished chord, something vaguely bothering her through the haze of her tiredness and contentment.

“Has your brother returned yet?” she asked after a while, stifling a yawn.

“What, from the monastery?” Ognyan kept playing, his fingers deft on the frets despite the fact that he was looking at Elena. “I don’t think so. Maybe he stayed to sleep there, out of the wind. Can’t blame him, really.”

Elena struggled to shake off the annoying numbness in her mind preventing her from getting her thoughts straight. “Vasilena, Gloria, come with me,” she said briskly, addressing the two younger women around the campfire. “And put some warmer clothes on. We are going to the monastery.” She turned back to Ognyan who’d stopped playing now to gaze at her questioningly.

“Gather the other people that are still awake and have a look around the sleepers,” Elena said, managing a comforting smile. “Maybe Zahariy returned last night and we just missed him.”

“Perhaps,” Ognyan said but his eyes now betrayed worry.

“They probably came through here,” Vasilena said.

Elena brushed past the younger woman, entering the first cave room of the monastery. A single narrow tunnel led deeper into the complex, obscured by darkness.

“We’ll need some light,” Elena stated.

Behind, Gloria shuffled, pulling out a small flashlight. Elena nodded appreciatively and headed into the rocky tunnel, the other two Nestinars following close behind her. The light cone from Gloria’s flashlight bobbed up and down as they traversed the uneven ground, creating strange shadows on the walls and the low ceiling. Elena tried to sort through her emotions while walking, her apprehension battling with her exhaustion. She forced back the fatigue as best as she could, commanding her numb mind to relax with little success.

As she walked into the next cramped cave room, Elena turned her foot slightly, raising her hands to the front. It was just the beginnings of an emberdance move, with no music and no embers under her feet, only the white dress connecting her to the spirit world beneath. But she wasn’t a Matriarch just because her mother had passed away...

The corridor’s outlines in front of Elena blurred in the dim light. Her eyes showed her the normal world while her mind overlaid the spirit one on top of it, the two appearing nearly but not quite identical. She took a look around the room, using her eyes to direct her mind’s gaze

in hope of finding some sort of clue if Zahariy had passed through here, some residue trail of the complex net of energy that made up his soul.

She saw nothing of the sort, however, as she spun slowly. Vasilena and Gloria's bodies were tiny beacons of lights next to her own, their souls brightly reflected in the spirit world, mixing with the artificial light from the flashlight, while the rock around them stayed dull and dark. Elena continued her slow half-dance, half-walk into the corridor leading out of the room, Gloria's flashlight mixing with the soul-light to reveal her way forward. For a brief moment, as the flashlight moved from side to side of the rocky corridor, Elena's mind registered something strange that she couldn't quite put a finger on.

"Light off," Elena commanded and Gloria fumbled with the flashlight in her haste to obey.

Like Elena had thought, there was something odd further down the corridor – a patch where hers and the other two Nestinars' soft soul-light reflected in the spirit world could not illuminate. Elena couldn't remember ever seeing something like that during her forty-odd years. She took a careful step closer to the dark patch, focusing on it as best as she could with her mind.

A headache blossomed in her head as she tried to concentrate even harder and Elena stumbled on a loose rock, the corridor going completely dark as her dance fell apart and the soul-light disappeared. She struggled to catch her balance for a moment, Vasilena's hand steadying her from behind but the other woman stepped on something slippery herself and they both fell down in a heap. Elena banged her elbows on the narrow corridor's wall as she fell, scraping her skin and next to her Vasilena let out a strangled curse.

Gloria turned her flashlight back on and Elena slowly oriented herself, putting a hand to the cold wall for balance as she blinked away tears of pain. Just behind her, a scream pierced the silence and Elena whipped around to see Gloria's flashlight tumbling through the air as

the younger woman raised her hands to cover her mouth and muffle her scream. The flashlight jumped madly around as it bounced on the cave floor, Gloria's scream echoing in the narrow confines of the corridor. Elena turned back around, following Gloria's gaze a few metres further down and found herself staring at a pair of corpses.

"Fuck..." Vasilena mumbled from next to her, stumbling back.

Elena forced herself forward, kneeling down on the smooth rock, the ground slippery from congealed blood. She looked with shock at Zahariy's facedown corpse, his trousers bundled around his ankles and the exposed skin on his legs a sickly blue tint. Gingerly, she reached out to shift him face-up, the small Kuker bells attached to his open robe giving off a soft chime. Behind, Vasilena let out a new string of curses while Gloria murmured something about the police while simultaneously backing away.

"What the hell happened here..." Elena murmured, her mind reeling. She took Gloria's miraculously unbroken flashlight off the ground from where it had fallen, shining it at Zahariy's corpse. Strangely, there were no wounds on the body that she could see. Steeling herself, she wedged the flashlight in the corner of her mouth and slipped her hands under Zahariy's clothes.

"Stop!" Vasilena cried out behind her. "What are you doing?"

Elena opened her mouth to reproach Vasilena and the flashlight tumbled out of her mouth. Cursing, she reflexively caught it mid-air before hitting the ground and turned around to face Vasilena. "Trying to figure out how he died, obviously," she said, forcing her voice down even though she wanted to shout at the other woman. She needed to stay calm and figure out what to do. What the hell had happened here?

"I don't think any of the blood is his," Elena said in a more controlled voice, turning back towards Zahariy's corpse. Her eyes came to rest on his neck. The skin there had an odd, flaking look, more akin to ashes than to flesh. She reached out and carefully prodded

Zahariy's neck with one finger; the skin was strangely solid, like cement, nothing like the softness its appearance suggested.

"He must have suffocated..." Elena whispered.

"Well, at least it's obvious how she died," Vasilena said from behind.

Elena shifted her gaze to the second corpse. It was the young female tourist from earlier. She was the source of all of the blood in the stone corridor, it appeared.

"You see, that hole in her face explains it," Vasilena chocked back a small laugh, as she pointed at the gouged-out eye before slapping her hands on her mouth in shock. "I'm sorry, I... This... It's too..." She paused, taking a deep breath and composing herself before speaking again. "Do you know who she is... was, Matriarch?"

"No," Elena said. "Just a tourist, perhaps. There was another man with her." She shifted closer to inspect the girl's corpse, noting that her jeans and underwear were pulled down, similar to Zahariy's. But they obviously hadn't died in the same way. Strangely, the girl's hands had been tied behind her back with Zahariy's missing belt. Had she put up more of a fight against their murderer? More so than a Kuker? It seemed unlikely.

Perhaps she was forced to watch, Elena mused, feeling a chill run down her spine. Whomever... or whatever killed them both maybe eliminated the bigger threat, the Kuker, first and then took its time with the girl.

But what of the half-stripped clothes? Was there a more ordinary, if similarly horrifying explanation for what had happened here? Perhaps Zahariy, for some inexplicable reason, had decided to rape the young girl and the missing older man had come to her defence, the situation escalating until... until what?

Elena shone the light at the girl's face and glanced immediately away, her stomach tumbling at the grotesque sight of the gaping hole where her right eye had been. The blue iris of the remaining eye was large, the pupil expanded, staring numbly into the darkness. After a

second, Elena forced herself to lean back down and brush away the hair stiff with blood from the girl's neck. She expected to see the same ash-looking skin at the throat as with Zahariy. However, apart from the bruising, the skin there looked relatively normal. Elena shifted her gaze slightly up and gasped involuntarily, leaning back. Where the girl's mouth should have been there was only a patch of smooth skin.

Elena's mind struggled to accept the horrifying and impossible sight in front of her, a mouthless face with a gaping hole instead of an eye. *Whatever happened to her mouth, some rational part of her thought, it must have happened inside the monastery. I saw her speak and laugh with Zahariy in the clearing outside.*

There was a supernatural force at play here. A spirit was involved, and somehow none of the Nestinars just outside the monastery had sensed it. It had overpowered a Kuker at the height of his powers, after bypassing the vigils of dozens of others.

What kind of spirit could do that, Elena couldn't even fathom. She shook her head desperately and stood up, her legs trembling from the adrenalin in her system.

"Go raise the sleepers, gather all of the Nestinars and Kukers, all of them," she spoke feverishly. "Tell them... tell them that they must spread through the surrounding forest in large groups and search for a lone man, possibly wearing bloodied clothes who may or may not have killed Zahariy."

Vasilena stared at Elena with wide eyes, rooted in place.

"I'm going to search the monastery in case it wasn't him who did this and his corpse is somewhere around here." Elena turned to fully face Vasilena. "Go! Now!" she shouted and the other woman cringed away before taking an unsteady step back. "Go," Elena repeated in a more soothing voice. "And tell everyone to be careful. I'll join you once I'm finished here."

It was hard to tell if Vasilena nodded in acceptance or was just shaking very badly but she turned around and ran off, hopefully, to convey her Matriarch's instructions. Elena glanced to

the ground again, at the corpses of Zahariy and the nameless girl, once again struggling to comprehend what had transpired here.

She sighed shakily and sat on the cold ground for a long minute, resting her back against the wall. She doubted the police would be of much help. They wouldn't even be able to rationalize the lack of mouth on the girl's corpse. An unbidden image came to Elena's mind, the girl struggling against whatever held her captive as she died. With no mouth all that would have been needed to suffocate her was pinch her nose, probably as she was pinned helplessly to the ground, her hands tied while she struggled desperately... perhaps her eye already gouged out, blood flowing from the socket all over her skin, the pain... the pain would have been...

Elena shuddered but instead of averting her eyes away from the two corpses, she steeled herself and forced herself to keep looking at them. An innocent girl and a dear friend of hers were dead and a third person was missing. In her mind, there was no doubt that a spirit that remained at large in the world was involved in this. As Matriarch, it was her duty to do something about it.

Only if she knew what, though...

Elena straightened her spine as she felt the weight of that new responsibility settle onto her shoulders. She stood up and with the flashlight in hand, began her inspection of the monastery.

Seven months later

Chapter 1

The November afternoon sun shone annoyingly bright into my eyes. I pulled up at the end of the dirt road just past the outskirts of Varna and parked by the lonely husk of an old Lada. I turned off the engine and tossed the keys onto the passenger seat. Itching with excitement, I reached for my school backpack on the backseat and pulled out the white dress from inside. The cloth had a simple, flowing design that reached past my knees, with long sleeves reminiscent of those of a robe. I'd bought it after spotting it in a second-hand shop instead of home-spinning it as the firewalking tradition demanded, which was just as well. I generally lacked my mother's patience when it came to sewing.

Or traditions, for that matter.

I popped the front door open and swung my legs out, immediately greeted by the faint sound of the surf crash in the distance and the sounds of birds chirping beyond the low, loose stone fence just ahead. Up the path and past the broken gate, a small, dilapidated church stood at the top of the gentle hill, the Black Sea glistening and sparkling far behind it. The church itself was made of simple driftwood, bleached by the salty wind and rain, its single window shattered. It looked like the kind of place no one visited anymore.

In other words, it was perfect.

I bent over to untie my sneakers and left them by the car's pedals before taking off my socks as well and stuffing them into the shoes.

That ought to do it, I thought as I wiggled my toes experimentally. I exited the car and stretched, feeling cold grass and damp soil beneath my bare feet. I took off my jacket and tossed it in the car, pursing my lips as I considered getting rid of my jeans and T-shirt as well before putting the dress on. In the city, I'd worry about someone seeing me but this church was totally abandoned – I'd happened upon it by chance last week when I'd driven out of Varna to calm myself after a fight with my father.

The autumn weather, however, was way too chilly to dance with nothing underneath the dress. I'd rather have my connection to the spirit world weakened than risk catching a cold just two weeks before my next biology test.

I slipped the white dress on and reached for the hair tie I usually wore around my wrist. Oddly enough, it was missing. Shrugging, I tucked the unruliest curls behind my ears, knowing full well they wouldn't stay there while I danced. I pictured the look on my mum's face if she saw me embeardance with hair that wasn't straightened and braided and with a white dress worn over casual clothing.

I felt my lips stretch in a mischievous smile.

I took a look at my phone before tossing it onto the front seat; I had a good two hours before I needed to head back to Varna and meet with Radoslav. My smile went crooked as I thought about our plans for the evening.

Taking a few steps up the gentle hill, past the crumbling wall and into the church's yard, I made a small twirl, flaring the skirt of my dress. The grass tickled me ever so slightly as I moved and I couldn't help a soft giggle. With my car parked behind me and the abandoned church on my right, an uneven field of green spread out in front of me. On my left, under the silent vigil of stoic Maritime Pines stood clusters of chipped tombstones, marking the resting

places of people who'd died long before I was born. Branches and grey stone blurred in front of my eyes as I spun and twirled in anticipation.

After a minute, I slowed down enough to choose a smooth looking section of grass and inspected it. It was generally a good idea to make sure there were no rocks for me to trip on when I was in the full swing of the dance.

Satisfied with the terrain, I slid a hand in the dress pocket and brought out a cheap, plastic lighter along with a thick candle. I lit the candle and held it up, closing my eyes. Wordlessly, I counted off the three connections to the other world, making sure they were all present.

Earth touching my skin - check.

White dress - check.

Source of heat, candle - check.

I closed my eyes and carefully let go of my conscious breathing, something that sounds a lot easier than it actually is. Taking the first few steps of the emberdance always felt a bit awkward to me. Observed from the side, at best, I must have looked like I was doing some weird sleep-walking routine or something... which is why I didn't dance in the city or anywhere else people could see me.

Blurry watercolours bloomed on the back of my eyelids as my mind tentatively grasped at the edges of what was all around but beyond me. With my eyes closed, I saw the green of the grass, the brown of the church and the grey of the tombstones reflected in the other world. The faint sound of the sea reverberated and echoed in my brain. Everything was in the same place as in my world. It was just ... not quite as solid.

Instead of following traditional firewalking practice and opening my eyes to force the images of the two worlds to merge, I let myself go into a state of passive awareness that I'd perfected over the years. I had no interest in influencing the webs of energies that firewalkers

called spirits. I didn't want to be in control of anything, I didn't need to banish or ward off anyone... I was just there, dancing.

Bring the arms up, now down, step forward, twist...

My hair escaped from behind my ears, brushing my face. Instead of tucking it back, I enjoyed its soft feeling where it caressed my skin.

Step left and lean right...

A pool of warmth had started spreading from my head to my whole body, slow but steady in its pace. The soft, distant lull of the sea pulled me, ever so enticing to move in rhythm with it...

Repeat the motion...

For a moment, I sensed an emptiness, so cold and unexpected, that it almost jarred me out of my dance. It was like an all-consuming void that pulled me towards Varna. Thankfully, it was soon smothered by the warmth expanding inside me, becoming nothing more than a vague wrongness somewhere far beyond the reach of my worries.

Eventually, I didn't have to think about the dance anymore, it just came to me, no, *flowed* through me. My mind was free from the need to exercise its will and I sensed a gentle connection between me and the other world form. My body felt soft as if it was boneless and my dance seemed like something that was controlled by a master puppeteer. I felt like a plaything for a force beyond my understanding but it also let me relax to the point that I lost sense of who I was.

Time lost its meaning as the warmth inside me became a powerful, all-consuming firestorm and I basked in its freedom.

I opened my eyes, the blurry colours of the other world in my mind merging with the images of the real one. The fire inside me had calmed down and now smouldered contentedly. I was

vaguely aware that I was smiling, my breathing calm even though my body had worked up quite a sweat while dancing.

I dragged my feet lethargically through a few more steps, and feeling I had reached my limit, finally stopped and lay down on the grass with a happy sigh. I breathed deeply and watched the sky slowly turn pale pink, like the inside of a seashell. Lying there on that patch of grass, I realised I felt serene for the first time in a long while. Only the memory of that unexpected wrongness I'd never felt before bothered me. Again, I tried to forget about it and allow the wind to soothe me, kissing the bare skin on my face. It had been way too long since I'd had the chance to do this and letting something small ruin the moment was just plain stupid.

The air stood still for a moment and a chuckle built up deep inside my belly, born of pure joy. I let it go happily and the wind blew away the sound of my laughter with the next sigh of the autumn. I wondered what Radoslav was doing... Was he waiting for me? Perhaps already stacking the coils of rope on top of his desk, sorting them out, getting ready?

I should probably head back soon, I thought without any sense of urgency.

I considered walking over to my car to get my phone and check the time but discarded the idea. The effort of moving wasn't worth it – if I did, my tiny bubble of peace might shatter. And it was so soft and warm inside it...

The horizon slowly turned orange, a harbinger of the fiery reds that spilt across the sky like blood. I marvelled at the colours, unbothered by the dropping temperature, warmed by the embers that the firestorm inside of me had left in its wake. The wind had become stronger and now every time it blew, the grass bent to follow its direction; I could even hear the green stalks rustle as if they were whispering to me their secrets...

Eventually, even the powerful red in the sky darkened, fading out. I vaguely wondered again what time it was, lying in the churchyard, still feeling like I was stuffed with embers

and could never be cold again in my life. It was a wonderful feeling and all I wanted to do was lie and bask in it until... A tiny bell penetrated the haze in my mind: if the sun was already setting, then surely time was well past-

“Shit!” I exclaimed.

I shot up, my bubble finally bursting. I ran across the yard and through the gate, reaching to open the door of my car before I’d even got to it, barely sparing the gutted Lada husk a notice. I grabbed my phone to check the time – yep, well past five o’clock.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I paused just long enough to take my dress off and bunch it up in one hand before opening the front door. The small lamp above the driver seat automatically switched on, lighting the gloom with a tired yellow glow. I paused, staring at the grass stains all over the white dress in my hand.

“Fuck,” I murmured, blinking in surprise. What had I been thinking, lying down on the grass in a white dress? How the hell would I ever sneak it into the laundry without my father noticing? Did grass stains even wash off at all?

I tossed the dress on the backseat of the car. I’d have to worry about that later.

Chapter 2

The rusty elevator doors of each floor scrolled down with a faint screech of metal as the old lift took me up. I was concentrated on the telephone pressed to my ear, counting the beeps and waiting to see if Radoslav would finally condescend to pick up.

Jeez, settle down, Lina.

It wasn't like I'd never been late for a date before, though it certainly didn't happen often. The combination of excitement and exhaustion leftover from the emberdance made me too keyed up. I put the phone away and tucked a stray curl behind my ear, slowing my breathing with a conscious effort. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything I could do about the sweat stains under my armpits; I'd just have to keep my jacket on.

The lift came to a shaky halt on the fifth floor and I pushed the door open, shoving it with my body when it proved heavier than I expected. I came to the small concrete landing, the door to my left and the stairs leading up and down on my right. I walked over to the second apartment, purposefully not glancing out the window by the staircase; heights were not my thing. I pressed the doorbell with perhaps a bit more determination than strictly necessary and a bird chirping sounded from the other side of the door, quite at odds with the dilapidated state of the apartment block's hallway. I frowned at the white door, counting the small scratches in the metal by the keyhole. Radoslav's aim with keys was terrible when he was drunk, which was thankfully not that often.

A muffled female voice rose from inside the apartment. I couldn't quite make out the words but a few seconds later muffled footsteps approached and the door swung open.

Radoslav's mother beamed at me in greeting and I smiled back. She stood on the doorstep, her trademark colourful cooking apron strapped on.

“Did Radoslav invite you for dinner and forget to tell me?” She glanced over her shoulder, raising her voice. “Rado! Lina's here.” She looked back at me, stepping to the side so I could pass. “Well, come on in, don't just stand there! I haven't seen you since summer!”

I walked into the apartment's corridor, a tight, narrow space, the floor littered with a variety of shoes, from sneakers, through high heels to winter boots.

“Let me find you some slippers,” she said, brushing past me to get to the closet.

“Oh, I'm not staying. I just need to talk to Rado for a minute.” I took a deep breath and the smell of freshly baked moussaka flowed into my nose. My stomach growled in protest as my mouth watered, reminding me I'd skipped going home for dinner to drive over to Chaika District.

“You sure you don't want to stick around for dinner?” Radoslav's mother asked as if reading my thoughts. There was *actual* concern in her voice. Radoslav was so lucky, having a mother like that.

In the end, I just shook my head and she shrugged, brushing past me to walk down the short corridor. She knocked on the door at the end. “Rado! I said Lina's here.”

I joined her at the door, nervous about having Radoslav's mum potentially witnessing my conversation with her son. She sniffed the air, however, and suddenly dashed for the kitchen. I sighed in relief. Alone in the corridor, I raised my hand to knock on the door myself when Radoslav finally cracked it open.

“What do you want?” he said, one brown eye peeking at me through the crack suspiciously, the other one hidden behind his dyed-red hair.

Great start.

“You weren’t picking up your phone.” Realising I sounded accusing when I was the one who’d stood him up today, I backpedalled. “Maybe you had it on silent, or whatever. Point is, I was driving through the neighbourhood and when you didn’t pick up... I just wanted to say I’m sorry... That I didn’t make it today and all...” I’d started blabbering so I shut up.

Radoslav frowned, probably guessing some of my words were a lie. I did live on the other side of Varna after all. A faint clinking of dishes came from the kitchen behind me, filling the awkward silence between us.

“Actually, I, uh...” I decided to try the truth... or at least part of it. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t call you earlier; I really should have let you know. I just got back to Varna; I haven’t even been home yet.”

“Well then, go home,” Radoslav said sullenly. “What’s the point of you being here now?” He paused, looking pointedly at the open door to the kitchen and back to me.

“I just don’t feel comfortable when your mum is around,” I said remorsefully. “Look, I’m really, really, sorry I didn’t show up. I was looking forward to it, honestly, but...” I trailed off not wanting to make more excuses; I’d come to apologise but that didn’t mean I had to sound pathetic while doing it.

“Maybe tomorrow?” I asked hopefully. “I’ll make it up to you.” I did my best to give him an alluring look despite wearing a trucker jacket and faded sneakers.

“My mum usually stays home on Sundays,” Radoslav said. He sighed then finally swung the door open, admitting me to his room. I brushed past him on my way in, a shot of excitement running through me as we came close then subsiding as I noticed he watched me with a still-irritated expression.

His room was modestly sized, with a single bed in the corner that I knew from personal experience was just big enough for two people; a smile blossomed on my face as I remembered the details of our last few Saturdays spent there.

A polished wooden desk sat in front of the window, late afternoon light spilling on open student books for university entrance exams. I glanced at them covertly and saw they were filled with lines of equations that somehow had more letters than numbers in them.

Maths... I shivered.

Radoslav went over to the desk, blocking my view. He sat on the old office chair there, rotating around to face me. I took a step towards the bed and after a brief moment of hesitation sat down, my hands in my lap.

“You drove here, right?” he asked finally.

“Yeah,” I said, not knowing what he was getting at.

“If we go to your place, we could still do the scene we planned.” He gestured vaguely with one hand towards the student books on his desk. “I’m about sick of studying anyways.”

“My dad always stays home on the weekends.” I tried putting as much remorse in my voice as I could; it wasn’t hard – I was sincere. “He’s playing that stupid online game of his whenever he’s off work. We wouldn’t be able to do... well, you know...”

Radoslav frowned. “Okay, then how about Monday or Tuesday? Your dad works till five and we get outta school at what, ten past one?”

“I’ve got to study during the week, unfortunately.” I motioned at his desk. “The entrance exams for medical universities are hard, though there isn’t a lot of maths in them, thankfully.”

“What, does your dad check on your progress every night or something?”

“Well, he sometimes flicks through my textbooks but... It’s more like, I really want to get into this university and-”

“I think,” Radoslav interrupted me, “that if you wanted to find time for our roleplay, you would. You are quite resourceful when you want to be, Lina.” He smiled and I tentatively returned the gesture. “But this is not a priority for you,” he added. Was it my imagination or was that actual bitterness in his voice? “I’m not a priority for you and that’s okay.”

“No, that’s not it!” I nearly shot up from the bed in frustration.

I took a deep breath before speaking again. “I mean, I’ve finally found someone to do… that type of stuff with. I don’t want to lose it – being able to choose not to be in control, it’s been awesome and-”

“You say you like to spend time with me but your actions speak otherwise, Lina,” he interrupted me, throwing his hands in the air. “It’s obvious this isn’t working. You don’t need to lie to me.” Radoslav turned away, picking up a book from his desk and flipping a page. “I can find someone else who won’t waste my time.”

I struggled to contain my anger. How dare he brushed me aside so casually when I was being sincere! Wasn’t I doing my best to make up for my slip up? Sure, it wasn’t the first time it had happened, and we weren’t strictly romantically involved or whatever but that didn’t mean our relationship wasn’t important to me. Watching Radoslav scribble something with a pencil, his shoulders ever so slightly slumped as he hunched over the desk, I tried to calm myself down.

He’s got a right to be upset, I reminded myself.

He didn’t need to be such an asshole about it, though. I wasn’t going to apologise again, and that was that. I’d missed a date, not his pet’s funeral. Maybe I could, as a last resort, tell him the full truth and see what he made of it. Sighing, I pulled my thoughts together.

I put a hand on Radoslav’s shoulder and he turned to face me, a look on his face that said he wasn’t too thrilled to see I was still there. “Look,” I began slowly. “Yesterday, an opportunity popped up for me to do something I love doing but rarely get the chance to. It meant I had to travel out of town and I umm, lost track of the time. That’s the reason I missed our date.”

“Play scene,” Radoslav corrected me automatically but he waited for me to continue.

I paused before blurting out, “I do firewalking as a hobby.”

“You what now?” He frowned.

“I’m a firewalker, or Nestinar if you prefer the traditional term,” I said, forcing the words out as if it was some big confession and feeling my cheeks heat up. Stupid cheeks.

“I don’t understand,” Radoslav said. “I get how you could lose track of time but how does your dance hobby explain why you suddenly decided to go out of town? Was there some Nestinar dude that called you and was like, ‘yo, come check this place out, there’s some mad-”

“Traditionally,” I cut in, “it’s only women that can become firewalkers.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you are bi,” he shot back. “Are threesomes a hard limit for you or would you be open to experimenting-”

“Would you just shut up and listen?” I glared at him until I was sure he wasn’t going to interrupt me again. “I’m not a firewalker in the traditional sense, my mother...” I trailed off, not knowing how to even begin explaining my relationship with my parents.

“I’m kind of like, I don’t know, freelance, I guess?” I said in the end, forcing an awkward laugh. “I just go out sometimes and dance, you know, and...” I trailed off again. “Look, I promise not to disappear on you next time.”

Radoslav stood silent, brow scrunched slightly but I couldn’t tell if he was confused or annoyed. Maybe this full truth thing wasn’t going too well. Regardless, I’d done what I’d come to do - apologise.

I was actually relieved when he finally spoke. “Well, it seems to me that you need to think about your priorities, Lina. You can’t keep saying one thing and do something else. I can’t make this work...” He gestured with his hands to encompass the space between us. “Not alone, at least. I need to see you put in some effort too.”

I bit my tongue to keep myself from pointing out that my coming over to apologise should count as effort. Words weren't going to be enough – I'd have to act if I wanted to keep our relationship intact, such as it was.

“In this case,” I said, “I'll catch you at school and maybe we can agree on when to meet next week?” I rose from the bed and tried to put on my best “it's settled then” expression.

“Sure,” Radoslav said finally, finally smiling slightly as he rose from his chair. “I'll see you out.”

We walked into the corridor, and since I hadn't even taken my shoes off, I headed straight for the door. On our way past the kitchen, Radoslav's mum peeked through the doorway, a greasy spatula held in one hand.

“You sure you don't want to stay for dinner, Lin?”

“I should really head home. Dad's given me a curfew.” I flashed an apologetic smile at her and opened the apartment's door. I walked out and turned back to face Radoslav over the doorstep.

“I'll see you tomorrow at school then?” I said.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I'll swing by your classroom during the first break. Bye, Lina.”

With that, he closed the door in my face and a second later I heard the key rotate in the lock.

I turned around on my heels and stabbed a finger at the button for the lift. I waited for a few seconds, impatient, before heading down the stairs instead, and out of the apartment block. The streets of Chaika were lined with parked cars, grey rectangular apartment blocks built on each side. Here and there a tree gave partial shadow and a breeze ruffled the hair that poked out from underneath my hat. I headed around the corner, locating the older-than-me Peugeot 205 I drove and absolutely adored. I'd named her Maya, both because of her bright yellow colour and because I loved honey, despite not being the biggest fan of bees or insects in general.

Sure, here and there rust showed under Maya's paint, but hey, she worked absolutely fine. She got me from point A to point B and that's all that mattered. My dad kept complaining that she was unsightly and too old but he was the one who'd bought her for me so I didn't pay much attention to what he said. Plus, I don't drive with him in the car. Ever.

No one needs that kind of stress in their lives.

Chapter 3

I made a right turn at the cathedral intersection, entering Vladislav Boulevard, and instantly wished I'd taken a different route home. All three lanes were chock-full of traffic, columns of dusty cars mixed with dirty yellow cabs and legitimately-older-than-I-was buses. The radio filled Maya's interior with static mixed with the occasional note in what could have conceivably been called a song, in a genre anywhere from folk to doom metal. It was safe to say that it wasn't soothing my nerves at all. Usually, only the right speaker worked, but today, the left one was making a futile attempt at working every few seconds, resulting in both speakers crackling and spasming. It converted my listening experience from mono-hell to stereo-hell and back.

I turned the bloody radio off completely and slowed down as I saw the traffic light ahead turn red. Maya's heater quivered and my heart skipped a beat. I glanced at the fan output next to the steering wheel from the corner of my eye. The loss of the radio I could withstand, but the heating...

Fortunately, the air current evened out a second later, the fan going back to its not-so-quiet original state. I sighed in relief and squinted at the countdown next to the traffic light, a rare commodity in general on traffic lights in Varna. With the number showing well over a minute, I tried to relax in my seat, resting the side of my head on the window. I idly fiddled with the safety belt where it kept scratching my chest between a layer of clothes and jacket buttons. My thoughts drifted back to Radoslav's apartment, my mind replaying our conversation; annoyance with him and with myself mixed within me. I could have explained

better. And he could have actually listened. Or maybe I could have kept track of the time while dancing, for a goddamn change...

Across the opposite three lanes of the boulevard, at the corner of St Kiril and Metodiy Square, stood a lively mess of small flower stalls, nearly identical in their faded white paint. Both their staff and their stock somehow managed to ignore the cold weather. A group of huddled tourists took photos of the larger building behind the stalls – the Dormition of the Mother of God Cathedral. It towered some thirty metres above, and my eyes naturally drifted and lingered at the highest of the four golden crosses, drawn in by the smooth lines of the architecture. I wasn't particularly pious, or even religious, but the high arches and the resplendent decoration gave the building both an imposing and a beautiful look at the same time. It made me picture spacious rooms with quiet, darkened nooks filled with the smell of incense and burning candles. Come to think of it, I suppose I was technically Orthodox Christian, what with my father having baptized me before I could even formulate a personal opinion on the matter.

I saw the cars ahead of me stagger into motion and belatedly shifted to first gear. I let out a sigh, happy to be moving again, my stomach reminding me I'd missed the opportunity of eating at Radoslav's. The moussaka had smelled simply too glorious to be true. And hadn't there been a salad seen on the table, as well? My mind wandered as I drove and a very old memory popped up in it: eleven-year-old me, riding shotgun with my father as he struggled to navigate the then-unfamiliar streets of Varna. He'd shouted mock-angry at me to lower down my window so he could better shout mock-insults at a driver who'd just illegally overtaken him. Funny how I'd once enjoyed riding with my dad but now wouldn't even sit in a car with him if given the choice. Another memory welled up, even older this time, from when I'd still lived in Tryavna and my parents hadn't divorced yet. Just me, mum and dad at home around the table, happy. I vaguely wondered if it was an actual memory or just wishful thinking at

this point – these days, I had trouble imagining a world in which all three of us got along with each other.

The traffic finally let up when I passed the corner of Vladislav and Republika and soon after that I was driving onto Yan Huniyadi, making steady progress towards home. The rest of my drive was rather uneventful. The most unusual thing that happened was when I was pulling in front of my apartment block in the Apricot Garden Neighbourhood; there was actually a free parking spot!

With narrow streets crisscrossing between the blocks in the area and the parked cars of the tons of residents, it was so rare to find a spot close to where I lived that I'd effectively stopped trying to find one months ago, instead opting to park Maya by the dumpsters at the corner. Needless to say, there was no trace of the apricot trees the neighbourhood was named after.

I parked in parallel with the next car, only needing one manoeuvre to get in. Feeling rather smug about it, I turned off the engine and slipped out of Maya, my mind already busy with providing me mental images of the huge dinner I was going to devour, my mouth filling with an appropriate amount of saliva. Just as I put the keys in the keyhole on the driver's door to lock Maya, I saw through the window my white dress sprawled over the backseat where I'd tossed it earlier. I paused for an instance, frowning, itching to just lock Maya up, get home and finally get something to eat. But my father might notice the tell-tale dress when he went out to work tomorrow and then...

Well.

I sighed deeply and pulled the key out of the lock without turning it, then opened the backdoor. I didn't want to hide the dress under the seat as it would get so dirty it would never again be white no matter how many times I washed it. (I still held on to a glimmer of hope the grass stains might come off.) I considered taking it upstairs in my school backpack but it

was too risky. In the end, I fiddled for two long minutes with Maya's trunk lock, finally managing to pry it open and hid the dress in there.

It was a fifty-fifty chance in terms of whether I'd need the help of a locksmith to get the trunk open again and retrieve the dress, but, oh well. You gotta work with what you have.

Chapter 4

I kicked off my sneakers with a contented sigh and let my backpack slide down my shoulder to fall on the ground. Heading directly for the kitchen door at the end of the corridor, I ignored the muted sounds of keyboard clicks coming from my father's bedroom. His door was cracked open as I passed but I could picture him well enough without peaking in – hunched over his desk, a large, expensive headset covering his ears and the harsh glow of the oversized monitor in the dark room casting sharp angles on his face.

A large glass table dominated the centre of the kitchen, the only items on it a small icon of Christ and a pack of my father's cigarettes. As none of those things suited my dinner tastes, I bypassed the table and made a beeline straight for the grey fridge by the window. I opened its matted door and groaned – the shelves inside were almost bare. Sadly, checking the oven proved a disappointing experience as well – there was no hidden tray with moussaka waiting for me inside. Resigned to my fate of eating sandwiches for the third evening in a row, I took out some butter and salami from the fridge, balanced them precariously in the grip of my left hand and took the remainder of the bread in my right. I nudged the fridge door closed with my shoulder and went to put everything down on the marble counter by the sink. I grabbed a knife and started slicing the bread, so hungry that I couldn't even spare the time to grab a chopping board.

The kitchen door opened just as I was buttering the first slice of bread, whilst simultaneously chewing on a piece of salami to stave off the worst of my hunger. My father walked in, wearing a white button-down shirt even though he was off work, and a pair of dark jeans in place of his usual black trousers.

“Use a chopping board,” he said distractedly, waving at me as he pulled a chair by the table. “That counter cost me more than your car.”

I sighed and kept on buttering the bread. My father scratched the stubble between the folds of his double chin and popped open the metal ashtray. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out, nodding to himself as he mulled something over; probably how better to besiege orcish strongholds in his online game or something. I flinched as I involuntarily breathed in some of the cigarette smoke. Despite the ‘more expensive than your car’ counter, we didn’t have an extractor fan in the kitchen. I weighed inhaling the disgusting cigarette smoke against being cold and went over to open the kitchen window to let the autumn breeze in.

“Make me some sandwiches while you are at it, hon, will you?” My father tracked me with his eyes as I walked back to the counter.

I just want to sit down and eat, is that too much to ask?

I glanced at the clock above the sink. “Isn’t your PvP thingie starting in a few minutes?” I smiled at my father and it took all of my considerable willpower not to let the expression turn sour. “Who has the time to eat when there are orcs to be killed, right, dad?”

“My clan’s fighting the Mer’Tul dwarves tonight. The event doesn’t start for another ten minutes.” He puffed out, the cigarette smoke lingering in the air despite the open window. I was cold *and* inhaling poison. Brilliant. “Plus, I can play and eat at the same time.” He grinned back at me as if he’d make some smart joke or something.

My hand gripped the knife a bit tighter but I otherwise stayed silent. I’d make him his damned sandwiches and then wait until he’d gone to play his stupid game so I could finally sit down and eat in peace.

“Didn’t I tell you to use the chopping board?” My father stubbed out his cigarette, rising from the table with a bone-weary sigh as if he’d ploughed a whole field today and not sat in a

chair playing video games. “Leave it, you’ll scratch the counters. I’ll make the sandwiches myself.”

I snatched the thick walnut chopping board hanging from the wall and smashed it on top of the counter with a satisfyingly loud bang. Ignoring my father’s startled yell, I drove the knife down with so much force that when I let go of it, its point was stuck and the handle quivered in the air. I turned to face my father. “Help yourself,” I declared tersely and stormed out of the kitchen, my anger overriding my hunger.

My father’s raised voice chased me into the corridor. “Lina Atanasova, get back here right this instant!”

I pivoted on my feet and stormed back into the kitchen just as angrily as I’d stomped out. I faced my father, his brown eyes narrowed as he looked down on me. “You pull this and then rush off...” He shook his head disapprovingly. “What’s up with you these days, Lina? Were you thinking of just driving off again? How many times-”

“Actually, I was going to my room, to starve in peace,” I said, interrupting his old ‘wayward child’ speech before it could gain traction. I sketched a mock salute, which probably looked just as ridiculous as it felt – my knowledge of army practices was limited to my father’s occasional rants about the recent abolishment of conscription. “By your leave, sir?”

“Where did you go today?” he asked me, showing uncharacteristic restraint by not taking the bait of the mock salute.

Here we go, I thought as he went on before I could respond.

“Don’t you have a biology test soon? Or have you been doing these stupid dances of your mother’s again, going to godforsaken places with a bunch of uneducated people? I thought being half a country away from Elena would protect you from all of that bullshit!”

“I haven’t seen mum in years.” I ground my teeth in anger. “And I don’t want to, either. I was with Radoslav, studying.” A partial lie, but who cares. I danced alone, not that I expected him to understand. I wasn’t interested the slightest bit in any of the rigid traditions my mum was so keen on following.

“Bring me your backpack,” my father ordered, clearly not trusting me.

With an exaggerated sigh, I turned around and went to fetch my backpack from the corridor. Inwardly, I was shouting at myself – he would figure out I’d lied to him the moment he saw there were no textbooks in it. Good thing I’d left the white dress in the car at least. I shivered for a moment, imagining his reaction if he’d found *that* in my backpack. I’d rather be caught snorting coke or something, honestly.

I thrust the backpack into my father’s hands and swiped a half-finished sandwich from the counter. I flopped down on one of the chairs to nibble on the bread sullenly. For some reason I wasn’t feeling hungry anymore – my stomach was clenched. My father put the backpack on the table, unzipping the first big compartment. He frowned at the empty space inside then unzipped the second compartment. Just as I was feverishly trying to word an excuse in my mind about how I’d left my textbooks at Radoslav’s my father pulled out a notebook. I tried not to stare at the flower design on the cover too much – by sheer luck, it seemed, I’d forgotten to take out my Biology notebook after school on Friday along with the other textbooks when I’d emptied my backpack.

“No textbook?” he inquired without taking his eyes off the notebook.

“We used Rado’s,” I lied quickly and then muttered, “no point in lugging mine over as well, right?”

My father glanced at me but stayed silent. He flicked through the notebook until he reached the last page that was filled out and frowned. “Why is there nothing written here since Friday?” He said it more like an accusation than a question.

“We revised the material from the beginning of the term,” I shot back in a challenge, committed to my lie and trying my best to project an air of confidence. “For the test.”

Please don't ask me about the Krebs cycle. If you do, I swear I'll start screaming...

Surprisingly, my father sat down across from me, closing the textbook and putting it gently down on the table beside my backpack. He looked up at me, his anger visibly subdued.

“And when do I get to meet this Rado boy then?”

Umm... how about never?

“Why don't you invite him over tomorrow?” my father pressed on, taking advantage of my shocked silence. He offered me a small, questioning smile, lifting his eyebrows in an expression of sincere interest.

“Excuse me?” I said, still struggling how to express diplomatically that I didn't want them ever meeting.

“I believe, as a father, I should know who my daughter is going out with.”

Ah, so that's what this is really about - control.

“I wouldn't say that we're...,” I did not want to discuss my relationship with Rado with him. “We're not dating.” I said simply in the end.

“Not dating?” he asked mildly.

“It's like, we're not...” I struggled to find the right words. “We are not that involved, I guess. It's just... casual.”

What else could I have said? Straight up ‘I don't want you to meet each other’ would have made him ask more questions. But there was no way I'd ever let my father and Radoslav in the same room – I wasn't *that* stupid. Although, a part of me did secretly wonder how my father would react if Radoslav explained to him in his straightforward way that our relationship consisted of primarily him tying me up and us having sex. On the plus side, my father's reaction would be priceless. I'd have to make sure to take a picture of his expression.

I'd totally print it when I moved out, then frame it and hang it somewhere. On the wall facing the toilet seat, most likely.

“Okay, how about bringing over some of your friends from school?” my father was saying. “Most teenage girls beg their parents to have their girl friends over to watch movies and have a sleepover or whatever. I just want you to have a normal, happy life, Lina.”

I snorted. “Yeah, sure thing, dad. I'll bring Monika over next week so we can browse stupid fashion magazines together.”

I wouldn't.

“What's wrong with Monika?” my father asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. “I know her parents,” he continued as if that somehow made Monika a better person. “Her mother works at the airport and her father is-”

“Dad, she is an absolute moron,” I had to refrain myself from shouting; he had no idea how vain Monika actually was. “She almost failed chemistry already and we are not even halfway through the first term!” I was aware I was ranting at this point but I didn't really care. “Don't you get it, most girls my age are *shit!* All they think about is how to make their school uniform seem more fucking fashionable or who that big muscled moron from class 12B fancies!”

“Enough of that!” My father's anger had come back with full force when I'd started swearing. He slammed his hand down on the table, rattling the ashtray and the icon. “While you live in my house, you will follow my rules! And that means no swearing! You just lost your car for a month. Hand over the keys. Now!”

“No!” I ground my teeth in response. “Maya is mine! Do you plan on beating me to get the keys? Because that's the only way I'm ever going to-”

“The car's registered to my name,” my father interrupted me, his voice suddenly quiet and menacing. “I pay the tax for it. You know I'd never beat you, don't pretend otherwise.”

But I can call the police and declare that ugly yellow car of yours stolen first thing in the morning if you'd like? They'd eventually pull you over and arrest you."

When I didn't say anything, he added, "That means you'll be taken into custody, Lina. Handcuffs, a police car, a cell, the whole thing. Neither of us wants that. Come on."

Speak for yourself.

The handcuffs part sounded exciting. Perhaps even the cell wouldn't be too bad, as long as it was private and Radoslav was around, wearing a uniform.

I stifled a sigh. Who was I kidding? Actually getting arrested was very different from roleplaying it and it did scare me if I stopped and logically thought about it. Despite that my first instinct was to keep arguing with dad just for the sake of it, I took my keychain out of my pocket. Stifling another sigh, I detached the key for Maya and slid it on the table towards him.

However, it seemed my father wasn't done. "If you were so grown up as you insisted, so *mature*, you wouldn't be doing half of the stuff you've been doing lately. It's your last high school year, for God's sake!"

"Don't say his name in vain," I murmured despite myself. I didn't much care about Christianity or believed in any god whatsoever, but it got to my father, and that's what mattered right now.

"I just want you to have a good, happy life," he said, making a very visible effort not to shout.

As long as that life looks exactly how you imagine it, that is.

His hand twitched on the table, his fist closing and relaxing as we both stayed silent.

"Your education is important," he started again, this time in a more controlled voice. "If it wasn't for *my* education we wouldn't have a roof over our heads right now."

More like you wouldn't have a fancy gaming computer and a counter that's more expensive than my car.

“Ask yourself, where would you be right now if your mother had raised you? Would you have any chance of making it into a medical university as you want if you weren't enlisted in a prestigious high school such as The Third?”

“I don't see a reason why I can't do emberdances as a hobby *and* get into university,” I said, trying to mimic his controlled voice.

My father's eyes narrowed dangerously at my mention of the words ember and dance in the same breath. “What happens when you get third-degree burns and never walk again, Lina? Imagine your life then.” He gazed at me triumphantly as if he'd just driven home his point. “Or some crazy guy stabs you in an alley?” he added. “What then?”

I couldn't help it – I laughed, a full belly laugh that brought tears to my eyes. Third-degree burns were far-fetched but a crazy guy stabbing me in an alley? Was he perhaps mixing weed with his tobacco? The mental image of my father rolling a spliff only made me laugh harder.

“Dad, you worry too much,” I managed, struggling to take a breath.

My father leaned back in his chair, his expression lacking any mirth whatsoever. “I know you feel like you're invincible, trust me. I was young too, not so long ago, and...” He paused, sighed then changed strategies. “Look, maybe I've been putting too much pressure on you. Why don't you consider taking a year off after high school before you go on to study medicine? You know I would never force you to move out or pay rent, Lin. You don't have to worry about any of that. I don't want you getting stressed about-”

“Yeah, well, maybe I can't wait to move out,” I declared, standing up. My father slumped with a sigh, rubbing his eyes. Sensing the fight had left him, I headed quickly out of the kitchen before he'd decided to renew the argument. I closed the door to my room with a lot

more force than necessary and collapsed on my bed, not even bothering to turn the light off or strip my clothes.

Chapter 5

I rubbed my bleary eyes as I brushed past Monika who, as always, stood in our classroom's door, exchanging gossip with the girls from the next class over. She smiled at me widely, and probably quite insincerely, bemoaning how the rain had ruined her carefully styled hair. I passed her without a reply, not wanting to complain to her of all people about the fact that I'd needed to wake up at six-thirty in the morning to catch a goddamn bus to school because my father was a prick. The smell of wet clothes hit me in the face as soon as I stepped into the room.

My classroom was shaped like a large rectangular, or at least it would have felt large if it wasn't filled up with eighteen double student desks and over thirty chairs arranged in three columns. I made my way from the door across the room to the first desk by the window, right in front of the teacher's desk. I popped down, throwing my backpack on the chair next to me as no one sat there regularly. It felt great to take off the weight of six different textbooks, that many practice books and a good few more notebooks from my back. I flung my beanie on top of the radiator nestled under the window sill and then snuggled up close to it with my back, letting the heat slowly seep into me while waiting for Mrs Ivanova to arrive. My eyes travelled across the room back and forth, tracking my different classmates as they did what teenagers usually did at school: anything but actually study.

I greeted the odd one I was actually on friendly terms with without ever leaving my post by the radiator. The minutes trickled by and the corridor outside grew quiet as teachers entered the classrooms, shepherding the last few errant students with them. Most of my class was still chatting between themselves, excited at the prospect of our teacher not showing up

and having two free classes. Eventually, there was a buzz around the door and the students standing there dispersed, moving towards their seats. With my line of sight clear, I saw through the open door and into the corridor. Dr Stanislavov was walking towards our door and I felt my heart flutter in hope. Mrs Ivanova was famously strict and hard to please, whereas a temporary teacher offered me something of an opportunity. It also helped that I knew him, or at least, I knew of him. He was one of the biology teachers for the Third University and more specifically, one of those who taught the medical students. Dressed entirely casually and quite a bit younger than Mrs Ivanova, Dr Stanislavov looked to be in his thirties and had a reputation for being very approachable, both inside and outside the classroom.

“Good afternoon,” he said as he entered and moved straight for the teacher’s desk on the low podium in front of the blackboard. A series of staggered greetings sounded from the classroom as Dr Stanislavov turned to regard the class arrayed before him,

“This is class 12 A, correct?” he asked no one in particular.

“Yes,” I replied, the other students behind me chiming in as well.

Dr Stanislavov put down our class diary on the desk with a resounding thump. I used the opportunity to take a closer look at him. Behind his narrow-framed glasses, he had brown eyes that never seemed to quite settle anywhere. The stubble on his chin was shot through with tiny flecks of grey. He was rather nice looking, in a dark, brooding sort of way.

Not that it mattered, of course.

“Okay,” he declared, his gaze sweeping the classroom once again without settling on anyone. He moved to stand in front of the desk, his hands stretched to the side and resting on its surface.

“My name is Doctor Ivan Stanislavov,” he explained. “I teach biology for the university students of the Third Combined School and University. As you may have guessed, Mrs

Ivanova is absent and Headmistress Petrova asked me to take over temporarily. So instead of sleeping in here I am.” His eyes drifted across the class slowly, his displeasure quite apparent. University classes started at one-thirty p.m. at the earliest. Given my car-less circumstances, I sympathised with him. He still gave me the creeps, though.

“Is Mrs Ivanova okay?” asked Monika, seemingly oblivious to Dr Stanislavov’s bad mood.

“She’s sick,” announced Dr Stanislavov, settling the matter.

Well, if Mrs Ivanova was going to be gone for a while it gave me a good opportunity to make an impression on her replacement and get an extra good grade before she came back.

“Where are you in terms of material?” Dr Stanislavov asked.

“Krebs cycle,” I declared immediately. It was a complicated topic but it also provided lots of opportunities for me to demonstrate my knowledge.

“Any questions about the homework?” he asked, pausing for the tiniest moment before continuing. “No? All right then.” Dr Stanislavov clapped his hands together with surprising enthusiasm. “The citric acid cycle, also known as the TCA cycle,” he declared and turned around to pick up a piece of chalk and write on the blackboard:

Tricarboxylic Acid Cycle

“Or, it’s also referred to as the Krebs Cycle, as...” he trailed off and spared me a brief glance.

“Lina,” I said helpfully,

“...As Lina pointed out earlier.” Dr Stanislavov faced the board once again and kept writing as he spoke. “Now, in eukaryotes, this cycle occurs in the matrix of the mitochondria, similarly to the conversion of pyruvate to...”

During the rest of the class, Dr Stanislavov proved to be quite different from what his reputation said about him. Sure, he knew his stuff - the next thirty minutes dragged on as I

struggled to simultaneously copy what he was writing on the blackboard and listen to his explanations. But he never asked any questions, he just kept writing on the board so I never got an opportunity to impress him. He even somehow managed to cramp an inordinate amount of reaction chains without ever having to wipe the board. It was as if the wet sponge in the bucket by his desk didn't even exist.

By the time the class was about to end, having been dumbly copying text and struggling not to zone out, I'd convinced myself that I needed to act. Dr Stanislavov had wrapped up his most recent tangent and according to my watch, the school bell would ring in just a few minutes. Resolutely, I stood up from my desk and approached Dr Stanislavov just as he was filling out the class diary, the chatter from the class behind me raising in excitement as break time approached.

"Dr Stanislavov, can I talk to you for a second, please?" I said, putting myself between him and the rest of the class to force his attention solely on me. He looked up from his desk, his eyes bouncing between me and the clock on the wall.

"The class isn't over yet." He seemed annoyed I'd approached him. "Take your seat... Lina, was it?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, ignoring the first part entirely. At least he remembered my name. That was something.

Seeing I was still there, he sighed and stopped writing in the diary. "Right. What can I do for you then, Lina?"

Okay, be concise.

"I was hoping you could ask me some questions next time in class, you know, for a grade. Or even give me a paper test or something." I couldn't help but shuffle a bit nervously.

Dr Stanislavov frowned. "Students don't ask for extra tests," he stated. And he was right. Generally speaking.

“Yeah, well...” I took a deep breath before blurting out, “I want to study medicine.”

“Medicine, huh?” he murmured distractedly, flicking through the diary until he found my name. He traced my grades on the page with a forefinger until he reached the biology one.

“Yeah, you didn’t start the year off great, did you? You’ll have to get a really good grade on the test once Mrs Ivanova comes back if you want to get into a medical university.” He closed the class diary apparently the matter settled as far as he was concerned.

“It’s just that I’ve had a hard time studying at home,” I said, trying a different tactic. “I’m not too confident about the end-of-term test. Maybe a mock exam could help...” I trailed off hopefully.

Someone catcalled from the back of the class and I heard a boy’s voice say, “I never took Lina for one to chat up a teacher.” More catcalls followed, along with a girl’s whispered comment about ‘older man.’ I resisted the urge to turn around and punch some people.

“Quiet!” Dr Stanislavov barked and the conversations settled down to background noise again. He looked back at me but not before his eyes strayed over the clock on the wall once more. Was he *that* bothered by that stupid remark that he couldn’t wait to get rid of me? I could feel my cheeks flushing, both in anger and embarrassment.

Suddenly, Dr Stanislavov smiled at me.

“You know what?” he declared, nodding as he spoke quickly. “Mrs Ivanova wouldn’t appreciate me giving extra tests to her students, but if you are that worried about your grades, here’s what we can do.”

He picked up the class diary and headed straight for the door. I hurried to tag along.

“I run an extra class with university students that are lagging behind. It’s on Thursdays, just after the end of your last period and before the start of their first. Why don’t you come?”

“Okay, that sounds great!” I said, excited at the prospect. Maybe he acted very differently when he was with just a few familiar students as opposed to a class full of strangers. “I’ll be there.”

“Right, I’ll see you on Thursday in this-”

He was just reaching for the doorknob when the bell signalling the end of the class rang. Even though I expected the three seconds long, annoying noise I still flinched when it came. Dr Stanislavov’s hands shot up to cover his ears, the class diary falling to the ground. His face was a mask of pain as students rushed past him and out of the door, only a few of them sparing him a glance.

“What’s wrong?” I blurted out. Sure, the bell was a bit on the loud side of things but I’d never seen someone react to it like that.

He put a hand to his forehead, shaking his head with a forced smile. “Bad hangover,” he rasped, frowning and then his face cleared. “Had a bit too much to drink last night.” He actually winked at me. Huh. So was he, or wasn’t he bothered by the whole ‘chatting up older men’ bit from earlier?

He picked up the diary from the ground and tucked it underneath his arm. I traced him with my eyes as he made his way out of the room. I guess a hangover could explain his slightly odd actions given that he was generally rumoured to be a nice teacher.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when I noticed Radoslav hanging by the door, just outside in the corridor. I’d all but forgotten that he’d said he was going to stop by my classroom today, what with my father going ballistic yesterday and then this whole new teacher business...

Radoslav caught my eyes and gave me a lopsided smile. He hooked his thumb over his shoulder, underlining his obvious question with raised eyebrows. I took a quick glance around the room – ideally, I’d have liked to stay next to the radiator during the break and chat

with Rado there but a few students were lingering at their desks. Instead, I joined him over in the corridor. Shouts echoed from the terracotta walls, the usual high school noise during a break present as ever. I led Radoslav to one side where we could get at least a little bit of privacy, hanging by the window overlooking the back entrance of the school. Students huddled in groups outside in the rain, small streams of smoke rising from their cigarettes.

“How’s it going?” Radoslav said as a way of greeting.

“Lousy. I have to take the bus now ’cuz my dad’s a prick.” I puffed in frustration. “Oh, I also have a temporary biology teacher who apparently drinks too much,” I added as an afterthought.

“At least he’s cool,” Radoslav remarked and I didn’t bother correcting him that excess drinking wasn’t cool. “How about we get together at yours on Friday after school then, since you can take a break from studying? We’ll have a few hours before your father gets home.”

I had a mixed reaction to his offer. In a way, I was glad he seemed to have forgiven me for standing him up and was impatient to meet up. It’s not like I wasn’t excited at the prospect, too. But on the flip side, I didn’t feel entirely comfortable with ditching my homework for that day...And then there was the risk of Radoslav and my father actually meeting.

“Yeah, we could,” I said carefully “But you’ll have to be gone by the time my dad comes back, and you will lose some time going home after school to...” I lowered my voice, taking a cautious look around me to see if anyone was close enough to overhear before continuing. “To pick up your stuff before coming over, that is.”

“It’s okay.” Radoslav laughed in a good-natured way. “I can fit the ropes along with the textbooks in my backpack. We can go straight to yours.” He winked at me. Why was everyone winking at me today?

“What about Saturday?” Radoslav said.

“What about it?” I said.

“My place, the usual time? Any crazy voodoo trips coming up or...?”

“Oh, shut up.” He laughed and I smiled to mask my uneasiness. I didn’t really want to discuss firewalking with him again. “No, nothing like that,” I said in the end.

“Great,” Radoslav ran his hand through his flattened mohawk and nodded. “See you on Friday then.”

He turned and walked away. I watched him go, hovering by the window and wondering why I felt vaguely disappointed by both him and myself.

Chapter 6

On Thursday, instead of heading home after PE where the teacher made us run laps outside in the cold, I headed back into the school building. I ignored as best as I could the crowd of high school students that were leaving for the day and the arriving university ones in the lobby. Dr Stanislavov's consultation room was just a run-of-the-mill classroom that happened to not be occupied at this time of the week. It had the same general layout as my own classroom, with the three columns of double desks, a low podium for the teacher and a blackboard. Tired as I was from the running, the first thing I did when I entered was to look for the radiator, dreaming about sitting down with my back propped up on it, the blissful heat sinking into my muscles...

Unfortunately, there was a guy already sat next to it, reading an impressively thick sci-fi book. He didn't even look up when I entered the room so I reckoned there was no chance of dislodging him from my favourite spot. Disappointed, I scanned the rest of the room – there were only two other girls sitting together. With no better options, I headed for the front row; might as well be closer to the teacher. But as I passed a couple of girls sitting together on the mid-row one of them looked up at me.

"You're here for the biology consultation, right?" she inquired, smiling at me. She had blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair which was probably dyed, judging by the black roots. I nodded mutely. She was *just* the person I wanted to talk to – a blue-eyed, blonde-haired wanna-be princess. In contrast, the girl sitting next to her had dark-blonde hair that seemed natural and was busy reading from a biology textbook.

“Finally I’ll have someone to chat with,” the first girl whispered dramatically. “Stella here is too busy studying prokaryotes.” Stella gave her friend a playful shove then went back to studying without saying anything. “Seriously, come, sit with us.” The girl pulled over a third chair to the two-person desk. “I’m Mariana, by the way; first-year, general practice.”

“Lina,” I said, forcing a smile back. Was she really a first-year? For some reason, I felt like she was too old. I stood there mutely for another few seconds then finally made my mind up, putting my backpack on the desk behind Mariana’s. “I’ll just take this one,” I said apologetically. “I’m quite messy with my textbooks. Don’t wanna take up too much of your space.”

I was hoping that would put a polite end to our conversation but Mariana didn’t seem fazed whatsoever. She turned to sit in her chair backwards, her eyes glued to me.

“You seem a bit too young to be a university student,” she remarked.

And I was just thinking the opposite about you, wanna-be princess.

I nodded again. “Yeah, I’m high school, actually; twelfth grade.”

“Huh.” Mariana looked at me with a confused expression. “So why is Ivan—”

“Dr Stanislavov,” Stella cut in distractedly but Mariana rolled on as if she hadn’t heard her.

“So why is Ivan giving you consultations if you are a high school student?”

“I’m going to study medicine,” I said.

Mariana smiled sympathetically at me and I looked back at her in confusion.

“I feel you,” she said. “My parents also made me go into medicine. And here I am, first-year and already failing.” Her smile turned a bit sour. “It’s not like I didn’t tell them it wasn’t for me.”

“You just need to try a bit harder,” Stella poked in, glancing meaningfully from her open textbook to the closed one behind Mariana.

I could appreciate your parents forcing you to do something. So I felt guilty about how quickly I'd made up my mind about Mariana. Maybe I ought to give her a second chance.

“So, which parent was it for you then?” Mariana asked me, rubbing her right eye distractedly. “For me, it was my mum. Damn it!” she exclaimed, now using both hands to rub at her eye. In the gaps between her fingers, I glimpsed a brown-coloured iris as she fumbled with a small glossy-white disk. “Stupid contact lenses... This one never stays in place.” She fiddled with the lense for a few extra moments until she finally got it back into place. Well, colour-changing lenses certainly didn't raise my opinion of her. Though maybe she just preferred them over glasses.

“Anyways, you should hear my mum, honestly,” Mariana continued. She laughed and pitched her voice ridiculously high. “*Your grandma was a dentist and she was a very respected member of society!*”

I tried to laugh sympathetically along with Mariana. “Guess I'm lucky,” I said. “I've wanted to get into medicine for as long as I can remember. My dad has always been supportive, too, although I imagine if I'd decided to be some kind of an artist instead it would have been quite different.”

Mariana nodded knowingly, her laughter flowing free. “Oh, I don't doubt it for one second. What about your mum?”

“She doesn't come into the picture,” I said, not wanting to get into the topic. What was taking Dr Stanislavov so long anyways? Wasn't he supposed to be here five minutes ago?

“Sorry,” Mariana said, looking almost comically distraught at the possibility she'd brought up an uncomfortable subject. I felt the need to reassure her.

“No, it's okay, really. My parents got divorced a long time ago. My mum doesn't even live in Varna anymore.”

The door to the classroom opened, finally interrupting our conversation and Dr Stanislavov walked in. He glanced at the boy reading a book by the radiator.

“Aren’t you supposed to be outside with your class for PE?”

“I’m excused,” he said, turning another page without ever glancing up. I was quite jealous of him actually, being able to stay in during PE, snuggled up next to the radiator...

“As long as you don’t interrupt us, you can stay,” Dr Stanislavov said. “Now...” he trailed off and his eyes settled onto me, Mariana and Stella. He frowned. “Lina, come sit back here for your test.” He tapped one of the desks in the last row and put an exam paper on it. “Let’s see how well you’d do on your own.”

Somehow I doubted Mariana would have been of much help and Stella didn’t strike me as the exam cheater type but, oh well. I made my way to the desk in the back, tiredly lugging my backpack along.

“Now, let’s continue where we dropped off last time, Mariana,” Dr Stanislavov was saying. He sat down on the chair Mariana had pulled up for me, foregoing the teacher’s podium and blackboard. He was the very image of someone concerned with his student’s progress.

“One of the possible topics for the next exams is the morphological characterization and classification of phylum Platyhelminthes so it’s important that you...” he was saying, huddled almost too close to Mariana. Stella had paused her reading to listen as well.

How come I don’t get any of that special attention, I thought in annoyance as I wrote my name on the front page of the test. Maybe I ought to do what Stella obviously did – just hang around Mariana. I turned to the first question where a few words and a blank white space greeted me.

Question 1:

Draw schematically the electron transport chain within the inner mitochondrial membrane.

I sighed and got to it.

Later that evening I was sat in the kitchen with my father, eating dinner. The TV masked the lack of conversation around the table, the attractive looking male and female newscasters droning on about Bulgaria's preparation to join the European Union by the end of the year. My thoughts wandered off as I stirred the takeaway food in my ceramic plate. I couldn't wait until school tomorrow was over and Radoslav and I...

I was shaken out of my daydreams when my father suddenly turned the TV volume up. He held the remote with one hand extended over the table, his other holding a half-forgotten fork with spaghetti on it. He relaxed back in his chair, his attention never straying from the TV.

"And now," the female newscaster was saying from behind her ovoid desk, "a follow up into the investigation of the tragic deaths earlier this year in March of twenty-two-year-old tourism student Yana Vladimirova and twenty-five-year-old businessman Zahariy Ivailov from Sofia."

Pictures of the two victims appeared on the screen, overlaid at the bottom as the newscaster continued to speak. Yana had short black hair and brown eyes, sporting a wide smile, the picture of her taken while she was hiking. Zahariy, in contrast, was in a black suit and white shirt, sat at a desk and gazing into the camera solemnly.

The female newscaster paused and the male seamlessly stepped in. "The two deaths, along with the disappearance of a third, unknown person near the Albotin Cave Monastery

has been the prime focus of The Criminal Police General Directorate. A C.P.G.D. spokesperson informed the public today that, ‘after a long and comprehensive investigation, we [the C.P.G.D.] have been able to rule out any involvement from the firewalkers and spirit scarers that had gathered by the monastery to perform rituals at the time the murders took place.’”

As soon as I heard the newscaster mentioned firewalkers I cringed – I knew what was coming. As usual, my father didn’t disappoint.

“Crazy people,” he murmured for my benefit as the report rolled on, shooting a covert glance my way to gauge my reaction. “I wouldn’t be surprised if your mother was there.”

I squeezed my jaw hard to remain silent, reminding myself I didn’t care about his opinion *or* my mother’s whereabouts.

“C.P.G.D. also shared that they are not abandoning their working hypothesis that the murders are connected to a cult practice but are now also exploring other possibilities. The missing person from the crime scene remains of strong interest and is considered potentially dangerous. Elena Atanasova, the eyewitness to last see him, described him as an older male, perhaps in his fifties or even sixties, wearing heavy clothing and in possession of a bulky, black travelling sack.’

My father threw me a glance. “What did I tell you, huh?”

Again, I clenched my jaw and remained quiet. Despite not being close with my mother, I was still worried if she was okay. But voicing such a fear to my father would be adding fuel to the fire.

The programme eventually switched to the weather forecast for tomorrow and my father finally turned to face me. I guess since he hadn’t been able to bait me out with his remarks he felt like he had no choice but to directly address the issue, such as he saw it.

“This is exactly why I want you to stay away from those crazy rituals,” he said, pointing with the remote at the TV where a brown-haired woman dressed in a tight red dress was presenting the weather forecast.

Oh, for fuck’s sake, I thought. Here we go again...

“I put an end to my marriage so you can be as far away as possible from Elena’s influence. We moved to the city so you can get a proper education. And yet, you run off every other weekend to God knows where and-”

“Oh please, we moved to the city because you wanted a better job. Plus, police said firewalkers had nothing to do with the murders.” I couldn’t decide if I was angrier at my father bring the subject of my dances up or at being forced to take my mother’s side in an argument. I took my fork back up and determinedly started digging into my food. Maybe he would have the decency to let me eat in peace for once.

“It’s the people you come into contact through your... dances... that worry me, Lina.” As usual, once something put him on the warpath, dad didn’t give up. “Can’t you see that I just want you to be safe?”

Sighing, I looked up from my plate; silence only ever got you so far. Or perhaps, stubbornness just ran in the family. “I don’t care about my mum’s friends and their silly rituals,” I stated with as much authority as I could muster. Which wasn’t a lot, given that I was still chewing.

“Then promise me you’ve stopped doing firewalking. For good, this time,” my father demanded, gazing intensely at me.

I considered explaining to him that I did the dances as a relaxation, that the trance-like experience helped me unwind and had nothing to do with the boring folklore traditions my mum was part of. But I’d tried doing that before and obviously, it hadn’t worked. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.

“Well, maybe,” I said instead, grasping for an alternative to outright lying to him, “you should be just grateful that I’m not one of those teens that come home drunk all the time or are always doing drugs or... or... I don’t know, all right?” Like, honestly, compared to the average teenagers I was practically every parent’s dream. “I just don’t see why you’re so hell-bent on making an issue out of a harmless hobby.”

“Hobby?” my dad asked in a low voice, leaning over the table threateningly. “This is not a hobby, Lina, it’s self-destructive behaviour, just as much as abusing alcohol or other drugs.”

“Okay, now you are exaggerating,” I said hotly but he went on.

“Lina, you simply cannot expect to-”

“I’ll tell you what I can expect,” I interjected. “Graduate high school, study medicine and go on to practice it somewhere where you won’t be able to tell me how to live my life.” I threw my fork onto the plate, splattering sauce onto the tablecloth. “What I can’t seem to expect, however, is to have one god-damn peaceful meal when you are at home.”

“Watch your tongue!” My father’s voice was rising along with his temper. “If I’d talked to my father like that he would have-”

“What, hit you? At least you haven’t fallen that low. Yet,” I couldn’t help myself but provoke him. Maybe he was right about me and self-destructive behaviour after all.

However, it gave me satisfaction to see my father struggling to control his voice, exasperated and pushed to his limits. He was pushing *my* patience to its limits every time he tried to control every aspect of my life so it was only fair.

“Lina,” he said, putting his hands down on the table and breathing deeply before continuing, “when you live for a little longer, maybe even have kids yourself one day, you will start to understand why I do the things I do. When I was your age I also felt that I knew every-”

“Oh, I don’t fucking care!” I shouted, standing up and storming out of the kitchen. There was absolutely no way I was staying for the classic ‘when I was your age’ lecture straight after being forced to listen to the all-time classic ‘firewalking is ruining your life.’

Lately, it seemed that’s how most conversations with my dad ended – with either of us storming out of the room, both of us angry, annoyed and frustrated. Then again, it wasn’t me who insisted on bringing up difficult topics constantly and refused to listen to the other person.

Right?

I shut myself in my room, silently steaming over our conversation. I sat on the ground next to my bed and snatched the biology textbook from my backpack. I opened it at random and putting my dad out of my mind, focused entirely on memorizing the words on the page in front of me.

Chapter 7

Friday's last period was Biology. I'd spent the first half of my school day in a rather bad mood – I hadn't slept well the previous night. It probably meant that the argument with my father had got to me more than I'd initially realised. The second half of the day I'd spent feeling a vague sense of uneasiness, accompanied by a constant headache. I couldn't wait for the school day to be over so I could meet Radoslav and finally relax, step out of my day-to-day life for a few hours. Adding to my stress, I still had to get at least one good grade in biology before the end of the term and Dr Stanislavov was still doing his best to ignore me during class, glancing over my raised hand on the few occasions he did ask a question at the class related to the material. Usually, teachers instantaneously liked me but not him, apparently.

There were a few minutes left of the period when Dr Stanislavov turned from the blackboard to address the class.

"I think we can stop here for today," he said. "You're free to go." He leaned on the blackboard, a sly smile on his face as watched the effect his words had on the class. People shot up from their desks, grabbed jackets and rushed for the door.

I stood up as well but instead of heading out of the room, I approached his desk, determined to talk to him. He looked unconcerned as he eased himself in his chair behind the desk, flipping the pages of the class diary.

"I was wondering if you are going to be covering for Mrs Ivanova next week too," I said, a hopeful note in my voice.

"I haven't spoken with your headmistresses but it seems likely," he said distractedly.

“So then I could come to the consultation next Thursday as well?”

“I don’t think that’ll be of much help,” he said, looking up at me and my heart sank a bit. “As you saw last time, that particular class is aimed at university students so I can’t devote as much attention to you as I would like.”

That last bit felt quite cheap given how much attention he’d paid to me during the regular class. But I wouldn’t let him brush me off this time, though.

I was just about to speak again when Dr Stanislavov took a pencil and started writing numbers on a small piece of paper. “In fact, here, take my number.” He slid the piece of paper on the desk towards me. I’ve got to admit, I was stunned – that’s not where I’d expected this conversation to go. “Call me over the weekend and we can arrange something that’s more effective.”

I instinctively reached for the paper but an alarm bell went off in my mind. Suddenly, this whole situation was giving off a bit of a creepy vibe. But at the same time, it would be very good to get some private lessons with him, especially if Mrs Ivanova wasn’t coming back anytime soon.

I felt confident I could handle him if he tried anything funny when we were alone. I was more concerned with a student seeing me getting his phone number and reporting it to the headmistress because they’d come to the obvious but wrong conclusion that something was going on between me and Dr Stanislavov.

In the end, I took the piece of paper and stuffed it in my pocket. My imagination immediately went on a tangent, providing me with a picture of the quite-good-looking and possibly shirtless Dr Stanislavov making me illegal student-teacher type of offers. I fantasized about me getting it all on tape somehow and then using it to blackmail him for a better grade. Was it amusing? Yep.

Realistic? Hell, no.

Coming back to the present, I realised that Dr Stanislavov was looking at the classroom door, frowning. I followed his gaze and saw a commotion near the door. Instead of students rushing out the door they lingered by it, looking uncertain and blocking my view of the corridor. In fact, some of them seemed to be trickling back *into* the classroom for some reason.

How odd.

A few seconds later the group of students dispersed as they headed for their desks, revealing Headmistress Petrova in the doorway. She was short and slightly plump but somehow always managed to look calmly authoritative and in control. I admired that in her even though she taught one of my least favourite subjects – physics. There was way too much math involved in that for my liking.

Headmistress Petrova threw a glance at Dr Stanislavov who'd lost his frown, now watching her with a blank, disinterested expression. I used the chance to retreat back to my desk and sit down. When the noise in the classroom settled down, Headmistress Petrova turned to address the class.

“There has been a major incident in the school,” she declared. If any other teacher had said that my classmates would have bombarded them with questions. But when it was Petrova talking, everyone stayed silent. “The police have cordoned off a part of the ground floor but there is no imminent danger. You are to evacuate in a calm manner, following Dr Stanislavov.” She glanced at him and he nodded curtly. “You will go out the front entrance and into the yard from where you are to return home. The school administration will contact your parents over the weekend to provide more information.” With that, she turned around and left.

Finally, a chorus of voices rose. People speculated about the details of this mysterious ‘incident’ and the possibility of classes being cancelled next week.

“You heard her,” Dr Stanislavov declared, his face still not betraying any emotion. “Line up and follow me.”

I picked up my backpack and trudged along with the rest of the class. I noticed that it was now past the end time of the class but no school bell had sounded.

The school lobby was full of students waiting their turn to exit through the front doors. Dr Stanislavov stopped at the bottom of the stairs where I and the class huddled behind him in a disorganised group. Speculative chatter kept flowing around me but no one was interested in my opinion which was just as well. I really didn't care – all I wanted to do was get out of here and get home.

I noticed a pair of uniformed policemen standing by the corridor leading to the back entrance, yellow tape barring the way into the back of the building. Whatever had happened must have been either by the backdoor or in the basement. Some kind of gas leak, perhaps? If it was, I couldn't smell it over the sweat of the hundred or more students in the lobby.

A path forward cleared and Dr Stanislavov led us out into the yard, along dozens of other classes. He did a quick headcount to check all of us had exited the building and then turned around and walked off.

Most of my classmates headed for the front gate immediately but I hung around for a minute or two, hoping to spot Radoslav in the huge crowd. I sat down on a bench and fished my phone out of my backpack. I was just about to call him when I felt a hand land on my shoulder. I turned around and saw Mariana standing next to me.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked in a rather subdued manner, sitting next to me.

I was about to tell her that I was meeting someone but then I noticed her distraught expression.

“What’s up?” I asked. “You okay?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know.” She looked at me then at the school building. “I just can’t believe it.”

Believe what?

“It’s okay,” I said carefully. “You can tell me.”

“Stella is...” Mariana paused for a long second, drawing in a shaky breath. “Dead.” Her hands went to her head. “I can’t believe it,” she murmured over and over again.

“Wait, hang on a sec,” I said, my thoughts strangely sluggish. “Stella? Weren’t you sitting next to her during consultation just the other day? What happened?”

Mariana shook her head mutely, her hands covering her eyes. Meanwhile, I struggled to process the news – how could Stella have died, at school? How was that possible? Petrova had described it as a ‘serious incident’, right? What kind of a school incident killed somebody?

Mariana started shaking then, crying silently and I put an arm around her shoulder. No one in the yard seemed to be paying any attention to us. A few minutes passed and eventually, Mariana calmed down enough to keep talking.

“I saw it,” she murmured. I barely heard her over the chatter of the crowd around us. “I found... Stella. In the basement, when I went to get a snack from the vending machine. She must have tripped on the stairs and... and... fallen o-on the... on all of the construction stuff. Bricks and... An iron rod, it had gone straight through her e-eye And I-I...” She lost her voice for a long second so I pulled her to me comfortingly.

“I panicked,” she continued finally, softer. “I ran away, hid in a bathroom. By the time I came out the police was already...” she trailed off.

“You need to talk to someone,” I said carefully, still holding onto her. “About... all of this. About what you saw.”

“I know,” Mariana let out a shaky breath. “I just need a minute to...” Her eyes wandered over to the school. “I’m not sure I can walk back into that building,” she whispered.

Well, that much was obvious even to me.

“Let’s get you home,” I said instead, helping her stand up. “We can go to a police station later but first, you need to rest.” Helping Mariana right now, indeed, having something I could focus on other than the fact that a student I knew, even passingly, was dead, helped me too.

I led Mariana through the crowd of students, leaving the school grounds and headed for the bus stop next to the school.

“I’ve parked just around the corner,” she said helpfully and we changed directions. I wasn’t that keen on trying to squeeze in a bus packed with students anyways.

Mariana stopped by a grey Opel parked in a long row of non-descript cars in front of an apartment block adjacent to the school building. She tried unlocking the door but her hands shook so much she couldn’t even fit the key in the lock.

“Here, let me,” I said gently, taking the keys from her. “I can drive.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, going over to the other side of the car and sitting down in the passenger’s seat. I sat behind the wheel, adjusting the rearview mirrors before starting the engine.

“So, where do you live?” I said, shifting into first gear.

“Oh, just drive to your place,” Mariana said and I looked at her quizzically. “You can drop yourself off. I should be calm enough by then to drive myself home.” She shrugged.

“Think of it as me giving you a lift.” She managed a small smile and I returned it as best as I could.

I pulled onto the Boulevard Slivnitsa and headed northwest, slightly uncomfortable in the unfamiliar car. My eyes stayed on the road as I focused entirely on the task of driving.

“You live with your dad, right?” Mariana said after a while.

“Yeah,” I said distractedly as I tried to dodge pothole after pothole. “He’s working right now though so I’ll have the flat all to myself.”

“No siblings then?” she inquired, glancing at me.

“Nope. I’ve always wanted a brother though.”

“I don’t want to intrude, but…” Mariana started, “If it’s okay, can I stay with you for a bit? At your place, I mean. My parents are working as well and I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Sure, of course,” I said automatically. I could see why she wouldn’t want to be alone given… well, given the circumstances. My phone buzzed from my backpack on the backseat, announcing I’d received a text.

“Should I…?” Mariana asked helpfully, pointing to my backpack on the backseat.

“Thanks,” I said as she pulled the backpack over, rummaging until she found my phone. I’d assumed she was going to hand it over to me to read the text but instead she read the message out aloud – I guess she didn’t want me to drive her car and use my phone at the same time. Can’t say I blamed her.

“Im heading over. Got ropes. See u soon.”

Ah. I’d forgotten about that.

“So, who’s Radoslav?” Mariana asked. “And why is he bringing ropes? You going mountain climbing over the weekend or something?”

I smiled at that – it was funny how people tended to always assume some mundane use for the ropes – basically, anything but bondage.

“Radoslav is a friend of mine – I invited him to come over and totally forgot,” I said apologetically, dodging the question about the rope.

An awkward silence settled in the car for the rest of the ride, both of us staying silent. Eventually, I pulled up in front of my apartment block and I was just looking for a space to park when Mariana spoke up.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to park. I’ll drive home,” she said.

“You should come up, at least for a bit,” I insisted. The more I thought about it, the more wrong it felt to leave her alone. Her friend had just died, for god’s sake.

“I don’t want to intrude on your plans with Radoslav, whatever they are,” she explained. She took my hand and squeezed it for a long second, her eyes boring into mine. I noticed she was back to wearing her blue contact lenses.

“Thank you,” she said finally.

Hesitantly, I climbed out of the car and after she reassured me again that she was fine, I let her drive off. I was stood in front of the entrance to my apartment block in the early afternoon, rooted to my spot as I watched the Opel disappear around a corner. One thing kept coming back to my mind, however.

There was no way someone just tripped and fell to their death, at school of all places... was there?

I didn’t know what to suspect – murder seemed even more outlandish than the tripping story – but while I didn’t have friends or family who worked in the police, there was something else I could try.

People’s souls sometimes lingered for a day or two after their death.

I went over to Maya where I’d parked her in what felt like ages ago, right in front of the block’s entrance. Even if my father had confiscated my key, I doubted it would have been of much help unlocking the temperamental trunk. I started twisting and pulling on its lid, trying

to force it open. At one point I giggled when I imagined someone seeing me trying to break into my own car and calling the police on me. That would be ironic, wouldn't it?

After a couple more minutes of huffing and sweating, I managed to pry it open. I grabbed the white dress from inside, still sporting the grass stains and all, and stuffed it into my backpack.

I was going to enjoy my time with Radoslav and then when night fell, I was going to go back to school. That was the plan.

**Incorporation of Bulgarian Folklore Traditions and Culture into the
Urban Fantasy Genre**

Introduction

All fiction writers construct fantasies no matter the genre they choose. Personally, I prefer to write fantasy.

But what is fantasy fiction?

John Clute and John Grant (1997) define fantasy in the digital version of their classic *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as follows: “A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it. When set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms.”

This world, of course, being the world we inhabit as humans and an otherworld anything different from that, anything constructed by the writer – also called a secondary world, a term coined by J. R. R. Tolkien (1947) in his essay titled *On Fairy-Stories*. Wherever set, it’s not fantasy unless it tells a story that’s considered impossible by the rules of real life. This can be anything from the supernatural phenomena of a human turning into a werewolf (*Moon Called*, Patricia Briggs, 2006), a house that’s haunted by some evil force (*The Little Stranger*, Sarah Waters, 2009) or a whole rigid magic system with pseudo-scientific rules that guide its users. (*The Name of the Wind*, Patrick Rothfuss, 2007)

In other words, from paranormal romance, through urban fantasy, sword and sorcery and to epic and high fantasy, there is one common element that binds it all together – the magic. Magic is impossible in our world as we perceive it. And whenever we encounter it as readers, its discovery is accompanied by a sense of wonder. In fact, Stephan (2016, p. 4) goes as far as claiming that, “[...] fantasy literature is fiction that offers the reader a world estranged from

their own, separated by nova that are supernatural or otherwise consistent with the marvellous, and which has as its dominant tone a sense of wonder.” That feeling of wonder is stronger when the magical is surrounded by the normal, routine, everyday shape of life as it provides further contrast; for example, in a modern, real-life city.

Urban fantasy (UF) has made up a significant percentage of my day-to-day reading for over a decade now. Clute and Grant (1997) describe urban fantasy as a mode – telling the story from within the city. They also state that “UFs are normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly *about* a real city.”

After reading many such UF texts, I’ve observed a few common tropes. A predominant one is that of the Hidden Magical within the norm of the urban environment. In those stories, the protagonist is exposed to the magic in the early chapters, often during some kind of a life-threatening incident. Thus the status quo is upset (the routine daily life no longer hides the magical) and the protagonist has to adapt to this new situation. Examples of this are plentiful. *Rivers of London* by Ben Aaronovitch (2011) in which Peter encounters a ghost after which he ends up investigating magical murders as part of a secret police force is one such. Another is fifteen-year-old protagonist Clarissa Fray from the novel titled *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (2016). Clary goes out to a club in New York and witnesses a murder of a demon and within the space of roughly twenty-four hours her mother disappears and she herself is attacked by a demon. Thus Clary, previously leading an ordinary city life, is transformed by encountering the Hidden Magical within New York.

The protagonist not being aware of the magic right from the start but learning of it early on works well in *Rivers of London*, *City of Bones* and many other novels. That’s because this way the reader gets to learn alongside the protagonist about the unknown – the magic side of the normal world. This is a convenient way for the writer to deliver information to the reader

without it being overly expositional and it's effective at establishing relatability between the reader and the protagonist – they are both 'new to this' and they are learning together.

However, there is one predominant trope in urban fantasy that's so important it's actually part of the name: the urban location. Unfortunately, the same few metropolitan cities are used as a setting so frequently in UF that I've become bored with, or perhaps more appropriately, overfamiliar with them. Places such as London or large USA cities have become the go-to option for writers. Examples are plentiful: *Rivers of London*, which I've mentioned already, is self-explanatory, *The Brimstone Deception* by Lisa Shearin (2016) - where the action is set in New York, *Some Girls Bite* by Chloe Neill (2009) with the story set in Chicago, *Succubus Blues* by Richelle Mead (2007) based in and around Seattle. *Rosemary and Rue* by Seanan McGuire (2009) is set in San Francisco and in *Kitty and the Midnight Hour* by Carrie Vaughn (2005) the story takes place in Denver, a city with a relatively small population of three-quarters of a million. The list goes on and on.

Anything else other than London or large USA cities feels like an 'exotic' setting for a UF story – and even when a different location is used, it's still the capital of a well-developed country. *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor (2011) springs to mind as an example. The story mainly takes places in Prague. The capital is portrayed as an artistic place and the protagonist of the series, Karou, reflects that setting – she goes to art school and paints as part of her normal life. She also, however, secretly collects teeth from Earth and delivers them to another world, where the chimaera will use them as a component for resurrection spells.

While I'm not saying works with the aforementioned cities don't have their merits (I've certainly enjoyed many of them and I continue to do so), I do feel the strong urge to move away from them in my writing – both from large American cities or capitals of other advanced, well-developed countries. I believe that these places have already been explored by other authors and I cannot add much of significance.

When I considered how I would subvert such a massive trope of the genre such as the metropolitan location, the first thing that came to my mind was to take it to the extreme opposite. This would have meant setting a story into a small village, a forest or a mountain perhaps. However, the hallmark of urban fantasy *is* the metropolitan setting. The massive, sprawling city itself is the foundation of the urban fantasy genre – the mix of the urban, not necessarily but more often than not, modern city with the mystery and counterpoint of magic. The juxtaposition of supernatural creatures working normal day jobs, commuting, hiding in plain sight, this is all part of the allure of urban fantasy. Magic is intertwined with the normal world in the urban environment, sometimes peacefully and symbiotically, sometimes not, and often it's hidden from the protagonist at the beginning of the story.

So instead of writing a story set in a large USA city or London, I decided that I could use a smaller city, one from my native country where I grew up, so I was already familiar with it. My belief is that, as a Bulgarian, I can authentically offer something fresh to an urban fantasy reader, in terms of overall atmosphere – an eastern European city. Using this different geographical location as a setting (when compared to the USA or London) means not only a different political climate that the characters within the story will inhabit but more importantly, different local history and cultural heritage that the reader probably won't be familiar with, thus strengthening their sense of wonder.

Setting *The Soul Beneath* in Bulgaria also allowed me to adapt Bulgarian folklore traditions in the key element of any fantasy work – the magic. Therefore, the two main aims of this thesis are to explore the relationship between character and setting, and to explore the history of the specific Bulgarian folklore traditions along with my adaptation of them in the context of an urban fantasy text – converting the mystic aspects of ritual into magic practices, constructing magic societies based on the hereditary traditions and creating believable characters that personify them.

Urban Fantasy and Setting

Alexander Irvine (2012) recognises two different types of urban fantasy in the section on Urban Fantasy in the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. He calls them strains. One of them is primary world urban fantasy where “[...] *urban* is a descriptor applied to *fantasy* [...]” and the other is secondary world urban fantasy where “[...] *fantasy* modifies *urban*.” This thesis will deal primarily with the former type as I’ve set *The Soul Beneath* in the real world.

Upon inspection of the urban fantasy genre, a convention becomes obvious - the one of magic existing within the confines of the urban, hidden and obscured. I am far from the only one to make such an observation. Stefan Ekman (2016, p. 463) uses the term the Unseen to describe the “Dark, labyrinthine, or subterranean setting that obscure our view; social outcasts we conspicuously look away from; and fantastical beings that hide out of sight [...]” When speculating about such magical dangers lurking within a seemingly normal city, a natural storyline emerges: a protagonist who is, to their best knowledge, an ordinary person, is exposed to the Hidden Magical, which sparks the primary conflict in the story. Or more conceptually put, the fantastic intrudes (to some degree) into the normal (the urban environment), juxtapositioning the routine against the other. Paraphrasing Mendlesohn (2008), intrusive fantasy is when the magical intrudes into, most commonly, contemporary Earth, bringing threat and conflict with it. The effect of the intrusion may be mild, extreme, or anywhere in between. In the case of *The Soul Beneath*, an unexpected death in the heart of the urban, completely mundane city, draws the attention of the protagonist. Lina reluctantly

takes it upon herself to privately investigate the case and any potential supernatural involvement. Either reluctant or not, when the status quo is disrupted by supernatural forces, it is natural for the protagonist to take a stand against this. Ekman's (p. 459) statement that, "The investigator, detective, monster-hunter or supernatural problem-solver is described as a typical character for the [UF] genre." supports this theory.

Such characters are truly abundant in urban fantasy. Let us consider *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (2016), a novel I have already discussed briefly. Clare depicts a version of New York within which a hidden layer of magic exists – the Shadow World. This term is used to refer to anything supernatural and invisible to ordinary humans, often called 'mundanes' – they are biologically incapable of perceiving the magic. The offspring of humans and demons are called Downworlders – half human, half demon, they have the potential to either be evil, neutral or good. For these characters, Clare makes use of common fantasy stereotypes – the vampire, the werewolf, the warlock and the fairy all make an appearance, as they often do in urban fantasy. The offspring of humans and angels, in contrast, creates Shadowhunters – half angel, half human, they are tasked with keeping the Shadow World secret from normal people, dealing with Downworlders who break the law (called The Accords) and most importantly, protecting humanity by slaying the full demons that invade the Earth. Basically, the Shadowhunters are a monster-hunter secret organisation that tasks itself with the protection of the whole planet from demons. One of the main characters in the series, Shadowhunter Jace, certainly regards himself as a noble, self-sacrificing protector of the realm:

'He said that we had made the world safe for humans for a thousand years,' said Hodge, 'and now was their time to repay us with their own sacrifices.'

‘Their children?’ demanded Jace, his cheeks flushed. “That goes against everything we’re supposed to be about. Protecting the helpless, safeguarding humanity-”

(*City of Bones*, p. 148)

The protagonist of the series, Clarissa Fairchild, is actually brought up as part of the normal New York, unaware of the Shadow World’s existence and the creatures that are part of it. She doesn’t even suspect that she has magical powers until she encounters the Hidden Magical within the city for the first time and becomes part of the Shadow World.

The less well-known Bulgarian novel titled *Magicians of Sofia*¹ by Martin Kolev (2017) takes a very similar approach in combining the ordinary with the magical in an urban setting. In Kolev’s work, the magic is a secret knowledge, reserved exclusively for its practitioners. In his version of Sofia, (Bulgaria’s capital) there is a hidden street in which magicians gather at special pubs to drink and mingle. This way they attract less attention from the general public. Overall, in both stories, *City of Bones* and *Magicians of Sofia*, the magic world is hidden from normal people as part of the status quo. The magic cannot co-exist in harmony with the mundane if it’s out in the open. The protagonists of the series have normal lives until the Unseen intrudes upon them and they have to adapt. There are, however, exceptions. As Ekman (2016, p. 462) says, “[...] there are protagonists to whom the supernatural comes as a surprise; protagonists who are familiar with the with the supernatural from popular culture, even if they don’t necessarily believe in it; and protagonists who know about the supernatural either because they are part of a hidden supernatural domain or because the world as a whole is aware of the supernatural.”

When writing *The Soul Beneath* I chose to mix different elements from the archetypical protagonists that Ekman suggests for UF. I used a world that isn’t aware of the supernatural

¹ All mentions of Bulgarian works of fiction, academic and non-academic sources are my translations unless otherwise stated.

but constructed a protagonist who is from the very beginning. But Lina isn't part of the hidden supernatural domain of the Firewalkers. She is well aware of it, as knowledge of it passed down to her from her mother. There are multiple references in the first chapters to Lina being aware of the Firewalking traditions and going against them deliberately. In essence, she rejects the established rules of the hidden supernatural domain she could be part of in exchange for personal independence.

I also moved away from one of the biggest staples of modern urban fantasy – the sprawling city. I have replaced it with a smaller one and in fact, the density of a city or its intensity can be more important than its size, according to Ekman.

But I have also adopted some of the main conventions of UF. *The Soul Beneath* follows a protagonist who is connected to the magical but lives in a city, surrounded by the mundane. The non-magical people in that city are unaware of the Unseen. From this emerges a common conflict in UF – the magical, represented by Lina, struggling to co-exist with the mundane around her.

We see a lot of how the magic-versus-mundane conflict can impact a character in the creative element. Lina has to travel outside of Varna (the boundaries of the mundane) to perform her magic in order to keep it secret, and I will discuss her reasons and the implications later on. The time spent travelling and performing magic, however, comes at the cost of social interactions, something that is important in the mundane aspect of Lina's life in the city. Furthermore, her father is disapproving of the travelling she does as he associates the non-magical folklore practice of Anastenaria with his ex-wife. And all the while, he remains blind to the magical aspect of his daughter's life; ironically, he immerses himself in fantasy worlds via PC games. All of this creates a domestic conflict between Lina and her father. Lina's magic also creates trouble in her relationship with Radoslav, another aspect of her mundane life. She has to either lie to Radoslav about her magic or risk telling him the truth.

Those are all subtle ways to portray the theme of the magical not being able to co-exist with the mundane in harmony – the not so subtle one being magical creatures that threaten human lives.

It should be mentioned that the opposite of the established convention in the urban fantasy genre of the magical being hidden also exists. However, it is far from being predominant – this approach tends to make the text lean towards immersive fantasy – where, according to Mendelsohn, the characters accept the magic as part of the norm in their world. An example of such works is *Magic Bites* (2007) by Ilona Andrews, a pen name for American husband-and-wife Ilona Gordon and Andrew Gordon. Andrews' work depicts modern-day Atlanta where technology and magic are like opposing forces of nature, locked in a never-ending struggle for supremacy. Over periods of time, akin to the cycle of day and night, waves of power hit and the balances between technology and magic shifts. When technology reigns, magic ceases functioning – protective wards power down until the magic 'power' comes back on, just like a power cut in real life. When magic rolls around, it nullifies technology – both electrical and advanced mechanical. Aeroplanes fall out of the sky and guns jam, for example. Skyscrapers erected by using advanced machines can even crumble down under the malevolent assault of magical currents. Funnily enough, telephones sometimes still work during such times, much to the convenience of specific characters.

The dynamic described above results in a cityscape that's much more similar to a post-apocalyptic one instead of a normal metropolis. In Andrews' version of Atlanta, ruined skylines and derelict buildings dominate the scenery. Castles are built on the outskirts of the city and the neighbourhood areas are a mix of the primal and the modern – witches practise rituals within apartment buildings and masters of the undead run casinos. As a result, the mundane people who live in Atlanta are deeply familiar with both magic and modern technology as the power between the two forces generally shifts quite often – both

technology and magic are part of day-to-day life so much that sleek sports cars with back-up magical engines that run on enchanted water are parked next to stables meant for vampires.

Overall, if there are any works within the urban fantasy genre where the action takes place entirely outside of a city, I haven't read any. Even in *Magic Bites* where some scenes take place at the countryside house of the protagonist, and with the series already running counter to some of the established conventions of the urban fantasy genre like I've noted earlier, the majority of the action still takes place in Atlanta.

Given that the action mainly takes place within a city, regardless of whether the normal people are aware of the existence of the magical or not, the city itself can sometimes be perceived as a character on its own according to some authors. Kolev (2020) talks about this when he discussed his creative process with me saying that, "Surely the setting did affect to a large degree the building of the characters. From the beginning of the creative process I visualised this story [*Magicians of Sofia*] as a specifically city one, tied to Sofia – in fact, I aimed to make the city itself a main character. Even though that all the characters are very different from each other, they are all 'children of the city' and this is evident by their behaviour."

While the city doesn't perform any actions directly, it can and does influence the way the characters are and the way their story is told. When asked about the way the city setting affects a UF story Marin Troshanov (2020), author of the *Lamia EOOD* (2016) states that, "The setting is the elusive and secret but ever-present hero in a story – it completes the emotional spectre, creates an atmosphere that allows an immersive sinking into the plot, it even affects the moods and the actions of the characters." He goes on to point out that action taking place in two roughly similar in size cities will still have a slightly different feel.

Regardless of whether one is justified in categorizing the city in urban fantasy as a character in its own right, there is no debating the fact that a large number of goals can be achieved by using different urban settings.

For example, an unfamiliar metropolis can give a sense of anonymity to the characters that inhabit it. *Clockwork Angel* by Cassandra Clare (2011) does a great job of illustrating this – the protagonist, Theresa Gray travels alone from the USA to London after her carer passes away and finds herself completely isolated in an unfamiliar city, amongst strangers. The theme is established early in the first chapter of the book through Theresa’s first impression of England, one of poor weather, dark colours and anonymous crowds:

Tessa couldn’t help being a little disappointed by this, her first sight of England. It was drearily gray. Rain drummed down onto the spires of a distant church, while black smoke rose from the chimneys of ships and stained the already discolored sky. A crowd of people in dark clothes, holding onto umbrellas stood on the dock.

(Clockwork Angel, p. 12)

Let us now turn our attention towards the relationship between the protagonist and the city in the creative element accompanying this thesis. Skipping the Prologue for the time being (as events that take place don’t directly include the protagonist) we first meet Lina in an isolated church outside of Varna, by the sea. Her being outside of the city to perform magic sets up the antithesis of magic and urban, especially obvious through this following bit of narrative:

Observed from the side, at best, I must have looked like I was doing some weird sleep-walking routine or something... which is why I didn't dance in the city or anywhere else people could see me.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 15)

In this, we see how Lina's default setting, the city, is shaping her. The fantastic intrudes into that setting, or at least it would if magic were to be performed within the bounds of the city. As a city inhabitant, Lina would stand out in a negative light amidst the mundane activities of the city so she has to leave its boundaries to perform her magic. This hints at a conflict between Lina and the city – she doesn't fully fit into Varna despite the fact that she lives there and has grown familiar with many aspects of her urban life. Being stuck in traffic for example is something most residents of a city can relate to and Lina is no stranger to it:

I made a right turn at the cathedral intersection, entering Vladislav Boulevard, and instantly wished I'd taken a different route home. All three lanes were chock-full of traffic, columns of dusty cars mixed with dirty yellow cabs and legitimately-older-than-I-was buses.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 27)

It is also at this point in the text that we encounter the presence of the cathedral in the heart of the city. We've already seen the isolated church where Lina chooses to practice her magic in Chapter 1 – an abandoned building from old times where modern society has no influence:

Up the path and past the broken gate, a small, dilapidated church stood at the top of the gentle hill, the Black Sea glistening and sparkling far behind it. The church itself was made of

simple driftwood, bleached by the salty wind and rain, its single window shattered. It looked like the kind of place no one visited anymore.

In other words, it was perfect.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 13)

Now let's compare this to the church image we encounter in Varna during Chapter 2:

A group of huddled tourists took photos of the larger building behind the stalls – the Dormition of the Mother of God Cathedral. It towered some thirty metres above, and my eyes naturally drifted and lingered at the highest of the four golden crosses, drawn in by the smooth lines of the architecture.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 28)

Whereas outside the city the church is small and it 'stands' on a hill, the cathedral is a large building that 'towers' in the very centre of the city. Standing in such a powerful location at the heart of Varna, the monumental Orthodox cathedral snuffs out any of the pagan folklore that's the thematic heart of the magic in the story.

With those concrete examples in mind, let's go back to considering the larger picture. Overall, my main goal in writing *The Soul Beneath* is to effectively use a Bulgarian cultural setting as a basis for an urban fantasy text. If I had set the story in almost any other country, it

would have resulted in an inauthentic work of fiction² – the tradition that inspired the magical elements is only practised in certain parts in Bulgaria and Greece but more on that later.

The city of Varna, specifically, was the logical choice on a couple of different levels. First, it is one of Bulgaria's biggest cities – 314 000 people lived in Varna during the year of 2005 according to Macrotrends (no date). Second, and more importantly, I've never been to Greece or to the few villages where the folklore tradition that inspired the magic is practised. Varna, on the other hand, I am deeply familiar with from growing up there. Even though my knowledge of the city is obviously far from complete, if such a thing is even possible at all, it is still comparatively large when set next to my knowledge of Sofia which I've visited twice or Burgas which I've visited only once. Knowing the street layout, the cityscape along with having a good general impression of what it's like to live there simplified and streamlined the writing process to some degree.

² Authentic fiction is something of an oxymoron – certain elements of fiction, however, can be realistic to a different degree.

Folklore and Traditions

Folklore is defined by Roger Abrahams (1971, p. 16) in a journal article titled *Personal Power and Social Restraint in the Definition of Folklore* as “all traditional expressions and implementations of knowledge operating within a community.” This means that the folklore within a community can take many different forms and its mediums of expression vary appropriately, material culture, as large as traditionally styled buildings or as small as handmade toys, oral lore and folk dances being some of the more common examples. For a community of people to form its own folklore, it’s vital that it is unified in a strong way over a long period of time, most commonly in a geographical sense.

With the creative element of my master’s project, I’m aiming to bring something fresh into the urban fantasy genre by including some of my native Bulgarian folklore-influenced ideas. As I mentioned before, a major hallmark of fantasy is the magic. Therefore, from the beginning, I approached writing the creative element with the idea of somehow turning a Bulgarian tradition into a magical system.

In his work titled *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music and Art, Volume 1*, Thomas Green (2010, p. 800) says that “Tradition is often defined as an adjective in a relation to specific genres, such as ‘traditional ballad’, ‘traditional narrative’ or ‘traditional belief’ [...]” In other words, a tradition is a belief or a behaviour that’s passed down within a society through its generations. This tradition will have some kind of symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past of that society. When discussing tradition, Martha Sims and Martine Stephens (2005, p. 65) argue that, “This definition of tradition implies a sense of continuity and of shared materials, customs, and verbal expressions that continue to be practiced within and among certain groups.”

It is the history of the society collectively that's important, more so than the sense of self of the individuals that make it up when it comes to traditions. Green agrees as it is evident by the following passage:

In the performance of a traditional genre, pre-existing values are of greater importance than the performers' individual tastes, and judgement of the relative success or failure of the performance is based on those constructs. As folklorist Jan Brunvand asserts, there is a relative fixity of form that causes these art forms to be regarded as traditional.

(An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music and Art, Volume 1, p. 800)

Traditions, in a sense, establish connections between people, and those connections are much akin to the glue holding together their society – both as a unifying force and a symbol of their unity.

In the next section, I'll be discussing which Bulgarian traditions I've decided to work with and how I've adapted certain parts of them, primarily the rituals that are part of those traditions, to fit within the bounds of the urban fantasy genre.

Anastenaria and the Fire-Walking Ritual

The Bulgarian tradition I chose to make integral to *The Soul Beneath* is the one of Nestinari. English academia generally uses the Greek-derived term Anastenaria. Dimitris Xyglatas (2013, p. 88) states that, “The Anastenaria are religious communities of Northern Greece and Southeast Bulgaria (where they are called Nestinari), known for their devotion to saints Constantine and Helen and the fire-walking rituals they perform in their honor.” For simplicity, henceforth, I will use the term ‘Anastenaria’ when I refer to the real-world folklore tradition along with ‘fire-walking’ when discussing the ritual that’s part of that tradition. In contrast, I will use ‘Firewalking’ when I refer to my adaption of Anastenaria tradition within the context of the creative element accompanying this thesis.

The Anastenaria tradition in Bulgaria takes place in only a few small villages, on the evening of the 3rd of June, the day of Saints Constantine and Helen in the old Julian calendar. The Anastenaria practitioners are all Orthodox Christians but despite the fact that in 1916 Bulgaria switched to the Gregorian calendar, meaning the church now celebrates the day of the two saints on the 21st of May, they still observe the fire-walking ritual on the 3rd of June.

Stefan Stefanov (2005), PhD student of Christian Sociology in the Theology department of the Shumen University “Bishop Constantine Preslavski” describes how the Bulgarian Church viewed Anastenaria during the 20th century in his article ‘Good Samaritanism and Anastenaria – Spiritual Essence and Aspects of Interaction’. He quotes Archimandrite Methodiy who proclaimed that the Orthodox Church does not tolerate any of the Anastenaria practices. In fact, the archimandrite regards the fire-walking ritual as a practice that leads to possession by dark forces. Stefanov goes on to cite various Christian texts and draws a

comparison between Anastenaria and shamanism, with “clearly defined demonic characteristics including [...] denying God and vowing to serve Satan [...]”

When celebrated in its traditional form, the preparation for the Anastenaria tradition starts early in the morning on the day of the two saints by ‘dressing’ their icons with bright red cloth to which old silver coins and flowers are attached. Then, a procession takes place in the village and by the evening, the musicians come out – a tapan player and a bagpiper. Meanwhile, a circle of Jarava (live embers) has been prepared, with a diameter of at least two metres and thickness of five to six centimetres. Under the melodies mandated by the tradition, the head fire-walker, also called the Archianastenaris, has the honour of first entering the Jarava, followed by the younger members of the Anastenaria families – they are all barefoot and dressed in red and white. As they enter the Jarava, they let out loud, piercing cries and dance while holding the decorated icons of Saint Constantine and Saint Helen. During the dance, the fire-walkers go into a trance and often make prophecies whilst the fire-walkers who are too old to participate in the dances tend to a separate fire. As time passes, the fire-walkers’ dance slows and becomes more lethargic at which point they will exit the Jarava circle. This marks the end of the fire-walking ritual and usually, a more general celebration will follow it, with villagers from all the families participating in the festivities. (Milena Hristova, no date)

Usually, only a few of all the families in a village would be Anastenarian, almost like an exclusive society integrated within the larger village community that has its own hierarchy. Borisova (2016) says that the Archianastenaris chooses their own successor – usually, it’s the son but if they don’t have one, it can be their daughter too. When the Archianastenaris feel they are at the end of their lifespan or are too old to continue the dances, they gather the elders to announce their successor – it’s believed that via this hereditary method the ability to prophesy is preserved.

Another interesting fact is that the fire-walkers don't get burnt during their dance – in fact, this is where much of the mysticism of the ritual comes from. The common conception amongst traditional Anastenaria practitioners is that the saints whose icons they carry protect them from harm. Given one of the purported origins of the tradition, this is an understandable rationalization for the fire-walkers but I'll get into that a bit later.

Alternatively, I remember my grandmother Bistra Delieva telling me stories of women being mystically protected based on the virtue of their gender although this isn't traditionally accurate. Trendova (2008) states that despite the fact that certain roles with the Anastenaria tradition were gender exclusive, such as the icons being carried around the village only by boys specifically named Constantine, both males and females could become fire-walkers if they were born into a fire-walking family.

There is, however, a scientific explanation. Jarava has low thermal conductivity and the contact between the embers and the bare feet of the fire-walkers is rapid but brief. (David Wiley, no date) This would explain the significance of the specific dance fire-walkers perform, with rapid steps, and why people outside of the fire-walking families, and therefore not trained in this dance, can get very severe burns when they try to participate in a fire-walking ritual.

As I've stated, the Anastenaria practitioners are Christians and the fire-walking ritual has strong religious links to Orthodox Christianity. However, the origin of the tradition remains unclear. Borisova (2016) reports a folk legend that describes how at some point after the 14th century when the fractured Second Bulgarian Empire was brought fully under the control of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman raided the village of Kosti. They set fire to the village church and an old woman ran into the building, shoeless, to save the icons. Sadly, she only managed to save a single icon of Saint Constantine and Helen but came out unharmed by the fire, as if in a trance, walking barefoot on embers and ashes. This supposed miracle sparked

the tradition of Anastenaria, with the purpose of commemorating it by emulating the circumstances through an artistic expression of ecstatic, barefoot dances over Jarava. The belief that through carrying the icons of the Saints, the participants in the ritual are protected from the fire as their ancestors had been became self-reinforcing through the years as generation after generation of Anastenaria practitioners performed the rituals and were unharmed.

However, ethnographers such as Katerina Kakoure (1965) and Georgious Megas (1958) view the Anastenaria tradition as something that grew from a cult of Dionysus, the god of ritual madness, religious ecstasy and festivity amongst other things. Those three aspects are certainly strongly displayed in the Anastenaria tradition in their trance-inducing dances and the general festive atmosphere that surrounds the fire-walking ritual. The two ethnographers support this theory in their publications, *Dionysiaka: Aspects of the popular Thracian Religion of Today* and *Greek Calendar Customs* respectively. Dimitris Xyglatas (2013), however, argues that this theory was purely ideologically motivated and lacks evidentiary support. His own opinion on the matter is that the origin of the Anastenaria tradition is unknown.

Regardless of how it came to be, the Anastenaria tradition neither faded into obscurity nor did it rise to prominence in Bulgaria and Greece through the centuries. Its only notable spike of popularity was when the fire-walking ritual in the Anastenaria tradition was commercialised by various sea resorts by the Black Sea in Eastern Bulgaria and was performed as a show for tourists in a notably unauthentic form. (Albena Bezovska, 2014)

When it came to adapting Anastenaria to fit my creative work, I had to make a decision early on as to which goal was more important for me – portraying Bulgarian folklore authentically or writing a work of fiction. As I'd expected, I had to settle for a compromise –

represent the visual aspects of the folklore elements as authentically as possible but change some cultural aspects to fit the context of the particular story I wanted to write.

Let us start by considering the Prologue of the creative element. In the text, the reader is introduced to a gathering of strange people outside of the usual boundaries of a society (a village, town or a city). The Firewalkers that are present in the scene are dressed in white dresses and have braided hair which is traditionally authentic in Anastenaria, along with the bagpipe music accompaniment and the Jarava on which they dance barefoot. This comes to the attention of the reader through the actions of Elena, the mother of the protagonist:

Strolling between the different ember circles, Elena checked if the dancing women all had their hair straightened and braided as was proper.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 1)

Here we explicitly see the fixity of form that Green (2010, p. 800) referred to when he quoted Jan Brunvand. Adhering to specific hairstyles, clothing, music and so forth establishes a connection through time between the different generations that perform a specific ritual, thus making those hairstyles, clothing, and music or so forth *traditional*. It's a feedback loop, in a sense – tradition demands something is done in a specific way, and therefore that something is done in this specific way because tradition demands it. Young people, generally speaking, rebel against traditions whereas older people seek to uphold them. Elena's social status within the Firewalkers' society grants her the power to enforce the fixity of the tradition.

Let us turn our attention to the setting in the Prologue, which is not authentic in terms of the Anastenaria tradition. I've mentioned earlier in this thesis that Anastenaria is practised authentically in Bulgaria only in a few Southeast villages. The events in the Prologue,

however, occur on the opposite side of the country, in the Northwest, by the town of Kula and the Albotin Cave Monastery:

Elena lifted her eyes to the limestone rocks beyond, their outline only vaguely revealed by the starlight. Although she couldn't see it, she knew the Albotin Cave Monastery rose for some twenty-five metres in the darkness, empty rooms dug straight into the rock. What sights the two strangers would get to see in the abandoned place during the middle of the night, she couldn't fathom.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 4)

When I was writing the Prologue, I aimed for a dramatic setting that lends itself well to a mysterious, perhaps slightly tense atmosphere in which to introduce the reader to the magical in the story. I also wanted to establish a strong connection in the reader's mind between the magic and nature overall. The former of the two I could have achieved with a similar degree of success in an urban environment too. This would have been in keeping with the genre conventions of urban fantasy and it would have gone, perhaps something like this:

Elena lifted her eyes to the abandoned building site on the hill, the skeleton of the half-finished skyscraper outline only vaguely revealed by the distant streetlights. Although she couldn't see it fully, she knew it rose for some fifty metres in the darkness, the wind howling through exposed cement and iron. What the two strangers hoped to find in this abandoned place during the middle of the night, she couldn't fathom.

The Anastenaria tradition doesn't co-exist with the urban in real life and that was a conflict that I wanted to explore in my creative element – nature, symbolised by the

Firewalking magic the protagonist possesses, versus the urban realm, the setting which the protagonist inhabits, two opposite forces. Had I chosen the urban setting in the prologue, I would have lost the sense of nature – even though the monastery is manmade, it's hollowed out from natural caves and surrounded by forests. Furthermore, it has stood the test of time for many centuries whereas a skyscraper is a modern, urban construct with no sense of tradition to it.

As a result, I've portrayed in the Prologue the setting that is traditionally associated with Anastenaria – nature. This, in turn, provides a counterpoint to the urban environment in the chapters that follow the Prologue, highlighting the urban and its effect on the daily life of the characters within it.

Choosing a forest by a cave monastery was further made easier by the fact that I'd previously explored such a setting through my writing so I was familiar with it and how to construct it. However, as I said, this is not where one would traditionally find Anastenaria practitioners in the real world. (Neither is it the right time of the year, in fact.) In this, I deviated from the Anastenaria tradition. Arguably, to both preserve the sense of nature and at least a tiny margin of the urban, I could have set the action in one of the few villages in Southern Bulgaria that practice Anastenaria. Then, however, the presence of a cave monastery would have been historically incorrect. In other words, I had to either compromise geographical or folkloric authenticity and in this case, I chose to preserve the former.

As far as changes of Anastenaria go, I have also stripped it of its overt relations to Orthodox Christianity. The lack of icons during the events in the prologue is the most obvious indicator. Instead of Saint Constantine and Helen serving as the origin of the rituals, they are replaced with an even stronger pagan construct that depicts the spirit world. Initially, this was because I simply didn't want to tackle the vast subject of traditional Christianity within the creative element nor the thesis. Separating Firewalking from mainstream religion,

however, also allowed me to avoid pitting against each other an artistic adaption of the Anastenaria tradition as a matriarcal order and the church, a historically patriarchal organisation. In such a story, a natural conflict would have emerged - feminism against patriarchy, a huge subject that I did not want to make central to my work of fiction. It is also not the focus of this project, which discusses urban fantasy and folklore.

During my research, I came across a passage in Borisova (2016) that is actually an excerpt from her interview with an Anastenaria practitioner. It describes the experience of an aged woman, Grandmother Zlata, back in the 1960s, which has spent many years fire-walking. She talks about the urge to step onto the Jarava when it's at its strongest, how her limbs feel heavy until she does it, her heart races and nothing else short of the dance could tame it and how there is never any pain. Upon reflection, it occurs to me that I've interwoven that same sense of yearning by real fire-walkers into the character of Elena without having any prior knowledge of it. In fact, I chose to start the creative element with it:

Elena shivered, yearning to join the younger Nestinars in the warmth of their emberdance as she would have a year ago; her own homespun white dress was rather thick but it still proved insufficient in the March cold. Tempted, she took a step towards one of the ember circles before stoically turning away, sighing.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 1)

In this opening passage from my creative element, Elena expresses the same urge to step into the Jarava that Grandmother Zlata describes. At this point, Elena has already performed the first ceremonial fire dance, very similar to the way the Archianastenaris does in the real world tradition. Again, I wrote this passage before coming across specific information about the Archianastenaris and their role in the ritual. This hints at a common theme that transcends

any specific ritual or culture – that of the revered elder granted a special honour by being the first to do something.

Even Lina, the young protagonist, who lives in the very different environment of the city and has rebelled against most traditional aspects of Firewalking showcases that same urge. However, for her, it's less linked to the Jarava or the demands of the tradition and more centred on her own enjoyment of the dance.

Taking a few steps up the gentle hill, past the crumbling wall and into the church's yard, I made a small twirl, flaring the skirt of my dress. The grass tickled me ever so slightly as I moved and I couldn't help a soft giggle.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 14)

What Lina seeks above else is the ecstatic element of the trance that Firewalkers achieve during their dance. She is aware of the magic of the dance but wants it purely for the pleasure she is able to extract from it and doesn't express any interest in any of the traditions surrounding the Firewalkers' society. Similar to some of the feelings grandmother Zlata has shared, Lina yearns for the soothing effect the dance has:

I breathed deeply and watched the sky slowly turn pale pink, like the inside of a seashell. Lying there on that patch of grass, I realised I felt serene for the first time in a long while.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 17)

I've already discussed the benefit of constructing a story with a protagonist who is learning of the magic at the same time as the reader is. In contrast, from the get-go in *The Soul Beneath*, Lina is part of the magical world – she has knowledge of it and practices the

magic. This has both advantages and disadvantages from a writing perspective. Constructing the story this way, I've had to work harder to teach the reader the rules of the magic in non-obtrusive ways, negotiating during the narrative between what the protagonist knows and what the reader does.

On the flip side, the earlier a writer can introduce an intriguing conflict within their work, the better it will captivate a reader's attention. Lina's knowledge of magic and living with her father in a 'normal' urban environment where mystical traditions such as firewalking are practised brings does exactly that. She struggles to balance between her 'normal' life and the 'magic' one.

In her daily life in the city, Lina can't perform any magic for the fear of being seen by others. Those others represent the society, and the fear of being rejected by a society is a very rational one.

I closed my eyes and carefully let go of my conscious breathing, something that sounds a lot easier than it actually is. Taking the first few steps of the emberdance always felt a bit awkward to me. Observed from the side, at best, I must have looked like I was doing some weird sleep-walking routine or something... which is why I didn't dance in the city or anywhere else people could see me.

(The Soul Beneath, p. 15)

The deeper Lina is within the boundaries of the urban, the more incompatible her magical side is with her ordinary life. The idea of home is important to every person and at the heart of Lina's life in Varna is her own home - an apartment in which she lives together with her father. However, the magical dance of the Firewalker, or even its mentioning, or the sight of something that symbolises it, like the white dress, for example, is anathema in that home. (the

home, of course, being personified by the father, the primary caregiver and parental figure in Lina's life.) Lina's father also personifies the city in the sense that he rejects Lina's magical side, thus partially alienating her from her default environment and her home. As a consequence of this, I had some doubts as to whether or not I wanted to associate Lina's father with religion at all. My strongest reason against doing it, as mentioned before, was so I could avoid putting a patriarchal order in opposition to a matriarchal one. The theme of power relationships between male and female individuals is a vast topic examined through the lenses of a variety of disciplines. In the end, I compromised with linking the father figure to the religious but only in a shallow and fake way, to better underscore his rejection of Lina's magic. He is also obsessed with spending his free time immersed in a fantasy computer game while simultaneously rejecting the magic in the real world, as personified through his daughter. There is an unintentional irony in this but one that is quite thematically fitting, now that I look back at the creative piece.

Conclusion

Upon reflection, I think I made the process of writing both the creative element and the thesis for my master's degree harder than it could have been. There is little doubt in my mind that it would have been simpler for me to write a self-contained piece of fiction instead of the beginning of a novel. That's not, however, because of the inherent challenges in writing something longer. Rather, it's because it is more straightforward to critically analyse a self-contained piece of fiction than a part of a novel. As it is, during the writing process of the academic element, I've had to constantly maintain an awareness that when I discuss *The Soul Beneath*, it's only the first twenty thousand words that are taken into consideration. While in my head I had access to a larger image and more information, the reader of this project did not, and the accompanying analysis in the academic piece had to reflect that. Dealing with this limitation proved unexpectedly challenging as I was unable to discuss the complete story and its plot along with the characters' arcs. However, it ultimately led to a more concise and stronger creative element, one with a faster pacing, clearer character voice and a stronger eastern-European feel.

Furthermore, whereas I often choose writing a story with a female protagonist simply for the challenge of writing from the point of view of the opposite gender (a challenge is a big part of my motivation to write), making the choice of having a female protagonist in *The Soul Beneath* was about more than that. My research into the UF genre indicates a strong presence of female leads (*Clockwork Angel*, *Rosemary and Rue*, *Succubus Blue*, etc.) and it was something I was keen to adapt in my writing, especially because I ultimately pictured the finished product of *The Soul Beneath* sitting on a bookstore shelf labelled UF. In essence,

having a female protagonist was a contextual, genre-driven choice, as I wanted the finished novel to fit a book market that does tend to run with female protagonists.

My bachelor's degree in Creative Writing had prepared me for undertaking a lengthier project such as this one. Through practising the short form in the art of fiction writing for three years I learned to constantly ask myself questions about my own writing, its intended purposes and objective strengths and drawbacks as a text. And as a writer, I can't overstress the importance of this – writing is, for me, a solitary act during the majority of the time. That, coupled with its many challenges, is a big part of what draws me to it. But without that ability to critically self-analyse, without an effective process of self-reflection, the editing process of fiction can become a never-ending exercise in futility. I've experienced it with the first novel manuscript I ever did; I followed it with a long string of changes and re-edits that never addressed the core problems the text had as I was unable to properly formulate them in my mind. In comparison, the drafting and editing process for the creative element in this project was a more productive experience, in big part thanks to the development of an already-established self-analytical routine. By the end of my bachelor's degree, I was keen to take on novel-length projects and the special project in my final year was a test for that. My arbitrary successes and failures during it signalled to me that I was ready to take the next step. The master's degree by research was a way of taking that step but it also gave me a fresh start in a sense. The creative element accompanying the thesis was an opportunity to explore an idea that had been hovering at the back of my mind for a while.

When I began this project, I was intrigued by the thought of what would the characters in an urban fantasy novel look like if they were to inhabit an Eastern European setting instead of a Western one. What implications would such a change carry? Circumstances have a great potential to affect our moral values, the education we receive, or more simply, who we become and why. The areas where we grow up and the culture we are surrounded by shape us

as people. Therefore, I reasoned, the same principle can be applied to fictional characters and their environment. And that would mean that the characters themselves will be different. My intuition said that I was onto something, that yes, the characters and the story overall would be different if the setting is so drastically altered.

After completion of this project, I'm somewhat surprised by the answers I found as they do differ from the ones suggested by my intuition. I expected that the change from a western city to an eastern-European one would result in a drastically different setting for a UF story. In fact, for a long time, I tried to create such a drastic change but the problem was that my intuition had been wrong, to begin with. Changing the archetypal geographic setting for an urban fantasy novel has the potential to affect what story a writer tells, yes, but through subtle details. This is especially true if you work with a limited subset of modern-day urbanised locations when making the comparisons. The characters and the story, archetypically, in that case, will tend to stay the same – mostly the difference will be cultural, and therefore, the fantastical flavour will be changed whereas the rest can be preserved or subverted as per the writer's intent. Modern, urban cities offer their inhabitants a wide set of different experiences depending on their socio-economic position but their fundamental characteristics remain the same – car traffic, neighbourhoods, market districts, et cetera. The difference between a western and an eastern-European urban setting instead can be found in the details of the culture, in the overall landscape of the city, its landmarks, history and so forth. Using Bulgarian folklore as the inspiration for the magical element was deeply intriguing for me and its adaptation proved both a challenging and a fulfilling experience. During the process, I had to maintain a balance between preserving the authenticity of the folklore traditions I was representing in the creative piece and also adapting them to fit my vision of a UF story.

Overall, I'm satisfied with the creative element accompanying this thesis despite it not being what I expected initially as it achieves the main goal I set for myself when I began

writing *The Soul Beneath* – using Bulgarian folklore traditions as the fundamental principle that guides the fantasy element in a work within the urban fantasy genre. My opinion remains that a few large metropolitan settings have become the unchanging trope of the UF genre and that moving away from those can be beneficial - it allows you, as a writer, to present the reader with a cultural setting they are likely to be unfamiliar with and therefore intrigued by it. This is, in essence, what I have attempted to demonstrate by writing *The Soul Beneath*. It is a story, undoubtedly, filtered by my own time spent in Varna, and adapted to fit the context of the urban fantasy genre as per my aims.

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