

The First Chapters Writing Contest

Elowen's Earth by Alyssa Hanke

(Winning Entry from 2020)



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A mysterious magical plague appears on the continent, consuming everyone in its path. Elowen, a failed healer, must journey to the kingdom of Vuruna to save their people and find the cure.

Chapter One

I was seven years old the first time it happened. I was skipping through the damp forest trail on the outskirts of town with some other kids from my village. We were picking whatever mushrooms and berries we could find to bring home to our parents, and messing around along the way. Ben was boisterous and liked to show off, and for some reason all the other kids loved him. I thought he was an idiot. I watched him throw himself haphazardly between mossy boulders and jump off whatever tall objects he could find.

Reckless showoff.

He liked to antagonize people, and would poke fun at anyone who was quiet or unassuming, which meant I was often the target. I was small and didn't look like the other kids. I had darker skin and wild hair, so I was used to being singled out. It usually didn't bother me.

Once we got to Imogen lake, Ben dared us all to hop the slippery rocks along the shore, leading to deeper and deeper water. I didn't know how to swim, so I didn't go very far, just far enough so that he wouldn't call me names. Eventually they all made it safely to the other side of the bank, passing over the deep murky water below. I only made it halfway before I imagined falling in and sinking like a rock down to the very bottom, staring up at the sky as fish nibbled at my skin. A shutter rolled through me and sweat began to break out along my brow. I had only hopped a few of the stones until I couldn't make my feet move any further. The air was growing chilly as the sun went down, and my teeth chattered. The other kids were taunting me from the other side.

“Come on Elowen! Don’t be a baby!”

“Hurry up so we can go home!” and finally,

“No wonder your dad left, with a coward like you for a kid!” it was Ben. Of course it was Ben yelling such nasty things in my direction.

I tore my focus from my feet and stole a glance at the other kids. They were getting impatient, some of them already turned to head home. Don’t leave me here! My cheeks grew hot and my eyes threatened to well with tears at the mention of my father. He had only been gone for a few months, just a little bit longer than normal. I missed him so much, and Ben knew it. I wouldn’t let myself look weak in front of the other kids, even if most of them had left already, so I shouted back.

“Shut your mouth Ben! Your mother doesn’t even love you!” I scrambled to come up with an insult that would make him leave me alone. “Everyone only hangs out with you because they feel bad for you!” I knew it was a low blow, but I was desperate. Everyone knew Ben had a troubled family. We usually all tried to ignore it, since we felt bad for him, but he was being so mean. At this, Ben’s face scrunched up into a snarl and his eyes grew red and glassy. He crossed the space between us quickly, fists clenched at his sides, face growing red and inflated.

I frantically searched for the other kids, but they had already disappeared around the corner, leaving me there alone. Ben reached me and shoved me hard in the chest. A shrill scream escaped my throat, and I fell. I remember seeing the trees turn sideways in slow motion as my body went backwards into the water, hitting the surface with a smack. The frigid water ripped the breath from my lungs, and I was submerged.

The water stabbed at my skin like icy knives, and my muscles went stiff. I remember thrashing my limbs, unable to see which way was up in the murk of the water. I had never swam before, and my brain wasn’t working right. My lungs burned. My eyes burned. My arms and legs burned with both the icy pain of the water and the ache of exhaustion. My lungs felt like they were going to explode, and my vision began to darken.

I don’t know where it came from, but something welled up inside me then. Everything was still and heavy, then a wave of power burst from within my chest and rushed out, pushing the water and reeds and mud away. I couldn’t hold my breath much longer, but the water around me was suddenly clear and I could make out the golden sun streaming through from above. Up! I finally oriented myself and frantically kicked with whatever was remaining of my energy, my vision almost entirely dark.

I broke the surface of the water with a ragged, painful gasp. Coughing and sputtering, splashing and kicking, I tried to get my bearings. I could see the rocks of shore in the distance and tried to drag my body towards them, my head frequently dunking below the water and filling my mouth. Eventually, I reached the shore. I was shivering, I was exhausted, and tears streamed down my face.

I almost died. I pulled myself up onto the rocks and closed my eyes, letting the darkness engulf me.

Some time later, I felt a strong hand grip my arm and turn me over.

"Elowen! Oh, thank the gods! I've been looking everywhere for you!" My father's face beamed down at me. His skin and eyes were dark as night, and his ebony curls hung down over his knitted brow. "El, what happened?" He looked around me, a horrified expression dawning on his face. I opened my mouth to explain what happened, that Ben pushed me in and it was all his fault, when I finally caught a glimpse at my surroundings.

Behind my father, covering the entire surface of the lake, were dead fish. Hundreds of them. Every fish in the lake had died and floated to the surface, their white bellies glistening in the last remaining sunlight. My brows wrinkled, I didn't understand. The fish weren't floating when I fell in.

I surveyed my surroundings, taking it all in. The reeds and rushes that lined the shore were shriveled and brown, and the grass on the bank looked as though someone had burned it to a black crisp. My first thought was to find Ben and demand to know what he did. He must have done something after pushing me in, then run away and leave me to drown. I turned my attention to the section of rocks where I fell in, and found a heap of something on the ground. A pile of wet clothes?

No, not clothes.

There, right on the rocks where we were standing before, was Ben. His limp body was draped over the stones, crimson blood leaking from his nose and eyes. Ben was dead. My father's eyes followed my gaze, and when he saw Ben's body, he cursed under his breath.

My bare feet thump against the grass as I hurry across the field behind our cottage. It's late summer and the air is sweet with the scent of honeysuckle. I lean down to swipe up some herbs from the garden on my way, stuffing them into my pockets. A

trail of chatty ducks waddle after me, hoping I drop scraps of something tasty for them to munch. I can't help but smile when they follow me around like this. My sweet little animal friends always bring me joy. I reach into my other pocket and gather some seeds in my palm, scattering them along behind me while I take off again towards home. My mother will be waiting for me.

I open the crooked wooden door to our cottage and drop my bag on the step. I begin pulling out the herbs I collected, flinging bits of dirt and weeds to the floor. My mother eyes me from her work bench, where she stands amongst various vials and jars of half finished remedies. Our cabin is small, but cozy. Only my mother and I live here now, and we've made it as comfortable as we can. Colorful mosaics of stained glass cast a warm glow from the tops of the windows, which are draped with curtains of vines from the outside. Sunlight streams into the kitchen, where bunches of herbs hang to dry over the hearth. The earthy aroma of pungent remedies mixes with the toasty scent of mother's freshly brewed coffee. This smells like home.

We work from the cabin, and have the back room sectioned off as our apothecary. My mother is the town herbalist, since Yarrin is too small to have a magical healer. There are only a few true healers born in each generation. Those born with the ability to sense and cure sickness with magic. Usually, children with the healer's gift show signs of their abilities from a young age, and are whisked away to the royal courts to begin their official training as soon as possible. Once training is done, healers are often scouted early and paid handsomely for their services. I was scouted when I was ten, but I don't like to talk about that.

"Taking your time today, I see" she teases. My mother is the most punctual and organized woman I've ever met, and I don't think anyone else could ever live up to those standards. Certainly not me.

"Harvesting stinging nettles isn't a task that can be rushed, mother" I pop some plantain leaf into a mortar nearby and begin to work it into a paste, silently cursing my choice of sleeveless tunic. "Are you almost finished with those? I want to make it to town before the book shop closes." Reginald's was my favorite place to stop if I ever had a moment in town to spare. After delivering medicines to our patients in town, Reginald's book shop would be there waiting for me with open arms, dusty stacks, and faraway lands.

"Almost finished. Pass me some sage oil, will you? Mr. Henry needs another salve today, and Marni needs her sleep tincture." I pass her a glass bottle of the oil, then proceed to rub the green plantain goop all over my arms. The burning from the

nettles begins to subside immediately, and I let out a relieved sigh. My mother finishes up the remedies and wraps them tightly in little packages. She glances up at me and wrinkles her freckled nose.

“Your hair is a mess. I can’t have you going into town like that. Here, sit down.” She pulls a chair out from under the table and motions for me to sit. I roll my eyes and groan a little, but plunk myself down and tilt my head back. “At least you’ve carved out some bangs, or you wouldn’t be able to see a thing.” Her voice tinkles with fond teasing. I let her work her fingers through my long, wild curls. Unlike her hair, which is smooth and a bright copper, mine is thick and dark, with ringlets that stick out at all angles. I really don’t mind, but mother insists it be tucked away in a braid to look presentable.

When she is finished, she comes around to face me and cups my cheeks in her palms.

“There, now you look like a healer’s apprentice.” She kisses me on the nose and sweeps up the basket of goods for me to take into town. “Now brush that muck off your arms and get going.” I clean myself off and drain the remainder of coffee from the cup she’s left on the counter. My mother pulls me into a tight embrace before bidding me farewell and returning to her herbs. I set out on the long walk into town.