

The Charms of Freedom

A Yurvanian Transition Novel

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Windmills lazily turned their white sails over a jumble of rooftop gardens. The Transition had grown gracefully into the charming playfulness and pompous self-importance of the old mansions. It covered them with greenery as tangled and vibrant as the patchwork of families and friends now inhabiting the stately homes. Ripening fruits gleamed on turrets and archways, and blossoming vines wound around a balcony where a few complacent hens clucked down at the people far beneath them. The morning sun came to bathe Varoonya in pale and glorious gold.

But behind thick velvet curtains, a gloomy twilight reigned. Muffled silence filled the hall, and the ancient walls seemed to run up endlessly toward the canopy of their vaulted ceiling. Enim squinted up into the shades. From a box hung with ornate tapestries, the expressionless faces of five examiners looked back down at him.

Enim cleared his throat.

There was nothing for it now.

He turned back toward the elaborate design laid out on the floor and checked again. Crystals of blue and purple blinked at him between threads of finest glass. Enim couldn't see a single flaw.

He raised his wand, his eyes narrowed. In that moment, the world disappeared to him. Enim knew nothing now but the runes in his mind and the flow of magic in his veins. Full and round, the first vowels rolled off his tongue, ancient words of power, intoned with a perfection reached through years of relentless practice.

With a deep, secret rustle, the lines of a pentacle began to glow, spreading their fiery gleam across Enim's face.

}} Kaya crouched behind low shrubbery, hidden in the shadow of the looming mountain. It was dark all around the mine. Black clouds scurried across a thin sickle moon high above, driven by a cold, gusty wind.

Lhut came up beside her, silent as a ghost, and gave her a short nod. So the path was clear. Kaya spied out from behind the branches. A guard had passed just a moment ago. It was now or never. She checked back with Lhut, then eased through the branches and swiftly made for the mine, without stopping and without looking back. Lhut followed close behind.

They did not halt once they were inside. They knew the path well enough. They had been toiling here for years, after all, day after day. Down they went, along the tunnel and down again, turn after turn into the maze of the mine. Finally, Kaya stopped. Almost there. She listened closely, then peered around the corner.

'Yes!' Kaya's heart jumped.

Everybody had come. They really had come.

Before her, where the tunnel broadened out, the figures gathered in the light of a single torch were little more than dark shapes and flickering shadows. But Kaya had no doubt. These were her people.

'We have come tonight, all of us,' she thought. 'Exhausted as we may be after shifts in the mine. Frightened as we may be after veiled threats, and more and more naked threats. We have come, in spite of it all.' Kaya smiled a proud and wretched half-smile, as did many miners.

"Well, then." Kaya's voice was low and intense as she took the hand of the man next to her. She gave Lhut the other and the circle closed all around, people clasping each other's hand in a solemn gesture of strength and determination.

In the silence of that rite, they heard it coming.

A low rumble at first, a sigh of stone somewhere deep in the mountain. An aching and moaning of slabs—and then, splintering wood and a crack in the ceiling.

Everybody jerked back. A scream tore through the air. Black figures began to run for the exit, stumbling and falling. Stones rained down on them, a hail of detritus hitting whoever was underneath.

Kaya bumped into two young men who were helping each other up, stumbling forward in clouds of dust, getting hit again. A massive block missed Kaya by inches as she instinctively pressed back against the wall. Another rock struck her head.

Blood streamed down her face.

Lhut appeared before her, taking her hand, urging her on. And then a pillar of wood and an avalanche of stone crashed down on Lhut, tearing his hand from hers. {{{

Kaya woke with a scream. Her breath was coming raggedly. Sweat covered her brow. She looked around in alarm, but all she saw was the shaft of moonlight falling in through her chamber window. All she heard was the racing beat of her own heart.

Kaya took a deep breath. She rubbed the scar on her brow. Her pulse began to slow down again. "It's all right. I am here. It is over," Kaya whispered.

Stiffly, she lay down on her mat again, staring out into the darkness.

It wasn't true. Things were not all right. Nowhere near right! Kaya thumped her fist into the mat, muffling her cry with her pillow.

Then she drew the pillow away. Her eyes were gleaming. "It is not right. And: It is not over yet!"

Her next scream tore through the night with full force, a lament as much as an oath, a promise, an unbreakable pledge.

* * *

On the outskirts of town, the din of Varoonya's bustling river port subsided into a soft background rustle until it finally faded into the gentle murmur of the waves.

Where the banks of the Roon turned green again, a festive little crowd had gathered on one of the meadows. People were idling about, glass in hand, a cloud of laughter, talk and music swaying over them. Strings of fairy lights answered warmly to the gold and lavender in a darkening sky. The air was soft, carrying scents of the coming summer.

Enim drifted happily between arriving guests and slaps on his shoulder, between farewell songs and conversations about his future. Slim and gangly as he was, he danced with more joy than grace, but his sweet smile and boyish charms still brought more than one kiss to his lips.

Enim had dressed for the occasion by putting on the least worn of his usual blue baggy pants, the loose folds drawn tight at his ankles. The short crimson vest over his shirt, however, was exactly the same as always because of the hundred tiny pockets full of potions and crystals and magical implements. Enim wasn't going to go out

without his equipment. So, wand tucked into his broad linen belt, Enim looked just his usual self. Which was precisely what everybody had come to celebrate anyway, right? Laughing, Enim pulled off his cap to push black hair from his brow when he suddenly froze.

A thousand tiny stars were gathering around him.

Enim looked about in confusion. But he found the source of magic soon enough.

Yoor had his arms stretched toward the sky, his skin shimmering in soft shades of blue and violet like the wings of a butterfly, subtle hues of color dancing over his velvety body.

Yoor brought his hand down in a circular motion. The stars multiplied into a shimmer of gold, arranging themselves into high pillars and arches, a sheer temple of light rising over Enim, the sacred hall filled with a celestial choir of triumph and glory.

Enim stared, wide-eyed. Then he laughed. "Oh, Yoor, please! Enough is enough!"

The music faded and the temple rained down in drops of amber to form a shiny pool at Enim's feet, before even that dissolved into nothingness.

"Goodness me," Enim gasped as he gave Yoor a hug. "I have only graduated from the academy. Not ascended to the heavens."

"As good as," Yoor murmured into his hair.

Torly threw herself at Enim from behind, squeezing him into a double hug before she stepped away to lean against Yoor's shoulder.

Faces all around them had turned, eyebrows raised in surprise and delight, smiles beginning to spread. Butterfly people were rare, and Yoor's appearance was admired as readily as the illusions he created. Noticing the eyes upon him, Yoor waved and gave a bow that was both humble meekness and extravagant flourish.

Torly laughed. "Yoor! You truly were born for the stage."

"Thank you." He straightened up, throwing pearly white hair back behind his neck. "I'll be back on in two nights."

Yoor tucked his arm under Enim's. "But what about you? Where will you go now that you are leaving the academy behind?"

A crooked smile stole onto Enim's lips. "As far away as I can, you might say. I'm going to the Mountains."

"To the Mountains!" Yoor's eyes widened. "Really? But why? There is nothing there! What do you think you'd do?"

"There is not nothing there, surely," Enim frowned. "There is nowhere where there is nothing. There's just places you haven't

thought about yet.” He wrapped his arms around his chest. “But to be quite honest, I don’t know what is there either. That’s why I am going. I have lived in Varoonya all my life. I’d like to see something new. To venture out into the unknown. Even if it is... challenging.”

“Oh my,” Yoor said, impressed. “What an adventurer. You could simply have sought work here. But, no. You go and travel the world. I am all amazement. I admit I had always thought you were rather tame. A stickler for rules, who always does everything right. How wrong I was!”

“Going to the Mountains is not against any rules,” Enim pointed out. “Otherwise, of course I would not do it.”

“Because you really do believe that rules are always right?”

Enim looked surprised. “Of course. What else? Rules are about what is right, and what is right is made a rule. That is the whole purpose of rules. If even the definition of right was not right, then where would we be and how would we know anything?”

Yoor tilted his head, giving Enim a sidelong glance. “I fear you may be in for a rude surprise, my friend.”

Torly pinched his arm. “Don’t be too sure, Yoor,” she winked. “Enim has his own way of looking at things and is not thrown off course so easily. His conviction is so strong that I would not be surprised if reality ended up bending to his will, and then right will truly be right, just like he said it would.”

“Now that’s what I call true magic,” Yoor said with feeling. “I wish they had taught us that at the academy.”

2

On the way to the Mountains, Toan was the last town still serviced by the stagecoach from Varoonya. From here, Enim had to make his own way.

He carefully chose a brown mare at the horse market and even met a farmer who agreed to take his baggage. So he set out, riding alongside the cart at a leisurely pace, taking in the landscape and the smell of fields on the breeze. Homesteads and hamlets glided past, sparkling streams and blooming orchards, ducks and cows and sheep. White clouds drifted overhead, and to Enim it all seemed a little like having journeyed into a picture book. Nice, but somewhat unreal. And impermanent too. Soon the picture book would close and then he would find himself back in the real world. In the Mountains, this time.

Whatever that might mean.

Enim shifted in the saddle.

He had grown up in Varoonya. All his family and friends were there. How would it be to arrive in a completely new world? To know absolutely no one?

Enim bit his lip.

There were diamonds in the valley of Shebbetin, he knew that much. And mines, where tons of stone needed to be moved with the help of magical traptions. Since he was an artificer, capable of creating and repairing traptions, surely someone would want to hire him? Even if everything he had done at the academy had been models and exercises. A real traption, sitting in the depths of a mountain like an old giant of cogwheels and magic, might still be another matter. Would Enim even be able to handle that, when he was all alone in the darkness underground?

Enim squared his shoulders and encouraged his horse to pick up the pace.

After two days, Enim reached Hebenir, a small village huddled into the steep rise leading up to the pass. All traders spent the night here. It was possible to reach Shebbetin in one day from Hebenir, but it had to be a very long day, especially if one was going with a cart.

So it was well before dawn when the merchant who had agreed to take Enim along let her wagon rumble out of the inn's courtyard, lanterns swaying in the dark. Enim's horse followed close behind. The dirt track they rode on wound up a slope behind the village, softly meandering through fields and meadows. But just as the first gleam of morning began to brighten up the sky, the road disappeared into a thick forest and they were plunged into darkness again. Only rare fingers of light penetrated the gloom here and there, slight shimmers breaking through the crowns in odd places, all giving Enim a vague, somewhat dreamlike feeling of his surroundings. Black trunks stood solemnly all around, companions to a wordless whispering song sent down from the treetops by the wind. The track got steeper and steeper, and increasingly thick undergrowth pressed onto the path from all sides, hindering their climb. Everything felt dark and dense.

And then, very suddenly, they were out.

As they rode up over the crest, sunlight exploded into Enim's eyes, radiating brightly over the open highlands. The sky stretched endlessly overhead, a pale blue and gold striped with pink. A chilly wind blew hair into Enim's face, and from high above came the shrill, piercing cry of a hawk.

Enim shook his head slightly, as if trying to wake up.

This was it, no doubt. He had arrived.

This was the Mountains.

They rode on the whole day, following the thin thread of a trail that wove across the highlands, a delicate dark yarn in a richly textured tapestry. Enim felt the slopes rise and fall beneath him like the timeless breath of the earth. He had become taciturn, like his guide. They just traveled on and on, in this vast, silent landscape, allowing themselves to become two tiny spots in a quiet, ancient, boundless world.

The sun moved along its arc. Gradually, the shadows grew longer until their dark fingers reached as far as the sky, pointing out into the universe. Enim had never before seen so many stars. In the blackness of night he heard the constellations sing to him with thin, ethereal voices, a nameless song of the cosmos that came to him from the

depths of time and space. The trail could barely be seen any more in the meager gleam of their lantern. Enim was grateful when the moon rose, pale and impossibly big, over the ragged line of the mountains. They trotted on, bathed in the silvery silence that now covered rocks and meadows.

Suddenly, the cart came to a halt.

Enim startled. He reigned in, then rode up front to see what was the matter.

His gaze hardly found the outlines in the darkness of the valley.

It was only a few huts at first, huddling against the slope. But farther on, they condensed into a thick crowd of buildings, a black tangle, a confusing shadow full of nooks and edges in the ghostly moonlight. Over to one side of the valley, lights were visible, and shapes of stone houses with hearth fires shining through their windows. Enim let out a deep breath.

“Shebbetin,” his guide said in a hushed voice, as if she too felt she was standing at a portal between two worlds.

Enim gazed down at the jumbled town. He could not really see or understand it, in the middle of night and darkness. He knew that. But still. Here it was. He took another long look at the mysterious life stretching out and hidden before his eyes.

Gently, he pressed the flanks of his horse and rode down into the unknown.

* * *

Pale morning light fell into the inn’s chamber.

As Enim climbed down the stairs in search of breakfast, he found the tap room occupied by a bustling group talking animatedly—in Vanian. Enim blinked. The innkeeper was right in the middle. Waving, and joking loudly. In Vanian.

Enim realized that last night, his guide had been the one to do all the talking, walking out toward the stables with the innkeeper. Enim had never thought to listen for the words. What would it have been other than Kokish, the language everyone had adopted as their own since the Transition?

A gust of wind blew in as the door opened and the boisterous group jostled out, trampling and shouting, leaving palpable silence behind. Slowly, dust began to settle between slanting rays of light. The echoes of ages past, of a language relegated to history, lingered on.

Enim sent a silent prayer of thanks to his old-fashioned parents for still having spoken the abandoned language at home.

He might stand a chance.

Enim cleared his throat. “Good morning,” he tried in his best Vanian.

The innkeeper gave him a bright smile as she turned around to face him. “Good morning!”

Right. What next? Enim searched his childhood memories for some follow-up words, for the obvious question. “You talk Vanian?”

“Of course. Everyone in Shebbetin does.”

Enim stared at her, stunned.

Enim shook his head at himself, or at Shebbetin, or the world. Such an obvious thing! Yet no one had told him. He had not thought to ask either.

Everybody spoke Kokish these days, didn’t they?

No. They did not.

Or only a little. The innkeeper’s Kokish turned out to be even more halting and bumpy than Enim’s Vanian. However, the woman assured Enim while wiping her hands on the apron, the distinguished people, the mine owners and such, all spoke fluent Kokish. No worries there. It was just the ordinary folks who did not.

Enim rubbed the back of his head. The notion of splitting humanity into groups of distinguished and ordinary people simply slipped past his mind for the moment. But the old Vanian... that caught. Kokish was the language of his heart, and of his head too. It was the language in which he had become an artificer. The language in which dreams came to him at night. Would he not be able to speak it, now? Would Enim still be able to be himself, in this new home of his?

Enim sighed.

He might have to resign himself to a period of stuttering and speechlessness. And a time of intense learning. This certainly wasn’t going to make his new start any easier.

Well. He would manage. His Vanian was rusty, but strong and healthy underneath. Or so Enim hoped.

The innkeeper was making breakfast.

Enim watched in silence.

Then another thought occurred to Enim. A happy one! Which was what he needed right now, anyway. There might be a welcome gift waiting for him, since a few friends unable to make it to his farewell party had promised to write to him instead. Maybe their letters had already arrived?

A smile came to Enim's lips. He had another go at Vanian. "Please, where... ah... have letters? Pouch! Pouch collection!" The words came back to Enim just in time.

"The nearest pouch collection point is in Behrlem."

"Behrlem..." Enim hesitated. "Where, please?"

The woman briefly raised her eyes to him while ladling beans onto a plate. "Behrlem is a town south of Hebenir, a ride of two or three hours."

Enim looked back at her, perplexed. "But..." Enim switched back to Kokish. "What I mean is the local pouch collection point for Shebbetin. You know, where the county courier drops off the pouch, and where local people can go and collect their letters?" And then he said it all again in Vanian, as best as he could.

"In Behrlem," the innkeeper repeated, arranging potatoes.

"But... I cannot three day travel for get my letters!" Enim's voice held all his bewilderment and confusion.

The woman took pity on him. "Well. For you, there might be a way. Do you know any of the mine owners? They have their own pouch collection. A private courier, who rides to Behrlem once a week. If you ask nicely, they might let you join. You, being an artificer and all, bearing the seal of the academy."

Enim still looked perplexed. "But... in Shebbetin thousands of people live. How they get letters?"

"They don't," the innkeeper said dryly. "Except if they are lucky and some trader takes the pouch along."

Enim stared at her, aghast. "But that... not possible. People in Shebbetin so far away. And then no letters? No." Enim shook his head. "This not right. Not possible. There is rules for this. The county bring pouch to everyone. Everyone. It must be."

The innkeeper turned away to pour steaming water into a teapot.

Enim appealed to her. "Of course, tell county. Bureaus, in Varoonya. Of course they make this right, very soon. They make pouch collection point in Shebbetin. And letters good everyone." Enim pinned the woman with an imploring gaze.

"Look here," she said somewhat defensively. "This is an inn, and I am the innkeeper. I have given you all I have on the subject."

"But—"

"Here's your breakfast," she said firmly, but not unkindly, pushing the tray over the counter. "I'll be around the back if you need me."

The only other guests still at the inn were huddled in the far corner.

“Did you hear that?” Kaya asked in a low voice.

“I most certainly did.” Lhut leaned forward slightly. “He is unusual, this fellow.” Lhut let his gaze wander over Enim, who had his back turned, eating breakfast with unseeing eyes. “He is from Varoonya, yet able to speak Vanian. And not too proud to do so, even though he has to scrape and scramble. He could have pushed all the awkwardness and headache on to the innkeeper by switching the conversation to Kokish. But he did not. He kept on making the effort himself. Not even afraid of sounding strange. That looks like someone with a strong and friendly mind.” He nodded respectfully.

Kaya’s eyes narrowed. “He saw a problem, and got upset. He did not opt out with his purely personal solution, even though he could have. He did not instantly forget about all the other people. Instead, he thought about what should be done.”

Lhut nudged Kaya’s elbow. “Go on. Right now, he does not have a clue. Let’s make sure we get to him before anyone else does.”

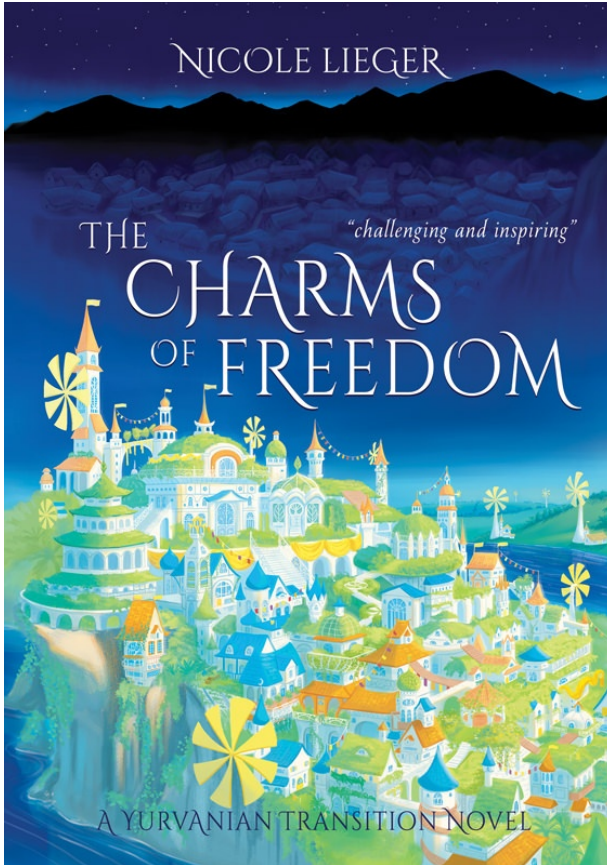
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“Excuse me.”

Enim snapped out of his absorption.

A lean but strong-looking woman stood beside his table, with black skin and dark hair that was both very short and very curly. A long scar ran across her brow down to her ear.

“Yes?” Enim said tentatively. But in Vanian, like her.



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