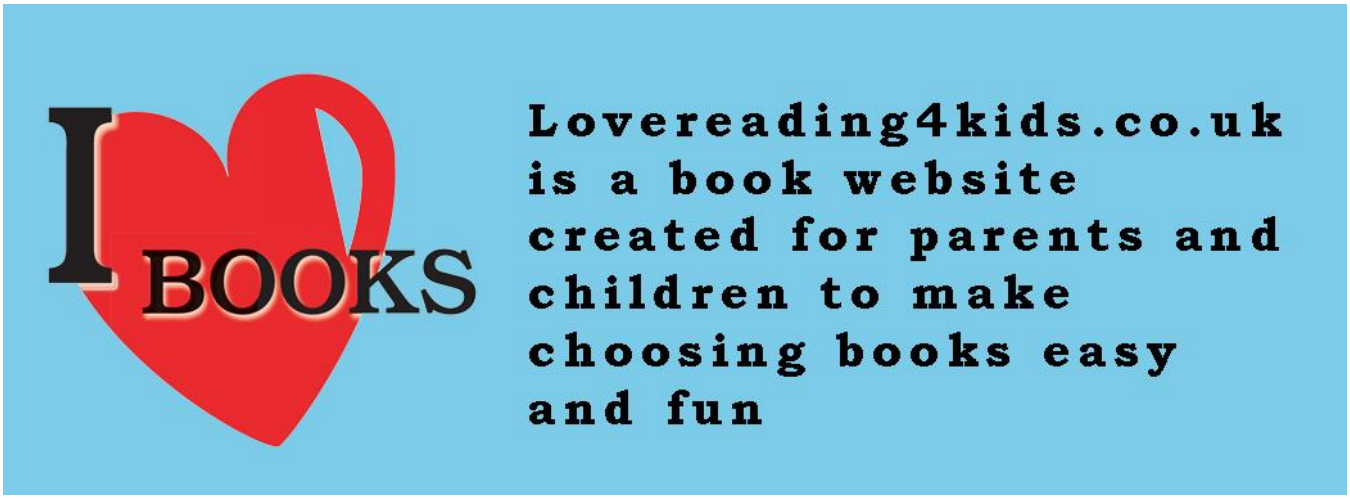


Opening extract from

Ariadnis

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The Chosen

We are the ones who came after the comet.

We are the ones who survived the Great Wave.

We were Chosen Ones, once, and we had many voices.

But the people we were have bled into one another, like water droplets gathering on a leaf.

So we no longer remember . . .

Who . . .

Was who.

But we remain; we are here, waiting. We are in-between, in the home of the Wise One: Ariadnis – carved inside the cliff shelf that stretches out between the last two cities on the last island.

It is an improbable setup: the rock should not be able to reach so far without crumbling. The metal city above should collapse onto the city beneath, the city of trees. But it doesn't. It should not be possible, but it is.

There is but a single path that joins the cities and it begins there on that topmost ladder rung through the trapdoor in the owlery. It spirals down the tallest pillar of Athenas and continues into the cliff. It winds past the entrance of Ariadnis and descends to that hollow passage accessible from the topmost branches of Metis.

The path is like a nerve: a feeling, a promise of unity, however reluctant, and that feeling has never been stronger than now.

We know the moment that the newest Chosen Ones come into the passage because the nerve is, all of a sudden, ablaze.



365 Days

Athenas, City of the Nine Pillars

Aula

Cos today is my birthday, seventeen owls are culled outside my window at dawn.

I can hear each bird screeching before its neck is wrung. Then there's the murmur of the priestess giving the blessing: 'Let the knowledge of the Wise One pass to the Chosen One on this, her seventeenth birthday, that she may better know how to serve Him. That she may better know how to serve her city. That she may better know how to serve herself.'

I blink myself awake, wincing at the smell of incense over the top of oil and spice and hard, thick heat, which means the people in the kitchens are already hard at it.

'Aula.'

I look up and see Nadrik is in the doorway.

'What?' I groan.

His eyes bore into me. You've gotta wonder if he was born with that brooding put-upon-but-don't-worry-I'm-a-martyr look or if he's been cultivating it since they made him Anax – that's the leader of our government – back when I

was nine. I guess the government are probably regretting that now cos they don't seem to get to do much. Nadrik would probably say they never did much in the first place anyway, and I'd just agree, cos like hell I know more about politics than he does and anyway, his people love him and no one's trying to throw him off the throne so . . .

He says, 'I'll meet you in the courtyard in five minutes.' Then he's gone.

'Oh, and by the way, *happy birthday*, Aula,' I mutter.

I crawl outta bed and find a tunic that might've been white once buried under all the crap on my floor.

'And can I just say what an excellent Chosen One you're turning out to be. Everyone in the city thinks so. I certainly do. You're brilliant. Actually, now I think about it, why don't you stay in bed.'

I root around for a headscarf and stuff every straggly bit of my too-long ginger hair up under it. The warped, black-edged mirror Nadrik gave me last year fell off its bracket a few days ago and I'd have to relieve it of some underwear and a few dirty plates if I wanted to stand it up. Judging by how puffy my eyes feel, I'm guessing looking into a mirror en't gonna be the most morale-boosting experience so I just rub my face with water and thank the Wise One that being Athenas's Chosen One en't any kind of beauty contest.

My best friend Etain ambushes me in the courtyard, outside the palace tower where I live. She throws a necklace she made in her workshop over my head as a present and hands me a book from her mother.

'Ma wanted to come down but no one was there to take over her shift in the prophet house,' she says.

'Perils of being Head Prophet,' I say, wondering if my smile is enough to convince her it doesn't bother me that Etain's ma, Ashir, en't wishing me a happy birthday herself.

Clearly it en't, cos she hugs me. She smells of metal and scorched hair and there's a burn going black on her smooth brown shoulder. She says, 'Party later,' all quiet so we en't overheard and, 'Meet in your room at ten.'

I say, 'Can't wait,' and we do this dumb fingerlock thing that we started when we were, like, five, and never grew out of. Then Nadrik does his creepy magi trick, appearing right next to us, and Etain bows, 1) cos he's Anax, and 2) cos she's the Anax's scribe, which basically means his assistant and involves a whole bunch of thankless jobs I wouldn't want to do.

'Sire,' she says.

'Lady Etain,' he says.

'I hope the day is good for you,' she says, and her voice switches instantly from the lazy, shortened sounds that we use with each other to clean, round syllables that make you sound like you're chewing on them.

'And for you,' he says. 'Come, Aula.'

'I en't a dog,' I mutter, but he's already walking away.

It's so hot my skin feels like an apple's shrinking tight in an oven. I swear Nadrik's taking us on the route with the least shade, but at least we get to go past the viewing point, where you can see the rest of the city sprawled out below.

It *is* sort of amazing, my city.

I've been told that, originally, the nine pillars that keep us in the sky were made out of nine trees. The trees are still alive, somehow, but they don't look like trees any more.

They're cased in metal, and hollowed to house the steam machines that power our buildings and water systems and all that. Each pillar supports a wide plateau – the same shape as a dinner plate, but half a mile across; and each has the same concentric-circle pattern of simple whitewashed houses and cobbled streets. Add watch towers, chimneys and pillars; connect each plateau with bridges and platforms and interlocking stairwells and there you have it: Athenas.

As we pass the view, I have the brief fantasy of taking the ladders down to another plateau for some nice birthday shopping like a normal person, but the dream wilts pretty quick as we turn away towards the owlery, and the breeze coming from that direction tells us about all the dead rodents the city owls have eaten.

It smells worse up close. I crane my head nervously as I follow Nadrik in through the arched door, wondering if any of the bright-eyed faces up there are pissed at me for those of them that got murdered just now in my name. I look into their yellow-eyed, I-will-kill-you-if-you-move faces and try and stare them out. *Look*, I wanna say, *it en't like I ever said, What I really want this year is a dead owl for every year my heart's been thumping, and while you're there do you mind hanging their corpses outside the palace temple*. The owls don't move. Maybe they're biding their time. Waiting to avenge themselves at my funeral when they get my head to chew on while everyone meditates on how all the wisdom in my brain is being passed to them, and through them, to the Wise One.

Nadrik clears his throat, which is what he does sometimes

to get my attention, and I know he wishes he didn't have to do it cos it ruins his air of mysticism. He's holding open the trapdoor that's in the floor of the owlery, which no one ever seems to discover (and judging by the owl shit caked on it, no one ever will).

'Yeah, yeah,' I say, like I en't in the least bit bothered about treading on all the mouse bones.

I approach. Below us is a ladder and then a platform, and below that, another ladder, another platform. It goes on for ever. And every year I struggle to get my head around it: we're going down into the hollowed-out trunk that holds this plateau over a mile up in the sky.

Nadrik clears his throat again and I snap, 'Yeah, OK, I'm going.'

Metis, City of the Nine Trees

Joomia

I wake up and remember what day it is. The air tastes of heat and warning, but it's still early. No one else is awake. My hands shake as I fold my blankets. I go to wash. I brush my hair.

'Happy Birthday,' says a voice.

I jump and Taurus laughs his rich laugh. He has a basket in his hand.

'Tea,' he says, putting down his basket in order to knot his dreadlocks high on his head. 'Brightbird eggs. Eros's flatbread,' he continues. 'I'm even going to cook for you.'

I smile sadly and shake my head.

'Why not? We've got plenty of time before Mathilde comes to get you.'

I shake my head again, and point.

He turns, and there is Mathilde, Elder of Metis and my mentor, standing at the end of the branch that leads to my hut. 'Can't it wait till after breakfast?' Taurus asks as she nears us.

'I dunno,' Mathilde snaps. 'Can we wait another *three hundred years* for a Chosen One?'

'Ah, come on, Mathilde. It'll take twenty minutes.'

'Twenty minutes worth risking the lives of all your people, Master Taurus?'

'She needs breakfast,' Taurus says, looking mutinous. 'It's her *birthday*.'

'But she remembers what is expected of her!' Mathilde snarls. 'More than I can say for you.'

Taurus gives me a furious look that says, *Go on, tell her*.

For a moment, I feel hot and frustrated and on the verge of the kind of tears that only appear when you're hot and frustrated. Because I've dreamed of having a voice – a real voice that I could surprise them with at a moment like this. Instead, I have only the voice I can pitch from my mind at a tiny handful of people – these two included.

Let's go, Mathilde, I say.

'Come on then,' she grunts.

Taurus clutches his basket like I've wounded him. I touch his arm.

Sorry, I say, but he doesn't answer.

I used to have this dream where I was flying along the shore of our island, looking towards the land.

The last two cities in the world: the nine trees of my city, whose branches tickle the underside of the cliff shelf that yawns out over us. On top of the cliff, Athenas, the *other* city, whose nine trees barely justify the name, devoid of branches and covered in hard steel casings. If it weren't for the fact that the roots of these trees grow thick and healthy through the cliff shelf to tangle in the branches of our own, you would have thought them dead.

Back then, I thought that if it weren't for that cliff shelf,

our cities would be one and there would be no need for all this fierceness towards each other. But then I learned about pride and tradition and prophecy, and those things are even harder than rock.

I think of this as Mathilde leads me away from my hut, up through the hollow passages of the cliff rising up out of the forest – the tallest trees you've ever seen, sprawled out before us in a lattice of branches so thick you can't see how far the trunks go down. This is my city. This is Metis.

If I squint, I can make out Taurus's thin figure watching us leave from between some of the outermost branches. But then we have to turn up through the tunnel in the cliff and the space around me draws in, and there is only dank stone and darkness.

'Exciting day,' Mathilde says, and I hear the clank of her bracelets as she claps. Light appears between her long, pickled-looking hands and spreads out around us in dingy clouds. She shakes her three long braids down her back and smiles at me out of her strange old face. She seems to be waiting for me to say something – perhaps to agree: *yes, it's an exciting day, isn't it?*

I nod, to please her and she gives me a knowing look.

I'm fine, I say. But I'm not. My throat feels small. My insides are vinegar.

We walk. The tunnel ascends gradually, in a tight spiral that has tighter consequences on the muscles in my legs. We're many turns up when I feel it: that tug in my solar plexus. I stop, gritting my teeth.

Mathilde looks back. 'Joomia?' she says.

It's nothing, I say. **She's coming. The other Chosen One.**

'You can sense her,' Mathilde says.

I shake my head, because she's looking at me like I might suddenly have an explanation for the phenomenon I've felt every year on this day.

She is . . . stronger this year, I say.

Mathilde presses her lips together. 'Come on,' she says. 'Let's keep going.'

The ascent takes ages, but we Metisians are no strangers to climbing. Eventually, we reach the strange place in the tunnel. Ahead of us, it spirals upwards out of sight. Off to our right, it widens into a circular cavern.

'He's late again,' Mathilde says, and she makes a kind of *humph* noise as she settles herself against the wall of the tunnel.

I glance into the cave, where the door to Ariadnis is. There is the archway – the entry to the Wise One's home, outlined by pale orbs of mineral which are stuck fast into the rock. I take a step towards it, and the markings in the doorway shimmer, as if I've passed a beam of light over them.

'Might be wise to have a look, kid,' Mathilde says.

But I'm afraid to leave the pool of light she's created. All I want to do is go back. I want the heat of real air around me, and Taurus making me laugh, and the smell of the soap bar that Ade makes for me every year.

'Don't be nervous,' she says. 'You've done your best this year.'

But I *am* nervous. If the past Chosen Ones don't approve of me, of how much I've learned, it's the end. Athenas will

win the Wise One's book and the island will be theirs. After nine generations, I will be Metis's downfall.

Mathilde glances up the passage, as if she's heard something. But when nothing appears, she says, 'Tell me what you know about how the Chosen Ones came to be, Joomia.'

Aula

'Tell me what you know about Ariadnis and its guardians, Aula,' Nadrik says as we climb down, deeper into the cliff.

'Why?' I say.

'Because I am asking you to.'

'But you *know* what I know about being one of the Chosen Ones,' I snap. '*You* taught it to me.'

Joomia

I shift irritably. ***Mathilde***.

'Why not? Good to remind yourself of why you are here.'

I suppose at least this will distract me from my nerves. I close my eyes and think of everything I've learned by rote: **There have been nine recorded Chosen Ones in our time. Since the Great Wave that covered the world, since our ancestors came here – to the last island on Erthe – there has been a Chosen One for every generation. When the ancestors first arrived, they warred over how to build a new world: should**

they keep the industry that had once dominated the planet, or should they start anew, embrace a natural life?

Aula

'And everyone got pissy with each other for a long time—'

'*Aula*,' Nadrik says, and I roll my eyes but carry on.

'Until they decided that their issues couldn't be resolved and they had to go and build their cities separately. Then they found this cliff with nine vishaal trees growing underneath it and nine growing on top of it. Which sounds a bit convenient to me, but there you go.'

'*Aula*.'

'One half of the ancestors went to the top of the cliff and made Athenas. They hollowed out the trees and filled them with machines that would be powered by steam. The other half went to live below the cliff in the other nine trees and called it Metis.'

Joomia

But this didn't stop their disagreements, especially when Athenas began to build more and more ostentatious things and use the island's resources wastefully. Soon, the two cities were at war again.

Aula

'. . . And the war went on for years and years, which is pretty surprising cos of how Metis is made of *wood* so I dunno why someone didn't think of just burning it down.'

Nadrik makes an impatient noise. 'Aula, you know very well the pillars of Athenas are *also* made of wood. And I have no doubt you also recall that vishaal trees are naturally fortified. How else did they become the tallest trees in *this* climate? They cannot be burned.'

I pause to think about that. Possibly someone did tell me that in a lesson once. The question is whether I was listening.

'Carry on,' Nadrik says.

'So the war went on and on. And the people reduced their populations even more, which I'm sure is *exactly* what they wanted to happen.'

'*Aula*.'

'Yeah, yeah. Anyway. Their war woke the Wise One.'

Joomia

She had slept in the cliff for a long time, but they had disturbed Her.

I am the God of this island, She said. *What do you mean by this fighting? How dare you disturb the balance here!*

Wise One, the ancestors said. *If you are truly the God of this island then tell us who is more worthy of it.*

You must prove yourselves, She answered. *The thing I prize above all things is wisdom.*