

Nan Manefield Young Writers' Award 2024:

Story Title: A girl born from flames.

You are nothing but a shadow on a wall, I remind myself. My ebony dagger lies cold in my bodice, where no one will touch me. I peer down the hallway, my auburn curls escaping their bonds. My silky auburn curls, courtesy of my "parents." I still remember the day my mother and father died, my real parents, eyes open and lying in their cold blood. I had wept until I was empty, until I was as hollow and emotionless as the Nobles. As the Nobles behind their murder. As the Nobles who thought they were helping me by adopting me, the ones who foolishly expected me to become one of them. I slip into the laundry room, shucking my black clothes and donning on my scullery dress. I tame my hair, using a white strip of cloth to tie it back. Memories of my parents and poor community still haunted me. The day they tried to rebel, still haunted me. Everything from my past sought to destroy me. I'm doing this for them, for their freedom, I tell myself, but I still can't shake off the wetness of their blood clinging to my hands. I slip my fighting leathers into my scullery dress pocket and thank the Lord for the extra-large pockets. Once I'm finish with my disguise, I grab a tub full of dirty clothes and place it on my hip. It's now or never, I think, slipping out of the room.

I hunch my back, making sure my head is tucked low, not daring to make eye contact with any of the guards. Their armour glistens with oil, more for show than use. One of them looks at me, his eyes full of wicked intention. He smiles and my heartbeat races. Ka-thump. Ka-thump. Ka-thump. I quickly dart past him and down the hallway that leads outside before his lips even part. Once I get outside, I greedily gulp down big breaths of air. I dump the basket down and put on my best maid voice. I open my mouth but then shut it when a memory fleets in my mind.

*I was sitting on my mother's lap in the dusty catacombs, tummy rumbling with hunger. I had always loved nature when I was a kid. I always imagined myself as a bird, soaring, soaring, soaring, reaching out and glimpsing the clouds coming out to play. Reaching out to freedom. I would always imitate many of the older members in the community, in hope to steal extra food. It never worked but was always worth a try. Mother had asked me to copy the wisewoman's voice. "The future speaks to me, and I listen. Wisdom is everything and anything," I answered in a deep rumbly voice. She laughed, the sound as soft as buttercup petals, twinkling like crystals tangled in the wind. I leaned into her warmth, into her fragrance of pine leaves and smoke. Suddenly, the memory shifted. Smoke. Smoke everywhere. Choking. Strangling. Heaving. Lots of heaving. Members running everywhere, panic building like a crescendo. Then the soldiers arrived. Slaying and stamping out small licks of rebellion in its wake. The licks of flame that my parents tried to coax and encourage, now dead.*

I jerk back to the present and rub my temples. I really need to stop dwelling in my tortured past. I clear my throat and but on my best maid voice. "Oy, ya forgot this lot. Ya think it' wash by itself?" I yell at the maid nearest to me. She immediately scrambles over and grabs the basket from my hand, running to place it near the water stations. I pity her. I pity anyone who works under the king. The traitor king. He was the reason the poor are poor. The reason my community's dead. The reason why my family is dead. I walk past the maids, heading to the other side near the chicken coops. Once I'm out of sight, I remove the scullery dress and change into my fighting leathers.

Once fully clad in black, I look up. Right under the King's bedroom window. I smirk, pulling out my dagger. This is when the darkest parts of me come out to play. My 'Shadow-self'. I can taste my revenge, sweet like the finest red wine on my tongue. After all, in a couple of minutes, its hunger will be satisfied. The King will finally get what he deserves, and my revenge will finally be nourished with the payment of blood.

- 750 words.