

Dear Amy Hoover,

Thank you for sharing your manuscript *RIVERS RUN RED*. You've created an evocative world and a compelling story. While I read, I was always eager to find out what happened next. It was a delight to read and think deeply about Elowen's journey.

In crafting this developmental editing response to your book, I've considered traditional story elements (plot, structure, worldbuilding, character development, dialogue, narrative voice), our class Zoom visit with you and some of the questions that came up there, as well as your writing goals stated on your website.

I'm hoping that these observations and questions will help you in your next round of revisions. At the very end I have a couple of copyediting notes, focused more on patterns, that would be worth addressing after you've completed your next draft.

One thing I want to be upfront about is that I don't typically read a lot of fantasy. I've done my best to look into genre conventions and the fantasy market, but that's not the same as being intimately familiar with the genre. So if something seems off, or like I'm missing nuances of genre or subgenre, trust your gut! I just wanted to be really honest about this off the bat, and I hope I'm not steering you wrong in here.

All that said, even though your manuscript was in an unfamiliar genre to me, it never felt inaccessible to me as someone not so familiar. This got me thinking about how your story has broad crossover appeal for readers of action/adventure tales, war narratives, and coming-of-age stories in general.

The more I read, the more I felt enveloped in the world you created and invested in the characters and their journeys.

PLOT

Plot Summary

I'm going to start by giving a fairly detailed reflection of the plot, so you can see if this matches what you were intending as the highlights and overall skeleton of the story:

Elowen is a well-trained eighteen-year-old fighter in the military of Rythial, a land ruled by the King and haunted by the river spirit Virella and her demons, the Virsha. Although she doesn't have the magic that many of her classmates do, she has skill, the willingness to put in extra training hours, and the support of the fatherly figure General Avel.

Elowen is devastated after tying her arch-enemy Keyne in a training exercise, seeing it instead as a loss. Nothing her best friends, siblings Finch and Kaira, say to her can get through. Elowen is so hellbent on being first because she knows that, because of the King's policy that every family have one child in military training, her parents had her only to send her to training to spare her brothers, and her parents always expected Elowen to die. Keyne challenges Elowen to a forbidden do-over duel.

Mid-fight, the Virsha attack, and though Elowen rushes to where Finch is, she isn't able to save him. Finch, missing his soul now, goes into a coma, and his sister Keira is sent to training to take Finch's place. To make matters worse, Keyne and Elowen are punished together for their

duel, and stuck with each other.

Feeling responsible for the fates of both siblings and determined to end the war that has been going on since long before Elowen's birth, she sets out to find Virella and set things right. To escape, she poisons Keyne, who then gets accused of having helped the Underground—a mysterious group of people who don't agree with the King—kidnap Elowen, so he sets out to find her and clear his name.

Elowen and Keyne end up working together, often reluctantly, to find Virella. Despite many arguments, attacks by Virsha and Vishren, and encounters with a Hunter, they are eventually forced to trust each other because it's the only way to overcome Virella's obstacles. In doing so, Keyne reveals that he has always been jealous of Elowen because she is General Avel's favorite, and he feels so much pressure from his family to be perfect and first because his father defected to the Underground and he needs to represent his family and prove they're not traitors.

Once in Virella's place, the river spirit tells Elowen and Keyne the story of her life, which contradicts all the myths they have heard all their lives. Virella isn't an evil spirit, but instead had her love and her magic (via her Crystal) stolen by a man who is the real villain. Elowen and Keyne suspect the King and head back home. Their mission has now changed to recovering Virella's Crystal from the King to end the war and restore Finch's soul.

On their way, they encounter the Hunter again and Elowen kills him to save Keyne and their mission. Elowen and Keyne are then kidnapped by the Underground. Keyne sees his father for the first time since he defected. His father proves to be cowardly, always hedging his bets and his offers and his promises, but ultimately does help Elowen and Keyne return to their world. All the while, romantic tension builds between Elowen and Keyne.

Once back home, Elowen and Keyne are honored as heroes, but Elowen's family shows up only to double down on their original position that Elowen only exists to keep her brothers out of the military, and is entirely dispensable to her family. Then, Elowen finds herself in a soundproof room with General Avel and realizes he is the man who has Virella's magic Crystal, not the King. General Avel tells Elowen he needs to keep the war going because everything in the land depends on it, and that he wants to make her his successor. When she doesn't agree, he locks her in the room and announces to the town that she is a traitor.

Elowen escapes. She and Keyne and Kaira gather their friends to defeat the King, recover the crystal, restore Finch's soul, and end the war. At the very end, Elowen, Keyne, and their peers are put in charge of the Council tasked with figuring out a way forward.

Plot Structure

The overall shape of the plot nicely follows the three-act structure typical of fiction. There is a clear inciting incident—the Virsha attack on Finch that leaves him soulless in a coma—that causes Elowen to undertake her adventure. There's also a clear midpoint twist—Virella isn't evil, someone else is—that changes the direction. Tension mounts as Elowen and Keyne prepare to take on the King, and then there's a final twist—it was really the general all along!—and a final showdown before the resolution to a new normal.

The one spot where you might consider re-ordering major plot points would be in considering The Underground. When that comes after the Virella reveal, it dissipates some of the

tension or feels a bit like a detour as the action ratchets up toward the final reveal. The Underground plays a crucial role, and it could play that role even better if it happened before Elowen and Keyne meet Virella.

Of course, moving the Underground portion before Virella would take a bit of restructuring, as Elowen and Keyne wouldn't yet have learned what they do from Virella. Perhaps their time in the Underground, while still reuniting Keyne and his father, could also sew seeds of doubt in Elowen and Keyne about what they've been taught. It could also help build the relationship between Elowen and Keyne up more so that the trust test comes at a more climactic moment.

Right now, the plot is almost triangular, with the Virella twist close to the exact midpoint. If you put the Underground first, and use it as a way to ramp up tension in both the war plot and the romance, it will skew so that your plot fits more detailed plot structure diagrams that typically show rising action through the second act with the twist coming toward the end of that section.

Try rearranging these plot pieces and see how it works for you.

One other small note: at times, it can feel like some struggles are resolved too quickly, which can undercut the building tension. The tension and forward momentum is there because Elowen's always progressing toward her ultimate goal, but if some things along the way are left less resolved, that might draw the rising tension to front and center. One concrete place where you could do this is in the first encounter with the Hunter. After they subdue him, if Elowen thinks more—or talks with Keyne more—about how that's a temporary measure and they're more worried about him eventually coming after them, the specter of the Hunter will augment the tension instead of seeming resolved. Look for other smaller plot points to leave a little less resolved in the pre-Virella portion of the manuscript.

The story feels propulsive. There is a lot of action, and it doesn't get slow. One thing I noticed and appreciated was how the text of the story matches the pace. The action in the story keeps moving, and the paragraphs stay short, adding to the sense of forward momentum.

The skeleton of your story is very strong, and tweaking some of its elements will help make it even stronger.

Opening Scene(s)

Because the beginning is the part that will most need to hook people, whether they be agents, editors, or readers, I want to spend time on how to make it even more impactful. You do an excellent job of jumping right into the action of an interesting scene and raising questions that hook the reader into wanting to know more.

There are a few aspects that may add some unnecessary confusion, and that may detract from the immediacy of the scene. It starts off with Virsha, and without context, it sounds like Virsha is an individual. (The first time I read the opening paragraph, I thought Virsha was a nonbinary person and was fairly confused for awhile).

The fight in which Keyne wins against Elowen (therefore tying her for overall first in their class) has a lasting impact on Elowen, and occupies her thoughts through most of the first third or so of the manuscript. But the action happens “off-screen,” summarized in the first

paragraph, before we move on to a fully fleshed-out fight scene between Keyne and Finch, which doesn't have much reverberation afterward. The tension throughout the whole novel is between Elowen and Keyne; Keyne and Finch hardly interact.

A stronger choice might be to reverse how these two scenes are weighted. Try writing out the full fight scene between Elowen and Keyne, which will introduce their tension and give more visceral context for Elowen's feelings in the aftermath. This is important because Elowen's feelings after losing to Keyne motivate many of her actions in the early part of the book. Then the Keyne/Finch fight scene could be shortened, focused on Elowen's interactions with both men, so that the Elowen/Keyne fight takes center stage.

The Ending

In our class meeting with you over Zoom, you mentioned wanting feedback about the ending. Now that you've told us that it was written separately, I can see that in reading it through again. There are some ways in which the voice changes in the end, which I'll address in the Narrative Voice and Dialogue section.

In thinking about the ending, I'm specifically considering about the last quarter of the book, everything from the time Elowen and Keyne return through to the epilogue.

There are a lot of strong plot elements here. It's an action-packed section!

A couple of considerations for you:

-Kaira is the one who takes the final swing with her sword that saves them all. While this fits with what you said about wanting to show that Kaira is more capable than Elowen realizes, should it be Elowen's victory? Often it's the main character and their agency that saves the day, and I wonder if having Kaira do it takes too much away from Elowen. Could they work more in tandem to take down General Avel?

-For the pre-epilogue ending, everything wraps up so neatly. The only real loss suffered by Elowen and her friends is Finch's ankle injury and subsequent limp. Might it make sense to have more loss, or loss that hits closer to Elowen? One way to do this might be to have one of the more minor characters die. A good candidate for this would be Lorcan, because he's a bit less central than Massey and Tatum, and because of the jokes about him being the first to die. Or, if that doesn't feel right to you, perhaps Elowen could think more on the loss she feels in losing the image she had of the General. Or, Finch's injury could be worse. As it stands now, the ending feels like it needs more consequence, and not to be wrapped in such a neat bow.

-The epilogue reads a bit rushed. A lot of loose ends—the Underground, the Council, Virella—are touched on so quickly as to be glossed over. Consider allowing more ambiguity to breathe here, especially if you're considering a series (more on that in a section toward the end).

Foreshadowing and Reveals

One area that can be strengthened is the plotting of revelations throughout the story. An example is when Elowen is Grippled by the Vishren (see pp. 114-115). In Elowen's flashback, we learn what she overheard her parents say. It's horrifying, and it's a huge underpinning of Elowen's character, but the reveal loses some of its power because we've already been told this earlier (pp. 10-11).

Consider holding back some of the details in the earlier section—not the takeaway, it’s important that we know early that Elowen’s parents had her to send her to military service, and said she was born to die—so we get all the context and feeling, the emotional reveal, when she’s Gripped.

A note about something that worked really well here: You moved into the present tense during Elowen’s flashback, and that’s particularly effective because it stands out, and because Elowen is experiencing the old scene as if it’s happening in the present. It was a lovely way to invoke the immediacy. This flashback could be developed further with more sensory details to more fully put Elowen, and the reader, into this moment that was so crucial (in a terrible way) to her sense of self.

Similarly, when Elowen and Keyne talk about the spat they had when they were young (p. 144), the reader has already learned all the details beforehand from Elowen’s narration and reflection (p. 131). When nothing new is revealed about this part of their past in such a pivotal scene where Elowen and Keyne are building trust, the emotional power of the scene feels dissipated. Consider holding back some of the details earlier on so their discussion retains its power. Or adding more intense elements to the reveal conversation. Or both!

The other big reveal has two parts: Virella isn’t evil but instead the victim of the real villain, and the real villain is General Avel. Both of these reversals work very well in the overall plot, changing the story in interesting ways and surprising the characters. Both could be made even stronger with more buildup.

In the case of Virella, the reversal might have more impact if there was more investment in her mythology beforehand. As it is, who Virella is (before we meet her) is somewhat elusive. Try solidifying what Elowen and her friends believe about Virella. If she, or the mythology about her, is built up stronger, the reversal will have more impact.

As for the actual villain, General Avel was an excellent choice, as he’s the person outside of the “kids” who’s closest to Elowen. And the King was a great foil, as there were some suspect things about his character—he’s the one requiring every family to send a child to war, after all—so it’s plausible he’d be the one extending the war indefinitely. Still, the King never felt like a real candidate for the secret villain because there hadn’t been much investment in him.

If it’s helpful at all to hear how this landed when I read it the first time, here was my thought process: When Virella tells them a man has her Crystal, my first thought was the King, because he seemed invested in continuing the war. In the next thought I realized, no, it has to be General Avel because he’s the only older male character that Elowen’s emotionally invested in. I went forth reading the rest of the story expecting the General Avel reveal.

If you want it to be more hidden, try building up the King, or the mythology about him, more in the front half of the novel. If the King’s mythology is expanded throughout the earlier part, that’ll make him a more realistic suspect, and will give the ultimate reveal more impact.

WORLDBUILDING

Summary of the World

Elowen lives at a military training camp in Lynamun, a town within the greater land of

Rythial. There are rivers and river spirits. Virella, the “evil” river spirit, is thought to control the Virsha demons, which suck the souls out of people, leaving them dead, or if their mission is incomplete, comatose. Vishren spirits Grip their victims and force them to have flashbacks of painful experiences. There is an Underground that serves as both a physical location and a gathering of defectors. Within the world, there is magic, though Elowen and General Avel do not have it. The magic system involves dust, breathing intentions into objects, and crystals. Using magic takes a bit of the magic doer’s soul.

Setting

Throughout the manuscript, you do an excellent job of describing the settings. This especially shines when Elowen and Keyne are on their journey away from the barracks. There’s a lovely sense of the natural world—all that cold and snow and wet river imagery—as well as the unnatural fantasy landscape. The complicated path that Elowen and Keyne traverse to reach Virella, the endless tunnels, and later the Underground, are vividly rendered. The glowing animals add an especially nice touch.

One location that could use a bit more explanation is the training camp. A couple points of confusion came up around how its location relates to the rest of the town. Finch’s family lives nearby, and was that true for all the families? Elowen’s family doesn’t show up often, and it wasn’t clear their distance from her. Do they live far away and just can’t be bothered to make an arduous journey, or are they close and still choose not to attend ceremonies? Either choice has different story and character implications for both the family and Elowen.

As a minor point, on p. 2 the training camp is described as “dire and disgusting,” but that’s not reflected in other descriptions of the place. If the training camp is meant to be physically gross or rundown, consider sprinkling disgusting details throughout the descriptions of the training camp. If Elowen meant that more metaphorically, in that it’s dire and disgusting because of the deaths of soldiers and the horrors of war, consider making that more clear in her narration.

Have you thought about adding a map to the front matter of the book? It reads like the landscape is very clear to you, and you know the positions of the different stations, and mountains, and rivers. A visual map might help readers feel as clear and familiar with the landscape.

Elusiveness of the World

As a general observation, some of the aspects of the world could be defined more clearly. There were times when instead of propelling the story forward, elements of the world that were elusive distracted me with questions and confusions.

Elements that could be clarified to strengthen the manuscript:

-The magic system - There are times when the magic is confusing, especially when it comes to Elowen not understanding how it works, how much of a person’s soul or energy it takes to use magic, how much a person can use in a given time period, etc. It felt like Elowen’s not having magic was a stand-in for not fully defining the system.

After talking with you in class, what I took away was that the magic was meant to be a

way to give the world a fantasy feel, rather than an element you wanted to take center stage. If that's accurate, a simple solution might be to take out the parts where Elowen's questioning the magic (as mentioned above). If it just exists in the world, is used sometimes by people who have it, and isn't dwelled on, that'll read as a flavoring. Once you have Elowen question the specifics, then the reader questions them too. Try either taking her questioning out altogether, or alternatively, fleshing out the magic system and having Elowen report it even though she can't use magic herself. She could say "a person who has magic can only use it x times in y days/weeks/months" as a straightforward fact.

-the war and its history - There are some contradictions—sometimes the text says the war has been fought for one hundred years and in other spots it says two hundred years—but what really needs strengthening is the lore of the war. Elowen has been raised and trained in this lore, so she knows it well, and so it can be clearly defined in her narration. What she's been taught is wrong, as we learn later, and for that to have maximum impact, it would help to have a clearer understanding of what she's been taught, what Elowen thinks they're fighting for. For the first half of the manuscript, she fully buys into the lore, and the more texture and detail you add to that lore, the more the reader will buy in along with her.

-the Virella/Virsha/Vishren lore - what Elowen (and the others) believe about Virella before meeting her was a bit elusive. Even though it's said that she's a river spirit, that felt undefined. Then when Elowen and Keyne meet her and she's very humanlike, it only adds to the confusion. Consider building up the lore about her in a more defined way.

Another point of confusion throughout was that Virsha reads like a singular person's name but is a plural entity. This continued to trip me up throughout the manuscript, and added a pause that probably didn't need to be there! It might read smoother if you changed Virsha to something plural (the Virsha demons, Virella's Virsha demons, the Virshas).

An action step that could help with making all of these elements more defined would be to map them out. That could mean drawing things out physically or virtually, or sketching out lore, or writing out the rules of magic. Whatever modality helps you look at these big-picture aspects of your story's world and sketch in detail and definition. It's likely some (or most) of those details won't make it into the manuscript, and still having a solid handle on them and adding big and little details throughout can make this world come alive in a more vivid and accessible way.

One place where you've done this wonderfully well is with the training system. There are enough details and mentions throughout that the structure of the military training, what age groups go with which titles, feels like a grounded and lived-in part of the world.

Another aspect of the manuscript where you've mastered this is the weaponry. I don't know the first thing about swords or weapons, but the system of how they work and what's best used in what kind of fight against what kind of human or demon is so well-established that I trust the narration implicitly and am never waylaid by questions or confusion.

If you can bring that level of "lived-in" knowledge to other aspects of the world, it could go a long way to making the world feel more real and the manuscript read more smoothly.

CHARACTER

Character Summary

Our main character is Elowen, an eighteen-year-old girl who's been training as a soldier since she was seven. Her parents gave birth to her in order to send her to training and then the war, and she overheard them saying she was born only to die, to spare her brothers. Because of this wound, she trains harder, puts in more hours than her cohort, and is described by her friends as "training obsessed." She wants to fight well enough to survive, and to prove her parents wrong. She is very individualistic at the start, and then over the course of her adventures, she learns to trust Keyne, her old enemy, and to trust her friends. One thing she struggles with throughout is not believing that she is enough unless she's first at everything.

Secondary characters include Keyne, Finch, Kaira, General Avel, and the group of friends in Elowen's cohort.

Elowen's Character and Development

Elowen has a clear overall arc, and is changed by her adventures. On the big-picture level, the story of Elowen's development is clear. In the moment-to-moment narration within the chapters though, it can be hard to pin down what she's feeling and how things are changing. Consider fleshing out Elowen's feelings in general a little more, to make her more defined, as there are times she feels a bit like a semi-omniscient narrator.

Some questions to consider, that we don't fully get to know about Elowen in this draft: How does Elowen feel about the war? Does she believe everything she's been taught? Does she have any suspicions? How does she feel about The Underground and does she believe the hype she's been taught about them? Does she have resentment toward anyone other than her parents (for example, The King), for being put into the role of a child soldier?

Defining clearly how much she has bought into the mythology of her world will help readers locate Elowen as a person in the story as more than a narrator.

In the beginning especially, it's hard to know how much the reader is supposed to trust or like Elowen. This can work, and I think with some clearer definition of who she is, that she's wrong about certain things (how she assesses others, mostly), and a little more of her commentary and emotions, it will be easier for the reader to identify with her when you want them to, and to question her assumptions when that's what you want the reader to do.

I also wasn't sure how much of her character was just who Elowen was and how much we were supposed to assume was because she was a child soldier from age seven on. If certain traits of hers are supposed to be because of the latter, it might help make that clear if you give other people in her world similar traits, to differing degrees.

Elowen's feelings toward Keyne also caused a bit of confusion. Their relationship has its own overall trajectory, but there is so much up and down in Elowen's feelings that it can be challenging to keep track of where she is emotionally and at times it feels a bit like whiplash. Elowen's feelings for Keyne could be fleshed out into a smoother arc, where now they feel a bit all over the place. I think the overall arc you were going for (as you mentioned to us) was enemies to lovers, and that's in the manuscript and could be electrified even more if Elowen's

emotions had a bit more consistency.

A natural enemies-to-lovers arc would be for Elowen to hate Keyne, to resent his showing up on her journey, then slowly start to trust him, culminating in the trust test to get to Virella. Then, there's a final questioning when Elowen thinks Keyne is getting back together with Bellea, before a final reconciliation. This arc exists but it's muddled a bit by Elowen always reverting to hating and distrusting Keyne. It will feel like there's more forward momentum in their arcs as characters and their story as enemies to lovers if that's cleared up.

Putting the Underground scene before Virella might also help with these arcs (mentioned in Plot section). It would be especially uncomfortable for them if people think they're married long before they're friends, which could be fun for you to play around with. There's also a lot of Elowen questioning if she can trust Keyne in this section, and that would make more sense before the Virella trust test.

Keyne

Keyne is a wonderfully well-developed character. He's perfectly positioned from the start to be the romantic interest in an enemies-to-lovers story. He's described in the first pages as handsome (even as Elowen says his face is punchable). He's smug and antagonistic toward Elowen, calling her by a nickname she hates and taunting her at all turns. It seems to Elowen that everything comes easily to him, especially because he can use magic and she can't. During the trust test, another side of Keyne is revealed as Elowen (and the reader) learns about his family struggles and the pressure he is under because of his father's defection.

The arc of the relationship between Elowen and Keyne gives a natural arc to Keyne's character as more of his story is revealed over their journey. In general, I don't have many notes or suggestions about Keyne because his character works so well. If you wanted to, you could play with making him a bit more of a jerk in the beginning (motivated by his own inner demons) if you want Elowen's anger towards him at the start to feel justified and righteous. But if you want it to be more that Elowen is overreacting and holding grudges from a long time ago, then I probably would leave him as is.

Villains

The main villains in this novel are General Avel and Elowen's parents. On your website, you wrote about loving to write morally gray characters, and there is definitely gray in Elowen's character (as one would expect of someone raised in military training), and I think there could be more gray in the villains as well.

General Avel is the more significant villain and his character can be amplified even further. Consider adding more scenes of him being a fatherly figure to Elowen, whether in the current time of the novel or in flashback scenes. That way, his betrayal will feel all the more powerful when it happens. Then at the end, when you have Elowen reflect on the good times, and miss the version of him she thought she knew for so long, leaving her with that bittersweet nostalgia you want them to take away, the feeling will resonate even more.

Consider giving General Avel a clearer motivation. Some of that might come from fleshing out the world a bit more (see Worldbuilding section) and giving more context for the

war and how it impacts the town. As it is now, after the reveal he can seem a bit cartoonish in his villainy. It might hit harder if his thinking that what he's doing is truly for the good of the land (even though Elowen and the reader know it's not because of all the deaths, the way families are ripped apart, etc.) is clearer to see. It also will make Elowen's choice about whether to follow in his footsteps or not read as more dramatic and suspenseful if he makes a clear case and if we can see his emotions of how much he wanted to pass this on to her (as you described in class). The elements are there, they can just be brought forth in stronger ways.

As for Elowen's parents, it works that they're not redeemable, and that Elowen doesn't have any heartwarming reunions with them. Still, their terribly hurtful decisions can be understood by readers to be a result of the rules of their land. It might be more powerful to render them in a bit more gray as well. One way to do this might be in the confrontation in the end. Elowen's mom, while being terrible to her, can also get distraught at the thought that she could've had to send one of her sons to war (if Elowen's plan to volunteer one of them as tribute to save Kaira from the war had worked). That way, Elowen's mom has understandable emotions, and is still irredeemable to Elo.

Finch

Finch is a brotherly character to Elowen. He's really only seen at the beginning and ending of the novel because he's in a coma for most of the action. He offers Elowen wisdom, and is a tempering force to Elowen's single-mindedness in the beginning. In some ways, he appears as a "wise elder," in the advice he offers to Elowen, even though he's only one year older than her.

This may be a wild thought, but would you ever consider making Elowen and Keyne and their cohort younger than eighteen? In thinking about how Finch seems more than a year older, it occurs to me that Kaira, though untrained in military ways, also feels older. What if Elowen's class were graduating into being Salts (which covers three years, right?) Instead of graduating out of Salts into Sages?

Kaira

In our discussion, you mentioned Elowen's misunderstanding of Kaira until the end. Elowen sees her as a helpless damsel in distress, and then in the end has to rely on her and trust her competence and ability to take care of herself.

This came through well at the very end, but in the beginning, Kaira does herself come across as a bit helpless. A clear example of this is when Elowen offers to help her escape Lyrarun so she won't have to enlist, and Kaira lists all the ways she wouldn't be able to survive if she escaped.

So as it is now, Elowen seems right in her assessment of Kaira in the beginning. If a little more is added early on about Kaira being capable, or holding her own, it will make Elowen's re-assessment feel more accurate at the end.

Minor Characters

The friends come into play in a big way toward the end, and it's a symbol of Elowen's

development that she's willing to rely on them. However, they're not all that defined, and I think giving each of them a bit more space on the early pages could help make them feel more like real characters, even if their roles stay as they are. They are currently introduced on p. 20. Bringing them in earlier in the first few chapters, and giving them more scenes, dialogue, and interaction with Elo could help establish them more, as well as Elo's relationships with them, her reluctance to rely on anyone.

Some places where the friends could come in earlier: If you decide to start with writing out a full scene of Elowen's fight with Keyne, they could be background characters as they'd presumably be in attendance. Same with the Finch/Keyne fight. When Elowen goes back to the barracks and finds the note from Keyne, they could be in the barracks too, and could provide commentary and background flavor.

NARRATIVE VOICE AND DIALOGUE

Elowen's Voice

Because your novel is in first person, the narrative voice is also Elowen's voice. At times, it feels like this creates a bit of tension in the manuscript. Most of the time, we are squarely in Elowen's head, learning her thoughts and feelings. When she is giving background info, though, it can feel almost as if we're in a third-person POV and the language slips into a more objective, impersonal feel.

One place this happens is whenever Elowen is describing people. When Elowen describes Kaira and Finch and herself (p. 8), her voice suddenly shifts to be more formal and detached, sounding more like a distant adult narrator than Elowen. The same shift happens when she describes Malsey, Tatum, and Lorcan (p. 20). This shift doesn't happen when Elowen is describing the setting or the weather; those descriptions are always well-integrated and in her more natural voice. Consider rewriting descriptions of people, especially their physical appearances, in a voice that's younger, less distant, and more natural to Elowen.

Other places where Elowen's voice slips some include when she's giving a lot of info about the world. The info is important and needs to be given, and it might feel natural if it has more "Elowen flavor" in the telling of the information. That could be accomplished by thinking about how a teenager would think about the info and infusing that sensibility into the info dumps, or giving more emotion to the information, or going into a bit of backstory of Elowen learning the info about the war, the magic, Virella, her family, etc. Because the whole story is in Elowen's voice, it should always feel like the narration is filtered through her particular character, instead of objective data.

There are also times when Elowen describes her own emotions in a detached way. I have the sense that this is intentional because of her training as a soldier. She's been taught to banish some emotions, or to use them strategically. She is still a teenager, though, and sometimes the detached rationalizing of her emotions makes it harder to connect and identify with our protagonist. Consider letting some more of her emotions show through without Elowen immediately dissecting and compartmentalizing them. If her emotions are allowed to linger more, this may also increase suspense and tension as the manuscript progresses.

Because Elowen usually tells her emotions, sometimes in an unemotional way, there are opportunities for you to show them more directly. An example of this is when Finch is in the coma, Elowen's failed in her mission to spare Kaira from entering the military, and Elowen is punching the tree (p. 56). Instead of being summarized quickly, you could draw that out into a longer scene, where we see each punch of the tree, hear what Elowen is shouting, feel her devastation with her, even if she never names an emotion. Try sprinkling more scenes that show what Elowen is feeling through action and dialogue, and less listing and rationalizing. This will smooth out her narrative voice, make her narration, and the experiences, more accessible to readers.

Dialogue and Other Characters' Voices

The dialogue is fairly consistent in voice throughout the manuscript. Characters who are revealed especially well through their dialogue include Keyne, Finch, and Kaira.

The one spot where the dialogue shifts in voice is toward the end. You mentioned having written that part separately, so this may just be a case of needing to integrate different writing periods and moods into a more cohesive whole. One example of this shift is that towards the end, people start saying "shit" a lot more frequently. It's a little jarring, not because they're cursing—they're teenagers, after all—but because it comes out of nowhere after a manuscript that's mostly curse-free. Similarly, Elowen reflects back to Finch telling her she needs a fling (p. 260), and this dialogue in this recollection lands very differently than all of Finch's previous dialogue.

To smooth out the voice in the dialogue, you could rework the ending to be more inline with the first $\frac{3}{4}$ or so of the manuscript, or you could add a bit more spice into the beginning and throughout.

This brings me to wonder again about the ages of the characters. In a way, the dialogue towards the end felt more apt for their ages. In the bulk of the book before the end, their insults to each other often amount to "you're the worst" (and compliments are often "you're the best"), which feels young for eighteen-year-olds, even when considering they've been locked into this training for eleven years and probably haven't had some of the typical formative teenage experiences we take for granted in our world. Consider playing around with the idea of changing their ages to be younger, see if that sits right with you and your vision, and consider punching up the dialogue with sassier insults.

To sum up this section as a whole, there are parts in the narration that read as an older, detached adult, and the dialogue can read younger than the characters' ages. Try to find a way to move both so they meet in the middle to create a more cohesive voice both in narration and dialogue.

IF YOU WANT TO HAVE POTENTIAL FOR A SERIES

When we spoke to you in class, it sounded like you could go either way in terms of setting *Rivers Run Red* as a standalone or the first in the series. After doing some market research—once again, fantasy isn't a genre I'm super familiar with, so check my outsider perusals against what you know of your genre—it looks like many fantasy books are picked up as part of a series. So, it may help you get published if you leave the door open to future books.

set in the same world.

Here are some ways I see that could open up the story more to a potential series, while also still working as a standalone:

-Make the ending a little less tidy. The seeds of this are already there but could be amplified. The Underground is still out there as an unknown. They don't know if the Virsha are gone forever or not. There are still questions about Virella. The more you can pose the ending as this current situation has settled but there's potential for more trouble down the line, the more open it will feel to future books.

-Elowen and her friends are now the Council, but it's hinted at that there are still adults involved or overseeing them. If you draw that out more, this gives a potential conflict for the next book. (One of the adults in charge of them could have nefarious intentions, or for some other reason the group has to rise up against them.) Because this is YA, it's important for there to be an adult/authority for the "kids" to fight or work against, so leaving it so that the teenagers aren't fully in charge leaves the door open for that.

-Develop some of the secondary and minor characters just a little more. That way, if you want to write your next book with Malsey (or Kaira, or Finch, or Keyne, or anyone) as the protagonist, there's some reader investment in the character.

TITLE

How attached do you feel to RIVERS RUN RED as your title? It's a catchy and alliterative phrase, and it's evocative. The drawback to the current title is that it doesn't quite reflect the manuscript. The phrase "rivers run red" comes up in the military chant but since the rivers never run red within the story there's a mismatch.

Consider brainstorming other titles, or adjusting the storyline so that Rivers Run had some payoff (either in the rivers running red in the way intended in the chant, or in an unexpected way) or symbolic import.

COPYEDITING

One thing to watch out for is mixing up words that sound the same or similar when read aloud. Examples include its and it's, past and passed, there's and theirs, alluded and eluded, know and no, mine and mind. It's always helpful to read a manuscript aloud for voice and flow and the sounds of sentences, and at the end of your next revision, it might help to also do a pass in which you don't read aloud so that you can focus in, and so the soundalikes don't bypass your filter. Or, if you're an author who verbalized and hears the words in your mind even when reading silently, it could be worth outsourcing a copyedit once the manuscript is revised to a more finalized version.

There are two places where the manuscript says "Finch" when I think it's supposed to be "Keyne." This is such a tiny thing to notice, and also so easy to fix, and it may really help with continuity. See p. 29, where Elowen wonders if Finch got his sword. I think this is supposed to be Keyne since he is the one who needs a sword for the clandestine duel, not Finch. See also p. 80, where Elowen is on her adventure with Keyne but it says Finch.