

A CROWN OF IVY AND GLASS
The Middlemist Trilogy, Book One
a (fairly) quick + helpful recap

In the world of Edyn—a realm built for humans by now-dead gods—the Middlemist serves as a magical barrier between Edyn and the Old Country, the dangerous parallel world where the gods were born and ancient magic runs wild.

After creating Edyn as a safe haven for humans, the gods destroyed themselves. They gifted some of their magic to humans; these people and their descendants, having been blessed directly by the gods, possess Anointed magic.

The remaining godly magic scattered across the world, and those lucky humans who happened to receive some of it by chance, and their descendants, possess low magic. They are neither as powerful nor as esteemed as those who were Anointed. Many humans possess no magic at all.

Each of the five gods ruled over a specific domain of magic: the senses, the mind, the earth, the beasts, and the unknowable. Any magic that a human possesses derives from one of those five foundational types.

Lady Gemma Ashbourne—the youngest of three sisters—is the only person in her wealthy Anointed family who doesn't possess magic. In fact, magic is painful to her; her life is defined by chronic pain and debilitating anxiety, which she calls “the panic” and hides from the world behind the mask of a glittering, spoiled socialite. Gemma considers herself a burden to her family, engages in self-harm, and has resigned herself to never finding love.

When Gemma was eight years old, her mother (a low-magic elemental with a talent for manipulating botanicals) abandoned the family without explanation, a wound of grief that has never healed, and which each of the Ashournes deal with (or ignore) in various ways.

Their father (an Anointed sentinel, gifted with superhuman strength, speed, and battle prowess) medicates his sorrow with drink and neglects his daughters and his estate.

Farrin, the eldest sister (an Anointed savant, gifted with the power of music and song), runs the estate, manages her father's volatile mood swings, and protects her heart with walls of thorns.

Mara, the middle sister (an Anointed sentinel like her father), serves as a shieldmaiden at the Middlemist. She is a member of the Order of the Rose, which protects Edyn from Old Country threats. Mara works hard to create a family among her fellow shieldmaidens to cope with missing her own family. Mara's life at the Priory of Rosewarren is dangerous, especially in the

wake of increased Old Country incursions into Edyn, a spate of natural disasters in the Mistlands, and rumors of a band of vicious women preying on the surrounding villages.

At a party, Gemma meets Talan d'Astier, a mysterious guest from the western country of Vauzanne who has business with her father. Talan is beautiful, soft-spoken, and holds an air of romantic tragedy about him, which intrigues Gemma. He is the sole, guilt-ridden survivor of a family that plummeted into social and political disgrace after falling victim to the machinations of a demon, one of the most powerful creatures of the Old Country.

Gemma and Talan's attraction is immediate, and they make a deal: Gemma will help Talan navigate high society and rebuild his family's reputation. In return, he will help her slay the demon that legend says is behind the old feud between the Ashournes and another powerful family, the Basks. A feud that Gemma's father has long been unhealthily obsessed with.

As Gemma and Talan search for the demon and plot to make fools of the Basks, their attraction blossoms into love. They begin to sense in each other a kindred spirit—someone who works hard to hide their true pain from the world, someone who aches for love but has long decided they don't deserve it. Gemma's best friend, Illaria, doesn't like or trust Talan, but Gemma ignores her warnings.

At a ball thrown by Edyn's queen Yvaine, the Bask family pulls off a cruel trick that makes the Ashournes believe their long-lost wife/mother has returned. In the aftermath, Gemma turns to Talan for comfort. The long-simmering tension between them erupts and they nearly make love, but then Gemma begins to physically transform into a more beautiful, otherworldly version of herself. Her skin and hair glow, her stature sharpens, her teeth elongate. Talan, terrified, flees the scene.

Devastated, Gemma resumes her demon hunting in earnest, without Talan. She tails her father through a network of magical passageways to the demon's lair, where the demon confirms he has been manipulating both Ashournes and Basks into hating each other and keeping the long feud alive. Gemma confronts the demon on her own. The demon is monstrous, grotesque, and keeps to the shadows. Terrified but resolute, Gemma makes him a deal: Help her destroy the Basks once and for all, fix her strange, hated body, and she will give herself to the demon in return.

The demon agrees, but shortly thereafter attacks the Ashbourne house and attempts to abduct Farrin. Desperate to save her sister, Gemma unwittingly unleashes a massive wave of power that drives away the demon and shatters every piece of glass in the house. When Gemma comes to, she discovers that the tremendous act of magic has embedded the shattered glass in her body, coating her with a glittering second skin.

Gemma's father confesses that when Gemma was small, she demonstrated confusing, volatile displays of power belonging to two different gods—the god of the senses (like him) and the god

of the earth (like Gemma's mother). Dual power such as hers is unprecedented. Deciding Gemma was a danger to herself and her family, Gemma's parents hired an artificer—a magical surgeon—to stifle Gemma's power beneath layers of protection. This is the cause for her chronic pain, and perhaps the reason she transformed while with Talan: Her long-dormant dual power is struggling to finally wake up.

Furious that her parents did this to her without her consent and feeling like even more of a monster with the glass in her skin, Gemma flees to Illaria's house for solace. Talan arrives, apologizes for abandoning Gemma at the ball, and pledges his devotion to her. He accepts her exactly as she is—anxiety, chronic pain, confusing power, and all. He understands her drive to self-harm—an urge he has experienced himself in his life of grief and loneliness—and wants to help ease her pain and support her however he can. She may not think she deserves love, but he won't rest until he shows her how worthy she truly is. They make passionate love.

Not long after, they are attacked by the band of monstrous women that has been plaguing the Mistlands. Talan fights them to protect Gemma, but in the confusion Gemma is abducted and taken to a distant forest, where the women live. The women are called Vilia; they are revenants, undead humans brought back to life by necromancers (another powerful Old Country being). The Vilia's necromancer masters are en route to collect a tribute payment, part of which will be Gemma herself. The Vilia sensed the great power Gemma expelled when fighting the demon and consider her a valuable prize for their necromancer masters.

While a captive of the Vilia, Gemma befriends her keeper, Phaidra, who takes pity on Gemma. Phaidra believes Gemma is powerful enough to fight the necromancers and free the Vilia from their captivity. She even suspects Gemma may have fae blood, as the first fae—powerful beings of the Old Country—were offspring of the gods of the senses and the earth, and therefore possessed dual power, just like Gemma.

Phaidra trains Gemma to become physically stronger and guides her to learn more about her emerging power. Gemma's progress is frustratingly slow, and time is ticking. The necromancers will soon arrive. Meanwhile Gemma is worried sick about Talan, whose fate after the fight with the Vilia remains a mystery.

During a training session, Gemma follows the pull of her emerging power to a deeper part of the forest and discovers a familiar sight: the demon's lair. Her family's magical passageways must lead all the way here. The demon arrives and transforms into Talan. Gemma realizes that the demon *is* Talan.

Furious at his deception, Gemma attacks Talan using her burgeoning powers and demands an explanation. He confesses that, yes, he is a demon, possessing powers of disguise and persuasion, and he has long been bound to a mysterious creature named Kilraith. He doesn't know who or what Kilraith is, but Talan is the latest in a long line of demons that Kilraith has

used to foment discord between the Ashbournes and Basks, using the energy of their violence and hatred to sustain himself. When Talan was a child, his demon family was abusive, and after they died in a battle with other magical beings they had wronged, Kilraith found the vulnerable, heartbroken Talan and brought him under his wing.

Talan hates being bound to Kilraith but hasn't ever been able to break the curse that holds him in service to Kilraith. He had accepted his fate before meeting Gemma; his love for her has restored his courage and will to live. He has been working hard to delay and distract Kilraith, keeping Kilraith from delivering the final, fatal blow to Gemma's family. The Talan Gemma knows is Talan's true form; the "demon" she encountered previously was Talan in the form of a monster, one of many forms Kilraith forces him to assume. Demons are actually human-esque creatures, like fae. Talan apologizes for the deception and begs Gemma's forgiveness.

Gemma tentatively decides to trust Talan and considers accepting his apology. She still loves him, and she knows very well what it's like to be failed by the adults in your childhood. But she is nevertheless still wary of him, though it breaks her heart to keep her distance.

With Gemma's Vilia allies, Gemma and Talan devise a plan to attack the necromancers when they arrive, break the curse that binds the Vilia to them, and run. The breaking of a curse should disrupt all magic in the area and confuse Kilraith, allowing Talan to at least temporarily elude him. The plan succeeds, and Gemma, Talan, and their Vilia friends flee.

After leaving the Vilia safely with Mara in the Mistlands, Gemma and Talan join up with Farrin and head to Fairhaven, the capital city. There they seek help from Gareth, Farrin's best friend, who is a librarian and university professor. They're hoping he can get access to the royal archives, the most extensive collection of magical knowledge in the world, and help them discover what the powerful curse is that binds Talan in service to Kilraith—and how to break it. Gareth suggests making a personal petition to the queen, who is one of Farrin's dearest friends.

Talan, meanwhile, fights to mentally block Kilraith's influence, which is both physically and mentally exhausting. Witnessing this, Gemma is more and more convinced that he is actually telling the truth and comforts him when he expresses suicidal thoughts—sentiments Gemma knows all too well. A tender hurt/comfort love scene brings them even closer together.

At the royal Citadel, the group tells their story to the queen, but she denies their request, claiming it's too dangerous to let Talan or anyone associated with him anywhere near the valuable archives. With him still bound to Kilraith, he's a security risk.

Shortly thereafter, a group of chimaera—beastly Olden monsters comprised of multiple animals—invade the Citadel, which has never before been breached. The group fights off the beasts with the help of the Bask siblings, who have been imprisoned since the trick they pulled at the queen's ball. The Bask siblings are wilders, able to communicate with and control animals.

The group becomes reluctant allies, their duty to queen and country superseding the feud of their fathers. With Gareth's help, they discover that Talan is bound to Kilraith by an ancient, obscure curse called *ytheliad*, which requires a physical anchor to function. In addition to controlling Talan, this curse allows Kilraith to travel easily between the realms of Edyn and the Old Country. The group suspects he is behind the growing unrest at the Middlemist and decide the curse must be broken and Kilraith must be destroyed.

With Mara's help, they convene at the Middlemist and travel from there to Talan's homeland in the Old Country, where they will begin the search for the physical object that anchors the *ytheliad*. In the Old Country, Gemma's, Farrin's, and Mara's appearances all change; they become otherworldly, more beautiful, and more powerful versions of themselves.

The Vilia's necromancers ambush them, set on revenge. The group fights them successfully, but Gemma's Vilia friend Phaidra is killed. In the chaos, Talan is lured away by Kilraith into an eerie facsimile of his childhood house. The group follows him and has to navigate a house of horrors—illusions that prey upon their worst fears and try to distract them. Gemma's love for Talan affords her clarity, and she finds Talan at last in the house's attic playroom, where he is now possessed by Kilraith.

Kilraith himself isn't physically present, but through Talan he taunts and attempts to kill Gemma. Gemma's power of the senses—enhanced by the Old Country—helps her find the *ytheliad* anchor. It's a three-jeweled crown buried in Talan's skull beneath layers of glamours. This cruelty reminds her of how the artificer buried her own power beneath layers of protective magic. Aided by her sisters and allies, she fights Kilraith's influence and rips the crown from Talan's head, which breaks the *ytheliad* curse and frees Talan. The act of doing so nearly kills them both. Everyone flees as Kilraith's house of horrors crumbles into the nearby sea.

The group recovers at Rosewarren, tended to by Mara's fellow shieldmaidens. The crown will remain at Rosewarren, secured and hidden. Gemma, Farrin, and Mara all wonder if they are indeed fae, as Phaidra suggested; and if not fae, what are they? Why did the Old Country enhance their magic so drastically? What is Kilraith's ultimate goal, and what other creatures besides Talan could he have bound in service to carry out his evil deeds? Is whatever he's doing tied to the increasingly dangerous instability of the Middlemist?

Gemma and Mara suggest trying to find their mother to learn more about their lineage, a suggestion Farrin angrily rejects. The sisters are left with more questions than answers, and Gemma doesn't know how to forgive either of her parents for what they did to her as a child.

Gemma and Talan reunite. The act of breaking the curse eradicated the glass from Gemma's body, but she and Talan did not emerge unscathed; Gemma's hand that grabbed the crown, and Talan's forehead, beneath which the crown lived, are marked with a glittering net of scars.

Gemma is saddened to realize that she still lives with chronic pain and the panic, even after everything that's happened. But she now feels more capable of managing it and more willing to ask for help doing so. Talan urges her to see a healer who specializes in disorders of the mind. Gemma agrees and feels not frightened by this prospect but energized.

Together, they decide Talan must go into deep hiding to avoid being found by Kilraith, whom they assume is now both wounded and furious. Gemma and Talan tearfully profess their love for each other and make love one last time before he leaves. Gemma returns home brokenhearted but resolute. She will take care of herself, for Talan's sake and for hers; she will find out what mystery lives in the blood of her and her sisters; and she will be ready to fight Kilraith if he ever again tries to hurt the people she loves.

The book ends with the following lines:

I took a deep breath, felt the cool morning air rushing into my lungs. I looked east and said a prayer to the goddess Kerezen, and then another to the god Caiathos. Strength for my Talan. Calm seas and clear skies on whatever roads he traveled—roads that would someday bring him back to me.

And until then, I would learn. I would work. I would fight.

I turned back to Ivyhill and started up the path toward home.