



Unfortunately...

You're Not (Always) in Charge

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Guest: Demi Winters

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Mona West: Welcome to *Unfortunately*, a podcast about fiction, failure, and moving forward. I'm Mona West.

Courtney Floyd: I'm Courtney Floyd.

[Music: A bluesy piano progression with a distinctive drum beat]

Courtney: Hi, everyone. This week we're chatting with Demi Winters, lover of all things fairy tales, fantasy, and romance. Demi lives in British Columbia, Canada with her husband and two kids. When she's not busy brainstorming fantastical worlds and morally gray love interests, Demi loves reading and cooking. Welcome to the podcast.

Demi Winters: Thank you so much for having me.

Mona: We're going to go ahead and get started with an icebreaker. Your icebreaker question is "what is one recent brief experience you had with failure?" I'll go ahead and get started. The one I have today is not writing-related, but I'm just going to say my internet went out today and despite scrambling to try and get my router reset, it didn't work. Now I am on my phone with my headphones and that's not a classic failure, but it's definitely a bit of a podcast failure because it's going to affect the audio and everything like that. Maybe I need to have a better backup plan in case this happens again in the future.

Demi: Should I go next?

Mona: Yes. Demi, go ahead.

Demi: I guess one failure I had this week, although I don't look at it so much as a failure, it's just part of the process, is I have my latest manuscript with beta readers. Those comments are coming in and it's like, things aren't landing perfectly. Of

course, I was hoping that I would write a perfect draft, but it's going to require some work to dig back into.

Courtney: Yes. The transition from a polished final draft to a first draft is brutal and that's related to what I'm struggling with this week. I'm working on materials for my option book, which for those of you who don't know, basically my current editor gets the option to be the first person to make an offer on my next book. It's just called an option book. That's a few chapters and a synopsis. I've been really, really struggling because I am a planner, a plotter, not a pantser, but it feels so tricky.

It feels like I'm committing to something that I don't know if it's going to work out and it's just been giving me lots of block. I've had to switch to writing longhand to trick myself into working on it. Even though I want to work on it, I've just been really struggling with that. Exciting new failures all the time.

Mona: We're never going to run out of topics, I think.

[laughter]

Courtney: Awesome. Now that the ice is broken, we have been asking a question about the writing journey because we're in an industry where so many of our efforts and our failures are invisible and where it's easy for readers and the public, and even us as fellow writers to think of each other as overnight successes when it may have taken decades for us to arrive. In the interest of making some of that invisible work more visible, can you tell us where you're at in your writing journey, Demi, and what you went through to get there?

Demi: Yesh. I think I'm kind of a weird situation in the publishing world. I actually started writing just under four years ago. I always loved writing as a kid. I always wrote tons of stories. I mostly started stories-- I definitely had trouble with the follow-through. I hit a point of really bad burnout in my other job. I was really missing that creativity that had initially sparked my interest in that field. I don't know, I just got the idea to write a book and I could not shake this idea and I just wholeheartedly hyper-focused on it.

For the next two years that I wrote the book, it was like I wrote it, it was terrible, I threw it out, I started from scratch, I wrote it over again, I got beta readers and I hired a developmental editor and I basically had to completely tear it apart again and rewrite it again. During that time, I was super, super focused on craft and why-- I could identify things that weren't landing, but I had no idea why or how to fix them. I really focused on that during that time. Then June 2023, I was like, "Okay, this is finally ready. This is the best I can do with the skills that I have."

I felt really good about self-publishing it. I personally knew that trying to find an agent and querying was not going to be great for my mental health. My previous job was I ran a food blog. I was very comfortable with entrepreneurship and steering this ship on my own. I was happy to self-publish it. From there, I always said, if an agent found me, I would follow up that opportunity for sure. I did, to my great shock, get approached by an agent who found me on TikTok. I didn't know if anything would come from this.

We waited till my second book released in February and sent the book out. It got picked up by Delacorte Press, which is an imprint of Penguin. They actually picked up all five books in the series, which is just like [laughs] I remember that week just being like, "What just happened?" Then to take it full circle, that book deal allowed me to officially sell my old business and just fully focus on writing. That's my crazy story. If you had asked me four years ago if I had ever thought this would happen, I would say no.

Courtney: That is amazing. Congratulations. Can you just for the listeners share, what's the title of that first book? Does the series have a name, too?

Demi: Yes. The first book is called *The Road of Bones*, and it's part of the Ashen series. It's like Vikings and romance and magic. Total- [crosstalk]

Courtney: That's amazing.

Mona: Sounds incredible.

Demi: -in this world.

Mona: It's like your journey. Your bio says you're a lover of all things fairy tales. Your journey here has been a bit of a fairy tale at least, outside looking in, it just looks like it's been remarkable, really.

Demi: Yeah. It has been a little bit crazy for me. I worked very hard on crafting the book, but it was more for myself to feel really proud of what I had put out there. I just didn't expect all this to happen. I'm very grateful and glad I never had to go in the trenches and have all those rejections. I actually did query for one week because I started to get foreign requests. I was like, "I'm not signing a German contract without an agent." I queried for one week and it was the absolute worst for me. I was like, "Oh, this is awful."

Mona: We have a number of questions and I'm going to go out of order a little bit because I want to follow up on that point. You mentioned this in your interest form that you haven't experienced failure the way a lot of others would define it. The exposure you had to querying, for example, was brief enough and you were set down the right path confidently enough that you didn't have to continue with that process. What are you worried about now as you move forward in your career? What are the things that you might consider failures or frustrations that you run into since this all happened or that you anticipate happening in the future?

Demi: Since it's a five-book series that they picked up, I don't have to deal with the next chapter for a while, what comes next from this book series. Just thinking forward. Submitting proposals and all that to the editor sounds like a very different experience to how the other books came about, which was just such a passion project. To suddenly have to think about things commercially will be definitely a mindset shift. In the same vein, I have learned so much about writing since coming up with that initial book that I've just learned so much. Hopefully that helps the process.

I do want to say that I was very happy self-publishing. I know with TikTok going away [\[it came back day later\]](#), that definitely changes the landscape for indie publishers. I hope that with the series, I'll be able to build a bit enough readership that they might follow me. I would be happy to self-publish again. I'm not as worried about selling the next book to a publisher if that makes sense. Having a traditional publisher definitely opens a lot of doors, though. I would love to keep working with the trad [traditional publishing] industry, but it's not going to be the be-all end-all for me.

Courtney: Totally with you on that. I have not self-published a book, but I have produced a three-season indie audio drama. I think there are some parallels there. I'm always thinking about like, what is the best audience and best way to send my stories out into the world? The indie piece of things is, I think, a piece of the puzzle that writers should consider. There are so many valuable things about trad, but also, we live in the world we live in. I think flexibility is a really key part to building a sustainable and a career that's as long as you want it to be and as rewarding as you want it to be.

Demi: Yeah, definitely. Part of my book deal did not include this novella that I have. I'm kind of in this limbo right now where I don't know if they're going to buy it. Either way, it's going to get published. I'm going to self-publish it probably. It didn't fit in book two, and it didn't fit in book three. I was like, "I need this story to be out there." Anyway, we get to keep our options open.

Mona: Yeah. It's very cool that you have experience with those options. You are more comfortable saying, "Well, because this doesn't fit this paradigm, we can go down this paradigm." Whereas I think some people get laser-focused on one or the other, and they have a really hard time thinking about alternative ways to get their stuff out into the world.

Courtney: I'm wondering about what your experience has been like shifting from self-publishing to trad pub in terms of like you have all of this control, this creative control. It can be 1000% your vision. You already mentioned there's like benefits to trad pub, but what has that been like? Are there cons mixed in there, too?

Demi: Yeah. The team at Penguin that I've been working with has been absolutely amazing. I was definitely worried that I would lose some sort of creative control. That has not been my experience at all. I was lucky in that the book didn't require extensive-- it didn't require any rewrites. It's like, really? Okay. I know that was going to be another question we did just to line and copy edit. Wait, no, we just did a copy edit and proofread. Sorry, I still get all the different types of edits confused. That was amazing because the proofreaders found some little inconsistencies and I was so glad to get those cleaned up. Having to do all that yourself as an indie author-- even if you hire a proofreader, you hire other editors-- to have multiple people proofreading for you and they're really, really invested in catching these typos, that is just such a weight off my shoulders. I absolutely love that. I was definitely worried about creative control. I write really long books. I'm happy they're still going to let me write these long books. That was definitely another reason that I didn't want to query because the book ended up being 100-- the first book was 170,000 words.

It was rejected based on word count. It was just a long story that required-- I've realized I write very complex, twisty plots, and it just required that many words to get

the story out. Sorry, I feel like I've gotten a little off track. Cons. It's definitely slower. I don't personally mind that though because I think letting the manuscript sit is so, so important. I think that might be a step that some indies miss, is just so important to let it sit. I'm at the point with my current manuscript, where I'm like, "I can't tell if this is completely boring or not." I've completely lost my perspective on it at this point.

I know that after my editor is done with it, I'll have a fresh perspective. The other thing that's been a little bit-- it's just a little annoyance really, is that just navigating the whole system of having a US publisher who serves certain regions and a UK publisher who serves different regions, and they both made different decisions about keeping the existing ebook available. The ebook was available through the US publisher, but not through the UK publisher, so I get emails from people where the UK publisher serves-- Australia, New Zealand—and they're like, "Why can't I access the book but then Americans can?" I will be glad when the next book releases February 4 [2025]. Then everything will be available everywhere.

Courtney: Oh, nice. My deal was for world rights so I haven't had to navigate that but I've been following along as other folks navigate that in the debut group. It sounds like so much stress that is completely outside of your control, but that people are coming to you asking you to control it. That's a lot.

Demi: Yeah. I'm trying to also untrain myself from being in charge of all of that. Because when you're self-published, you're responsible for all the customer service. The other day, I got an email about why is it taking so long for the German edition to ship. I started to email my agent who was going to email their sub-agents who is then going to-- and I just paused. I'm like, "Okay, you're going to need to contact customer service," because this is not a me-- I need to just be writing the books."

Mona: It's hard to turn off that entrepreneurial background, and hard to turn off the like, "Well, I can do it, right?" Now you have a team. Yes.

Demi: Yes. It's I could do it but should I be handling all these requests and using up all my spoons for the day? It's hard.

Mona: Absolutely.

Demi: The one the huge thing of being with a traditional publisher is getting the books in bookstores. It's so hard for indies. To walk into the bookstore and see my book has been absolutely amazing. The other thing is they got my book into a [Book of the Month box](#), which was just like-- I don't know if you can see [the books on Demi's shelf], half of those books are from Book of the Month. I'm a subscriber and I was just floored and completely blown away. It was just such a cool thing to reach a lot of new readers.

Mona: I want to ask a question that-- it's not one of the questions that we sent you and completely fine if this is a question you want to skip over. I'm very curious because I have said again and again in the podcast, I've been writing a very long time, but I'm still clawing my way into the writing world as much as possible. I have had just a few things published and I have a novel that I'm working on, which on the one hand, I'm jealous of all the successes that my friends are having and on the other hand, it's like, "You haven't actually finished a book yet. You haven't even tried

to get out there in the world so there's nothing to be jealous about. You've got to finish the stupid thing."

But I'm curious because your writing career started, it sounds like not too long ago. It's been really amazing that you started not too long ago and have already managed to find yourself in this position. Have you had to deal with people who are naysaying because you haven't been doing it long enough? You didn't struggle hard enough? I just wonder if there are people out there who have not given you credit for everything you've accomplished because it doesn't look like the typical journey of a lot of folks that is longer and fraught with a little bit more rejection and failure along the way.

Demi: I haven't experienced this at all. I found the writing community--

Mona: That's fantastic.

Demi: -- be really welcoming. I will admit that I was a little worried about that when I joined the 2025 debut server because I felt like I didn't do the query trenches, is this going to be seen as "I just won the golden ticket and got to the chocolate factory?" [laughs] No, everyone has been incredibly welcoming and supportive. I recognize that I have this leg up in some ways over other debuts because I have now got followers on Instagram and, well, TikTok. [laughter]

Mona: Yeah. RIP. [Nevermind]

Demi: I've got a newsletter and I've got a little bit of a platform. It's not a huge platform but I do try to offer to blurb debuts and give their books a voice on my platform. I hope that I'm putting the good karma out there and being a good community member.

Mona: That's really encouraging to hear too because I know other industries can be a little bit more ruthless, but definitely in my professional field of healthcare, people are not as understanding necessarily. Everyone is just like, "I want to be the best." Sometimes that means they have to sabotage somebody else, or they at least are not going to speak kindly of somebody else. It's always so reassuring that again and again, the writing community, I'm reminded of how wonderful it is, and how supportive it is, and how it's really just rooting for everyone. I just think that's also a huge part of how you succeed.

Demi: Yeah, no, I come from a more cutthroat world as well. I did like advanced degrees in biochemistry. [laughs] It's cutthroat, so I feel that.

Mona: I can only imagine. It's a better, more welcoming place to be. You don't always feel like you're having to watch your back. You don't feel like you're always trying to one-up somebody else. Everyone is just in it for everyone else, which is awesome.

In your interest form was the fact that you've taken a lot of the struggles in your life and put them into your stories. Using the writing as a way to-- it's kind of therapeutic because you're able to recontextualize and reevaluate these things that you're going through that may be really hard.

I was wondering if you could talk more about the vulnerability of doing that. That's something I also find to be one of the best parts of writing is that you can take something that you're really struggling with in the real world and turn it into a story that gives you closure or clarity or whatever the case may be. At the same time, you are putting yourself out there, maybe more so than someone who's not writing from a personal place like that. Because even if it's hidden in the fiction, a lot of your mental health, your "weaknesses," those sorts of things are in the story. Does it ever give you pause to put your vulnerabilities in the stories, especially now knowing that your stories are reaching a wide audience? Do you ever worry about how you're representing those experiences, traumas, and things like that? Because I know there's a lot of focus on Own Voices and making sure that we are representing things appropriately, but every experience is different. Does that ever nag at you at the back of your mind?

Demi: Very good question. I am weirdly not bothered at all to put that stuff in the stories. Maybe it's just like I've hit a certain age where I just don't care anymore. [chuckles] I don't know. I'm not worried about it at all. I personally connect better to characters who are struggling with mental health or some physical aspect. I think everyone on this planet has struggled in some way and to see it represented, even if it's not quite the same, is very validating. I also think it's amazing that we live in this day and age where we can talk about this stuff because it wasn't that long ago that even mentioning these things was so stigmatized.

When I was writing *The Road of Bones*, I was suffering very much from burnout and working with a therapist. I feel like I was working through a lot of things and it was just so cathartic to put it into the book. For example-- it's still so strange to me-- I would suddenly realize that I hadn't left the house for like three weeks and I hadn't even noticed until I was talking to my mom and I'm like, "Hey, this is the first time I've left the house in three weeks." She's like, "Oh, honey, what?" I put that into a character in the book who suffers from agoraphobia.

I don't actually struggle from agoraphobia. I just had this... hide myself away in my office and write or just hide in my room and read. For that character, I made sure to seek out both a sensitivity reader to make sure that portrayal of agoraphobia because I knew-- I don't suffer from panic attacks or anything like that. I certainly could not write to that aspect of it. I had a sensitivity reader. I just wanted to reach out to somebody who had lived experience because my sensitivity reader did not have lived experience.

I put a call out to my readers and I was lucky I had a little bit of a platform at that time because this character doesn't appear until book two. I was able to find a reader who was willing to help out with that. She's been amazing because she can really get inside the character's head and help me find those little things that make it real. I think for her, it is also maybe cathartic to see what she's lived through represented in an accurate and respectful way. I've also had sensitivity readers for portrayal of race, for disability. Hekla has a prosthetic arm.

At first with that character, because this is fantasy, I had her have a super arm. It just was better than a human arm. I felt like after I read through it, I was like, "No, I feel like that's just erasing her disability entirely." I rewrote it and made it more realistic in that she has joint pain, she has phantom limb pain, and irritation on her residual limb.

There are certain things that she's hindered with having this prosthetic arm and just things like that. I had a sensitivity reader who really helped me with those. I hope that answered your question. I kind of rambled.

Mona: It does. No, no, no. I've been rambling this whole time. No, that is wonderful. I think that also, to me, the fact that you have no concerns about sharing this probably is directly related to the fact that you are doing it so well and sensitively and making sure that you're representing in an accurate way. I'm making an assumption there. I think that there are people who are confident in their ability to write this stuff in a vacuum. The fact that being able to recognize where your lived experience is going to be helpful, but then where someone else's lived experience is going to be important is the key to ensuring that the representation is accurate.

It's really cool that you have such a different variety of characters so that so many different people are going to see themselves in the writing, because one of my favorite experiences is reading something, and even having a little moment where I'm like, "Wow, I've experienced that. I've been that person, and I've never really seen that before in fiction," or I didn't know other people were experiencing that. It's going to be awesome for those, I think, characters to be out in the world and for people to discover them.

Courtney: Maybe this is my little bubble of internet community, but I think people are really hungry for those kind of stories. I have a background in Critical Disability Studies, and the thing that really sticks with me is there's a scholar, [Rosemarie Garland-Thomson](#), who talks about the fact that we all move in and out of disability throughout our lives. There's something, yeah, as you said, incredibly validating about seeing even a fragment of that experience on the page. Because I think the default, especially in fantasy, is these 20-something bodies who are like, they can just go and go and go and burn the candle at both ends, and for some reason, we rarely get to experience them dealing with the burnout or the injury or the trauma from that that we all carry because we live in the real world.

Demi: Agreed. I find that when I do encounter characters like that, they stick out in my mind. I'm still thinking of this one character from [Godkiller](#) [by Hannah Kaner] who had, I think she had a prosthetic arm, and maybe I was looking at this more closely because I had gone through it, but I was like, "Wow, she really wrote that. She really did that character justice. She really dug into it." The book and the character still stick in my mind.

Mona: You hear all this backlash to the Mary Sues and stuff like that, but I think there's something valid about the fact that readers are tired of invulnerable, perfect characters because that doesn't reflect any of our experiences. It also lends itself to more, I think, satisfying and gratifying storytelling, because your characters aren't just going to solve every problem without a challenge. They actually have to figure out how they're going to do X, Y, and Z, given the circumstances they're in, given the context, given the world. Things aren't coming easily because when things come easily, there's real no story. I think it's awesome to see more of this.

Demi: One thing that was really important to me is I wanted to write a female main character who was not an assassin, who was not endowed with a sword. She was actually inspired by a rom-com heroine. She's in this totally bleak world. She ends up

climbing in a mercenary cruise wagon, and they're called the Bloodaxe Crew. It's like watching this sunshine dynamics with the grumpy Viking warriors. It was really fun because they slowly realized that no, she runs away whenever there's danger. She trips over rocks and apologizes to them. She's so--

[laughter]

Mona: That's too real.

Demi: It is. She always gets back up. She is so resilient. Her superpower is her resilience. That was really fun to write.

Mona: She sounds really cool. I would like to meet her. I'm looking forward to picking up the book and meeting her. To circle back to the theme of the podcast, the thesis of the podcast, and how we're overcoming frustrations and failures and stuff. I think this is a really excellent example when people are struggling with how to represent characters that they don't have experience with. I know that can be a real challenge. If done wrong, it can really, really backfire. This is a good lesson.

If you can write outside your own experience, you just have to make sure you're consulting with the right people and you're doing it in good faith, and you're doing it thoughtfully. You can very much succeed.

Demi: On that note, though, I think there are some things that you need to stay away from when you're writing outside your own-- like writing a character of a different race from my own is one thing, but writing about their racial struggles, or their struggles with racism is something I would never touch. It's not my story to tell. I do treat my characters with disabilities in the same vein, in that there are certain struggles for them I would not personally tackle because it's not Own Voices. I want to be able to 100% stand behind what I write.

Courtney: I have a similar rule for myself of, if it's an experience that I have lived, then I can tell the story about what it's like to live that experience. Otherwise, what I'm trying to do is just let people see themselves in the worlds I create, but not tell their stories for them. It's a fine line. You have to be very considered and thoughtful. The beauty of writing is that you do it alone, but you don't have to do all of it alone.

The sensitivity readers and the editors, all of their perspectives can help us make sure that we're not only staying true to our visions and accomplishing what we're trying to, but also not causing undue harm to populations that are already marginalized and traumatized often by media.

Mona: Absolutely. I have a follow-up question to that. Because your writing journey really was born out of this burnout and finding yourself in a darker place, and those themes and those experiences have shown up in the work that you've written so far. With your deal, with the expectation that you're going to continue to write, do you feel like your ability to be flexible like that and your ability to put into the story whatever you want, whatever experiences you feel are going to be most valuable, do you think you still have that freedom or do you think there's more pressure now to be more "commercial," whatever that might mean? Ultimately, tailoring your writing more to maybe the audiences and the zeitgeist, as opposed to what is really in your heart.

Demi: That's a good question. I think I'm okay with the current series that I have because I feel like I really know those characters. There are constantly new characters being introduced, but the main characters with point-of-view chapters, I already know them pretty well. I don't think I'm going to have any issues with them. Then looking forward to the next series, it could be an issue. Who knows? Because when I came up with this series, it was just me writing what I wanted to see. It was not driven by any commercial expectation at all.

I guess I have to just trust in my taste. Because when I wrote what I wanted to see, I was like, "I hope other people want to see this too. I think I'll just have to trust in my taste, and that what I want to see, other people do as well."

Courtney: I'm really curious. I always thought I was going to be a series writer, and I have written an audio drama series, but so far all of my novels have been standalones. I'm wondering what that's like. Are you naturally thinking in serieses and how's the experience been of you've sold them and now you write them, and I don't know, I've heard people talk about painting themselves into corners with past books because once it's out there, you can't go back and retcon or whatever. What has that been like for you?

Demi: I always knew I wanted it to be a series because fantasy series have been some of my favorite to read. I feel like once you get a handle on the world-building, there's just something so magical and you truly do feel like you're transported into a different world. It's so hard to do standalones in fantasy because to get all the world-building without doing info dumps and to have a complex plot, it's hard. It's hard. I applaud all the standalone fantasy authors out there. I have the whole series plotted. Kudos to the developmental editor I initially hired because she asked me, "How does the series end?"

I was like, "I don't know." [laughs] Then she told me, "Well you should probably know." So I sat down and I plotted it out very basic point form. And I was so glad I did because I could sprinkle things in the first book that actually won't come to fruition until book five. It's all plotted out. I can't remember what your question was, but I'm not worried about finishing it because I have it plotted out. If I hadn't done that, then absolutely that would be worrisome. It's so easy to switch things. This thing I had for book four is now in book three and this thing for book three is in book four. If I hadn't plotted it, I wouldn't be able to shift things around like that.

Courtney: Yeah, I think you did answer my question and I maybe had not articulated it, but definitely, that was one thing I was wondering about because in the audio drama series I wrote, I did not plan the ending and that was hard. It makes a lot of sense and it empowers you to do so many cool things if you know the ending, but--

Demi: I still discover a ton while I'm writing. Even though I have these things plotted out, all of a sudden this thing comes from left field and there's one character who's always messing with my plans. It's not like you have to be one or the other, but it's all about finding a system that works for you, I think.

Courtney: Absolutely, yes.

Mona: Having that flexibility because one of the most exciting things about writing in my view is the fact that stories do kind of write themselves once they hit a certain point and they develop this momentum and the characters are like, "I would do this" or "I wouldn't do this." You have to learn to dodge and parry with that because you may have it all in your mind and your characters have something else that they want to do and you have to learn how to adapt to that. That's really an exciting part of it.

I imagine though in a series that does come with challenges because something that happens in book two that you didn't anticipate could have repercussions and echo through the rest of the book. Actually, I guess I have a question about that is when that happens with a series like this that is longer, how do you incorporate those changes and make sure they're not breaking something later on?

Demi: I don't actually know the answer to that because I feel like I'm still figuring this out. I'm still learning the most efficient way for me to write a book. I'm trying to [chuckles] things this time. I think you have to be really careful. There was some details I had to include in book one that weren't going to come to fruition until book three. I had to sit down and go, "Okay, what's going to happen in book three," to detailed levels because I had to set that up properly. I don't know how writers can "discovery write" a series, to be honest. I applaud them.

Mona: If you're like George R. R. Martin, you just kind of stop. That's one strategy.

Courtney: It is so relatable that you're still learning the most efficient way. I feel like as a writer, I'm constantly trying to build a better mousetrap. I'm trying to hack myself into getting it right in the first draft, which is impossible, I think. I don't even know why I want that, because it is so rewarding to go through the revision process and to make it all come together seamlessly. I think without that process, I wouldn't even see some of the most amazing things about the story to pull out. I still am constantly trying to be more efficient, to build a better mousetrap, whatever. It is a vicious cycle with every book.

Demi: My unpopular opinion is that revisions are my favorite part because to watch it transform, it's my favorite. To watch everything come together, and it always feels like it's not going to, and then suddenly it has, and that's my favorite part.

Mona: I second that. I really like it because the hard part's done, honestly. The foundation is built, and now you get to do the fun stuff of making the house on top of it and making it fit and look exactly how you want. I love revisions.

Demi: To me it's decoration.

Mona: Yeah, exactly. Getting to that point, building that foundation, you've got to start there, unfortunately. You can't build a house without the foundation. There's pros and cons, but I agree with you there. Before we get to the very last question, I want to follow up on something that, again, was not in the questions we sent out, but I'm very curious to hear your answer on this. Because you do have experience with going too hard and hitting that burnout point, things are moving quick, and you have a lot ahead of you.

You're writing a big series with a lot of moving parts in an industry with a lot of moving parts. Do you worry that burnout could rear its head again? Are there steps you're taking to try and mitigate that? Because it sounds like this is something you really love but that doesn't necessarily protect you from hitting a point where it's just too much.

Demi: That is a very good question. It's something that I worry about a lot, to be honest. What I didn't tell you is before-- I have a history of hitting a burnout with things and then totally pivoting my entire life. I did an advanced degree in biochemistry. I was absolutely in love with it at the start. By the end of my degree, I was like, "Nope, this is not for me." And so I pivoted. I had started this food blog for fun during the process, and then I realized people were making a living running food blogs. Then I built that up. When I finished my degree, I pivoted into food blogging.

Eight years later or so, I hit a wall with that and that's when I pivoted into writing. I'm very conscious about this. There was such a hustle mentality back then. I feel like maybe it's just the content that I'm consuming these days, but I feel like we've reached a turning point where the hustle culture is no longer revered the way it was. I personally have made it extremely important to me that I take evenings and weekends off. It's like you work at home. It's so easy to just go back into the office and I'll just answer that email or whatever. So I've been careful to put strict boundaries on my working hours. It's hard when you really love something and you want to do it all the time. I'm also a lot better at putting up boundaries with being online. Part of the reason that I burned out with my food blog was just this constant online content-making machine. I was just online all the time, getting feedback all the time on social media. With the writing, I'm just trying to keep a little bit of a veil between myself and readers. When I was doing food blogging, it was this era where people were just making themselves completely vulnerable to their followers.

People still do that and that is great for them, but now I know that is not for me. I'm happy to share my mental health struggles and talk about them with you guys, but I don't think I need to be out there on social media, constantly talking about it and getting feedback from people on it all the time. I don't know if that was just like a rambling response, but boundaries. [laughs] I'm trying to build that. The other thing is I have hobbies that I cannot monetize.

[laughter]

I cannot monetize my garden. I guess I could, but I'm growing frivolous flowers. I'm not going to sell any of them. [laughs]

Mona: If you do monetize though, that's the name of the company. Frivolous Flowers.

[laughter]

Demi: Yeah. Because my hobbies, I kept monetizing them. No more monetizing my hobbies.

Courtney: I'm right with you there. I think we have enough time for one more question before we wrap up. This one is about debut year. Whatever timescale you

want. I think given the timescale of when your books have come out, I think it's fair to keep counting this year as part of it. It seems like it's just been really rapid fire, but so debut can be really surreal in a lot of ways, good and bad. I'm wondering what's been the hardest parts of the process for you or even the most surprising-- for example, for me, maybe this this should not have surprised me at all, but the thing that I've been really struggling with is being a professional public author for the first time, and how that has impacted my mental health very immediately.

In a year where I feel like I should be celebrating all the time, I'm really stressed out a lot because of navigating that and not feeling like I have all of the resources or even, I don't know, internalized ableism making me think I should be able to do things that I just don't have the capacity for all the time. Anyways, surreal experience, good and bad. What has been the most striking part of that for you?

Demi: First of all, I have to completely agree with you because being a creative person in your writing cave is so very different from all of a sudden you're a forward-facing figure. I don't think any writers get into it for that. I certainly don't. I was actually running away from that type of thing when I was writing. Yes, I feel you on that. When I look back though, on my debut year, because I had been running the social media stuff for a year before I published, that was less strenuous for me than just putting the work out there because even though I'd had critique partners and editors and people I paid to give me feedback and everything, you just never know how candid they're being.

They could not want to hurt your feelings. Even though I have like no heart-- no, that's not right--, but I'm extremely resistant to criticism. I think it's because of my background in science. It's just part of it there. You're always critiquing each other's work and it's only to strengthen the work. I'm not worried about negative reviews, but I just didn't know how the work would be received. I was proud of what I had put out there. That was really important to me is to get it to a point where I was happy and I had done the best I could with the tools that I had.

I had no idea how it would be received. That was big uncertainty for me when I put it out initially. You just don't know if you're going to have the same taste, if what's really important to you in a book, if that's going to resonate with others. Also, there are some subtleties in my book that are-- it's hard to explain without spoiling the whole thing-- there are red flags in the book about the love interest that starts to snowball. I wasn't sure how that was going to be received, because romantasy, there are always red flags, and we just overlook them. I'm playing with people a little with that. I did not know how that was going to be received, but people have loved it. I think that actually is the reason for the book's success. The uncertainty was the hardest part for me.

Courtney: I feel that in my bones.

Demi: Just being untested or you know what I mean? I think having it out is just relief.

Courtney: I will report back in October to let how I feel about that too.

Demi: When's your release date?

Courtney: October 7th. I've got a ways to go.

Mona: It'll be here before you know it.

Demi: Yeah, time flies.

Courtney: Thank you so much. This has been such a fabulous conversation. I am really, really excited to go get a copy of your book and read it right away. Everything you've said, I'm just like, I have to read this. It's at the top of my TBR [to-be-read list]. Can you tell readers where to find you and pitch a thing that you'd like them to do?

Demi: Sure. I am at DemiWinters.com and on Instagram as DemiWintersWrites. I'm on TikTok [at DemiWintersWriters]. I'm in Canada. Technically our TikTok isn't shutting down, but just 80% of my readers will no longer be there, which is really sad. The books are called *The Road of Bones* and the second one is called *Kingdom of Claw*. I'm hard at work on book three. Act Two is kicking my butt right now.

Courtney: It's the hardest act.

[laughter]

That's awesome. Yeah. Just for context, listeners, we're recording this like, isn't it like the day before TikTok is getting shut down theoretically in the US? Yeah. It is very real for a lot of creatives online at this point. It's a hard week for a number of reasons, especially in the US.

Mona: No further comment on that.

Courtney: Thank you so much. This has been a delight.

Demi: Thank you for having me.

[music: A bluesy piano progression with a distinctive drum beat, which fades into the sound of a crashing train]

[00:53:07] [END OF AUDIO]