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## Critical Introduction

### A History of Genre Fiction

A philosopher named Walter Gallie argues that topics such as art are “essentially contested concepts,” meaning that there exist some concepts whose essential definitions are contestable. In other words, the proper use of these concepts “inevitably involves endless disputes... on the part of their users” (Gallie 169). This is seen in the disputes of what constitutes as art in the waves of romanticism, modernism, and post-modernism, just to name a few. But what are the factors at play which create these essentially contested concepts? Gallie argued that there are four criteria which must be met for a concept to be essentially contested. 1. The term must signify some valued achievement (Gallie 171). 2. The achievement must be of an internally complex character (Gallie 171-72). 3. “Any explanation of its worth must... include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features” (Gallie 172). 4. The achievement must be capable of considerable modification in light of changing circumstances without being prescribed or predicted in advance (Gallie 172). For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus almost entirely on the form of art that is literature, especially as it pertains to what is now called “genre fiction”.

First, let us consider the current state of affairs. In the consumer market, romance as a genre (read “category of fiction”) is consistently the most popularly bought and consumed among fiction books. “However, when we shift our attention to non-fiction, religious and inspirational books take the lead. And if we’re talking about audiobooks, thrillers seem to have the most captive audience” (Thornton). One might have assumed that because romance was the most popular genre in fiction, that would naturally correlate to being the most popular among

audiobooks. However, since that isn't the case, we have learned something important about readers' habits: the ways in which readers engage with fiction actually have a correlation with the types of stories they like to consume.

In addition, there's a market difference between traditionally published books (books picked up by publishing houses that are then printed in a number of copies and shipped to bookstores to be sold off shelves) and self-published books (manuscripts directly uploaded to sites like Amazon by the authors themselves that are then made available to the online market). In years past, it would have been utterly impossible to get a self-published book into the hands of thousands of readers. Now, however, there have been recent breakthroughs in the self-publishing realm that enable authors to find a viable consumer base for their books without the lengthy process of traditional publishing. Traditional publishing still holds the upper hand when it comes to gaining the attention of mass consumers, but one wonders if that will continue to be the case for much longer.

Lastly, even the ways in which people learn about new books have changed. Prior to the internet, most people would find new books from newspaper reading lists (such as the New York Times) or their local library's recommendations. Now, though, social media and online advertising customized for individuals have allowed people to refine the scope of their focus to authors or styles of fiction that they enjoy. Simply by following a handful of authors on Instagram, a person can be exposed to a wealth of fiction in-line with their tastes and proclivities. There are even websites like Goodreads dedicated to providing online space for groups of like-minded readers to discuss and promote their favorite authors or books.

The modern-day literary marketplace is thus impacted by several different factors: modes of reading, modes of publishing, and modes of interaction among readers and authors. Andrew

Goldstone, in a 2023 article titled “Origins of the US Genre-Fiction System, 1890–1956”, provides a holistic examination of how this phenomenon recently gave rise to what we now call “genre fiction”:

“Genre fiction” is a familiar phrase today, widely used to designate certain kinds of fiction: crime stories, romance novels, Westerns, science fiction, and so on.... The term... has little currency before the 1970s, and no earlier equivalent is to be found. The phrase is fifty years old or so; here, I mean to show that the thing itself is not more than fifty years older. Genre may be perennial, but genre fiction was a new institution of early to mid-twentieth-century US print culture that significantly reshaped the production and circulation of fiction. Genre fiction should be understood as the result of the institutionalization of popular fiction categories as a *system* that came to be persistently and self-consciously used by writers, readers, publishers, and libraries (Goldstone 203).

This is important to understand because it shows that: a.) literature as a whole has historically been influenced by changing markets, new technologies, and different consumer groups; and b.) using “genre fiction” as a pejorative is an incorrect historical and theoretical application of the term. Therefore, it is entirely unfair to use genre fiction’s emergence as a market phenomenon to justify the denigration of science fiction and fantasy as though such a phenomenon is somehow a unique, negative feature of those genres alone.

On that note, there are those who claim more precisely that “commercial fiction” (fiction that is produced with a commercial audience in mind) is inherently less artistic than “literary fiction”. That argument runs something along these lines: “Pure art is that which is produced by the artist as an expression of their inner creativity. It is not merely a commercial product. The author of literary fiction writes without regard to the current market trends or reader desire. By

contrast, the author of commercial fiction necessarily sacrifices elements of their inner creativity in order to better suit their fiction to market demand.” Understanding this argument more specifically, a person might say that an author of a popular romance novel doesn’t create art because they tailor their characters and plot to the trends of the market (perhaps by adding steamy sex scenes or using a character trope that is popular at the time). Another way to think of this argument is to imagine two coffee tables: one from a person who crafted it by hand according to their own artistic sensibilities (whether or not consumers might like them or find them useful), and the other from a person who crafted it according to a model that consumers regularly purchased. One is art, the other a commercial product.

That is one assumption I want to push back on in this introduction. *Why* is it that a person who produces fiction in line with market desires necessarily gives up the right to call their creation “art”? Asking this question often spawns contentious discussions which can quickly devolve into *ad hominin* attacks between both parties. This is partly because these types of discussions focus too much on present-day circumstances and lack necessary context. In order to prevent this essay from doing the same, it’s necessary to lay a foundation of understanding regarding the emergence of genre fiction in America.

Goldstone offers a helpful historical analysis in this venture. He addresses the present issue of wide-ranging ignorance when he reminds us that, “Though genre fiction is now ubiquitous, and though both book history and literary studies have devoted considerable attention to individual genres like science fiction and romance novels, the history of the system of popular fiction categories has been little studied” (Goldstone Abstract). But why? Goldstone has an answer for this, too:

... whereas studies of individual genres are numerous, historical studies of the system itself have been rare. This neglect is not only due to the long-standing and still widespread critical prejudice against mass-cultural writing, assumed to be uninteresting because it is generic or formulaic. Even scholars who take popular fiction seriously often assume that this fiction must inevitably be what we now call genre fiction. “Popular fiction,” contends Ken Gelder in his valuable survey, “is, essentially, genre fiction” (204).

Goldstone goes on to explain that in the early 1900s there was no broad classification of fiction—meaning, fiction wasn’t split between the genres of romance, mystery, etc. Rather, categories of fiction were only used sporadically in the 1910s, and only by the 20s and 30s was there an institutionalized format of genre, though only in pulp magazines. Even these categories are markedly different from the categories of today, with romance often being referred to as “love stories” and so on (Goldstone 203). Because such categories were used by pulp magazines, which were often dismissed as low-quality, theoreticians and academics came to associate genre fiction with the stigma attached to pulp fiction. Eventually this use of genre categorization made its way into book publishing, which Goldstone explains in the following way:

The genre-fiction system was transmitted to book publishing only in the course of the so-called “paperback revolution” of the 1940s and 1950s, which made room for fiction-book production by categories while relegating it to a permanently low-status position. This transmission across publishing formats was far from deliberate; instead... the system of genre fiction arose and endured as a stable compromise articulating an expanded fiction-reading public to an expansive print culture industry, making new readers and new fiction---and new kinds of fiction---regularly available to each other in an enduringly hierarchized field (Goldstone 203).

This is significant because it demonstrates that the term “genre fiction” did not begin as a classification for a low-ranking form of literature, but rather as the product of unplanned coordinating interests among publishers, authors, and readers. As Goldstone explains, “actors in the literary field—publishers, writers, readers, and others—gradually adopted fiction genre labels and increasingly understood them *as* a distinctive system. Only when this process was complete did it become usual to speak of ‘genre fiction’ and to take this system and its categories for granted as part of print culture” (204).

Therefore, we can understand the emergence of genre fiction as a phenomenon of a society that began to recognize the dynamic, often amorphous, and semi-distinct differences between various types of fiction. By way of example, Goldstone points out that Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1893) was in its own time described as a “study of crime”:

Labeling one of the great inaugural bestsellers of the detective story a “study of crime” seems, in present-day terms, like an absurd category error. The term “detective story” was certainly available—*Publishers’ Weekly* was using it in 1890—but the genre was a contingent, informal shorthand in book-talk; Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories did not yet have an *obligatory* subcategory label. Indeed, the genre label in the title of the book is “Adventures” (Goldstone 207).

Such “category errors” began to dissipate as the system of genre fiction became more widely accepted over the following decades. “By 1930,” Goldstone continues, “an *equivalence* was widely implied among multiple genres: the detective story was no longer idiosyncratic but rather typical of a whole family of genres” (213). This implied equivalence soon became more formally recognized with the advent of paperbacks—pioneered by new publishing ventures such as

Penguin and Pocket Books—in the 1930s. As Goldstone further points out, “All paperback fiction publishers in this period practiced genre categorization, though to varying degrees” (219-20).

However, this didn’t mean that genre categorization had escaped past prejudices. When Robert de Graff, owner of the paperback imprint Pocket Books, began instituting both genre-labeled fiction (such as mysteries) and non-genre labeled fiction (often considered more serious), he knew that he had to pacify those readers who might be offended at the inclusion of genre-labeled fiction. Goldstone provides this overview of how he got out ahead of such criticisms:

For the benefit of the book trade, de Graff promises “genuinely good and enduring books,” like those favored by “cultured Europeans,” as opposed to “pulp,” “trash”—and most tellingly—“magazines of vast circulation.” This is a somewhat implausible characterization of an initial list.... But de Graff knew that a tribute had to be paid to ideals of quality in order to escape the stigma of cheapness (Goldstone 221).

Goldstone’s essay goes on to provide a more comprehensive historical analysis than can be fully addressed here, but it’s worth considering his final paragraph and its implications for the present discussion:

The system of genres, despite the steadiness of *Publishers Weekly’s* tabulation after mid-century, was not altogether consensual.... It was a production practice, a market strategy, an epiphenomenon of changing readership; it was also a structural trade-off, granting publishers, writers, and readers access to circulation and visibility even as it applied the stigma of lower status. Even once the genre-fiction system had been institutionalized, its potential uses remained as contingent, and as contested, as its origins (228).



### A Proposed Definition for Art

In light of this history of genre fiction's roots, I now want to re-evaluate the claims made against genre fiction that I mentioned earlier. If a critic wants to claim that there are stories within genres such as romance, fantasy, etc. that display no artistic qualities and exist only as a commercial product, that is a tenable position. It is rather pointless to claim that all created work should be called art, because that makes the definition so broad and all-encompassing as to be rendered meaningless. However, I would argue that limiting the definition of art by fiat to be so narrow as to exclude all fiction that fails to fit within the parameters of so-called "literary fiction" is too restrictive and fails to encompass genre works that *do* possess artistic qualities. Therefore, a mediating approach should be taken. This approach maintains that there are created works across all genres that exemplify artistic qualities, while also making clear that not every created work is worthy of the title "art". (This isn't to say that created works which don't meet the criteria need necessarily be denigrated or ridiculed. If an individual enjoys such works, then no other individual should come along to disparage them or their enjoyment of the work.)

As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, art is an essentially contested concept, and there is no one exact definition for it. For the purposes of my argument, however, it's necessary to provide at least a "specific enough" definition. I arrive at my definition via a philosophical argument inspired by Gallie's insightful point about art and other such concepts:

1. Humans, as a kind of creature, regardless of where we are from, are creative. We make things, experiment (even if not in labs or lab coats), and improve our crafts.

2. Humans, regardless of where we are from, have an innate ability to experience beauty, wonder, awe, and other such similar aesthetic emotions. We are also drawn to that which produces these emotions.
3. Because we are creative beings, and because we are drawn to the emotions of beauty, wonder, awe, and so on, it is only natural that we would try to create things which produce these emotions within us. These creations, then, attempt to function as vessels which contain and communicate experiences of these aesthetic emotions; in this way they are both a medium and an end. To draw on Plato's theory of Forms, perhaps they can be described as vessels which contain and communicate some aspect of a Form's essence. To say that something is "beautiful" is to say that it shares aspects with the Form "Beauty".
4. Therefore, when we speak of "art", we refer to those creations which function as worthy vessels—ones that are highly successful in containing and communicating these aesthetic emotions. Those creations which do not meet this (admittedly abstract) threshold are considered not-art, and therefore, not as capable (or wholly incapable) of containing and communicating a sufficient amount of these emotions (or any of these emotions at all).

So, in sum, artistic qualities are qualities which contain and communicate aesthetic emotions of beauty, wonder, awe, and other such similar emotions; thus, a thing can be called art if a person finds that thing to be successful in its containing and communicating of these artistic qualities. Note that the use of the term "sufficient" is intentionally vague here, as it relies upon the reason of individuals to determine what is sufficient and what is not; while I argue that there is such an essential quality as beauty—a Form, if you will—and that the experience of beauty is universal, I would suggest that the determination of whether or not a particular work conveys enough of this

essential quality to be considered art is ultimately subjective. It's important to also note that this definition allows for discourse between those who experience such emotions from reading a text and others who don't experience such emotions from reading the same text, and this is done intentionally to allow *guided* debates about what constitutes as art. If a person wishes to claim that a text has artistic qualities, they now have a framework for building their argument; they can examine the text for passages which evoke the previously mentioned emotions and demonstrate how those passages exemplify artistic qualities.

### **Genre Fiction: An Apology**

Based on the provided definition, this essay now seeks to find examples of artistic qualities in books labeled genre fiction. The first that comes to mind is the second book in the *Twilight* saga, *New Moon*. If you are shocked by my choice, I ask that you humor me long enough to consider my argument and examples. This series about a human who falls in love with a teenaged vampire became wildly popular in the 2010s, even earning its own series of movie adaptations. It was often classified under the sub-category "paranormal romance" and inspired dozens of authors to write similar stories within the same sub-category. It also received its fair share of criticism from those who denigrated it as commercial fiction and claimed it didn't meet the necessary criteria to be art. However, I thoroughly enjoyed the series, and I would argue that its critics are sometimes too dismissive of its merits. In particular, I will forever remember a section in the second book after Edward leaves Bella, telling her he doesn't really care for her in a misguided attempt to protect her from the dangerous world of vampires. Bella suffers a severe depressive episode due to Edward's rejection, which affirms her long-held fears that she is not worthy of being loved, that she isn't special and doesn't deserve to have her feelings

reciprocated—and might I say, what a blow every self-conscious teen reader must have felt when reading that passage as it touched our own most vulnerable fears and insecurities.

But the worst has not yet come. Through a series of events, Bella becomes lost in the woods and is later returned home where she realizes that Edward has stripped her of every remembrance of him and his family.

*Someone had been in the house to leave a note for Charlie, a note that would lead him to find me. From the minute that I'd realized this, a horrible suspicion began to grow in my head. I rushed to my room, shutting and locking the door behind me before I ran to the CD player by my bed.*

*Everything looked exactly the same as I'd left it. I pressed down on the top of the CD player. The latch unhooked, and the lid slowly swung open.*

*It was empty.*

*The album Renée had given me sat on the floor beside the bed, just where I'd put it last. I lifted the cover with a shaking hand.*

*I didn't have to flip any farther than the first page. The little metal corners no longer held a picture in place. The page was blank except for my own handwriting scrawled across the bottom: Edward Cullen, Charlie's kitchen, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>.*

*I stopped there. I was sure that he would have been very thorough.*

*It will be as if I'd never existed, he'd promised me.*

*I felt the smooth wooden floor beneath my knees, and then the palms of my hands, and then it was pressed against the skin of my cheek. I hoped that I was fainting, but, to my*

*disappointment, I didn't lose consciousness. The waves of pain that had only lapped at me before now reared high up and washed over my head, pulling me under.*

*I did not resurface.*

Beyond the sheer weight of emotional turmoil this scene puts the reader through, the prose is also efficient and elegantly crafted. Lines like “It was empty” and “I did not resurface” are set apart from the rest of the text, alone in their own paragraphs for us to consider their meaning separate from the rest of the scene’s goings-on. They’re like poetry in this way, as is much of Meyer’s prose. Consider, too, the paragraph beginning with “I felt the smooth wooden floor....” It’s imbued with subtlety and subtext so that we understand Bella’s pain partly as a performance, a collapse that feels alien to her and the reader. It’s as if we’re watching it happen to someone else until Bella and we both realize that no, it’s happening to her, and she’s not fainting, merely succumbing to the pain that has only lapped at her until now.

What happens next in the novel has stuck with me ever since I first read this book. I recall running from my childhood bedroom to show the pages to my mom (who had read the books before me and let me read them on my own when I expressed the interest) and to try, with the limited vocabulary of a middle-schooler, to articulate the vast sea of emotions Meyer had suddenly plunged me into. As we turn our eyes to the facing page from where the previous section ended, we see a single word centered in the middle of the page: “October”. The rest of the page is blank, lacking even page numbers. Thinking that perhaps it’s a way of breaking up the novel by time into separate sections, we flip the page. The next reads, “November”. Understanding begins to dawn on us. Again, we flip the page. “December”. The next page. “January”. Finally, after flipping another page, we see a change.

### 5. *Waking Up*

*Time passes. Even when it seems impossible. Even when each tick of the second hand aches like the pulse of blood behind a bruise. It passes unevenly, in strange lurches and dragging lulls, but pass it does. Even for me.*

Despite this being the only text we get for the fourth chapter, we again see subtlety and a sort of musicality in every word. Over four months have passed since the emotionally devastating conclusion to the third chapter, and here we find the tone that Meyer will set for the next several hundred pages as we read through Bella's life absent Edward.

I find that this book serves as a wonderful example of the artistic qualities of fiction (and literature more broadly as well). The selected passages display masterful use of language in order to create sensory experiences in the reader's mind as they progress from word to word. Meyer uses a sense of undertone to accomplish a "less is more" dynamic with Bella's world-ending realization that Edward is gone and will not be coming back. Her prose is meticulously constructed, as is evident by the careful selections of standalone sentences that draw our attention to important moments and thoughts without us ever feeling forced to notice them. Furthermore, the use of the pages displaying only the names of the passing months, contrasted with Meyer's usual attention to detail, uses negative space to create a void of experience that exemplifies Bella's own despair during this period, as we soon discover.

The medium of literature is language, and Meyer uses that medium to tell a beautifully heartbreaking story in this novel. It is, in a word, art.

## An Evaluation of Fantasy and its Critiques

I turn now to the specific genre of fantasy, a genre perhaps even more scorned for its lack of literary qualities than romance. Perhaps not coincidentally, fantasy, like romance, is also extremely popular with modern mass audiences. The first example that comes to mind is, of course, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. According to Publishers Weekly, for the top-selling titles from 2004-2021, Rowling took both first and second place with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, respectively (McLean). (Interestingly enough, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* ranks at fifth place.)

Though many lauded Rowling's work for its various achievements, there were those who were astonished—perhaps even incensed—at its overwhelming success. One author, Ursula K. Le Guin, arguably had more reason than most to justify her feelings. In an essay titled “The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists,” she explains her reaction to *Harry Potter*'s success:

People would come up to me to say, “You must read this wonderful book about a school for wizards, it's so original, there's never been anything like it!” The first time this happened, I confess I thought they were telling me to read my own *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which involves a school for wizards, and has been in print since 1969. No such luck.

...

It wasn't only common readers: reviewers and critics kept talking about Rowling's book as if it were a unique, unprecedented phenomenon. The true phenomenon was its reception – the huge, genuine popularity it earned, before the sales hype took over. The book was a charmer, in the wizardly sense of the word: it cast the narrative spell (83).

Having read both *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*—the first books in Le Guin's and Rowling's series, respectively—I feel it's important to mention that the content of the stories differs in many significant ways. But Le Guin's point still stands: millions of people were “charmed” by the magic and wonder of Rowling's universe, a magic and wonder that those in-the-know, such as Le Guin herself, see as part and parcel of the fantasy genre in general. It's certainly the case that among these millions of people, a large portion (perhaps even most) were only casual readers of fiction who might not have read anything remotely like it since their childhood—who picked it up as adults, found it new to their experience, and thus thought it original (Le Guin 83). Such people Le Guin seems readily willing to forgive. It is the other group, though, toward which she turns her ire.

... critics and reviewers of literature are supposed to have some experience of literature.

Those who praised *Harry Potter* for its originality were demonstrating blank ignorance of the tradition to which it belongs: the literature of fantasy, specifically fantasy for children.

Within that tradition it also belongs to an intensely British sub-tradition, the “school story,” which American readers and reviewers might excusably not recognize as such.

But how could so many reviewers and literary critics know so little about a major field of literature, have so little background, so few standards of comparison, that they believed a book that was not only typical of a tradition, but quite conventional and in many respects derivative, to be a unique achievement? (Le Guin 83)

Towards the end, Le Guin's frustration begins to bleed into her words, especially in her description of the *Harry Potter* series as “quite conventional” and “derivative”. She soon moves on from this, though, and addresses what she believes is the root of the ignorance among the critics and reviewers: modernists such as Edmund Wilson and his tradition of criticism, which Le



Guin describes as “quite a little monster.” “In this school for anti-wizards [meaning Wilson’s tradition],” she writes, “no fiction is to be taken seriously except various forms of realism, which are labeled ‘serious.’ The rest of narrative fiction is labeled ‘genre’ and is dismissed unread” (83).

Le Guin criticizes such ideology by saying “[t]o declare one genre, realism, to be above genre, and all the rest of fiction not literature because it isn’t realism, is rather as if judges at the State Fair should give blue ribbons only to pigs, declaring horses, cattle, and poultry not animals because they’re not pigs” (Le Guin 83). This connects to what the philosopher Gallie said about art as well. If the term “literature” carries the same connotation of “art,” but more specifically for that vein of art that is contained within the written word, then it seems entirely unjustified to limit literature’s encompassing power to only the genre of realism. If instead we imbue “literature” with the same definition that I proposed for art, we open the doors—not the floodgates—to a wealth of other genres which we can now evaluate for artistic properties such as beauty and wonder. After all, how could critics and reviewers who in one breath denigrate such genres as fantasy for their characteristic qualities then in the next breath laud *Harry Potter* for its unique achievements, which Le Guin makes clear are actually typical of the fantasy tradition? It becomes glaringly obvious that critics and reviewers cannot do so without making an obvious contradiction.

But why weren’t they aware of such a contradiction? Le Guin suggests that university training is partly responsible:

Following this rule [i.e., the rule that only realism should be taken seriously], the universities have taught generations of students to shun all “genres”, including fantasy (unless it was written before 1900, wasn’t written in English, and/or can be labeled

magical realism). Students of literature are taught to flee most children's books, or books that appeal to both children and adults, as if they were ripe buboes. Academic professionalism is at stake – possibly tenure. To touch genre is to be defiled. Reviewers in the popular journals, most of whom come out of the universities, obey the rule. If the reality of what people read forces a periodical to review mysteries or science fiction, they do it in separate columns, coyly titled, at the back of the journal – in *pardah* (Le Guin 83).

Le Guin argues that such institutional behavior is nonsensical, as is shown by her analogy of the State Fair. As she explains, such institutional “foolishness breeds ignorance, and ignorance loves to be told it doesn't have to learn something” (Le Guin 83-84). This self-assured ignorance spreads beyond just academic institutions, fostering a broader cultural environment wherein people are unaware of the artistic qualities of major genres such as fantasy. As Le Guin further points out, this means that criticism is actually ill-equipped to assess these genres:

But nobody can rightly judge a novel without some knowledge of the standards, expectations, devices, tropes, and history of its genre (or genres, for increasingly they mix and interbreed). The knowledge and craft a writer brings to writing fantasy, the expectations and skills a reader brings to reading it, differ significantly from those they bring to realist fiction. Or to science fiction, or the thriller, or the mystery, or the western (83-84).

Le Guin also makes the case, echoing the historical account provided by Goldstone, that there isn't even historical justification for the assumption that realist fiction is superior to genre fiction. “Until the eighteenth century in Europe,” she writes, “imaginative fiction *was* fiction. Realism in fiction is a recent literary invention, not much older than the steam engine and probably related

to it. Whence the improbable claim that it is the only form of fiction deserving the name of ‘literature’?” (Le Guin 84)

Because of this wide-spread disregard for genre fiction, many critics and reviewers erroneously attempt to judge fantasy works by the metrics of realist fiction. In an amusing demonstration of this point, Le Guin challenges the reader to judge classic titles from certain categories of fiction by using the metrics of other categories:

For example: judge *The Lord of the Rings* as if it were a late-20<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel. (Deficient in self-evident relevance, in sexual and erotic components, in individual psychological complexity, in explicit social references. Exercise too easy, has been done a thousand times.) Judge *Moby Dick* as science fiction. (Strong on technological information and on motivation, and when the story moves, it moves; but crippled by the author’s foot-dragging and endless self-indulgence in pompous abstractions, fancy language, and rant.) Judge *Pride and Prejudice* as a Western. (A pretty poor show all round. The women talk. Darcy is a good man and could be a first-rate rancher, even if he does use those fool little pancake saddles, but with a first name like Fitzwilliam, he’ll never make it in Wyoming.)

And to reverse the whole misbegotten procedure: judged by the standards of fantasy, modernist realist fiction, with its narrow focus on daily details of contemporary human affairs, is suffocating and unimaginative, almost unavoidably trivial, and ominously anthropocentric (Le Guin 84).

Here, I think, Le Guin touches on an important issue. Though she argues that ignorance bred by foolishness explains why critics and reviewers were unaware that *Harry Potter* was a product of

the fantasy genre and in no way unique for its fantasy characteristics (such as a magic school for children), the question remains as to *why* the critics and reviewers enjoyed it so much in the first place. Without dismissing Rowling's significant efforts to construct a good story and improve it with multiple revisions, I think one of the driving factors in its success was due to where it fell within the realm of fantasy. Le Guin argues that if we try to judge one textual product of a genre by the conventions of another, we will almost always find it lacking. Because Le Guin's own story, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, was a secondary world fantasy, I believe that critics and reviewers found it too alien to appreciate all the things it did well—in other words, the characteristics of the genre acted as an opaque window through which they couldn't see. Rowling's story, on the other hand, is a portal fantasy; that is, a story in which characters travel through some kind of portal from the realistic world to enter the fantastical world.

Although *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* begins with a short prologue containing unexplained examples of magic, the story quickly moves to a second chapter that situates us in the realistic world with a pitiable, likeable character in the form of young Harry Potter. We immediately come to despise his abusive adoptive family and to wish for his escape from them. The elusive secret contained within letters delivered by owls (recognized as strange in the real world, but more whimsical than alien) builds the reader's anticipation for understanding the things they've been nudged towards in the book's prologue (things such as light leaving lampposts and flying motorbikes). The anticipation builds as we watch Uncle Vernon's increasingly maniacal attempts to prevent Harry from reading the letters, foiling Harry's (and our) burning curiosity. This is done so well that by the time Hagrid appears and hands a copy of the not-yet-read letter to Harry, we are cheering for this small but important victory over his abusive family.

In this way the story incrementally transports the reader from a foundation of realism to the fantastical. From the beginning we associate the world of magic with wonder and awe—a characteristic shared by much of the genre of fantasy—but also with Harry’s escape from an oppressive aunt and uncle, as well as a bullying cousin. Through Harry, we come to see the fantastical world as an escape from the horrors of his realistic world; combined with the already mentioned wonder and awe, this generates in the reader an appreciation and love for the growing discovery of a world where Harry can experience friendship, proper role models, and a budding sense of who he is and where he truly belongs. Though perhaps Rowling didn’t think of her fiction in this way, it seems she was able to catch the attention of readers primed for realist fiction and then to slowly shift their appreciation from the realistic elements of the story to the fantastical elements. Her use of the portal fantasy might explain some of its popularity.

By contrast, I turn now to several examples of secondary world fantasies like that of Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, with an eye toward explaining my own fiction practice. First among them are Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series. As a well-educated scholar, Tolkien was very familiar with epics and myths from the past, such as the epic old English poem *Beowulf*. As Catherine Hall explains, *Beowulf* was influential on Tolkien’s worldbuilding: “When Tolkien asserts that the Beowulf dragon is a personification of ‘the evil side of heroic life,’ he echoes the purpose of Hrothgar’s warning to Beowulf: that heroes are not immune to evil (‘Monsters’ 17)” (189). Hall argues that this influence is especially visible in Tolkien’s treatment of monstrosity:

Using Hrothgar’s advice to Beowulf as a central means of defining the concept of monstrosity in the poem, Beowulf appears as a good king but also as a hero because he is primarily motivated, not by pride, but by the need to protect his people. Thorin [character

from *The Hobbit*] also embodies the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal as presented in *Beowulf* as he strives to protect his people. The main difference between these two heroes is that while Beowulf never succumbs to the evils that mark his enemies as monsters, Thorin momentarily succumbs to ‘dragon-sickness’ when he begins to value hoarding his treasure above protecting his people, thereby embodying the characteristics that define Smaug as a monster (Hall 187-88).

For this reason, Tolkien is a rather interesting example. After having studied *Beowulf*, a text commonly lauded as a classic, he chose to write his own fantasy stories inspired by it. But despite Tolkien’s respectable source of inspiration, the reception of his fiction from fellow scholars was far from positive. They believed the fiction to be childish, simple, unserious, ridiculous. However, it’s important to note that in this respect they were the minority of readers. As Le Guin writes, “The mandarins of modernism, and some of the pundits of postmodernism, were shocked to be told that a fantasy trilogy by a professor of philology is the best-loved English novel of the twentieth century. People are supposed to love realism, not fantasy. But why should they?” (84)

The counterargument that some critics have made is that the masses don’t understand proper fiction—that they are too simple-minded to engage with the complexities of fiction, and thus are drawn towards simple-minded stories such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, the critic Edmund Wilson (referenced earlier by Le Guin) wrote a rather scathing review of Tolkien’s work titled “Oo, Those Awful Orcs!” Beyond criticizing the story itself, he also turned his antipathy onto its readers:

Now, how is it that these long-winded volumes of what looks to this reviewer like balderdash have elicited such tributes...? The answer is, I believe, that certain people –

especially, perhaps, in Britain – have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash.... You can see it in the tone they fall into when they talk about Tolkien in print: they bubble, they squeal, they coo; they go on about Malory and Spenser – both of whom have a charm and a distinction that Tolkien has never touched (Wilson).

The rest of the review pulls no punches, even making the implicit assumption that any literature which appeals to children (as he says *The Lord of the Rings* does) is undeserving of both the praise and recognition that was awarded to Tolkien's fiction by its adult readers:

One is puzzled to know why the author should have supposed he was writing for adults. There are, to be sure, some details that are a little unpleasant for a children's book, but except when he is being pedantic and also boring the adult reader, there is little in *The Lord of the Rings* over the head of a seven-year-old child. It is essentially a children's book – a children's book which has somehow got out of hand, since, instead of directing it at the "juvenile" market, the author has indulged himself in developing the fantasy for its own sake; and it ought to be said at this point, before emphasizing its inadequacies as literature, that Dr. Tolkien makes few claims for his fairy romance (Wilson).

Wilson continues in this disposition as he makes several more criticisms about the book and its plot, some of which readers have pointed out are so contradictory to the book's actual events that they wonder if he read it in the first place. David Bratman, for example, provides rather damning examples of Wilson's incompetent understanding of Tolkien's work, though he does say he believes Wilson at least read the books:

What's striking about Wilson's review is his inability to see the book in front of his eyes. His review is loaded with some of the most imperceptive remarks ever made about *The*

*Lord of the Rings*. He consistently spells Gandalf with a “ph” instead of “f.” He writes staggering things like this: “The hero has no serious temptations; is lured by no insidious enchantments, perplexed by no serious problems [...]”.... Most amazing is that he seems to have missed Frodo succumbing to the lure of the Ring at Mount Doom, because he says he was expecting something like that to happen but it never does (Bratman 21).

Though Wilson goes on to credit author James Branch Cabell’s fantasy books as his “most successful” and “most ambitious” works, seemingly as a preemptive defense against those who might claim he simply hates fantasy altogether, Bratman explains this isn’t a sufficient counterargument (23). Bratman points out that Wilson initially despised Cabell’s fantasy until a friend convinced him to read one of the author’s non-fiction books. From there Wilson slowly made his way to Cabell’s fantasy, and upon reading it found he actually enjoyed them.

Do you see what happened here? From finding Cabell’s fantasy as uncongenial as a brick wall, Wilson turned to admitting that it’s much of Cabell’s best work. And how did this happen? He found a way into Cabell. By finding a book which eschewed what Wilson was allergic to, he was able to grasp and appreciate the quality of Cabell’s prose, the nature of his thought. And so, with a new understanding, a meeting of the minds, he proceeded, step by step, through more personal nonfiction, to realistic novels, and at last to the fantasy, and now he gets it (Bratman 23).

This accords with what I was arguing previously in regard to why critics and reviewers who widely denigrate fantasy became so enthralled with *Harry Potter*. Bratman seems to also be thinking along similar lines, as he describes Wilson’s distaste for fantasy and his incapacity to accurately recall the events of *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of an “allergy”:



This suggests to me that what Wilson is suffering from is an allergy: an allergy so intense as to cause him to be unable to absorb, to remember the details of, the book he's just read aloud long enough to write a review of it. He really doesn't care who killed Roger Ackroyd, or how Frodo defeated Sauron, and considers himself superior to those who do care. And that explains his inability to get facts straight or perceive the most forthright characteristics of the book.

But what exactly is it that he's allergic to? In part, yes, it's the clear and straightforward prose. But in Tolkien's case I think it's also the fantastic element. Tolkien's use of this is what Wilson reserves his strongest critique for: "An impotence of imagination seems to me to sap the whole story. The wars are never dynamic; the ordeals give no sense of strain; the fair ladies would not stir a heartbeat; the horrors would not hurt a fly" (Bratman 22).

### **The Art of Fantasy**

So, to sum up my argument thus far:

1. Given that genre fiction is a recent phenomenon created by factors such as market interests—and also that this phenomenon has no bearing on the quality of fiction produced within genre—there is no historical ground for claiming that genre fiction as a whole has proven to be of low quality.
2. "Art" is an essentially contested concept, which means that its meaning is subject to changes across (and within) cultures and history. I proposed a definition for art which said that works of art are creations by humans that act as vessels which contain and

communicate experiences such as beauty, wonder, awe, and so on. This argues against the strict definition proposed for art and literature which seeks to include only those texts that are deemed “realistic.”

3. This definition of art was defended by examining excerpts from Stephanie Meyer’s *New Moon*, showing that works which are denigrated as “genre” or “commercial” fiction can nonetheless possess literary and artistic qualities.
4. An evaluation of fantasy and its criticisms revealed that much of the hate the genre receives is due to what Bratman referred to as an “allergy” that prevents readers from properly assessing the stories they read. Le Guin pointed out that readers must be prepared for the genre they’re engaging with, else they will try to judge them by improper metrics, as has so often been done by fans of realist fiction when evaluating all other genres.

Having demonstrated the previous points, the essay now turns to its concluding argument: that fantasy as a genre is more than capable of embodying literary, artistic qualities, and not only that, but that there are certain literary, artistic qualities which are unique to fantasy that cannot be found in realist fiction. These are the qualities that I’m attempting to achieve in my own work.

In thinking about my approach to fantasy, I’ve found Northrop Frye’s theory of literary modes (as glossed by Robert Denham) helpful. As Denham explains, the theory is premised on several key categories which literature falls into: fictional, thematic, ethos, and mode. *Fictional* literature refers, obviously, to literature in which there are internal characters apart from the author and his audience (this is opposed to *thematic* literature, which refers to works in which no characters are involved except the author and his audience, such as lyrics and essays). By *ethos*,

Fry means “the internal social context of a work of literature, comprising the characterization and setting of fictional literature and the relation of the author to his reader or audience in thematic literature.” Fry defines *mode* as a “conventional power of action assumed about the chief characters in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet toward his audience in thematic literature. Such modes tend to succeed one another in historical sequence” (Denham 1). Denham further characterizes Frye’s term mode to mean “a category defined broadly in relation to what Frye calls the ethical elements, or the *ethos*, of a literary work. The *ethos*, an expansion of Aristotle’s ‘character,’ refers on the one hand to the literary hero and his society and on the other to a writer and his audience” (Denham 2).

As Denham further explains, Frye describes five main modes: myth, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis, and irony.

His principle for differentiating the modes is the relationship of the hero both to other men and to his natural environment, a principle which yields the five categories that appear throughout *Anatomy of Criticism*: (1) *myth*, in which the hero’s superiority is different in kind from that of other men and their environment; (2) *romance*, in which the hero’s superiority is one of degree; (3) *high mimesis*, where the hero is superior in degree to other men but not superior to nature; (4) *low mimesis*, in which the hero is more or less equal to other men and not superior to his environment; and (5) *irony*, where the hero’s power of action is inferior to that of ordinary men.... (Denham 3-4).

Frye outlines these five modes in order to make it clear that they exist as kinds of fictions that can be told. If one wants to write a story in high mimetic mode, then they would do well to work at combining the heroic and the ironic, “the incongruous and the inevitable” (Denham 4).

Similarly, if one wants to evaluate a text’s worthiness for art, they should first identify in what

mode(s) that art was written (or at least what mode(s) it most strongly correlates with). In a passage that closely resembles Le Guin's earlier point about correctly judging texts by the conventions of their genres, Frye argues that critics and readers must necessarily judge a text with its mode(s) in mind in order to most accurately assess its success:

... [Frye] claims that we must learn to recombine the modes once we have learned to distinguish them. The point is that if we try to judge (say) [Henry James's short story] *The Altar of the Dead* by the low-mimetic standards of those nineteenth-century realists from whom James learned his craft, then we will have to call his story "a tissue of improbable coincidence, inadequate motivation, and inconclusive resolution." But if we look at it from the perspective of fictional modes "as ironic myth, a story of how the god of one person is the *pharmakos* [scapegoat] of another, its structure becomes simple and logical." In other words, the study of modern fiction cannot rely solely upon the critical procedures which were developed to study the realistic novel. And insofar as the novel-centered view of narrative structures has recently become something of a norm (what Frye calls the low-mimetic prejudice), then his claim that the study of all narrative need not follow the canons of nineteenth-century realism is an effort to encourage a more pluralistic set of norms for critical inquiry (Denham 15-16).

The theory of modes has significant consequences for the criticism of fantasy, because modes dictate what features seem appropriate and which, on the contrary, strain a reader's credulity. In the low-mimetic mode, to consider one of Denham's examples, "a writer would be unlikely to represent a ghost because...it would tax the reader's credulity. But in the high-mimetic mode he can easily choose to introduce such spirits because the fictional world is on a plane above our own, where they do not violate the canons of plausibility... Thus the conventions that a writer

adopts depend on the particular mode he has selected” (Denham 16-17). The problem arises when, as Denham explains, critics “use as their norm for interpreting all literature the principles peculiar to a given mode” (Denham 17).

Frye thus provides a basis for understanding that fantasy—which like science fiction so often imagines worlds distinct and separate from our own—can include elements that realism cannot. This also echoes previous arguments about how critics (such as Wilson) who are not properly prepared to read fantasy can experience a figurative allergic reaction to its characteristics, claiming them to be contemptible, unserious, etc. because their palate is only attuned to realism. For fantasy writers and readers, however, they are free to engage with ghosts, magic, orcs, and so on. Of course these things are unrealistic, but Frye’s taxonomy of modes demonstrates that these unrealistic elements of the story serve greater purposes than just entertaining readers.

And it’s not as if fantasy authors are necessarily incapable of adding elements of realism to their text. George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Ice and Fire* is well known for its mucky realism and moral nuance. The scholar Joseph Young, for example, argues that “Fantasy has a long history of sophisticated moral discussion,” and he backs up this claim by pointing out the moral complexity of Martin’s universe:

... the Others—a telling appellation—are to all appearances utterly, unfathomably evil. But they do not simplify Martin’s work; like Tolkien’s Ring, they bring out the accompanying complexities. Part of the tragic irony of the game of thrones is that Westeros is tearing itself apart over petty trifles while this altogether gnarly common enemy recrudesces beyond the ill-defended Wall. Placing humanity in such contexts is a

long-established function of fantasy... Martin continues a long tradition of deploying monsters to accentuate human behavior (Young 292).

Young also categorizes the series as “ironic”, drawing on Frye’s conception of the modal term when referencing the numerous descriptions of bodily functions the characters perform: vomiting, defecating, peeing, ejaculating, etc. (Young 294). He points out that this shows a marked difference from the fiction of Tolkien, but makes clear that

This difference goes beyond Martin’s being more realistic than Tolkien...Martin in fact subscribes to an entirely different literary tradition and literary mode from that espoused by Tolkien. Tolkien, drawing on his knowledge of medieval literature, resonantly perpetuates Frye’s high mimetic mode, encouraging the reader to look up to his imagined aristocrats. Martin, by contrast, continues a recognizable theme in *medievalist* literature, one that uses Frye’s ironic mode to encourage a concerted critical, rather than realistic, view of his characters (Young 293-294).

Even within fantasy, then, authors can use the characteristics of their genre to achieve vastly different goals. William Dellinger explains this in his examination of the fiction of Tolkien, Martin, and Patrick Rothfuss, author of the *Kingkiller Chronicle* series (2007-present). As Dellinger argues, the fantasy genre requires special critical categories, because “the movements with which we typically categorize other literary works, such as modernism and postmodernism, do not necessarily fit these works of immersive fantasy, or Secondary World Fantasy, defined by the creation of a fictional universe entirely unrelated to the Primary World of the reader” (Dellinger 2). “Tolkien,” Dellinger continues, “is surrounded by modernist writers, but an analysis of his work reveals a rejection of modernism, favoring a return to the romanticism of an earlier century. His work is traditional, glorifying the past, rejecting Ezra

Pound's call to action to 'Make it New!' and preferring instead to keep it a rose-tinted vision of a past that never actually existed, at least outside of chivalrous medieval literature" (2). Martin, although "lumped together" into the same genre of fantasy, does "something different than Tolkien" (4). That "something," however, isn't fully captured by the term postmodernism, as Dellinger argues:

Herein lies the difficulty in classifying Martin's work as postmodern; it certainly accomplishes the same things as postmodernism, such as cynically deconstructing the grand narrative of good and evil in favor of an all-too-human war of conquest, ironic outcomes for many of the traditionally-modeled character archetypes, and subjective value contingent upon social mores. Yet Martin's series does not engage in parody or pastiche, nor is it experimental, in the way that many examples of postmodern literature do and are... While postmodern fantasy does exist, it typically falls into a parody and mockery of the genre, which Martin does not engage in. Additionally, Martin's reaction is so closely tied to Tolkien, so dependent upon the foundation Tolkien lays, that declaring it precisely postmodern becomes difficult (4-5).

If Tolkien writes "traditional" fantasy, then Martin's straightforward deconstruction of Tolkienesque tropes makes him (to quote Dellinger) a "post-traditional" fantasy writer. Rothfuss, by comparison, takes what Dellinger terms a "metatraditional" approach:

Like the post-traditional, the metatraditional fantasy also dismisses these traditional conventions as childish or mere fantasy, but only through the lens of the characters, while the metatraditional story itself recreates and mythologizes these traditional conventions. It mediates between the two, superficially adopting the cynicism of the post-traditional while maintaining an informed naivety that seeks the wonder and magic of the traditional.

It is hopeful at its core, though capable of recognizing the dangers of unrestrained innocence. Just as post-traditional fantasy is reminiscent of postmodern literary themes in its reaction to Tolkien, the metatraditional mimics the trend of metamodernism by fluctuating between the two, carefully maneuvering through a cynical worldview in pursuit of measured optimism (Dellinger 6).

Like Frye's theory of modes, Dellinger's insights help us recognize the value of fantasy as a genre. It is indisputable that fantasy has the capacity to stir within its readers feelings of beauty, wonder, awe, and so on. It's also clear that any who claim fantasy cannot be art or be taken seriously due to its fantastical, unrealistic conventions are ignorant of both the breadth of literature articulated by Frye's modes and the capacity for fantasy to embody artistic, literary qualities as demonstrated by Young and Dellinger.

### **Reflection and Synthesis**

I have embarked on this lengthy justification of fantasy's unique artistic and literary qualities because of my own experiences as a fiction writer. As an undergraduate student, I have felt pressured to defend my desire to write fantasy, even when it took place outside the classroom. I have spent so much time constructing arguments for the worthiness of fantasy in general that I have had little time left for considering the specific kind of fantasy I want to write. This honors thesis has turned that dynamic on its head. Finally given the opportunity to write fantasy under the guidance of encouraging faculty members, I initially felt a little at a loss. "You don't need to convince us," my advisor, Professor Wilhelm, often told me when I would begin launching into my prepared arguments that defended fantasy as a viable form of fiction to write in.



Well what else was there? Suddenly I realized I didn't have any strong arguments past this topic. I of course knew some of the fantasy authors I liked—Brandon Sanderson for one, whose YouTube lectures gave me a more thorough introduction to craft than three years of undergraduate fiction courses—and so I began discussing fantasy in-depth with my advisor. I decided to read *Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin in order to have a wider understanding of the fantasy genre and its most popular texts. I remember telling my advisor that I was fascinated by Martin's story, but that it held a kind of edge I didn't want my own fiction to have. I saw myself as trying to mediate between the sometimes-cloying positivity of Sanderson and the cutthroat brutality of Martin. Soon after this I picked up *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss since I'd heard several people talk about how much they liked the *Kingkiller* series. This was the turning point for my conception of the fantasy I wanted to write. Even before I learned the terminology provided by Dellinger, I knew Rothfuss's fiction was the perfect mediation I'd been trying to conceive of. This, combined with Frye's taxonomy of modes, laid the path before me that I had previously been blindly searching for.

I revisited my story and searched for the places I had already been gesturing towards the metatraditional without realizing that's what I was doing. Now much more informed, I wanted to bolster them in the appropriate ways. Rothfuss's series was instrumental in this process, as well as Dellinger's careful analysis. Kvothe, the main character and speaker in *The Kingkiller Chronicles*, makes clear several times to his audience (and to the reader) that his life is not some fairy tale. As a young boy, when his parents are killed by mythic figures thought to exist only in legend, he doesn't embark on some great quest aided by a clever talking squirrel, an old drunken swordsman, or a mad hermit in the woods (characters who might fulfill the archetype of mentor in fairy tales) (Rothfuss 304). Instead, he reacts as a young boy would: he tries his best to survive

in a world full of both good and evil. Kvothe and other characters within the story periodically deride fantasy tropes as being unserious and naive, but the story itself reaffirms the desire in both the characters and the reader for these tropes, displaying a “more realistic” achievement of them. Though one character sneers at “Roaring sheets of fire, magic rings, invisible cloaks, swords that never go dull, [and] potions to make you fly,” the story later includes these very tropes and treats them with both seriousness and the characteristic wonder often found in the fantasy genre (Rothfuss 249).

As Dellinger puts it, half the focus of metatraditional fantasy is to celebrate the elements of traditional fantasy (whereas post-traditional fantasy rejects them). The other half of metatraditional fantasy is its veneer of cynicism, which “is simply a pretense that rebuffs the systemic cynicism of the post-traditional” (28). With this in mind, I made some significant changes to the structure of my story to better adhere to this principle of metatradition. In narrative order, the first change I made was in the section that introduces my primary protagonist, Kelsier, who belongs to a class of low-ranking non-magic users (known in the fictional world as “Putristovs”). In Draft 1.2, a sixteen-year-old Kelsier chases after a conscription officer to volunteer for the military after his childhood sweetheart, Latenva, is drafted. But such an act of self-sacrifice is more in-line with the traditional heroes in high mimesis, which I do not want Kelsier to be. In Draft 1.3, I rewrote the sequence so that Kelsier is caught in what he knows is a foolish, doomed attempt to rescue Latenva. This action is more closely related to metatraditional heroes like Kvothe and the ironic mode. While both drafts maintain the notion of Kelsier wanting to protect Latenva, Draft 1.3 strikes a much more somber, defeated tone that is more appropriate given the stratified society he lives in, and helps set up his character arc.

I also changed the storyline surrounding my secondary protagonist, a high-ranking magic user (or “Supristov”) named Maleem. My plan for the novel will involve Maleem, whose father is a powerful Lord in the fictional nation of Tyre, using her political savvy to oust the other Lords with a vote of no confidence. In Draft 1.2 she offers this plan in a last-ditch effort to convince more sympathetic Lords to help her stabilize Tyre’s crumbling economy. In this earlier draft she already knows of the no-confidence mechanism when we first meet her, yet is hesitant to enact it.

But in rereading her chapter, I realized the tension was too shallow and the scene too rushed. In Draft 1.3 I chose to slow down and first introduce Maleem’s life at court—the kinds of pressures she’s under as her father’s heir, her personal and political aspirations. During a disastrous meeting-turned-date, Maleem finds an opportunity to escape when an old friend named Ryder arrives. She abandons her former dinner partner and joins Ryder for the evening. During their conversation she confesses her newfound discovery of Tyre’s crumbling economy, hoping that he can help her find a solution. Unable to offer much help, Ryder half-jokingly asks Maleem if there isn’t some convenient law or loophole to usurp the Lords’ power for herself—the kind of catch often found in stories of heroes outsmarting villains. Like the cynical Kvothe of *The Name of the Wind*, Maleem dismisses the idea immediately, saying that such a thing is ridiculous; the law acts to preserve government and its powers, not destroy it. Ryder admits it seems like a near-impossible task, and Maleem leaves the conversation no closer to a solution than before. Later, though, as she’s desperately researching for a way to prevent Tyre’s collapse, she stumbles upon exactly the kind of law she’d initially thought couldn’t exist: a vote of no confidence where a majority of fiefs can remove a Lord from power. Shocked by this discovery, she initially chooses to ignore it, though it never truly leaves her mind. In this new version, I’m attempting to emulate the kind of metatraditional approach that Dellinger was pointing to in his

study of Rothfuss. Maleem calls out the implausibility of Ryder's suggestion, yet later discovers that the implausible paradoxically exists. However, this doesn't mean the story immediately returns to tradition and the problem is solved. Instead, Maleem must now navigate between the massive cost of this viable solution, this fairy tale loophole, and her ever-growing concern that there is no better alternative.

Finally, the third change takes place in a conversation between Kelsier and Kavaan, a major antagonist and heir to one of the high-ranking Supristov Lords that Maleem is seeking to oust. Although he's a magicless Putristov, Kelsier is successful on the battlefield and an inspiration to his fellow soldiers. Hoping to use Kelsier's popularity to his advantage, Kavaan congratulates Kelsier on his routing of the enemy Gawanéan forces and reminds him that many of the Putristovs are beginning to call him a hero. Kelsier, like Maleem, dismisses this notion. He claims there are no heroes, that they only exist in legend. He points out that hundreds of soldiers died during the battle and says a hero would have saved them. Kavaan, unlike Ryder, engages with this rebuttal and says that heroes are what people believe them to be: because people believe Kelsier to be a hero, that is what he is. However, the reader (if they are not already skeptical of Kavaan) soon realizes that Kavaan's motive in telling Kelsier this is to use him to more effectively subjugate Putristov soldiers.

In the context of the ongoing story, this at first seems to justify Kelsier's claim that there are no heroes; Kavaan was only flattering him to get what he wanted. Yet as events continue to unfold, the reader notices Kelsier slowly beginning to take on more heroic traits. Given the opportunity to secure freedom and wealth for himself and his family by revealing Maleem and Ryder's plan to secure a vote of no confidence, Kelsier instead chooses to help them. Of course, he's still motivated by the prospect of protecting his family, but his decision here is an important

one. Kelsier displays honor and integrity, and perhaps even a kernel of hope that the lives of Putristovs will improve if Ryder and Maleem are successful. At the climax of the story—the details of which will remain shrouded in mystery for now—Kelsier, a lowly Putristov, publicly demonstrates his heroism before some of the most powerful people in the world, becoming a symbol of hope for Putristovs everywhere—a verifiable living legend.

### **Parting Thoughts**

I began writing this critical introduction with two goals in mind: 1.) to dismantle the claim that genre fiction (and fantasy more specifically) is inferior to realist fiction; and 2.) to properly prepare readers for the creative component of this thesis. As for my first goal, I did this because the current state of academia is such that any undergraduate student interested in writing fantasy, science fiction, or other forms of genre fiction will face significant pushback from their professors. However, this isn't to claim that these professors don't make a valid point when they say fiction courses should hold themselves to a standard of excellence. My argument is only intended to make the case that genre fiction is not incapable of rising to that standard, so long as it is a fair and balanced standard that doesn't tip the scales in favor of realist fiction.

As for my second goal, I did this because I wanted to demonstrate the level of thought and consideration that goes into every scene I write. Despite what critics of fantasy might think, I'm not just throwing words on the page about magic, dragons, and so on. I have a vision for a world full of complex characters with competing motivations who are trying to change that world in the ways they believe it should be changed. Magic functions as a part of this world, creating just as many problems as it might solve, and I invite the reader to consider the variety of ideologies held by my characters that are influenced by the existence of magic, who has access to

it, and what they do with it. While those elitist Supristovs who claim superiority due to their magic certainly seem reprehensible, are their claims factually incorrect? In a world where they can kill someone with a single word, it makes sense that they have become drunk on their own power. Conversely, why do some Supristovs seem to detest this drunkenness and desire a more just world for Putristovs? What is it about them that separates their attitude and beliefs from those of their peers? And as for heroism, is Kelsier right? Do heroes really not exist except in stories? Or is Kavaan, schemer though he is, actually closer to the truth? Are heroes what we believe them to be, irrespective of what they might think of themselves? As this thesis moves into the creative component, I ask that you continue to ponder these questions as you read an excerpt from the fourth draft of *The Thieves Who Rule Us*.

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Creative Component – *The Thieves Who Rule Us* Excerpt

Part One

## Chapter One

1275 AA

It was cold. Bitterly cold, really. Kelsier stamped his feet in the calf-deep snow, the fine powder clinging to his pants. His eyelids were the only flesh left unexposed on his entire body, and they ached with the cold lashings of wind that came howling down the distant Terta Mountains. He exhaled, his breath passing through the multiple scarves covering his face to fog in the air before him. It became a cloud through which the tree line of the forest grew hazy and indistinct, the shape of its shrubbery, trunks, and canopies coalescing together in the grey half-light of predawn.

“It’s nearly sunrise,” Junten whispered. Kelsier glanced to the right and saw the shorter boy’s face lifted towards the sky. They were only a few feet apart, close enough for Kelsier to notice the way Junten’s hands trembled at his sides. They were encased in thick leather gloves, and no doubt Junten wore several more pairs of wool beneath them. Kelsier and the other sixteen-year-old boys had only been waiting about half an hour, not long enough that Junten could use the cold as an excuse.

“Means it’s almost time, then,” Kelsier whispered in reply. He looked to the left and right, taking stock of the other boys in line. There were only about a hundred in all, fewer than previous years. Depending on how you looked at it, that was either good or bad, and for the same reason too. Good in the sense that there were still plenty of predators lurking in the forest, so every boy had ample opportunity to claim a *mekh*. Bad in the sense that there were still plenty of predators lurking in the forest, meaning any moment of carelessness could be your last.

Kelsier saw Junten fiddle with the string of the bow slung over his back, his hands still trembling. “Hey,” Kelsier said to him. Junten looked over, and Kelsier glanced around to make sure none of the other boys were paying attention to them. “It’ll be alright.”

Junten’s blue eyes stared at him, unblinking. “You heard the elders, right? When they said that if we’re not ready to risk dying then we shouldn’t go on the Hunt at all?” Kelsier had heard them. Before he’d come to the forest, he and the other boys had met in the church with the elders. There, under high ceilings of wooden arches and domed roofs, the elders had begun to prepare them for the Hunt.

They’d listed off the rules, each of which Kelsier had already known from a childhood of asking too many questions too many times over. They were not to enter the forest until the sun rose over the horizon. They were not to aid or even acknowledge another hunter in the forest unless they were tracking the same animal, in which case the gods had brought them together for a reason. They were not to abandon any predator whose presence they discovered, whether by tracks or sight of the predator itself. They were not to leave the forest without a slain predator in tow, else they forfeited earning their *mekh* until next winter. Once they’d finished, the elders had given them all one final warning.

“This is no game,” Elder Riveten had said, his wrinkled face and faded-blue eyes somber. Elder Kona and Elder Teven, Kelsier’s own grandfather, had stood next to him, silent but slowly nodding. “You hunt to become a man. You hunt to earn your *mekh*. You do not hunt because you are told to, or because you are afraid of refusing. Consider this: if you are not prepared to die on the Hunt, then you are not ready. Now, go.”

Kelsier could still hear the echo of those words in his mind, and he knew the fear that Junten felt. He hadn't slept at all the night before. He'd lain awake on his cot in the dark, hands clutching the one remaining piece of his father he had left. It was the small wooden likeness of a badger his father had carved for Kelsier's mother. His father had gifted it to her when he asked if she would accept the proposal of his *mekh* at the next day's bonfire ceremony. According to his mother, that same *mekh* he'd taken from its body was the fur she kept carefully sealed away in the wooden box in her room. She'd given the carving to Kelsier years ago at a time when he couldn't help asking questions about his father, even though he could see the pain in his mother's eyes when she spoke of him.

Kelsier didn't remember much about his father. Hardly anything, in fact. He was something of a legend, like the stories Kelsier's grandfather told of a time before the Supristovs or the Formation Wars. The only memory Kelsier had was of a lilting smile, the left corner of the mouth just barely higher than the right. Kelsier liked to imagine it was the last smile he'd ever seen from his father before he left for the war.

"Ah, Junten," Kelsier said as he pulled down the scarves wrapped around his face. He flashed his father's smile—he'd worked for months while watching his reflection in cups of water until it finally matched the smile in his memory. "When we get back, I'll buy you a draft of cider from Albeny's, alright?"

Junten choked out a laugh, which seemed to surprise him. "That's supposed to make me feel better?" he asked, gesturing to the impending forest before them. "Gods, Kelsier, I might die in there, and that's the last thing you have to say to me?"

Kelsier lifted his scarves back over his face, the exposed skin already pained from the biting cold. “It’s something to look forward to,” Kelsier said. He turned his eyes to the forest where the earliest glimmers of the rising sun were just beginning to shine through the dense foliage. “We’ll go with Ghertan and Aden to celebrate, and I’ll even pair with Ghertan for royals so you don’t lose all your coin again.”

Junten let out a shaky breath, and from the corner of his vision Kelsier saw the shorter boy shake his head. “You’re a shit friend, you know that?”

Kelsier grinned behind his scarves. “Good luck,” he told Junten as the sun finally crested the horizon and lit the world in rays of gold. Silence fell upon them all, and in the morning sunshine Kelsier forced one foot in front of the other as he approached the forest’s edge. On either side of him were boys doing the same, each of them preparing themselves to make that step into the wilderness. Once inside they would be tasked to separate from one another, each going their own ways. The forest surrounding nearly their entire city stretched for hundreds of verstas to the eastern coast of Tyre and to the northern base of the Terta Mountains. If they weren’t careful, they could lose their way entirely and die a slow, cold death.

Kelsier couldn’t stop thinking about that and the hundreds of predators lying in wait for him as he approached the forest’s edge. In front of him was a massive fir tree, its trunk nearly as wide as the span of his arms. Its bark was etched by age and weather, snow pressed into its crevices like hands to a wound. He stopped for a moment and pressed an open palm to a pocket several layers deep over his heart. Inside was a small bag of tinder and his father’s badger carving.

Kelsier prayed, casting his attention to the four gods above just like he'd been taught in church. *Please, please guide me to a badger. It's all I ask.* Around him the other boys were already entering the forest, so Kelsier joined them, stepping past the fir tree and sinking his boot into the soft snow of the forest floor.

\* \* \*

Kelsier fell to his knees in the snow, gasping in ragged breaths as pain lanced through his shoulders and back. They were the only parts of his body he could feel with any clarity; his hands and feet had long since gone numb, along with his face. The smell of blood hung heavy in the air around him, and he wondered how many eyes watched him in the darkness.

No branches stirred, no wind howled. The watery crescent of the moon overhead was barely bright enough to see more than an arshin or two in front of him. He'd been walking for ages ever since dusk fell, but he had no way of knowing how much further he still had to go. He'd known travelling at night was an awful choice, but it had been his only one. He'd sacrificed a couple of his gloves to serve as makeshift bandages for the deep wounds weeping blood from his shoulders and back, but they'd only just barely staunched the flow. This far into winter there were no goldenseals left poking through the frozen ground and snow. Kelsier's grandfather would have some though, and if Kelsier took them soon enough he could stave off any infection. In the meantime, he'd done his best to clean the wounds on his own—forced himself to grab handfuls of snow and scrub them into the scratches, his whole body shaking from the hammering blows of pain.

He hadn't been able to reach his back, though, and he worried that was the worst of it.

“A sm-small r-r-rest,” he hissed through chattering teeth. It had become a mantra of sorts, a consolation whenever his legs failed him and he collapsed in the snow. It was happening more often now, and Kelsier was beginning to have trouble remembering how much time he actually spent walking. How many steps had it been since his last rest? Was he even headed in the right direction?

It didn't matter. Anywhere was better than the forest. Kelsier stripped off the dead lynx from his back and dropped it in the snow. He settled himself against a tree, humming at the pain in his back as he did so. He still had enough strength left not to just lie down in the soft, cold, white powder. For now, anyway. He blinked his eyes furiously, resisting the seductive lure of sleep that edged at the corners of his vision. He focused on the lynx's open mouth, its teeth gleaming with stolen moonlight, its front and back paws tied with knots of twine.

He remembered the moments just before it had happened. He'd been walking through the forest, carefully avoiding tree roots hidden by banks of snow, when he'd heard a whisper of movement from behind him.

Then there was a great force crashing into him from behind and he was falling to his hands and knees. Heat, like a still-burning coal, seared through his back. He gasped and choked on snow, unable to move. Thankfully, though, he'd landed at the top of a hill, so his momentum carried him forward into a roll.

He felt something tumble off of him and heard it hit a nearby tree trunk. The inhuman yowl of pain and surprise shocked Kelsier almost more than the initial attack. As he scrambled to his feet, he saw a lynx shaking its head and growling low in its throat as it got back onto its paws. It turned its amber eyes on him, its predatory gaze rooting Kelsier to the spot.

He stared at the lynx for a heartbeat that stretched into a lifetime, watching it watch him. There was an animal's intelligence in those eyes. No mercy. No pity. As much as it terrified Kelsier, it also silenced his racing mind. He realized, in a quiet kind of way, that he was going to die. The knotted muscles of its shoulders, the subtle strength of its jaws; Kelsier was no more threatening than a rabbit. It lunged, and though Kelsier knew he was going to die, he still wanted to live. So he reached for the skinning knife at his waist and drew it from its sheath just as the lynx's front paws landed on his shoulders.

Looking back now, Kelsier was sure that if he'd actually tried to strike out at the animal he would have died. As it was, he'd been too slow to launch a proper attack. By sheer luck the lynx's throat had slammed to the hilt of the blade in less than a heartbeat, so fast that Kelsier could only stumble backwards and fall once more in the snow.

There Kelsier again stared into the lynx's eyes. This time they were close enough that the fog of their breaths entwined over the ravaged snowbank. The animal screamed in Kelsier's face, its pain and anger contorting its features just as the blade in its throat contorted its voice. It flailed away from him, desperate to get to its paws and escape.

Having come face to face with his own imminent death, Kelsier could only lie there in the snow as he heard the distant sounds of the dying lynx's panting wet breaths. Eventually it grew quiet, and around him the forest slowly returned to its previous state. The wind passing through the trees, the distant echo of birdcalls—the pregnant silence of nature.

Now, Kelsier stared at the lynx in the dark. The grey and white fur of its throat was matted with frozen blood. He'd never even seen it coming. Had he walked right by it, completely



unaware of its presence? How many more predators had he passed tonight? How many more might attack him, their presence unknown until they sank their fangs into his flesh?

And even if he got out of the forest alive, he couldn't imagine being proud of what he'd done. He'd barely escaped with his life, and that had been luck. The struggle had broken his bow into pathetic splinters when the lynx first slammed into him; without his knife, he would have died. He *should* have died. And besides all of that, it was a *lynx*.

Kelsier lifted a trembling hand and rubbed his face as he stared at the animal. "Sh-should b-b-be grate-grateful," he whispered. It was true, but all Kelsier felt was frustration. He'd prayed for a badger, had convinced himself he would kill one. Countless nights he'd faded to sleep imagining the smiles on his family's faces when they saw him returning with the corpse of a badger. And maybe, when he looked into his reflection after the Hunt, he'd see enough of his father in his own face to remember what the man had actually looked like.

Kelsier fought with a shaking hand to reach past the outer two layers of his coats to find the pocket that held his father's carving and the last bit of tinder he had left. He pulled the carving out, not caring that the pouch of tinder fell in his lap. In the faint moonlight, Kelsier turned the carving over in his gloved hand. It was a crude likeness, discernible only as a badger once one recognized that the misshapen lump at the top was the head and the bulbous center was its stomach. The badger stood on its hind legs, staring back at him.

Kelsier jerked his arm over his head and aimed high above the darkness encircling him. What did the carving really matter, anyway? His father had died years ago, and all of Kelsier's dreams should have died with him. Better to be done with it all, to give up on trying to know a

man he'd never meet, never see, never hear from again. Kelsier tensed the muscles in his forearm and shoulder, ignoring the sharp stab of pain as he did so.

But nothing happened. Seconds passed, and Kelsier continued to hold the carving in his grip, his fingers clenched around its small body. Eventually he relaxed his hand and lowered his arm, eyes still fixed beyond the darkness. He grabbed the bag of tinder from his lap and placed both it and the carving back in their pocket, making sure they were safely stored inside before he stood up and shouldered the lynx once again.

Kelsier was only aware that time passed because he forced himself to count his footsteps, his chattering teeth and shaking voice loud enough that he hoped they'd scare off anything that might think him an otherwise easy meal. Even after falling to his knees repeatedly, his wounds throbbing, he refused to rest. There wasn't any real thought to his determination; he just felt, deep within his heart, that he had to keep moving. And so he did.

Collapse after collapse, he kept getting back up on shaking knees. A tree trunk jumped out from the darkness and Kelsier staggered around it. He lifted his head and saw a tiny pool of lights in the distance. For a moment he thought he'd walked off the edge of the world and was seeing the night sky without the horizon. He blinked and realized it was his city. Every doorframe in Lower Tennen had a burning lantern hung at its top, a beacon for any hunter like Kelsier who returned at night to find their people asleep but still waiting for them.

He felt the same as he had when he'd stared into the lynx's eyes; he was rooted to the spot, captivated by the sight before him. Moments passed until finally he blinked and felt all at once as if he were waking from a dream that was already fading from memory. Kelsier lifted the lynx higher on his back, winced at the pain, and began heading home.

## Chapter Two

### 1275 AA

The blow of the hammer against the lunch bell echoed up Kelsier's arm, the ringing of the metal carrying over the sounds of men grunting and saws furiously slicing through wood. A few heads perked up with confused expressions, each of them newcomers to Kona's sawmill. The rest of the men and more experienced boys kept their eyes on the saws and blades in their hands as they quickly brought their work to a halt; everyone who stuck around long enough knew that losing a finger or two could happen faster than you could blink.

Kelsier set his axe and hammer aside and removed the gloves from his hands, his skin damp with a light sheen of sweat. Juntan and Ghertan—who were both cutting through some of the smaller trees brought to the mill today—were already headed his way, their two-man saw left waiting in a log's flesh behind them.

“What's going on?” a nearby boy asked, a large knife in both hands and sap stuck to his face. He was one of the younger ones fresh to the mill, and he stood with his shoulders hunched and pressed close to his chest. The boy's friend merely shrugged, similarly confused.

Though Kelsier didn't know them, he answered anyway. “Hey,” Kelsier called to them, and they jerked their heads round to face him. “Bell means it's lunch.” He motioned to the sun beyond the roof's overhead shutters—they were open at the moment to help them all cool off as they worked.

“So we go home and eat?” the boy with sap on his face asked.

“If you didn’t bring any food and you can get there and back before lunch is over, then sure.” The boy and his friend exchanged panicked looks before they both ran from the mill. Kelsier smiled, watching the two exit as he remembered his own first few days working for Kona. It had been unnerving at first, especially when the elder had asked a few of the older men to show their missing fingers to demonstrate just how dangerous the work really was. Now, though, the mill was almost like a second home.

“Hey Kel,” Junten said, his voice coming from behind Kelsier. “How are your shoulders?”

Kelsier turned and rolled the joints, Ghertan and Junten both watching him. There was some tightness, but no pain. “Not bad. Grandfather said I should be fully recovered in another couple of weeks, but I feel fine now.”

“Good. My mother said the last of the *mekhs* will be ready in a few days. Wouldn’t want to miss your chance to propose to Latenva, eh?” Junten asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Gods above,” Ghertan said with a tired sigh, “is the proposal the only part of the bonfire you can think about?”

“What? Just because you can’t propose to Wren this year, the rest of us can’t be happy we finally get to marry?”

Ghertan’s eyes grew hard, his fair skin flushing with anger. “Hey, enough” Kelsier cut in, lightly cuffing the back of Junten’s head. Ghertan cut Junten with his eyes and walked past Kelsier to the back of the mill’s long workshop where their lunches rested in sealed pouches

buried in the outside snowbanks. Kelsier watched him go before turning on Junten. “What’s your problem?”

Junten rubbed where Kelsier had hit him and glowered in Ghertan’s direction. “*He’s* the one with a problem. Said he doesn’t even want to go to the bonfire on account of there ‘being nothing to do.’”

“Can you blame him? Having to watch you, me, Aden, and everyone else at the bonfire propose while he sits there with Wren?”

Junten let loose a frustrated sigh, loud enough that some of the older men walking past them looked over with raised eyebrows. “I get that he’s upset, Kel, but it’s been *two weeks* since the Hunt ended. He chose to leave after only three days in, not a scratch on him. You stayed for five and nearly died. I don’t see why he’s got to be so bitter about a choice *he* made.”

Kelsier glanced to the end of the mill where the old men, young boys, and new adults like himself and Junten were streaming through the open doors and into the bright winter sunshine. They were far enough away that Kelsier was sure Ghertan couldn’t hear them, but he lowered his voice all the same. “Considering you were ready to turn tail and run before the Hunt even began, I really don’t think you ought to be so hard on Ghertan, eh?”

Junten’s shoulders and neck stiffened as Kelsier’s words hit him. For a moment he didn’t say anything, and Kelsier wondered if he’d gone too far. Then, like the falling of snow from a roof in spring, all the tension left Junten’s body. “You’re right,” he mumbled. “I just—I don’t know how to make him feel better, you know? Everything I try only makes it worse.”

“You can start by apologizing,” Kelsier said. He left the mill with Junten close behind him, cringing as the first blast of wind hit his exposed forearms and face. Inside the mill it was

warm enough that some of the men removed their shirts entirely, but none of them lasted long like that outside. Already a few were breaking ice from their chest hair and heading back through the doors to fetch their coats.

Ghertan was standing in a circle with some of the other workers their age, talking and joking around. Kelsier recognized a few of them. “Yehnah’s said her mother will let us stay in her room for a few weeks after the ceremony, but after that we’ve got to find our own place so her two younger sisters can move in,” Potvik said. He was a large-framed man of sixteen, fresh from the Hunt just like Kelsier and Junten.

“Yehnah, Val’s daughter?” Kelsier asked as he and Junten joined them.

Potvik grinned and nodded proudly while Kelsier dug through a snowbank for his lunch. “Asked her as soon as I gave my beaver over to my mother,” he explained. “She was surprised. I don’t think she’d even known my name before then, so she told me she’d think about it. I couldn’t sleep all that night, and the next morning...”

Kelsier listened as Potvik went on telling the story while grinning so wide Kelsier occasionally wondered if the young man would split his dried lips. Ghertan, Kelsier noticed, had his eyes pointedly fixed on the small loaf of bread he ate. Unlike Junten, Kelsier understood Ghertan’s misery. For him, every day in the forest had been like a hand pawing carelessly at an aching wound. On the fourth day he’d even turned back three times to return to Lower Tennen, but each time he’d resisted and carried on with the Hunt. Marrying Latenva, the girl he’d loved since childhood, had certainly been one motivation, but he’d known she would wait another year for him without complaint. It had really been the lure of finding a badger, of feeling a connection with his dead father, that had convinced him to stay, to keep going.

“But what about you and Latenva, eh?” someone asked.

Kelsier blinked a few times, clearing the memories away. The others were looking at him expectantly. “What about us?”

“Ah, come on now,” one of them, a young man with straw-blond hair and a pinched nose, said. “How did you ask her?”

“Ask her what?”

The one who’d asked the question gestured to Potvik and said, “You know, how’d you ask Latenva to marry you? What did she say? I don’t think I’ve ever even heard her speak more than two words to me.”

They all quickly agreed on how quiet she was. Kelsier had never really thought so, but over the years his friends had always said that was because she was so much more open around him. Kelsier tried to remember how he’d asked Latenva to marry him and what she’d said in response, but after a moment nothing came to mind.

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “I guess we’ve always just understood we would marry.”

“Oh, come on Kel,” Junten said, smiling as he elbowed him. “Don’t be embarrassed. How did it go?”

Kelsier couldn’t even remember the first time he’d seen Latenva. Their mothers were close friends, so they’d been in one another’s lives from the moment they’d been born. She was a year older than him, but he’d never thought of her as a sister. Lena was plenty for Kelsier.

Latenva was kind and sweet, patient beyond reason, but funny and mischievous, too. One time she'd offered him an apple, and without thinking anything of it, he'd accepted and bit into it to find nothing but its red skin concealing a ball of snow. He still didn't know how she'd done it; all she'd told him was that it had taken her over an hour to prepare. Kelsier could easily list off another dozen memories: helping her and her mother plant onions in the still-wet ground from a recent thaw; hanging out with her at Albeny's tavern and cracking jokes as they watched their friends play royals and sing along to bar songs; dancing at previous years' bonfires as far back as he could remember. The one memory that wouldn't come to mind, though, was of a time when he might have asked her to marry him. He'd told her he loved her in quiet whispers under the stars on cool summer nights, but he'd never mentioned marriage. But she knew—didn't she?

Kelsier's silence seemed to have spoken for him, as each of the young men, and even Ghertan, too, were now looking at him with concern and disbelief. "You've really never asked her?" It was Ghertan who spoke, his eyebrows furrowed and his lips downturned. "Kel, you've got to at least *talk* to her about it."

Kelsier felt his neck flush as they all continued staring at him. "Alright, alright," he said. He busied himself by picking over the last bits of cured sausage and cheese from the meal he'd eaten while listening to Potvik. "I'll talk to her about it. I'm sure she knows, though."

"Still," Junten said from beside Kelsier, "a girl likes to be asked." The others nodded in agreement, making Kelsier feel even less sure about himself than before.

"I already said I'd do it," he told them. "Can we talk about something else now? Potvik," he said, singling the young man out, "how's your family? Your father's coming back from the war in a few weeks, right?" Normally, Kelsier would have never asked such a question—many



people considered it bad luck to talk about the war—but he was tired of all the other young men’s eyes pressing against him. Besides, it was well-known that Potvik’s father had gotten himself a coveted non-combatant position on account of his being able to read and write so well. He’d spent good money studying at the church over the years from the Supristov clergy. Everyone had thought of that as wasted coin, but it had saved him in the end; he was a low-ranking Supristov’s letter-writer now, or something of the sort.

Potvik grinned, and this time his dried lips actually *did* split, sending a thin rivulet of blood down his chin. He cursed and wiped it away before answering. “Yeah, he’ll be back a little after the bonfire ceremony. He said he was sorry to miss it, but he didn’t really have any choice.” Not only was Potvik’s father lucky that he didn’t have to fight, but he also had the freedom to write letters back home. Kelsier had never heard of any other Putristov who was afforded such a thing. Most families either heard news of their relation’s death by the church announcements on Fellingday, or they saw their relation when they returned home from the war. Most who came back after their year of service did so intact in the body even if not in the mind. Some, though, like Kelsier’s own grandfather, who had lost his entire left arm up to the shoulder, were discharged early on account of their grievous, debilitating wounds. That said, most of those who left for the war in Gawané never returned home at all.

“Oh, by the way,” the boy with straw-blonde hair cut in, “have any of you heard about Tonin?” The name brought to mind a vague recollection of a large, quiet boy who worked at Kinaan’s smithy.

“No, what’s going on?” Kelsier asked. A few of the other boys voiced similar interest, but one or two were already nodding their heads, obviously in the know.

“He’s said he’s going to try to volunteer in the next few weeks,” the boy answered.

“Hang on,” Junten said from beside Kelsier, “isn’t he only seventeen? I thought they didn’t take younger than eighteen, even for the draft.”

“Sometimes they make exceptions,” Potvik said before the other man could answer. “Father said he’s noticed more young Putristovs at the front lately, and that he even spoke with one my age a few weeks ago. Said the man had been drafted from a small town in Ajuvaar to keep up with quota.”

Another boy with a smattering of freckles across his cheeks and nose spoke up. “If that’s true, I can’t imagine them not taking Tonin. He’s nearly got a beard and is only a couple vershoks shy of standing eye-to-eye with Elder Kona.” He cracked a smile and gestured to Junten, the shortest among them. “You’re in luck, though, Junten. Long as you shave, they might think you’re not still a boy.”

A chorus of laughter followed the remark, but Kelsier only winced. Everyone who knew Junten knew how sensitive he was about his height; it was the surest way to start a fight with the young man, probably even surer than clubbing him without warning.

Before the laughter had even fully died out, Junten was on the attack. “You’re one to talk, Lionel. I heard you wet yourself the last time a conscription officer came down from Upper Tennen.” Lionel’s face grew red as more laughter followed. Junten wasn’t finished, though. “But don’t worry, one look at your shaky knees and they’d know you’d faint at the first sight of a Gawanean.”

“Enough,” a rough voice said from behind Kelsier. He turned and saw one of the older men, his beard near full white and his head clean-shaven, eyeing them all with displeasure.

“You’ve lost brothers and fathers, sisters and mothers, all of you to the war. Would you mock their deaths, too?” No one replied, though Kelsier could hear the crunch of snow as a few of the boys awkwardly shifted their weight. The older man sighed, his eyes closing for a few seconds as he shook his head. “Leave off the jibes. Potvik’s right, you know. There’ve been rumors from Rond and other cities to the east that the Supristovs are starting to take younger and younger men, and more women, too. You should all pray such things don’t happen here.”

The man spat to the side before he turned and left, heading back inside the mill with the rest of the workers. Neither Kelsier nor any of the others spoke for a time as they watched his retreating figure.

“Gods, it was just some joking,” Junten muttered under his breath.

Kelsier shrugged. “He made a good point, though.” He looked to Junten and saw his friend scowl at the words, but he didn’t argue. “Come on, then,” Kelsier told him as he packed away the crumbs of his lunch and pushed the sack inside the snow. He walked towards the mill, the fog of his breath shining like morning dew in sunlight.

\* \* \*

The sun hung suspended over the treetops to the west of Lower Tennen, and the blue sky was cut through by lines of faint red and orange. Kelsier had finished work and was heading home, his coat hanging loosely on his shoulders. He relished the cool breeze ruffling the rough fabric of his shirt and pressing close to his heated skin, its icy touch a soothing balm. The streets were brimming with people walking about, young lovers arm-in-arm, children laughing and playing, a few older adults seated at tables playing cards. The soft amber glow of lanterns outside Albeny’s tavern at the next intersection were a welcome sight; maybe he’d stop and buy a cider,

chat with Albeny and his wife. If he was lucky, there might be a group looking to find a fourth player for royals. He'd gotten paid his weekly earnings—six full and three quarter dengas—so he could even afford some dried apple cubes for Lena and his mother.

Kelsier had made his way to Albeny's front doors and was about to step inside when he felt something catch at the back of his shirt. "Drinking before sundown?" a soft, familiar voice asked. Kelsier could already see the quiet smile on her face before he turned around. Latenva was dressed in a simple cream dress almost completely hidden by her long coat. Her light brown hair was free and hung in curls around her face, and at her right hip she held a straw basket.

"Only a cider," Kelsier said as he stepped out of the way of the opening doors. Latenva stepped with him, their bodies in sync, dancing. "Thought I might play a few hands of royals if anyone was looking for a partner. You in?"

Latenva hefted the basket. "Can't, I'm on an errand for mother."

"Oh," Kelsier said, reaching for the basket, "well then I'll just come with you."

Latenva stepped out of his reach, her smile growing to show her white teeth. "No, no, don't bother yourself. I'd hate to interrupt your *illustrious* plans."

Kelsier snorted and shook his head. "Keep taking lessons at the church and soon enough you'll be speaking a whole different language. I'll have to talk to you with hand signals and grunts."

Latenva laughed, obviously pleased with herself. For the past few months she'd been spending any extra coin on tutoring at the church. She planned on working there, too, eventually. *Something to do with books*, she always said.

“Really, though, I’ll come with.” Kelsier reached for the basket and this time she let him take it. It held some folded fabric and a few spools of thread. “Where are you going?”

“Upper Tennen,” she said easily. Kelsier fought to keep his shoulders relaxed, hoping his discomfort wouldn’t reach his eyes. “Mother mended a serving girl’s dress and needs it returned, but Talvid’s been fussy lately, so she needs to stay with him.”

“That so?” Kelsier asked as they left Albeny’s behind. They set off north toward the wall that split Tennen into its Upper and Lower districts.

“Yeah, I think it’s the cold. This winter’s been a bad one.”

“Grandfather’s been saying the same thing. I imagine it’s even worse for Talvid, though.”

“Oh, it is,” Latenva agreed. She stepped past a little girl who was running by with a group of children as she continued. “Just last night his little hands and feet were like chunks of ice, so mother and I wrapped him in blankets and took turns holding him till he fell asleep.”

Kelsier listened as Latenva went on talking while they slowly approached Upper Tennen. He liked it when she spoke about her days; as children they’d spent every moment of free time together, exploring the fields and nearby forest in spring and running through the city streets in fall and winter. Now, though, they were so busy that even small moments like this were hard to come by. All the little insignificant details of her life were like morsels of fresh-baked bread that took the edge off his hunger to be with her.

“But poor Irene,” Latenva said in a hushed whisper as they passed the cobbler’s shop. “She still swears up and down that Naten will come back from the forest, even though he’s been

gone past two weeks now. She's already refused four proposals, and I worry she'll just keep refusing until they stop asking her."

"Naten was one of Tretan's sons, right?"

"The second," Latenva said with a nod. "He was the one we saw get kicked in the leg this summer, remember? He was herding aurochs with Tretan and his brothers when one of the yearlings spooked and caught him just above the knee?"

Kelsier remembered. He had never really spent much time with him, though, and could only bring to mind brief conversations in passing at the church on Fellingday. Still, it pained him to think of Naten lost in the forest somewhere—or, more likely, dead. It could have easily been him, or Juntan, or even Ghertan.

Latenva seemed to have a similar thought, because she stepped closer to him and linked her arm through his, pulling him close. They walked in silence as the sun fell behind the forest's western canopy and their city fell into twilight. Around them, Lower Tennen began to stir to life. Lantern after lantern began to light the streets as shop owners set about making sure they could keep an eye on their wares. Music from the occasional tavern spilled into the street, a lure meant to catch at the ankles of passerby and entice them inside for a drink and a laugh. The smell of roasting meat and spices set Kelsier's mouth watering. Grinning street-side vendors wafted the smoke from their skillets and pans into the delighted faces of small children who clutched quarter dengas in their fists, their skin kissed with a red glow from the cold.

They were nearly to the wall now, and Latenva pulled away from him just far enough to wave to one of the Supristov guards standing underneath the arch of the passageway between the two halves of the city. The guard lifted a hand half-heartedly in reply, and as Kelsier drew closer

he could see it was a woman, her hair tied tight behind her head to display the characteristic tattoo of an eye in the center of her forehead. Kelsier had always been unnerved by the sight of them; as a child he'd heard countless tales of those tattoos blinking, or of their pupil moving to watch you whenever you turned to leave. Even now he had to suppress a shudder as the Supristov stepped forward.

“I was told to expect your mother,” the woman said in a bored tone. She didn't even look Latenva or Kelsier in the eyes; instead she stared above their heads, as if not speaking to them at all.

“She's come down with a cough,” Latenva said smoothly. She lied so effortlessly that for the briefest moment Kelsier thought it might actually be true. “She said she didn't want to pass anything along on this side of the wall.”

The guard merely shrugged and held out a hand. Kelsier passed over the basket and watched as the Supristov turned over its contents, her gloved hands carelessly tossing about the delicate spools of thread. “Can't see why the serving girls don't get their mendings here,” the guard muttered. Kelsier didn't bother telling her the reason: that the serving girls' wages weren't much more than his own, and that if he wanted to get a shirt mended in Upper Tennen it'd cost him more than a month's worth of coin.

Finally the guard handed the basket back to Kelsier and waved him and Latenva through. He breathed a sigh of relief as they emerged into Upper Tennen, grateful the guard hadn't used the opportunity to try and shake them down for coin.

Stepping out from beneath the wall and into Upper Tennen was like stepping into a different world. Instead of crude lanterns hung from metal hooks screwed into roofs, here there

were tall metal poles with flames as big as Kelsier's hand to light the city at night. They lined the streets like watching guards, their red and yellow eyes burning with power. Men and women rode in bulbous carriages pulled by shaggy aurochs, the beasts' very horns gleaming as if polished. There was still the scent of food in the air, but here it was a rich, sweet smell that coated Kelsier's tongue as he breathed.

And that was to say nothing of the music. Whereas in Lower Tennen they played tavern songs on long-necked lyres, here Kelsier saw a woman at a nearby intersection with her lips pressed to a thin metal tube. The instrument seemed almost to cry with a beautiful, inhuman voice. To Kelsier it sounded as if the voice rose, flying through the air, then crashed to earth with a low, mournful sob and shattered on the cobblestones. A few passing Supristovs clapped and cheered, but most continued on their way, not even bothering to toss the woman a coin or two.

"We're this way," Latenva said, breaking Kelsier out of his stupor. She seemed completely unfazed by the surrealness of their surroundings.

"How often do you run errands here for your mother? Last we spoke you said you'd only done it once or twice."

Latenva shrugged, her eyes fixed on the doors to a nearby shop that had glass—actual glass, not shuttered wood—windows displaying various pieces of jewelry like rings, necklaces, and what Kelsier assumed were cuffs meant to go on one's forearm. "I've been coming more often these past few weeks, mostly for small things like this that mother doesn't have time for."

Kelsier glanced her way, taking in the easy confidence of her shoulders and the casual expression on her face. It really didn't trouble her at all to visit here, to walk these streets and speak to the Supristovs. It was something he couldn't understand; ever since he could remember,



Kelsier had always been unnerved by the magic-wielders who ruled them. Even at church when he listened to the priests speak about the gods, all too often he became distracted by their tattoos or trying to avoid the gazes of their actual eyes.

He was surprised to feel hurt by this—not that Latenva wasn't troubled being in Upper Tennen, but that it had happened without him even realizing it. Unbidden came the words from earlier that day at lunch, the uneasiness he'd felt still a fresh taste in the back of his mouth. He'd always assumed he and Latenva understood each other. He'd known she would accept him just as surely as he knew how Latenva hated the taste of mint leaf in her cider. Now, though, there were things like this that he didn't know about her, important things like that she could walk through Upper Tennen without fear or discomfort. What else might have changed? Could he really be so confident in her answer now?

“Wait here, would you?” Latenva asked as they came to stand outside the shop with the glass windows and jewelry. “The owner doesn't much care for Putristovs, so it'll be best if I'm the only one who comes inside.”

“Fine by me,” Kelsier said as he handed over the basket. Latenva flashed him a quick smile before she opened the door, a gust of cinnamon and something sharper spilling out from the shop as she stepped inside. Kelsier turned around, busying himself by studying Upper Tennen. It was rare that he ever came to visit; the guards wouldn't let you through unless you had business to attend to.

Upper Tennen was like a half-brother to its counterpart, one that had inherited the same gradual incline in its streets, the same distant treetops, and the same twilight sky. The family resemblance ended there. Whereas Lower Tennen's shops and houses were squat, rough shoots

of wood and clay growing from the land, here the buildings were pieces of art with their stone pillars, glass windows, and gleaming metal accents. The largest building, though, was brutal and ugly by comparison. It was the jail where Putristov soldiers were held until they could be transported to Ponovera's western coast and shipped off to Gawané. The last time he'd seen it he'd also been on an errand with Latenva, though at the time both of them had still been uncomfortable being on this side of the wall.

Kelsier examined the jail's stone walls, its multiple windowless stories. It was longer than it was wide, a rectangle at the western end of the same street Kelsier stood at. He couldn't see its front doors, but that didn't matter; they held no significance for him, being used only by Supristov guards and conscription officers. Instead he focused on the building's eastern facing wall, where a pair of great wooden sliding doors were open like some terrible beast's maw. That was where the Putristovs who were collected in Lower Tennen were brought, their hands and feet chained to the inside of the cell carts they rode in. Even volunteers couldn't escape that ride through the streets.

Most people called the soldiers' journey "the last trip" since, for nearly every one taken, it was the last time they'd ever see Lower Tennen. He remembered his conversation with the boys at lunch again, though this time different words came to mind. How long might it be before Kelsier himself was drafted? Or Junten, or Ghertan? Five years? Less, even?

Kelsier cut his eyes away from the jail and looked instead towards the musician an intersection to the north as she began playing a new song on her pipe. He'd grown up with the weight of the draft hanging over his head like a heavy stone ready to fall. There was no sudden sense of despair when he lifted his eyes and saw it still looming there—only a grim acknowledgement of a fate to come.

The shop door opened and Latenva emerged, an empty basket at her hip. She still had a smile on her face as a trailing goodbye followed her out into the street. “Sorry I took so long,” she told Kelsier as she stepped next to him and linked their arms once more. “Henea wanted to try it on to make sure it still fit properly.”

“No worries. Shop owner say anything?”

“No, thankfully he wasn’t in today,” she said with a sigh of relief. “He always follows me around like he thinks I’ll try to steal something.”

“Would you?” Kelsier asked, flashing his father’s smile as they set off back home.

“Of course not!” she said, bumping him with her shoulder.

Kelsier laughed and they began joking back and forth, falling into an easy rhythm. A different guard waited at the wall on their way back, but this one seemed even less interested in them than the first and ignored them completely as they passed through. Back in Lower Tennen, they passed a drunken group of young men still celebrating their return from the forest. Latenva pulled their arms apart. “I’ve got to get home,” she said, her eyes on one of his shoulders as she reached out and picked off one of her hairs that had fallen there.

“I can walk with you,” Kelsier said, catching her hand before she could pull it away. It was warm and soft in his, and it made him aware of just how rough his own flesh was.

She smiled and slipped her hand free. “Don’t look so sad, Kel. My mother said the *mekhs* are almost ready, and that in a few days we’ll be having the bonfire. I’ll see you then. Make sure another girl doesn’t take what’s mine,” she said with a wag of her finger.

Kelsier smiled in return and, before she could walk away, leaned in and stole a kiss. He felt the corners of her lips lift even higher when theirs met. A moment later she pulled away and began walking backwards through the street, her eyes holding his own. “I love you, Kel,” she called out, without shame or care for who heard.

“You’re alright,” Kelsier called in return. Her echoing laughter washed over all the sounds of Lower Tennen before it finally found shelter within his heart.

## Chapter Three

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Kelsier's grandfather was tossing split logs on the fire, the powdered snow caught in the cracks melting and hissing as the flames licked them into steam. He moved quickly, the lack of his left arm proving no large impediment. "Gods but it's cold," his grandfather said, shivering as he paused to wrap the blanket tighter around his body.

"Think it'll snow?" Kelsier asked, picking up where his grandfather left off to toss a final log in the fireplace.

"Very well could. Should clear up by sundown, though. I tell you, Kelsier, if Kona doesn't set up that bonfire right this year—"

"He will," Kelsier's mother called from the kitchen just around the living quarters' corner. "Naanev said she'd make sure of it. Come on now, it's ready."

Kelsier helped his groaning grandfather to his feet. The man's head was clean-shaven like most of the older folk, but he kept a thick, grey beard neatly trimmed. He was thin, too, his clothes and the blanket wrapped around him sagging like gloves on a snowman's stick-hands. His voice was strong, though, and his eyes still keen despite the wrinkled flesh around them. Kelsier helped him walk to the small table where the rest of their family waited for them. His joints were often frozen over in the mornings, and it was the only time he'd ever let anyone lend him a hand to walk or stand up.

Lena was already tearing into the dark-meated dove breast on her plate, her fingers ripping the flesh into small chunks that she quickly popped into her mouth. His mother, on the other hand, sat waiting as Kelsier and his grandfather took their seats at the table.

“Thank you for the food, Vera,” his grandfather said with a nod to Kelsier’s mother. It was the same thing he said at every meal, but it somehow never sounded insincere.

“You’re welcome,” his mother said, and they joined Lena in having breakfast.

“You perfumed it, right?” Lena asked after taking a sip of her water.

“Last night when we got it back from Halder,” Kelsier answered.

Lena launched into a story she’d heard about a girl at the bonfire being proposed to with a *mekh* that had still stank like tannin and blood when she got it, and how the girl had nearly vomited as she turned the man down. “Can you imagine?” Lena asked, giggling. “Someone asking you to wear that?”

“Lena,” his mother chastised. It was enough of a reprimand to silence her, though Lena still made sure to giggle into her clay cup. “Don’t let her worry you, Kelsier. The *mekh* will smell fine. And besides, I’m sure Latenva would wear it even if you’d skinned it just a moment before handing it to her. That’s what *real* love will do for you,” his mother said with a pointed look to Lena.

Kelsier cracked his father’s smile. “Actually, I think she’d beat me over the head if I did that. That’s what *Latenva’s* love will do for you.” Lena burst out laughing, and Kelsier saw that, despite herself, his mother smiled.

“And you’d grin like a fool all the while,” his grandfather said. Kelsier’s smile grew, no doubt proving his grandfather true. Kelsier had hardly been able to sleep last night. The thought had come upon him all at once like a blow to the head—he was going to *marry* Latenva today. Suddenly his arms and legs had prickled with energy, a need to move, a need to find a way out for all the overwhelming feelings booming in his chest.

His mother had frowned when she heard he was still going in to work at Kona’s today. Most men were expected to take the day off work, to prepare themselves for the coming evening bonfire, but Kelsier couldn’t imagine staying at home. At least at Kona’s he would be able to move, to *do* something. Kelsier quickly finished his breakfast and stood from the table, already dressed to leave, his coat hanging over the back of his grandfather’s rocking chair by the door.

“Kelsier,” his mother called to him as he left the kitchen, “*please* be safe.”

“I always am.”

“I know, I know, but especially today.”

Kelsier smiled and assured her again as he put on his coat and opened the door.

“Make sure you hurry back to clean up! Don’t propose stinking like sweat,” his grandfather shouted as Kelsier stepped outside and shut the door behind him. Kelsier shook his head as he set off from home.

The streets of Lower Tennen were even busier than usual as people set about preparing for the day’s festivities. Boughs of fir limbs were being nailed to every rooftop. Wagons of firewood patrolled the streets. Wooden carvings of Moraav, matron god of Tyre, were scattered throughout the city, some as large as small children and others as small as a finger. Men and

women stood behind carts serving rare treats; the intoxicating smell of baked fruits, warm pies, and candied apples hung heavy in the cold morning air. It was perhaps the only time of year Kelsier ever smelled their like in Lower Tennen.

He watched as a group of children stood at one of the carts, arguing over how to spend the collection of coins they held between them. “It’s a plum tart,” a little girl said, sounding close to tears. “We’ve *never* had a plum tart, Rodren.”

The boy she spoke to—Rodren—wore a face covered in confliction. “But what if it’s no good? We know the apple pie’s a sure bet!”

Kelsier covered his laugh with a cough as he passed them by. He was sure he’d had the exact same argument with Ghertan when they were younger. Junten had always wanted the candied apples, and one year had even refused to share his coin with them until after he’d bought one just to be sure he wouldn’t be talked out of it.

Some of the adults weren’t much better. Kelsier passed two women arguing over fabrics outside a travelling merchant’s caravan parked on the street, their conversation nearly identical to the children’s he’d heard earlier. By the time he made it to Kona’s mill, Kelsier had already forced himself not to buy an apple pie at three different carts. He was rapidly losing confidence in his ability to refuse himself a fourth time before lunch.

He was one of the earliest to arrive; the others were all older, grizzled men who paid him no mind. They waited together under the overhang of the mill’s roof for Kona to arrive. They didn’t have to wait long. Kelsier saw Kona emerge from the crowded street just a few shops down, his short hair and braided beard dotted with the now slowly falling snowflakes from the clouded sky.



“You’re here?” he asked when he caught sight of Kelsier, his hand stalling in his pocket where he kept the mill’s key. His eyebrows furrowed and the corners of his lips stretched down. “You ought to be at home, Kelsier.”

“That mean you won’t let me inside?” Kelsier asked him, his own hands clutched tightly inside the pockets of his coat to stave off the chill.

“Course not,” Kona said as he drew out the key and set about unlocking the door. “Long as you can work, I don’t care if you’re stupid.” The other men chuckled as they all filed into the mill behind Kona. Kelsier followed suit, chuckling along with the other men. Once inside he grabbed one of the many axes hanging from the walls and set about splitting his way through the heap of logs stacked in a corner of the mill.

It was exactly what he’d needed. The grain of the axe handle against his gloved palms; the satisfying *thunk* of the head landing once, twice, and then the loud *crack* of a log splitting down the middle; the music of metal teeth biting their way through wood as men heaved at their long-saw handles. Kelsier fell into the familiar rhythm of the mill, eventually shedding his coat as he began to sweat from his labor.

He wondered what Latenva was doing at that moment. Fellingday was two days off, so she couldn’t be at the church taking lessons. Was she with her mother, trying to keep little Talvid warm despite the aching cold? Or was she in Upper Tennen, basket-at-hip as she ran her errands? Kelsier smiled, imagining the look in her eyes when they saw each other that night. No doubt she’d take the chance to tease him a bit, twisting her lips as if actually considering whether or not she’d accept his *mekh* and wear it at the bonfire.

He was trying to think of something clever he could say to her when he first heard it.

“Kelsier!” A voice, faint but recognizable. “Kelsier!”

He dropped his axe, leaving the split remains of a log lying on the ground. “Lena?” He ran to the door and threw it open. There, coming up the street amidst a crowd of people, was his sister. Her coat was thrown on carelessly, one of her shoulders exposed to the falling snow. Her hair whipped about her face, tossed by the wind.

“Oh, Kelsier,” she sobbed, and he saw then that she was crying. She held something in her arms clutched tight to her chest as she half-ran, half-stumbled through the gathering snow of the street. He froze, watching as she closed the remaining distance between them. Behind him, Kelsier could hear the awkward sounds of the mill coming to a halt.

“Lena, hey, what’s going on? What’s happened?” he asked as she nearly fell into him, her head landing square in his chest as her shoulders shook from her sobs.

He grabbed her by the arms and pulled her upright—he saw that his hands were shaking where he held her. “Lena,” he said, fighting to keep his voice level as he stared into her teary brown eyes.

“Oh, Kelsier,” she mumbled. “Gods, Kelsier, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He couldn’t breathe. “Lena, *what’s happened?*”

“Oh, gods, Kelsier, they took her. They took her.”

“Who, Lena? *Who?*”

She choked in a breath and gasped out, “Supristovs, Kel. Latenva—she’s been drafted.” She opened her arms and Kelsier looked down. A pair of small, confused eyes stared back up at

him. Talvid blinked and whined as a snowflake landed on his cheek. Kelsier's heart, which had been thrashing about in his chest, fell dead. "They took her," Lena sobbed, her voice barely a whisper.

"Kel," he babbled, lifting a chubby little hand towards Kelsier's face. "Kel, Kel," he repeated. Understanding came then, and with it, devastation.

*So, a tiny voice thought within his mind, this is what it feels like.* Kelsier watched as a stranger took over his body, lifting his arms to take Talvid from Lena and press him close to Kelsier's own chest. Talvid cooed appreciatively, completely unaware that Kelsier was being torn apart piece-by-piece from the inside. He nuzzled closer, enjoying the warmth of Kelsier's body.

There were voices now, coming from behind Kelsier in the mill. They might have been speaking to him, but it didn't really matter. He wasn't there anymore.

\* \* \*

Kelsier's grandfather had been right; the last drifting flakes of snow had fallen to the earth just as the sun began to drop to the western treetops. In Lower Tennen, those who could were dancing, singing, and clapping around the roaring flames of a bonfire just outside the city's perimeter. Young men proposed with *mekhs* to young women who either accepted them or turned them back over to their owners. Even from here, Kelsier could hear their distant rumble. For him, though, the loudest sound was the brutal sobs he could still hear echoing inside his mind.

Latenva hadn't been the only one taken; if hearsay was to be believed, one hundred and eighteen people had either volunteered or been drafted when a conscription officer rode through

their streets early that morning. Kelsier could believe it. He'd seen the families inside the church when he'd gone with Lena and his mother to try and console Latenva's mother. Nearly everyone had been on their hands and knees, some silent and others loosing guttural cries that touched the very marrow of his bones. Latenva's mother had been among the latter—a wreck, sobbing and tearing at her hair, her pleading eyes fixed to the large marble statue of Moraav at the front of the church, seemingly oblivious to Lena's and his mother's words. For his part, he'd said nothing. He'd belonged to the former.

“Dreadful business,” a haughty voice said. Kelsier shifted in the dark alley and saw who had spoken—a middle-aged woman dressed in a green overcoat buttoned to her chin with another, thicker coat draped over her shoulders. She sat across from a younger woman at one of the outdoor tables of the restaurant to Kelsier's left. “It's rather indecent behavior, you know. The rabble they become each year. Ugh,” she said, closing her eyes and shivering with disgust.

“It certainly is strange,” her younger companion said. A man came into view at their table then. He laid down two small cups, one for each of the women, and then a floating kettle appeared from over his shoulder. Despite himself, Kelsier sucked in a breath from shock. The kettle gently tipped itself over to fill the women's cups, steam curling from the dark brown liquid it poured.

“Could you bring us some sugar?” the older woman asked the man, her eyes still fixed to the smoke visible over the top of the city's wall. The man said something and disappeared, the kettle following close behind him. He returned a moment later, carrying a tray of small, white cubes that he laid on the center of the table between the two women. “Thank you,” the older woman told him as he once again left them. She turned her attention to the tray and said, “*Pata.*” Captivated, Kelsier watched as one of the cubes rose into the air and floated over to the woman's

cup. Slowly, it submerged itself into the liquid. “*Nimeno.*” At first Kelsier wasn’t sure what was happening, but as he took a step closer to the edge of the alley and peered at the women’s table, he realized that the liquid within her cup swirled as if an invisible finger was at work.

The two women fell back into easy conversation as Kelsier retreated from the alley’s edge. He closed his eyes and leaned against the solid weight of the stone-and-mortar wall behind him, slowly sinking to a seat in the cold, powdery snow.

*“There’s a good chance she makes it back,”* his grandfather had told him. *“They don’t like to put the women on the front lines. They keep them for fetching water, carrying lumber, those kinds of things. If you love her, Kel, then you can wait for her.”*

It’s what his mother had done. Even knowing that his father likely wouldn’t return, she’d waited for him. Kelsier thought she still was, really. She and Lena had echoed his grandfather’s encouragement, trying to convince him out of his misery, trying to tell him it would be alright. When he’d told them he couldn’t go to the bonfire they’d said that was fine, that they understood, that they loved him and would stay if he wanted them to. It had taken effort, but eventually he’d gotten them to leave the house by saying he just needed some time alone.

He hoped they would forgive him. He knew the reality of the situation. He was no hero. Supristovs could bend the elements to their will with a simple spell. If it came down to a fight, he was as good as dead. He saw again the eyes of the lynx, staring at him. No mercy. No pity. A predator, through and through.

He clutched at the shape of his father’s carving buried several layers deep beneath his outer coat. What would he have done if Kelsier’s mother was the one taken? Would he have

waited? *Could* he have waited? Kelsier wasn't sure, but he did know one thing for certain: *he* couldn't.

The dark outline of the jail pressed against Kelsier's mind. Latenva was there, two streets over to the north. There were no windows to climb through, and the large sliding doors had been barred shut by a massive wooden beam stuck through their hinges and deep into the earth. There was no way he could move the beam—it was as tall as a tree and nearly as thick, too. The only option left for him was to break through the building's front doors.

If he was lucky, no guards would be up by the time he snuck inside. He could search for Latenva, find her, and then they could escape together. They wouldn't be able to return to Lower Tennen, though. The Supristovs kept track of every soldier they collected and from which families they came. Latenva wouldn't be safe if they stayed. Instead, they would gather enough supplies to head south. There were other cities down there, and not too far, either. Less than a two-week journey if they travelled light and fast. They'd settle in Rodaan or some other big city where their arrival could be overlooked by the Supristovs there. And if either of them caught even the barest hint of trouble, they'd be on the move again. They could even leave Vasenka and head to another fief if they needed, hopping from city to city as they went. Wherever they went, though, they'd be together, and that's what mattered more than anything else. Kelsier would travel with Latenva to the ends of the earth if he had to.

He opened his eyes and lifted his head to the night sky above. Pinpricks of starlight broke up the otherwise impenetrable darkness, and among them Kelsier traced out a few constellations his grandfather had taught him, looking for the ones that would guide his and Latenva's journey. *The moon bear. Moraav's eye.* There were others he knew, but he couldn't see them from where he sat.

*Help me*, he prayed, gaze fixed on the heavens above. *If not for my sake, then for hers.*

Kelsier listened for some kind of answer, but as he settled in to wait for the hours to pass, he heard only the voices of the restaurant's customers and the distant sounds from his people's bonfire.

## Part Two



## Chapter Four

### 1281 AA

It was growing dark in Maleem's office. The burning candles in their sconces flickered dully against the shadows that crept in from the windows in the wall to Maleem's right. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, unable to read the small text of the reports on her desk any longer.

"*Pata,*" she said, the incantation tugging at her gut as magic left her and caught hold of several fresh candles waiting in their box on the fireplace mantle. She willed each of them through the air and lit their wicks with the other candles' dying flames. Then she split her focus and cast the incantation again, this time on the spent candles within the sconces to remove and float them over to a metal trash bin in the corner of her office. She released them of her magic and fitted the new brightly burning candles into the sconces, the shadows retreating back to the lip of her windows as they waited for their chance to emerge once more.

Still leaning back in the soft velvet cushions of her chair, she surveyed her office. The portrait of her and her parents hung over the barren fireplace against the opposite wall, their smiles radiant. They'd had it painted for Maleem's twelfth birthday—that had been before they learned of her mother's sickness. In the rich oil her mother's hair still shone golden, her skin a soft white with a red glow in her cheeks. It was hard to reconcile this image of her mother with the memories of her sallow skin, the yellowed whites of her eyes, her ragged breaths.

Maleem shifted her attention, scanning the titles of the books in the shelves lining her walls. Her father had selected the stock himself, saying that they were the finest Tyresian classics in existence. Among them she'd found histories and legends, theologies and philosophies, poems

and dramas. Years ago she'd read at least a book a week, spending her free time between studies and entertainment shut away in this very office. Her favorites had been the legends of Corsia, the daughter of an Eileean noble and a Tyresian courtier. In the legends Corsia was a genius, able to read and write by just three years old. By her fifteenth birthday she had captured the interest of the Law Lord, an old man who had been struggling to find a suitable heir since he had fathered no children and didn't trust his power-hungry nieces and nephews. He invited her to play a game of royals, and after Corsia won five hands in a row he asked how it was that she could be so good at a game he'd been playing for most of his long life. Some accounts varied as to what she said next, but they all agreed that it was witty and humorous, and that it earned Corsia the Law Lord's respect. It wasn't long until he officially declared her his heiress, and only a few months later he died, leaving her at sixteen to be one of the youngest Lordesses ever in Tyresian history.

Maleem had aspired to be just like her, studying night and day so that she could become Law Lordess in her father's stead, ruling with all the wisdom and justice that Corsia displayed in her legends. She thought he might have allowed it to happen had he not been plagued with grief following her mother's death when Maleem was only fifteen. She'd watched him steadily sink into his work, burying himself in it just like they'd buried her mother in the earth. Her sixteenth birthday came and passed, and she remained alone above ground. So too her seventeenth, and eighteenth, and on unto the present.

Maleem blinked and rubbed her hands over her face. She was tired and her mind was wandering without her permission, dredging up old memories better left alone. "Stupid," she muttered, shaking her head. There was work to be done. She returned to the reports on her desk and began reading them aloud, hoping it would keep her focused.

“To the Lords of Tyre, we of Vasenka fief humbly—” Maleem interrupted herself, amused by the phrase. “Oh, ‘humbly’? Is that right?” She cleared her throat and started over. “We of Vasenka fief humbly ask that you reconsider the pressure you exert on us. Your quotas for conscripts deplete our supply of Putristovs to such a degree that we fear we will see significant reductions in our steel and lumber production. As you very well know—” Maleem clucked her tongue. “Oh yes, we know *quite* well. You won’t shut up about it.” She tossed the report to the side, the thick stack of papers slapping against the dark mahogany of her desk. Vasenka had been complaining for years about their “reductions”, but time and time again Maleem checked the most-recent updates from the Commerce Court and saw that they were never as awful as the Vasenkans made them out to be.

Maleem had grown accustomed to their haughty letters. They were the birthplace of the Supristovs, and until a few centuries ago in the Reconstruction era following the Formation Wars, had been home to the empire’s capital city. It now sat in Calder fief, and its crowning jewel was the palace in which Maleem currently sat. The move had ruffled Vasenka’s feathers to no end, and often they tried to assert their superiority over the other fiefs by asking that they be allowed fewer quotas and lower taxes. Reviewing their letters had been just one of the many tasks she’d volunteered to take from her father’s burden. At the time she’d been looking for opportunities to slowly convince her father of her potential to take over his responsibility, but it had amounted to nothing greater than a smile and thank you. Often she considered selecting an advisor to take over such duties, but she worried it would only strengthen her father’s hesitancy.

She picked up the next report and cringed when she saw that it was from the Eileaan’s king. His role was off-putting to Maleem; holding all the governmental powers and more of Tyre’s Lords, in one breath he could change the regulation of currency, and in the next declare

war on foreign nations. To be fair, in Maleem's lifetime he'd been a fine ruler. No doubt the divine gift of near immortality helped him to not be so rash.

"To our trusted ally and companion, I, King Leonian, ask that you be so kind as to host one of my princes for your month of Studen. He is greatly interested in the customs of your people and wishes to become better acquainted with your empire so that he might more wisely interact with your Lords and lesser rulers." The letter continued with necessary details about the prince's passage, where he could be received, and the people King Leonian hoped would take the young man under their wings. Maleem's eyes froze when she neared the end of the page. "Prince Raleigh," she read slowly, absorbing every letter like a towel soaking up wine, "also wishes to speak with the scholar Ryder Ventra. I am aware of the tense nature between him and his father, but I hope this proves no large impediment in hosting him at the palace for the duration of Prince Raleigh's stay." The letter slipped from Maleem's hands as she read those lines over and over again.

Seeing Ryder's name so suddenly before her touched at old wounds she often kept carefully hidden away. She recalled his confident smile, his wild brown hair, his emphatic debates at dinner parties. Six years older than her and the youngest son of War Lord Regant, he'd been a kind of mentor as she adopted the role of her father's heiress. When she was seventeen and despairing of her father's continued refusal to appoint her as Law Lordess, Ryder had confessed to her a truth he'd said no one else had ever heard from his lips: his father had originally wanted to appoint Ryder as his heir instead of Ryder's older brother, Kavaan.

"*Why didn't he?*" she'd asked in a hushed whisper in his office as he scanned the pages of a book he was reading.

*“Because I said no. Kavaan’s the one who wants to be War Lord, not me. There’s something else for me out there, Maleem—I can feel it.”* He’d looked up from his book and offered her a warm smile. *“Don’t think you’re a failure just because you’re falling behind Corsia’s schedule. Find your own purpose now; don’t wait on someone else to give it to you.”*

She’d blushed, embarrassed that he remembered her secret role model. Still, his words had given her a kind of peace. Though she’d still longed to be Law Lordess, she’d considered what it might be like to take Ryder’s advice. She could visit more dinner parties, spend more time with the friends she’d slowly been losing touch with over the passing years. Maybe she could even find a young man who would fall in love with her rather than her position and power.

Her dreaming didn’t last, though. Only a few days later she woke to hear the news that Ryder was gone after an argument with his father. According to rumor, his father had given him an ultimatum: either take on work in the War Court or leave the palace at once. Ryder had made his choice, and he’d left without saying a word to her. Later that night her father came to visit her as she sat crying in her office over the loss of her friend.

*“I’m sorry, Maleem,”* he’d told her, standing with his back to the fireplace and his eyes gazing out the window. She’d stared at the lush violet carpet as he spoke. *“Regant’s been trying to convince that boy for years to take some responsibility. This was the last straw. I’m sure he’ll come back after seeing how hard it is beyond these walls, though.”*

He’d lapsed into silence for a time before walking to where she’d sat to rest a comforting hand on her shoulder. *“I’m proud of you, you know. For always trying so hard, for always being involved in my court. It’s where you belong.”*

Unable to speak, Maleem had only nodded. Her father left soon after, and for one of the few times in her life she found that she firmly disagreed with him. She knew in her bones that Ryder wouldn't come back, and true to form, he never did.

Maleem pushed King Leonian's letter aside, not trusting her trembling fingers to pick it up. For a heartbeat she considered trying to get through more of her reports, but almost immediately she dismissed the idea. She knew it would take hours for her to fall asleep now, and she still had to preside over a trial between the Ponovera and Tintra fiefs tomorrow. She stood from behind her desk and walked to the door, pausing before she left to cast an incantation that whipped a breeze through the room and snuffed out all the candles. Released from their confines, the shadows at the windows leapt into the room and overtook it with darkness as she stepped into the hall and shut the door behind her.

\* \* \*

Maleem sat in her chair and watched as people slowly filtered back into the courtroom from their break. She'd taken the opportunity to remain behind and eat her lunch while looking over a report she'd received that morning from her father. There was something about a meeting with a liaison from Vasenka fief to coordinate the details of a new road, but she hadn't read much more than that so far.

She set the report aside and scanned the courtroom. Her chair was raised several feet off the ground with her back to one of the four walls, so she had a fine vantage point. She spied Patron Avalen in his gaudy maroon suit and black epaulette. He was in his late thirties with light brown hair retreating at the temples and a thin beard. He'd served for three years in Gawané before his father—the patron before him—died, after which he returned home to rule over

Ponovera. He'd brought back to Tyre with him a military mind, and Maleem had heard rumors floating about that he'd even begun ordering that unproductive Putristovs be publicly whipped. She watched as he walked to one of the two tables set before her and took a seat next to his representing lawyer.

Patron Jakaad, ruler of Tintra, was by contrast a meek and humble man. He wore a simple beige tunic and a pair of black trousers, his own tan epaulette much shorter than Avalen's. He was also older, his blonde hair shot through with grey and the skin of his face marked with numerous age-lines around his eyes and mouth. He was still making his way through the assembled crowd, pausing to let others pass before him take their seats among the rows of long benches reserved for curious citizens, heralds, and law courtiers.

Maleem waited until everyone had taken their seats before she picked up her mallet and struck the bell next to her chair. The murmuring of the room died out quickly, leaving behind an expectant silence. Maleem looked over to the courtroom reporter, making sure she was ready to begin taking notes. The young woman dipped the tip of her quill into an ink jar and hovered her hand over the blank paper on the desk before her. "After hearing both parties' arguments," Maleem said loudly, projecting her voice throughout the courtroom, "I have come to a decision."

She paused to look down at her desk and review the notes she'd made, taking care not to misspeak any of the finer details. "Patron Jakaad, the Putristovs under your jurisdiction did indeed violate the border between your fief and Ponovera without permission. They are also guilty of theft and destruction, having killed an estimated twenty-six deer and eighty-three pheasants within Ponovera's forests." She looked up from her notes to see a somber expression on Jakaad's downcast face. She knew he was among those few strange Supristovs who spoke about more justice for the Putristovs, so no doubt he empathized with the starving masses who

had started all this mess in the first place. Still, the law was the law, and the guilty had to be punished.

That didn't mean, though, that she was completely without sympathy. "However, the Putristovs were not the only lawbreakers. Patron Avalen," she said, watching as the satisfied glint in his eyes quickly became confusion. "Upon discovering news of the trespassers, you ordered the militia under your command to attack them without first notifying Patron Jakaad and allowing him the opportunity to collect the Putristovs and make financial compensation. This action resulted in the deaths of thirteen men, women, and children, as well as subsequent rioting among the Putristov population within Tintra." Maleem watched as Avalen's face flushed with anger; meanwhile, Patron Jakaad was gazing up at her with shocked appreciation.

"Therefore, I have set punishments for both parties. Staring with—"

"This is outrageous!" Avalen shouted as he stood to his feet. Maleem paused, having already predicted something like this would happen. The lawyer next to Avalen stood as well and tried to get the man to retake his seat. Avalen cast the lawyer's arm off and thrust a finger in Maleem's direction. "I had every right to send in my militia! Jakaad's Putristovs are rebellious little creatures, and if he didn't coddle them like children then they wouldn't have been there in the first place!" Jakaad, for his part, remained silent, though Maleem noticed the icy glare he turned on Avalen.

"Patron Jakaad's Putristovs," Maleem said evenly, "are just as much under his authority as the animals within your forests are under yours. Therefore, since casualties were suffered on both sides in this matter, I have decided to proceed with that in mind. Do you have any further questions, Patron Avalen?"



“This is utterly—”

Maleem lifted the hammer in her hand and slammed it against the bell. The ringing echo surged up her arm and into her chest as it simultaneously boomed throughout the courtroom. Avalen screwed his mouth shut and finally sat back down. Maleem waited until the bell fell silent before she spoke again. “As I said, I have set punishments for both sides. Starting with Patron Jakaad: Tintra fief owes Ponovera a sum of thirty-four full kopecks, six full pols, and seven full dengas due in thirty days’ time.” Patron Jakaad nodded silently; it was a fair cost, about the amount one could expect to pay for the market value of as many animals as had been killed, along with the price for crossing the border without Avalen’s consent.

“As for Patron Avalen,” she said, locking eyes with the obviously fuming man, “Ponovera fief will allow a total of eighty Putristovs from Tintra to hunt the forests along its southern border for a period of twelve days. Any animals killed, trapped, or otherwise apprehended by the Putristovs immediately become their property and are subject only to the taxes expected of them from Tintra and Calder law. This period will start seven days from now on the first of Listopad. That is all.” She struck the bell twice with her hammer and then stood from her chair as the rest of the courtroom’s occupants did the same. Nearly a hundred people in all began talking at once, their voices a cacophony that trailed after Maleem as she left through a backdoor and quickly travelled to her chambers, the report from her father stuffed under her arm.

Shutting the door behind her, Maleem let loose a great sigh and shuffled over to the nearby couch, collapsing onto it with complete disregard for the wrinkles and creases she might make in her olive-green dress. She’d barely slept four hours the night before, her mind assaulted by memories of Ryder and anxieties about his potential return. She’d passed along King

Leonian's requests that morning on her way out of the palace, the notes in her hand like hot coals she'd desperately held onto even as they burned her.

She heard the door open and then a surprised intake of breath. "Heiress Maleem," a woman's voice said. Maleem quickly righted herself, embarrassed to be caught in such an unprofessional manner. In the open doorway stood the court reporter, the wire-frame glasses perched atop her small nose reflecting the room's soft candlelight. She held a sheaf of papers bound together with black yarn against her chest.

"The trial's recordings, I presume," Maleem said with a gesture to the papers. The reporter offered them to her, but Maleem shook her head and pointed to the nearby desk at the other end of the room. "Lay them there, please. I'll have one of the clerks take them to the archives later." The reporter did as told and left quickly after, her gaze fixed to the floor the entire time. Once she was gone, Maleem let her shoulders sag and her head fall on the couch's back. "Stupid," she muttered. She had a reputation to uphold as her father's heiress. She couldn't be so careless as to forget that, exhausted or not.

She allowed herself one final moment of disregard before she stood from the couch and smoothed the fabric of her dress with a free hand, the other still holding the report from her father. She approached the filing cabinet next to the small oak desk in her office and selected the docket of trials for the upcoming week. Thankfully they were all minor disputes. Chief among them were Ajuvaar and Inikaar petitioning the Lords for lighter taxes, claiming that a recent disaster at sea—three ships presumably destroyed in a storm—had cost them over twenty thousand kopecks in lost goods and damages. It was really something the Commerce Court should be dealing with, but with the upcoming loan repayments, all the courtiers were busy

negotiating the costs of conquered lands in Gawané, tallying the taxes owed from each fief against taxes already collected, and whatever else Lord Tanek had them doing.

Maleem took a seat at her desk and began reading through the case's research. Whichever unlucky clerk from the Commerce Court had written the notes must have been in a hurry; there were blots on the page where it was obvious the quill had been rushed from the ink jar to the paper without first letting the excess drip free. Despite this, after a few hours she managed to wrap her head around most of the trial's details. She'd already decided to rule that no insurance would be allotted until an official seal was provided by both Eileea and Naha'rakesh stating that neither had received the mercantile ships at port. The two fiefs wouldn't be very happy about that, but it was standard procedure so far as Maleem could tell from the clerk's notes. The more difficult matter was deciding how much—if any—of their taxes should be reduced as they tried to recover from the loss.

Maleem decided to leave that problem for another day. The clerk from the Law Court had come and collected the trial's recordings while she'd been working without saying a word to her. She appreciated the young man's constant respect for the silence of her chambers; she'd have to put in a good word for him at his annual review. She grabbed the report from her father and quickly left the courthouse, nodding to a few of the staff who noticed her and bobbed their heads respectfully. She'd been seventeen when she first came to work at the capital's courthouse. It had taken months for everyone to stop tripping over themselves to bow anytime they caught a glimpse of her in the halls. Thankfully, now they just saw her as another of her father's trusted judges instead of some high-ranking outsider.

Maleem emerged into warm sunshine and cool fall air, only a smattering of thin clouds in the late afternoon sky. Around her, Caravel was bustling with life. Creaking carriage wheels

rolled over cobblestones; voices and laughter boomed from the throngs of passerby; the undercurrent of an organ's deep moans and a flute's glass voice floated unseen overhead; a small black and white terrier at a nearby crossroads barked while straining against its master's leash.

She was surprised to see a small group of Putristovs sitting on the courthouse steps. Even amidst all the people present, they were easy enough to identify. Everyone else in sight, even if they wore only breeches and a shirt, were clean and at ease, their brows relaxed and their smiles easy. The Putristovs—three young men and a middle-aged woman—on the other hand, wore threadbare clothing, much of it patched with off-color garments. Their eyes were anxious, watchful, and any speech shared among them was nearly silent. The most obvious of all, though, was that they lacked the prominent tattoo of an open eye on their foreheads like every other Supristov in sight. Nearby Supristovs were beginning to take notice of the group as well, hesitating on their way through the streets as they caught sight of them.

“What are you doing here?” Maleem asked the Putristovs as she descended the steps. Their eyes flew to her, shoulders tensing and heads ducking as if to dodge a blow. “Putristovs aren't allowed to wander about unaccompanied in the city. Where's your escort?”

“Ma'am,” the middle-aged woman said quickly, standing to bow, “we're sorry, terrible sorry. Mr. Terren said—”

“Go inside,” Maleem interrupted. She didn't have time for this. “Explain yourself to the receptionist at the door and tell him I sent you. Have him place you all in a waiting room while your escort finishes his business. I'll deal with Mr. Terren later.” She was already walking away when the woman's voice stopped her.

“Ma’am!” the woman called out. Maleem whipped around, annoyed by the interruption. The woman noticed, taking a step back and bowing apologetically over and over again as she spoke. “So sorry ma’am, so sorry. It’s only—” she hesitated and cast her gaze upwards, though not high enough to reach Maleem’s eyes. “We don’t know who you are.”

“Maleem Nikenaan, Heiress to the Law Lord.” Every one of the Putristov’s faces drained of color as the young men scrambled to their feet and raced after the woman already headed up the stairs. Maleem shook her head and continued on her way, joining the crowded streets as she travelled north. Men, women, and children all bustled along, most carrying satchels or cloth sacks containing their recent purchases. Maleem even noticed a young girl excitedly nibbling at the corner of a bright green lollipop, the hard candy shining like glass in the sunlight.

She checked the position of the sun and increased her pace, hoping she wouldn’t be too late. Soliday evenings were the one time in the week when she and her father sat down at dinner together and left their work behind them. At least, that was the idea, anyway. Really the dinners functioned as meetings where she updated her father on recent cases, and he assigned her new ones. She knew that’s what the report he’d sent her was about, and if he’d taken the trouble to get it to her before tonight then it was probably important.

With that in mind she travelled through Caravel at a brisk walk, ignoring the shouted offers from the shopping district and the delectable scents of roasted meat and fresh bread from one of the city’s many markets. Though it took at least thirty minutes to travel even a single versta, Maleem loved the capital. It was like a living, breathing entity made up of brick-and-mortar buildings and cobblestone streets, and at the very center was its beating heart—Monolith Palace. Visible from anywhere in Caravel, Monolith Palace was a spire of marble, glass, stone, and even carefully smithed metal. It stood over two hundred stories tall and looked as if it could

touch the very clouds in the sky. Maleem was headed towards her home on the outskirts of the palace grounds, so she took the opportunity while walking to marvel again at its impressive architecture.

Her mother once told her that it had taken three generations of Supristovs carefully casting hundreds of thousands of incantations to build the palace. However, building up had only been the beginning. Ceilings had been painted with murals depicting a variety of historical accounts, some as early as the gods Moraav, Soliyo, Iksalah, Vivant, and Tlamacayo lavishing in their golden cities before they abandoned them. Support columns had been carefully carved to display reliefs of gorgeous men and women gazing into the middle distance. They'd even built ballrooms, dining halls, indoor gardens, amphitheaters for concerts—three generations of Supristovs had turned Monolith Palace from a building into a paradise. It was her home even more so than her father's house, which she'd been *born* in. She couldn't imagine ever leaving the palace like Ryder had.

Maleem scowled at the sudden, unwelcome thought and rudely shoved it from her mind. She was close to her home now, so she crossed the street and stepped through an entryway in the wrought iron fencing that surrounded the palace, ignoring the guard who bowed in her direction as she passed him. She followed the familiar winding path under the ripe canopy of apple trees, taking care not to let her dress snag on any of the brush creeping in her way. She made a mental note to tell her father's servants to take better care when trimming his estate.

She emerged from the orchard path to find her childhood home waiting for her exactly as it did every other Soliday. A warm amber glow radiated from the windows, and from the chimney on the second floor a steady supply of woodsmoke lazily drifted to the sky. She breathed in the sweet, rich scent filling the air as she ascended the front porch steps and stepped

inside, making sure to close the door behind her loudly enough that her father and his servants knew she'd arrived.

According to her father, the home had belonged to her paternal great-grandfather but was remodeled just a year before Maleem herself was born. Apparently, the previous home had been narrower, its hallways slimmer and its rooms more confining. Her mother had told her that after the death of her paternal grandparents in Gawané, her father spent the next two and a half years totally consumed with the politics that come from declaring war. Finally, during the celebrations of Studen, he'd taken a break to return home. *"I wish you could have seen his face,"* her mother had said with a small smile, though there had been a touch of sadness in her eyes, too. *"When he walked through that front door and realized he couldn't stand beside me in the hall, he looked so bewildered. 'Vera, dear,' he'd asked me, 'have I gotten fatter?' Oh, Maleem, I laughed until I cried, and for the first time since hearing the news his parents had died, your father laughed, too."*

Maleem swallowed back the lump in her throat. She didn't know how her father handled it, being back here. Every single time she stepped through that door, she was assaulted by the memories of her mother. And every single time, they broke her heart, over and over again.

"Ah, Heiress Maleem," a servant said, appearing around the corner of a doorway. "Your father's just sat down at dinner. Please, follow me." Maleem forced one foot in front of the other through the hall, taking in the rich mahogany wood of the ceiling and the dark red wallpaper. She avoided looking at the paintings hung along the wall.

The carpet of the hall was replaced by the smooth tile of the kitchen, only a handful of servants still within who were busy placing the final touches on what looked like a pair of apple

pies. Maleem's stomach was already in knots, and she knew—like most dinners—she'd barely get past the appetizers. “Would you like cider or wine this evening? Your father just got a shipment from Eileea a few days ago. White wine this time, I'm sure you'd love to try a taste.”

“Cider will be fine,” Maleem said quietly. She struggled to keep her head with Eileean alcohol of any kind, though she made it a point not to tell anyone. The servant bobbed her head, the blonde curls of her hair bouncing as she did so. She went on speaking for several minutes before Maleem even realized she was a new hire. It hurt her more than she'd expected, to bear witness to the onward march of time. At least in dreams and memories the house never aged, and sometimes she could fool herself into thinking her mother still walked these halls, still lay within her bed. All of that was shattered when she came back and saw different vases on end tables, new furnishings in the living and reception rooms, and new servants.

“Lord Clarent,” the servant said with a bow as they stepped inside the dining room. Maleem's father sat in a high-backed chair of deep red velvet and ash wood, the sunlight from the windows behind him illuminating the shadows cast by the candles along the walls. He was a thin man, his nose and jaw sharp without the necessary fat to soften them. He'd always been slim, but the slight paunch he'd begun developing in his middle-age had quickly disappeared after the death of Maleem's mother. He still kept himself well-maintained. His eyebrows were carefully plucked so as not to grow too bushy, his blonde beard and hair carefully trimmed to ensure they looked full but not unkempt. Even now, at a private dinner with his daughter, he wore a grey suit and black tie to match the hue of his collared shirt. At least he wasn't wearing an epaulette.

He was focused on a book open on the table when they entered, but he quickly looked up with a smile when he heard the servant's voice. “Ah, Maleem! Sit, sit,” he said. Maleem offered



a smile of her own and walked over to the dining table long enough to host twelve guests. She chose to sit on her father's left side, a chair between them. Above the table hung a chandelier, its candles unlit since it was only the two of them dining tonight. At the opposite end of the room from their side of the table was fire burning steadily in its little hearth, offering enough warmth to take the edge off the evening's growing chill.

She wished her father hadn't remodeled the house after all. Now, with just the two of them to occupy it, Maleem felt even more alone. She wanted the paintings of their family to fall to the floor, the walls to crush her into herself until the void within her chest was finally filled.

"So, you had court today," her father said as he marked his place in the book and set it aside. "How did that go?"

"Fine," Maleem said as she lifted her eyes to see her father's face. He was studying her as he always did. "Avalen was upset by the ruling, but I don't think any rational person would call it unfair."

"Do you think he'll challenge it?"

"I'm sure he wants to, but he won't risk the penalty, especially after his outburst today. I imagine his lawyer is already counseling him of the potential consequences I could level against him if he doesn't cooperate."

Her father smiled and nodded his head proudly. "Good, good. That's the right way to handle men like him." Maleem only nodded as servants bustled in carrying trays which they laid on the table. They quickly set plates and silverware before Maleem and her father, even portioning their food for them. By the time they left Maleem had a plate of toasted bread, a small dish of basil and tomato sauce, half a link of dried sausage, and a full glass of cider.

Her father quickly began cutting into the sausage on his plate and dipping the pieces into his sauce. "I saw that you brought the report with you," he said. Maleem blinked, surprised to realize she was still clutching it in her hand.

"Oh, yes," she said, trying to inconspicuously smooth the wrinkles she'd left in the pages as she slowly set them upon the table. "I haven't had the chance to read it in detail. Something about a road with Vasenka?"

Her father nodded as he took a drink of his wine. "Yes, that's really all it is," he said after setting the glass down. "They've been wanting to establish a faster trade route between Caravel and their own capital for years now, but there's just been too much trouble coordinating with their various cities up until now."

"What changed?"

Her father pointed to her and nodded approvingly. "Good question. Apparently they've finally struck a commission rate with the cities and towns for the safe transport of the travelling goods. There are still some wandering bands of Putristovs hidden in those forests, too small and too fast to bother chasing for months on end. Better to catch them in the act of pillaging and robbing, only that's more dangerous, of course. That was the main contention until now since the citizens and guards bore all the risk in having the caravans travel along their roads, most of which cut right through those very same forests where the Putristovs lie in wait."

"I was wondering why one of the specifications for the proposed road was that any trees within half a versta be cut down." Maleem nodded to herself as she recalled the drawings of the road's route through Vasenka and into Calder. "They'll have the benefit of stopping to resupply and rest at checkpoints along the way without worrying about ambushes. Still, that's thousands

of miles of road that needs to be built, and that's not even mentioning the potential number of trees that'll need to be cut down. Why not cut back some of the forest from the already existing roads?"

Her father raised an eyebrow. "Can you really not conceive of a reason?" Maleem sighed, knowing this was a test she'd already partly failed for having asked the question in the first place. She considered the logistics of the proposed road. Vasenka's capital, Roshaar, was among several of the fief's northernmost cities, almost at the foot of the Terta Mountains. There were few roads that went that far north, so their options of travel and trade were already limited. According to her father's report, for years the government of Vasenka had preferred Tail Road, one that offered the shortest possible route to another of Vasenka's large cities. From there the road took a wide berth to the east around a lake until it met with another city, this one smaller than the first. Tail Road continued making stops at major cities and towns on its journey as it tried to correct its path back towards Calder without going too far beyond the range of potential checkpoints. Maleem tried to bring to mind the drawings she'd seen, but they were hazy at best.

"I assume they have a good reason, but I don't know it," Maleem finally answered. Servants filtered into the dining room, collecting their plates and replacing them with new ones as they portioned out seared steaks, meat dumplings, and cubes of boiled potatoes topped with melting butter.

Her father waited to continue speaking until the servants had left. "I suppose you didn't reach that part of the report. Well, suffice it to say that they want to begin ferrying their goods across Lake Taheen to the foot of the new road they plan on building. From there—"

“They can cut and build their way to the closest checkpoint, and onto the next and the next until they’ve reached Calder.” Maleem sat back in her chair, a little stunned by the enormity of the undertaking.

“That’s the idea, yes,” her father said as he began eating his potatoes.

“I know the Commerce Court is too busy to handle negotiating the price of resources and such, but what about the Infrastructure Court? This sounds like something they should be picking up instead of us.”

“It will be, but for right now Vasenka’s government wants to speak with us about the stipulations surrounding naval transport of goods. Calder law has different insurance and taxes for such transportation, and they’re concerned that by utilizing the lake they’ll lose out on the lower taxes afforded to land transport. They’d like to discuss these details with us before communicating with the Infrastructure Court to begin determining exactly how and when the road will be built.”

“I didn’t even think of that,” Maleem confessed as she used the two prongs of her fork to push around her meat dumplings.

“Intersections of the courts happen like this more often than you might think,” her father said. He continued, a bit quieter now, “Sometimes it feels like I’m not even Law Lord at all, just one of the other three trying to hold everything together all at once.” Before Maleem could think of how to reassure her father, the moment passed. He shook his head and took a sip from his glass, already on his third refill of wine. “But that’s just part of the job. You’ll see that too, one day.”

Maleem nodded with a smile, but her heart fell at the words. *When will “one day” ever become “today”?* Her father informed her of the rest of the meeting’s details as they finished their dinner. In twelve days, she would be having dinner with Pelan, the son of Matron Leeanna and her *vitorobaya* named Tienaan. The restaurant was one she knew well. Named in Old Tyresian as *Saliichshe Pokoin*, it served the best lamb she’d ever tasted in her life. She’d only been able to justify the two-hour long carriage ride twice after eating there for the first time with her parents. Once had been the day she realized she was forgetting the details of her mother’s face; she’d cancelled all her meetings and left within the hour, desperately clutching at a small portrait of her mother’s face as she cried within the privacy of her carriage. The other had been a few days after Ryder left the capital.

Despite those somber memories, Maleem couldn’t help but smile. “Is there anything you’d like me to bring you back? Some oysters, perhaps?”

Her father laughed and shook his head emphatically. “No, no! Absolutely not, please!” She chuckled, remembering how he’d gagged after reluctantly slurping at the strange creature’s slimy insides. “Don’t worry about me. Take the chance to have some fun. It’s not often we’re given the opportunity to meet with our guests in such luxurious settings. Oh, and before I forget,” he said as he pushed his plate away and stood from the table, “there are some more papers you’ll need before then. I’ll go up to my office and—”

“Don’t worry about it, father,” Maleem said as she quickly stood up as well. “The servants haven’t even brought dessert out yet. Let me go up and grab them, okay?” He hesitated, but Maleem insisted until he relented and sat back down. “I’ll only be a moment,” she told him as she left the dining room.

“They’re either on my desk or inside one of my filing cabinets,” he called to her as she stepped through the swinging door. She didn’t bother shouting back; she knew where he kept his things perhaps even better than he did. She ascended a staircase to the upper floor and passed her childhood bedroom, a washroom, and her parents’—her father’s—bedroom before arriving at the door to his office.

It was fashioned similarly to his office in the palace. The door swung open into the middle of the wall, her father’s desk directly across the room from her. It was a large desk of applewood, crafted from some of their own trees, and atop it sat a cup of various quills, a tray of fresh papers and envelopes, a stand holding a large ink jar, and various piles of papers and books scattered about the rest of its surface. It stood in front of a pair of tall windows, their view filled with the boughs of ripe apple trees. The rest of the room seemed built around the desk; clear walking spaces set between filing cabinets, guest chairs, chests, and so on allowed her father the freedom to navigate his way through the office without being blockaded by all its furnishings.

To her right there was a small fireplace, a mesh grate of blackened steel closed to prevent the dying coals from popping sparks onto the room’s ornate purple and gold rug. Above it on the wall hung a copy of the same painting that hung in Maleem’s own office. They rarely discussed her mother’s passing, but once when coming to her office to ask for an update on some trial she’d been presiding over, he’d stopped in his tracks upon seeing this painting hung over her own fireplace. She’d frozen in the middle of a sentence, taken aback by her father’s sudden captivation. Quietly, he’d said, *“I’m glad to see she’s still watching over both of us.”* A few moments later he’d bid his farewells and left her alone in the room to try and understand him. Even now, years later, she wasn’t sure she truly grasped her father’s grief; she only knew it was different than her own, though certainly no less severe.

Maleem tore her eyes away from the painting and navigated through her father's office to his desk. The sooner she collected the papers for Vasenka's road, the sooner she could retreat from this place. She was only giving the desk a cursory glance before moving to one of its drawers when a familiar signature caught her eye. She paused, her back to the windows and her fingers touching the cool metal of a drawer's handle. There, atop one of the stacks of papers on her father's desk, sat an opened letter from King Leonian.

Maleem recalled the letter she'd read last night, the one where the king had asked for Ryder to be invited back to the palace. Was there more to be said about him? Had the king changed his mind? Maleem glanced up to the open door and deliberated, her fierce curiosity warring with her better sense. Her father had always made it clear that she was not to go through his belongings or correspondences without his explicit permission. He'd looked so stern when he'd told her that she'd never tried, never even been tempted. But now...

Maleem quietly walked to the office door and shut it closed. She decided against locking it, knowing that would be much too suspicious if he came up to check on her. She hurried back to the desk and picked up the letter, carefully slipping the paper from its envelope. She unfolded it but made sure not to interrupt its creases, and there she found the king's familiar handwriting.

*To Lord Clarent, Lord Tanek, Lordess Yashu, and most of all, Lord Regant,*

*When you beseeched me for aid almost thirty years ago now, I provided it with the understanding that your vengeance would not exceed the borders of the Gawanéan province that killed your empire's previous Lords and families. That this was not stipulated in the written agreement between our two nations is an oversight that has troubled me relentlessly since you first began your expansion and conquest of the continent.*

*It is with this in mind that I now write to inform you of my decision regarding your pending default of the loans Naha'rakesh and I provided you. I am aware—as is Emperor Yuang—that you have still not revealed the true predicament of your nation's economy to its citizens. I speak for both myself and Emperor Yuang when I encourage you four to do this without delay; the panic will no doubt be severe, but every day delayed only exponentially increases its potency.*

*If you retreat your forces from Gawané with all due haste, I will show leniency. I will allow your balance of 123.4 million franks—currently valued near 136.9 million kopecks—to be paid out over a period of time to be decided upon later in further conversations. If you refuse this offer, I will exact the tolls outlined in our agreement. Your lands, your harbors, your nation's resources—more than a quarter will become property of Eileea immediately upon your default. Naha'rakesh, too, will have its portion. Of this I am certain, as I have already confirmed it with Emperor Yuang. Lords, I ask that you duly consider this offer as stewards of the Tyresian empire. It is your final chance to divert your nation from ruin.*

The letter's date beneath King Leonian's signature showed it was written two months ago. There was a low roaring in Maleem's ears; she realized it was the sound of blood rushing from her beating heart, the organ's cadence increasing with every passing breath. What was the king talking about? Tyre was going to default on its loans? That couldn't be true. Maleem had checked the Commerce Court's economic updates just the other day, and there had been no indication they were struggling to come up with enough money to pay back the loans. Sure the predictions weren't as favorable as they could be, but none of them had even come close to suggesting the empire would default. Maleem remembered what the king had written: *"You have still not revealed the true predicament of your nation's economy to its citizens."*



Her vision began to spot and she realized she was hyperventilating. How long had she, like everyone else, been fooled by the Lords? By her own father? Pieces of a puzzle she hadn't even realized existed began to fall into place: the pleas from Vasenka and other fiefs for reduced taxes; the Commerce Court's reluctance to grant insurance claims; the no-doubt starving Putristov masses from Tintra who had knowingly broken the law in a desperate attempt of survival. The deception was on such a scale that she almost couldn't fathom it. Almost.

But these were King Leonian's words in his own hand, the letter marked by his own signature. There was no denying their reality. Maleem closed her eyes and sucked in a shaking breath, forcing her burning lungs to hold it, to wrap themselves tight around the small bubble of air. After several moments, she let them relax and exhaled. She waited several heartbeats before she breathed again, her hands trembling silently at her sides. *In. Wait. Out. Wait.* She'd learned how to deal with these kinds of mental collapses before; there had been several in the wake of her mother's death, and a few more after Ryder left and she was alone in the palace once again.

*Think.* What did she know? She opened her eyes and folded the nightmare back along its creases before she slipped it into the envelope and returned the letter to where she'd found it. She set about searching the rest of her father's desk for more information, looking through his various drawers. It wasn't long before she found the next piece of evidence. This time it was a letter from Tanek, Lord of the Commerce Court.

*Clarent,*

*I'm serious. I've run the numbers so many times that I see them in my sleep, and neither in reality nor in dreams have I found a solution. The economy is at its limit, and any increase in taxes will break it just as certainly as our default will. I've been playing with smoke and mirrors*

*for the past eleven years, and all it will take is for someone to glimpse behind the curtain to see the truth of the matter. I cannot keep this farce up for long. We must find a way to either delay our repayment or come to some kind of arrangement with Eileea and Naha'rakesh to settle our debts without the expense of our empire's stability.*

*I know you would have forbidden me from doing it, so now I can only ask that you understand my motives were pure; I have sent a letter to King Leonian asking if there is some way we can accomplish the second proposal I offered above. He is just as aware of our current crisis as we are, so my involving him does not violate the terms of our oath. I pray to the gods that you will listen to reason, Clarent. Please.*

Lord Tanek's letter was dated nearly four and a half months ago. Maleem surmised that he must have been the one to prompt King Leonian's letter. She kept looking, and it wasn't long before she found more letters, and reports, and economic predictions. Within her father's office, Maleem had stumbled upon a chasm of evidence that at the bottom of it all held the utter ruin of Tyre as she knew it. Perhaps selfishly, the one thing that hurt the most was contained in a letter from Lordess Yashu to her father. In the third paragraph, she wrote:

*I know you have said your daughter isn't yet ready for the burden of Law Lordess, but your repeated refrain that she shouldn't know of the issue at all seems rather short-sighted to me. Lord Tanek and I have pointed out to you and Regant on numerous occasions that if we want to solve this problem, then we would greatly benefit from the use of our heirs—whom, unless I am mistaken, we chose because we believed they would rule with wisdom following our retirement. Why can we not use their wisdom now? Though he hasn't yet informed you, against your wishes Tanek finally told his heir three weeks ago, and already she's been instrumental in aiding his maintenance of the economy's false veneer. I believe I'll follow his example soon, and*

*if you and Regant have any sense, you'll do the same. Unless, of course, you don't believe you can rely on the wisdom of your heirs after all?*

It was an obvious challenge, a coordinated attack on her father and Regant's ego to manipulate them into doing what Yashu wanted. Still, as Maleem read the letter, she couldn't help but agree with the Infrastructure Lordess. Maleem could help—she *wanted* to help. This was her empire too, and if she wanted to have any part in it a year from now, she'd commit her entire being to solving this problem. Already King Leonian's suggestion was a viable one as it allowed them to keep their lands and resources. Maleem's heart sank in her chest when she reached the end of the letter and saw that it was dated a little over a year ago. Her father had read this letter, probably for the first time in this very office, and every day after had continued to keep Maleem in the dark.

*"Unless, of course, you don't believe you can rely on the wisdom of your heirs after all?"*

Was it true? Maleem had always known her father didn't yet think her ready to take over his position, but she'd always believed it was because he thought there was more for her to learn, to experience. Could it truly be because he didn't think her a worthy heir at all?

Maleem's eyes pricked with tears, but she kept searching. King Leonian's letter was addressed to all of the Lords, so the other three would have received identical copies. Surely they would have written about it to one another. Maleem leafed through piles of pages, searched the contents of dozens of letters, but she couldn't find anything. She knew her father would be growing curious about her continued absence, but she had to know the Lords' answer.

Finally, tucked away at the very back of a drawer near the bottom of her father's desk, she found it. It was from Regant, Lord of the War Court, and it was only a single page long. The date was from two weeks ago.

*To my fellow Lords, especially Tanek and Yashu*

*I understand your vexation at my so-called "hasty" reply to King Leonian, but I refuse to retreat from this war. We signed an oath, the first of many, when we agreed to begin this war. We would not stop until those responsible for our parents' and previous Lords' deaths were punished. For any of us to suggest agreeing to King Leonian's proposal is to suggest a violation of that oath, one which was made between us and the very gods. The devastation wrought from breaking an oath of such enormity would vastly outweigh the potential consequences of our default.*

*However, this is not to say that I have made my peace with such a future. We must continue searching for a solution—one that enables us to pursue justice for our dead without hesitation. It is for this reason that I wrote to refuse King Leonian's proposal. Not only was this done for myself, but for each of you, and our oath, and our empire.*

*May the gods shower blessings upon us, and our children, and our children's children.*

Several minutes later, Maleem entered the dining room with the relevant papers for Vasenka's road in hand. Her father smiled when he saw her and gestured to the untouched apple pie at her seat. "It's still warm from the oven," he told her. A similarly untouched pie sat before him. "I decided to wait on you before eating. These are the first apple pies of the season, after all."

Maleem smiled and took her seat, passing the papers to her father as she did so. He leafed through them, stopping every so often to mention some important piece of information. Maleem nodded her head and used a fork to break through her pie's golden crust and into its mushy, sweet insides. Steam wafted from the speared piece on her fork, and she blew on it a few times before slipping it past her lips and onto her tongue.

She tasted nothing.